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Touching Impenetrable Bodies: Material Ecologies in Cuban Literary and Visual Works

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Spanish and Portuguese

by

Christina María García

Dissertation Committee:  
Associate Professor Ivette N. Hernández-Torres, Chair  
Associate Professor Emily Maguire  
Associate Professor Viviane Mahieux  
Associate Professor Santiago Morales  
Chancellor's Professor Gabriele M. Schwab

2018



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a project that aspires to think ecologically, to imagine the imperceptible entanglements that constitute legible bodies, it is only fitting, if not imperative, to begin by acknowledging what is not visible in the final version of this dissertation: the electronic drafts with track changes and lengthy inserted comments; the printed copies that bear underlines, circles, question marks, cursive elaborations, and suggestions in ink and pencil; the conversations over Skype, in offices, and coffee shops; the expressions of faith and encouragement; recommendations to see an exhibit, to read that article, this novel; the friendships, the hospitalities, the voices, hands, penmanship, and the post-its and paper clips that hold these pages together.

I have been the beneficiary of exceptionally generous mentorships. In my committee members I have found a constellation of scholars where, in addition to deriving sustenance from their individual corpuses of knowledge, the exchange of ideas, of intuitions, of disagreements, of enthusiasms could flourish.

Ivette Hernández-Torres, my dissertation chair, has provided me with a model for academic rigor and creativity, a captivating set of pedagogical practices and philosophies, and a compassionate and challenging mode of advisement that I aspire to emulate. If in theory literary critics espouse the inexhaustive potential of a text, Ivette's engagements with literary and visual works continuously remind me of this potential in practice. In our conversations throughout the years, she has pushed me to think beyond the limits of my assertions, guiding me towards more nuanced readings. Where I only saw surface, she prompted me to consider depth, and where I only heard sound she noted its synesthetic production of color. Ivette has also disabused me of a biasness for the contemporary. In her

ability to imagine inter-temporal ecologies that both intersect present day and early colonial works and draw from both classical and twenty-first century thinkers, she has brought me to consider the layers of sedimented pasts in the new and the virtual futures in the old.

With Ivette I have also learned that a disciplined analysis of the objects we study does not preclude the personal joy they might inspire. Entangled in our unpacking of a complex passage, or in the joint effort to elaborate a theoretical point, there were mutual expressions of enchantment for particular novels, installations, and films. I am especially grateful for her faith in my work and for fostering a relationship where I always felt I could depend on her support and care.

Viviane Mahieux's attentive and generous feedback on an early essay, where I first explored some of the key organizing concepts for this dissertation, has been critical to the development of this project. From the seemingly disparate connections or unorthodox readings I was intuitively elaborating, Viviane culled and identified for me what it was I was doing, as well as the implications of my work. She nudged me towards a practice of analysis I wanted to pursue—that is, to read the literary in the philosophical and the philosophical in the literary—but in which I felt unsure of my capacity. Indeed, there would be other occasions where Viviane's encouragement gave me the confidence I needed to cross academic thresholds, e.g. qualifying exams or the submission of this dissertation. She has also been especially insightful and supportive with regards to my professional development.

Much of the theoretical texts and concepts that underpin this dissertation are drawn from seminars I took with Gaby Schwab. However, it is Gaby's own commitment and

attention to the transformative potential of creative works, to the imbricated relationship between the imaginative and the political that I have found most formative. Through her written feedback and our conversations, Gaby has helped me better understand the connections between my interests in interspecies bodies, ecology, and non-identitarian forms of community. Gaby has been an infinite source of encouragement; her enthusiasm for my project has been a great source of sustenance and motivation.

Emily Maguire has been exceptionally generous with her time, her attention, and her feedback both at the preliminary and final stages of this project. In addition to her primary and secondary source recommendations that proved essential, Emily has underscored connective threads and tendencies in my readings that were not initially apparent to me. In so doing, she has helped me better situate my project within the field of Cuban Studies and formulate the interventions of my work. Most importantly, when I was daunted by the prospect of engaging canonical texts and unsure of the validity of my analysis, Emily helped me understand the singularity of my readings, while also challenging me to stretch their limits and to dialogue more with the work of other scholars in the field. It has been a joy to have her as an interlocutor and to know I have her support.

Although Luis Avilés is not on my dissertation committee, he has generously engaged with my project and made critical interventions. In my predilection for the non-human and privileging of particular aesthetic forms, Luis drew my attention to the risks of essentializing and of reproducing binary structures. My last dissertation chapter on friendship and hospitality emerged from a project I did for one of his seminars and as a result benefitted greatly from his guidance and suggestions. Luis' own elaborations on the ethical potential of friendship, particularly in the communication of uncomfortable truths,



have been very impactful for me. Not incidentally, as department chair, Luis has fostered a departmental environment of hospitality and friendship, making my experience as a graduate student singularly positive.

If I needed information with regards to musicology, Cuban history, politics, or travel, I could always rely on Raul Fernandez's expertise. But more than a source of knowledge, Raul has instilled in me an appreciation for interdisciplinarity and the importance of one's various academic communities. My academic trajectory has not only benefitted from his penchant for connecting scholars and organizing events, where collaboration and the exchange of ideas are privileged over showmanship, but also, and most importantly, from his irreverence, humor, and friendship.

I also want to thank Horacio Legras for introducing me to the work of Fred Moten. Santiago Morales for saving the day on more than one occasion, providing critical feedback on both oral and written work, and especially for being a joy to interact with. Leopoldo Peña and Fernando Hernández for their friendship and for their essential readings of early, malformed drafts. Martha Torres for her absolute friendship, her wisdom, and love of Eydie Gormé y Los Panchos, for being the best confidant and ally. Lauren Gaskill for being there from the very beginning and welcoming me into the amazing graduate community represented by the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, for all the adventures, for being one of the most creative, kind and generous people I know. George Allen for agreeing to fumble through Deleuze's Kafka with me, for his camaraderie, insightful comments on early drafts, for laughing too loud and insisting on the inscrutable. And for taking that damn poster down. To Jessica Gordon-Burroughs for reading drafts, generously sharing her insights and wisdom, for her friendship. Ángeles Torres, Pía Valdés Muñoz, James Hirsch,

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To James Goebel for being a partner in our interspecies pack with Emperor Titus and Queen Maeve, for our shared love of baroque ecologies and Francis Bacon, for hours upon hours spent polishing PowerPoint slides and revising presentations, for introducing me to eco-feminist and new materialist works, the novels of Louise Erdrich, for reading Jeanette Winterson, for being supportive and excited about my work, but also challenging me to consider its limits, to be more rigorous, to elaborate more complexly, for provoking my imagination on a daily basis, for calling me out when I was being proprietary, OCD, or simply behaving like a bad Derridean.

To my parents Martha and Charlie and my siblings Sebastian, Michael, Charlie and Miriam, for tolerating me when I had to “write a paper” and the sky was going to fall; or rather, for teasing me at every opportunity and teaching me how laugh at myself. For their unabashed pride, faith, and unwavering support. For being affectionate and weird and funny.

# CURRICULUM VITAE

CHRISTINA MARÍA GARCÍA

## EDUCATION

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<b>Ph.D.</b>	<b>University of California, Irvine</b> Spanish and Portuguese	June 2018
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Dissertation <i>and Visual Works</i>	<i>Touching Impenetrable Bodies: Material Ecologies in Cuban Literary</i>  Committee: Ivette Hernández-Torres (Director), Emily Maguire, Viviane Mahieux, Gabriele M. Schwab (Comparative Literature)	
Certificate	<b>Cornell University, NY</b> School of Criticism and Theory	July 2017
<b>M.A.</b>	<b>New York University, NY</b> Humanities and Social Thought	Jan. 2009
<b>B.A.</b>	<b>Florida International University, Miami</b> English, Art History	May 2004

## PUBLICATIONS

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### Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

“Baroque Revolutionaries, Communist Fags and Risky Friendships: Reading the Politics of Friendship in *Fresa y chocolate*.” *Cuban Studies* 47, January 2019.

“The Ethics of Botched Taxidermy.” *Antennae: the Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, Issue 7, Autumn 2008.

### Book Chapters

“Incorrect and Beautiful Anatomies: Becomings, Immanence, and Transspecies Bodies in the Art of Roberto Fabelo.” *Re-Encountering Animal Bodies*. Eds. Matthew Calarco and Dominik Ohrem. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

“Among the Ruins of Ecological Thought: Parasites, Roaches, and Nuclear Imaginings in *La fiesta vigilada*.” *An Island in the Stream: Ecocritical and Literary Responses to Cuban Environmental Culture*. Eds. David Taylor, Armando Fernandez, and Scott Slovic. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, forthcoming.

## Art Reviews

“The Off-Havana Thriving Art Scene.” *Cuba Counterpoints*, April 2017, Arts Section.

“Surfaces, Skins, and Secrets: Belkis Ayón in L.A.” *Cuba Counterpoints*, November 2016, Arts Section.

## CONFERENCE AND WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS

---

“Sonorous Nonsense and Poetic Possessions in Nicolás Guillén’s *Motivos de son*,” *Resonance*. 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Interdisciplinary Conference Graduate Center for Literary Research. University of California, Santa Barbara. May 12, 2017.

“Material, Sensuous, and Impenetrable: The Body in Severo Sarduy and Roberto Fabelo,” *Beyond Perpetual Antagonism: Reimagining U.S.-Cuba Relations*. 11<sup>th</sup> Conference of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. Florida International University. February 25, 2017

“Touching Impenetrable Bodies: Material Ecologies in Cuban Literary and Visual Work,” *Emerging Frames and New Research*. UCI Latin American Studies Events, University of California, Irvine. November 18, 2016.

“Incorrect And Beautiful Anatomies: Becomings, Immanence And Transspecies Bodies In The Work Of Roberto Fabelo,” *Tropical Exposures: Photography, Film, and Visual Culture in a Caribbean Frame*. Cuban and Caribbean Studies Institute. Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana. March 11, 2016

“Material Ecologies and Transspecies Bodies In The Work Of Roberto Fabelo,” *2016 Spanish and Portuguese Graduate Colloquium*. University of California, Irvine. February 10, 2016

“Baroque Revolutionaries, Communist Fags, and Risky Friendships: Reading the Politics of Friendship in *Fresa y chocolate*,” *Precariedades, exclusiones, emergencias*. LASA 2015 - XXXIII International Congress. San Juan, Puerto Rico, May 30, 2015.

“The Ethics of Reading Musical Sense/Nonsense in *Motivos de son*,” *More than White, More than Mulatto, More than Black*: *Racial Politics in Cuba and the Americas*. 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. Florida International University. February 27, 2015

“Reading Musical Nonsense in Nicolás Guillén,” *2015 Spanish and Portuguese Graduate Colloquium*. University of California, Irvine. January 18, 2015

“Incorporation and Immunity: Making Queerness Consumable in *Fresa y chocolate*,” *Disentangling Cuban Publics: UC-Cuba Graduate Student Conference*. UC-Cuba Academic Initiative. University of California, Irvine. November 21, 2014.

“The Ethics of Stardust: Nonhuman Perspectives in *Nostalgia de la luz*,” *Inhumanities: UCLA Comparative Literature Graduate Student Conference*, University of California, Los Angeles. February 22, 2013.

### **FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, AWARDS**

---

Latino Excellence and Achievement Award School of Humanities, UCI	2018
US Department of Education Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need - \$18,662	2017
UC-Cuba Academic Initiative Conference Travel Grant - \$300	2017
School of Humanities, UCI, Fellowship to Attend the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University - \$5,000	2017
US Department of Education Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need - \$20,602	2016
Spanish and Portuguese Department, UCI Graduate Student Travel Award - \$500	2016
Associated Graduate Students, UCI Conference Travel Grant - \$400	2016
School of Humanities, UCI Conference Travel Grant - \$918	2015
Graduate Division, UCI Decade Professionalization Stipend – \$500	2015
UC Regents Graduate Fellowship	2012-13
John W. Draper Program, NYU Tuition Remission Grant for Academic Excellence - \$5,000	2007

## COURSES TAUGHT

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### **University of California, Irvine (2013 – 2016)**

#### Teaching Assistant (11 quarters)

As the instructor of record, responsibilities included designing exams, quizzes, class activities, interactive presentations, writing prompts, assessment and grading.

Approaches based on second-language-acquisition theory and research.

- **1A-B-C Fundamentals of Spanish.** Communicative approach with emphasis on conversational skills. Reading and writings skills, along with an introduction to Hispanic cultures.
- **1AB Intensive Spanish Fundamentals.** An intensive, proficiency-oriented, and task-based approach, designed to develop basic oral communicative abilities.
- **2A-B-C Intermediate Spanish.** Conversation, reading and composition skills are developed using films and texts of literary and social interest. Emphasis on grammar review.
- **2AB Intermediate.** Intensive intermediate course designed to improve student's abilities in reading, writing, speaking and comprehension.

#### Teaching Practicum

- Quarter-length teaching practicum with professor Ivette N. Hernández Torres - Spanish 101B, "**Introductory Studies to Latin American Literature and Culture.**" In addition to regular assistance in the conduction of class, I was responsible for teaching 3 sessions, writing exam prompts, as well as midterm grading.

#### Guest Lectures

- "**Inhuman Writings: Ahmel Echevarría's Buffalos.**" Invited by Professor Ivette Hernández Torres's to discuss the work of Cuban novelist Ahmel Echevarría in her graduate seminar on Caribbean literature, "Writing Archipelago." February 15, 2017.
- "**Spanglish.**" Weeklong presentation to undergraduate and graduate students in collaboration with Dr. Armin Schwegler for his linguistics class on "Spanish in Contact." March, 2014.

### **Miami Dade College (2010 – 2012)**

#### Adjunct Faculty (3 Semesters)

- **English Composition 1101** required general-core course in college-level writing. Students compose essays and other various methods of development.
- **English Composition 1102** second required general core course in college-level writing. Students compose informative and persuasive essays, write responses to a variety of literary genres and/or non-fiction, and produce a documented paper based on research. I specifically tailored these courses around “Anglophone Caribbean Fiction and Ecocriticism” and “LatinX Communities”

#### **OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

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**Graduate Assistant for Kamau Brathwaite** (NYU, Spring 2008). Assisted in arranging course materials, leading class discussions, organizing special guest lectures for graduate seminar “Topics in Caribbean Literature.”

**Graduate Assistant for Kamau Brathwaite** (NYU, Fall 2008). Researched and proofing manuscript.

#### **SERVICE**

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Discussant, <i>8<sup>th</sup> UC-Cuba Graduate Student Workshop</i> UC-Cuba Academic Initiative Conference, UCI	2017
Organizer, Workshop and Lecture by Henry Eric Hernández, “Reescribir la historia,” UCI	2017
Panel Co-Organizer & Chair, “Feeling Cuba at its Limits” 11 <sup>th</sup> Conference of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, FIU	2017
Co-Organizer & Discussant, <i>Beyond Insularidad: Cuba in the World</i> UC-Cuba Academic Initiative Conference, UC Merced	2016
Co-Organizer, <i>XXI Congreso de Mexicanistas Juan Bruce-Novoa</i> UCI Spanish and Portuguese Department	2015
Co-Organizer & Discussant, “¿Qué bolón??!!” <i>New Directions in Cuban Studies</i> UC-Cuba Academic Initiative Conference, UCI	2015
Co-Organizer, <i>Graduate Student Colloquium Series</i> UCI Spanish and Portuguese Department	2014-15
PhD Graduate Student Representative UCI Spanish and Portuguese Department	2014-15
Co-Organizer, <i>Disentangling Cuban Publics</i> UC-Cuba Academic Initiative Conference, UCI	2014

Moderator, *XX Congreso de Mexicanistas Juan Bruce-Novoa*  
UCI Spanish and Portuguese Department 2014

Co-Organizer, *Representations of Violence in Latin America*  
UCI Spanish and Portuguese Department 2013



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Touching Impenetrable Bodies: Material Ecologies in Cuban Literary and Visual Art

By

Christina María García

Doctor of Philosophy in Spanish and Portuguese

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Associate Professor Ivette N. Hernández-Torres, Chair

*Touching Impenetrable Bodies: Material Ecologies in Cuban Literary and Visual Work* departs from available binaries of criticism on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Cuban literary and visual productions by attending to materiality, the body, and the environment in such works. Drawing from the perspectives and methodology of Caribbean studies, poststructuralist aesthetics, ecocriticism, critical animal studies, and the new materialisms, “Touching Impenetrable Bodies” stages an encounter between these fields in order to bypass the polarizing rhetoric epitomized in Cold War politics, and to question the limits of nation-building narratives. Doing so, I argue, illuminates how writers and artists on the island have undermined the presumptions of both human and national sovereignty, while generating an alternative political ontology of material and territorial interdependency. Chapter one engages Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén’s collection of poetry *Motivos de son* (1930) alongside Severo Sarduy’s first novel *Gestos* (1963). Whereas scholars have tended to read these works as expressions of Cuban identity, I trace each text’s formal experimentations in order to argue that both authors developed literary techniques that, instead, worked against identity formation. As such, both texts can be read as shifting the

coordinates of dominant modes of perception so that race, class, gender, and species differences are sustained as irreducible to a politics of representation. Chapter Two continues this line of argumentation by exploring the depiction of hybrid, metamorphic anatomies and the disarticulation of taxonomic classification in Sarduy's novel *Cobra* (1972) as well as the work of contemporary artist Roberto Fabelo. Importantly, I look at how Sarduy and Fabelo subvert representational techniques that would naturalize either the Human or the Nation. In so doing, I argue, these literary and visual works unsettle post-1959 Cuban national identity and its attendant, normative figure of *el hombre nuevo* (the "New Man").

Building on this analysis, my third chapter focuses on the link between writing and becoming-nonhuman in Ena Lucía Portela's *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* (1999) and Antonio José Ponte's *La fiesta vigilada* (2007). In both novels we find characters deemed futureless and abandoned; their means of surviving abject conditions are at once the source of nonhuman becomings and a practice of writing. These novels recall the use of animalization as a figurative device in Latin American literature to address a series of social and political issues, most significantly the dehumanization of the dispossessed. However, in my treatment of these texts, I complicate the possibility of an allegorical interpretation—or, better, of simply reading animals as metaphoric stand-ins—and, thus, undermine attempts to establish an equivalence between the nonhuman and the abject. Finally, for my fourth chapter, I interrogate the politics of incorporation through an analysis of a queer friendship in Gutierrez Alea's seminal film, *Fresa y chocolate* (1993). Adopting the biological and political trope of immunity, this chapter considers friendship and hospitality in relation to the dynamic exchanges between a host-organism and its environment. By

demonstrating how the tensions between history, nation, and identity can be illuminated by literary and visual form, “Touching Impenetrable Bodies” argues that the above works offer alternative ways of thinking community ecologically, rather than by the rubrics of human and national exceptionalism.

## INTRODUCTION

The photographic series, titled *El dibujo, la escritura, la abstracción* (1997 – 2012), by the contemporary Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa, might at first appear like large non-objectivist paintings. Seen along the exhibition wall (**fig. 1.1**), the rows of color photographs, each measuring approximately 6 x 5 ft., recall the Color Field canvases by the “abstract expressionist” Mark Rothko and the gestural oil scribbles of Cy Twombly. And yet,

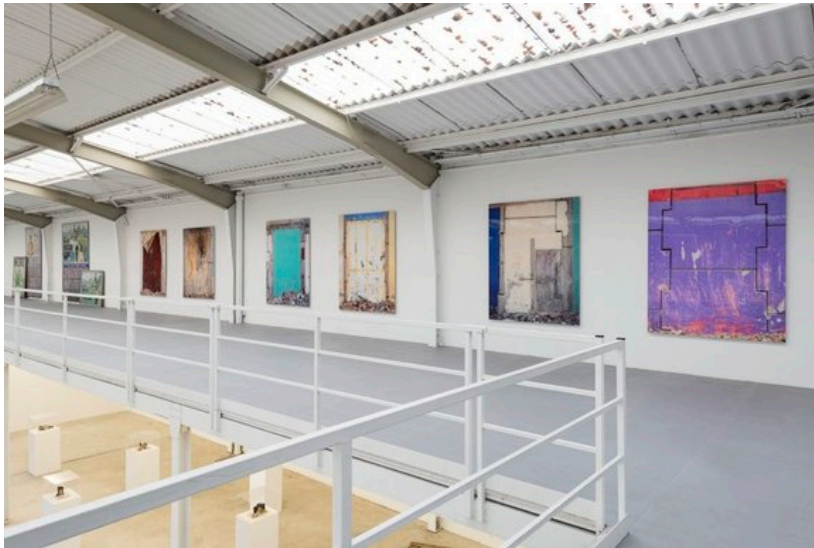


Figure 1.1 Exhibition view - Carlos Garaicoa - *El dibujo, la escritura, la abstracción* series (1997 – 2012) – Ilfordjet print color photographs mounted and laminated on Plexiglass and aluminum 188 x 155 cm

these are in fact photographic images printed on glossy paper that show no traces of manipulation of the medium; in their high-resolution, they remain true to the technology of the camera. If these images are not the result of painterly abstraction, what then has

Garaicoa made the subject of the lens’s sharp focus, of the camera’s viewfinder, that tiny window through which the photographer sees and frames? Each of the rectangular photographs in this series provides a frontal view of a wall, a roughened architectural exterior with stains, fading and peeling paint. Having no other figures or horizon line to partition the compositional space and situate the viewer’s gaze, the images lack a dominant or centralized focal point. It would seem the sole function of each photo is the cataloguing of a single datum: an impenetrable material surface, bearing nondescript marks, textures, and colors.

Turning our attention to an individual piece titled *La abstracción VI, Blood Wall* (fig. 1.2), we find smudges of burnt sienna and ochre—earthy, organic colors that do indeed resemble blood. An amorphous darker cloud at the top right—possibly a soot stain—appears like the specter of a previous fire.

The smooth glossy surface of the photographic paper displays rough textures, as the precision of the lens allows us to detect a minutia of lines, scratches, incisions, fine and coarse, almost imperceptible marks, traces of impact, deterioration and duration. The shallow space of the composition forces one to reckon with a depth at the surface.



Figure 1.2 Carlos Garaicoa - *La abstracción VI, Blood Wall* from the series *El dibujo, la escritura, la abstracción* series (1997 – 2012) – Ilfordjet print color photographs mounted and laminated on Plexiglass and aluminum 188 x 155 cm

Garaicoa’s photographed walls, I suggest, are like vertical planes, raised maps, meant to be felt with our hands instead of our eyes. As a

vertical plane we are drawn to its incisions like the traces of a writing; however, that writing is no longer legible. Invisible, unreadable histories are made palpable. Ochres, scratches, soot stains and marks of impact betray a violence and a material decay that evokes corporeal vulnerability. We are left to imagine and to feel the layers of its sedimented pasts.

At the bottom of *La abstracción VI, Blood Wall* we see a rim of rubble and debris. Garaicoa, much like the writer Antonio José Ponte, has made Havana’s ruins a focal point of his work. We might consider *Blood Wall* as a visual correlate to Ponte’s statement, “las

ruinas son arquitectura torturada.”<sup>1</sup> Taken between 1997 and 2012, Garaicoa’s photographs document the city’s architectural disrepair, representations of which are now a common trope, synonymous with the economic crisis of the 1990’s. Following Ponte, the ruins are a testament of a criminal and violent negligence—a culpability he assigns to the Cuban government.<sup>2</sup> However, Garaicoa’s series, *El dibujo, la escritura, la abstracción*, with its decentralized compositions, absence of figures, and indecipherable marks works against facile identifications or the elaboration of linear, cause and effect narratives. As suggested above, these images evoke a visceral as opposed to a cerebral response; they transmit sensation through the nervous system.<sup>3</sup> To better appreciate the implications of such a visceral evocation, I draw from Juan Duchesne Winter’s analysis of Eduardo Lalo’s hybrid photo-essay book, *donde* (2005), in which the artist attends to Puerto Rico’s industrial ruins. Interrupting the indexical relationship between icon and referent in his “alphabetographic” text, Lalo provides us with, Duchesne Winter explains, “una mirada despojada que acaricia lo que queda después de los proyectos, de las utopías, los progresos, los desarrollos y la babelización una vez colapsa la obra humana sobre el desperdicio de su verdad.”<sup>4</sup> To caress (*acaricia*) from a dispossessed viewpoint the waste left by human projects is for Duchesne Winter part of a meticulously ethical engagement, one in which taking a position of authority is thwarted, if not rendered impossible, by an inoperative

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio José Ponte, *La fiesta vigilada*, (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2007), 203.

<sup>2</sup> Esther Kathryn Whitfield, *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and "Special Period" Fiction*, Vol. 21 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing the concept of sensation elaborated by Gilles Deleuze in his reading of Francis Bacon’s work. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Translated by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 31, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Juan Duchesne Winter, *Comunismo literario y teorías deseantes: inscripciones latinoamericanas* (La Paz, Bolivia: Plural Editores, 2009), 66.

writing.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Garaicoa's photographs of stained, peeling, damaged walls provide a shallow space that does not presume to penetrate interiorities, but instead sustains its attention on surfaces, textures, and the material.

Although Garaicoa's work will not be featured in the body of this dissertation, there are tensions in his photographic series I find especially generative for the kind of irresolute engagement I aim to sustain in my treatment of literary and visual work from the island. There is a tension between the dense, resistant opacity of the walls and the viewer's desire to recognize, identify, and make sense of the photographs, a tension between the seemingly unmediated raw data the camera records and compositions which approach the condition of language and art, as "dibujo," "escritura," and "abstracción." Against the tiny window of the camera and its promise of seeing through, of capturing, and rendering static, Garaicoa obstructs our view; we are left facing walls with un-exhaustive creative potential.

This dissertation moves across a wide expanse of time and a diversity of medias, discussing works such as Nicolás Guillén's 1930 collection of poetry and Roberto Fabelo's 2009 bronze sculptures. A guiding thread throughout this project is a form of ecological thinking; that is, an awareness of complex networks of interdependences and of the material as having its own transformative potential outside of human agency.<sup>6</sup> Given these

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<sup>5</sup> Duchesne Winter, *Comunismo literario*, 67. An inoperative writing can be understood as that which undoes imposed systems of meaning, or renders a conventionalized mode of communication dysfunctional and incomprehensible.

<sup>6</sup> In my formulations of material and territorial interdependence I am drawing from Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009) and Rosi Braidotti's *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002). In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett aims "to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance," and argues, "vibrant matter is *not* the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God," xiii. Her book challenges anthropocentrism and calls for an attentiveness to "the capacity of things [...] not only to impede or block the will and designs

dynamic relations, such a thinking necessarily acknowledges the impossibility of mastery or of knowing absolutely.<sup>7</sup> My interest in Garaicoa's photographed walls is as sites of mediation, of contact and separation; surfaces are where touch happens. Garaicoa's "caressing," as opposed to penetrating interiorities—and by this I mean the presumed access to a closed system or knowable, reproducible content—expresses an epistemological humility as well as a relational existence. If, as Jean-Luc Nancy claims, "Being is 'outside itself,'" an "exteriority that is impossible to recapture.... an outside that it cannot relate to *itself*, but with which it entertains an essential and incommensurable relation,"<sup>8</sup> then we can understand exteriors, exposures, epidermises, surfaces, artifices not as that which contain or cover an immaterial or more meaningful substance, but as the very sites of sense-making and transformation.

Starting from Jean-Luc Nancy's assertion that it is "precisely the immanence of man to man, or it is *man*, taken absolutely considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community,"<sup>9</sup> this dissertation considers works that insist on the limits of comprehension, on a writing that allows us to move away from human agents and teleological narratives, to reconsider collectivities, configurations and assemblages. Against the backdrop of the Cuban Revolution's messianic promise of *el hombre nuevo*, the State's rhetoric of progress, its violent enforcement of productivity (as in

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of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own," iii. For a literary example of complex networks see my description of Antonio José Ponte's novel *La fiesta vigilada* in the section summary of chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Samantha Frost, "The Implications of The New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology," in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, edited by H.E. Grasswick (London and New York: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 79.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Vol. 76 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 3.



the UMAP camps)<sup>10</sup> and Castro's prescription to intellectuals manifested in "Palabras a los intelectuales,"<sup>11</sup> I interrogate how particular texts and images may insist on or betray a sense of excess and unproductivity. How might the secure boundaries of the human and its attendant nationalisms and projects be unsettled? If, as Gregory Bateson argues, style and form reflect a "larger patterned universe," then I ask what kinds of relationships and contexts are brought to the fore in a particular aesthetic and what kind of reading and relating is elicited by that work? Drawing from Nancy's ethical and ontological claim that bodies are irreducible to signs and that being is located in the sensuousness that is produced in the contact and sharing of other bodies, a critical line of inquiry for me is how corporeality and material interdependence is either foregrounded or disavowed in literary and visual work produced in Cuba. What are the political and ethical implications of the creativity and craft exhibited in these works? How does their manipulation of recognizable form and received knowledge disrupt structures of authority and generate different forms of perception and relating?

Duchesne Winter's elaboration of an ethical engagement as attending to the remains of modernizing projects from a dispossessed viewpoint is especially pertinent when considering work produced in the wake of the devastating economic crisis and the questioning of the Revolution's ideals that followed the demise of the Soviet Union. The damaged architectural exteriors, the debris and rubble that surface in Garaicoa's *El dibujo*,

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<sup>10</sup> UMAP is the acronym for *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción*, the 1960's labor camps designed to rehabilitate homosexuals, religious believers and those deemed anti-social. See Ted Hencken, *Cuba: A Global Studies Handbook* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 248.

<sup>11</sup> Fidel Castro, "Palabras a los intelectuales," in *Política cultural de la Revolución Cubana*, (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977). It is in this speech where Castro famously stated "dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada."

*la escritura, la abstracción* are akin to the disposable lives<sup>12</sup> that Ena Lucía Portela and Antonio José Ponte attend to in their Havana-based novels—lives, valued as less-than-human, excised from the polis of the productive citizen. Considering the Revolutionary Cuban state’s teleological narrative and its formulation of a binary opposition between the promise of *el hombre nuevo* and the rejection of political dissidents as *gusanos* (worms) and *escoria* (scum of humanity), I’m interested in how the figure of the human is either unworked or rearticulated in literary and visual works. Given that the logic of humanist thought has often resulted in universal and totalizing structures<sup>13</sup>—and in the context of Cuba the imposition of an androcentric national subject—I focus my attention on works that unsettle the boundaries of the human and insist on an impenetrable corporeality. Visual and literary practices that privilege the material and the aesthetic over the transmission of information offer ethical alternatives to the representation of transparent subjectivities, which in turn may be appropriated and reproduced by monolithic communal projects as exclusive identities. Following Duchesne Winter’s lead, I trace instances of an inoperative writing (alphabetical and graphic) and its implications for an ethics of non-identitarian community. In Portela’s and Ponte’s novels corporeal vulnerability illustrated on both formal and representational registers undermine the presumptions of human

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<sup>12</sup> For elaborations on the notion of disposable and futureless lives see Zigmunt Bauman’s *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2004) and Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> In his essay, “Racism as Universalism,” Etienne Balibar writes, “no definition of the human species, or simply the human—something which is so crucial for universalism, or universalism as humanism—has ever been proposed which would not imply latent hierarchy. This has to do with the impossibility of fixing the boundaries of what we call “human,” or fixing the boundaries within which all human beings could possible be gathered.” *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy After Marx*, translated by James Swenson (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 197.

sovereignty and call attention to our material and territorial interdependence. Significantly, it is the parasite, or “el bicho,” and not the New Man that would seem to prevail in their novels.

In what follows, I provide a summary for each of my four dissertation chapters. I have selected works from a diversity of medias: poetry, narrative fiction, painting, sculpture, and film. Drawing from both literary and visual disciplinary practices, I provide a close reading of each work tracing the different ways in which corporeality and materiality are made manifest. My aim is to theorize from the works themselves allowing each to raise their own set of issues and questions.

### **Chapter 1. “Reading as Touching: Tracing Impenetrable Materiality in Nicolás Guillén’s *Motivos de son* and Severo Sarduy’s *Gestos*”**

While a large part of my dissertation focuses on contemporary texts and images, there are earlier works by Cuban writers that are critical for my project. My first chapter, titled “Reading as Touching: Tracing Impenetrable Materiality,” looks at Nicolás Guillén’s 1930 poetry collection, *Motivos de son*, and Severo Sarduy’s 1963 novel *Gestos*. Whereas scholars have tended to read these works as expressions of Cuban identity, I trace each text’s formal experimentations in order to argue that both authors developed literary techniques that, instead, offer lines of flight from homogenizing national discourses. The challenge to identity formation, however, does not rest solely in the literary techniques deployed, but is equally contingent upon a particular engagement from its readers. Perhaps more than offer an intervention in the literary scholarship on *Motivos de son* and *Gestos*, what this chapter aspires to do is elaborate a practice of reading that suspends the production of knowable content and, in so doing, suspends the assimilation of difference.

The title to Guillén's 1930 collection of eight short poems refers to the *son*, a popular Cuban dance form composed of both Hispanic and Bantú (African) musical elements. *Motivos de son* was published at the height of the *afrocubanismo* movement, which sought to revalorize Afro-Cuban culture and to establish a national literature through the unique composite of African and Spanish derived traditions on the island.<sup>14</sup> By 1930, references to Afro-Cuban religious practices, music, and dance populated literary production with short stories, such as "El bongó," and poems dedicated to the Rumba.<sup>15</sup> Among these musically themed literary works, *Motivos de son* stands out in its distinctively acoustic quality; that is, music is not simply a trope but a product of the poems. Rather than identify the instrumental properties of the *son* or describe the movements of its dancers, the poems in this collection structurally reproduce the rhythm of the *son*. Accompanying the poems' eight-count beat and call and response chorus, is an emphasis on the material sonority of the words. Through non-standard orthography, Guillén phonetically articulates the vernacular speech spoken in Havana's poor black neighborhoods.

*Afrocubanismo* is often understood as part of a national project of *mestizaje*, critiqued as a movement that appropriated black cultural forms in order to assimilate racial differences and mask material inequalities. In tangent with this line of criticism, the works of *afrocubanismo's*, predominantly, affluent white artists and writers have been dismissed as inauthentic representations of black Cubans that serve to reaffirm the

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<sup>14</sup> Miguel Arnedo-Gómez, *Writing Rumba: The Afrocubanista Movement in Poetry* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 1, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Gerardo del Valle's short story "El bongó," 1927; Ramón Guirao's poem "Bailadora de rumba," 1928; José Z. Tallet's poem "La rumba," 1928 are cited in Arnedo-Gómez, *Writing Rumba*, 1, 2.

hegemony of the dominant class.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, these perspectives have also structured readings of Guillén's *Motivos de son*. While some consider its avant-garde form a superficial engagement with black culture that contributes to the fantasy of racial harmony,<sup>17</sup> others have come to its by defense by either arguing for the legitimacy of Guillén's representation through his membership within the community<sup>18</sup>—himself being of mixed race parentage—or mining the poems for originary African signs where others only read sonorous play.<sup>19</sup> Miguel Arnedo-Gómez's 2016 book, *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation*, has made critical interventions in these debates. He not only underscores the essentialist logic underpinning the question of authenticity, but also shows how these critiques of *afrocubanismo* and *mestizaje* fail to consider the socio-cultural singularity of the historical Cuban context.<sup>20</sup> Where Arnedo-Gómez identifies an "antiracist didacticism" in *Motivos de son*'s contextual meaning, that is, in what its poetic speakers communicate,<sup>21</sup> I'm interested in the counterhegemonic potential of its non-semiotic matter, in precisely that which has been undermined as merely aesthetic and sonorous.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Jackson, *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1988, 2008), 26; Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 6, 153; Luis Duno-Gottberg, *Solventando las diferencias: La ideología del mestizaje en Cuba* (Madrid: Iberoamericana – Vervuert, 2003), 85, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Jorge Ruffinelli, *Poesía y descolonización: Viaje por la poesía de Nicolás Guillén* (Editorial Oasis, 1985), 19; Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets*, 154-155.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, *Black Literature*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, "Guillén as Baroque: Meaning in *Motivos de Son*," *Callaloo*, No. 31, Nicolás Guillén: A Special Issue (Spring, 1987), 313; Thomas Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 80.

<sup>20</sup> Miguel Arnedo-Gómez, *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation: Blackness, Afro-Cuban Culture and Mestizaje in the Prose and Poetry of Nicolás Guillén* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), introduction.

<sup>21</sup> Arnedo-Gómez, *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation*, 71.

To consider *Motivos de son* as impenetrable is arguably counterintuitive. One of its avant-garde characteristics is its departure from the erudite language of Hispanophone modernist poetry. The poems read like fragments of conversation; their language is quotidian, straightforward and, more notably, lacking in metaphors and symbols. And yet, it is in large part because of their seemingly accessible, transparent language that the poems pose a challenge for the literary analyst. My initial efforts to interpret, unpack, or unearth what may remain symbolically coded to the untrained reader were thwarted by the poems' playful simplicity. Any deciphering was at the level of the words' misspellings, often requiring me to phonetically pronounce the letters out loud, like someone just learning to read. And with every rereading, hoping to discover something hidden, I found myself reciting, performing an accent like a stage actor, enchanted and moved by the poems' rhythm. Rather than work against this enchantment, rather than assume a position of analytical distance, *Motivos de son*, prompted me to consider a practice of reading that withholds "making sense" or mines for signification and instead stays with the phonic material difference it makes the object of its poetry.

Notwithstanding Guillén's status as Cuba's national poet, I aim to explore how *Motivos de son* brings the reader in contact with a racial difference in such a way that works against the cooptation of that difference by nation building projects. Guillén's oeuvre is characterized by a strong sense of musicality; however, it is *Motivos*, his first collection, that most insists on the sonorous over the semiotic. Whereas his later poems contain symbolic substitutes for Afro-Cubans, and references to recognizable religious and cultural practices, the linguistic and structural composition of *Motivos*, together with the absence of metaphors, resists a practice of hermeneutics. Legible as their language is, these poems do

not invite further penetration, and instead through their rhythmic compositions solicit the repetitive performance of its phonic difference.

While Guillén's 1930 collection allows me to elaborate impenetrability through rhythm and the sonorous, Severo Sarduy's novels do so through the spatial composition of the canvas: visual artifice and two-dimensionality pervade throughout his texts. In the place of psychic or emotional depth, exteriority and surface exposition collapse the scaffoldings of mimetic representation, denying his readers the pleasure of identifying with well-formed subjects or the voyeurism of a penetrating gaze. In *Gestos* we find images of Havana covered in posters, newspapers, flyers and placards while the figure of the human is fragmented and dispersed: "aparece y desaparece, recortada, superpuesta sobre sí misma."<sup>22</sup> Set just before the triumph of the revolution, the narrative consists of the detonation of bombs, in particular one by a black female cabaret performer at an electrical plant. And yet, the word "revolution" or explicit political references are absent in the novel. Instead, Sarduy sets off his own explosives at the level of the writing: "El letrero de las puertas [...] se desintegra: CASSO, PISSO, PICA. Ruido afuera. Todo asciende y desciende [...] casas llenas de bombas, jardines, raíces, ríos, manos que dicen adiós, rifles, castillos que se viran y arden, granadas."<sup>23</sup> Having no discernable organization or internal logic, Sarduy here produces an inventory or an assemblage where "raíces, ríos, manos que dicen adios" are on a parallel plane. The "letrero" that originally read Picasso, has been disintegrated into material fragments, highlighting the tactility of text and its entanglement in the ecology of the city.

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<sup>22</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Gestos* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1963), 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

In a 1976 interview on Spanish public television with the journalist Joaquín Soler Serrano, Severo Sarduy describes his literary practice stating, “poco importa si yo le comunico un relato o no [...] Se trata de ponerlo en una situación física [...] Lo que yo le invito no es que me lean [...] sino que hagan el amor conmigo.”<sup>24</sup> Sarduy’s disinterest in communicating an intelligible message in favor of an inoperative aspect of writing corresponds to the Parisian literary trends of which he was a participant, contributing alongside Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida to the *Tel Quel* magazine. However, I find it productive to also consider how this disinterest stands in stark contrast to the cultural climate of 1970’s Cuba, particularly the state’s edict that writers and artists have a civic obligation to contribute to the narrative of progress. Following the legacy of the 1965 forced labor camps—a means to make the revolution’s “lumpen” productive— and the continued administering of Castro’s 1961 prescription to local intellectuals “Palabras a los intelectuales,” the 1970s, remembered as the “Quinquenio Gris,” would be accompanied by an increasing Sovietization, most famously marked by the poet Herberto Padilla’s 1971 forced *auto-da-fé*.<sup>25</sup> While some critics have viewed Sarduy as politically disengaged, reducing his work to “frivolous” textual games<sup>26</sup>—like the aestheticist critique waged against Guillén’s *Motivos de son*—I’m interested in teasing out the ethico-political implications of such a “physical situation.” Sarduy’s invitation, “que hagan el amor

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<sup>24</sup> Joaquín Soler Serrano, “Severo Sarduy, a fondo,” de la serie *A Fondo* de RTVE, Ministerio de Cultura, Expte. N. 63. 158, 1976.

<sup>25</sup> Guillermina De Ferrari, “Embargoed Masculinities: Loyalty, Friendship and the Role of the Intellectual in Post-Soviet Cuban Novel,” *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 35, No. 69 (Jan.-Jun., 2007), 88.

<sup>26</sup> Rolando Pérez, *Severo Sarduy and the Religion of the Text* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1988), 27. See also Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Calibán: Apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra América* (México: Editorial Diógenes, S.A., 1972), 71.



conmigo,”<sup>27</sup> as opposed to “que me lean,” calls for a practice of reading not unlike the exhortations of Jean-Luc Nancy: “One has to understand reading as something other than decipherment. Rather, as touching, as being touched. Writing, reading: matters of tact.”<sup>28</sup> In his essay “Corpus,” Nancy’s treatment of writing as material and impenetrable is critical to the unworking of a Christian metaphysics and its union of the sign and the body. Placing Nancy’s essay alongside Sarduy’s novel allows me to bring corporeality and its ecological entanglements to the foreground of my reading.<sup>29</sup> In each we find a practice of writing that refuses to lay out an explicit political project or to represent a subjectivity, insisting instead on sensuousness and on the contact between bodies as a weave of collective fabric.

Through *Gestos* and *Motivos de son* this first chapter explores a particular ethics of reading. Sarduy’s and Guillén’s texts allow me to theorize a practice of “caressing” (Duchesne Winter) or “touching” (Nancy) that which has been discarded by, or remains in excess to, totalizing nationalist projects. The seeming simplicity and playfulness of *Motivos*

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<sup>27</sup> Although the imperative “que hagan el amor conmigo,” might imply corporeal penetration (as well as psychic and emotional penetration), I would argue that, following a Nancian-ontology, this depth remains at the surface of the skin or the material. In his reading of Nancy’s formulation of being-outside, Ian James writes, “matter or materiality is always an outside or an impenetrable element since we know that objects are touched, seen, sensed and given sense only from the outside and from this relation of exteriority, of objects touching each other in a mutual distance or separation (if we open them up, dissect, X-ray, scan, or hugely magnify them we are simply creating another exterior surface or relation of contact-separation of sense.)” *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 143.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpus,” in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>29</sup> While the notion of ecology is never made explicit in Nancy’s essay, for him bodies only come into existence in the exposure and proximity to other bodies. Writing and ideas, furthermore, are conceived not as immaterial but as being irreducibly corporeal. Nancy’s and Sarduy’s texts, I suggest, express an ecological sensibility in their proliferating configurations and assemblages where the distinctions between artifice and organism, interior and exterior, are collapsed. Their work renders impossible the isolation or compartmentalization of any one body.

*de son* is incongruous with Sarduy's deconstructive language. And yet, as I will demonstrate, both *Motivos* and *Gestos*—one through the sonorous, the other through ocular means—work against transparency or the penetration of an interiority. Both writers keep their readers on the surface and at the same time do the critical work of bringing to the fore a difference or, to use Jacques Rancière's formulation, they "redistribute the sensible."<sup>30</sup> I'm interested in examining how they accomplish this while resisting the tendency to convert that difference into a property. In other words, how might a particular aesthetic or formal experimentation change the coordinates of dominant perceptions so that race, class, gender, sexuality, or species material differences are made palpable while sustaining their irreducibility to a politics of representation.

## **Chapter 2. "Transmaterialities: Incorrect Anatomies in Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* and Roberto Fabelo's Art"**

In my second chapter, I pair Sarduy's 1972 novel *Cobra* with the work of contemporary visual artist Roberto Fabelo. Titled "Transmaterialities," this second chapter considers the reconfiguration of discrete anatomies and the manipulation of conventionalized modes of knowledge production. Taking, for instance, Fabelo's repurposing of a medical encyclopedia, this chapter interrogates the consequences and political implications of tampering with authoritative materials. I explore how these adaptations or interventions complicate and de-familiarize received knowledge while generating new and imaginative forms of relating.

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, edited and translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).

In a novel like *Cobra*, where art historical references abound and the protagonist is at one point described as “maquillada con violencia,” “desde los pies hasta el cuello es mujer; arriba su cuerpo se transforma en una especie de animal heráldico de hocico barroco,”<sup>31</sup> creativity and craft continuously manipulate and denature human forms. A process of “dehumanization” might also be said to occur at the level of the writing, as conventions of representation—through which we order and understand the world—are made inoperative. The indistinction between diegetic and exegetic passages renders a single coherent interpretation impossible, for instance, where it becomes unclear for the reader what is transpiring within the frame of the main narrative versus that of a *mise-en-scène*—the description of a painted canvas or a staged performance. These vanguard techniques do not simply elicit an “active” reader but rather submit the reader through a process of “unknowing relating,”<sup>32</sup> continuously destabilizing their position as a knowing subject.

While Sarduy is no doubt engaged in linguistic deconstruction, what interests me are the consequences this engagement has for the humanist figure of the indivisible body. Mutations, mutilations, drag performances, theatrics, cosmetics and tattoos, are recurring tropes throughout his work. Bodies never emerge in isolation, but always as part of configurations and collectivities. *Cobra*’s baroque aesthetic consistently brings the reader’s attention to material encounters: at the limits of comprehension, the mechanics of writing become tactile and the links between the body and its sign come undone. Invoking a Nancian ontology where bodies do not incarnate ideas and words do not incarnate

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<sup>31</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Cobra* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1972).

<sup>32</sup> I am borrowing this term from Santiago Colas’ essay “Toward an Ethics of Close Reading in the Age of Neo-Liberalism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 7, number 3, Winter 2007, pp. 171-211.

thoughts, as thoughts themselves are weighty bodies, in Sarduy's work bodies, texts and paintings—the organic and the artificial—share a single plane of immanence.<sup>33</sup> We see this emphatically in a passage from *Cobra* where a “Dermic Silversmith” paints elaborate designs on the bodies of the drag performers, “decorando las divas con sus arabescos teta por teta.” On their hands, using “azafrán y bermellón,” the same colors of henna tattoos, the silversmith writes “los textos de entrada a escena.”<sup>34</sup> Textuality here is produced not on an inert, flat, surface that passively receives the writing, but on one that is supple, porous, irregular, absorbent and curvilinear; textuality, moreover, is not only semiotic. At times, tiny, consistent and tightly spaced, its graphemes appear like a decorative non-representational design. Later the madam of the club, “las revisaba, les pegaba las pestañas y una etiqueta OK,” as though the flesh and blood performers were dolls moving down a conveyor belt on an assembly line.<sup>35</sup>

Roberto Fabelo's drawings, paintings and sculptures also continuously manipulate and denature human forms through creativity and craft. In a series of ink drawings over the pages of a nineteenth century medical encyclopedia containing illustrations of human anatomy, Fabelo produces a catalogue of figures displaying zoological physiognomies. Overlapping the precise, uniform incisions of the text's original engravings with sketchy, gestural cross-hatching, Fabelo transforms tissue, capillaries, cavities, muscles and bone into aesthetic material. While these images produce hybrid morphologies on an iconographic level, a critical question is whether the crossing of species identities remains at the safe distance of the fantastic. Much like Severo Sarduy, a process of

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpus,” 17.

<sup>34</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

“dehumanization” occurs at the level of the work’s reception. Fabelo’s compositions undermine representational techniques that presume unmediated access to the “natural” world, a logic that has served the means of producing taxonomic classifications. Bearing in mind the Cuban revolution’s promise of *el hombre nuevo*, I consider Fabelo’s trans-species bodies (as well as Sarduy’s metamorphosing protagonists) as deterritorializations of nationalistic and teleological narratives. The persistence of roaches—often considered the only potential survivors of an environmental catastrophe—and the inversion of scales in his pieces suggest a nuclear imaginary, situating the island within a planetary configuration. Alongside the roaches we also find references to Cuban art history—conch shells, roosters, full-bodied nudes, vibrant color pallets and baroque compositions—entangled and impossible to disaggregate from a shared materiality that exceeds Cuban or even Caribbean identity-markers.

Given that so much of the Cuban state’s *período especial* (Special Period in Time of Peace) rhetoric relied on evoking the threats of the Cold War era and the Missile Crisis to justify its inability to provide citizens with basic needs after the loss of Soviet subsidies, it is not surprising to find allusions to the effects of an atomic holocaust and more generally to the theme of survival.<sup>36</sup> One such piece, from 2009 titled *Sobrevivientes* by Fabelo, has been described as “giant mutant roaches” that result from “the aftermath of a nuclear war or prolonged environmental pollution.”<sup>37</sup> In an interview regarding the installation, Fabelo explains that the piece is a “reference to today’s world where man in some form or another is surviving” and that “we do not know if it is the roach that turns into man or the other

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<sup>36</sup> Whitfield, *Cuban Currency*, 143.

<sup>37</sup> David John Carton, <http://www.fotolibra.com/gallery/533546/giant-mutant-cockroaches-havana>

way around.”<sup>38</sup> The indeterminacy of the piece—is it a de- or re- humanization?—can be understood as a simultaneous attraction to the metamorphic potential of the insect<sup>39</sup> and its ability to survive, as well as an anxiety regarding ecological and political issues.

The indeterminism, creative transformations, and transgressions of normative conventions that Sarduy and Fabelo evoke are not without discomfort and pain. Indeed, we might imagine Fabelo’s human-roaches as the forced morphogenesis of an ecological disaster. Returning to *Cobra*, the trope of tattooing links art, skin, and pain, as suggested in the name Dermic Silversmith. Drawing from both poststructuralism and new materialisms, this chapter intersects two theoretical camps often treated as mutually exclusive. I argue that Sarduy and Fabelo demonstrate how performative (un)doings of social constructs, be that gender or species identity, are imbedded in lived material relations.

### **Chapter 3. “Inhuman Writings: Roaches, Parasites, and Radiation in Ena Lucía Portela’s *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* and Antonio José Ponte’s *La fiesta vigilada*”**

The simultaneous attraction and anxiety Fabelo’s roach sculptures inspire is also operative in the work of contemporary writers. In Antonio José Ponte’s seminal novel, *La fiesta vigilada*, for instance, buildings and trash are anthropomorphized and the people inhabiting Havana’s ruins appear at different moments as parasites, insects and even algae. As Esther Whitfield has suggested, the inhabitants of Ponte’s ruins are at once agents of “decay and hope.”<sup>40</sup> While Ponte assigns culpability to the regime for creating the living conditions in which people have been reduced to a parasitic state of being, it is their very

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<sup>38</sup> “Montaje de Sobrevivientes,” *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, 10 ma Edición de la Bienal de la Habana, Video, March 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 149.

<sup>40</sup> Whitfield, *Cuban Currency*, 144.

parasitic attributes that have allowed them to survive. Ponte's ambivalence leads me to consider the critical question of how a literary or visual piece might do the work of protesting "inhuman" or "dehumanizing" conditions while not appealing to a transcendental humanism or resorting to the discourse of human rights. This question and what I read as a simultaneous attraction and anxiety towards the potential of nonhuman becomings, serve as the foundation for chapter three, "Inhuman Writings: Roaches, Parasites, and Radiation."

"Inhuman Writings," pairs Ena Lucía Portela's 1998 novel, *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* with Ponte's *La fiesta vigilada*. In both novels we find characters deemed futureless and abandoned; their means of surviving abject conditions are at once the source of nonhuman becomings and a practice of writing. Echoing Fabelo's thought that today "man in some form or another is surviving," Portela's novel foregrounds inhospitable environments, the effects of radiation on a human body, and the roach as a figurative trope. Although allegorical readings might treat *El pájaro* as a critique of the economic and political climate of post-soviet Cuba, I suggest that Portela does more than signal her immediate context; she turns our attention from the rhetoric of the state to the larger legacy of the Humanist (androcentric) tradition. A male character that physically resembles a figure from a Renaissance painting and devotes his time to translating ancient Greek texts is guilty of domestic violence and rape. A desacralization of the Humanities and a deauthorization of the figure of the writer is also performed through meta-textual references. For instance, Portela's narrator will dismiss certain literary practices as fashionable trends, such as Neo-Barroquismo, while very consciously participating in those same trends. Further undermining the position of the author, a writer in the novel with

biographical links to Portela is referred to as a “fucking mosquito.”<sup>41</sup> And later the first person narrator will state, “Me fascina figurar en mis inventos como las moscas en la comida vieja y los guajacones en el fanguito.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, creative production here is not that which humanizes or transcends mere material subsistence, but is imminent and interdependent, even parasitic, on a particular territory.

Like Sarduy and Fabelo, Portela subverts conventions of representation and transforms scientific-medical devices that presume to expose interiors, as that of an X-ray, into impenetrable aesthetic material. While she explores the dehumanizing processes of an institution like a psychiatric ward, she also questions the boundaries between humans and animals. Her protagonist/narrator is a survivor who does not disavow her being other than “humano ciento por ciento,”<sup>43</sup> nor does she aim to transcend her conditions through a revelatory writing that makes truth claims, but instead “se propone a descubrir cuerpos, latencias, enanos, y sirenas de trapo.”<sup>44</sup> Through a perspective that is “anormal,” she reconfigures received abstractions—“los garabatos y fórmulas [del] orador”<sup>45</sup>—into a series of differentiating agencies.

Ponte’s and Portela’s novel do the important work of making visible lives on the margins of society and their survival of inhospitable conditions. And where such survival might conventionally signal the endurance of “human spirit,” their work insists, instead, on a shared corporeality and nonhuman attributes. While Portela’s novel draws parallels between the figure of the writer and mosquitos, flies, and roaches, Ponte’s unnamed

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<sup>41</sup> Ena Lucía Portela, *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* (Barcelona: Editorial Casiopea, S.L., 1998), 146.

<sup>42</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



narrator—a writer who has not only been blacklisted, but whose civic identity has been bureaucratically erased—adopts the same parasitic attributes he observes in the inhabitants of Havana’s ruins, who simultaneously destroy and sustain their host structures. Ponte’s narrator similarly repurposes and reconfigures found texts; the novel reads like an assemblage of retold movie plots, spy fiction, historical events, journalistic information, scholarly essays, and personal reflections. Through the trope of the inhabited ruins—reiterated in the composition of the novel—Ponte underscores complex networks of interdependencies. The porosity of the decomposing buildings makes the boundaries between interior and exterior indistinct and the buildings’ precarious conditions heighten the intricate relations of their surroundings. At one point the narrator speculates if it was the slamming of a refrigerator door from a neighboring apartment that brought the collapse of the entire structure. These ruins, which often appear animated and defy the principles of physics in Ponte’s novel, point to the limitations of an instrumental and compartmentalizing logic. The buildings and its inhabitants are, in effect, part of an ecology from which they cannot be disaggregated, exemplifying Bennet’s statement that “in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.”<sup>46</sup>

Through Ponte’s and Portela’s expressed affinity with the animal, I consider creative production not as that which establishes a distinction between “culture” and “nature” but instead does the opposite and, in so doing, challenges a politics that relies on the distinction between exploitable material resource and recognizable political subjects. In various Spanish American literary texts the slaughterhouse has served as an allegorical device to

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<sup>46</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

address a series of social and political issues, most significantly the dehumanization of the disenfranchised.<sup>47</sup> In my reading of Portela's and Ponte's novels, I complicate the possibility of an allegorical interpretation, or of simply reading animals as metaphoric stand-ins and, in so doing, also complicate the equivalence between the nonhuman and the abject.

#### **Chapter 4. "The Body Politic and Immunitary Spaces: Hospitality and Friendship in *Fresa y chocolate*"**

In contrast to my first chapter, where I aim to sustain my attention on materiality, providing an aesthetic analysis at the micro level of the sentence, my fourth chapter will provide a more characterological-based reading and consequently bring me to consider individual subjects as well as (de)articulations of the nation. Doing so allows me to interrogate alternative representations to that of the human self as a free and self-determining agent, while also rethinking notions of interiority that would compliment and also complicate the concept of impenetrable materiality that runs throughout this project. If inoperativity and excess is mapped on a formal register in my previous readings, here I consider subjects inassimilable to totalizing national projects. With a particular emphasis on friendship and hospitality in relation to the body politic, my reading of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1993 film, *Fresa y chocolate*, draws from Roberto Esposito's work where "the body is understood as a functioning construct that is open to continuous exchange with its surrounding environment." In other words, identity and the body are not conceived as closed and monolithic units and "interior" and "exterior" are mutually constituted through

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<sup>47</sup> Gabriel Giorgi, *Formas comunes: animalidad, cultura, biopolítica*, (Eterna Cadencia Editora: 2014), 128, 129.

porous and fluid boundaries. Esposito's conceptualization of "immunitas,"<sup>48</sup> as both a political and biological structure that includes by excluding and visa versa, prompts me to consider the dynamics of friendship and hospitality—the dominant modes of exchange within Gutiérrez Alea's film—through a corporeal and ecological lens, once again bringing to foreground an interdependence. Significantly, I hope to underscore vulnerability and an ethics of incommensurable debt to an other, countering the hubris of the Revolution's impervious and heroically righteous New Man.<sup>49</sup> Put differently, if what the New Man represents is a future community, a telos realized through the logic of sacrifice, then my reading of this film will bring to the fore a consubstantiality and an "irreducible and inoperative difference."<sup>50</sup>

Gutiérrez Alea's film, *Fresa y chocolate*, responds to the call of incorporating those who had been excluded by the Cuban Revolution, specifically its gay citizens. Presenting us with a radical friendship between a homophobic, militant communist and a gay, suspected counter-revolutionary, the film inverts classical paradigms of friendship based on similitude. Set in 1970's Cuba, a period of exceptional vigilance, the interior of the home becomes a site for ethico-political practice and personal interactions acquire the revolutionary significance of public demonstrations. While the larger narrative of the film advocates for a politics of assimilation, paying close attention to expressions of vulnerability, dissymmetry and irreconcilable differences, the film unworks the notion of

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<sup>48</sup> In its biological and political signification, the term refers to the aporetic structure in which "[t]he body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body." Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity, 2002, 2014) 8.

<sup>49</sup> Marta Hernández Salván, *Mínima Cuba: Heretical Poetics and Power in Post-Soviet Cuba* (SUNY Press, 2015), 48, 49.

<sup>50</sup> Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 203.

community as shared identity and gestures towards an ethics of hospitality. Betrayals and disguised intentions between the two friends place them in danger of political persecution and exclusion from their respective communities. In its representation of friendship and the risks it necessarily entails, Gutiérrez Alea's film points to experiences of insecurity and un-belonging as that which create the possibility for political transformation.

Staging a large part of the film within "la guarida," a leading character's name for his apartment, the film has been associated with the proverbial closet, generating readings of the film as "la salida de la guarida." However, drawing from its significations—den, hide out, refuge, or cover—I read "la guarida," as an immunitary space, or an attempt thereof. Recalling Esposito's understanding of the immunitary system and its inseparable relation to *communitas*, as each constitutes the boundaries of the other, this aporetic structure prompts me to consider how our understanding of incorporation within the film might be complicated. Given that queer theorists have strongly critiqued *Fresa y chocolate* as an attempt to neutralize the oppositional charge of the homosexual figure—a threat to the integrity of the body politic—through a cultural incorporation,<sup>51</sup> I argue that the logic of inoculation might offer a different reading. Significantly, Esposito tells us "This homeopathic protection practice—which excludes by including and affirms by negating—does not consume itself without leaving traces on the constitution of its object."<sup>52</sup> Following Esposito's thinking, in its incorporation of the gay man through a national allegory, *Fresa y*

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<sup>51</sup> See José Quiroga, "Cuba: la desaparición de la homosexualidad," in *Una ventana a Cuba y los estudios cubanos*, edited by Amalia Cabezas, Ivette N. Hernández-Torres, et al., (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Callejón, 2010) and Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, "Lecciones de *cubanía*: identidad nacional y errancia sexual en Senel Paz, Martí y Lezama Lima," *Cuban Studies* 29, (Jan 01, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

*chocolate* affirms the oppositional charge it aims to deactivate. And the foreign bodies it wished to expulse necessarily contaminate the body politic.

## Conclusion

In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy explains that the failure of communist projects wasn't that its ideals were betrayed, but that its main ideal was problematic: "human beings defined as producers...human beings defined at all."<sup>53</sup> He presents the humanist archetype of the indivisible self as a totalitarian form since its articulation can only be achieved through a work of death. That is, the desire for immanence, an interiority without relation—the closure of the absolute—or communion of individuals within a mystical body, or head of state—calls for the "the extermination of the other," as it seeks to eliminate all that is extraneous to its circumscribed identity.<sup>54</sup>

Guided by Nancy's exhortations, this project emerged as an effort to imagine community in non-identitarian terms, "to think community at its limits," Roberto Esposito encourages us to do, to foreground ways of relating that are conventionally imperceptible, challenging dominant modes of seeing and organizing bodies. In so doing has necessarily brought me to consider material ecologies, trans-species bodies, and the undermining of the individual sovereign subject. While the rhetoric and practices of the Cuban Revolutionary state provides a foil for such considerations, I do not wish to construct my own national literary or artistic history or to engage in explicit dialogue with the policies of the State in relation to cultural production. Instead, I attend to extra-institutional and non-

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<sup>53</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, passim.

official politico-ethical practices, to the aesthetic, the material, and the points of touch between bodies.

## Chapter 1

### “Reading as Touching: Tracing Impenetrable Materiality in Nicolás Guillén’s *Motivos de son* and Severo Sarduy’s *Gestos*”

#### Introduction

In the literary supplement of the Havana newspaper, *Diario de la Marina*, under *Ideales de una raza*, a subsection meant to attract Afro-Cuban readers, Nicolás Guillén’s collection of eight poems titled *Motivos de son* was first published in 1930.

The collection features a cast of eight characters, stereotypes of black Cubans drawn from vaudeville-like shows, such as the pimp, the *mulata*, and the dandy.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more striking than the ironic adaptation of these codified figures was the graphic appearance of non-standard orthography, reproducing the vernacular speech spoken in Havana’s poor black neighborhoods. The collection’s opening eight syllabic line, “¿Po qué te pone tan brabo,”<sup>2</sup> with its repetitive bilabial consonants, the missing *r* at the end of “Po” [por], and the use of *b* instead of *v* in “brabo” [bravo], make it almost irresistible to read silently. In fact, the poems’ misspelled words would require most non-native speakers to phonetically sound

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<sup>1</sup> María Golán, “El grotesco popular en la obra de Nicolás Guillén: *Motivos de son*” in Barchino, Matías, and María Rubio Martín, eds. *Nicolás Guillén: hispanidad, vanguardia y compromiso social*. No. 79. (Ediciones de Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2004), 303. Golán posits that Guillén’s stereotypical personages are ironic critiques, intentionally drawn from popular theatrical shows, 330. See also Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría, “Guillén as Baroque: Meaning in *Motivos de Son*,” *Callaloo*, No. 31, Nicolás Guillén: A Special Issue (Spring, 1987), 311. However, it was not the general consensus that these characters were ironic adaptations. While some readers, as I will note ahead, found these poetic speakers to be (non-ironic) offensive stereotypes of black Cubans, others like Nancy Morejon in a 1972 essay, considered them audacious for representing black working class archetypes, “Su obra: Introducción,”

[http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portales/nicolas\\_guillen/su\\_obra\\_introduccion/](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portales/nicolas_guillen/su_obra_introduccion/)

<sup>2</sup> Nicolás Guillén, *Obra poética 1920-1958, tomo I* (La Habana: Instituto Cubano del libro, 1972), 103. All citations of *Motivos de son* are taken from this edition.

out its letters in order to determine their meaning. With the stanza “sin acoddadte de mí”<sup>3</sup> one might repeat it several times, fumbling with its multiple *d*'s at the tip of the tongue and behind the teeth. Among *Motivos de son*'s playful banter and colloquial vocabulary, we also find sonorous refrains composed of Afro-phonemes, “sóngoro cosongo,”<sup>4</sup> that remain indecipherable, at least to the inexpert philologist. Adding to its auditory and performative quality, the structure of the poems follows that of the *son*, a popular Cuban dance form composed of both Hispanic and Bantu (African) musical elements. The poems' eight count rhythm and call and response chorus might induce in its readers steady forward propulsion with a subtle sway in the hips and the shoulders, as they pronounce the words out loud, imitating an accent like a stage actor, an impersonator, or a ventriloquist.

*Motivos*' departure from traditional rhyme schemes and syllabic counts, its irreverent break with the polished and erudite language of modernist Hispanophone poetry, and its textual reproduction of a popular musical form, not only challenged aesthetic sensibilities, winning Guillén immediate praise from the literary vanguard, but also the self-image of affluent black Cubans.<sup>5</sup> Having placed so much stock in the cultivation of literature and the mastery of language, Cuba's black bourgeoisie found the picaresque

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<sup>3</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Golán provides a good summary of the initial reception of *Motivos de son* in her essay, “El grotesco popular.” See also Frank Andre Guirdy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), where he explains that representations like those in *Motivos*, which “foregrounded... the cultural practices and the material conditions of the working classes,” were “shunned by aspiring-class and elite blacks.” These representations “challenged the tenets of racial respectability touted by black institutions,” 118. Along similar lines, see Thomas Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 4, and Vera Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 152.



poems' lack of linguistic formality and allusions to the working classes damaging to their efforts of assimilation and racial equality.<sup>6</sup> Nicolás Guillén was not the first to articulate an Afro-Hispano speech in a literary context if we recall seventeenth century writers such as Lope de Vega, Góngora and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.<sup>7</sup> Critics have noted these Spanish Golden Age approximations of slaves' creolized language were often placed adjacent to that of monolingual speakers, with the aim of producing humoristic and parodic effects.<sup>8</sup> Closer to Guillén's temporal and geographical context, starting in the 1920's, there is a surge of African inspired images and sounds in the cultural production of Cuba and other Caribbean islands. In the Puerto Rican author Luis Pales Matos' 1928 poem "Danza negra," and the Cuban José Zacarías Tallet's "La Rumba" from that same year, we find onomatopoeic phrases composed of Afro-phones, Caribbean and African nations listed alongside each other, references to folklore and popular dance forms that "vibrate" with the "soul" of Africa, "El alma africana que vibrando está/ en el ritmo gordo del mariyandá" (Pales Matos).<sup>9</sup> Whereas Pales Matos' and Tallet's poems are narrated in third person, situated in particular contexts, "Haití, Martinica, Congo, Camerún" (Pales Matos), and ripe with visual images, "Ella mueve una nalga, ella mueve la otra./ Él se estira, se encoge, dispara la grupa" (Tallet), the first-person speakers in Guillén's *Motivos* perform, as it were, on a bare stage,

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<sup>6</sup> Guirdy, *Forging Diaspora*, 118.

<sup>7</sup> Adriana Tous, *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1971), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Ángel M. Aguirre, "Elementos Afronegroides en dos poemas de Luis de Góngora y Argote y en cinco villancicos de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," *Acti del Convegno di Roma*, March 15-16 1995, Vol. 1, 296-298. Aguirre specifies that with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, by contrast, the reproduction of black voices is not meant to be parodic but instead to demonstrate their religious devotion to Catholicism, 307.

<sup>9</sup> Luis Palés Matos, *Tutún de pasa y grifería* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1993), 95-96. José Zacarías Tallet, "La rumba" (Biblioteca Virtual Universal, 2003).

with no scenic descriptors or folkloric props, and little to no visual cues.<sup>10</sup> In effect, Guillén distills the sonorous, isolates an Afro-Cuban speech on the page, making its tonality and texture its sole poetic object, if not also the graphic materialization of an incorrect writing: “tu inglés era de etrai guan,/ de etrai guan y guan tu tri.”

Rather than referring to Africa by name or symbols, rather than describing “vibrations” and “rhythms,” rather than identifying the properties of the *son*, Guillén’s 1930 collection, as I aim to explore further, produces the rhythm of the *son* and the sound of Afro-Cuban speech through its composition, grammar, and orthography, that is, the minima of language. With respect to representation and its politics, one of my aims in this chapter is to consider the ethical implications of foregrounding the sonorous over a semiotics of words and images. If vibrations in *Motivos de son* are not *seen*, offering no narrative description of dancing bodies, I suggest vibrations have the potential to be *felt* in the process of reading the poems. This prompts a central question for this chapter: how might reading solicited as an affective, visceral process, instead of one that mines for signification, complicate representation and generate a different relationship with the Other?

Notwithstanding Guillén’s status as Cuba’s national poet, I aim to explore how *Motivos* brings the reader in contact with a racial difference in such a way that resists its assimilation and co-optation by nationalist projects. In the second half of this chapter, I will turn to the work of another writer who might be considered Guillén’s stylistic and political

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<sup>10</sup> Jose Quiroga describes the characters in *Motivos de son* as speaking “without mediation or contextual setting on the page. No scene is described: these are actual performances that use the black rhythmic idioms of the *son*.” “Spanish American Poetry from 1922 to 1975,” *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, vol. 1, edited by Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría and Enrique Pupo Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 336.

opposite. While Severo Sarduy's abstract and disorienting texts are anathema to the seeming simplicity and playfulness of *Motivos de son*, both Camagüey-born writers allow me to theorize an ethics of reading where the expert interpretive practices of the literary analyst must give way to a sensuous and "unknowing relation."<sup>11</sup> While Guillén's 1930 collection takes on a materiality through rhythm and the sonorous, Severo Sarduy's 1963 novel *Gestos* does so through the spatial composition of the canvas: visual artifice and two-dimensionality pervade throughout the text. As I hope to illustrate, both writers keep their readers on the surface and at the same time do the critical work of bringing to the fore a difference. In this chapter I try to imagine how it might be possible to accomplish this foregrounding while avoiding the pitfalls of converting difference into a property; that is, a positive substance that belongs to and is proper to a subject, a substance that can be reflected in institutions and heads of state, reproduced and commoditized. Through the work of Guillén and Sarduy, I consider how certain aesthetic or formal experimentations, in tangent with a particular practice of reading, can change the coordinates of dominant perceptions so that race, class, gender, sexuality, or species material differences are made palpable while sustaining their irreducibility to a politics of representation.

With Sarduy's *Gestos* we cross the historical divide marked by the 1959 Revolution, an event with providential weight. That said, Guillén's and Sarduy's periods share the hubris of modernizing projects and the articulation of a national subject. While Guillén's early poems coincide with the preoccupation of establishing an ethnic national identity, a mulatto fusion, or "color cubano," Sarduy's texts might be seen against the backdrop of

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<sup>11</sup> I am borrowing this term from an essay by Santiago Colas' that has been very influential in my thinking of reading, as a practice and its ethical implications: "Toward an Ethics of Close Reading in the Age of Neo-Liberalism," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 7, number 3, Winter 2007, pp. 171-211.

establishing a revolutionary subject and an ideal communist society. In an article titled “Pintura y revolución” published on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, 1959, Sarduy warns against a post-revolutionary tendency to prescribe an art that is figurative with “cuadros que ‘signifiquen’ algo, que den opiniones...”<sup>12</sup>

Sí, queremos arte nacional, pero puede hacerse pintura nacional sin llenar los cuadros de guajiros y palmas, puede hacerse teatro nacional donde no aparezcan gallegos y negritos, puede hacerse poesía nacional que no cante a los turistas y a los soldados.<sup>13</sup>

The instrumentalization of an art work, making it signify within and contribute to the progressive narrative of the Revolution would be implied in Castro’s famous quote, “dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada” from his 1961 speech, “Palabras a los intelectuales.”<sup>14</sup> As we shall see through close readings of *Gestos*—a novel that could be summarized as the detonation of bombs in 1959 Havana and, accordingly, a representation of the revolution and *Cubanidad*—Sarduy very consciously works against such purposive notions of art and identitarian politics.

Although his appeals against a didactic Social Realist art were already formulated in his 1959 article, another context should be noted when we consider Sarduy’s aesthetics. In 1960 he leaves on a state scholarship to study Art Restoration in Paris.<sup>15</sup> There he would befriend Roland Barthes and immerse himself in the intellectual world of the poststructuralists, contributing alongside Derrida, Lacan and Sollers to the *Tel Quel*

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<sup>12</sup> Severo Sarduy, “Pintura y revolución,” *Revolución*, January 31st, 1953, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Sarduy, “Pintura y revolución,” 14.

<sup>14</sup> Fidel Castro, “Palabras a los intelectuales,” in *Política cultural de la Revolución Cubana*, (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Mercedes Sarduy, *Severo Sarduy: Cartas a mi hermana en La Habana* (Coral Gables, Florida: Severo Sarduy Cultural Foundation, 2013), 73.

journal.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, Sarduy's novels are distinguished by their semiotic displacements and the prevalence of diegetic passages over the elaboration of plot and characters. When his student visa expired in 1961, Sarduy stayed in Paris, never returning to Cuba. Given his deep familial attachments and expressed desire to return home, Roberto González Echevarría speculates Sarduy's decision to remain in exile was in part out fear of persecution as a homosexual and a dissident: "Ya para esa fecha [1961] el gobierno cubano daba claros indicios de que llegaría a convertirse en un régimen totalitario.... [E]mpezó también por esas fechas la persecución sistemática de disidentes políticos, entre ellos muchos homosexuales, entre los que se encontraban no pocos artistas."<sup>17</sup>

In sharp contrast to Guillén, who was assigned the title of National Poet and served as the first president to the *Unión de escritores y artistas de Cuba* in 1961, Sarduy, as a writer in exile, would be become persona non grata to the Cuban establishment; up until he died in 1993 none of his works had been published or reviewed in Cuba.<sup>18</sup> Considering their positions in relation to the state and the distinctiveness of their literary styles, my pairing of Guillén and Sarduy is at first glance incongruous. However, my interest in Guillén's vanguard *Motivos de son* and Sarduy's neo-vanguard *Gestos* is in a politics implicit in their formal experimentations and the type of reader engagements they solicit.

In developing an ethics and practice of reading from their literary texts, I have found the work of three theorists to be especially generative; in this chapter I devote space to the elaboration of their thought as they also inform organizing concepts for the dissertation as

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<sup>16</sup> Lucía Guerra, *Ciudad, género e imaginarios urbanos en la narrativa latinoamericana* (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1960), 255. Roberto González Echevarría, ed., *De donde son los cantantes* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedras S.A., 1993), 20, 21.

<sup>17</sup> González Echevarría, ed., *De donde son los cantantes*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

a whole. The poet and critic Fred Moten helps me better formulate the relationship between racial difference and aesthetics. In his book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Moten considers how the conceptualization of the avant-garde and its production are antithetical to black politics, since they rely on Eurocentric notions of historical progress and the appropriation of non-European forms (made rhetorically and materially possible through colonialism), as in Modernist Primitivism and, arguably, the *Afrocubanismo* movement of which *Motivos de son* is considered exemplary. However, “oxymoronically,” Moten asserts, “the avant-garde is a black thing [...] and blackness is an avant-garde thing.”<sup>19</sup> In their rupture from dominant culture, their experimentalism, illegibility, and marginal status, blackness and the avant-garde, Moten argues, are the material surplus, the remainders reproduced in very processes that attempt to subjugate and appropriate them. Black performance, as “the extremity that is often unnoticed as mere accompaniment to (reasoned) utterance,”<sup>20</sup> he writes, “embodies the critique of value, or private property, of the sign.”<sup>21</sup> Eco-feminist Jane Bennett’s concept of “vibrant matter,” to which I will turn at the end of the chapter, similarly theorizes materiality in a way that challenges systems of exchange value, semiotics, or any other such sciences of equivalence.<sup>22</sup> To think matter as vibrant, rather than inert and passive, demands a reexamination of the logics of utility and exploitation. Moten’s and Bennett’s combined theorization on animated materiality support my efforts to consider the merely aesthetic or technical aspects of Guillén’s and Sarduy’s work as having an ethico-political potential, in

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<sup>19</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 32-33.

<sup>20</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).

their resistance to instrumentality and their thwarting of the knowing subject. Finally, the post-structuralist Jean Luc Nancy's notion of reading as touching, as opposed to a practice of decipherment or the culling of knowable content, prompts me to dwell on the tactility of language in Sarduy's *Gestos*, much like the triple *d*'s in Guillén's poetry. Through close readings of Nancy's philosophical texts on corporeality, intertwined with those of Sarduy's novel, in the second half of the chapter, I further elaborate a practice of reading that sustains an impenetrability. Reading Sarduy and Nancy alongside each other allows me to complicate the difference between literature and philosophy and its attendant binary distinctions between body and soul.

### **The Logic of Incorporation**

The social significance of showcasing in poetry a music and a speech, which had been disparaged by the cultural elite at that time, cannot be overstated. In his famous prologue to *Sóngoro Cosongo*, the collection immediately following *Motivos de son*, Guillén himself acknowledges, "No ignoro, desde luego, que estos versos les repugnan a muchas personas, porque ellos tratan asuntos de los negros del pueblo." Matching the audacity of his poetry, Guillén's response to this "repugnance" is "No me importa. O mejor dicho: me alegra."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, following Jacques Rancière, we might say that Guillén's placing of black working-class speech on the stage of high-art demonstrates a redistribution of the sensible, in which the distinguishing (sonic and linguistic) features of a particular racial and class

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<sup>23</sup> Nicolás Guillén, *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931), *Obra poética: 1920-1972. Tomo I* (La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1974), 111-132.

population, whose cultural imports had been unrecognized, are accorded poetic value.<sup>24</sup> Before considering artistic movements such as *afroantilleanism* or *afrocubanismo*, it is important to remember the rhetoric and policies that followed four hundred years of slavery and natal alienation. Latin American and Caribbean nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalist projects went to great lengths to pathologize, criminalize, and deny the persistence of African cultural practices. Discourses that circulated imagined Latin America as an organism sick with racial impurities, prescribing miscegenation as a form of diluting these pollutants and social progress through an education that located the birth of civilization in ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>25</sup> In the first decades of Cuba's independence (1902), the *comparsas*, carnival processions with musical roots in African religious rituals, were banned, as were the religious Afro-Cuban secret societies of *nañingos*.<sup>26</sup> Political organization along racial lines had also been made illegal, leading to protests by black and mulatto Cubans; the military's brutal response to these demonstrations resulted in what historians now call the "Racist Massacre of 1912."<sup>27</sup> In addition to these laws, there was the continuation of Christian missionary work, a colonial Spanish education, and government

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<sup>24</sup> Jacques Rancier, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, edited and translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 10. "There is...an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics.... This aesthetics...can be understood...as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise.... Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."

<sup>25</sup> Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (México DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, S.A., 1989), 237. Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets*, 5. See also José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel: Liberalismo y Jacobismo* (Biblioteca Cervantes Virtual, 1919).

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity*, 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7



propaganda that framed African derived traditions as primitive, at best.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, with regard to the genesis of Cuba's *son*, the composer and historian of Cuban folk music, Eduardo Sanchez de Fuentes (1874- 1944) denied that African decedents had contributed anything to Cuban culture and instead identified the traditions of the Spanish and the indigenous *tainos* (a population made almost extinct in the colonial process) as the sole ancestral sources of musical forms on the island.<sup>29</sup> Buttressing such claims, US and Anglophone Caribbean sociologists as late as the 1960's posited that the memory of practices originating in Africa could not have survived the trauma of the Middle Passage.<sup>30</sup> In the face of such erasure, the effort to unearth and celebrate "the African presence"<sup>31</sup> in cultural production of the Americas becomes a critical political labor. And yet, such claims to "presence" as, for instance, Pales Matos' stanza in "Danza negra," "El alma africana que vibrando está," and its implication of indefinable properties are not unproblematic, as I will elaborate further ahead.

In contradistinction to the likes of Sanchez de Fuentes, there were other thinkers, such as Juan Marinello (1898 – 1977), who identified the decedents of African slaves as the very "marrow and root" of the people.<sup>32</sup> Although Cuba's black population was in the minority, many artists and writers looked to Afro-Cuban culture as a "protest" and "authentic alternative" to the legacy of Spanish colonialism and an encroaching US

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<sup>28</sup> Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Literature," *Daedalus*, Vol. 103, No. 2, *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism* (Spring, 1974), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Guillermo Cabrera Infante's prologue to Natalio Galán's *Cuba y sus sonos* (Madrid: Pre-Textos, Artegraf, S.A., 1983, 1997), XII.

<sup>30</sup> Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Literature," 73 and footnote #4.

<sup>31</sup> The citation is from the title of Brathwaite's essay and refers precisely to the aims of his analysis.

<sup>32</sup> Brathwaite, "The African Presence," 79.

imperialism.<sup>33</sup> In fact, for the Barbadian poet and cultural theorist Kamau Brathwaite, there is an imminent radical politics in the black aesthetics deployed by Cuban and Caribbean artists, to which I will return. However, critics have also noted that the incorporation of presumably African images and sounds often reproduced stereotypes, such as the sensuous *mulata*, or romanticized African folklore as originary and immemorial, effectively evading ethnic tensions and lived material conditions.<sup>34</sup> These artistic productions, if not explicitly co-opted by nation building projects, structurally coincided with the desire to assimilate whatever posed a threat to national unity. In the development of a Caribbean modernist poetics, Michael Dash identifies a “nostalgia for a prelapsarian mythic past” and a desire for the reconstitution of an organic whole.<sup>35</sup> Tracing the political manifestations of creative movements such as Negritude and Indigenism, Dash links this nostalgia to “totalitarian impulses.” We see this in the fascist politics of the 1940’s Haitian monarchist Charles Maure whose appropriation of “indigenist poetics” allowed him to exercise a politics of exclusion.<sup>36</sup>

*Afroantilleanism, afrocubanismo, poesia negra, negrismo, and negritude*, among other artistic movement monikers, all signal a turn towards African derived traditions in the early twentieth century, but each has also come to signal different political inclinations. Cultural theorists, then and now, have aimed to distinguish these various artistic manifestations, marking the difference between aesthetic and anthropological trends that participated (consciously or unconsciously) in forms of colonial appropriation and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets*, 143, 145.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*, ed. James Arnold (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 72.

<sup>36</sup> Dash, *The Other America*, 76.

primitivist fantasies, inspired by a European “negrophilia,” against those meant to celebrate and recover black culture from racist practices of erasure.<sup>37</sup> If *negrismo* designates white creole writers that fetishized black culture for their own artistic gain, *negritude* is said to name those of African decent who where committed to enacting political and social change.<sup>38</sup> While these distinctions are no doubt important, the question has often, reductively, become that of determining which representations of blackness are authentic and positive and which are not. More nuanced readings of cultural and intellectual production of these years (20’s, 30’s and 40’s), recognize that individual works are not so easily catalogued.<sup>39</sup> Miguel Arnedo-Gómez’s 2016 book, *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation*, has made critical interventions in these debates. He not only underscores the essentialist logic underpinning questions of authenticity, but also shows how critiques of *afrocubanismo* have failed to consider the socio-cultural singularity of the historical Cuban context. In adopting the same critical frameworks drawn from European and North American cultural production, scholars have conflated *afrocubanismo* with French Negritude and Modernist Primitivism.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, late twentieth century Afro-Hispanists have come to understand *afrocubanismo* as a predominantly white elite movement that sought to assuage political tensions and mask material inequalities through

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<sup>37</sup> Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets*, 143.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Jackson, *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America* (The University of Georgia Press, 1988, 2008), 26. See also Rene Depestre, “Aventuras del negrismo en América Latina,” *América Latina en sus ideas*, ed. Leopoldo Zea (Editorial Siglo XXI, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> See Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets*, and Dash, *The Other America*.

<sup>40</sup> Miguel Arnedo-Gómez, *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation: Blackness, Afro-Cuban Culture and Mestizaje in the Prose and Poetry of Nicolás Guillén* (Lewisburg: Buckness University Press, 2016), xxii.

a unified image of the nation.<sup>41</sup> Although these strategies were largely true, Arnedo-Gómez argues, these critiques foreclose the possibility of Afro-Cubans having been active agents in their own representation, appropriating some of the ideological elements of the movement to stage cultural and political resistance. By situating *afrocubanismo* literary works within the context of Cuban Black intellectual writings and considering the reception and interpretations of contemporaneous readers, Arnedo-Gómez makes a case for their counterhegemonic potential.<sup>42</sup>

The debates surrounding *afrocubanismo* have inevitably structured readings of Guillén's *Motivos de son*. For critics that consider the movement an emulation of a European fashion for blackness, Guillén's 1930 collection has been described as "superficial," "pintoresco," and "folklorista."<sup>43</sup> Counter to these descriptions, in a 1973 essay Nancy Morejon calls the denomination of *Motivos de son* as "poesía negra" a bourgeois pigeonhole, from which she seeks to rescue the poems by underscoring how they contribute to the nation building process. These critics, Morejon writes, "No entendieron jamás que se trataba de la aparición de una poesía que hablaba al negro y del negro para hallar su justo papel en la cultura nacional y para definir su aporte a ella. No es el negro como elemento aislante sino integrante."<sup>44</sup> She draws a direct correlation between the poems and Guillén's

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<sup>41</sup> Arnedo-Gómez, *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation*, xiii. He refers specifically to Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secrets* and Robin D. Moore's *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>43</sup> Eugenio Florit and José Olivio Jiménez's 1968 reading cited in Luis Duno-Gottberg, *Solventando las diferencias: La ideología del mestizaje en Cuba* (Madrid: Iberamericana – Vervuert, 2003), 85. Jorge Ruffinelli echoes this in his description of the poems as a superficial engagement with blackness, *Poesía y descolonización: Viaje por la poesía de Nicolás Guillén* (Xalapa, México: Editorial Oasis, 1985), 19.

<sup>44</sup> Morejon, "Su obra: Introducción," [http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portales/nicolas\\_guillen/su\\_obra\\_introduccion/](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/portales/nicolas_guillen/su_obra_introduccion/)

lived experience to show that *Motivos* was more than a formalistic experimentation. Similarly, Richard Jackson defends Guillén's poems, arguing for the legitimacy of their representations by pointing to the author's membership within the community as an Afro-Cuban.<sup>45</sup> Later scholars such as Vera Kutzinski and Luis Duno Gottberg, for whom *afrocubanismo* is a discourse of *mestizaje* deployed by an intellectual elite, will consider the nationalist, integrationist, work Morejon underscores as part of project that sought to resolve racial tensions for the benefit of the dominant class. For them, Guillén's poems contribute to the fantasy of racial harmony.<sup>46</sup> In response to critics that have dismissed the emancipatory potential of *Motivos de son* as a superficial engagement with black cultural forms,<sup>47</sup> others, such as Roberto González Echevarría, have mined the poems for originary African signs.<sup>48</sup> In Arnedo-Gomez's treatment of *Motivos de son*, read in light of contemporaneous socio-cultural events and Cuban Black intellectual debates, the poems combat the intraracist behavior of the black middle classes.<sup>49</sup> Arnedo-Gómez, not unlike those engaged in a semiotic recovery, articulates his aims as a process of unearthing meaning and identifies an "antiracist didacticism" in the poems' contextual meaning, that is, in what its poetic speakers communicate.<sup>50</sup>

In my treatment of *Motivos de son*, I'm interested in locating the political not in what the poems intelligibly communicate or how they correlate to identifiable subjects or a

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<sup>45</sup> Jackson, *Black Literature*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Duno-Gottberg, *Solventando las diferencias*, 95-97; Kutzinski, *Sugar's Secrets*, 151-154.

<sup>47</sup> Ruffinelli, *Poesía y descolonización*, 19; Tous, *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría, "Guillén as Baroque," 313; Thomas Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo* (University Press of Florida, 2011), 80.

<sup>49</sup> Arnedo-Gómez, *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation*, 71.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, xx, 71.

historical period, but in what scholars have deemed aesthetic and superficial, the “mere accompaniment of (reasoned) utterance.”<sup>51</sup> Returning to Morejon’s statement, her use of the words “integrante” and “aporte” signal a logic of incorporation and a conception of artistic renderings as having the capacity to stand-in for already existing subjects. If a concern with movements such as *afrocubanismo* has been the appropriation and assimilation of black cultural forms, perhaps a way to circumvent cooptation is to think these forms not as a representation of a positive substance or property, but as irreducible materiality. Where “poesía negra” might have been a delimiting designation, I find that thinking how the poems perform as opposed to represent blackness, insisting upon its exteriority to dominant national models, as a non-integrational surplus, allows that blackness to remain an oppositional charge to the presumed unity of the nation.

To better understand the conflicts that arise in the effort of making visible that which has been negated or accorded an inferior status, and the effects of particular aesthetic strategies, I find it useful to turn to Jose Martí’s notion of “Nuestra Mestiza America.” When Martí published his seminal essay “Nuestra América” (1891), in which he defines the substance of Our America as precisely that which had been considered its contaminant—peoples of indigenous and African decent—this was nothing short of revolutionary. Through a densely figurative language, Martí constructs various binary oppositions that invert those inherited from a colonial rhetoric and perpetuated in the profoundly Eurocentric intellectual climate of his time. Notwithstanding his appeals to inclusiveness of ethnic diversity, Martí’s strategies produce inevitable exclusions. The title’s possessive pronoun, “nuestra,” converts America into a property, prompting the following

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<sup>51</sup> I’m using Fred Moten’s phrasing cited in the introduction to this chapter. See note #19.

assumptions: there is a subject, “nosotros,” that possesses this America, and this America may be defined and represented. And by its very grammar, this *nosotros* constitutes an *ellos*. Throughout the essay, unity is invoked through a series of filial and arboreal metaphors; like the roots of a tree, the (American) autochthonous is assimilated to the virile and unwavering, and the (European) exotic, impermanent like leaves, to the feminine and weak. Martí’s insistence on rootedness and brotherhood coupled with his rejection of the foreign establishes a paradigm that leaves little room for an ethics of hospitality. In the need to represent that which had been omitted from dominant discourses, Martí produces images, identifiable American properties, that result in reductive abstractions, e.g. “masas mudas de indios” and “El negro, oteado [...] solo y desconocido.”<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, through such formal mediations, as Julio Ramos has argued, the authority to represent comes to rest with the literary writer.<sup>53</sup>

At the close of “Nuestra América,” Martí appeals to the universal identity of man and his soul, “El alma emana, igual y eterna, de los cuerpos diversos en forma y en color.” Significantly, he claims there can be no racial hate in *Nuestra América* or, for that matter, the concept of races because “el mestizo autóctono” has vanquished the exotic Creole.<sup>54</sup> The concept of *mestizaje* (or *mulatez*), which would later become almost synonymous with Cuban national identity,<sup>55</sup> diffuses, blurs, blends, mixes, dilutes racial material differences. As a form of racial amalgamation, or miscegenation, *mestizaje* has been promoted in Latin American nation building projects as both a form of whitening and a multicultural

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<sup>52</sup> José Martí, “Nuestra América,” (Publicado en *La Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York*, Estados Unidos, el 10 de enero de 1891, y en *El Partido Liberal*, México, el 30 de enero de 1891), *Aportes*, 134, 137.

<sup>53</sup> Ramos, *Desencuentros*, 239.

<sup>54</sup> Martí, “Nuestra América,” 138.

<sup>55</sup> Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets*, 6.

celebration, “disavowing divisive social realities.”<sup>56</sup> Likewise, the concepts of syncretism and transculturation, which hold high currency in the cultural theorization of the Caribbean, invoke a hybrid new third composed of two distinct properties. In Fernando Ortiz’s formulation, transculturation does not disavow the violent and complex context of which it emerges, “each of them torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the Cuban anthropologist elaborates the neologism through the tropes of grafting and sexual reproduction, not only relying on gendered roles, but also reinforcing a sense of community through filiation.<sup>58</sup> Although these tropes recognize diverse “parents” and its “offspring” as different from them, offspring are ultimately of the Same, related to each other like Martí’s roots and brothers, “hermanos... han de encajar, de modo que sean una, las dos manos.”<sup>59</sup> Ortiz’s metaphor of the *ajiaco* stew for Cuba’s diverse demographic similarly evokes a whole composed of different parts, parts which can be enumerated as individual ingredients.<sup>60</sup> What I would like to underscore is that in the conceptual mixing of properties the result is an imagined fusion or harmonic synthesis, like the ideal shade of a color or just the right taste. As long as *ajiaco* is composed of individual ingredients, other ingredients are inevitably left out, as its delicate flavor is consigned to recipe.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>57</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, translated by Harriet de Onís, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>58</sup> Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 101, 103.

<sup>59</sup> Martí, “Nuestra América,” 133.

<sup>60</sup> Martinez, *Cuban Art & National Identity*, 72-75. The word “coctel” comes from Guillén’s prologue cited above and “ajiaco” is taken from Fernando Ortiz quoted in Martinez’ text.

<sup>61</sup> Stephan Palmié’s recent treatment of Fernando Ortiz’s conceptualization of transculturation and the metaphor of *ajiaco* offers a sustained and nuanced analysis of these terms where they do not operate as simply processes of assimilation, but instead as a



Through the concepts of *mestizaje*, syncretism, and transculturation community is imagined as the sharing of a property (or properties, however diverse).<sup>62</sup> Community imagined as a fullness, an interiority, the unity of individual subjects forming a larger subjectivity, will inevitably have immunitary impulses, protecting its body from the incursion of foreign others.<sup>63</sup> It is this traditional conceptualization of community that has fed nostalgic desires to recuperate an imagined past and resulted in the formation of totalitarian regimes.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, philosophers, such as Roberto Esposito, have aimed to untie the concept of community from its historical association to the semantics of *proprium*, arguing that instead it is the absence of a property, the negative, or the concave from which community happens. It is an unfulfilled duty, a sense of debt, or an insufficiency, that create the conditions for a being-with. What we have in common, Esposito writes, “is an otherness

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means of working “against the metapragmatics of essentialist racial taxonomizing.” Most notably, what distinguishes the *ajiaco* dish, at least in theory, is its non-recipe and capacity to include any ingredient on hand. I would, however, add that ultimately the metaphor still implies a logic of incorporation. And that as a metaphor it operates as a stand-in or representation of what would otherwise be irreducible singularities. “The Cuban factors: Reproductive biology, historical ontology and the metapragmatics of race,” *Anthropological Theory* 2016, Vol. 16(1), 4. Along these lines, Luis Duno-Gottberg looks at *ajiaco* and transculturation as part of a national imaginary that aimed to represent Cuban identity through an ethnic synthesis, generated by intellectual elites in their desire to eliminate internal conflicts and the threat of racial war. *Solventando las diferencias*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> I am using these terms abstractly in order to consider the homogenizing and exclusionary tendencies that arise in a politics of incorporation/assimilation and how that politics is symptomatic of a particular conceptualization of community. Arnedo-Gómez has aptly argued, when considering the deployment of terms, such as *mestizaje* and transculturation, within their specific socio-cultural contexts, these terms operate in far more complex and contradictory ways, *Uniting Blackness*, xxvi.

<sup>63</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), introduction.

<sup>64</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, edited and translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) and Maurice Blanchot, *The unavowable community*, translated by Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988).

that withdraws us from our subjectivity.”<sup>65</sup> This negative, or non-subject forming community, instantiated in exposure and exteriority, provides an alternative to the logic of incorporation and its inevitable exclusions. However, as I hope to elaborate in this chapter and those that follow, it is not so much the sharing of an absence I wish to underscore, as that of a materiality, a materiality irreducible to an identity and, therefore, inassimilable.

Like Martí and Ortiz, Nicolás Guillén will also formulate tropes, such as the “coctel Cubano,” that suggest a fusion of properties in the unification of a single body. Returning to his 1931 prologue to *Sóngoro Cosongo*, referenced above, Guillén’s recourse to floral metaphors treat nation and race as organically constituted:

Opino por tanto que una poesía criolla entre nosotros no lo será de un modo cabal con olvido del negro. El negro -a mi juicio- aporta esencias muy firmes a nuestro coctel. Y las dos razas que en la Isla salen a flor de agua, distantes en lo que se ve, se tienden un garfio submarino, como esos puentes hondos que unen en secreto dos continentes. Por lo pronto, el espíritu de Cuba es mestizo. Y del espíritu hacia la piel nos vendrá el color definitivo. Algún día se dirá: «color cubano».<sup>66</sup>

The eventual correspondence between “espíritu” and “piel” in what will one day arrive as “color cubano,” suggests a metaphysics of incarnation, the union between soul and body, as well as a teleological projection. Ultimately, “color cubano” is the blending of two whole races, the totality of “dos continentes” that lie submerged in the depths of the water.

Notwithstanding Guillén’s conception of race and nation, in my reading of *Motivos*, I aim to show that the sonorous, or that which is registered as aesthetic and artificial, works against such organicist assumptions and easy appropriation.

In his seminal work, *The Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar observes, “The voice is the instrument, the vehicle, the medium, and the meaning is the goal. This gives rise to a

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<sup>65</sup> Esposito, *Communitas*, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Guillén, “Prologo,” *Sóngoro Cosongo*, 132.

spontaneous opposition where voice appears as materiality opposed to the ideality of meaning.”<sup>67</sup> Considering the extent to which *Motivos* preoccupies its readers in the production of a particular voice, in my treatment of this collection I sustain my attention on its sonic materiality, on the tension between meaning and non-meaning. Put otherwise, I aim to read the poems as non-representational, resisting the hermeneutic tendency of identifying subjects or reproducible knowledge. It is important to remember, as Vera Kutzinski has aptly argued, music is no less representational than images and phonic patterns “are no less stereotypical than more familiar physiognomic signifiers of blackness such as skin tone and hair texture.”<sup>68</sup> That said, if we consider that the acoustic has the potential, as Julio Ramos states, “to remove the body from the plane of perception dominated by perspective, by the division of sensory work in the proliferating optical, geometric, dominant schemes of modernity,”<sup>69</sup> then perhaps holding our attention on the sonic, as *Motivos* invites us to do, might generate a form of relating that does not presume to render an Other legible and enhances the possibility of being affected and transformed by the poems.

### **Sonorous and Semiotic**

Published in 1961, at the cusp of structuralist and poststructuralist intellectual production, Vladimir Jankélévitch’s book, *Music and the Ineffable*, called for an engagement with music that would not only recognize the impossibility of arriving at stable meaning,

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<sup>67</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, edited by Slavoj Žižek (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT press, Short Circuits series, 2006), 15.

<sup>68</sup> Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets*, 180.

<sup>69</sup> Julio Ramos, “Descarga Acustica,” *Papel Máquina* II, 4 (2010), 61. My translation from the Spanish.

but altogether resist the treatment of the sonorous as semiotic material. "Music acts upon human beings," he writes, "on their nervous systems and their vital processes.... [It] takes possession of the listener. This process, at once irrational and shameful, takes place at the margins of truth, and thus borders more on magic than empirical science."<sup>70</sup> Current musical theorists, such as Carolyn Abbate, have argued that the corporeal and emotional vulnerability that Jankélévitch underscores in both the production and the reception of music offers an ethical form of engagement with human others.<sup>71</sup> If music, as Jankélévitch insists, does not present us with a discourse from which we can tease out reproducible knowledge, but rather an impenetrable phenomenon experienced in time, then the musical presents us with an opportunity to relate to an unknown without the pretense of expertise.

On a similar note, drawing from Gadamer's thoughts on music, Andrew Bowie writes in his introduction to *Music, Philosophy and Modernity*:

It is when we don't understand and have to leave behind our certainties that we can gain the greatest insights. Given that this situation is in one sense almost constitutive for music, which we never understand in a definitive discursive manner, it is worth taking seriously the idea that such non-understanding might be philosophically very significant.<sup>72</sup>

Echoing Bowie's assertion that we gain insight from uncertainty, literary theorist, Doris Sommer has argued for the benefits of submitting oneself to the untranslatable. The incomprehensible, she explains, opens the possibility for reflection; we come to see "the

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<sup>70</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the inefable*, translated by Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>71</sup> Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 517.

<sup>72</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11.

world is complicated beyond our understanding and worthy of our respect.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, music as indecipherable is not unlike the experience of encountering a foreign language. However, it is the verbal, or reasoning generated through a system of signs, that thinkers like Jankélévitch and Abbate insistently define music against. In opposition to the gnostic—a practice which presumes to make “the opaque transparent” through a “knowledge based on semiosis and disclosed secrets,” Jankélévitch privileges what he calls the drastic—an experience which “connotes physicality...desperation and peril.”<sup>74</sup> Taking seriously the idea that non-understanding is philosophically significant, as Bowie suggests, it is the very opposition between the intelligible and the sonorous, or the gnostic and the drastic, that I am interested in bringing to bear on literary analysis.

Where dialectical synthesis is the sublation of difference and the production of signification is the making instrumental of a work, Jankélévitch’s description of music as a synchronism of voices that says nothing offers an alternative model with which to engage literary texts that would potentially bypass the reductive economy of the former. Although he states that only music is capable of this “*concordia discors*,” or the superimposed voices of polyphony,<sup>75</sup> as I will demonstrate through the work of Guillén, poetry can also produce a non-dialectical *concordia*, imbued with a magical charge of its own.

Not incidentally, debates regarding the political or emancipatory potential of *Motivos de son* tend to focus on the question of nonsense or indecipherability. That is, those that seek to defend *Motivos* from aestheticist critiques insist on the presence of meaning

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<sup>73</sup> Doris Sommer, “Ethical Asymmetries: Learning to Love a Loss” in *The Ethics of Latin American Literary Criticism: Reading Otherwise*, ed. E. Zivin Graff, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 188-189.

<sup>74</sup> Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” 509.

<sup>75</sup> Jankélévitch, *Music and the ineffable*, 19.

where others find only linguistic or sonorous play. Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría, for instance, claims, “It is a revealing fact that Guillén’s poetry, no matter what the real color of the critic, has been the object of exclusively ‘white’ readings.... [I]t may be necessary to awaken all of us out of a massive process of repression.” Such criticism is “repressed” because it has dealt with “what sounds to the lay ears like music (or noise) as if it had no meaning.”<sup>76</sup> For Gonzalez Echevarría, what critics have described as “purely sonorous facts” in *Motivos de son* is a Eurocentric simplification, the abnegation of meaning in the Bantu phonemes. Thomas Anderson’s recent analysis of Guillén’s poem “Sensemayá: canto para matar una culebra” (1934), echoes Gonzalez Echevarría’s complaints when he argues against the treatment of some lines as “apparent nonsense” and posits that the highly anthologized poem is “still misunderstood.”<sup>77</sup>

González Echevarría’s and Anderson’s attentive readings produce compelling and novel interpretations of Guillén’s work that underscore the poems’ response to socio-political events and cultural practices. Anderson, for instance, reads “Sensamaya” as “a carefully constructed response to the many bans that were enacted against Afro-Cuban carnival processions during the early decades of the 20th century.”<sup>78</sup> However, by implication, their arguments assign value and complexity to recoverable meaning and the process of decoding, a process that necessarily relies on a degree of expertise and logocentric thinking. Like González Echevarría’s philological labor to unearth the repressed Bantu signification, Anderson sets off to “uncover... latent connection[s]” between images

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<sup>76</sup> Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría, “Guillén as Baroque,” 313.

<sup>77</sup> Anderson, *Carnival and National Identity*, 80.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

in the poem and religious iconography.<sup>79</sup> In the pretention of laying bare the encrypted, these readings also entertain the fantasy of recovering mythical origins: “Through this gesture the poem is reaching back to the original *Son*, the mythical ‘Son de la Ma Teodora,’ modeled on African and *taíno* rituals (*areítos*) whose function is to awaken a collective memory.”<sup>80</sup> Such readings, providing icons and founding narratives that may be easily co-opted, structurally coincide with ideological movements that aim at formulating national and ethnic identities. In my engagement with Guillén’s *Motivos de son*, I propose an alternative form of reading in which the apparently nonsensical or the exceedingly musical is not subjected to a hermeneutic practice that would mine for reproducible meaning. Rather, I consider and take seriously the ethical potential immanent to a reader’s confrontation with obstinate phonic materiality.

In developing this reading, I have found the work of Fred Moten to be particularly helpful. In his book, *In the Break*, which gives sustained attention to the aesthetics of the black radical tradition, Moten suggests that black performance is precisely that which is registered as noise, a “*material*” remainder that is irreducible to patrilineal logic, an impropriety that irrupts attempts at a nostalgic suturing. Moten reminds us here that the children of slaves were born outside of a familial structure; male slaves were not recognized as legal fathers, leaving mothers, as reproducers, to be the dominant figure of heritage. Motherhood, however, was “not perceived ‘as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance.’”<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, blackness is birthed in illegibility; it is improper and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> González Echevarría, “Guillén as Baroque,” 314.

<sup>81</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 12-15. Italicizing the *mater* in *materiality*, Moten links materiality to maternity in order to underscore the generative, reproductive performativity of black aesthetics, as opposed to an originary, historical property that can be identified

dispossessed, lacking the legitimacy of a filial lineage and its generational acquisition of property. For these same reasons, Moten argues that black artistic production is always necessarily avant-garde. Where one might expect an analysis of the black radical tradition to entail the political insistence on black human subjectivity, Moten instead locates this tradition's radicality in the "resistant object," in "objection to subjection," in the impassioned shriek of a slave (as in Fredrick Douglas' narration of Aunt Hester's beating) or what he also describes as a "speaking commodity."

In his analysis of the theory of exchange value immanent to the capitalist mode of production, Marx facetiously makes recourse to the impossible scenario in which commodities speak.<sup>82</sup> Moten argues that the limits of this impossibility are shattered with the phonic irruption of the slave. If a slave as a commodity can speak, shriek, and/or sing, then value or meaning may no longer be attributed solely to human sociality; "break[ing] down the distinction between what is intrinsic and what is given by or of the outside," the science of economy, as well as that of semiotics and its reliance on the difference between spirit and matter, is rendered inoperative.<sup>83</sup> Moten writes,

I want to show the interarticulation of the resistance of the object with Marx's subjunctive figure of the commodity who speaks. According to Marx, the speaking

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and recovered. Significantly, the maternity in materiality animates it and undoes distinctions between spirit and matter.

<sup>82</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 176.

<sup>83</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 8-12. Marx's fictional scenario of speaking commodities is meant to show the absurdity of assuming that commodities have inherent value; (exchange) value is determined only through human sociality, that is, given from an outside. Moten takes the figure of the slave who speaks/shrieks (and its recordings in black artistic production) as an instance that disproves that theory and an entire science based on the dichotomy of the material and the immaterial, inside and outside. The impassioned shriek of the slave, the phonic irruption of the commodity and its re-generations in black performances "embodies the critique of value, or private property, of the sign" and disrupts the law of equivalence, semiotics, or any other such sciences of universals.



commodity is an impossibility invoked only to militate against mystifying notions of the commodity's essential value. My argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke – of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and “freedom.” But I am interested, finally, in the implications of the breaking of such speech, the elevating disruptions of the verbal that take the rich content of the object's/commodity's aurality outside the confines of meaning precisely by way of this material trace.<sup>84</sup>

Although Moten is mostly concerned with the work of North American Black artists, his analysis provides me with a model with which to treat *Motivos*. As Thom Donovan elaborates, “in Moten's book, the resistance of the object is related through certain ways of reading (and seeing, and hearing) it without reducing its materiality, or reducing this materiality through the object's representation.”<sup>85</sup> Guided by Moten's claim that “blackness is only in that it exceeds itself...it bears the groundedness of an uncontainable outside,”<sup>86</sup> let us hold our attention on the sonorous difference Guillén makes the poetic object of *Motivos de son*.

## **Black is Beautiful**

Caribbean scholars, such as Edouard Glissant and Kamau Brathwaite, have long noted the privileging of the voice and oral traditions in Caribbean poetic production as a response to institutions of writing and their links to Eurocentric constructions of history.<sup>87</sup> Foregrounding of the voice is also a strategy of concealment or what Glissant has called a

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>85</sup> Thom Donovan, “A grave in exchange for the commons: Fred Moten and the resistance of the object,” *Jacket2*, April 2011, <http://jacket2.org/article/grave-exchange-commons>

<sup>86</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 26.

<sup>87</sup> Simon Gikandi's “E. K. Brathwaite and the Poetics of the Voice: The Allegory of History in *Rights of Passage*” in Emily Allen Williams, ed. *The Critical Response to Kamau Brathwaite* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004), 16.

“forced poetics,” “one in which the true meaning of words ‘is hidden from the master’s ear by the non-meaning of the noise and staccato, which is the true meaning. This non-meaning hides and reveals hidden meaning.”<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, scholars have understood the noise and sound that challenge “master-codes of the plantation system” as “sustain[ing] a symbolic or semiotic system of cultural resistance.”<sup>89</sup> Teasing out hidden, double meanings has been the aim of many critical readers of Caribbean texts, as noted above with González Echevarría’s and Anderson’s treatment of Guillén’s work.<sup>90</sup> The recovery of such meaning is particularly significant, when we recall practices of erasure and the belief that African cultures could not have survived the trauma of the Middle Passage.<sup>91</sup> However, returning to Glissant’s contradictory statements, where “true meaning” is located in the “non-meaning of the noise,” it would seem that rather than treat these fragments as a secret language, what is significant (but does not signify)—reiterating Moten’s argument about black aesthetics—is the phonic matter.<sup>92</sup>

Viewed in relation to the various Negritude movements of the early twentieth century, critics of Guillén’s work do well to remind us that the search for African origins

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<sup>88</sup> Edouard Glissant quoted by Gikandi in “E. K. Brathwaite,” 16. See also Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, translated by J. Michael Dash, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989, 1996), 120-130. Here he argues in favor of “opaque” strategies as a way to defy “a universalizing and reductive humanism,” 133.

<sup>89</sup> Gikandi, “E. K. Brathwaite,” 16.

<sup>90</sup> In addition to González Echevarría and Anderson, see Jose Piedra “From Monkey Tales to Cuban Songs,” in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, edited by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>91</sup> See note #28.

<sup>92</sup> This is not to suggest that there is a void or an empty signifier, but rather, in thinking opacity or impenetrability, to undo the opposition and correspondence between signifier and signified and the negative dialectic through which meaning is produced, to challenge the privileging of the signified.

often produces essentialist conceptualizations.<sup>93</sup> With regard to his poem “Negro bembón” from *Motivos*, which begins with “¿Po qué te pone tan brabo,/cuando te disen/ negro bembón,/ si tiene la boca santa,/ negro bembón?”<sup>94</sup> Guillén explains “va contra el prejuicio racista en Cuba, exaltando los valores auténticos de la raza negra en lucha obstinada contra una discriminación racial que duró más de cuatro siglos.”<sup>95</sup> This claim to authenticity at once encapsulates the best intentions of Negritude and that which impede its project to combat racism. On the one hand, the recognition and valorization of African traits in the face of dominant European cultures and their strategies of erasure are critical to self-empowerment and emancipation. On the other hand, the generalization of “la raza negra” and the search for cultural origins results in reductive archetypes.

Whereas Gonzalez-Echevarría insists on *Motivos de son*’s meaningfulness, other critics have treated the collection as an aesthetic and artificial engagement with Afro-Cuban culture, from which Guillén would depart, gradually expanding his perspective from the local towards the universal conditions of the proletariat.<sup>96</sup> It was this small collection of poems published early in his career where he first wrote in an Afro-Cuban register.

Dismissing its distinct style as a product of Negritude essentialism, Jorge Ruffinelli explains that the focus on a black aesthetic ignores social and economic realities. He characterizes *Motivos* as a stage in Guillén’s oeuvre preoccupied exclusively with blackness in contrast to his later poetry, which addresses neocolonial themes (e.g. his collection *West Indies Ltd.*). In Adriana Tous’ study, *Motivos* is also presented as narrowly focused on Cuban popular

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<sup>93</sup> Ruffinelli, *Poesía y descolonización*, 19; Michael Dash, *The Other America*, 76.

<sup>94</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 103.

<sup>95</sup> Nicolás Guillén, *Páginas vueltas. Memorias*. (Havana: UNEAC, 1982), 83, quoted in Ruffinelli, *Poesía*, 50.

<sup>96</sup> Tous, *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén*, 121. Ruffinelli, *Poesía*, 22.

culture, while its merit resides in its great rhythm and stylistic features. And according to its most reductive and critical reception, *Motivos* perpetuates racial stereotypes in its imitation of a vernacular speech and the use of pejorative racial terms.<sup>97</sup>

Ruffinelli valorizes Guillén's later work for transcending the scope of Negritude; however, in these more explicitly political poems, such as "Balada de los dos abuelos" (1934) where he represents the legacy of slavery and his European and African ancestry through the figuration of two grandfathers, Guillén develops binary metaphors and an exclusive identity. The effort to equate the value of African traditions to those of Europe resulted in the construction of complementary black and white subjects; in other words, it reiterated a colonial rhetoric. This bipolarization is also exhibited in a poem titled "La canción del Bongo" (1931). Here we have the afro-Cuban deity, Changó, alongside the Catholic saint, Santa Barbara; together they operate as icons for Africa and Europe. Gathered under their respective signs, the diversity of cultures is reduced and sublated. Moreover, this symmetry of origins in the mulatto identity that Guillén proposes based on the syncretism of Spanish and African cultures excludes indigenous and Chinese Cuban minorities.<sup>98</sup> In response to those who would dismiss the political potential of *Motivos de son* for its emphasis on artifice and those who would dispute its artificiality by insisting on recoverable meaning (Gonzalez-Echevarría), I suggest that by bringing the reader's attention to the materiality of language—note the pattern of single syllable words and

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<sup>97</sup> See footnote #1.

<sup>98</sup> Ruffinelli, *Poesía*, 51. Luis Duno-Gottberg, also notes that the musical instrument of the bongó, as a double drum, operates as a single, unifying voice of blacks and whites, while "Balada de los dos abuelos," annuls the confrontation between blacks and whites, *Solventando las diferencias*, 97. Following Duno Gottenberg's reading, not only is a binary symmetry of ancestors formulated in these poems, but lived material tensions are effectively dissolved.

dental consonants in line such as “te lo da to”<sup>99</sup>—and by not providing symbolic substitutes (e.g. Changó and Santa Barbara), this first collection does not so easily lend itself to abstractions of race and resists the pitfalls of identity formation. Racial caricatures, such as “Negro bembón” and “Mulata,” remain just that, superficial constructions that lie at the surface of the text.<sup>100</sup> That is, the already codified characters stand in for nothing other than their artificiality.

### **Concordia discors**

Where one might associate poetic language with the creation of metaphors, images and lyricism, in *Motivos* the objective is almost exclusively the reproduction of audio, that is to say, voice, rhythm, music:

Con tanto sapato nuevo,  
!qué ba!  
Con tanto reló, compadre,  
!qué ba!  
Con tanto lujo, compadre,  
!qué ba!<sup>101</sup>

Punctuation here acts like a musical notation. The repetition and alternating refrains produce rhythm and a call and response chorus. Like Jankélévitch’s *concordia discors*, the verbal exchange forms a polyphony of voices, a harmony achieved through synchronism rather than a dialogic resolution. With every repetition “¡qué ba!” becomes less the exclamatory expression of “no way” and more the sounding of trumpets. This is not to say that the stanzas are illegible. In his reading of this sixth poem in the collection, which

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<sup>99</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 103.

<sup>100</sup> In the following pages I will elaborate further on the ironic adaptation of these codified stereotypes and how doing so consciously insists on a surface or inaccessibility.

<sup>101</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 108.

begins with “Búcate plata,/ búcate plata,/ poqqe no doy un paso má: etoy a arró con galleta,/ na ma.”<sup>102</sup> Antonio D. Tillis explains “[it] thematically speaks to the social, economic and political plight of Afro-Cubans in a communicative form understood by them.... The poetic voice expresses the level of poverty and struggle in this community”<sup>103</sup> While not dismissing the value or validity of such interpretations, in my effort to privilege the sonorous—or that which exceeds representation—I suggest that the content of these lines is not so much their semantic meaning as it is their exclamations and accents; it is the tone and texture of the phonemes that come to fore. In the alternating refrains, the alliteration, and the omission of consonants and syllables, the reader’s attention is sustained not by the formulation of a narrative or an image, but by an acoustic polyphony. So distinctive is its style and so overpowering its rhythm that critics like Ruffinelli overlooked the socioeconomic content of the poems.

In her study of the humorous word play, or *choteo*, in *Motivos*, Emily Maguire explains that these linguistic expressions, “poking fun at what is too serious,” are a strategy that undermines established order (e.g. calling out the self-disparagement of African features in “¿Po qué te pone tan brabo,/cuando te disen/ negro bembón,/ si tiene la boca santa,/ negro bembón?”).<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the above stanzas from “Búcate Plata,” like the rest of the collection, exhibit a picaresque and quotidian tone that is irreverent towards the elevated status of lyric poetry. Guillén inverts the romantic legacy of the poet as a heroic figure, who offers an interior monologue and a new vision. Throughout the eight poems in

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>103</sup> Antonio D. Tillis, “Language as Vernacular Cultural Performance in Black Communities in Cuba and the USA,” *Estudios Anglo Americanos*, N° 39 – 2013, 152.

<sup>104</sup> Emily Maguire, *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 104. Here she is drawing from Jorge Mañach’s 1928 essay *Indagación del choteo*.

*Motivos*, it would be difficult to identify any reference to the subject of the author or an expression of introspection. To better appreciate this, recall Pablo Neruda's *Canto General*, a work of epic proportions where the author states, "Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta [...] Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre."<sup>105</sup> Whereas the poetic voice of *Canto* assumes the responsibility of speaking for the community, for those who are voiceless, *Motivos* is a community of voices: fragments of conversations, complaints, gossip, and songs. Each poem has an implied interlocutor: "Mira si tú me conose," "pero biejo," "compadre," "mi negro" are just some of the invocations. In this way, "Guillén's poetic voice rejects the literary descriptive conventions of a 'literate' speaker,"<sup>106</sup> and consequently, the reader, as a sophisticated literate figure, is never addressed.

In his discussion on the impenetrability of music, Jankélévitch explains that whereas the listener to a lecturer "is the second person—'you,' the object of invocation or allocution," the listener "for the pianist sitting at the piano," "is the third person, the outsider."<sup>107</sup> In a similar manner, I want to suggest that as "readers" of Guillén's ensemble of voices, we are the third person, the outsider. *Motivos* does not draw us inside the psyche of its speakers. As we recite the poems we hear ourselves produce the voices of this Afro-Cuban community, but we are not given access to it. To further illustrate this point regarding the characters in *Motivos*, González Echevarría explains,

Guillén's figures...had already been codified by Cuban literature, particularly by the theater. Hence, as they speak there is a double distancing, a layering that fixes the figures. The pimp, the mulatta, the dandy, the pretentious *catedrático* are stereotypes, which heightens their artificiality, their dependence on given codes in

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<sup>105</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Canto General* (1950)  
<http://www.literatura.us/neruda/general.pdf>, 420.

<sup>106</sup> Maguire, *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature*, 115.

<sup>107</sup> Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 21.

which black Cuban culture has been objectified. In so doing, the poems of *Motivos de son* are clearly denouncing the process by which black culture identifies itself....<sup>108</sup>

Significantly, in this collection, Guillén does not counter these flat personas with the representation of a more three-dimensional subjectivity. *Motivos* leaves us with an exteriority and, in so doing, does not position itself as inside this black community. Although Guillén was often touted as a more “legitimate” representative of Afro Cuban culture for being of mixed race in contrast to other white *negrista* poets, Miguel Arnedo-Gómez argues that *Motivos* remains a representation of the Other, given that Guillén came from the upper middle class and not the poor urban neighborhoods of his characters.<sup>109</sup> Arnedo-Gómez’s critique is not meant to undermine the legitimacy of Guillén’s representation, but rather to counter the evaluation of his work as more authentic than that of white *afrocubanistas*.<sup>110</sup> Such evaluations suggest that it is possible, and politically preferable, to write as a self-identifying member of a group, from the position of sameness and thus erasing what differences emerge in writing or the relation from one singularity to another. My concern, by contrast, is not whether Guillén did or did not *belong* to the community of voices he produces—especially since we’re working against the paradigm of

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<sup>108</sup> González Echevarría, “Guillén as Baroque,” 311.

<sup>109</sup> Miguel Arnedo-Gómez, “*Motivos de Son* de Nicolás Guillén desde perspectivas teóricas sobre la representación del Otro en la novela testimonio latinoamericana y en la etnografía posmoderna,” *América sin nombre*, n° 19 (2014), 92. “En la crítica sobre Guillén existe cierta tendencia a asumir que, al ser mulato, el poeta consiguió representar a los afrocubanos y su cultura de una forma más auténtica que otros poetas afrocubanistas, quienes al ser blancos no fueron capaces de representar al negro cubano «desde dentro» o desde una perspectiva interna. Sin embargo, la supuesta interioridad de la perspectiva de Guillén en relación a los sectores de la población afrocubana sobre los que se enfocaba el afrocubanismo no puede legitimarse en base a su pertenencia a dichos sectores.”

<sup>110</sup> In *Uniting Blacks in a Raceless Nation*, Arnedo-Gómez writes, “as the scholarship of Antonio Cornejo Polar demonstrates, the exteriority of a group of writers with respect to the human groups they write about does not by itself justify dismissing their literature as a superficial or inaccurate representation,” xxi.



community as a cohesive body made up of members—for remembering Moten’s argument, the black radical aesthetic is dispossessed; “it bears the groundedness of an uncontainable outside.”<sup>111</sup> In *Motivos*, if we are to speak of the author’s voice, then it is one that does not assume a position of authority or of knowing, but that of a performer, reproducing an irreducible material sound, a resistant object.

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of this poetry collection is its orthography. In phrases like “búcate plata/ poqqe no doy un paso má”, Guillén reproduces an afro-cuban phonetics through non-standard spelling that forces the reader to very deliberately sound out the letters. The musicality of the poems demand that they be read out loud, or rather recited. Starting with exclamatory forms of calling out or drawing the attention of their interlocutor, “!Ay, negra/si tú supiera!”<sup>112</sup> Guillén imbues his poems with a performative quality. Notably, traditional poetic devices that ask to be unpacked, such as symbols and metaphors, are absent in this collection. In fact, visual descriptions are also sparse. If we consider that traditional European culture is ocularcentric, basing objective and empirical knowledge on what is visually observed,<sup>113</sup> then the lack of visuality here is another way the poems insist on their musicality and their unknowability. Put differently, if we note that the single instance of a simile reads, “la narise como nudo de cobbata,”<sup>114</sup> and descriptions such as “negro bembón” and “mulata,” the poems demonstrate how visual language and assimilation have served racial discrimination. Instead of inviting us to penetrate a vision, or *read* its signification, the poems force us to reckon with its materiality

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<sup>111</sup> Cited above, Moten, *In the Break*, 26.

<sup>112</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 105.

<sup>113</sup> Martin Jay, “The Disenchantment of the Eye in Surrealism and the Crisis of the Ocularcentrism” in *Visualizing Theory, Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990-1994*, edited by Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>114</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 104.

while entertaining us with its rhythm and onomatopoeia. The reader/performer becomes a ventriloquist of Afro-Cuban speech, while the poems resist being interpreted. That is, beyond their literal meaning, or the sound of their indecipherable fragments, the poems do not elicit a deeper, or more expert, analysis.

The Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz describes the “untranslatable neologisms” in Guillén’s poetry (e.g. “sóngoro cosongo”) as “signifying nothing word by word, but as a whole expresses just this: an unintelligible black song.” The value in these nonsensical constructions, explains Ortiz, is not simply in their artistic properties but in their imitation, their very precise onomatopoeia of “the emission of an African song” as heard by the uninitiated.<sup>115</sup> As Lyotard discusses in his essay “A Few Words to Sing,” onomatopoeic constructions “decompose linguistic behavior,” making the materiality of language, its vocal sounds and their affects, the content of its expression.<sup>116</sup> Shifting our attention from the discursive to the sonorous, allows us to treat *Motivos* not as an identitarian flag for Afro-Cubans, but instead, as presenting the voice of an inassimilable other. In a similar vein, Maguire argues that while references to Afro-Cuban folklore had been in vogue with the aim of “co-opting Afro-Cuban culture to create an ahistorical national essence,” in *Motivos*, Guillén sets himself apart from this trend “by locating his poetry within the...linguistic parameters of daily urban life.”<sup>117</sup> This becomes all the more evident when we turn to the poem “Tu no sabe inglés” where there is an explicit preoccupation with the production of language. Here the poetic voice teases her interlocutor for his pretension of speaking

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<sup>115</sup> Fernando Ortiz, “Los últimos versos mulatos”, *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, (Habana), XXXV, (1935), 334, cited in Tous, *La poesía de Nicolás Guillén*, 123. My translation to the English.

<sup>116</sup> Jean Françoise Lyotard, *Music/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetic*, edited and introduced by Adam Krims (Amsterdam: G + B Arts, International, 1998) 24.

<sup>117</sup> Maguire, *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature*, 112.

English and, implicitly, for being an anglophile, as she advises him not to fall in love with American women. Cited below, we find again the absence of a described scene, images, or metaphors. And aside from baseball, there are no references cultural practices or African traditions. What do occupy the reader's visual frame are the misspelled words, a deformed writing printed on the page.

In "Tu no sabe inglés," Guillén not only reproduces the phonetics of an Afro-Cuban Spanish but also that of an English distorted in the mouth of a Afro-Hispanophone speaker:

Con tanto inglés que tú sabía.  
Bito Manué.  
con tanto inglés, no sabe ahora  
desí: yé

La americana te buca  
y tú le tiene que huí  
tu inglés era de etrai guan,  
de etrai guan y guan tu tri.

Bito Manué, tú no sabe inglés,  
tú no sabe inglés,  
tú no sabe inglés,

No te enamore má nunca,  
Bito Manué,  
si no sabe inglés,  
si no sabe inglés.<sup>118</sup>

The name of our interlocutor, Victor Manuel, is transformed to "Bito Manué." The letter *b* substitutes *v*, as the distinction between the two in Spanish is only etymological and orthographic; *ct* is simplified to *t*; the liquid consonants *r*'s and *l*'s are dropped; and the final vowel *e* is accentuated. We also find the characteristic *seseo* of Afro-Cuban speakers with the assimilation of *c* to *s*, "desí", and the dropping of the *s*'s at the end of words, both in Spanish, "inglé", and English, "yé". The lines "tu inglés era de etrai guan,/de etrai guan y

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<sup>118</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 110.

guan tu tri,” which translate to “tu ingles era de strike one, de strike one, y one, two three” in standardized Spanish and English, would seem to be twice removed, a linguistic mise en scène. To understand the word “etraí”, I repeated it over and over again trying to reach an approximation of an English word and ultimately had to rely on a secondary source reading. The three-strikes-and-your-out reference to baseball, “de etrai guan,/de etrai guan y guan tu tri” also operates as a rhythm count, “one two, one two, one two three.” Indeed, the repetition of “tú no sabe ingle,” like other lines in the poem, becomes a refrain. Its meaning recedes into the background; it is the syllabic count and the articulation of its phonemes that fill the mouth and preoccupy the reader. Instead of considering the linguistic variance exhibited in *Motivos* as representative of an ethnic or racial identity (notwithstanding my own identification of an “Afro-Cuban speech”), following Moten, we might say that the performance of blackness is in the materiality of its incorrect writing, in the reader’s repetition of “etraí”, in the metamorphous of the word “strike,” in its becoming illegible, its rupture from a standard. The words themselves do not stand-in for a subject. They are activated in their vocalization, in the production of difference that occurs at the minima of the writing.

### **Music & Magic**

The third poem in *Motivos de son*, titled “Si tú supiera,” whose chorus is made up of “purely sonorous facts,” or indecipherable Bantu phonemes, becomes the focal point for questions regarding the collection’s artificiality versus that of hidden meaning. “Si tú supiera” has also been the subject of numerous musical adaptations. Héctor Lavoe, Enrique Morente and Fe Cortijo are just a few of the musicians to have performed the poem:

¡Ay, negra  
 si tú supiera!  
 Anoche te bi pasá  
 y no quise que me biera.  
 A é tú le hará como a mí,  
 que cuando no tube plata  
 te corrite de bachata,  
 sin acoddadte de mí.  
 Sóngoro cosongo,  
 sogo be;  
 sóngoro cosongo  
 de mamey;  
 sóngoro, la negra  
 baila bien;  
 sóngoro de uno  
 sóngoro de tre.  
 Aé,  
 bengan a be;  
 aé,  
 bamo pa be;  
 bengan, sóngoro cosongo,  
 sóngoro cosongo de mamey!<sup>119</sup>

In her analysis of *Motivos*, Maguire provides us with a succinct description of the *son* musical form, which “each of the eight poems in Guillén’s collection faithfully reproduces”: “the *son* is composed of an eight-line ‘exposition’, consisting of one or two versus, followed by an *estribillo* (chorus, later called *montuno*), which features a call and response repetition of two different lines.”<sup>120</sup> According to the musicologist Raul Fernandez, the format of the *son*’s instrumental ensemble produces “a deep melodic-rhythmic groove....”; “its distinct eight tones... produce a feeling of steady forward propulsion.... [with beats that] intensify dancing desires.”<sup>121</sup> Such propulsion and desire recalls Jankélévitch’s statements on music as acting upon the nervous system and vital processes. In his chapter titled, “Ontology of

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<sup>119</sup> Guillén, *Obra poetica*, 105.

<sup>120</sup> Maguire, “The National Art of Signifyin(g),” 113.

<sup>121</sup> Raul A. Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, Vol. 10. (Berkley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006), 28.

the Son,” Fernandez writes,

[T]he son...is something that people listen to with their feet. It is a dance to which people give themselves body and soul, dancing sometimes for hours, tasting the music with their hips...approaching the spiritual levels of trance characteristic of Cuba’s sacred ancestry of Arabic and African religious performances.<sup>122</sup>

Communication with divine beings through percussion, incantations, and especially through the process of possession is a key feature of African Atlantic religious practices.<sup>123</sup>

With Ortiz’s description of the neologisms as an African song heard by the uninitiated in mind, I would like to suggest that the musical structure reproduced in Guillén’s *Motivos* might also be seen as an evocation of magico-religious oral practices.<sup>124</sup> In addition to the bodily affects (or trance) the poems’ rhythmic composition would induce, the sonorous words with no available semantic meaning like “sóngoro cosongo” might operate as enchantments upon the reader/performer/listener. To clarify, I do not mean to suggest a recovery of an originary chant, but more that like these African oral traditions the poems have the potential to impact the body. We could also turn to the Greco-Roman myth of Orpheus who is both poet and musician; he enchants even inanimate objects with his lyre and voice, crosses from the world of the living to the dead, and is considered the founder of religious rituals.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Jankélévitch discusses music operating like a charm or an incantation, which he also associates to poetry. The Russian formalists were particularly

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<sup>122</sup> Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms*, 26.

<sup>123</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & African American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), introduction.

<sup>124</sup> The more obviously incantatory and sonorous poem of Guillén’s is “Sensemayá: canto para matar una culebra” (1934). I do not address this poem here because it more easily lends itself to readings linking it to specific cultural practices and beliefs (e.g. see Anderson cited above). My interest in *Motivos* is its insistence on artifice and the inability to recover from its archaic cultural properties.

interested in the trope of enchantment precisely because it brought language to its musical and material attributes, liberating it from the need to produce any signification. Velimir Klebnikov writes, “poems may be understandable or they may not” but they do not lose their power, or perhaps we can say their affective potential. He affirms, “I mean only that we must not reject a piece of writing simply because it is incomprehensible to a particular group of readers.”<sup>125</sup> “Sóngoro cosongo,/sogo bé;/sóngoro cosongo/de mamey” has been incomprehensible to most and yet the rhythmic phrasing has enchanted and delighted its readers.

Carolyn Abbate elaborates on the ethical implications of the experience of charm in music saying, “the ways that one is transformed in response to it, is equivalent to the power of love, caritas and eros—the love of another or for an Other.”<sup>126</sup> The corporeal vulnerability that Jankélévitch highlights in music—its ability to “possess”, “intrude”, and “irrupt”—is yet another aspect of this ethical engagement, as it puts the listener in a position of exposure and openness to an other. The “tak[ing] up residence in our intimate self”<sup>127</sup> that he describes of music is no better illustrated than in the Afro-Atlantic religious practices where states of trance and spirit possessions are produced in devotees through percussion. Producing the afro-phonemes dominated by unvoiced and fricative consonants, “Sóngoro cosongo,/sogo bé;/sóngoro cosongo,” engages the body of the performer in the articulatory process—consider, for contrast, how vowels, produced solely through the vocal chords, sound more ethereal and less corporeal. The phonemes, which are

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<sup>125</sup> Velimir Klebnikov, *The King of Time: Selected Writings of the Russian Futurism*, translated by Paul Schmidt (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 152 – 154.

<sup>126</sup> Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, xviii.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

unintelligible, can be said to possess the speaker as she pronounces them and her body is affected by the rhythmic quality of the verses, as the beats of the *son* intensify dancing desires. Like a “vibrating string” or “sound pipe,” to use Jankélévitch’s description of the reception of music or “man inhabited,” the reader/listener/performer of Guillén’s poems momentarily loses herself and becomes a receptor for the voice of an unknown other.

### Reading Nonsense

In response to those who would say *Motivos* is merely aesthetic, González Echevarría, as mentioned above, has ventured into Bantu philology insisting that the seemingly purely sonorous aspects of *Motivos* are in fact “exceedingly meaningful” containing encrypted messages available only to the initiate, or in this case the trained philologist.<sup>128</sup> In my effort to privilege the sonorous over the intelligible, I do not mean deny the various significations that can be teased from these phonetic fragments—after all, as González Echevarría himself concedes, “It is easy to make anything mean anything.”<sup>129</sup> Rather, I propose a practice of reading that does not presume to know or aim at disclosing hidden secrets. In his analysis of the *son*’s form, Fernandez describes its open and closed structure as a unity of opposites.<sup>130</sup> Drawing from this structural antinomy, we can say that *Motivos* plays with both sense and nonsense. At the end of his essay, González Echevarría asks, “Why is it that no one has dared interpret the second half of the poem [“Si tú supiera”]? I believe that is partly because we are not meant to. The poem encrypts its meaning in an incomprehensible code... that leaves us babbling sounds not to be

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<sup>128</sup> González Echevarría, “Guillén as Baroque,” 314.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>130</sup> Fernandez, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms*, 36-37.



understood..."<sup>131</sup> Following Doris Sommer's lead,<sup>132</sup> let us submit ourselves to the untranslatable, let us dwell on this babbling.

## Part II

If Guillén's audible and rhythmic poems provoke in its readers the desire to dance, if his poems corporeally possess its performers, Severo Sarduy similarly affirms a relationship between writing and the body: "La escritura es como la danza.

Es un ejercicio predominantemente corporal y el cuerpo lo siente."<sup>133</sup> The second part of this chapter will focus on this relationship between writing and the body through close readings of Sarduy's 1963 novel *Gestos*. Although music is also operative in his text, we will instead focus our attention on the predominance of a textual ekphrasis and its sensuous tableaux. In the place of psychic or emotional depth, exteriority and surface exposition collapse the scaffoldings of mimetic representation, denying his readers the pleasure of identifying with well-formed subjects or the voyeurism of a penetrating gaze. Not unlike the two-dimensional characters in *Motivos*, Sarduy's black protagonist is drawn from popular culture; she speaks melodramatic lines lifted from *telenovelas*, *boleros* and popular cinema.<sup>134</sup> Once again as readers we are left outside, and yet, as I will explore, Sarduy's text solicits a proximity between the reader and the writing, engendering an experience of reading that affects the body.

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<sup>131</sup> González Echevarría, "Guillén as Baroque," 314.

<sup>132</sup> Cited above, note # 70.

<sup>133</sup> Severo Sarduy in Joaquín Soler Serrano, "Severo Sarduy, a fondo," de la serie *A Fondo* de RTVE, Ministerio de Cultura, Expte. N. 63. 158, 1976.

<sup>134</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *La Ruta de Severo Sarduy* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Ediciones del Norte, 1987): 83.

## ***La deshumanización del Arte***

The title to Jose Ortega y Gasset's canonical 1925 essay on the growing movement of nonrepresentational and abstract forms in cultural production is "La deshumanización del Arte." Whereas Beethoven and Wagner gave us cathartic works steeped in personal emotions, early twentieth century artists had overturned an age-old hierarchy where people and the living took precedence over the inorganic. "[E]l veto del arte nuevo se ejerce con una energía proporcional a la altura jerárquica del objeto. Lo personal, por ser lo mas humano de lo humano, es lo que más evita el arte nuevo." In this new artistic zeitgeist, appeal to personal emotions and self-identification was thought to contaminate the artwork and impede its spiritual, intellectual and universal aspirations.<sup>135</sup> Sarduy's novel corresponds to this hierarchal inversion, this *deshumanización*, but rather than approximate a pure, ideational state, what his text suggests is a corporeal contagion, as the decomposition of recognizable form brings the reader in contact with the limits of writing.

If the stylistic tendency of avant-garde painting is the lack of figuration, the flattening of space and the exhibition of the techniques of painting, we could equally say that Sarduy's novel foregrounds the mechanics of writing. Producing images of Havana covered in posters, newspapers, flyers and placards, Sarduy creates a two-dimensional space: "Bandas de chapapote enrejan las caras sonrientes...[y]...líneas largas y espesas lo desaparecen todo." Through montage, shifting and occluded perspectives, the figure of the human is fragmented and dispersed: "aparece y desaparece, recortada, superpuesta sobre si misma."<sup>136</sup> In her study of early twentieth century vanguards, Vicky Unruh explains that,

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<sup>135</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, "La deshumanización del Arte," *Obras Completas Jose Ortega y Gasset, Tomo III* (Revista de Occidente, 1994), 368-376.

<sup>136</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Gestos* (Editorial Seix Barral S.A., 1963, 1973), 13.

in response to the critique of the dehumanizing tendency in modernist art, Latin American artists, in particular, looked for “an active engagement between art and existence,” which she identifies as a “re-humanization.”<sup>137</sup> However, considering, as Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein do, that “[h]umanism delineates a normative standard of legibility by which all others are read, measured, controlled, disciplined, and assigned to fixed and hierarchical social statuses,”<sup>138</sup> I am interested in showing how the process of dehumanization in Sarduy’s novel—giving precedence to technologies and the minimal mechanics of writing—might instead be that which allows for the encounter between art and existence. Put differently, the process of unworking the human, its logic of organization, its attendant nationalisms and assumptions of sovereignty, allows for relations between singularities to flourish.

Set just before the triumph of the revolution, the narrative in *Gestos* consists of the detonation of bombs, in particular one by a black female cabaret performer at an electrical plant. However her motives remain unclear and the word “revolution” or explicit political references are absent in the novel. Instead, Sarduy sets off his own explosives at the level of the writing: “El letrero de las puertas [...] se desintegra: CASSO, PISSO, PICA. Ruido afuera. Todo asciende y desciende [...] casas llenas de bombas, jardines, raíces, ríos, manos que dicen adiós, rifles, castillos que se viran y arden, granadas.”<sup>139</sup> Having no discernable organization or internal logic, Sarduy here produces an inventory or assemblage where “raíces, ríos, manos que dicen adios...rifles” are on a parallel plane. The “letrero” that

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<sup>137</sup> Vicky Unruh, *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) 21.

<sup>138</sup> Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein, “Introduction: Transanimalities in the Age of Trans\* Life,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, V. 2, N. 2, May 2015, 195.

<sup>139</sup> Sarduy, *Gestos*, 32.

originally read Picasso, has been disintegrated into material fragments, highlighting the tactility of text and its entanglement in the ecology of the city. Moreover, in this cubistic, textual reshuffling, this taking apart of the sentence's anatomy, Sarduy also renders inoperative conventions of representation through which we order and understand the world, anthropocentrically.

### Reading as Touching

In a 1976 interview on Spanish public television with the journalist Joaquín Soler Serrano, Sarduy describes his literary practice stating, “poco importa si yo le comunico un relato o no [...] Se trata de ponerlo en una situación física [...] Lo que yo le invito no es que me lean [...] sino que hagan el amor conmigo.”<sup>140</sup> While some critics have viewed Sarduy's disinterest in communicating an intelligible message as politically disengaged, reducing his work to “frivolous” textual games,<sup>141</sup> I'm interested in teasing out the ethico-political implications of such a “physical situation.” His invitation, “que hagan el amor conmigo,” as opposed to “que me lean,” calls for a practice of reading not unlike the exhortations of the French poststructuralist Jean-Luc Nancy: “One has to understand reading as something other than decipherment. Rather, as touching, as being touched. Writing, reading: matters of tact.”<sup>142</sup> In a 1990 essay titled “Corpus,” Nancy makes an ethical and ontological call to

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<sup>140</sup> Joaquín Soler Serrano, “Severo Sarduy, a fondo,” de la serie *A Fondo* de RTVE, Ministerio de Cultura, Expte. N. 63. 158, 1976.

<sup>141</sup> Rolando Pérez, *Severo Sarduy and the Religion of the Text* (New York: University of America press, 1988), 27. See also Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Calibán: Apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra America* (Mexico: Editorial Diógenes, S.A., 1972), 71.

<sup>142</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpus,” in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 24. This was first presented at a conference on the body organized by the International Association for Philosophy and Literature at the University of California Irvine in 1990.

undo the dichotomy between language and the body. Drawing from the Christian ritual phrase “this is my body” and its invocation of the transubstantiation, the spiritual incarnation of the blood and body of Christ into bread and wine, Nancy exposes how the demonstrative assumptions of language as in “*this is my body*,” “the sign of itself and being-itself of the sign” depend on a magico-religious faith, or the metaphysics of body and soul.<sup>143</sup> Rather than producing a correlation, or perfectly containing its referent (as implied in a metaphysics of body and soul), words, categories, definition entries, he argues, generate new bodies. Words do not incarnate thoughts, as thoughts themselves are weighty bodies. Performing his own poesies through lists and catalogues, Nancy transgresses the disciplinary boundaries between philosophy and literature: “But a corpus, an ectopic topography, serial somatography, local geography. Stains, nails, veins, hairs, spurts, cheeks, sides, bones, wrinkles, creases, hips, throats.”<sup>144</sup> Like the passage from *Gestos* cited above, Nancy here collapses structural frames; the anatomy of the sentence as well as that of the body is disorganized. Through his proliferating lists, Nancy deconstructs the well-formed or ideal body and, in so doing, disables its metaphysical and symbolic power.

With Nancy in mind, I want to suggest that Sarduy’s invitation “que hagan el amor conmigo,” does not imply a penetration, be that the interiority of a character or the disclosure of meaning, but rather the meeting at a limit. Limits—the boundaries, the outsides, the parts exposed, the skins that come into contact with other bodies—are the sites of pleasure and pain. That is, sensuousness (as opposed to an operative sense-making) is necessarily experienced at the place of exposure to another exterior.

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<sup>143</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 21.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Alternatively, when Sarduy says “lo que yo le invito no es que me lean,” reading here, refers to the process of interpretation, of uncovering meaning. In other words, Sarduy prioritizes an aesthetic and visceral experience over one of knowledge production: “el placer que yo le comunico no es un placer intelectual.”<sup>145</sup> Forcing the reader to reckon with the impenetrability of writing, with writing as a material body and not simply the hollow representation of a body, allows for a sensuous experience; it collapses the distance between the reader and the text bringing them into contact.

This lovemaking is not, of course, without corporeal vulnerability. Later in his televised interview Sarduy continues,

Practicar la literatura es un especie de transgresión muy grande, es una especie de amenaza muy grande para la seguridad simbólica de nosotros y yo creo que hay una especie de represión en este acto aparentemente banal de escribir. [...] Se amenaza, se manejan conceptos simbólicos muy importantes para el cuerpo de uno y para el cuerpo de otros. Se ejerce una especie de violencia somática, de violencia corporal muy grande.<sup>146</sup>

From a poststructuralist’s point of view, practicing literature threatens symbolic systems because of the excess and irreducible meaning that language produces. When we consider that hegemonic structures and their classificatory systems impose signs on bodies and seek to corral them through identitory markers, the link between the destabilization of symbolic systems and corporal and somatic violence becomes apparent. Sarduy’s transgression, I hope to demonstrate, works against the union of the sign and the body.

The undoing of this union, moreover, helps us arrive at the material enmeshment between so-called art and existence. Thinking bodies not as the incarnation of something invisible (spirit, thought, idea), but as impenetrable materiality, keeps us from addressing

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<sup>145</sup> “Severo Sarduy, a fondo.”

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

bodies as anything but non-identical and singular beings. When Nancy writes, “bodies are impenetrable to language, and languages [are] impenetrable to bodies, bodies themselves, like this word ‘body,’ which already withholds itself and incorporates its own entry”<sup>147</sup> he is articulating an ontology where ideas, thoughts, or language (the seemingly abstract and immaterial) are corporeal: “Here is the hard point of this thing ‘thought,’ nodule or synapse, acid or enzyme, a gram of cortex.” “Thought is itself a body,” a physical mass that weighs and occupies space.<sup>148</sup> Signs, symbols, words, images, therefore, cannot be made to stand-in for, or to take the place of, other bodies. Such an ontology bridges the distance between existence and art since art would no longer be a representation of an already existing, reproducible reality, but itself a singular and non-identical part of our relational existence.<sup>149</sup> This has important political implications. If the body cannot be reduced to its sign, or a sign equated to a body, then bodies remain unclassifiable. In this way we can approximate what Sarduy means when he says that writing challenges symbolic security. A symbolic structure, we should remember, be it a patriarchy, or monotheistic religion, transmits meaning from a center producing relations of power through fixed identities and social hierarchal organizations. Because writing inevitably “exscribes”—generates new bodies in its irreducible materiality—symbolic systems are always in danger of destabilization.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 17.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 28.

<sup>149</sup> Here I am drawing from Jonathan Burt’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the cinema of the in-between, where he explains that images in film are “material and integral” to our everyday relations in his article, “The Aesthetics of Livingness,” *Antennae*, no. 5 (Spring 2008): 10.

<sup>150</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 24.

## Writing, Painting, Matter

In the following passage from *Gestos*, the fired missives of printed media become muddled in the city's ecology:

A lo largo de los contenes el agua rueda arrastrando papeles y piedras, desaparece en remolinos los tragantes de las esquinas o se acumula detenida por grupos de piedras formando pequeñas represas, en las que los periódicos se mueven como barcos. La tinta de la tipografía deja sobre el pavimento manchas de titulares aún adivinables; la reproducción monstruosa de las figuras grabadas. Cuando los autos pasan, las ruedas proyectan grandes bloques de agua contra los muros y las páginas de los periódicos quedan fijas a la parte baja de las fachadas, donde el agua entintada chorrea formando sucios lamparones.<sup>151</sup>

The rain has rendered these newspapers inoperative. *Papeles* like *piedras* are physical objects, rubble and debris that are swallowed by the city's drains and at other times obstruct small rivers of dirty water. Paper, rocks, curbs, asphalt, water, cars and ink form a vibrant assemblage where the uniform print of mechanical reproduction bleeds and births deformed, or "monstrous" copies.<sup>152</sup> Alongside the repeated question "ha leído usted los periódicos," the image of wet text that covers the city like wallpaper recurs as a leitmotif through out the novel. Like the journalistic texts blurred by the rain, Sarduy's writing will smudge the sharp edges of meaning and deliberately fail to communicate knowable, reproducible messages.

While little is identified in the novel, Sarduy is precise with the context of *Gestos*: La Habana, its neighborhoods, its streets and its clubs. In his deliberated visual, sonic and gestural descriptions, it is as though he were exclusively concerned with conjuring the city,

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<sup>151</sup> Sarduy, *Gestos*, 37-38.

<sup>152</sup> Jane Bennett's theory of "vibrant matter" informs my reading of this vignette in Sarduy's text. I will discuss her book "Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things" (2010) further ahead.



only that the images he produces by no means make use of perspectival illusionism or a single point perspective, that is, modes of naturalistic representation:

Las últimas vueltas descubren todo el panorama: el esquema, en círculos concéntricos, de la ciudad cuyas calles arrancan ondulando, interrumpidas unas por otras, mientras más lejanas más estrechas, hasta que en el horizonte no son más que líneas rayadas, mientras más lejanas más rectas, más estrechas..., más grises..., mientras más lejanas.<sup>153</sup>

Here Sarduy converts the panorama of the city into a dynamic, geometric, two-dimensional image; not unlike an abstract expressionist painter, he flattens the space with large gestural brushstrokes. It is not surprising that Sarduy was fascinated with the work of Franz Kline during the time he was writing the novel and aspired to “pintar con palabras”: “me preocupaba o me fascinaban las barras negras que un pintor bailando trazaba sobre inmensas telas blancas.”<sup>154</sup> In the recurring passages of newspapers and other documents wet from the rain, “la tinta de los textos se va lavando, desdibujando.”<sup>155</sup> As the printed text loses the definition of its contours we imagine its communications become illegible. Ink becomes paint and discourse becomes impressionistic images. Alternatively, the ubiquitous printed media textualizes the city and, like text on the flat surface of a page, the city becomes planimetric. In a similar vein to the New York School artists or the Cubists before them, Sarduy works against the pictorial conventions of receding space and makes his readers aware of the artifice, of its material components.

Is the “art of speech...only metaphorical?” Nancy asks, “What does a word touch, if not a body?” And yet, “A body is what cannot be read in writing.” That is to say, the body in

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<sup>153</sup> Sarduy, “Gestos,” 22-23.

<sup>154</sup> Julián Ríos, ed. *Severo Sarduy, Espiral/Figuras* (Madrid: Editorial Fundamentos, 1976), 10. The quote “pintar con palabras” is from Sarduy in “Severo Sarduy, a fondo.”

<sup>155</sup> Sarduy, “Gestos,” 27.

its “obstinate thereness”<sup>156</sup> is that which cannot be interpreted or subsumed by another sign. Of course, all speech is metaphorical, Nancy concedes, but in all speech there is also a limit, a border from which we separate and to which we come into contact. This point of touch is at the limits of comprehension, where writing stops operating as a sign. “In all writing, a body is traced, is the tracing and the trace—is the letter, yet never the letter, a literality or rather a lettericity that is no longer legible.”<sup>157</sup> “[L]a reproducción monstruosa de las figuras grabadas” formed by the bleeding ink of Sarduy’s wet newspapers, are an instance of such a trace. Following Nancy’s ontology, *lettericity* is unavoidable, but there are practices of writing that pronounce these limits, that bring reading-as-touching to the foreground of the text. Nancy continues,

To write the sign of oneself that does not offer a sign, that is not a sign. This is: *writing*, finally to stop discoursing. To cut into discourse. Corpus, anatomy. One must not consider anatomy of dissection, the dialectical dismembering of organs and functions, but rather the anatomy of configurations, of shapes—one should call them states of the body, ways of being in the world, demeanors, respirations, gaits, pelts, curlings, masses. Bodies are first to be touched. Bodies are first masses, masses offered without anything to articulate, without anything to discourse about, without anything to add to them.<sup>158</sup>

“Ways of being in the world, demeanors, respirations, gaits,” is a fitting description of *Gestos*, as the novel opens with the narration of movement, the back and forth of the city: “Pasan de un lado a otro, de un lado a otro de la calle, El transito nunca cesa. No se detienen, no se vuelven sobre sí mismos.”<sup>159</sup> Opening the novel in this manner, the reader has no point of reference for the subject of these actions. It is the actions themselves that take

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<sup>156</sup> In his description of contemporary art works that use or refer to the bodies of animals, Steve Baker uses the phrase “obstinate thereness” to describe the presence of an animal and its resistance to ready-made concepts. I find the phrase to be an apt description for how Nancy invokes the body.

<sup>157</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 24.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Sarduy, *Gestos*, 7.

center stage. Returning to a passage partially quoted above, we see how the narration, describing the effects of an explosion at a Havana club called Picasso, “stop[s] discoursing”:

La puerta está próxima. La salida. La cabeza gira. El mural del fondo se precipita hacia la sala, se desune y rueda sobre la pista, contra los estantes, bajo el mostrador. El caballo rojo, dividido, veloz, salta sobre las líneas negras que lo enmarcan y galopa sobre el piano, se eleva, relincha, se diluye, estalla. El ángel sobre la contadora. El toro doble se agrieta y arde en el traganíquel. La lámpara azul se invierte y el aceite desciende sobre la pista. Los cascos de la bestia se escuchan. Las cabezas dilatadas, los cuerpos descompuestos, el brazo dorado que sostiene la pica la impulsa, la clava contra la pared. La puerta se abre de un tirón.... La pianista se desarma como un rompecabezas bajo los cascos negros y acerados del toro. El letrero de las puertas del refrigerador se desintegra: CASSO, PISSO, PICA. Ruido afuera. Todo asciende y desciende, huje y se acerca en ráfagas. Curva. Escaleras, casas llenas de bombas, jardines, raíces, ríos, manos que dicen adiós, rifles, castillos que se viran y arden, granadas.<sup>160</sup>

“Cuerpos descompuestos” is precisely (or literally) what this passage produces, riddled with fragmentary, single word sentences. Verbs, such as *desune*, *rueda*, *salta*, *agrieta* and *arde*, enact a constant flux of images, forces, and intensities, on the vertical plane of the page. We can read, “El caballo rojo, dividido, veloz, salta sobre las líneas negras que lo enmarcan... diluye, estalla,” as Picasso’s *Guernica* painting trotting off the canvas and into the open space of the bar. The explosion of this canonical painting is coupled with the deconstruction of the artist’s name along with its cultural authority, “CASSO, PISSO, PICA,” becoming “lettericity.” “Curva. Escaleras, casas llenas de bombas, jardines, raíces,” produces what the philosopher calls for time and again in “Corpus”: the compiling of a catalogue without a logos or hierarchal ordering. Vernacular words, such as “traganíquel” and “rompecabezas,” stand out in this anatomy of configurations, drawing the reader’s attention to the mechanics of language in both its literal and metaphorical registers. In this

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 32.

difficult and dense passage, Sarduy brings the reader to the limits of comprehension, to point of touch.

### **Resisting Subjection**

Insisting on a cartographic relation to the text, penetrating depth is denied all fronts, perhaps most especially with regard to its protagonist. Referred to only in the feminine pronoun, “Ella,” the text does not provide us with a name or a past history. We are given few physical descriptions and no inner dialogue, with the exception of what would appear to be the most inconsequential free indirect discourse: “(siempre haces la misma pregunta tonta: ¿este pull-over es blanco con rayas negras o negro con rayas blancas?).”<sup>161</sup> In fact, the novel does not provide emotional or psychological descriptions; its third person narrator does not presume to know or reflect upon character’s intentions. Instead, we are given gestures, movements, actions, and sensorial impressions seemingly without the guide of an authorial voice.<sup>162</sup> The novel lacks narrative frames and, as such, a fixed perspective. If narrative voice is considered the self-knowledge of a written work, then perhaps its absence here is an expression of what Nancy calls the “non-knowledge” of the body. “Massive substance is supported only by a spreading, not by interiority or by a foundation. So, as Freud remarks, ‘Psyche is spread out’—adding ‘she knows nothing about it’. This non-knowledge is the very body of Psyche, or rather, it is the body that Psyche herself *is*.” Significantly, “knowledge wants an object” and “in the absence of an object there is no

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>162</sup> In her reading of the text, Lucía Guerra writes, “se presentan a través de una voz narrativa despojada de toda opinión y saber, como figura contratextual del narrador realista y su proverbial omnisciencia. Se trata, más bien, de una mirada anónima, despojada de toda subjetividad...” *Cuidad, género e imaginarios*, 257.

subject.”<sup>163</sup> Following this logic, the apparent lack of a narrative voice and its object of knowledge is another way in which the text resists subject formation and reaffirms the corporeal.

*Ella* is always described carrying a small suitcase, the contents of which are repeatedly enumerated, as though they were fetishes or objects with symbolic potential. As readers we might attempt to decipher their meanings as does an investigator:

Un policía toma la pequeña maleta [...] y va sacando los objetos, mostrándolos con la seriedad de un mago: un peine, un baniti, un espejo rojo, una pieza de música, un libreto de artista [...] una falda negra, una lata de sardinas, una novela, un candado, un abanico, un..., una...<sup>164</sup>

And yet, this catalogue of objects sustains an irreducible and enigmatic thingness, as suggested by the trail of articles and ellipses. Her script (and here I refer to the script that Sarduy has written her outside of her dramatic roles as a performer, which are often crossed and difficult to distinguish from those off stage) is sparse and can also be inventoried. Repeating the same melodramatic lines with little variations, her fragments of speech are simultaneously parodic and poetic:

¿Queda alguna aspirina? ¿O es que con este calor se han derritado hasta las aspirinas? Ah, qué calor; el calor ambiente y el de los focos. Dos calores en uno. Un calor doble. Uno frente a otro mirándose... ¡Ah, qué calor, qué asco de vida, qué mierda!<sup>165</sup>

Recalling Nancy’s “lettericity,” speech here does not disclose an interiority, but remains on the surface of the text.

### **The art of assemblage**

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<sup>163</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 25.

<sup>164</sup> Sarduy, *Gestos*, 56.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

We might say that the character of *Ella* functions less like a protagonist and more like one of the Chinese Cabala icons with which the novel opens and serves as a unifying thread throughout the narrative. González Echevarría explains that the zoological symbols that reappear throughout the text—e.g. “los caballos-sapo, los mariposas-piedra fina, los peces muerto grande, las culebras-niña bonita, los ratones-marinero, los caracoles-gato”<sup>166</sup>—refer to *la Charada China*, a system of interpreting dreams used to play the illegal lottery game, “la bolita,” popular in Havana.<sup>167</sup> This system of metaphors and metonyms, explains González Echevarría, gives a certain coherence to the text. It not only prophesizes the revolution and with it the explosion of all existing codes, but also corresponds to Sarduy’s use of rhetorical devices.<sup>168</sup> Notwithstanding González Echevarría’s hermeneutical unveiling (recall here my critique of his treatment of Guillén), that the narrative should be pieced together by a series of tropes reiterates Nancy’s concession that all speech is metaphorical. Significantly for our purposes, these zoological symbols—“inexistente”<sup>169</sup> hybrid figures that come into being through the grammatical relation of the hyphen—makes apparent the mechanics in the production of texts and breaks the illusion of a realistic representation. At the start of the novel, in addition to the Chinese symbols, objects are listed, “una ferretería, una vidriera de números, un bar [...] un carro de ostiones, una casa de lámparas [...]”;<sup>170</sup> together these symbols and objects (like those in *Ella*’s suitcase) form a bank of signs of which the novel is composed. Repeated and reassembled, these icons produce different vignettes and, consequently, the impression that the novel is

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>167</sup> González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, 92.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 91, 92.

<sup>169</sup> Sarduy, *Gestos*, 7.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

constructed on the reshuffling of a deck of cards. Conceived in these terms—as the reconfiguration of repeated icons—the development or penetration of subjects is made impossible while the composition of the icons, “caracoles-gato,” made up of radical juxtapositions, demonstrates how meaning is not embodied in the sign, but rather produced through combinations and assemblages.

In the following passage that depicts a segment of a street parade, we see how Sarduy not only withholds markers of classification, but in the place of recognizable subjects he gives us a web of movements and forces:

A ambos lados de la cadena el coro sigue los movimientos: las batas de encaje blanco, los espesos pañuelos amarillos amarrados en grandes lazos alrededor de la cabeza forman una marea ondulante que choca contra el público diseminado en las aceras. Un laberinto de metales dorados, de cornetas, trombas y flautas silbantes tiembla alrededor de los tambores. Las largas tumbas cilíndricas rayadas en blanco y negro parecen contraerse y estirarse con los golpes. La batería de bongoses, claves, triángulos, quijadas de vaca, simples botellas y cajones se desordena y cierra tras la cola de la comparsa.<sup>171</sup>

Significantly, this vignette of choreographed performers gives place to the movement and multitude of accessories and instruments. Without prior knowledge of Afro-cuban cultural practices, the reader is left to trace the labyrinthine movement of yellow, gold, and brass in this visual and sonic configuration. With the exception of the word *cabeza*, no reference is made to the individual bodies that produce these gestures. Rather, what we see is “una marea ondulante” where flutes tremble and drums—or as Sarduy refers to them “long cylindrical tombs,” invoking corporeality and finitude—appear to contract and shrink. Like the lists of objects in previous passages, here we have another assemblage made up of “claves, triángulos, quijadas de vaca, simples botellas y cajones” where no explicit reference is made to the figure of the human.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 50.

We might describe the above scene as displaying an “anatomy of configurations” and “states of the body,” what Nancy calls for in opposition to an organized body.<sup>172</sup> The body as a seamless structure with functioning organs implies a complete and closed unit and, as such, an interiority without relation. Imagining the body as an individual whole or microcosm has led to regarding other bodies as aberrations, inferior or defective versions of an originary archetype. Against this model of the body, made up of working organs, or “members,” where inside and outside are demarcated, Nancy insists on “parts outside parts.” That is, an areal, topographic view—an absolute exteriority, where existence is synonymous with exposure, where *techne*—as in technology, art, craft and skill—rather than essence, creates bodies and where bodies are the very “separation and sharing” of sense.<sup>173</sup> Sarduy’s “marea ondulante que *choca*” and “tambores... que parecen contraerse y estirarse con los *golpes*” (my emphasis) produces a context where corporeality comes to the fore in the impact, in the separation and the contact between bodies, between the skins of drums and hands.

### **Vibrant Corpse**

In calling our attention to the limits, to the place of touch, Sarduy’s writing brings us to the material enmeshment that connects singular bodies and allows us to move away from human agents and teleological narratives, to consider collectivities, configurations and assemblages. While the notion of ecology is never made explicit in either Sarduy’s or Nancy’s text, treating the technology of writing as matter and thinking being, as being-outside, as the contact between bodies, necessarily foregrounds networks of relation,

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<sup>172</sup> Cited earlier, footnote #95.

<sup>173</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 28-31.



interdependencies, and vulnerabilities. I want to suggest that in their lists and catalogues Sarduy and Nancy express an ecological materialism, where the distinctions between artifice and organism become less apparent and where the seemingly immaterial—as in “demeanors, respirations, gaits, pelts” and gestures—becomes corporeal. In thinking the body not as the incarnation of something invisible, or an exceptional organism made in the image of God, but rather as impenetrable materiality, not only are the secure boundaries of the human destabilized and but also the differences between life and matter. A definition entry of *corpus* reads “a person or animal, especially when dead”; as the title to Nancy’s essay on the body, this meaning comes to the fore when he invokes the death of God, the death of the glorious sublime body that subsumes all others.<sup>174</sup> If life is no longer the embodiment of an immaterial force, then we can imagine a different notion of vitality?

Earlier I described a passage from *Gestos* as a vibrant assemblage in order to suggest a sense of aliveness in what would otherwise be understood as a conglomeration of inert and passive objects. Here, I am drawing from the work of Jane Bennett and her theory of “vibrant matter,” an “impersonal affectivity” of things irreducible to their instrumentality. Her book, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, challenges anthropocentrism and calls for an attentiveness to “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”<sup>175</sup> Whereas historical materialism worked to demystify the fetishistic power of man-made things—recall Marx’s speaking commodity—Bennett proposes cultivating “a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—

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<sup>174</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 18.

<sup>175</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii

[...] to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought.”<sup>176</sup> Interestingly, Bennett, as I see it, is theorizing along parallel lines to Fred Moten: both thinkers depart from the demystifying strategies of historical materialism and, in so doing, challenge humanistic presumptions of spirit, matter, agency and the social hierarchies that are generated from such presumptions. Where Moten is interested in drawing out a materiality that reproduces itself and resists subjection in the decedents of slaves and in black artistic production, Bennett is interested in drawing out a vitality that *is* materiality and which she locates “alongside and inside humans to see how analysis of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due.”<sup>177</sup>

Collapsing the divide between life and matter, Bennett’s vital materiality also approximates and enriches Nancy’s deconstruction of a Christian metaphysics:

What I am calling an impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement of “life force” added to the matter said to house it. Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body.

My aim, again, is to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance. This vibrant matter is *not* the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God.<sup>178</sup>

The theoretical interventions of bio-politics have demonstrated how political techniques and culturally determined ways of seeing have ordered bodies in two camps: those as having a plentitude of life, as having futures and, therefore, bodies to protect, and those considered already dead, as abandoned, available for consumption and exploitation.<sup>179</sup> For bodies that do not correspond to a normative model, that are not politically recognizable as

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>179</sup> Gabriel Giorgi, *Formas comunes: Animalidad, cultura biopolítica* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2014) 26.

life to be valued, Bennett's vital materialism and ecological thinking upends the logic that would justify their sacrifice for instrumental ends. To quote her once more, "Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself."<sup>180</sup>

## Conclusion

In my reading of Sarduy's cabalistic icons "los caballos-sapo" and Guillén's sonorous phonetics, "sóngoro cosongo," what I have been particularly interested in underscoring is an impenetrable materiality. In his elaboration of Nancy's ontology, Ian James argues that matter can only be sensed from an outside, relating to it – whether that be through sight, hearing, smell or taste – is ultimately a form of touching, that is, the coming into contact with a limit, or the mutual contact and separation of distinct bodies.<sup>181</sup> Accordingly, penetration would then be the dissolution of those distinctions, the fusion and assimilation of material differences. The presumption of penetrating interiority, as the expert analyst might do, implies accessing a closed system or knowable, reproducible content, demonstrating mastery over what would otherwise be irreducibly complex. The title of this dissertation, *Touching Impenetrable Bodies* expresses, therefore, an epistemological humility, as well as a co-constituting relationship. James offers a useful illustration, if we

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<sup>180</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

<sup>181</sup> Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2005), 143.

open an object up “dissect, X-ray, scan, or hugely magnify [it] we are simply creating another exterior surface or relation of contact-separation of sense.”<sup>182</sup> In the chapter that follows, “Transspecies Bodies,” turning to a 1973 novel by Sarduy and the contemporary drawings and sculptures of Roberto Fabelo, we will see how the work of the anatomist does not, indeed, reveal anything but another exterior surface; how dissection results in metamorphosis, in the reproduction of new bodies, rather than a seeing inside.

To insist on an impenetrable materiality is also to insist on an “unknowing relating.” This phrase by Santiago Colas describes a practice of “writing the other.” In the absence of a preposition—it’s not “writing *about* the other”—the distinction between subject and object are collapsed; “to write” and “the other” share a plane of immanence.<sup>183</sup> Colas formulates an ethics of close reading through a short story by the Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernandez, in which the narrator describes a ritual of feeling objects in the dark with one’s hands, a ritual capable of inducing discomfort and uncertainty, as much as pleasure. As a parable for the kind of close reading Colas is advocating, in the story “hands...compensate for the loss of vision, an unknowing relating in the place of the representational knowing associated with sight” and, thus, judgment is suspended and “thought [is disengaged] from narrow utilitarian ends.”<sup>184</sup> Colas’ ethical close reading is “a touching without knowledge,” “an exploration, and in that way [an] unfolding of what we do not know in texts (and figuratively speaking in things).”<sup>185</sup> In this way, Colas echoes Sommer’s and Abbate’s arguments that encountering the unknown in literature and music (respectively) offers an ethical form of engagement with human others.

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<sup>182</sup> James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, 143.

<sup>183</sup> Colas, *Toward an Ethics of Close Reading*, 173, 186.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 184, 192.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 173, 189.

In response to the aestheticist critiques waged against *Motivos* and *Gestos*, I have sustained my attention on the micro-compositions of their texts so as to locate an ethics and politics precisely where their work does not provide a prescriptive, empirical project or a knowable, reproducible subject. My engagement of *Motivos*, privileging the sonorous over sight and language, is an effort at unknowing relating, as well as a strategy of marking a difference while maintaining its irreducibility to representation. Following Moten, I suggested treating the phonetic materiality in *Motivos de son* as a resistant object, that is, resistant to the production of meaning, and its performative reproduction of racial caricatures, as resistant to subjection, impenetrable to the analyst. Accordingly, *Motivos*, prompts us to consider its aesthetic form not as the empty container of a political content, but as the very material surplus—racial, gender and sexual differences—that dominant culture aims but fails to subordinate.<sup>186</sup> While Sarduy’s novel brings us back to semiotics and the visual, it does so in such a way that displaces an anthropocentric perspective. As we saw, human figures and so called inanimate objects share a plane of immanence in the novel, while the reader’s capacity to comfortably treat the book as an object of knowledge is also thwarted. Against the grain of reading these two canonical writers as expressions of

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<sup>186</sup> Here I am drawing from Moten’s treatment of racial difference as a material surplus and its continual reproduction, as the dominant culture tries to subordinate difference through appropriation. As I understand this, an example of such subordination through appropriation might be Modernist Primitivism (which influenced movements like Afro-Cubanismo) in the work of artists such as Pablo Picasso. What in part made his art “avant-garde” was the appropriation of non-European forms made possible materially and rhetorically through colonialism. Considering that avant-gardism is couched in the notion of developmental history (and the presumed crossing of frontiers) puts it at odds, if not in opposition, to a black politics. However, what Moten seems to insist on is that in this appropriation there is the (re)production of a surplus. Blackness and Black art is this surplus, an irreducible materiality, a material performative reproduction that is neither a property nor an object of knowledge. *In the break*, introduction, passim, 262.

a *Cubanidad*, of mining their work for national properties, I have aimed to trace a tendency in their texts that works against identity formation.

Sarduy's statement on Spanish television, "poco importa si yo le comunico un relato o no [...] el placer que yo le comunico no es un placer intelectual," could not have been farther from the cultural climate of 1970's Cuba, particularly the state's edict that writers and artists have a civic obligation to contribute to the narrative of progress. In the continued administering of Castro's 1961 prescription to local intellectuals "Palabras a los intelectuales," the 1970s, remembered as the "Quinquenio Gris," would be accompanied by an increasing Sovietization, most famously marked by the poet Herberto Padilla's 1971 forced *auto-da-fé*.<sup>187</sup> The state's polarizing rhetoric—"dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada"—justified its purging, its disposal of bodies deemed un-revolutionary, as having no future in the ideal community to come. The 1960's labor camps designed to rehabilitate homosexuals, religious believers and those considered anti-social were called *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción*—a means to make the revolution's "lumpen" productive.<sup>188</sup> In this context, we can better appreciate the political implications of insisting on an inoperative aspect of writing.

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<sup>187</sup> Guillermina De Ferrari, "Embargoed Masculinities: Loyalty, Friendship and the Role of the Intellectual in Post-Soviet Cuban Novel," *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 35, No. 69 (Jan.-Jun., 2007), 88.

<sup>188</sup> Ted Hencken, *Cuba: A Global Studies Handbook* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO: 2008), 248.

## Chapter 2

“Transmaterialities: Incorrect Anatomies in Severo Sarduy’s *Cobra* and Roberto Fabelo’s Art”

### Introduction – Creation Stories

Before there was earth or sea or the sky that covers everything, Nature appeared the same throughout the whole world: what we call chaos: a raw confused mass, nothing but inert matter, badly combined discordant atoms of things, confused in the one place. [...] Nothing retained its shape, one thing obstructed another, because in the one body, cold fought with heat, moist with dry, soft with hard, and weight with weightless things.

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*

Matter is not mere being, but its ongoing un/doing. Nature is agential trans\*materiality/trans-matter-reality in its ongoing re(con)figuring, where trans is not a matter of changing *in* time, from this to that, but an undoing of “this” and “that,” an ongoing reconfiguring *of* spacetimemattering in an iterative reworking of past, present, future integral to the play of the indeterminacy of being-time.

Karen Barad, *Transmaterialities*

In Book I of Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses* the “primal chaos” and “raw confused mass” is given form by “a god and a greater order of nature.”<sup>1</sup> It is the separation of the elements, the splitting, dividing, disentangling, and fixing that transforms obscure mass into distinct bodies, such as the earth, sea, winds, and sky. At the start of this creation narrative, in which Ovid calls upon the Gods to inspire his poetic endeavor, it would seem that creative vitality is infused into inert matter from an outside intelligent being. Order, hierarchy and a linear development from the Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages, are the *modus operandi* in this cosmology where Humankind is the “animal capable of higher thought that could be ruler of all the rest [...] moulded into an image of the all-controlling gods.”<sup>2</sup> And yet the

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<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, translated into English prose by A. S. Kline (The Netherlands: Poetry in Translation, 2000), 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 12.

composition of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, loosely referred to as an epic poem, defies all attempts at classification. Both mythical and historical, it lacks a single unifying hero or people, a characteristic of traditional epics.<sup>3</sup> Its themes and tones are varied and if moral reflection or insight were the purpose of myths, Ovid is said to make them "the object of play and artful manipulation."<sup>4</sup> Its fifteen books and two hundred and fifty myths might be better described as a proliferating catalogue of metamorphic accounts, restyled and, thus, transformed through Ovid's poetic voice. Here we find ontological crossings as diverse as that of humans and gods into flowers, rocks, stars, mountains, birds; statues into young girls; spears into trees; two people into one, and so on.<sup>5</sup> It would seem that rather than reflect the "order of nature," Ovid's text comes closer to supporting a claim made by one of Severo Sarduy's narrators: "La escritura es el arte de descomponer un orden y componer un desorden."<sup>6</sup>

Drawing from the previous chapter's expositions on the body—imagined not as an organism made up of members but as an anatomy of configurations, coming to being through *techne* rather than essence—and its treatment of materiality as agential and vibrant,<sup>7</sup> in this second chapter, I consider the disarticulation and reconfiguration of human-animal forms through the various metamorphoses in Sarduy's 1972 novel, *Cobra*,

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<sup>3</sup> Elaine Fantham, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>4</sup> G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975) 1.

<sup>5</sup> For a list of transformations in *The Metamorphoses* from Ian Johnston's translation to the English see <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/ovid/transformations.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Cobra* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1972), 20. All citations of the novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>7</sup> The two works I am predominantly drawing from here, discussed in more depth in chapter 1, are Jean Luc-Nancy, "Corpus," in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).



and Roberto Fabelo's contemporary drawings, paintings and installations. In the epigraphs above we find that, whereas in the fragment from Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* the chaos of indistinct inert matter is a primal stage before its organization by a supreme being, in the fragment from Karan Barad's *Transmaterialities*, the indeterminateness of matter is not a quality of the past but the source of ongoing reconfigurations.<sup>8</sup> That is, if chaos is overcome by the act of creation in the former, creation is immanent to chaos in the later. The passage from Ovid, we should remember, is just one among the many accounts of "bodies changed into new form"<sup>9</sup> of which he makes the object of play and artful manipulation. And it is this play and manipulation thought together with the notion of "transmateriality"—where the *trans*, as both prefix and preposition, does not signal this or that, but the process, the sharing of sense through which new bodies are infinitely engendered<sup>10</sup>—that will guide my readings of Sarduy's text and Fabelo's images. Treating matter as vibrant and not as "the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God,"<sup>11</sup> allows us to provincialize the anthropocentric narrative that Humankind is the "ruler of all the rest [...] moulded into an

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<sup>8</sup> Karan Barad, *Transmaterialities: Tran\*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21:2-3 (2015): 411.

<sup>9</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> While this term is taken from the fragment of Karen Barad's essay cited in the epigraph, Eva Hayward provides us with a useful elaboration on the significance of Trans\* in "Introduction: Transmaterialities in the Age of Trans\* Life," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, V. 2, N. 2, May 2015, cited in chapter 1. "Trans\* foregrounds and intensifies the prehensile, prefixial nature of trans- and implies a suffixial space of attachment that is simultaneously generalizable and abstract yet its function can be enacted only when taken up by particular objects (though never any one object in particular): trans\* is thus more than and equal to one. [...] The sticky tentacularity of "\*" signals not the primacy of "the human" [...] but the eventualization of life. If trans\* is ontological, it is that insofar as it is the movement that produces beingness. In other words, trans\* is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted. In its prefixial state, trans\* is prepositionally oriented — marking the with, through, of, in, and across that make life possible," 196.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

image of the all-controlling gods.” Following Barad’s lead into the science of Quantum Field Theory (QFT), we can better conceive of materiality’s vibrancy. Whereas classical physics sustained the notion of the vacuum, a space of complete emptiness,

[The QFT] principle of ontological indeterminacy calls the existence of such a zero-energy, zero-matter state into question. [...] [The] particles that correspond to the quantum fluctuation of the vacuum, that are and are not there as a result of the time-being indeterminacy relation, are called “virtual particles.” Virtual particles are quantized indeterminacies-in-action. Virtual particles are not present (and not absent), *but they are material*. In fact, *most of what matter is, is virtual*. [...] And if the energy of the vacuum is not determinately zero, it is not determinately empty. In fact, this indeterminacy not only is responsible for the void not being nothing (while not being something) but may in fact be the source of all that is, a womb that births existence.<sup>12</sup> [My emphasis]

This science prompts me to consider that which registers as nothing or immaterial, as, instead, imperceptible matter that comes into contact *with* and separation *from* other bodies, a *transmateriality* as Barad says. Accordingly, that which appears distinct or solid may be virtual. As the memory of that which could have been or that which is yet to come, virtual particles can also be understood as forces, energies and intensities, the invisible dynamics that constitute perceptible bodies.<sup>13</sup> Transformation is, thus, ongoing and recognizable form is always already incomplete or insufficient. QFT allows us to imagine a non-heteronormative creation story: “Nature is birthed out of chaos and void, *tohu v’vohu*, an echo, a diffracted/differentiating/différencing murmuring, an originary repetition without sameness, regeneration out of a fecund nothingness.”<sup>14</sup> Such queer imaginings render impossible a correspondence between so-called Humankind and an image, be that of the gods or otherwise. In light of this ontological indeterminacy, the categorical

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<sup>12</sup> Barad, *Transmaterialities*, 394, 395.

<sup>13</sup> I am drawing from Gilles Deleuze to better understand Barad’s theorization of the virtual particles via QFT. *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994), 214.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 393, 395, 410.

designation of Humankind is an artful manipulation. And images are a material part of our relational existence; they do not stand apart or as substitutes, but are themselves singular and non-identical.

Sarduy's and Fabelo's metamorphoses, as this chapter will explore, are the happenings at the intersection of technology, art, skill and craft. It is the very artifice, the smooth texture of a painting on silk, or the glitter of eye makeup on which their transfigurations would seem to insist. Silk and glitter, however, do not mask or disavow the fleshiness of human-animal bodies, the rot of decay, or the tares of a corpse. Death and art, artifice and organic matter are intimately entangled in both their works. Considered together, Sarduy's novel and Fabelo's images break the illusion of the self-possessed subject at the other end of the Renaissance's linear single-point perspective. The use of geometric projection to produce the illusion of receding space on paintings and frescos not only assumed biological and inherent ways of seeing,<sup>15</sup> but also, following the tenets of a classical aesthetic, constituted the spectator as an individual subject or, more accurately, a five-foot-nine Italian man.<sup>16</sup> Remembering Aristotle's *Poetics*, his dictums for a sense of the whole and unity of space and time were predicated on the notion that a representation should be "easily embraced by memory" and "easily embraced in one view."<sup>17</sup> "Vast size," Aristotle writes, is not beautiful because "the eye cannot take it all in at once."<sup>18</sup> Later when the Latin Americanist Alejo Carpentier elaborated his theory of a destratifying baroque

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<sup>15</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Illusion: Looking at Animals Looking," *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 342.

<sup>16</sup> The single point perspective was typically placed at the eye level of someone who measured 5ft9in, since this was the average height of an Italian man in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, (Chicago: Dover Thrift Editions, 1997), 15, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 15.

spirit, he opposed this spirit to the organizing structures of classicism, described as a geometrical harmony imposed through the partitioning of vacant spaces.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, Sarduy's compositions would horrify the classist with their seemingly unrestrained textual *horror vacui*: the medieval tendency to leave no space unadorned in its proverbial fear of emptiness. As one of the theoretical engineers of a Latin American Neo-Baroque,<sup>20</sup> Sarduy constructs a novel that is dynamic, expansive, eccentric, and centrifugal. For instance, the text continuously draws its reader outside the purview of its pages with a minutia of technical and esoteric references that compel one to consult outside sources, be that medical, astrological, or art historical. And in its proliferation of vignettes, it becomes unclear for the reader what is transpiring within the frame of the main narrative versus that of a *mise-en-scène*—the description of a painted canvas or a staged performance. The result is an indistinction between diegetic and exegetic passages that renders a single coherent interpretation impossible. In so doing, the text actively works against the classical tenets for a self-contained, conceivable, proportionate, and static representation intended to reflect the view of the individual sovereign subject.

In my reading of his novel *Gestos* in chapter one, I suggest Sarduy textually reproduces the two-dimensional plane of the canvas. As an avid student of art history and a painter, it is not surprising that Sarduy invites his readers to imagine his literary work through the tropes of visual space.<sup>21</sup> This invitation is made all the more emphatic in *Cobra*

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<sup>19</sup> Alejo Carpentier, "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real," *Magical Realism*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 92, 93.

<sup>20</sup> See Severo Sarduy, *Ensayos generales sobre el barroco* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Mercedes Sarduy, *Severo Sarduy: Cartas a mi hermana en La Habana* (Coral Gables, Florida: Severo Sarduy Cultural Foundation, 2013), 73.

with section titles, such as “PETIT ENSEMBLE CARAVAGGESQUE” and “PORTRAIT DE PUP EN ENFANT.”<sup>22</sup> In his analysis of Sarduy’s literary corpus, Pedro de Jesús underscores the preeminence of the plastic arts and suggests Sarduy inverts the ontological hierarchy between reality and artifice.<sup>23</sup> Following de Jesús’ lead, I’m interested in tracing the implications of this inversion for other naturalized categories. In *Cobra* creativity and craft continuously manipulate and denature human forms. Through mutations, mutilations, drag performances, theatrics, cosmetics, and tattoos, Sarduy undoes the humanist figure of the ideal body. As though turning Leonardo Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man upside down, the protagonist “[s]e había suspendido [...] al techo, por los pies, ahorcado al revés: cadenas de cimarrón la colgaban por los tobillos al zócalo de una lámpara. Era un murciélago albino entre globos de vidrio opalescente y cálices de cuarzo.”<sup>24</sup>

If Sarduy breaks with the classical universe, in which man is the measure of all things, through an aesthetic of excess and proliferation, Fabelo does so by employing the very techniques of the master Renaissance artists in such a way that he undermines their presumptions of an unmediated access to the “natural” world. In a series of ink drawings over the pages of a nineteenth century medical encyclopedia containing illustrations of human anatomy, Fabelo produces a catalogue of figures displaying zoological physiognomies.<sup>25</sup> Overlapping the precise, uniform incisions of the text’s original engravings with gestural cross-hatching and chiaroscuro modeling, Fabelo transforms anatomical parts into aesthetic material.

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<sup>22</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 47, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Pedro de Jesús, *Imagen y libertad vigilada: Ejercicios de retórica sobre Severo Sarduy* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2014), 71.

<sup>24</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Images for this series are reproduced in *Fabelo’s Anatomy*, Exhibition catalogue from the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA), Long Beach, CA, 2014, 36

While Fabelo's illustrations of interspecies bodies transform naturalized taxonomies, in tampering with an encyclopedia, specifically Leo Testut's *Traité d'anatomie humaine* from 1887, still cited today by faculties of medicine around the world,<sup>26</sup> Fabelo is also transforming disciplinary boundaries and modes of knowledge production. In other words, Fabelo's drawings do more than intervene in the content of the encyclopedia. The integration of his drawings with those of the encyclopedia's engravers and the decontextualization of fragments of Testut's text—rendering instructional descriptions poetic—suggest the encyclopedia, as well as other sciences of compartmentalization, is a convention, a language, an art form, and not the repository of unmediated information. To better appreciate the implications of this intervention, let us recall that the encyclopedia is both a product of and emblematic of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment ideology of progress through the acquisition of scientific knowledge nourished and laid the groundwork for twentieth century modernizing and utopic projects, of which eugenics and the sacrifice of life for the imagined betterment of the human species was one manifestation. The rhetoric of progress and sacrifice, a predilection for taxonomizing, and models of an ideal man, as I will show below, are also operative in the discourse of the Cuban Revolution.

My interest in Sarduy's and Fabelo's work is not simply in the iconography of hybrid bodies, nor as reading these bodies as a direct response to a national subject model, but to consider how the de-stratifying work their texts and images do help us see the limits and processes of a dominant national discourse. To this end, I sustain my attention on their aesthetic practices, exploring the epistemological and, consequently, ethical implications of

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<sup>26</sup> Dr. Juan Carlos Collado Otero, essay contribution to *Fabelo's Anatomy*, Exhibition catalogue, 36.

their artful manipulations. By aestheticizing presumably natural and scientific means of understanding and ordering the world and by foregrounding a shared biomorphic-materiality, Sarduy and Fabelo unsettle the secure boundaries of the human, its presumptions of sovereignty and its attendant nationalisms. The political significance of their non-anthropocentric strategies comes into high relief when considered against the backdrop of Che Guevara's seminal essay, "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba" (1965). In Guevara's vision of the generation to come, "el hombre del futuro" is not only compelled by heroic duty, knowing that "libertad y su sostén cotidiano tienen color de sangre y están henchidos de sacrificio," but he is also free of "original sin," of the "infectious germs" and "perverse" tendencies of his bourgeois past.<sup>27</sup> The violent repercussions of this idealized, heroic subject and its sacrificial logic are made evident when we recall the 1965 forced labor camps where gay citizens and dissidents were interred and the involuntary quarantines for those infected with HIV in the 1980s.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, Guevara elaborates his own creation narrative with allusions to techniques and the malleability of clay:

El esqueleto de nuestra libertad completa está formado, falta la sustancia proteica y el ropaje; los crearemos. [...] Nos forjaremos en la acción cotidiana, creando un hombre nuevo con una nueva técnica.... La personalidad juega el papel de movilización y dirección en cuanto que encarna las más altas virtudes [...] La arcilla fundamental de nuestra obra es la juventud, en ella depositamos nuestra esperanza

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<sup>27</sup> Che Guevara, "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba," 1965, [https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/65-socyh.htm#n\\*](https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/65-socyh.htm#n*) Translations from the Spanish are mine.

<sup>28</sup> See Mirta Suquet Martínez's dissertation chapter, "De testimonios y de reos: biopolítica y revolución, el seropositivo cubano" (2015), where she explains how the Cuban Revolution's public health policy (and its corresponding moral codes) manifested itself in the medicalization of the New Man as an immune man, 303. <http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/383016>

y la preparamos para tomar de nuestras manos la bandera. [...] *Patria o muerte*.<sup>29</sup>  
(author's emphasis)

Here the future community is imagined corporeally, a skeleton in need of meat and clothes, but ultimately a cohesive organism that will be lead by “un hombre nuevo.” A Christian metaphysics is invoked not just in its messianic projection, but also in its allusion to body and soul, “La personalidad...*encarna* las más altas virtudes.” In the previous chapter, following Jean Luc Nancy, I suggested that conceiving of the body as an individual whole, a microcosm, or as the incarnation of an ideal, has led to regarding non-normative bodies as aberrations, inferior or defective versions of an originary archetype. Indeed, we see this in the context of Cuba, where those who did not match the Revolution’s model of a hyper-masculine, morally and physically incorruptible New Man were categorized as *gusanos* and deemed disposable. In the Revolution’s motto, *patria o muerte*, the grammar of one or the other, leaves no possibility for deviations, for that which is unproductive to the coming community. Moreover, *patria o muerte* invokes the sublation, or the making operative, of death for the nation’s providential fulfillment. Considered within this context—the imposition of a national subjectivity and its inevitable exclusions—it becomes critical to break the correlation between Humankind and an image, to decenter and fracture the single point perspective, and to dwell on the creative potential of chaos.

### **Cataloguing Cobra from Frozen Orchids to Asthmatic Bishops**

Sitting at her boudoir, the novel’s protagonist “[s]e asilabla las enmarañada fibras de vidrio.”<sup>30</sup> Taken literally, the reader is confounded. Glass hair? Is there such a thing?

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<sup>29</sup> Guevara, “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba.”

<sup>30</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 12.



Tinsel comes to mind and David Bowiesque glam rock pink wigs. But can glass be untangled? Wouldn't the glass break? Read as poetic object, however, a wig of glass hair is emblematic of Sarduy's novel, a text that consistently conjures the paradoxical simultaneity, or the becoming-indistinct, between antithetical concepts—such as the organic and the synthetic—of a text that seeks to make the seemingly unbendable pliant, the solid porous, and the static unstable. Regarding a White Dwarf, a term for a celestial body that is small and dense, one passage reads, “ahora menos pétrea, menos densa de materia en su interior, ampollada.”<sup>31</sup> The confluence of antinomies in the novel and their formal undoings recalls the chaos at the start of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, “Nothing retained its shape [...] because in the one body, cold fought with heat, moist with dry, soft with hard, and weight with weightless things.”<sup>32</sup> Whereas in Ovid's myth the gods organize the elements into their proper places and create Humankind in their own image, in *Cobra* they seemed to have blundered. The novel's eponymous, transgender protagonist admonishes god, “Dios mío [...] ¿por qué me hiciste nacer si no era para ser absolutamente divina?”<sup>33</sup> Appeals to divine intervention notwithstanding, Cobra and company will go to any lengths to untangle glass hair.

Cobra is a performer/prostitute in the Lyrical Theater of the Dolls; its location is unspecified and historical context seemingly both fifteenth century and 1970's. On its first page we find allusions to the Italian Renaissance, Chinese foot binding and Calder's mobiles, all the while “en el tocadiscos, como es natural, Sonny Rollins.”<sup>34</sup> As the star, “la reina,” with the most admirers, she is almost perfect except for her feet. Cobra rarely appears outside

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 65, 66. More on this passage to follow.

<sup>32</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the company of her diminutive double, Pup, also known as the White Dwarf [la enana blanca], and the Madame. Together they form an (un)holy trinity. In the first half of the text, sectioned “Cobra I,” Cobra’s obsessive experiments to decrease the size of her feet, in which science and magic intermingle, are complimented by those to enlarge her double, Pup. The denouement of these transformative experiments is Cobra’s castration. The search for the elusive Dr. Ktzab who will perform “la conversión” takes the trio to Morocco and reproduces Orientalist fantasies of bazaars, hashish and mosques. While the feminine gender is used during this first half, surprisingly, once Cobra emerges from the surgery—now possibly in a Parisian subway—on to the second half of the novel, “Cobra II,” the adjectives switch to the masculine, as though grammatically insisting on the improper, on that which does *not* belong or correspond to its subject. Following her castration, phalluses and ejaculation abound as Cobra is now in the company of biker thugs who perform orgiastic initiatory rituals and go by the names Tundra, Escorpión, Totem, and Tigre. They also appear at times as Tibetan Lamas and drug traffickers in Amsterdam. The text ends with the section entitled “Diario Indio” in a Buddhist monastery in Nepal or perhaps the West Indies, given its allusions to Columbus’ error.<sup>35</sup> Although Cuba is no doubt present in the text, whereas in *Gestos* it might be identified as its leading star, in *Cobra* its most explicit reference is in a footnote on the Mambo, which Cobra sings in Esperanto.<sup>36</sup>

The “novel,” not unlike Ovid’s “epic poem,” is composed of a series of metamorphoses. In the place of a larger narrative arc, or a discernible plot, there is instead a catalogue of transformations. Even summaries of *Cobra* by other critics take on the form

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 290.

<sup>36</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 66.

of lists. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, for instance, lists eleven transformations and observes that they occur “at the same time, or successively (there is no valid chronology although there is a succession of episodes in the conventionally bound solid called a book).”<sup>37</sup> Of course the quantification of eleven is arbitrary, for as Rodríguez Monegal notes the text itself performs its own metamorphoses.<sup>38</sup> A single sentence, such as the following, conjures for the reader continuously shifting images from one unexpected noun and modifier to the next: “A las sorpresas térmicas respondieron los invasores con grandes maniobras: de las uñas brotó un violeta vascular que tiraba a orquídea congelada, a manto de Obispo asmático, bajo un refectorio que se derrumba, comiéndose una piña.”<sup>39</sup> In the comma that both separates and brings together “frozen orchid” and “asthmatic bishop,” Sarduy’s writing stops discoursing and instead enacts a transmateriality, a zone of indeterminacy in which the reader must sustain an imaginative doing and undoing from one word to the next. If “linguistic structure [has] shape[d]...our understanding of the world, believing that the subject and predicate structure of language reflects a prior ontological reality of substance and attribute,”<sup>40</sup> Sarduy upends this presumed correspondence and, in so doing, a prior ontological reality. Put otherwise, although grammatically, a vascular violet, a frozen orchid, and the robe of an asthmatic bishop correspond as attributes of the nails, as unique, idiosyncratic composites, they do not refer back or stand in for the nails, but

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<sup>37</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, “Metamorphoses of the text,” *Review 74: Focus on Cobra*, Winter (1974), 16.

<sup>38</sup> Rodríguez Monegal, “Metamorphoses of the text,” 16.

<sup>39</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 28, no. 3 (2003), 802.

occupy in the mind of the reader their own substantial space, like added objects to an expanding composition.

Before exploring this becoming at the level of the writing further, we can say that at the macro level of “the book,” identifying a unified, well-organized body, or at least one lead by a head, becomes an impossible task. Like an assemblage of found objects, the text contains, among other things, passages by Octavio Paz, surgical procedures [curetejas], allusions to Caravaggio, a recreation of *Las Meninas*, the Chinese torture Leng T’che, linguistic terms [trigramas], Lotus Pose, Derrida, Coca Cola, cocaine, Italian glazed pottery [mayólica], Tiano statuettes, Astronomy [enanas blancas] and so on. And this is to say nothing of the various stylistic forms, tones and shifts in narrative voice the text exhibits. The abundance of literary, visual, musical, scientific, religious, popular culture, and philosophical references over spill the boundaries of its narrative frame, so much so that it begins to resemble a disorganized encyclopedia, one that necessitates the use of another encyclopedia. It is as though Sarduy might have anticipated the spreading, virtual, web-like connections of the Internet. A twenty-first century reader, such as myself, will often refer to Wikipedia several times within the span of a single sentence. And with each search the text continues to expand; its virtual potentialities proliferate, for example: “Cobrita—que para ser breves, es una ventana de Tomar con dos patas.”<sup>41</sup> For those unfamiliar with a “ventana de Tomar,” a Google Image search will reveal a dizzyingly ornate window from a twelfth century convent founded by Templar Knights in Portugal. “Para ser breves,” this image of our diminutive, *Cobrita*, provides a visual counterpart to the text’s accumulative composition and transmorphic figures: The Tomar window is framed by Gothic pinnacles,

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<sup>41</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 49.

reliefs of vegetal, animal and choral motifs, a human head and set of hands, ropes in elaborate knots and sections of geometric shapes. All intricately carved, stylized and tightly spaced, the sculptures form repetitive, exuberant patterns.

As previous readers of *Cobra* have done, and in this way continuing a tradition, like a ritual invocation, I will list here some of the title's allusions: 1. An anagram for a group of experimental 1950s painters, (Appel, Aleschinsky, Corneille, Jorn) from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam 2. Other anagrammatic possibilities are the Spanish verb "cobrar" 3. Barroco 4. Córdoba, Cuba 5. The name of an actress killed in a plane crash over Fujiyama 6. "The hypnotic snake that bites its own tail." 7. Octavio Paz's poem "La Boca Habla."<sup>42</sup> While each of these signals a particular aspect of the novel, my interest is in noting the multiplicity of meanings and directions that are conjured just at the title, before the novel has even "started." Like an elaborate knot of a Tomar window, or the dense consistency of a White Dwarf star, individual words and phrases in *Cobra* operate as conrescences of signification that dilate and expand the space of the novel.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, as González Echevarría has noted, the string C-O-B-R-A has infinite semantic potential:

A computer study might reveal that the string C-O-B-R-A contains the phonic groups most often repeated in Western languages, perhaps in all languages: a sort of minus-zero degree where phonology turns in on itself, a point at which negations and

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<sup>42</sup> See Rodríguez Monegal, "Metamorphoses of the text," and Roberto González Echevarría, "Rehearsal for *Cobra*," in *Review 74: Focus on Cobra*, Winter (1974), as well as Susan Levine's preface to the English translation of *Cobra* and *Maitreya* (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995). The four experimental painters, as well as the poem by Paz, appear in the novel. Sarduy, *Cobra*, 136, 229.

<sup>43</sup> Philippe Sollers uses the metaphor of "pulverized rock" and "concentric vibrations" to describe this quality of layered, concentrated meanings of individual words in *Cobra* in "La Boca Obra," in *Review 74: Focus on Cobra*, Winter (1974), 13.

oppositions which compose language cancel each other out: the non-origin of language.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps not unlike the aesthetics of *horror vacui*—the meticulous and compulsive covering up of surfaces in fear of empty space—the polysemic nature of the title is meant to fill the vacuum of what González Echevarría calls the “non-origin of language” and later “an empty center” and “originary loss.”<sup>45</sup> Other readers of *Cobra* have similarly reiterated this sense of absence. Considering that Sarduy himself describes his writing as a linguistic psychoanalysis,<sup>46</sup> *Cobra* has generated various Lacanian and poststructuralist readings. The text performs its own deconstruction and, as such, analysis of the novel, particularly by thinkers, such as Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers and Hélène Cixous,<sup>47</sup> result in poetic expositions, forming not so much interpretations of the text as continuations of its desires and metamorphoses. The title to Cixous’ essay, “O C, o, b, r, a, b, a, r, o, c, o: A Text-Twister,” is perhaps a literal example of this textual expansion. These material regenerations of the novel notwithstanding, the poststructuralist attention to the deferral, elision and erasure in the production of meaning insists on an absence. Susan Levine, for example, writes, “[t]he text tells us that what is left after the recognition of the lack of a concrete center [...] are doublings and mirror images [...] rather than the objects themselves. [...] In Saussurean linguistics, they are signs minus sense or ‘signifieds’.”<sup>48</sup> Following language’s dialectics of negation—e.g. to say that something is present is to also say it is not absent—and the

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<sup>44</sup> González Echevarría, “Rehearsal for *Cobra*,” 41.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Sarduy is cited in Enrique Marquez, “*Cobra*: De aquel oscuro objeto del deseo,” *Revisita Iberoamericana*, Núm. 154, Enero-Marzo (1991), 310

<sup>47</sup> See the *Review 74: Focus on Cobra*, Winter (1974) issue.

<sup>48</sup> Susanne Jill Levine, “Discourse as Bricolage,” *Review 74: Focus on Cobra*, Winter (1974), 33. I would like to note that while Levine’s analysis reproduces the negative dialectics of language she concludes by associating *Cobra* to a Nietzschean affirmation which would correspond to the New Materialists notion of plenitude.

correspondence between a sign and its signified, suggests that to destabilize this relationship, to make the sign nonsensical (or *minus* a signified) is to make it empty. This lacking is reiterated in the Lacanian formulation of the subject; its psychic structure is conceived as linguistic and, like the deferral of meaning, constituted in the desire for a lost object.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, readers of *Cobra* have traced its heterogeneous and accumulative style back to an originary dispossession:<sup>50</sup> the protagonist's metamorphoses are driven by a desire for that which she is wanting, be that smaller feet, a divine body, or erotic ecstasy.

In my engagement with the novel I would like to slightly deviate from these readings, perhaps following another line of flight, another metamorphic desire of the text. Drawing from Barad's writing on Quantum Field Theory and its treatment of the void as virtual particles and a "fecund nothingness," I would like to reimagine what others have previously designated as a loss or an empty center as a plenitude of indeterminate materiality. Sarduy's own theoretical writings, in fact, support a rethinking of loss and emptiness. In an essay devoted to the metamorphic work of the transvestite, in which he cites Buddhism and Chinese theories of painting, Sarduy writes that instead of the full presence of god, man, or logos classical philosophy assumes, there is "*una vacuidad germinadora cuya metáfora y su simulación es la realidad visible* [...]. [El] estallido inicial no [es] de un átomo de hipermateria [...] sino de una pura no-presencia que se traviste en pura energía, engendrando lo visible con su simulacro" (his emphasis).<sup>51</sup> Although Sarduy posits a pure non-presence, the nothingness of which existence is birthed, "una vacuidad germinadora," is fecund and what we perceive as "realidad visible" is a transvestism of

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<sup>49</sup> Marquez, "Cobra: De aquel oscuro objeto del deseo," 302.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Severo Sarduy, *La simulación* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, C.A., 1982), 20.

pure energy or, alternatively in the terms of QFT, virtual and infinitely transforming. Imagining a plenitude of indeterminate materiality where others have an empty center, allows me to attend to other dynamics of the text, such as fields of becoming, constellations, assemblages and collectivities that do not reiterate subject formation—its constitution in opposition to an Other, self-knowledge, (mis)identification, or its splitting into many selves—and the negative dialectics of sign and signified. Returning to the string c-o-b-r-a, to its *lettercity*,<sup>52</sup> rather than point to its negations and oppositions, I suggest this graphic configuration appears like a string of malformed pearls one can touch, or at least trace the curvilinear lines of its graphemes on the page.<sup>53</sup>

### **Painting the void as full... of Drag, Dolls and Toy Cats**

At the opening lines of the novel we encounter our first act of transformation:

Los encerraba en hormas desde que amanecía, les aplicaba compresas de alumbre, los castigaba con baños sucesivos de agua fría y caliente. Los forzó con mordazas; los sometió a mecánicas groseras. Fabricó, para meterlos, armaduras de alambre cuyos hilos acortaba, retorciéndolos con alicates; después de embadurnarlos de goma arábica los rodeó con ligaduras: eran momias, niños de medallones florentinos.<sup>54</sup>

Corporeality comes to the fore in this passage in the verbs of enclosure, pressure, twisting, and binding, but the objects [Los] and subject of this punishment and submission remain unclear. Repeated every morning, like a ritual, these vulgar mechanics [mecánicas groseras] suggest perverse devices or even sadistic torture. At the end of the passage, *Los*,

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<sup>52</sup> For more on *lettercity*, see Chapter 1, pg. 55, where I cite Jean Luc-Nancy.

<sup>53</sup> In my allusion to malformed pearls I'm taking inspiration from the word "Barroco." Sarduy writes "del barroco perdura la imagen nudosa de la gran perla irregular—del portugués *barroco*—, el áspero conglomerado rocoso—del español *berrueco*." *Ensayos generales sobre el barroco*, 149.

<sup>54</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 11.



the object pronoun of these actions, a grammatical particle, are not *like* but *were* [eran] mummies and the children of Florentine medallions. Significantly, Sarduy does not give us an analogy. It would seem that the objects of these mechanics are at once an embalmed corpse and a lithograph, bandaged in strips of cloth and smeared in Gum Arabic: a viscous edible substance that was not only used by Egyptians to coat the bandages of mummies, but is also a key ingredient in traditional lithography, a mode of making medallions. We can consider “children” here as the multiple copies, the material and mechanical reproduction of lithographic printmaking. The materiality of the corpse and that of the lithograph is not inert matter, but alive, “eran...niños.” In this opening passage, where subject and object remain indistinct, Sarduy entangles corporeality, mechanics, ritual, perversity and art. Repeated later in the novel, the passage becomes a refrain, like the text’s own ritual invocation. However, by the second encounter, the reader associates the “vulgar mechanics” to the protagonist’s foot binding. “Cayó en el determinismo ortopédico.”<sup>55</sup>

The Madame, aka la Madre, la Matrona, la Buscona and la Señora—note the collectivity of names and roles—is the director of the show at the Lyrical Theater of the Dolls: “Aun allí seguía dirigiendo la mise-en-scène, el tráfico de tarimas y atuendos entre el espectáculo visible—donde ya cantaba la Cadillac— y el teatro generalizado en los sucesivos aposentos.”<sup>56</sup> Between “el espectáculo visible” and “el teatro generalizado,” there is no un-staged or un-crafted scene. This sense of artifice is reiterated at the level of the writing. After the self-referential statement, “La escritura es el arte de la digresión,” the narrator goes on to say, “Hablemos pues de un olor a hachís y a curry, de un basic english tropezante y de una musiquilla de baratijas. Esa ficha señalética es la del indio

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 16.

costumista.”<sup>57</sup> Drawing on an orientalist stereotype, the reader is made aware that rather than referring to an outside knowable subject, this figuration is another sign within the tapestry of the text, a single plane that “el espectáculo visible” and “el teatro generalizado” share.

Nevertheless, this artifice marks the skin. “El indio costumista” is also referred to as the Dermic Silversmith, “El orfebre dérmico”:

Iba pues decorando las divas con sus arabescos teta por teta, que éstas, por redondas y turgentes, más fáciles eran de ornar que los pródigos vientres y nalguitas boucherianas, rosa viejo con tendencia al desparramo. Desfilaban las divinidades roncadas ante el inventor de alas de mariposa y allí permanecían estáticas, el tiempo de repasar sus canciones; aplicado, el miniaturista en vivo de las heladas reinas de grandes pies iba encubriendo la desnudez con orlas plateadas, jeroglíficos de ojos, arabescos y franjas de arcoíris, que según la inserción y el aguaje las adelgazaban o no; disimulaba de cada una las desventajas con volutas negras y subrayaba los encantos rodeándolos de círculos blancos. En las manos les escribía, con azafrán y bermellón, los textos de entrada a escena [...] La Señora las revisaba, les pegaba las pestañas y una etiqueta OK a cada una y les daba una nalgada y una pastilla de librium.<sup>58</sup>

The transformation of bodies occurs through artistic and illusionistic devices: “el aguaje las adelgazaban o no; disimulaba [...] y subrayaba.” Arabesques reiterate the curvilinear lines of breasts, buttocks, and swollen bellies. And yet in this transformation, the nakedness of the bodies is at moments lost for the reader behind the description of “orlas plateadas, jeroglíficos de ojos, arabescos y franjas de arcoíris.” Phrases, such as “el miniaturista en vivo de las *heladas* reinas” juxtapose and invert the life-like and the inanimate; the suppleness of the bodies is contrasted to their static postures, “allí permanecían estáticas.” The passage where “[l]a Señora las revisaba, les pegaba las pestañas y una etiqueta OK” evokes the image of dolls moving down a conveyor belt on an assembly line; whereas, the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

spank on the buttocks and the dose of Librium suggests these are bodies with corporeal and psychic vulnerabilities. The rusty pink, “con tendencia al desparramo,” recalls the images from *Gestos* where ink runs outside its circumscribed boundaries. Using the same colors of henna tattoos, “azafrán y bermellón,” “[e]n las manos les escribía...los textos de entrada a escena.” Textuality here is produced not on an inert, flat, surface that passively receives the writing, but on one that is supple, porous, irregular, absorbent and curvilinear; textuality, moreover, is not only semiotic. At times, tiny, consistent and tightly spaced, its graphemes appear like a decorative non-representational design. The trope of tattooing, of course, links art, skin, and pain, as suggested in the name Dermic Silversmith: “[T]anta nalguita rubensiana a su alrededor [...] intenta una pincelada y da un pellizco.”<sup>59</sup>

Soon after the description of the paintings on the skins of the “dolls,” the narrator brings us to another diegetic passage. What follows is a segment from the Dermic Silversmith’s biographic background, which will later be dismissed as another fiction: “¡sólo un tarado pudo tragarse la a todas luces apócrifa historieta [...]!”<sup>60</sup> Consequently, what constitutes the main narrative and that of other fictions or tableaux becomes indistinct.

Un espejo abombado y otros doce más pequeños que lo rodeaban multiplicaron su imagen cuando entró con una sirvienta mofletuda en una casa de muros y puertas blancos que cerraban aldabones negros.

Por las ventanas ojivales rondales de vidrio opaco filtraban un día gris y húmedo. De un baúl sienés sobresalía un tapiz flamenco. Colgaban de las vigas arenques ahumados y racimos plateados de ajo. En una mesa había una balanza y una biblia abierta cuyas iniciales eran hipogrifos mordiéndose la cola, sirenas y harpías; entre las letras saltaban liebres. Junto al libro un reloj de arena. Reflejo de un vaso de vino, temblaba sobre el mantel una línea transparente y roja.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 26.

Like the curves of the “heladas reinas,” our first surface here is a convex mirror whose image is multiplied in twelve smaller mirrors. What follows is a description of an interior whose contents recall those of a Dutch seventeenth century painting with smoked herring and garlic hanging from the beams. Within this scenic arrangement there is another composition, the pages of a bible whose illuminated medieval script shows hippogriffs biting their tails, mermaids and harpies. There is yet another still life imbedded within the scene: a book, an hourglass and a glass of wine whose reflection is “transparente y roja.” In terms of narrative action, nothing happens. As readers we are presented with an image that fractures into other ones, producing an inventory of very disparate objects (e.g. mermaids, bibles, and garlic). Like the horror vacui composition of medieval European, Islamic, or Hindu art, Sarduy produces a multiplicity of images on single plane. What action occurs is not at the level of the story but at the level of the writing, in the conjuring of images that transform from one to another in the imagination of the reader. Accordingly, the textual here—in the spatial work it demands of the reader to reconstruct the described scene—operates less like a narrative and more like a visual composition.

While Cobra might momentarily succumb to “el determinismo ortopédico,” her cosmetic process before the drag show takes on a semi-religious discipline, something she endures for hours like a faithful devotee:

Empezaba a transformarse a las seis para el espectáculo de las doce; en ese ritual llorante había que merecer cada ornamento: las pestañas postizas y la corona, los pigmentos, que no podían tocar los profanos, los lentes de contacto amarillos—ojos de tigre—; los polvos de las grandes motas blancas.<sup>61</sup>

False eyelashes, color contact lenses, pigments and powder—articles one might associate with fakeness, artifice and illusion—are treated like the vestments and liturgical objects of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 12.

a priest, “que no podían tocar los profanes.” Except that unlike the theatrics of a Catholic mass, the ornamental here does not invoke a more substantive immateriality. The reflective surfaces of “mirror images,” “what is left after the recognition of the lack of a concrete center,”<sup>62</sup> have depth; they are both sacred and profane. This paradox is reiterated in Sarduy’s irreverent treatment of eastern religious and philosophical practices, references to which abound in the text: mosques, the Ganges River and Lotus Pose, to name a few. The iconography of the Buddha appears in one instance as a kitsch object: “No quedó Buda inflable, elefante de celuloide tamaño natural con dos arqueros en el lomo, seda, sari, raso, wash and wear indian silk ni electric sitar.”<sup>63</sup> On the one hand, its mass produced materials are a mark of its commercialization, of its iconography made trite and cliché. On the other hand, in its very syntheticity, the inflatable celluloid signals the Buddhist belief that the material world is but mere appearance, an illusion.

In the edited volume, *Materiality*, the anthropologist Daniel Miller begins by noting the relationship between the material and immaterial in many religious belief systems,

For religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, theology has been centered upon critique of materiality. At its simplest Hinduism, for example, rests upon the concept of *maya*, which proclaims the illusory nature of the material world. The aim of life is to transcend the apparently obvious: the stone we stub our toe against, or the body as the core of our sensuous existence. Truth comes from our apprehension that this is mere illusion. Nevertheless, paradoxically, material culture has been of considerable consequence as the means of this conviction.<sup>64</sup>

If all material and corporeal sensation is an illusion, then it stands to reason that art is no more illusory than everyday-life. In this way we can better appreciate the novel’s insistence on artifice and its interweaving of the organic and the synthetic, or the life-like and the

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<sup>62</sup> Citing Levine here again, see footnote 39.

<sup>63</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 59.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Miller, ed. *Materiality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005),

seemingly inanimate. Thinking Buddhism with the science of QFT, we might consider the religion's insistence on the illusory as virtual particles, a state between being and non-being. Significantly, for Buddhism, as noted earlier via Sarduy's elaboration, the void is not an empty space of negativity as it is in traditional European thought, but instead a space that is generative with potential becomings,<sup>65</sup> and in this sense corresponds well with QFT's understanding of the void as indeterminate materiality. Surrounding the figure of Cobra, we find "gatos vivos y de peluche," "juguetes mecánicos" and the fleshy bodies that perform as "las muñecas."<sup>66</sup> I suggest these doublings do not cancel each other out, but rather signal to the non-essentializing *techne* and virtual becomings that make up a shared, vibrant materiality. Rather than transcend materiality, as most theologies would compel us to do, what we find in *Cobra* is a plane of immanence, one of paradox and indeterminism.

Returning to Cobra's cosmetic transformation, we also find a becoming-animal, invoked in the camouflaging of the color contacts, in the color of tiger-eyes. Rolando Pérez writes in his book *Severo Sarduy and the Neo-Baroque Image in the Visual Arts*,

for Sarduy there is little or no difference between human transvestism and the kind of animal mimicry described by Rober Caillois, where certain insects mimic other insects, for no other reason than for their own non-teleological pleasure. In other words, the transvestite is not making some kind of statement about 'X', but is instead, if one can put it this way, 'communicating' through a logic of sensation.<sup>67</sup>

We might relate this unpurposive sensation to Barthes' notion of *jouissance*, in which our own subject positions are dissolved in the impossibility of self-identification with, or the extraction of knowable content from a text. Put differently, the bliss produced in *writerly*

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<sup>65</sup> Sarduy, *La simulación*, 20. See also Rolando Pérez, *Severo Sarduy and the Neo-Baroque Image in the Visual Arts* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2012), 4, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 11, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Pérez, *Severo Sarduy and the Neo-Baroque*, 4. Pérez is drawing from Sarduy's text, *La simulación*, which I cite on page 18, note 51.

works takes us outside ourselves.<sup>68</sup> Whereas art has traditionally been conceived as the domain of the gods or Humankind, here the creative act of transformation, the ecstasy of writing, or the communication “through the logic of sensation,” brings us closer to non-human animals.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Sarduy’s text does not elicit any kind of identification, but rather compels one to take an oblique or decentered (i.e. non-normative) perspective.<sup>70</sup> The perversity implied in the punishing and submissive “mecánicas groseras”<sup>71</sup> of Cobra’s foot binding suggests that in creation, in the act of changing bodies into new form, there is a transgression of normative values, a disordering of an order as Sarduy’s narrator states. And in this creative process, “en ese ritual llorante,”<sup>72</sup> there is also discomfort and pain. The novel’s insistence on suffering in tandem with its subversion of the “natural” speaks to feminists’ critiques of the super textualization in postmodernists’ theory and “its utopian disregard for the lived relations of domination that ground the ‘play’ of arbitrary reading.”<sup>73</sup> Let us recall Sarduy’s statement about the somatic violence of language, “Practicar la literatura es una especie de transgresión muy grande, es una especie de

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<sup>68</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang by Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1975).

<sup>69</sup> In Sarduy’s text *La simulación*, transvestism is a self-effacement, a disappearance, like the insect’s camouflage. It also is not an imitation of an already existing model, or determined reality, for there is no “woman,” only ever an icon, or an “infinite irreality,” 14. Sarduy’s association of human transvestism to the insect is especially interesting to keep in mind when I turn to the work of Roberto Fabelo in the second half of this chapter. We will see how insects and their metamorphic potential figure prominently in his art.

<sup>70</sup> Perez, *Severo Sarduy and the Neo-Baroque*, “The (eccentric) transvestite figure demands to be read eccentrically, and in so doing it forces us—perhaps disturbingly—to move from our comfortable position to one that actively transforms us. Ethically and philosophically, Sarduy makes us take note that there is no such thing as an “innocent,” normative position, but that instead every point of view reflects an aesthetic,” 35.

<sup>71</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152.

amenaza muy grande para la seguridad simbólica de nosotros.”<sup>74</sup> Language, after all, affects how bodies are distributed and spaced, made visible and invisible through identity markers. When Sarduy’s narrator describes Cobra as “desde los pies hasta el cuello es mujer; arriba su cuerpo se transforma en una especie de animal heráldico de hocico barroco,”<sup>75</sup> he is not only drawing upon the performativity of gender, but also that of species and its impact on the body; she is “maquillada con violencia.”<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, when we move on to Roberto Fabelo’s images we’ll see that some of his hybrid figures wear wings tied to their torsos or beaks as helmets, as though performing species-drag.

### **Stages, Screens, Surfaces and flipping the channel.**

After a comical exchange of insults between the Madame and Pup (aka la Enana Blanca)—“frijol podrido,” “desdentada trecemesina, alcahueta, bruja,” “repugnantísima enana, aborto fétido,” “gusarapo hediondo”—the former warns the latter, “prepárate una vez más para el cambio,” and then using the imperative, “Vas a transformarte.”<sup>77</sup> Since characters in the novel are not given a substantive form, be that in appearance or in psychic interiority, they transform for the reader in the very act of name-calling; that is, language acquires an incantatory effect. Having no stable image of Pup, the white dwarf is transformed as we read “—Dios mío, ¡pero si es una lagartija!”<sup>78</sup> The change the Madame is threatening, however, is an agonizing process that will involve injecting Pup with snow (or

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<sup>74</sup> Severo Sarduy in Joaquín Soler Serrano, “Severo Sarduy, a fondo,” de la serie *A Fondo* de RTVE, Ministerio de Cultura, Expte. N. 63. 158, 1976. Also cited in Chapter 1.

<sup>75</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 126.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



possibly cocaine) to enlarge her. The passage leading up to her metamorphosis, and what I am particularly interested in, sets the stage:

Rumor de aceitados aros metálicos deslizándose a lo largo de una varilla. Ábrense las cortinas de terciopelo púrpura: mi reducida pantallita cuca —rachienta se va agrandando... ya es una vasta superficie blanquísima, sutilmente curva. Sí, mi 16 mm blanco y negro— lo sé: en realidad carmelitoso y amarillento —, de bordes carcomidos, que interrumpían a cada rato números porosos, cabezas al revés y un tembleque de letras, se transforma en un Cinerama a todo Metro-color. Himnos estereofónicos. En la pantalla se va definiendo un paisaje... <sup>79</sup>

What follows are a series of disparate scenes that might correspond to those of classical and pop films, as though someone were flipping through channels on the television, whose screen and technology are described in the above passage. If we consider “una vasta superficie blanquísima” as a reference to a blank page (in addition to the surface of a White Dwarf star, a mound of snow, or a mound of cocaine), we might take this passage as an analogy of the text. Like a television screen, the virtual images that are conjured as we read appear on a single impenetrable plane. The surface of this plane—again like that of the convex mirror or bodies of the dolls—has a subtle curve [sutilmente curva], a distorting effect, and as such depth. While images transpire on its surface, this plane itself transforms from that of a stage with curtains to that of a 16 mm black and white TV and, finally, to that of a color Cinerama. Similarly, the plane of the text shifts; one notes, flipping from one page to the next, how its graphic body changes from paragraphs of prose to poetic arrangements, from a screenplay to disparate fragments, columns or lists. Sarduy draws our attention not only to the page, the stage, the screen and its surface, but also to its very materiality, its deterioration, its becoming- “cuca —rachienta,” “carmelitoso y amarillento,” “de bordes carcomidos.” Language is not simply an abstract, formal structure, but

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

historically and geographically constituted; an organic/synthetic body that wears and tears, grows and transforms. As the sharing of sense, or of sense making, language is in perpetual metamorphosis, infinitely engendering new bodies.<sup>80</sup>

As we saw with *Gestos*, Sarduy does not take his readers inside his characters but to a field of material encounters, from one sensuous exterior to another. With passages and scenarios that repeat themselves we are brought to do cartographic, (as opposed to a penetrating) reading, marking its patterns and interconnecting nodes. One such node is Cobra's sexual conversion.<sup>81</sup> The character of Cadillac (a performer at the Lyrical Theater of the Dolls), who assists the Madame in the transformation of Pup, appears once again dressed as the elusive Dr. Ktazob, who will perform Cobra's castration. This assemblage of figures—Madame, Pup, Cobra, with the assistance of Cadillac/Ktazab—form a network or algebraic formula in Cobra's transformation, "{Sra + Cobra (+/ =) Pup = (3/2)}."<sup>82</sup> The doctor/Cadillac, while smoking a Romeo y Julieta cigar (another nod to Cuba), insists that Cobra must be conscious during the operation otherwise she might not recognize herself in her new body.<sup>83</sup> One could consider this potential risk as the misidentification that occurs before the Lacanian Mirror, both a developmental stage [stad] as well as a performative one. To move forward with the operation without anesthesia, the doctor draws from math, the Sufi martyrs, whirling Dervishes, the logic of scapegoats, and devises a diagram in the shape of a diamond. This diamond-diagram, illustrated in the text, shows how the signs of

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<sup>80</sup> I'm drawing here again from Barad's notion of transmaterialities and QFT, discussed in the introduction of the chapter.

<sup>81</sup> Terms such as "castration" and "conversion," as opposed to "Sex Confirmation Surgery" or "Transgender-Sex Reassignment," are used to be consistent with the historical context of the novel and the language in the text.

<sup>82</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 85, footnote.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 106 - 108.

pain will be transferred [“hay que disipar todo signo de dolor”]<sup>84</sup> from Cobra to her diminutive double Pup, her residual excess: “No es más que tu desperdicio, tu residuo grosero [...] Tu excremento, tus senos falsos, ¡qué asco!: cuerpo de ti caído que ya no eres tú”.<sup>85</sup> The projection of what one rejects in him or herself upon another is a process that psychoanalysts have identified in the constitution of one’s subjectivity.<sup>86</sup> We might even say that in the deferral of one sign to another we are brought to the empty center of language and the subject’s lost object. However, rather than treat “la conversión” as a developmental stage, as a self-determination, or even a misidentification—a process of individuation symbolized by the diamond—I suggest reading the diamond as a map, or a constellation, that expresses a cosubstantiality, a shared enfleshment.<sup>87</sup> In Cobra’s operation signs are not simply differed to other signs, but also have a physical impact on Pup’s body; she writhes in pain. As readers of *Cobra* we are distributed along its networks, disoriented by its dense tapestry, brought into contact with other bodies in an *extimate* relationship: Sufi metaphysics, poststructuralism, algebra, psychoanalysis, and surgical procedures are made proximate within the space of the page but remain un-dialecticizable. “La conversación” does not result in fully actualized, autonomous, self-possessed Cobra, but in another complex configuration of figures—Tundra, Totem, Tigre and Escorpion—

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>86</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 29. “A projection is what I disown in myself and see in you; a projective identification is what I succeed in having you experience in yourself, although it comes from me in the first place.”

<sup>87</sup> My use of the terms cosubstantial and enfleshment come from Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

changes in narrative voice and tone, and, as we shall see further ahead, an irreducible corporeality.

## **A Baroque Ecology**

Decadence, lack of restraint, unremitting movement, excess and unmeasured expansiveness are some of the characteristics of a baroque aesthetic. These pejorative descriptors were reclaimed by Latin American thinkers, such as Alejo Carpentier, as expressing a counter-hegemonic ethos against the self-contained, proportioned and exclusive compositions of a classical aesthetic, associated with imperial and totalitarian systems.<sup>88</sup> In “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” Carpentier illustrates the spatial mastery of these systems through three iconic buildings that stand in contradistinction to the baroque spirit:

In the architecture of Versailles, the Escorial or the Parthenon, there is something very important, which is that empty spaces, naked spaces, spaces without ornamentation are in and of themselves as important as adorned spaces or the shafts of grooved columns. [...] Their boundaries [...] create a sort of geometrical harmony. [...] The construction [of all three buildings] is complemented by vacant space, by space without ornamentation whose beauty resides precisely in its circumscription [...] majestic beauty stripped of every superfluous element.<sup>89</sup>

Remembering that for the Roman architectural theorist Vitruvius (80 – 15 BC) a building stood for that most perfect creation, the human body, contemporary theorists of architecture argue that we perceive buildings in relationship to our own bodies, as stand-ins for our own psychic and corporeal structures.<sup>90</sup> After all, “experience in art and beauty

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<sup>88</sup> Alejo Carpentier, “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” *Magical Realism*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B Faris (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), 89-108

<sup>89</sup> Carpentier, “The Baroque,” 92-93.

<sup>90</sup> Anthony Vidler, lecture, School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell, July 12, 2017.

strengthens the ego, if only because balance, pattern, harmony, welcome a composite whole.”<sup>91</sup> Accordingly, the classical buildings Carpentier describes reflect an autonomous, independent ego-bound subject whose boundaries are clearly circumscribed against a vacant background. In juxtaposing these structures to the following passage describing the interior of Cobra’s room, we might better appreciate what a baroque composition does to that most perfect creation:

Un vaho verdoso, de alcanfor, emanaba del tugurio de Cobra, arabesco que se iba ensanchando hasta abrirse en una banda espiral, nebulosa, en un caracol que se expandía, de menta. Encerrados en frascos transparentes por todas partes retoñaban cepos, hojas anchas y granulosas, retorciéndose, pestilentes arbustos enanos, flores enfermas cuyos pétalos roían larvas diminutas y brillantes, helechos estrujados que en los pliegues albergaban huevecillos translúcidos, en multiplicación constante. De lo estilizado vegetal art nouveau el cubículo había pasado a la anarquía yerbera —buscaba sin tregua los zumos, el elixir de la reducción, el jugo que achica—. [...] <sup>92</sup>

Pronto comprendieron su presunción. El mal carcomía por dentro. Los invadió una erupción blanca, una escarcha que iba ascendiendo, sarna arborescente que formaba en los tobillos dibujos coptos. Flores palúdicas, naves perforadas: los pies de Cobra iban al caos.<sup>93</sup>

Cobra’s “den” recalls a scientific lab or a medieval herbalist’s workspace overrun by the specimens of biomorphic experimentations. Once again organic matter and artifice are imbricated. Vegetation morphs from the stylized designs of art nouveau to an undomesticated proliferation of greenery. The arabesques, spirals, and floral illustrations we saw painted on the bodies of the Dolls, are here the product of a superabundant organic life. “[L]a multiplicación constante,” the sprouting, gnawing, and anarchy recall Barad’s description of the ongoing reconfiguration of transmateriality, the undoing of this or that.<sup>94</sup> An indiscriminate regeneration of larvae, eggs and foliage, leaves no ground vacant. Not

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<sup>91</sup> Adrian Stokes, *Smooth and Rough* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 243.

<sup>92</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, 30.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>94</sup> See the introduction.

unlike the passage describing the interior of a room from the Dermic Silversmith's fictional backstory, or the paintings on the skins of the dolls, here we have another diegetic passage that leaves no space unadorned. Every clause produces another image, another composition. Meanwhile, the boundaries of the body are obfuscated, perforated, erupted and invaded by foreign bodies: Cobra does not have sovereignty over her feet; they are taken over by a chaos that leaves its marks as Coptic drawings. Significantly, decay, sickness and degeneration are part and parcel of creation. Against the empty center of poststructuralist thought, the vacuum of classical physics, the autonomous and independent structures of renaissance compositions, what we have here is a plenitude of indeterminate materiality. Nothing appears isolated in the novel; characters, ciphers, objects are always part of complex configurations. What Sarduy expresses through this aesthetic is a dense material ecology.

When Cobra eventually dies in the narrative, in "homenaje póstumo," we do not find the memorialization of a subject (nor the cause of death). While rituals are performed over the dead body, what is produced in the text is an engagement with its very corporeality. The decaying of the corpse is made viscerally palpable for the reader, "un tufillo grasiento y dulzón subía desde los depósitos inferiores:--la esponja de los intestinos abriéndose."<sup>95</sup> The same arboreal and floral designs that invaded her ankles reappear, "bajo la piel transparente se abrían minúsculas flores capilares, negras."<sup>96</sup> Recalling the opening of the novel where her bound feet "eran momias, niños de medallones florentinos,"<sup>97</sup> we now

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 11.

read that Cobra is both “embrión y momia.”<sup>98</sup> Death and life cannot be disaggregated, especially in an ecology where “pestilentes arbustos” and “flores enfermas” are the place where “roían larvas diminutas y brillantes.”<sup>99</sup> As such, death never belongs to anyone; finitude is communicated but death cannot be compartmentalized, sublated and exchanged through the economy of sacrifice.

Exploring the textual and cartographic potentialities of the corpse, the section that follows is appropriately titled “Lección de anatomía”:

Estabas diagonal, amarillabas. Eras un puro peso, una madera unida, sin nudos, un objeto encontrado que los cuatro curiosos escrutaban.

Te leían. Te señalaban. Confrontaban tu cuerpo con un cuerpo dibujado —un mapa del Hombre abierto— ; enumeraban tus partes, nombraban tus visceras, te abrían los párpados —globos empañados—, tomaban notas, volvían la página.

Junto a tus pies callosos, impregnados de azufre, como una partitura, se desplegaba un libro.

Te hundían en la carne la punta de los dedos: quedaban las depresiones de las yemas, las ranuras de las uñas: eras de cera, de papel, de mármol blando, de arcilla.

Con un bisturí te cortaron las muñecas; te apretaron el brazo con ligaduras, desde el hombro. Por la herida brotó una pasta negra que recogieron en un cofrecillo. En otros dos conservaron de tu orine y tu excremento.

Esos tres residuos, disueltos en vino, rociaron el banquete funerario.<sup>100</sup>

In the second half of this chapter, we’ll see what Roberto Fabelo does to that very “cuerpo dibujado” (anatomical illustration) with which Cobra’s body is confronted, and its presumptions of being “un mapa del Hombre *abierto*” (my emphasis). If anatomy texts are objective, addressed to no one specifically except the medical student, this “Lección de anatomía” is notably different; narrated in 2<sup>nd</sup> person, it is addressed to you. It is your body that is being read and taxonomized according to the representation of a so-called “human” physiognomy, “Te leían. Te señalaban.” And yet, your yellowing diagonal corpse would

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

resist such interpretations; it is “puro peso,” or dead weight as the English idiom goes, an obstinate impenetrable materiality: “una madera unida.” Against the map of “el Hombre abierto,” your body presents another text, “se desplegaba un libro.” Nevertheless, this text that is your body is meat, “Te hundían en la carne la punta de los dedos.” And the act of pointing and identifying has affects on the body, “quedaban las depresiones de las yemas”: the other’s touch leaves its marks. The phrase “eras de cera, de papel, de mármol blando, de arcilla,” again links art and the corporeal, creation and death. Your body might be read, but there is always an excess of body. From these residues, the blackened blood, excrement and urine, they get drunk, “disueltos en vino, rociaron el banquete funerario.” Were we to read Cobra’s corpse as an analogy for the body of the novel, Sarduy here brings our attention to our imposing other representations and structures of thought on to it, and how the text will always be in excess and irreducible to these structures.

Considering that what Sarduy has presented us in *Cobra* is a series of visual tableaux whose transitions are metamorphic, rather than a chronological unfolding of plot, and considering his explicit allusions to art historical works, turning now to Roberto Fabelo’s compositions of hybrid bodies is in many ways a continuation along the same plane. If Sarduy imbedded Cuban icons within a web that is transhistorical and transcultural, Fabelo will similarly make references to Cuban art history—conch shells, roosters, full-bodied nudes, vibrant color pallets and baroque compositions—entangled and impossible to disaggregate from a shared materiality that exceeds Cuban identity markers. Jumping from the publication of *Cobra* in 1973 to the 2010’s of Fabelo’s images, what becomes urgent is a planetary concern, environmental disaster and the threat of a nuclear annihilation. Our material and territorial interdependence, expressed in Sarduy’s dense stylized ecologies



and complex configurations, are in Fabelo's work made explicit through human and animal compositions and its allusions to the environment.

## Animals and Art

In *The Postmodern Animal* (2000), the British art historian, Steve Baker, observes a reemergence of animal bodies in contemporary art after a long absence in the early and mid-twentieth century. Whereas modernist artists might have abstained from representing animals in order to avoid referential images that draw the viewer's attention away from the formalistic aspects of their work, animals now populate the work of contemporary artists, many of whom aim at making their singular bodies present in a literal or "obstinate thereness."<sup>101</sup>

Whether this aim stems from a political commitment to animal welfare or the desire to undermine anthropocentric constructs, Baker takes "obstinate thereness" as a starting point for mapping an ethics of engagement with animal bodies in visual art. Looking at various artists that recycle the bodies of

taxidermied animals, producing morphologically

incorrect forms or hybrid species—as in a piece from a series titled *Misfit* by Thomas

Grünfeld where bat wings were fixed upon the body of a fawn (**fig. 2.1**)—Baker formulates



Figure 2.1 - Thomas Grünfeld - *Bat/Fawn* from the *Misfits* series- 2013 - taxidermied bat and fawn

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<sup>101</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), chapt. 1, passim.

his notion of the postmodern animal as “botched taxidermy.”<sup>102</sup> This practice results in “messy confrontations” and “new baffling whole[s]” through the deliberate use of “wrong” materials and clumsy suturing.<sup>103</sup> The smooth bodies of professional taxidermied animals acquire a “tattiness” that indicates “something went wrong.” Their botched appearances not only disrupt species identities but also, as physical objects that spatially incorporate the body of the viewer, insist on a proximity to the animal body without the pretense of expertise.<sup>104</sup>

In a series of ink drawings over the yellowed pages of a nineteenth-century medical encyclopedia containing illustrations of human anatomy, Fabelo produces a catalogue of human figures displaying zoological physiognomies in a variety of ways: as an integral part of the body, like a reptile spine or a set of insect eyes; sometimes as a worn accessory like a bird beak helmet or feathered wings tied to a torso; and, in other instances, simply the stacking and overlapping of farm animals over a human head (**see figs. 2.2 and 2.3**). The assemblage of human and animal anatomies exhibited in these drawings recall the hybrid morphologies that Baker identifies as botched taxidermy. Interestingly, the material source of a nineteenth century anatomy text like that of a taxidermy piece is necessarily a corpse. Whereas the biologist dissects the body to display its interior, the taxidermist empties and seals the body in order to preserve its exterior. Both Roberto Fabelo and Thomas Grünfeld recycle and tamper with materials—encyclopedias and hunting trophies—that are emblematic of authority and power. We might also consider the instrumentalization of bodies their artwork alerts us to as indicative of a *necropolitics*, in which sovereignty

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 54-61.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. Clumsy suturing does not apply to all these artists; Thomas Grünfeld’s pieces are seamless and very carefully constructed.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

(exercised by the hunter) and absolute knowledge (produced by the anatomist) are expressed through the work of death.<sup>105</sup> In his account of the material destruction of populations, Achille Mbembe argues that the calculus and compartmentalization of modernizing projects are not so much guided by reason as the need to constitute the limits between those who must live and those who must die.<sup>106</sup>

There are, however, significant differences between Fabelo's work and that of the various artists Steve Baker studies as exemplary visual engagements with animals.

Significantly, Fabelo's images would seem to fail the criteria of "obstinate thereness." There

are no messy confrontations or clumsy arrangements, but instead we are lured by the drawings' masterful skill and beautiful compositions. Monstrous as its iconography may be at times, we admire its statuesque nude torsos, its floral ornamental designs, the texture and quality of its lines, and the seamless integration of its mismatched parts. In

*Sin título* (Fig. 2.2), a giant sowing needle or skewer both pierces through the figure of a body and divides the

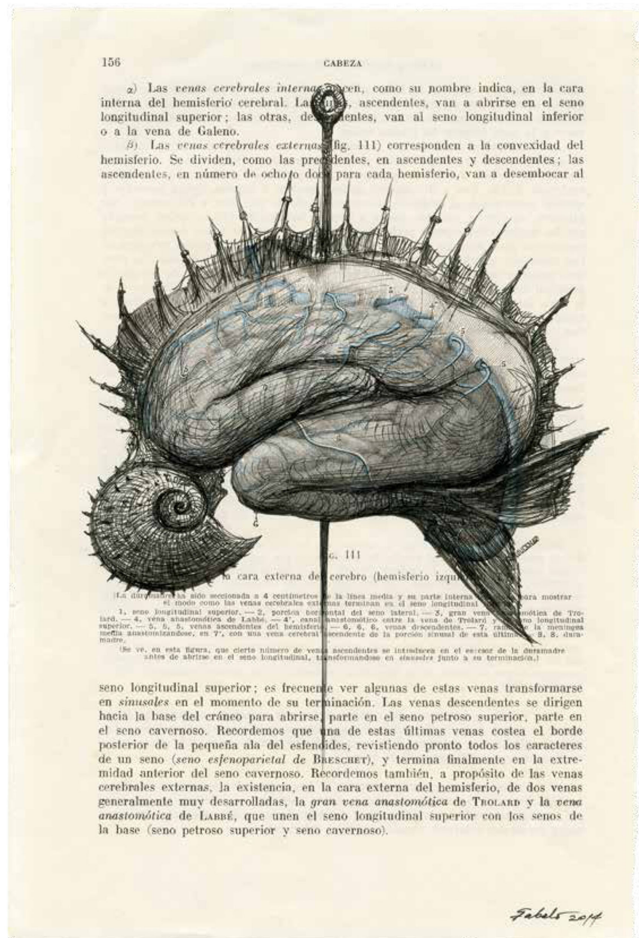


Figure 2.2 Roberto Fabelo - *Sin título* - ink on printed paper - 25x15 - 2014

<sup>105</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), 13 - 15.

<sup>106</sup> Mbembe, "Necropolitics." 11, 17.

space of the composition in equal halves. Fabelo's black ink drawing of a nude human body in a fetal position, anatomically well proportioned, volumetric and muscular, wears a conch shell on its head—its geometric spirals are visually seductive and reiterate the curvilinear lines of the body—extending from its spine we see a long dorsal fin, like that of a Marlin, and in the place of feet a caudal fin. The sharp points of the dorsal fin are both uniform and irregular; their rhythmic repetition running along the beautifully arched back produces another pleasurable pattern for the eyes. Drawn over a page from the medical text devoted to cerebral veins, Fabelo has not only superimposed his ink figure over the original illustration, but integrated it in such a way that the cerebral veins now run along the length of the figure's spine and its skin appears translucent, revealing subtle muscles and veins that lie beneath its surface. The image is attractive; Fabelo's is well skilled in creating the illusion of a three-dimensional body and a composition that delights the eyes. But this alluring image is also violent. Struck through by a sharp needle, the figure might serve as a specimen of medical inquiry, a nineteenth century cabinet curiosity, or meat prepared to be grilled.

Considering their expert execution, soliciting aesthetic contemplation, we might ask if their morphological transgressions remain at the safe distance of pure fantasy or if they have the potential to unsettle anthropocentric notions. Put differently, can his figures be easily reduced to psychic archetypes in a human-centered drama or do they evade a hermeneutic decoding and, in so doing, uproot our sense of the real and empirical in the daylight of consciousness? Given that for Baker so much of the undermining of "the secure sense of the human" at work in botched taxidermy is contingent on a display of inexpertise

and an assault of the viewer's sensibilities,<sup>107</sup> I'm interested in how Fabelo's images may offer alternative ways of disrupting identitarian and hierarchal thinking. Throughout the trajectory of his work, he has demonstrated a sustained attention to environmental themes and human-animal compositions. Following Gregory Bateson's lead, let us pose the question: "What sort of correction in the direction of wisdom [or an ecology of the mind] would be achieved by creating or viewing this work of art?"<sup>108</sup>

### **Thinking Ecologically**

In *Metamorphosis: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Rosi Braidotti takes to task conservative psychoanalytic interpretations in which the figures of animals, be that in dreams or the literary imagination, are treated as iconographic substitutes within a patriarchal narrative. In theory, the unlocking of hidden meaning through the use of a master code will lead to the patient's psychic resolution and a well-formed subjectivity. Nonhuman creatures and uncivilized behavior remain just that, while the ontological border crossings in imaginative metamorphic processes—epitomized by figures such as the wolf-man or the vampire—are pathologized and treated as cautionary tales.<sup>109</sup> In referencing these interpretative strategies, Braidotti makes evident that much of a work's transgressive potential lies in the approach of the reader. Rather than assuming the expert knowledge of the analyst who can penetrate the meaning behind Fabelo's figures, and

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<sup>107</sup> Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 19, chapt. 1, passim.

<sup>108</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1972, 1982) 120.

<sup>109</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphosis: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), 139 – 142.

rather than treating his figures as figurative stand-ins,<sup>110</sup> following Braidotti's lead, I will adopt a cartographic approach, not unlike my readings of *Cobra*. In privileging "the organization of the multiple elements" over a semiological reading, we find a "web of interconnections" in Fabelo's two-dimensional planes.<sup>111</sup> This is an approach that does not focus its attention so much on content as it does on style, in an effort to bring an ecology in Fabelo's work to the foreground of our analysis. In a chapter titled "Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art," in his *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson argues that form and pattern in art objects—the stuff of context and relationships—reflect a "larger patterned universe."<sup>112</sup> For him, data is never simply "raw", but always imbedded in complex interactive systems.<sup>113</sup>

Since skill, as Bateson explains, necessarily involves large components of an unconscious or a Zen-like process, "art becomes in this sense an exercise in communicating about the species of unconscious."<sup>114</sup> Bateson's interest in art—or for that matter poetry over prose—is its relation to a different form of knowing that produces involuntary and irreducible meanings, dislocating the central authority of the individual subject. Because consciousness or "mere purposive rationality" tends to compartmentalize and address issues in an isolated manner, the result is "necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life."<sup>115</sup> In a powerful statement, Bateson writes, "unaided consciousness," that is, unaided by art, poetry, or dreams, "must always tend toward hate" and "[the] extermina[tion of] the

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<sup>110</sup> I'm borrowing the difference between figure and figurative from Steve Baker, 141.

<sup>111</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphosis*, 139, 140.

<sup>112</sup> Bateson, *Steps Towards an Ecology*, 110.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction, *passim*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

other fellow.”<sup>116</sup> Art, poetry, dreams, by contrast, bring to the fore connections and potentialities that are imperceptible to dominant modes of seeing and, in so doing, create the possibility for unconventionalized forms of relating. “The consummate skill of the draftsman validates the artist’s message about his relationship to the animal—his empathy.”<sup>117</sup> Grace, as that exhibited in artistic skill, or the unselfconscious movement we associate with animals, is the result of psychic integration, an over all wisdom that recognizes “interlocking circuits.”<sup>118</sup>

Making a similar case about the limiting and violent aspects of how consciousness operates, Braidotti writes:

[The] potency of Life is experienced as ‘other’ by a mind that cannot do anything else but fold upon itself and go on patrolling its own constitutive elements as if it were in charge of them. This inner inversion by negative passions is a deeply-seated, uneasy form of mild schizophrenia, which we gloriously call ‘consciousness.’<sup>119</sup>

Again not unlike Bateson, for her “Artists have crowded into this in-between area [of mind-body dualism], offering a number of interconnections,” and she draws a parallel between artists and animals: “Like artists, animals mark their territory physically, by colour, sound or marking/framing.”<sup>120</sup> We could consider these marks—the buzz of an insect, a cat’s bodily fluids, or the howl of a wolf—as the intersection between *bios*, discursive or intelligent life, and *zoē*, all matter of life that exceeds discourse. Braidotti writes, “In the process of recognizing, coding and coping they transcend their sheer animality, joining up with the human in the effort of expressing, inhabiting and protecting their territory.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 108, 119.

<sup>119</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphosis*, 133.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 132, 133.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 133.

Imagining a post-human “bio-centered egalitarianism,” Braidotti not only seeks to unfix the categories of human-*bios* and animal-*zoē*, but also to recognize an intimately shared materiality that is lacking in negatives and therefore un-dialectical. We might also consider here Barad’s notion of the void, as a field of indeterminate materiality that does not allow for a logic of antagonisms on which dialectics relies. Working from various Deleuzian concepts, Braidotti counters the ego-bound human with the notion of philosophical nomadism that considers animal’s “attachment and interdependence on a territory” as “a model of radical immanence that needs to be revalued.”<sup>122</sup> What Braidotti and Bateson both offer us is an analysis of art where becoming-animal, as opposed to a transcendental human spirit, is the source of creativity. Moreover, this becoming-animal, that is, the unself-conscious state of grace (Bateson) and an attachment and interdependence on a territory (Braidotti), provides an ethical alternative to the destructive forces of the ego-bound subject. It is useful to recall here Achille Mbembe’s linking of subject formation to a necropolitics. Following Hegel, Mbembe writes,

[T]he human being truly *becomes a subject*—that is, separated from the animal—in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity). It is through this confrontation with death that he or she is cast into the incessant movement of history. Becoming subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death.<sup>123</sup>

Becoming-subject, Mbembe elaborates, entails a negation of nature, in which the human reduces nature to a material resource for his or her own needs. The negation of nature, or of the animal, achieves its fullest expression in the conscious decision to risk one’s own life, so that “human death is essentially voluntary.”<sup>124</sup> As such, death is attributed meaning and

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 14.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.



purpose; it operates within an economy (symbolically and/or materially) and can therefore be condoned.

Indeed, the work of thinking ecologically, that is, beyond categorical and exclusionary frames that have justified the extermination of different life forms, requires a move away from the privileged interiority of the Subject. It would require a move towards material surfaces, as Ron Broglio has argued, “deflat[ing] both cultural scaffolding of metaphor and truth by returning thought to the site where bodies meet.”<sup>125</sup> In a quote that expresses a dislocation of meaning and agency from the subject to the material, Roberto Fabelo explains in response to one critic’s reading of his drawings as poetic, “What you call poetry is an attraction that certain media have; they have their own memory, and all you do is intervene in that existence, in that memory.”<sup>126</sup> Following Bateson, we might describe Fabelo’s interventions in the pages of a medical encyclopedia as art coming to the aid of purposive rationality and, in so doing, an art that supplements and, significantly, challenges the hegemony of a necropolitics.<sup>127</sup> Fabelo further elaborates,

The anatomy book pages are attractive in and of themselves. They contain solutions, tremendous creativity.... I drew on top of those images, creating a new one, and also using some text as titles. Anatomical terms that, when decontextualized, when taken out of the sentence or of the book itself, the specific description, become poetry. It’s a little game.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ron Broglio, “‘Living Flesh’: Animal-Human Surfaces,” *Journal of Visual Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 110.

<sup>126</sup> *Fabelo’s Anatomy*, Museum of Latin American Art Long Beach exhibition catalogue, 2014, 16.

<sup>127</sup> As I suggested in the introduction, the encyclopedia operates as a symbolic object of the Enlightenment, its predilection for scientific knowledge and classifications, and the modernizing projects it spawned, of which eugenics was just one of its outcomes. To tamper, then, with the authoritative knowledge of the encyclopedia and to illustrate human-animal bodies in web of interconnections presents a challenge to a science of compartmentalization on which a necropolitics relies.

<sup>128</sup> *Fabelo’s Anatomy*, 16.

This game, as we shall see, is one that exposes modes of knowledge production that presume unmediated, transparent access to the “natural word” as no less conventionalized than other cultural practices.

### The Tricks of Illusionism

The title to one of Fabelo’s drawings, taken from the medical text, *El antro está excavado* (The antrum is excavated) (fig. 2.3), calls to mind the work of the anatomist who,

after cutting a body open and revealing its interiority, dissects and identifies parts. It is a science of penetration and taxonomy.

Turning our attention to the intervened page, perhaps what is most dynamic about this image is the integration of the minute, precise, uniform incisions of the text’s original engravings and Fabelo’s sketchy, gestural cross hatching. Page sixty-seven, with section title “PARADES CRANEALES” (Cranial walls), appears to have been torn from the book’s binding along the left edge of the paper. A fragment of a sentence, “el

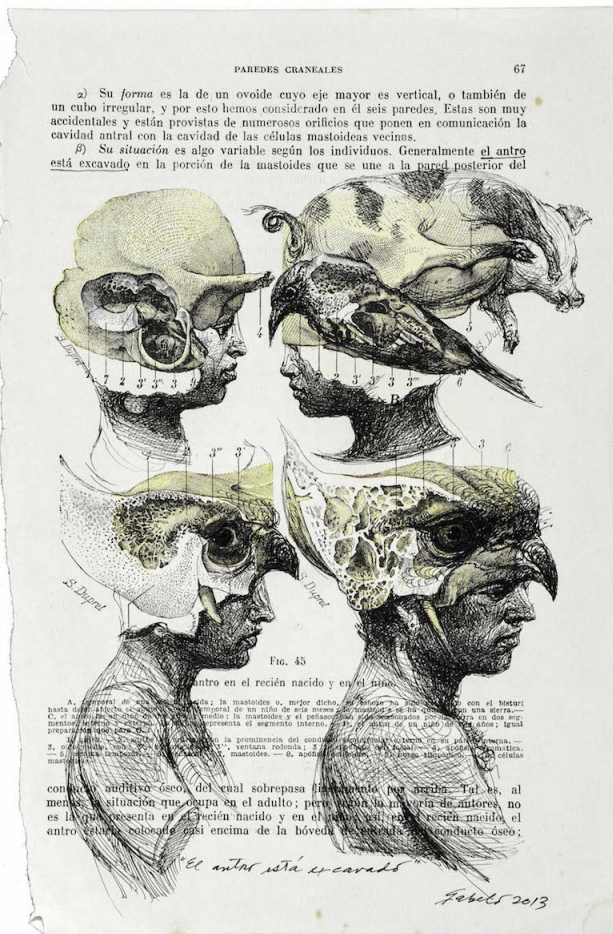


Figure 2.3 Roberto Fabelo - *El antro está excavado* - ink on printed paper - 25x15 - 2013

antro está excavado,” is underlined,

marking the place from where Fabelo

lifted his title. The passage that remains un-obfuscated by his repetitive and irregular black

ink lines begins with “*Su forma*” (its form) and goes on to describe an oval, vertical shape with numerous orifices and cavities. Removed from its medical context, we might read this passage as a formalistic analysis of an artistic rendering, rather than the scientific observation of an organ. Still visible is the engraver’s name, S. Dupret, printed diagonally alongside each of four illustrations. However, recovering S. Dupret’s original drawings from Fabelo’s becomes a difficult, if not impossible, endeavor. While the quality of their marks is no doubt distinct, Fabelo has so effectively merged his lines with those of the engraver that the illustrations of the cranial walls have expanded and metamorphosed into something else altogether. Four busts, viewed in profile, emerge from the page like sculptures, modeled volumetrically in classical chiaroscuro. What anatomic parts the original illustration described are now illegible. Tissue, capillaries, cavities, muscles, bone, and cartilage have been transformed into headpieces with birds’ eyes and beaks over two of the busts. On a third bust, the biological material has been outlined as a bird and the backside of a pig overlapping the face. And on a fourth, the original illustration that appears to sit over the bust’s head remains unaltered and, as such, an unidentifiable organic fragment. Following Deleuze and Guattari, I want to suggest that Fabelo has changed the coordinates on this plane, moving from a molar to a molecular perspective. These engraved illustrations that had an instructional function are now aesthetic material; juxtaposed to Fabelo’s dramatically gradated bodies they appear as two-dimensional designs. The body parts that had been cut open and laid flat to provide us with a maximal vantage point from which to view “nature,”<sup>129</sup> to penetrate its exterior and see inside, are now another material surface

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<sup>129</sup> Giovanni Aloi, in his lecture *On a Wing and a Prayer: Butterflies in Contemporary Art* at the Natural History Museum in London, April 2104, describes the inherent violence

on the page. Deterritorialized, like the fragment of text that serves as its title, these medical illustrations, “un mapa del Hombre abierto,” are made poetic.

The light and dark gradations produced through Fabelo’s cross-hatching and to a lesser degree the small incisions of the text’s engraver are techniques that were refined during the Renaissance to produce the illusion of three-dimensionality. Founded on the notion of Euclidean geometric perceptual fields in which the eye, through a single-point perspective, can penetrate, discover and measure space, rendering what lies within that field knowable, these techniques assumed inherent and universal biological ways of seeing.<sup>130</sup> Whether illusionism was used to produce a landscape on a painted canvas or a botanical illustration in an encyclopedia, both artist and scientist presumed a transparent representation of the natural world. In poeticizing this encyclopedic text, and in juxtaposing similar and yet different forms of representation, Fabelo demonstrates how these are in fact conventionalized modes that produce knowledge rather than display raw data. Given that these are the tools that have been used to produce taxonomies and species identities, we can say that Fabelo unsettles the foundations of these categories. This unsettling is all the more significant when we consider the historical privileging of sight as an exclusively human faculty, whereas non-human animals have been relegated to the dominion of other senses. Fabelo, in effect, provincializes vision and situates its perspective

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in the production of natural science illustrations of butterflies and how the flattening of the butterfly serves our visual vantage point.

<sup>130</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, “Illusionism: Looking at Animals Looking,” *Picture Theory: Essays on verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 332-335.

alongside other senses in order to counter its presumed transcendental view.<sup>131</sup>

Returning to the drawing's title, *El antro está excavado*, as a cavity, whose contents have been exposed to the light of day, calls to mind Plato's cave. In his essay "Corpus," Nancy writes,

The body was born in Plato's cave, or rather it was conceived and shaped in the form of the cave: as a prison or a tomb of the soul, and the body was thought *from the inside*, as buried darkness into which light only penetrates in the form of reflections.... This body is first an interiority dedicated to images, and to the knowledge of those images; it is the inside of representation.... (author's emphasis)<sup>132</sup>

Nancy follows this line of thought further stating: "[T]he philosophical-theological *corpus* of the body is still supported by the spine of *mimesis*, of representation, and of the sign" (author's emphasis).<sup>133</sup> While the philosophical and biological caves may be at odds with each other, certainly technologies of representation and the relationship between seeing inside and the acquisition of knowledge are operative in both. As I have shown, Fabelo undermines the demonstrative pretensions of signs and mimesis; collapsing inside and outside, the body is rendered impenetrable. In fact, one could say Fabelo draws us towards his images through the illusion of receding space, seducing us with volumetric and sculptural bodies, only to effectively bring us to an impenetrable materiality.

## Silk and Immanence

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<sup>131</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, with a forward by W.J.T. Mitchell, (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19, 20.

<sup>132</sup> Nancy, "Corpus," 19.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

In a drawing that departs from the series' characteristic sculptural figures, *Sobre la cara* (On the face)(fig. 2.4) shows a frontal view of a disembodied face. With disproportionately large eyes, a spiked collar, and the figure of a female nude emerging from the center of the forehead, the overlapping drawing transforms the text's scientific engraving into a surrealist composition with inexhaustible symbolic potential. While the bottom portion of the face is

depicted through black ink cross hatching, modeling a soft cherubic face that recalls those of renaissance paintings, the top portion is painted over an anatomical illustration that depicts the intersection of various veins and capillaries that lie beneath the surface of the face. In this radical juxtaposition between the top and bottom half of the image, we can see the overlapping of *bios*, as in facial identity, and *zoē*, the

indistinguishable stuff of life. In fact, if we look across this series of drawings in which both animal and human figures seem to share the same biological



Figure 2.4 Roberto Fabelo - *Sobre la cara* - ink on printed paper - 25x15 - 2013



material, it is as though Fabelo were exposing the pulsating *zoē* that runs through all species, as a web of interconnections.

This shared biological material is made even more explicit in a series of paintings where we find bodies brimming the tops of cauldrons and stacked on barbecue skewers. Human flesh as edible meat becomes a trope throughout Fabelo's work.<sup>134</sup> In *Perla* (Fig. 2.5),



Figure 2.5 Roberto Fabelo - *Perla* – Oil on canvas – 210x230 - 2014

an oil painting on canvas displaying a color palette of warm pinks and cool purples, blues, and greys, the viewer's perspective looks down upon a heap of nude female torsos and marine anatomies, over-spilling a deep metal cooking pot. Conch shells, squid tentacles, long dorsal and caudal fins, sharp spikes and claws extend from these voluptuous human-sea creatures. In this hearty stew of cold and warm-blooded animals, Fabelo's impasto and impressionistic application of paint heightens the fleshiness/meatiness of human bodies. Turning back to his ink drawings, we can similarly observe a becoming-animal not just on an iconographic level, as is suggested by the assemblage of transspecies figures but, especially, on the level of its organizational makeup, in the "restless, agitated, [and] repetitive"<sup>135</sup> quality of his lines. After all, for

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<sup>134</sup> For more on the in-distinction between human flesh and animal meat see James Goebel's essay on "Uncanny Meat," *French Journal of English Studies* 55 (2016).

<sup>135</sup> Monica E. Kupfer, "Roberto Fabelo," *Art Nexus* 82, no 128, Sep/Nov 2011, 147.

Deleuze and Guattari it is “through style that one becomes an animal.”<sup>136</sup> They write:

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs.<sup>137</sup>

An essentially creative process, becoming “refers to the discontinuous regularity which marks the continuous present of energetic flows.”<sup>138</sup> Indeed, this energy is not only expressed in the repetitive and dynamic quality of Fabelo’s lines, but also in their interweaving with and contagion of the encyclopedia’s text and engravings. Making the encyclopedia dysfunctional, Fabelo brings biology, chiaroscuro, medical terminology, cross-hatching, humans, birds, pigs to the surface of the page; they are in effect collapsed from their cultural scaffolding to a plane of immanence. Overall, what we observe is overflowing and irreducible visual information that does not lend itself to an indexical reading.

This plane of immanence, or impenetrable materiality, becomes all the more evident when we turn to a series of large acrylic paintings that Fabelo made over embroidered silk. In his characteristic chiaroscuro, convincingly three-dimensional female nudes emerge from a solid color background. Yet despite its very skillful volumetric modeling, the viewer is forced to reckon with its two-dimensionality. We are drawn to the silk fabric and the texture of its embroidery. The stitched ornamental floral patterns (like the “minúsculas flores capilares” we saw on the body of Cobra), both an aesthetic and a craft that has historically been associated with women, populate the surface of the painting and break its

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<sup>136</sup> Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Vol. 30 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>137</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 13.

<sup>138</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphosis*, 118.



perspectival illusion, that masculine gendered technology linked to mathematics and the so-called natural sciences. Instead, Fabelo's repurposing of the aged silk, not unlike the encyclopedia, brings us to a depth at the surface. (Let us recall here the skin of the "dolls," the curvilinear screen of the television, or the convex mirrors in Sarduy's *Cobra*.) The texture of the embroidered silk and the virtual memory it holds produce a depth that can only be sensed through touch or, as Deleuze might say, transmitted through sensation and the nervous system.<sup>139</sup>

### Insects & Art

While most of these paintings depict full-bodied statuesque figures, in keeping with *Sobre la cara*, I'd like to turn to another disembodied face. *Meditación de Remedios* (Remedios' meditation) (**fig. 2.6**) shows a lovely feminine face with full, heart-shaped lips and a delicate cleft chin. Her perfectly oval head is a model of symmetry and proportion, accentuated by dramatic lighting that casts a



Figure 2.6 Roberto Fabelo - *Meditación de Remedios* - acrylic on embroidered silk - 136x100 - 2012

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<sup>139</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 31, 32. In her book, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press: 2014), Giuliana Bruno writes with regard to depth, "[T]he motion of an emotion can itself be drafted onto the surface, in the shape of a line or in the haptic thickness of pigment [...]. An affect is actually "worn" on the surface as it is threaded through time in the form of residual stains, traces, and textures. In visual culture, surface matters, and it has depth. [...] On this material level [...] distinctions between inside and outside temporarily dissolve into depth of surface," 5.

dark shadow, partitioning the face in equal halves. With her eyes turned to the left in a quiet, pensive stare, the figure seems unaware of, or unconcerned by, the swarm of flies that frame her head in the place of hair. The image is unquestionably beautiful, luring and attractive and yet the idea of a swarm of flies covering one's face is repulsive. The flies are distributed in a way that works with the casting of lights and darks, helping model the three-dimensionality of the face so that the flies also operate as marks or brush strokes that when seen from very close—as one might, drawn to the gold sheen of the silk and its raised embroidery—become imperceptible, even ugly dark smudges. In other words, the artistic process and the figure of the fly are intertwined. As Braidotti argues,

[Insect life] dwells between different states of in-between-ness, arousing the same spasmodic reactions in humans as the monstrous, the sacred, the alien. This is a reaction of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, disgust and desire. They pose the question of radical otherness not in metaphorical but in bio-morphic terms, that is to say as a metamorphosis of the sensory and cognitive apparatus.<sup>140</sup>

Looking through the trajectory of Fabelo's work, insects take on a predominant role. The simultaneity of attraction and repulsion is one that he seems to draw from very purposefully as noted above. And while part of the appeal is undoubtedly its unassimilable difference and metamorphic potential, Fabelo's insects also seem to express an anxiety that emerges from the nuclear imaginary. In an earlier installation titled *Mundos*, one of five suspended spheres was made of 17,000 cockroaches. One critic, reminding us that cockroaches are believed to be the only species to survive an atomic holocaust, describes the installation "as a reflection about the crisis that threatens the planet."<sup>141</sup>

In 2009 for the Havana Biennial, Fabelo produced another large-scale sculptural project involving the body of insects. Over the exterior walls of the Museo Nacional de

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<sup>140</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphosis*, 149.

<sup>141</sup> Caridad Blanco de la Cruz, *Roberto Fabelo*, *Art Nexus* 5, no. 60 Mr/My 2006, 130.

Bellas Artes, he installed massive bronze sculptures of roaches displaying human heads (fig. 2.7). Each sculpture, rendered in detail, was executed with maximum fidelity to the roach's body (as well as its human face) and, I suspect, employing all of Fabelo's skills and resources. I point this out because large-scale sculptures using a material such as bronze have historically been reserved for the depiction of national heroes. I don't mean to suggest that the roaches are necessarily being revered (although that is possible to an extent), but rather to indicate an inversion of values, as well as scale. Titled *Sobrevivientes*, the piece has been described as "giant mutant roaches" that result from "the aftermath of a nuclear war or prolonged environmental pollution."<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, in an interview regarding the installation, Fabelo explains that the piece is a "reference to today's world where man in some form or another is surviving."<sup>143</sup> Provoking us to consider the ways in which we live in the shadow of nuclear objects' future effects, or what Gaby Schwab has recently called a "haunting from the future,"<sup>144</sup> Fabelo further elaborates that the installation is also an allusion to the threat of disappearance and "that here, in this piece, we do not know if it is the roach that turns into man or the other way around."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> David John Carton, <http://www.fotolibra.com/gallery/533546/giant-mutant-cockroaches-havana>

<sup>143</sup> "Montaje de Sobrevivientes," *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, 10 ma Edición de la Bienal de la Habana, Video, March 2009.

<sup>144</sup> Gabriele Schwab, "Haunting from the Future: Psychic Life in the Wake of Nuclear Necropolitics," *The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis*, vol. 1, 2014, 85-101.

<sup>145</sup> "Montaje de Sobrevivientes"



Figure 2.7 Roberto Fabelo - Detail of installation *Sobrevivientes* - Mixed technique and variable dimensions - 2009

It is not surprising to find allusions to the effects of a nuclear disaster and more generally to the theme of survival when we consider that so much of the Cuban state's *período especial* (Special Period in Time of Peace) rhetoric relied on evoking the threats of the Cold War era and the Missile Crisis to justify its inability to provide citizens with basic



needs after the loss of Soviet subsidies in the 1990s.<sup>146</sup> To appreciate the political implications of Fabelo's roaches within a specifically Cuban context, it helps to take a look at Havana's topography. In the Plaza de la Revolución, on the façade of the Ministerio del Interior, another national building about five kilometers away from the Museo Nacional, we find a sculptural mural of Che Guevara. Made out of iron, the massive silhouette of the national hero's face, fitted to cover the entire sidewall of the concrete building, replicates Alberto Korda's now well-recognized 1960 photograph. Underneath the silhouette, we read the words "Hasta la Victoria Siempre" (Always towards Victory). While Che's mural was installed in 1995, a second similarly styled mural on an adjacent telecommunications building was added of Camilo Cienfuegos (another youthful martyr of the Revolution) in 2009, incidentally, the same year Fabelo's roaches were installed on the façade of the Museo. The images of Che and Camilo are ubiquitous throughout the country and have come to represent an aspired national subjectivity.<sup>147</sup> They are the models of *el hombre nuevo*, the Revolution's messianic promise of a new generation of men whose sense of civic obligation would surpass the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>148</sup> The narrative of the New Man like the slogan "Hasta la Victoria Siempre" represents a future community, a telos realized through

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<sup>146</sup> Esther Kathryn Whitfield, *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and "Special Period" Fiction*, Vol. 21 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>147</sup> I want to thank David Tenorio and Jeremy Breningstall for their presentations *Images of Counter-utopia: Queerness, Temporality and Visual Culture in Post-Soviet Cuba* and *Politics of Past and Future in the Visual Landscape of Havana*, respectively, at the 2016 UC Cuba workshop at UC Merced. Both of their projects brought to the foreground a national subjectivity modeled on Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos and the ubiquity of these icons in the Cuban landscape.

<sup>148</sup> Ernesto "Che" Guevara, "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba," cited in Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, "Lecciones de cubanía: identidad nacional y errancia sexual en Senel Paz, Marti y Lezama Lima." *Cuban Studies* 29, (Jan 01, 1999), 133.

the logic of sacrifice.<sup>149</sup> However utopic, this sacrificial logic is tied to a necropolitics; its violent repercussions discussed at the introduction of this chapter.<sup>150</sup>

Fabelo's roaches and the indeterminacy of the installation—is it a de- or re-humanization?—allows us to pose the provocative question of whether the New Man, the generation to come, is better represented by a human-roach hybrid than the handsome figures of Che and Camilo. These giant mutant roaches counter the futurity of the state's rhetoric of sacrifice with a haunting from the future (Schwab). Moreover, Fabelo's statement that the piece is a "reference to today's world where man in some form or another is surviving" insists on thinking in the present, a task that impedes the efforts of teleological projects.

## Conclusion

In Sarduy's and Faeblo's artful manipulations we see bodies as part of complex configurations. In *Cobra* the protagonist is always read as part of a constellation of other characters, at times indistinguishable from those of tapestries, stages, or proliferating vegetation. While in Fabelo's drawings, his volumetric, voluptuous figures form part of and are formed from the two-dimensional engravings of the encyclopedic page. Language, printed media, ink, charcoal, paint, glitter, flesh and bones form vibrant material assemblages, interdependent and indeterminate. Exceeding an anthropocentric sense of

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<sup>149</sup> In her analysis of *el hombre nuevo*, Marta Hernández Salván highlights an ethos of self-sacrifice and heroic righteousness in *Mínima Cuba: Heretical Poetics and Power in Post-Soviet Cuba* (New York: Suny Press, 2015), 48, 49.

<sup>150</sup> In her dissertation chapter, "De testimonios y de reos: biopolítica y revolución. el seropositivo cubano," (2015) Mirta Suquet Martínez explains how Cuban Revolution's strong public health policy (and its corresponding moral codes) manifested itself in the medicalization of the New Man as an immune man, 303.

<http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/383016>

scale through expansive, outward-bound texts (Sarduy) or giant mutant roach sculptures (Fabelo), their work incites us to imagine the imperceptible, the virtual particles that fill those seemingly empty spaces. The shared substance they bring to the fore suggests that to instrumentalize, or dispose of, one part of a collectivity will necessarily impact the rest. Returning to Gregory Bateson's question, "What sort of correction in the direction of wisdom would be achieved by creating or viewing this work of art?": Fabelo's images and Sarduy's text prompt us to consider community through an ecological lens, one that concerns itself not just for the green in the environment, but also recognizes the negative consequences of compartmentalization, or the corralling of bodies through fixed identities. This poses a significant challenge to the hubris of totalizing nationalist projects and particularly to the Cuban Revolution's narrative of progress through sacrifice. In Sarduy's baroque ecology, in its treatment of Cobra's corpse death is not presented as the finitude of a subject, as something which exclusively belongs to any one individual. Put differently, life does not exist independently (the "minúsculas flores capilares" on her corpse express the life that is embedded in death) and is therefore not available for the transaction sacrifice presupposes. Accordingly, in the passages describing Cobra's conversion the "cuerpo caído que no eres tú" cannot be neatly severed because of our shared enfleshment. Fabelo's images equally work against the logic of necropolitics, as he exposes the pulsating *zoē* that runs through all as a web of interconnections.

In making bodies impenetrable and in scrambling identities, Fabelo and Sarduy also challenge a metaphysics that treats bodies as the incarnation of an idea or that assumes a

unity between the body and its sign.<sup>151</sup> The undoing of such a metaphysics, as discussed in chapter 1, has significant political implications when we consider that hegemonic structures and their classificatory systems impose signs on bodies and seek to corral them through identitary markers. Unlike Che and Camilo, Fabelo's roaches do not easily serve any state, psychological or mythical narrative. Instead, in their imposing size visible to the city, their detailed bodies that demand closer scrutiny, their feeling antennas, and scattered movements, acquire an obstinate thereness.

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<sup>151</sup> See Nancy's "Corpus" (cited above and in chapter 1) for a deconstruction of a Christian metaphysics and the unity of the sign and the body.



### Chapter 3

“Inhuman Writings: Roaches, Parasites, and Radiation in Ena Lucía Portela’s *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* and Antonio Jose Ponte’s *La fiesta vigilada*”

#### Introduction

In Ena Lucía Portela’s 1998 novel, *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china*, an unnamed lecturer at the University of Havana is quoted by the narrator, “—Un escritor moderno es un ser retórico, exuberante, verboso, palabrero, sin conciencia alguna de la economía [...] Como diría un amigo, <<el escritor moderno escribe, no inscribe>>.”<sup>1</sup> Although the distinction between “escribe” and “inscribe” is never elaborated, a character speculates it regards the writer’s materials: paper versus stone. We might then deduce that a writing conscious of economy has substance, political import, and lasting permanence, whereas an exuberant wordy writing is superficial and ephemeral. An exuberant wordy writing with no consciousness of economy, moreover, is implicitly wasteful and unproductive. The difference between “escribe” and “inscribe” calls to mind Jean Luc Nancy’s neologism, *exscription*, in lieu of inscription. Through the prefix *ex* Nancy signals the exposure, the coming-into-contact of writing with an outside, another limit, be that the reader or another writing. As such, writing always “traces a body,” irreducible and in excess of its operative signification.<sup>2</sup>

Portela’s novel is certainly culpable of trafficking in a writing that is rhetorical, exuberant, and needlessly verbose, consciously aware of its uneconomic *exscribing*. As in

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<sup>1</sup> Ena Lucía Portela, *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china*, (Barcelona: Editorial Casiopea, S.L., 1998), 178.

<sup>2</sup> Here I am drawing from Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpus,” in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), discussed in chapter 1.

previous chapters, one of my interests here is to cull the ethico-political from the seemingly apolitical, of what might be dismissed as mere textual, visual, or sonic jouissance. More specifically, I'm interested in how her novel produces an aesthetic excess as a means to challenge the pretense of knowing and expertise, such as a literary analyst's grasp on the narrative or a medical doctor's diagnosis and pathologizing of a character. As I explored through the work of Roberto Fabelo and Severo Sarduy, in my reading of *El pájaro*, I pay special attention to the ways in which Portela transforms means of seeing inside, of penetrating surfaces—like those of a third person omniscient narrator reproducing a character's inner dialogue, or an obstetrician's determination of a fetus's sex through an ultrasound—into inoperative aesthetic material. In much of the same way that Fabelo tampers with the 19-century medical encyclopedia—making an instructional object of authority dysfunctional—Portela tampers with technologies of representation, be they literary or scientific, and modes of knowledge acquisition. In so doing, her novel undermines dominant ways of seeing and organizing bodies.

In chapter 2 we ended with Fabelo's 2009 installation *Sobrevivientes*, which he explains, is a "reference to today's world where man in some form or another is surviving."<sup>3</sup> I suggested that one way to approximate his designation of "today's world" and the installation's allusion to a disaster yet-to-come is through Gaby Schwab's notion of a "haunting from the future," as we live in the shadow of nuclear object's future effects.<sup>4</sup> I also suggested that the indeterminacy of the piece—Is it a de- or re- humanization?—

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<sup>3</sup> "Montaje de Sobrevivientes," *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, 10 ma Edición de la Bienal de la Habana, Video, March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriele Schwab, "Haunting from the Future: Psychic Life in the Wake of Nuclear Necropolitics," *The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis*, vol. 1, 2014, 85-101.

solicits a simultaneous attraction to the biomorphic potential of the insect and its ability to survive, as well as an anxiety regarding ecological concerns. Not incidentally, the indeterminism of Fabelo's installation, its potential for both attraction and anxiety towards non-human becomings, and its reference to survival are recurring themes in contemporary cultural production from the island. In her book *Cuban Currency*, Esther Whitfield observes that much of the Cuban state's rhetoric, following the loss of Soviet subsidies during the Special Period in Time of Peace (early to mid 1990's), relied on evoking threats of the Cold War era and the Missile Crisis to garner legitimacy as it failed to provide its citizens with basic needs.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, then, to find allusions to the effects of an atomic holocaust and more generally to the theme of survival in literary and artistic production. The affects of radiation on human biology, as well as paradoxical responses towards the body's metamorphosis, will figure in my reading of Portela's novel. *El pájaro's* uneconomical, rhetorical, and exuberant writing moreover, thwarts the reader's desire to make determinations and distinctions within the narrative.

Antonio José Ponte's 2007 novel, *La fiesta vigilada*, in which he attends to the rubble and ruins of Havana's urban landscape, provides another rich example of a literary work that foregrounds survival and states of ontological indeterminism. Linked to the city's architectural ruins, we also find the ruination of subjectivities deemed unproductive to the Revolution's teleological project. Against the Cuban state's narrative of progress and victory, Ponte's novel traces the waste left behind by the incessant drive towards a future and the desire to cultivate "a scientific education necessary for the domination of available

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<sup>5</sup> Esther Kathryn Whitfield, *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and "Special Period" Fiction*, Vol. 21 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 143.

resources” [*la educación científica necesaria para dominar los recursos disponibles*].<sup>6</sup> This call for a “scientific education” by a bureaucrat in the novel is posed against what he conceives as an “erotic” and, therefore, inoperative aesthetic. Ponte’s novel, as readers have noted, is explicitly concerned with assigning culpability to the Cuban state for allowing the perpetuation of inhospitable living conditions; a city in ruins, after all, supports the rhetoric of a country under siege.<sup>7</sup> That said, in its attention to Havana’s inhabited ruins, the novel also illustrates networks of material and territorial interdependencies that exceed the limits of state politics. In my reading of the text, I will underscore these networks with the aim of bringing to the foreground an ecological thinking in Ponte’s novel, as it challenges the instrumental logic of modernizing projects and displaces the centrality of the human as the agent of history. In *La fiesta vigilada* buildings and trash are anthropomorphized and the inhabitants of Havana’s seemingly war-torn buildings appear at moments as parasites, insects and even algae; they are survivors of an incoming implosion.

Portela’s and Ponte’s novels attest to dehumanizing conditions. In *El pájaro* and *La fiesta* we find state institutions, a hospital/psychiatric ward and a nursing home, respectively, in which individuals are treated as disposable bodies, left to die or experimented on like laboratory rats. While the international community with regard to the Cuban state often invokes the discourse of human rights, Ponte’s and Portela’s novel, as I aim to explore here, do not appeal to a shared humanism nor do they seem to advocate for a politics of representation. In their novels the survivors of these necropolitical institutions do so precisely in their capacity to scurry away or behave parasitically. Moreover, in

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio José Ponte, *La fiesta vigilada* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2007), 187, 188. All translations from Spanish to English are mine.

<sup>7</sup> Whitfield, *Cuban Currency*, 143. María Guadalupe Silva, “Antonio José Ponte: el espacio como texto,” *Iberoamericana*, año 14, no. 53, 2014, 76.

Ponte's and Portela's texts the practice of writing and of creative production—that which is often cited as evidence of a human spirit or intelligence, and charged with the duty to humanize and represent legible political subjects—appears to emerge from an irreducible corporeality and territorial interdependence. In other words, cultural production in their texts is not imagined as transcendence from mere “animal” subsistence but the result of creatively surviving.

In a chapter titled, “Can Thought Go on Without the Body,” from his book *The Inhuman*, Jean-François Lyotard considers early on, “Technology was not invented by us humans. Rather the other way around.”<sup>8</sup> Even the simplest life forms operate as technological devices, absorbing and processing information from their environment in order to survive. Although humans demonstrate a higher capacity for storing information, differentiating, and reflection, they are, ultimately, material, technological systems. The question, then, more specifically for Lyotard is whether human thinking can be technologically reproduced outside of its corporeal and terrestrial environment. Restated philosophically, can “the life of the mind,” like that of the soul, be segregated from that of the body? The answer is no. Unlike artificial intelligence, human thought does not operate in a binary mode; it works intuitively, hypothetically, accepting imprecise, ambiguous data, or what Kant called reflective judgment. Lyotard goes on to demonstrate how reflective judgment is conditioned by and generated from our perceptive, phenomenological experience. Just as our vision is marked by blurry, peripheral limits, anticipating always a horizon beyond reach, infinitely unfurling, so too does thought make inferences and imaginative leaps of what it has not yet determinately encountered. In order to make these

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12.

leaps, to think the *unthought*, Lyotard continues, one must be irresolute in their thinking, resist arriving at a conclusion, and patiently wait in the discomfort of the unknown, “letting a givable come towards you.” Much like an actor, a painter, or a calligrapher, one needs “a kind of suspension of ordinary intentions of mind associated with habitus, or arrangements of the body” for the grace of the right brushstroke, gesture, or thought to be evoked. And this “doesn’t happen without suffering. An enjoyment of what we possessed is now lost. [...] [T]here’s a necessity for physical experience and a recourse to exemplary cases of bodily asceticism [...] if the mind is to think.”<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, while Lyotard makes a case for the singularity of human thought, he does so by arguing that it is both technological and corporeal. Put otherwise, corporeality is technological and intelligent in its very survival and attachment to a particular environment. If “the life of the mind,” in its transcendence over mere material need, is what conventionally distinguishes humans from non-human life, following Lyotard’s elaboration, what constitutes human thought is its inhumanness, its technicity and corporeal dependence on an environment, that which it shares with the simplest of life forms. Drawing from Lyotard’s theorization on thought and the inhuman, an important consideration in my treatment of Portela’s and Ponte’s novels, as indicated by the chapter title, is how these writers prompt us to reconsider our conceptualization of “culture” as that which marks humans from non-humans. If artistic creations can be considered part of the zoological, ecological, “natural” domain, then what distinguishes a political being, whose life is worthy of protection, from raw, material, instrumental resources?

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<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 18-19.

## Chinese Brush Painting

The title to Ena Lucía Portela's novel, *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china*, presents us with a grammatical convention more akin to that of academic essays or non-fiction works. Though audibly it reads as a list—such that the bird, paintbrush, and Chinese ink are ontologically parallel—graphically, the three nouns are organized by a colon. Following the logic of this punctuation, the paintbrush and Chinese ink elaborate or explain the bird; put otherwise, the bird *is* brush and ink, an artificial figure. Setting its grammatical arrangement aside, the three nouns recall the tradition of Chinese brush painting, in which artists, drawing from the disciplined craftsmanship of calligraphy, meticulously apply ink over silk or paper using a very fine tip brush.<sup>10</sup> The cover to the novel's first edition displays one of these paintings, a black silhouette of a bird surrounded by an Asian script; both title and cover image provide a particularly evocative paratext for my reading of the novel. Composed historically by so-called “scholar painters,” Chinese brush paintings of birds, flowers, rocks, and bamboo also integrate poetry. Notably, it was (and continues to be) the custom for the recipient of the work, or a later appreciator, to inscribe his or her own response to the original poem–painting in the empty spaces of the blank background. To accommodate the proliferation of responses, additional panels of silk or paper are attached along the length of a scroll.<sup>11</sup> In its display of various authorial voices and artistic hands, one is reminded of the notations found at the margins of ancient Greek scrolls by later translators or the supplemental and decorative illustrations of medieval illuminated

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<sup>10</sup> Maxwell Hearn, The Metropolitan Museum of Art History, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Chinese Painting, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chin/hd\\_chin.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chin/hd_chin.htm). See also Asia-Art.net, “Chinese Brush Painting,” [http://www.asia-art.net/chinese\\_brush.html](http://www.asia-art.net/chinese_brush.html).

<sup>11</sup> Hearn, The Metropolitan Museum of Art History.

manuscripts. And not unlike the stylized renderings of these manuscripts, a formalistic feature of Chinese brush painting is its reliance on line. That is, rather than modeling through lights and shadows, with economical precision, the “scholar painter” aimed to distill an ideational form, “capturing” both the outer silhouette and inner essence of the represented figure.<sup>12</sup> For contrast, recall how European naturalistic conventions adhere to a particular angle of view and a source of light in order to produce the illusion of receding space and volumetric bodies. Whereas a fifteenth century Italian painting was conceived as a window through which the spectator can see a landscape or the interior of a room, the linear calligraphic compositions of these Chinese paintings reiterate the flatness of the picture plane, drawing the viewer’s eyes from top to bottom, vertically, as though scanning a text. It is then not surprising to learn that a traditional way of appreciating a painting in Chinese is often expressed as “*du hua*, ‘to read a painting’.”<sup>13</sup>

To be clear, Portela’s novel, *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china*, is not “about” Chinese brush painting, nor much less, a bird, a paintbrush, and Chinese ink. In fact, references to the translation of ancient Greek texts, classical Roman sculpture and portraits of the Florentine Renaissance play a far more visible role within the novel. And yet, *el pájaro*, *pincel*, and *tinta china* will reappear in the text, in grammatical arrangements that read more like a litany, becoming a refrain, couched between clauses and sentences, with no explicit meaning for the reader: “Entonces todo era recorrer la casa [...] a la ida y a la vuelta el pájaro enjaulado, no pincel, no tinta china”; “De nuevo sufrir el tiempo... el pájaro desbordado, no pincel, no tinta china”; “Lo hace con sus pájaros, ya sean grises o lluviosos

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



(pincel y tinta china, grabados).”<sup>14</sup> And later in a meta-textual reference, “Así era *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china*, una historia como la seda. Envolvente, translúcida, sensual.”<sup>15</sup> I want to return to the narrator’s self-referential description of the story as enveloping, *trans*-lucent, sensuous silk. But first let us consider the following: while the colon in the title announces something explanatory like an essay, within the body of the novel the three objects operate as enigmatic tropes. As readers we are misled, if we expect to learn about el pájaro, or the tradition of Chinese brush painting. What follows the colon does not explain or substitute the bird, but adds objects to a list or an assemblage, like “parts outside parts,”<sup>16</sup> or additional panels of silk along the length of a scroll.

By way of introduction, the tradition of Chinese brush painting provides a rich analogy for how Portela’s text does and does not operate. With the aim of “capturing” the inner essence of the object represented, brush painting’s linearity and symbolic figuration present images as text and not naturalistic representations. In no way does Portela’s novel presume to capture an inner essence and will in fact play with the impossibility of doing so. However, like the ink brush paintings, the novel suggests that its representation is based on conventions within a long and expansive literary tradition, to which recipients and future readers will supplement, (miss)interpret and (miss)translate, adding their own responses at the margins of the text. *El pájaro* continuously brings the reader’s attention to the artifice of its narrative with a hyper-self-awareness, making the process of writing and story telling ever-present themes. Discussion of literary styles, such as Nuevo Realismo and Neobarroquismo; critical theory by Barthes and Derrida; as well as intertextual references

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<sup>14</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 21, 38, 185.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy, “Corpus,” 28-31. The implications of this phrase are elaborated in chapter 1, section “The art of assemblage.”

to literary works by JD Salinger, Djuna Barnes, and Lewis Carroll, to name only a very few, abound in the novel, populating its pages with citations, stories, voices that do not belong to, or are not proper to, its author.<sup>17</sup> That is, Portela deliberately undermines the authorial and proprietary boundaries of her own text.

In Chinese brush painting not only is visual representation textualized, but the textual, in turn, is made visually palpable. The calligraphic scripts, while conveying linguistic meaning, are also meant to please the eyes through the disciplined marks of the artist's hand, which sought both regularity of form and originality. As readers of a brush painting, we can take our fingers and trace the lines of ink script dried on the silk fabric. Put otherwise, the art of calligraphy allows us to better imagine what Nancy and Sarduy have theorized with regard to language and corporeality: writing always *exscribes* another body, irreducible to its conventionalized signification. Language is always both metaphorical—displacing its referent, attempting to stand-in for something absent—and absolutely singular in its *lettericity*, its tangible materiality.<sup>18</sup> What's more, as a specialized craft, Chinese brush painting prompts us to consider how the textual and visual bodies of *El pájaro* are the result of honed skills, a *techne*, and not the incarnation of an already existing bird. While the concept of technology is often thought in opposition to the organic, recalling Lyotard, consider that in order to achieve the controlled and precise application of ink, the calligrapher-artist is said to suspend "ordinary intentions of mind associated with *habitus*

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<sup>17</sup> For an exhaustive list of Portela's intertextual references in *El pájaro*, desacralization of the canon, and self parody see Nara Araújo, "Erizar y divertir: La poetica de Ena Lucía Portela," *Cuban Studies*, Vol. 32 (2001), 61, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy, "Corpus," 24. *Lettericity* is discussed in chapter 1, section "Writing, Painting, Matter."

[and] arrangements of the body.”<sup>19</sup> In order that grace may be received—that the iteration of a character may also display an unexpected gestural mark, something unimagined before—an emptiness and evacuation is solicited, which “doesn’t take place without some suffering [and] discomfort.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, artistic creation, here, is not imagined as a disembodiment, a purely intellectual process, but happens from and with corporeality. I find it significant that the title of the novel should refer to an artistic practice which calls for the disciplining or un-conditioning of the body, to sit with the discomfort of the unknown, when Portela’s text, as I will explore in the pages that follow, links creative production with states of paralysis, loss of bodily control, disease, contagion, and possession. It is also telling that Portela’s title should reference an artistic practice that rejects the use of a direct light source and a fixed point of view, for the novel might be summarized as the manipulation of light and the destabilization of perspective: the very sources postmedieval European art and science relied on to see “nature” and “discover” knowledge.

### **Staging the abject**

Camila, aka “la sacerdotisa” and “la Mirada,” Fabián, aka “ese loco de rostro renacentista,” and Bibiana, aka “Beatriz,” “la Modelo,” and “la niña ilustre,” provide the main casting for the narrative, with minor roles given to Zarathustra, as aborted fetus, Dr. K Schilling, as what his name conjures—a fascist medical doctor that performs human experiments—and Emilio U, as contemporary Cuban writer and sometimes double for Ena Lucía Portela. In addition to writing, Emilio U will also play the role of Fabián’s lover and

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<sup>19</sup> Lyotard elaborates his theory on the suffering of the unthought specifically with regard to the calligrapher, *The Inhuman* 18-20.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

murderer. Main set locations are a home, a hospital, and a university in early 1990's Havana, such that, hospitality, medical treatment, and the production of knowledge within a context of power outages play thematic roles in the novel. The three main characters, as "la Mirada," "la Modelo," and "ese loco de rostro renacentista," also stage the spectator, the object of the gaze, and an enigmatic work of art. Accordingly, the question of perspective, where the spectator is situated, seeing and not seeing, and interpreting or diagnosing will be guiding concepts for my reading of the text.

Camila is an eighteen-year-old aspiring actress from the provinces that has come to study theatre in Havana on a scholarship. She is described as having "una personalidad y un cuerpo pequeños y grises," who through a series of errors discovers the advantages of being a spectator, "de ser espectador, actuar de espectador."<sup>21</sup> We are introduced to Camila's character in a subsection titled "Posiciones humillantes" and a passage that runs about two pages in length with no periods. In an informal conversational style that implicates the reader with phrases such as "mira tú," the narrator often switches from using the third person feminine singular, referring explicitly to Camila, to the impersonal and passive "uno", "lo" and "se," as though the actions narrated are not exclusive to her, but commonplace and possibly applicable to the speaker as well: getting drunk by day, cultivating and selling marijuana in order to buy and snort cocaine, getting kicked out of school, and landing on the street, homeless, sifting through trash and talking to oneself, with no one to notice or care. As "pequeña" and "gris," Camila does not stand out, but is over-looked, invisible. "Ni siquiera la miran. Sólo tú y yo sabemos que ella está allí," our

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<sup>21</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 28.

narrator confides in us.<sup>22</sup> At other times, Camila “está por completo fuera de foco, *old fashioned*, en plena disonancia, haciendo la payasada del siglo [...]”<sup>23</sup> Dissonance and out-of-focus are adjectives that not only signal discursive strategies Portela deploys—continuously destabilizing the reader’s perspective—but also the construction of her characters; they do not conform to conventional subject models, or certainly not “respectable” ones we should emulate.

Camila’s “payasada” is the result of a series of missteps, one inevitably leading to the next:

como quien dice, personaje del aire bajo la corona de pámpanos, de ser posible con ron, llegado el caso con pediculicida de plátano—producto de la conjunción entre la química, el vicio y la miseria, horrendo como su nombre indicia: pedi, culi, y SIDA, preparado a base de alcohol, que también sirve, mira tú, para matar bichos—y fumar marihuana con alegría, como no, cultivarla, matica linda de mi corazón, en algún sitio donde nadie la reconozca—venir a La Habana a cultivar, qué mal chiste— [...] <sup>24</sup>

The narrator’s phonetic breakdown of “pedi, culi, y SIDA,” is not insignificant. That Camila should be associated with something that exterminates insects, “para matar bichos,” and semantically evokes feet, ass, and a virus, points to the abjectness with which her persona is continuously imagined. If that weren’t enough, our narrator makes clear that Camila does not fit-in anywhere, she has no home, no friends, and no belongings: “se carezca de amigos, de sentimiento de pertenencia a un grupo cualquiera, de dinero, de ropa, de comida [...] se pone a dormir en las aceras y a husmear en los latones de basura, hablando solo sin que nadie lo mire ni se asombre.”<sup>25</sup> The image of Camila sniffing [*husmear*] through trash like an animal, is reiterated with a description of her as a “liebre marceña”—a reference to Alice

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 30.

in Wonderland—, “con las orejas paradas,” and in the following page, “se siente cucaracha,” and has the face of a mouse [*cara de ratón*].<sup>26</sup> But as to why Camila should find herself marginalized and dehumanized, is unclear; or at least from a legible social justice issue, Camila is not stigmatized by a disability, racial, class, or sexual difference.<sup>27</sup> It would seem, instead, that Camila’s fall into “posiciones humillantes” is the result of her own hubris, a tragic flaw in Greek theater:

entonces se advierte que uno se ha malogrado—al menos es lo que dice la peruana del cuarto, inca de mierda—, uno se ha pasado de los límites con mucho *hybris* sin saber por qué (mentira, uno sí sabe), si no había una Causa por la cual luchar ni nada de qué quejarse, si uno tuvo en sus manos las mejores oportunidades y las dejó pasar porque eso es precisamente lo que le gusta hacer a uno con las malditas oportunidades <sup>28</sup>

There’s much to be said about ruination and hubris in post-soviet Cuba during the economic crisis of the early 1990’s. The narrator’s mention of a lack of a Cause, with a capital C, there being nothing to complain about, and the best opportunities, implicitly, made available to its citizens, might be read as an ironic reference to the Revolution’s assumed accomplishments. However, our narrator does not appear to be making a critique of the status quo and the absence of a Cause, with a capital C, may also be a reference to the tenets of a logical cause-and-effect in Greek tragedy.<sup>29</sup> Without a justifiable Cause, Camila’s actions are seemingly the result of a morally degenerate character. She has squandered her

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 30, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Odette Casamayor Cisneros, “Incertidumbre resplandeciente. Breve incursión en la narrativa escrita durante la década del 90 en la Isla de Cuba,” *Caravelle* (1988-), No. 78 (June 2002), 190. With regard to Portela’s characters in *El pájaro*, Cisneros writes, “Ningún estigma es evidente en ellos y es difícil encontrar una lógica cualquiera a su alejamiento del cuerpo social. En realidad, este extrañamiento no es bien definido. Se trata más bien de un flotar en sociedad, de un estar sin asumirlo realmente. [...] Esta literatura no pertenece a nada ni a nadie. Se pierde en ella toda noción de grupo.”

<sup>28</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics*, (Dover Thrift Editions, 1997).

scholarship, which would necessarily be a gift from the Cuban state. Recalling the ethics of Che's *hombre nuevo*,<sup>30</sup> Camila has failed to fulfill her debt to the revolutionary forefathers and her obligation to her fellow compatriots. Like a bacchanal figure, "personaje del aire bajo la corona de pámpanos," Camila is an unproductive citizen. It is only reasonable then that she has been expelled and left to survive on trash, or so the tone of our narrator would lead us to believe.

The narrator's citing Camila's roommate, "al menos es lo que dice la peruana del cuarto, inca de mierda," situates him or her within the world of the novel. It also demonstrates that this speaker, who confides in the reader "(mentira, uno sí sabe)," makes racist statements. But identifying who the narrator is becomes a difficult, if not impossible, game. At one point the reader is outright challenged to do so: "si adivinas quién soy yo, te doy un premio."<sup>31</sup> And before you judge, the narrator asks "antes de pensar que soy un <<sexista abominable>> que <<reincide en estereotipos represivos>>, considera, te lo ruego, que esto del *kalós* y el *agathós* no es tan simple."<sup>32</sup> The ancient Greek terms that translate to "beautiful and good" or "fine and noble," were used in reference to an ideal of life and behavior. The usage of these terms also corresponds to the philosophical position that "[t]he more elements of the ideal were realized in an individual, the more fully human that person was. If he had few or none of the elements, his life was essentially subhuman and not worth living."<sup>33</sup> I find the narrator's questioning of "*kalós* y el *agathós*" especially

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<sup>30</sup> Che Guevara, "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba," 1965, [https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/65-socyh.htm#n\\*](https://www.marxists.org/espanol/guevara/65-socyh.htm#n*). Discussed in the introduction to Chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 176

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph S. Salemi, "Kalos Kai Agathos," (2017) *The Pennsylvania Review*, <http://pennreview.com/2009/05/kalos-kai-agathos/>

relevant. Camila will be hospitalized in a so-called rehabilitation ward, where she and the other patients are described as “anormal,” treated as though,

carecían de espíritu o cosa parecida, eran puro cuerpo, muñecos a los que no había necesidad alguna de tratar como a personas, nada de hablar con ellos, por ejemplo. ¿O es que uno, humano ciento por ciento, *zoón politikón*, conversa con los ratones blancos o con los monitos de los modelos experimentales?<sup>34</sup>

The assimilation of the hospital’s patients to animals in a lab is indicative of the “dehumanizing” treatment they receive there, of the indignities they must endure. However, Portela’s novel does more than expose exploitative conditions. As I will explore in more detail ahead, her novel undermines the authority and the metrics used to determine “[un] humano ciento por ciento,” or what gives *zoón*—undifferentiated animal life—*politikón*—a political identity—distinguishing a life as worthy of living from that of an instrumental material resource. If artistic creation has served as both evidence of Humanity and as a means to humanize, *El pájaro* will also complicate the notion that art—as discursive and intelligent life that transcends mere material need—and animal life—as immanent, attached and interdependent on a territory—are mutually exclusive.<sup>35</sup> Were we to judge from the Humanist tradition and its notion of “*kalós* y el *agathós*,” *El pájaro* is neither an edifying nor civilizing work; there are no morally good characters with which to self-identify and pity, a necessary requisite for a hearty cathartic purging. Within the discourse of the Cuban Revolution and its call for artists to contribute to the nation’s

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<sup>34</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> In second half of this chapter, section “Inhabited Ruins,” Ponte will cite the philosopher George Simmel, who offers a theorization of cultural production as the transcendence of human spirit over nature, or mere material subsistence. For an analysis of the artist and the animal, as both participating in discourse and materially interdependent on a territory, see Braidotti, *Metamorphosis: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 2002), 132-133. Also discussed in chapter 2, section “Thinking Ecologically.”



progress, the novel also seems to renege on its civic duty to produce a socially committed, purposeful art.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, statements such as the following mock any endeavor to make art purposeful, “[E]n última instancia todas las ocupaciones humanas resultan por igual inútiles.”<sup>37</sup> In case the reader had any expectation about the novel’s redemptive potential, in one of the text’s many self-referential passages, Fabián tells the writer Emilio U (sometimes double for Ena Lucía Portela), “Eres un puñetero mosquito [...] vas a terminar creyéndote tus propias ficciones y confundiéndonos con los personajes de tu novela, los cuales, me disculpas, no son nada dignos de imitación.” Followed sarcastically by, “¡es tan edificante lo que estamos hablando!”<sup>38</sup> And yet, it is creative production, a literary work, which will *inexplicably* instill in our abject character, deemed unworthy by the powers that be, the desire to survive.

### **Perspectives, Possessions, Parasites**

With phrases such as, “desentona, según muestran las superficies pulidas que la repiten,” “[a]sí la veía él en los cristales de un hombre,” “[c]olocada desde siempre en el mismo centro de la luz,” “de pie junto a la lámpara,” “la iluminación en la azotea es de pocos watts, amarilla casi ocre,” “mirarlos [...] a través del ojo de una cerradura,” “mirando desde el suelo,” “desde el fondo de la penumbra,” “desde su precaria posición,” “desde ese punto de vista,” “[d]esde la sombra,” “[d]esde el sofá más alejado de la lámpara,” *El pájaro* constructs visual scenes by marking a spectator’s perspective, situating the object of the

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<sup>36</sup> Fidel Castro, “Palabras a los intelectuales,” in *Política cultural de la Revolución Cubana*, (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977). Also cited in the introduction to Chapter 1.

<sup>37</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

gaze, and determining the source or quality of light.<sup>39</sup> These perspectives and light sources, moreover, are usually oblique, unstable and opaque. In the following exchange between two characters, Portela ironically underscores the artifice of what is seen, mediated by lighting and staging, “<<[N]o vamos a poder vernos ni las caras [...] Quedaremos murciélagos. [...] Hoy toca el apagón, ¿no te acuerdas? ¡El apagón! ¡Je je! Te lo digo para que no vayas a pensarte que esta oscuridad de mierda es pura escenografía o algo así.>>”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, when we are first introduced to Fabián, a series of consecutive paragraphs each begins with, “El espejo del baño,” “El espejo era un cuadro,” “Inmóvil y enmarcado,” “Aunque era el hombre de la medalla”; so that, the elaboration of this character emerges from a two dimensional plane or a framed composition. Whether the image is a reflection on a polished surface, displaced, multiplied, or miniaturized on a pair of spectacles, it is always from a situated, singular angle, “desde su ángulo singular,” and not an unmediated “transcendental view from nowhere.”<sup>41</sup> Writing also happens from a particular standpoint, “Quizá lo que deberías hacer, desde tu escondrijo, desde debajo de tu piedra, es escribir una novela.”<sup>42</sup> In this case, our narrator writes not from an upright, sovereign, human perspective, but from that of a vulnerable quadruped close to ground.

Portela not only plays with perspective at the level of representation, but also at the level of the writing. If narrative voice provides a focal point, that which situates the reader, Portela constantly destabilizes our position and, in so doing, our ability to fully grasp the novel’s characters and actions. From one clause to the next, narrative voice might switch

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 32, 58, 106, 46, 195, 44, 138, 119, 39, 36, 37, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 182. Lucian Taylor, ed., *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R. 1990-1994* (New York: Rutledge 1994), xiv.

<sup>42</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 131.

from a situated, unnamed character expressing their love for marijuana, to a third person omniscient, to that of Emilio U, Fabián, a female narrator, possibly Camila, or a self-identified neighbor and friend.<sup>43</sup> Fabian’s warning to Emilio U, that he will end up confusing himself with the characters of his novel—incidentally, titled *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china*—is both a meta-textual nod to the reader and a way in which Portela undermines authority: The error of “creyéndote tus propias ficciones y confundiéndote con los personajes” falls on the writer, “un puñetero mosquito,” and not, necessarily or exclusively, the reader.

In his study of perspectival illusionism, the art historian WTJ Mitchell notes that the metaphors “taken in” and “capture” have historically been used to describe the deceived spectator, or “beholder,” of a naturalistic representation. These metaphors are an indication of how “the problem of illusionism is deeply interwoven with structures of power” and implicated in a process of social othering. In his *Treatise of Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci describes various instances of animals being deceived by perspectival illusionism in order to prove, Mitchell explains, “that painting is superior to poetry because it is a ‘natural’ and scientific medium that produces true representations of the visible world.” Quoting da Vinci’s claim, “I have seen a picture that deceived a dog because of the likeness to its master... likewise I have seen a monkey that did an infinite number of foolish things with another painted monkey,” Mitchell points out that in these stories “the ‘error’ [...] is not the painter’s, but the beholder’s: the dog, not the master, is taken in by the illusion of

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<sup>43</sup> Chiara Bolognese, “El pájaro: pincel y tinta china de Ena Lucía Portela: escritura y cuerpo en escena,” *Mitologías hoy*, vol. 10, invierno 2014, 52. In her description of narrative strategies, Bolognese writes, “Queda claro que la autora nos confunde constantemente con las diferentes instancias narrativas: la voz del narrador es, según la situación, la de Emilio U, la de Fabián, o la de un narrador omnisciente extradiegético, de una narradora, o de un narrador metadieético.”

the master.” The binaries it relies on—“human/animal; painter/holder”—base illusionism “in [a] structure of alterity [...] characterized by inequality in power, self-consciousness, or self-control.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, perspectival illusionism has been deployed as a method of domination through “the perfection of the panopticon, ‘lures,’ and ‘decoys,’” while its presumed objectivity has buttressed notions of expertise, social hierarchies, and fixed identities.<sup>45</sup> The pretense of producing a “true representation” or the endeavor to create verisimilitude is not exclusive to painting; I want to suggest that in narrative fiction similar devices of illusionism are also operative, in its elaboration of so-called three-dimensional characters and a believable progression of events. In bringing our attention to the question of perspective—“desde ese punto de vista”—, in destabilizing the reader’s view-point through shifts in narrative voice, and in constructing visual scenes that are fragmentary, cubistic, where lighting dramatizes, but rather than illuminate, obfuscates and veils (we will see this in more detail in the following section), Portela breaks the illusion of her fictional world and insists on a writing that is immanent, interdependent on a particular territory.<sup>46</sup> As such, the novel upends authorial modes of knowledge production and their attendant structures of power. Efforts to fix and hold the object of the gaze are

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<sup>44</sup> WJT Mitchell, “Illusion: Looking at Animals Looking,” *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 332-335.

<sup>45</sup> Mitchell, “Illusion: Looking at Animals Looking,” 332-342.

<sup>46</sup> By interdependence and territory I mean both the material resources the writer depends on to subsist and write—Portela notes that the greatest challenge to writers in Cuba during the 90’s was not the threat of censorship but the lack of paper—their situatedness historically and geographically, and literary tradition. Portela is cited by Iraida H. Lopez in the prologue to *El viejo, el asesino y yo y otros cuentos*, edited by Iraida H. Lopez (Doral, Florida: Stockero, 2009), vii.

consistently thwarted: “De nuevo guiña el ojo y se me desdibuja entre las manos cuando ya creía haberla atrapado.”<sup>47</sup>

When Camila’s and Fabián’s paths cross, the narrator in third person omniscient will provide us with Camila’s thoughts through indirect discourse. However, later in a scene that describes the two having sex, the narrative voice switches to first person: “Las manos de ella, muy poco lo que se espera sean las manos de una muchacha, se apoyaban en mi cabeza [...] Ella gemía de placer aunque a mí no me gustara su voz y me empujaba todavía más [...] me empujaba hasta el vacío que yo temía [...]”<sup>48</sup> The phrases correspond to Fabián’s subject position and for a moment, one might, as I initially did, assume that Fabián has been the narrator the whole time. In the following paragraph, this assumption is immediately countered: “Fabián no podía evitar en esos momentos la acometida de una tristeza oscura.”<sup>49</sup> This confusion, both the reader’s and ostensibly the narrator’s, generates a becoming-other, moments where subject and object are intersected, or where the spectator becomes the model and visa-versa. Put otherwise, if, as readers, our position within the world of the novel comes from the narrative voice, then in one passage we are “watching” Camila and Fabián have sex, and in another we are Fabián having sex with Camila.

I find the literary critic Chiara Bolognese’s explanation of these narrative transitions especially evocative: “el narrador habla por la boca de los diferentes personajes; les roba la voz.”<sup>50</sup> The act of stealing and of speaking through another’s body conjures the act of possession, or an unwelcomed, parasitic, hosting. In the novel’s first pages, we read that

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<sup>47</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 195.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 36, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>50</sup> Bolognese, “*El pájaro*,” 51.

Fabián, “personaje misterioso [...] del cual, a pesar de su elegancia y rara belleza, sabes que es el malo, el rufián, el sinvergüenza,” “lamentaba perder el tiempo. Como si antes hubiese sido suyo, como si pudiera ser suyo.”<sup>51</sup> The expressed lamentation of losing something which could never have been his, of imagining something like time as a property, is soon followed by his desire to possess, “poseer algo, si no el continuo, quizás un algo más modesto, en cuya posesión pudiera creer sin la sospecha de una nueva estafa, de un nuevo descalabro en este mundo tenebroso signado [...] Hubiera deseado poseer limpiamente.”<sup>52</sup> A world darkly signified is an apt description for the novel itself. Let’s also not forget Fabián’s fear of the void [*el vacío que yo temía*] and dark sadness [*tristeza oscura*]. The impossible fulfillment of this desire to possess “limpiamente” without deceit or injury, that is, to possess with total certainty, is further elaborated as a failed attempt to recall a lost paradise or “alguna otra ucronía a contrapelo.”<sup>53</sup> Given that Fabian, not unlike Camila, does not belong to any particular group, he has been abandoned by his family and lives alone, it is perhaps not surprising to read, “Desde la sombra Fabián extendía la mano, cada vez más ansioso. Quería, por decirlo de algún modo, acceder a alguien, estar de acuerdo. Poseer. La misma angustia de siempre.”<sup>54</sup> This anxiety to have access to someone and to be in accord might be understood as an anxiety for communion, to commune with someone, to be of one mind. In fact, Fabián will later describe his sexual rendezvouses as “comuni3n con otra persona.”<sup>55</sup> But to possess “limpiamente,” without remainder, within the context of recovering “la *belle 3poque*,” or a univocal community without the ambiguity of a darkly

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<sup>51</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 25, 26, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 39.

signified world, would necessarily entail violence, the elimination of difference, of disagreement. Unlike Camila who does not try to understand *el vacío*, “lo aceptaba como había aceptado la calle,” “[a] Fabián siempre le preocupaba el fondo de todo,” otherwise described by our narrator as “una vulgar angustia metafísica.”<sup>56</sup> Fabian’s fear of the void, of the unknown, of that which is impenetrable and impossible to decipher—interestingly, he spends his time translating (poorly, our narrator says, for he is not a trained philologist) ancient Greek texts, “una lengua muerta,”—and his anxiety to access and to be in accord, to possess, is perhaps manifested in the torture and rape of Camila. As Freudians, we might diagnose Fabián’s inability to recall a lost paradise as melancholia and the self-abasement and self-destruction that follows is projected onto an Other; in this case Camila, as small and grey, becomes the void upon which his violence is inscribed.

I see possession as operative in at least two ways in the novel: 1) to possess *limpiamente*, without ambiguity, a structural impossibility that necessarily entails violence, and 2) to possess and be possessed through confusion, a confusion generated through writing. In those shifts of voice, following Bolognese’s lead, the narrator possesses the body of its protagonists and, I would add, the protagonists, in turn, possess the body of the narrator. These are messy transfusions difficult to trace and disaggregate. In the following statement we can observe what begins as the narrator’s self-critique, “Esto no es ya narración, sino retazos de ideas, aburrimiento, analogías discordantes que, tras la tormenta tropical, iban apareciendo sin más ni más en la mente de él,”<sup>57</sup> become inscribed in the mind of Fabián; the discordant fragments of ideas the reader attributes to the narrator become, in the last clause, Fabian’s thoughts. Significantly, this statement follows almost

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 37, 24, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 37.

immediately the passages where the narrator speaks through Fabian, “se apoyaban en mi cabeza.” And consequently, in the act of “stealing” his voice, in becoming-other, the narration becomes scrambled, discourse comes to a halt, “Esto no es ya narración.” I want to suggest that here writing operates as a parasitic form of inhabiting, or a form of contamination, and the reader is not immune. When the narrator asks, “considera, te lo ruego” or simply “mira tú,” this call to the reader, this plea, not only implicates the reader, but also instantiates an invitation, a possible hospitality, and hosting is not always welcomed. The question of hospitality and the risks it entails arise at the level of the plot. Fabián invites Camila who is homeless to his apartment for tea and a bath. The bath becomes a gruesome scene of cruelty; Camila becomes hostage to the sadistic whims, or anxious and anguished need to possess of a Renaissance man—Fabián, after all, looks like a quattrocento Florentine model and translates classical texts. Camila never leaves and becomes a sort of live-in girlfriend to this “loco”. To our surprise and feminist indignation, she tolerates his constant barrage of verbal and physical abuse. However, remembering our narrator’s plea, “considera, te lo ruego, que esto del *kalós* y el *agathós* no es tan simple,” for the sake of hospitality, let us not judge Camila, or too quickly pathologize her.

### **Making Bodies Trans-lucid**

Chapter two of *El pájaro* begins with a visual description of what might be the moving water, oil, and wax of a lava lamp, but that ultimately remains enigmatic:

En el interior de la ampolla de vidrio, ambiente gelatinoso, se agitaba una multitud de figuritas brillantes, unas con forma de clave de sol y otras no. Triángulos, sombreros de copa, burbujas, explosiones calladas. El jardín de las delicias. Era uno de esos cuerpos que cuelgan multicolores de los llaveros o de cualquier otro cuerpo (siempre cuelgan) como calidoscopios asimétricos sobre los cuales gravitara el malentendido con sus vísceras doradas al descubierto.



Portela's sentence fragment, "Triángulos, sombreros de copa, burbujas, explosiones calladas," recalls Severo Sarduy's lists with no hierarchal ordering, his anatomies of configuration.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, we might read the entire passage as a vibrant assemblage. The notion of asymmetric kaleidoscopes, much like Sarduy's glass hair [*fibras de vidrio*] in *Cobra*,<sup>59</sup> provides the reader with a seemingly ontological impossibility and, as such, a charged poetic object. Incidentally, lava lamps and kaleidoscopes delight the eyes with images that transform through light and mirrors, respectively. Also notable, the etymology of the word kaleidoscope comes from the Greek *kalos*, which we've already seen signifies beauty and goodness, *eidos* "form, shape," and *skopeo*, "to look or examine," so that the term literally translates to "observer of beautiful forms."<sup>60</sup> There is a third object, "cuerpos que cuelgan multicolores de los llaveros." And wedged between descriptions, a reference to Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights," a work that depicts carnal joys and temptations through a composition so dense and so imaginative it puts the juxtapositions of twentieth century Dadaists and Surrealists to shame. The phrase, "Era uno de esos cuerpos que cuelgan multicolores de los llaveros o de cualquier otro cuerpo (siempre cuelgan)," brings us from the whimsical "figuritas brillantes" of a lava lamp, or an ornamental key chain, to the terrestrial gravity and weight of a body. The syntax of the sentence is difficult to follow; is it a multicolored body that hangs from a keychain, or a body that hangs multiple colors from a keychain, or from any other body, (siempre cuelgan)? What does come through is the notion that bodies are not sovereign, but

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<sup>58</sup> See chapter 1, sections "Writing, Painting, Matter" and "The art of assemblage."

<sup>59</sup> See chapter 2, section "Cataloguing Cobra from Frozen Orchids to Asthmatic Bishops."

<sup>60</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary,  
<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=kaleidoscope>

attached, hooked, lifted, pulled, dragged, by other bodies, “como calidoscopios asimétricos sobre los cuales gravitara el malentendido con sus vísceras doradas al descubierto.” This last clause combines the impossible asymmetry of a mosaic pattern multiplied through double mirrors and the exposed entrails of the so-called misunderstood. Gold entrails, that is. Unpacking Portela’s paragraph, untangling literal from figurative bodies, determining the object of the narrators’ gaze, becomes a chimerical task. What I would like to underscore is the figure of the body possibly seen as/through gelatinous, golden, liquid, light and its interior exposed, as a beautiful form to observe.

Following this paragraph we read that Camila, Fabián, and Bibiana have all been observing the enigmatic image with fascination, though Camila for a much longer time. We are also given Camila’s location within the apartment and what would seem to be a further elaboration of what she sees in the lava lamp-kaleidoscope-keychain object, “[d]esde el sofá más alejado de la lámpara (y de su ignorancia), la sacerdotisa presentía que los delirantes paisajes de figuritas evolucionaban en un silencio total [...]” However, the scene transforms into another composition. So that, the *figuritas* Camila now watches are those of Bibiana and Fabián:

Camila los hacía contraparte de su propia experiencia. Pues ella tenía por costumbre observar todos (o la mayoría de) los cuerpos sigilosamente, en puntillas de pies. Como a través del ojo de una cerradura, una grieta, un claro de luna o el espíritu curioso de Monte palomar. Desde la franja oscura hasta la franja iluminada era *voyeur*, espectadora, espía de los pies increíbles de Bibiana, muchacha descalzada y sentada sobre la alfombra—unos pies demasiados bien formado para ser ella tan alta—, sus rodillas, el pañuelo con talento para el desorden, el bolso tejido, un ojo azul y el otro verde, las figuritas de un útero transparente. La alfombra misma, anacrónica a mas no poder.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 44.

As la Mirada, la espectadora, Camila, “[j]amás se le ocurría la idea de habitar esos espacios. Al menos no en el sentido de asimilarse a ellos, de pertenecer.”<sup>62</sup> Again, we are reminded of Camila’s un-belonging and the question of perspective is brought to the foreground. A view from a keyhole, a crack, or a fringe is an occluded and framed one. In keeping with the themes of light, reflections, and deceptive illusions, “Un claro de luna,” is an astrological term for the nocturnal illumination of the earth by the light of the sun reflected upon the moon. What we see is always displaced, distorted, and mediated. Bibiana, la Modelo, seated on the rug, is evidently now the object of Camila’s gaze. However, the ensuing composition is fragmented, an anatomy of configuration: We get her feet, knees, scarf, a knitted handbag, a blue eye, a green eye, and an anachronistic rug. But what on earth are “las figuritas de un útero transparente” doing in this frame? Eventually, we learn that Camila is six months pregnant. And when Fabián critiques the clumsiness of the *figuritas*’ movements, Camila responds that one cannot expect a small child to have too much agility. I want to suggest that the lava lamp-kaleidoscope-keychain the three characters observe with fascination, in which bodies hang and where entrails are exposed, might also be read as a sonogram or the screen of an ultrasound monitor.

Let us recall that a sonogram is a two dimensional image produced through the transmission of sound waves and their reflection; emitted through a probe, sound waves reach the boundaries of tissues and bone and produce an echo. In other words, the image that would seemingly make the womb transparent, allowing one to *see* inside, is, in fact, constructed by recording the distance of sound waves from their emission to the point of contact and separation, to the point of touch. Earlier I cited a passage from the novel that

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

referred to itself as sensuous, enveloping, translucent silk [*como la seda. Envolvente, translúcida, sensual*]. A fabric that is translucent allows one to see through it, but what we see is mediated and obfuscated by the tangible material. Portela's text, as I aim to further illustrate, much like Sarduy's invitation to his readers, solicits a form of reading as touching, where decipherment or a penetrating decoding is stymied by enveloping—wrapping, covering, as a membrane or a sheath—sensuousness. Indeed, as one of its narrator's considers, "¿Y si en vez de la pluma, me pregunto, eligiéramos un pincel para acariciar?"<sup>63</sup> From the sonogram, a medical, scientific device used not only to examine a fetus, but to also diagnose symptoms, to identify the cause of an illness, Portela generates delirious landscapes [*delirantes paisajes*], images as imaginative as Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights." The sonogram, or ultrasound screen, becomes a gelatinous space of brilliant figures with the potential for an infinite number of compositional arrangements. Turning back to the object of the kaleidoscope, note that its exterior body is a long cylindrical tube, much like a telescope and a microscope, instruments which also rely on mirrors and whose etymology share the suffix *skopeo* "to look or examine." Portela, not unlike Fabelo and his treatment of the medical encyclopedia, transforms scientific devices, which would presume to see or discover nature, into kaleidoscopes, objects of play, illusion, and aesthetic pleasure. And kaleidoscopes, in turn, are not simply inert instruments for the production of artifice, but vibrant matter with a biology that operates like bricolage: As indicative of Camila's creativity, we read that she

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 64.

has a “funesta iniciativa de reordenar células en el hueco de un calidoscopio vivo, de un inasible calidoscopio, *ars combinatoria*.”<sup>64</sup>

Before taking another look at scientific technologies made art and vibrant matter, I would like to sustain some attention on how the body, in particular the female body and its reproductive capacities, are imagined by some characters or narrators in the novel:

Compasión y asco fue todo lo que expresó el rostro de Fabián. Sobre todo asco. Tan fatigada y lenta, con los senos hinchados y aquella barriguita de seis meses debajo de algo harapiento (en ella todo lucía harapiento), Camila se le antojaba, ahora sí, la peor de las cucarachas. Y él, por supuesto, un cucarachón. [...] *una mujer en casa?* Pues, bien, ahí la tienes. En toda su expresión multiplicadora y reproductiva [...] Tu Fabiancito, gran horror, o tu Camilita, horror de horrores. La sagrada familia, el Tondo Doni de La Habana. [...] [A]quello de reproducirse le parecía algo diabólico, más bien propio de las lombrices y las amebas, de negros, indios y chinos, del subdesarrollo más basto. Sus ideas al respecto [...] consistían más bien en el producto rígido y desaforado de la perplejidad, del asombro de que su cuerpo tuviese, en cierta forma, vida independiente. Aunque parezca mentira, nunca se había percatado. Contra la actuación del cuerpo se estrellaban los sentimientos y las filosofías; el cuerpo merecía su tributo, su vigilancia, su culto aparte. Era un demonio peligroso.<sup>65</sup>

Camila, pitiful, appearing homeless and incapacitated—she is fatigued and slow moving—inspires disgust in our handsome Florentine-Renaissance-look-a-like. Embedded in Fabián’s animalization of Camila, we have the narrator’s interjection in second person, “Tu Fabiancito, gran horror, o tu Camilita, horror de horrores. La sagrada familia, el Tondo Doni de La Habana.” As a representation of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, Michael Angelo’s painting of the Holy-three-member-Family is an iconic image of a patriarchal structure; it is also a work that reflects the High Renaissance and its classical values: Its composition is a perfect circle. Drawing the spectator’s eyes right to its center, one can delineate the invisible intersection of equilateral and longitudinal lines of a mathematically harmonious

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 47, 52, 53.

space, and its figures display well-proportioned, idealized, volumetric bodies. Somehow imagining “el Tondo Doni de La Habana” incites horror and disdain in the narrator (or is it Fabián, our lover of all things Greco-Roman?) as though this classical image in the tropics is absurd. Moreover, this image of both a dominant organizing structure (the patriarchal family) and “high-art” is juxtaposed to that of roaches and their ability for indiscriminant proliferation. That worms and bees are grammatically parallel to Blacks, Indians, and Chinese, is indicative of how racism and other discriminatory forms of organizing of bodies rest on the fictive distinction between *zoón*—undifferentiated life—and *zoón politikón*, “humano ciento por ciento.”<sup>66</sup> And what exactly constitutes “el subdesarrollo más basto”; is it the absence of Michael Angelo, of having not mastered the art of perspectival illusionism?

It appears that what really terrifies Fabián is the body’s “vida independiente,” the body’s biological activities undomesticated by our intellectual domain. The perplexity and astonishment the body evokes is tellingly described as rigid and boundless [*rígido y desaforado*]. At the limits of the body, against its rigid, or impenetrable, perplexing mysteries, emotions and philosophies crash [*estrellar*]. For this, the body merits not only its own cult, but also vigilance against its dangerous monstrosity [*demonio peligroso*]. I want to suggest that here Humanism and the inhumanity of roaches are mutually co-constitutive. At the limits of what is known, measurable and compartmentalized by Reason’s equilateral and longitudinal lines, is the body’s becoming-roach.

From Fabián’s living room, the reader suddenly finds him or herself in a hospital waiting room. Camila’s contemplation of “el mismo espacio gelatinoso de las figuritas brillantes,” transitions to a diatribe by Fabián on education without dogma, and from there

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<sup>66</sup> Gabriel Giorgi, *Formas comunes: Animalidad, cultura biopolítica* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2014) 26. Also cited in chapter 1.

to the images reflected on the surface of a man's glasses, a man wearing a long blue robe, whose face also happens to be blue. Indirect discourse weaves in and out from one character to the next, and narrative voice switches back and forth from third, to first, to second person. In effect, as one of our narrators aptly describes, "[l]as historias se cruzaban, se interrumpían, formaban una red, una malla doble, triple y pegajosa, difícil de leer."<sup>67</sup> Portela's narrative produces a dense, tangled ecology from which subjects, objects, viewpoints, actions, thoughts, opinions, and compositions are difficult to disaggregate, difficult to dissect and identify.

What exactly brought Camila along with Fabián and Bibiana to the hospital remains unclear, Camila simply states "<<Tuve un accidente.>>" Across the span of a number of pages and intersecting narrative strands, we come to speculate that, while at the hospital, Camila has crossed the threshold of a room, willingly or unwillingly, clearly labeled "NO PASE," where radiation for producing X-Rays is emitted. As a consequence of this transgression, her now eight-month-old fetus, "Zaratustra," also referred to as "la Cosa," would necessarily be affected, as the exposure to such radiation results in "anomalías embrionarias, malformaciones múltiples, el tipo de cosas que paladean los médicos." Notwithstanding the ionization of cells such exposure would cause, Camila's unborn child survives: "El feto estaba vivo, pero más le valdría no estarlo."<sup>68</sup> Note the use of "valdría" and its implication of a life "worth" living. In Portela's "malla doble," scientific explanations of the biologically hazardous material are entangled with, and reimagined through, literary references, "En ese horno de azufre tan lleno de íncubos y súcubos con las fantasías de Paracelso, las bodas químicas y los ingredientes de las brujas *Macbeth*, se cocina la nueva

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 62.

criatura óptima, el ciudadano modelo.”<sup>69</sup> The denomination of the model citizen, “la nueva criatura óptima,” an ironic jab at Che’s *hombre nuevo*,<sup>70</sup> might be thought alongside Fabelo’s human-roach sculptures crawling over the walls of the Museo Nacional, as the biomorphic creatures imagined to survive the effects of a nuclear explosion. Indeed, from the description cited below, in which modern X-Ray machines have the capacity to produce radiations comparable to those emitted by Gamma Rays, the power of this medical device is linked to that of a nuclear weapon. The figure of the doctor and the hospital, moreover, are described as authoritative and totalitarian, “todopoderso,” so that the evocation of nuclear weapons further underscores a necropolitical institution.

Los aparatos modernos de rayos X de alto voltaje, los cuales se emplean para el diagnóstico y la terapéutica, son capaces, dijo, de producir radiaciones de longitudes de onda comparables a los rayos *gamma* que emanan, por ejemplo del *radium*. [...] ¡Atención! Otro sistemas, decía, también productores de radiación, emplean cobalto-60, un emisor monocromático de rayos *gamma*. ¿Monocromático? ¿De un solo color? ¡Que aburrido!<sup>71</sup>

Dr. K. Schilling is also monochromatic; with his blue robe and blue face, the stereotactic neurosurgeon is at once assimilated to radiation and rendered as a fanciful figure. Having possession of “<<una de las más sólidas y reconocidas experiencias internacionales en las novedosas técnicas quirúrgicas aplicadas en las neurociencias>>,”<sup>72</sup> Dr. Schilling has the institutional backing and power to perform secret experiments on “negras, sacerdotisas, veteranos de África, etc.”<sup>73</sup> That is, anyone who does not conform to the dominant subject

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>70</sup> Bolognese also reads the “el ciudadano modelo” as a clear allusion to Che’s *hombre nuevo*, “*El pájaro*,” 54.

<sup>71</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 59.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 72.



model (or the state's ciudadano modelo), whose life is not deemed worthy of living, is treated as a "muñeco."<sup>74</sup>

If the doctor's authority is grounded in a particular expertise, Portela's text undermines this authority by challenging certain modes of knowledge production, scientific and medical practices that presume an unmediated access to the body. Literary analysts are also denied entry; readers that attempt to dissect and compartmentalize the body of the text will find themselves continuously thwarted by Portela's "malla doble, triple y pegajosa," or sensuous enveloping silk. While some Gamma Rays are only emitted in cobalt blue, Camila's body is injected with a variety of colors "destinados a volver más nítidas y hermosas ciertas radiografías como retratos fantasmales."<sup>75</sup> The X-Ray, which is produced with the express purpose to see inside the body, is transformed into a portrait, made beautiful and phantasmal; the positivistic is now eerie, paranormal. In other words, the diagnostic power of the X-Ray is rendered inoperative, made into aesthetic material, while its hazardous effects are imagined to produce biomorphic anomalies—again another creative process. That said, the fetus is eventually aborted, "firmaron los papeles que contenían la sentencia de anulación," and Fabián is suspected of having pushed Camila into the radiation room. Accordingly, the "sentencia de anulación" is indicative of both the violence Camila suffers at the hands of her domestic abuser—who at one point says, "me tratan como si fuera la bomba atómica"<sup>76</sup>—and the necropolitical power the hospital exercises. We learn that Camila wanted to keep the child despite its prognosticated malformation and is not granted the opportunity to see "nada de los restos del Zaratustra,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 81.

un varoncito o algo así, en la cubeta llena de algo sanguinolento?”<sup>77</sup> The aborted fetus is at once corporeal waste and all that its mythical and literary name conjures: “¡Qué gran personaje habría sido el (la) Zaratustra de las células rebeldes!”<sup>78</sup>

During the hospital scenes, noting the incongruousness of the simultaneous narrative strands, the narrator/Fabián makes the following assimilation, “[e]ran casi como el paraguas y la maquina de coser encima de la mesa de disección.”<sup>79</sup> The phrase, which originally appeared in a nineteenth century literary text, was adopted by the Surrealists to express their ethos of chance and radical juxtapositions, unsettling preconditioned notions of reality.<sup>80</sup> Portela’s text certainly participates in this unsettling, juxtaposing kaleidoscopes and sonograms, for instance. However, the reference to the dissection table, reiterated again, “No le había gustado pensar en la mesa de disección,” also draws our attention to a particular treatment of the body.<sup>81</sup> In the following passage we are lead to consider the diverse implications of touching, dissecting, and possessing:

Uno es tan ingenuo que a pesar de todo le encanta ver radiografías del propio cerebro. [...] porque esa porción grisácea, arcilla palpitante, no se puede tocar por muy cerca que se encuentre, qué fastidio. A mí, por ejemplo, me gustaría tocar mi cerebro, debe tener pelusitas. Mis ideas tienen pelusitas, ¿no se nota?. Los intestinos, en cambio, o el estómago, sí se pueden tocar en el supuesto caso de que a uno lo destripen y no se muera enseguida. Claro, da náuseas. Uno también se puede autodestripar con alegría, romper para conocer, para poseer como posee el niño que desarma un juguete. Para eso sirve la mesa de disección, ¿no es así?<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 64, 72.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>80</sup> See André Breton, “First Manifesto of Surrealism,” *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison & Paul Woods (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 87-88.

<sup>81</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 61.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 62, 63.

The impossibility of touching one's brain while still conscious, imagining its texture as greasy and clay-like, imagining also that this particular brain and its ideas would have small hairs or fuzz, prompts us to consider the materiality of the seemingly immaterial. Let us recall here Nancy's concept of thoughts as weighty bodies, "[h]ere is the hard point of this thing 'thought,' nodule or synapse, acid or enzyme, a gram of cortex."<sup>83</sup> That thoughts or ideas might have "pelusitas," that they can be touched, suggests not that thoughts can be incarnated, but rather that each and every thought is absolutely singular and therefore unpossessable, at least not *limpiamente*. How would one reproduce or understand a "pelusita"? Alternatively, "romper para conocer, para poseer," signals the violence that knowing and possessing entail, or more accurately that a particular form of knowing entails, in its assumption of being in full possession. The assimilation of taking apart a doll, as a child might do, to the dissection table alerts us to the instrumentalization of bodies as mere material resources, as well as to the whims of sovereign power, cutting and taxonomizing under the guise of reason and modernizing projects.

### **Inhuman Writings**

Following the abortion of Zaratustra, Camila suffers from a sudden paralysis and is relocated to a famous research center that boasts integral rehabilitation and whose name the narrator prefers not to remember.<sup>84</sup> The cause of her paralysis evades Dr. Schilling and his cruel experiments.

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<sup>83</sup> Nancy, "Corpus," 27, 28. Discussed in chapter 1, section "Reading as Touching."

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 71. We might also interpret this desire to forget as Portela's own, given that she also experienced a series of neurological examinations before she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. In "Alas rotas" reproduced in *El Viejo, el asesino, yo y otros cuentos*

Vino una extrañeza que no había conocido antes, la levedad y al fin la parálisis acompañada a veces de espasmos [...] Una inmovilidad móvil, inquietante oxímoron [...] que durante varios meses impidió a diversos especialistas, unos con caras azules y otros no, establecer un diagnóstico.<sup>85</sup>

Camila's body, "conformada por lo indefenso de volverse gusano retorcido por no decir otra vez feto," is subjected to electroshock therapy and a diversity of injections and pills.<sup>86</sup> At one point she is denied sedatives, "<<a ver qué pasa>>," and her body goes into convulsions, palpitations, and spasms. Described by the narrator as a sack full of cats thrown into the water, Camila's body is no longer hers, nor an individual entity, but a force, a pack of animals desperate to survive.<sup>87</sup> "Siempre con el sádico propósito de hacerla caer [...] en un agujero [...] ¿Para qué sirve el poder si no se ejerce."<sup>88</sup> Between stimulants and depressants, Camila imagines Dr. Schilling telling her with a baroque flair for the infinitesimal, "no eres persona en el sentido recto de la palabra. Eres una cucaracha. ¿No lo sientes de vez en cuando? ¿Nunca te lo habían dicho? Un grano de arena entre todas las playas del mundo, un gorgojo entre quinientos quintales de arroz. Eso eres."<sup>89</sup> If Dr. Schilling's physical torture and imagined verbal abuse weren't enough, the hospital attendants speak in front of her assuming she cannot understand them: "<<Dicen que tuvo un hijo anormal, un monstruo.>> <<Lógico: los hijos salen a sus padres.>> <<Quién sería el valiente, eh?>> [...] <<No hay una perversión sexual que es así, que hace que a la gente le gusten los anormales? [...] debe ser la mongofilia [...] estas retrasadas mentales que andan

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Portela gives an account of her diagnoses and subsequent treatment, 123-127. Bolognese also argues that Camila's paralysis is akin to the symptoms of Parkinson's, "El pájaro," 51.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>89</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 78.

por ahí sueltas y sin vacunar casi siempre son tremendas putas.>>”<sup>90</sup> The attendants’ gossiping, as though Camila were not in the room, is symptomatic of her invisibility and unbelonging. Although she may be reduced to a grain of sand or an insect, Camila clearly poses a societal threat: her association with perversion, her suspected sexual proclivity and unvaccinated body present her as a behavioral and corporeal contaminate. And no wonder she poses such a threat. When Camila attempts to speak in her semi-paralysis, her tongue trembles and her speech is illegible: “No entiendo nada de lo que estás diciendo. Sácate lo que tengas dentro de la boca.”<sup>91</sup> Her inability to control her body and to articulate renders her defenseless. However, it also renders her incomprehensible and, as such, I want to suggest, instantiates, to quote the narrator again, “el producto rígido y desaforado de la perplejidad, del asombro de que su cuerpo tuviese, en cierta forma, vida independiente.”<sup>92</sup> The incomprehension and perplexity Camila inspires is yet another mode in which she becomes-animal.

Earlier I proposed that Portela’s novel does more than expose institutional abuse of power and inhumane treatment. As I hope to illustrate further, the text prompts us to reconsider the ways in which bodies are organized and made legible, to reconsider the distinction between undifferentiated animal bodies, as material resource, and political bodies, as lives worth living. When Camila finally regains control of her body and her speech, rather than confront Dr. Schilling and defend herself as “una persona en el sentido recto de la palabra,” la sacerdotisa “prefirió escabullirse, suelta y sin vacunar.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, Camila and the text’s narrative voice do not disavow her being a vulnerable, un-

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>92</sup> Cited above, note #65.

<sup>93</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 106.

immunized “bichito” or “animalejo”<sup>94</sup> that scurries away. It is survival, the desire to stay alive, and not heroics that conditions Camila’s actions. For her, “no existe ningún sentido, ninguna trascendencia [...] Se trataba de vivir, circunstancia ajena a toda comprensión.”<sup>95</sup> In her reading of *El pájaro*, Odette Casamayor Cisneros echoes this sentiment when she writes, “Portela [...] parece decirnos solamente que lo importante es vivir.”<sup>96</sup> Camila manages to escape the hospital and possibly stages a mutiny with other patients on her way out, but the events remain unclear. Portela’s politics in this novel might be dismissed as indifferent or as having no import given that her characters do not insist on recognition or protest for the rights and representation of a particular disenfranchised group. Once out of the hospital, Camila will continue to be medicated and never demonstrates an autonomous agency that is legible or in accordance with a broader political agenda. In fact, Casamayor Cisneros claims that in *El pájaro*, “no hay críticas ni elogios, la burla es ingrátida, y todo es más bien un deslizarse por entre estructuras, ideologías, y políticas y culturas [...] Esta literatura no pertenece a nada ni a nadie. Se pierde en ella toda noción de grupo.”<sup>97</sup> While the observation is meant as a negative critique, considering this dissertation’s investment in exploring non-identitarian forms of community, I would argue that *El pájaro*’s belonging to nothing or no one, and its espousal of surviving over the

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<sup>94</sup> Camila is again referred to after her escape from the hospital as “nuestro animalejo” and “nuestro bichito,” *ibid.*, 128, 129.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 74. Later the narrator states Camila, “optará por vivir durante algún tiempo,” 246, and describes her as, “Muchacha viscosa hasta escalofrío, sobreviviente de prácticas brutales, radiaciones, anestias, en cuya pancita o sueño de razón se engendran monstruos,” 261. In keeping with the art historical references and allusions to visuality, in this quote Portela imbeds a reference to Francisco Goya’s 1799 engraving, “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos.” More to the point, this reference also shows how the work of author is not transcendent, but interdependent on a territory, in this case networks of literary and visual culture.

<sup>96</sup> Casamayor Cisneros, “Incertidumbre resplandeciente,” 190.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

fulfillment of a teleological project, is precisely where its political impact lies. In this last section, I will explore how Portela, in addition to deploying an aesthetic practice of impenetrability and impropriety, links creative production to a becoming-animal, as a means to challenge authority, dominant subject models, notions of autonomy, agency, and what it means to be *humano ciento por ciento*.

After having been read a short story—one written by Emilio U (sometimes double for Ena Lucía Portela)—Camila experiences a sense of wellbeing and the following day, to the “estupefacción” of Dr. Schilling, she regains control of her body.<sup>98</sup> Aesthetic pleasure, it would seem, provides the cure to Camila’s un-diagnosable medical ailment. However, even before she recovers from her paralysis, the narrator illustrates Camila’s capacity to creatively mediate the happenings at the hospital. From her outsider’s perspective, or “desde la puerta, su ángulo favorito,”<sup>99</sup> and her “a-normality”, Camila’s spectatorship transforms the cruel and banal events at the hospital into fantastical pieces. As noted above, her X-Rays become beautiful phantasmal portraits. Through Camila’s thoughts, her dramatic illusions, her visions, what happens in the hospital does so on a stage, “Y así por el estilo cada vez que aparecían en el escenario,” “teatro total,” “la tragedia,” “majestuosos espectros,” “proyectos.”<sup>100</sup> When she watches a 1993 telenovela, *Corazón salvaje*, with other patients, Camila does not distinguish between commercials or the plot of the soap opera, but considers what transpires on the television screen as one continuous dramatic

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<sup>98</sup> The story that Camila is read, from an anthology is she gifted at the hospital by Bibiana, is authored in the narrative by Emilio U and titled “La urna y el nombre: un cuento jovial.” The story is in fact written by Ena Lucía Portela. In her reading, Bolognese notes that Camila’s inexplicable recovery, “sin que haya una razón médica,” follows her having been read the story and is, therefore, indicative of Portela’s relating writing to life, or of writing providing the impetus to survive. “Escritura y cuerpo,” 53.

<sup>99</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 106.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

narrative. The doctor may be “todopoderoso,” but what Camila conjures imaginatively remains outside of his jurisdiction.<sup>101</sup> Her inability to perceive distinctions—be that between fiction and reality, or commercial and soap opera—or rather, her capacity to unrestrict her vision by conventional limits, has political implications. After the death of one of the patients,

Camila sintió curiosidad por el destino del cadáver, imagen ausente, y su fantasía voló en dirección a una siniestra cámara refrigerada, donde también habría jamones colgando del techo [...] <<Sería interesante si a la hora del almuerzo se confunden (o no, ¿quién sabe?) y nos sirven a los sobrevivientes un plato raro con forma de mano o de pie o de algo peor.>><sup>102</sup>

In Camila’s fantasy, where once again bodies hang, Portela prompts us to consider the indistinction between human flesh and animal meat and, consequently, between that which is protected, fed and nourished and that which is consumable, disposable, and sentenced to death.<sup>103</sup> Through curiosity, fantasy, and confusion, not only does the ordering of bodies into human and animal come into question, but also, necessarily, other forms of societal discrimination. Drawing from the discourse of biopolitics, Gabriel Giorgi reminds us that hierarchal binaries of race, sex, class, and gender, while commonly understood as cultural constructs, are projected upon the limit that marks *zoón politikón* from indistinguishable animal life, a limit assumed to be natural, but that in fact is constituted by aesthetics, by a way of seeing and organizing.<sup>104</sup> When Camila wonders if blacks or whites taste the same and speculates that blacks must be more nutritious since black slaves were more expensive

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>103</sup> Roberto Fabelo’s painting *Perla* discussed in chapter 2 also presents human bodies as edible meat. See also James Goebel, *French Journal of English Studies* 55 (2016).

<sup>104</sup> Giorgi, *Formas comunes*, 11-16. See also his third chapter, where Giorgi considers the trope of the *matadero* in Latin American literary works, and notes that more contemporary deployments of the *matadero* are used as a zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoe*.



than white ones,<sup>105</sup> Portela implicitly, if not ironically, demonstrates how structures of value and exclusion, disguised as rational and apolitical, are violently arbitrary—like a child taking apart a doll. Accordingly, the distinction between the living and the dead is also rendered cultural and political; Camila considers the contradictions of “una cultura que entierra a sus muertos y a veces, ¿por qué no?, también a sus vivos.”<sup>106</sup>

In her search for the elusive Emilio U, author of the short story read to her at the hospital, Camila attends a lecture at the university. Discussions on Lacan, Foucault, Neo-Barroquismo, and a series of other ideas and assumptions about modernist and postmodernist literary writers are mentioned; each dismissed in one way or another with irreverence by the narrator. It becomes impossible for the reader to identify a particular thought or tradition with which Portela might align herself. Meanwhile through Camila’s eyes the respected university professor is seen in the following way, “No usa pañuelo y el sudor le pega la camisa al cuerpo todo cubierto de pelos. Es un mamífero.”<sup>107</sup> And the content of his lecture becomes material for more interesting compositions:

Los garabatos y fórmulas que el orador <<inscribe>> en la pizarra semejan una composición informalista, cada vez más complicada, donde Camila de nuevo se propone descubrir cuerpos, latencias, enanos y sirenas de trapo que se escudan ahora tras la más citada de las frases, tanto así, que hasta yo la cito (ver en alguno de los capítulos anteriores), obra de un pe-pensador, un fi-filósofo, escuela de Viena. Ninguno de nosotros estuvo allí, ¿cómo creer en eso?, piensa ella y alguien susurra que Viena está de moda.<sup>108</sup>

The narrator may mock the orator’s stuttering, “un tartamudo rodeado de imbéciles,”<sup>109</sup> and dismiss those in attendance with their preoccupation for what is academically

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<sup>105</sup> Portela, *El pájaro*, 102.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

fashionable, but the narrator does not exclude him/herself from participating within this particular intellectual world, “hasta yo la cito.” Camila, as always, goes unnoticed in the lecture hall even when she faints and falls to the floor. She observes her surroundings, from the ground, littered with cigarette butts and even an albino roach; “desde su angulo singular, aunque no desconocido para ella,” the narrator notes.<sup>110</sup> But from her humiliating positions [*posiciones humillantes*], her obstructed perspectives, “[q]uizá la perspectiva no sea del todo buena, pues la sacerdotisa es bajita,”<sup>111</sup> she takes the formulas on the chalk board, abstractions and generalizations with an instructional function and (like Fabelo and Deleuze) changes the coordinates on this plane; she moves from a molar to a molecular perspective. Bodies, latencies, dwarfs, and mermaids made of rags are idiosyncratic, differentiating agencies that contaminate the authority of those citations so often deferred to.

Unlike people she speculates to be “incapaz de percibir la corriente de poesía que fluye de todas las cosas,”<sup>112</sup> Camila states, or so the narrator speculates,

<<Soy una diáspora, la visión final del estallido>>, diría Camila si en verdad tuviese algún interés en explicarse. <<Estoy disgregada, puedo representar diversos personajes cuando yo quiera [...] Cualquier apariencia de unidad, de sujeto coherente deducible de lo que digo, es falsa, es una ironía. [...] Me gusta escuchar, aprender, puedo devorarlo todo, mi estómago es infinito. No hay escape. Soy una diáspora, soy mis fragmentos.>><sup>113</sup>

Although Camila is never identified as a writer per se, her imagined ontology as a dispersed, fragmented, diasporic explosion, is certainly poetic, if not philosophical. Her perceptiveness of situations is later assimilated to that of the narrator’s, “(como la

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 157

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 156, 157.

sacerdotisa o el mismo narrador).<sup>114</sup> Fabián and Bibiana, by contrast, are clearly not writers: “Fabián no era escritor, sino personaje.”<sup>115</sup> Bibiana is imperceptive, unobservant, and incapable of expression, “[l]a modelo, daltónica para gentes, lugares y cosas, vagaba por el espectro sin distinguir entre sí los tonos complementarios,” “[l]os signos [son] ignorados por sus ojos de colores distintos,” “jamás hubiera conseguido expresarlo.”<sup>116</sup> “Ante los ojos de la sacerdotisa,” on the other hand, we get the most spectacular visions; “Camila [...] percibe ahora todos los detalles con nitidez anormal.”<sup>117</sup> On each of Bibiana’s fingernails painted with iridescent polish, Camila envisions mermaids, volcanoes, and figures from Bosch’s paintings.<sup>118</sup> She is also a captivating storyteller, and one that does so all the while “acariciando ella a la modelo y haciéndole estremecer por caminos que sabe de memoria.”<sup>119</sup> Camila’s audience demands “Dime, ¿qué pasó después?” and she considers “qué es realmente lo que ellos desean escuchar.”<sup>120</sup> Camila, as we’ve seen does not look for meaning, she does not believe in the transcendental, she does not try to understand the void, she is not motivated by dignity or heroics, she will not jeopardize her survival. She is by no means a model citizen, nor much less a political activist challenging the status quo. Camila scurries away. And yet through her creativity she continuously transforms her surroundings; she subverts and undermines authorial ways of seeing and understanding the world around her. Creative production here seems to always be linked with “un bicho raro” or “un puñetero mosquito.” The narrator states, “soy tímido, desmesurado (si lo

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 108, 109.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 107, 108.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 152, 153.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 119, 120.

prefieres, denso) y padezco de ansiedad. Me fascina figurar en mis inventos como las moscas en la comida vieja y los guajacones en el fanguito.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, creative production is not that which redeems and transcends mere material subsistence, but is imminent and interdependent, even parasitic, on a particular territory. Accordingly, the text itself or, rather, texts in general are a territory, a mud, from which meaning cannot be disaggregated. With regard to a Greek-Spanish dictionary, one passage reads “con palabras en forma de bichitos que significaban otras y otras palabras y así hasta el infinito, calzaba los papeles.”<sup>122</sup> So that the deferral that poststructuralism posits takes on here a materiality; alphabetic scripts are tiny bugs, proliferating pages upon pages from which meaning can never transcend, but only generates more insect-letters.

At the start of this chapter, in reference to the Chinese brush painting, I discussed how the calligrapher-artist was thought to suspend ordinary habits of mind and body in order that grace may be received, in order that an iteration of a character may reflect something un-imagined before. Interestingly, Portela’s narrator denies having grace: “Para lograrlo, sin embargo, es necesaria la gracia de un talento especial, una suerte de sanción divina que no me ha tocado, pues aquí estoy, cada día más aburrido de mí mismo.”<sup>123</sup> And with regards to the writer Emilio U, the narrator states,

del cachorro no desprovisto de talento que todavía no ha llegado a creerse [...] tocado por la gracia divina; escribía con el descaro del aprendiz que aún piensa el lector sin hacer de ello un manifiesto, que busca erizar y divertir al lector, colársele por debajo de la puerta como una tarjeta de Navidad, en lugar de mortificarlo con inhóspitas densidades u otras malevolencias por el estilo.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 97.

Recalling here Gregory Bateson's elaboration of artistic grace as a wisdom that recognizes interlocking circuits, a capacity for empathy—imagination unrestricted by identitarian limits—and the unselfconsciousness movements of an animal, I want to suggest that while Portela does not claim a divine grace, something immaterial and transcendent, what she does exhibit is an ecological grace. Her narrative style as a network, “una malla doble, triple y pegajosa, difícil de leer,” is certainly laborious and arguably inhospitable to her readers. Her constant shifts of narrative voice disabuse us of any notion of a coherent subjectivity, of our ability to penetrate the text. Instead, we must submit ourselves to the dispersed, fragmented, diasporic explosions, to the enveloping, sensuous and translucent silk of her textual embroidery. She looks to “erizar y divertir” in place of a manifesto, in place of a political project. The image of the writer slipping through the bottom of a door, [*colársele por debajo de la puerta*], brings us again to that horizontal animal, that insect small enough to crawl through a crack like an uninvited guest. The absence of a legible project does not foreclose, but only enhances the political potential and impact of Portela's text. In its impropriety, in its uneconomic verbosity, in its refusal to provide self-identifying subjects, and in its predilection for non-anthropocentric perspectives, *El pájaro* destabilizes dominant modes of seeing, knowing, and relating; it challenges the limits of what constitutes the political and prompts its readers to consider alternative forms of community.

### **Unproductive and De/composing Bodies**

Although Portela's novel takes place early in the 1990's, at the height of the Special Period, and makes references to power outages and characters stealing goods from stores

exclusively available to tourists—Bibiana steals baby socks and clothing for Camila—its main characters do not suffer from inadequate housing or material shortages. Camila is initially homeless due to her own reckless behavior (or so the narrator suggests) and later lives with Fabián who has inherited an apartment and receives funds from his family living abroad. Bibiana, through her modeling, has access to luxury apparel and opportunities to travel to cities like New York. In effect, their living conditions are not representative of the island at large and in this way Portela’s novel participates of the same un-belonging of her characters. Ponte’s novel, *La fiesta vigilada*, to which we now turn, by contrast is very much focused on the housing crisis and dire need for basic material goods everyday citizens endure. However, both writers share a particular attention to the vulnerability of the body, its entanglements with its surroundings, and a strong critique of dominant subject models, institutional power and a narrative of forward progress.

“Mea!”, llegué a gritarle viendo que se dormía en el inodoro. (Una tarde la arrinconé con una escoba del mismo modo que se trata a las ratas.) Las noches se iban en ese tango y al final era dulce escucharla orinar”; this Ponte’s narrator tells us about his maternal grandmother early in *La fiesta vigilada*.<sup>125</sup> Wedged between stories of literary enemies, the fall of the Soviet empire, the Eiffel Tower and a statue of John Lennon sitting on one of Havana’s park benches, we have the deteriorated body of an old senile woman, a body with the “consistency of a rag doll” [*consistencia de muñeca de trapo*].<sup>126</sup> In what turns out to be very infrequent in this novel, Ponte takes some eight uninterrupted pages to narrate an intimate and biographical story, a story, moreover, about incontinence and fragility.

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<sup>125</sup> Ponte, *La fiesta*, 31.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

As the first person narrator, the unnamed author recounts his suspension from the Cuban writer's union, UNEAC. With the loss of his civic identity, expelled from the "lettered city," he wanders through Havana's ruins like a "phantom".<sup>127</sup> And yet, the narrator rarely appears as a character in what would seem to be an autobiographical account.<sup>128</sup> With the exception of his voice and parenthetical digressions, he disappears for parts of the narration, as though exiled from his own text, or perhaps transformed into a ghost. The very idea of one's own proper text is called into question when we note the "novel" is composed of a series of retold movie plots, spy fiction, historical events, journalistic information, scholarly essays, topographies, and personal reflections. In short, *La fiesta* reads like a catalogue or a work of assemblage. Its pages are marked by an excessive use of parenthesis, as the narrator appears to slip in wherever he can, producing fissures and ruptures, parasitically. Novelistic conventions such as plot and character development—climactic and voyeuristic devices to lure its readers inside—are largely disused and, instead, Ponte draws his readers outside the text, situating *La fiesta* within a web of other archives, artifacts, and contexts. This is a text without a well-formed body, without a recognizable structure, and among the rubble of other stories, as I aim to demonstrate, we find a pulsating subterranean life, an insistence on corporeality, exposure, and survival.

Before taking a closer look at this life underneath, let's consider the following: The Cuban Revolution "domesticates time" [*doma el tiempo*], states Ponte's narrator; it institutionalizes "what was open adventure" [*lo que fuera aventura abierta*].<sup>129</sup> Shortly after

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 40-47.

<sup>128</sup> See Adriana Kanzepolsky, "¿Yo no soy el tema de mi libro? *La fiesta vigilada* de Antonio José Ponte," *Abehache*, año 1, no. 1-2, 2011, for a reading of how Ponte complicates the conventions of autobiography.

<sup>129</sup> Ponte, *La fiesta*, 120, 121.

the Revolution's triumph in 1959, leisure, laziness, festivity for the sake of festivity—otherwise considered “killing time while the fields of sugar cane needed cutting” [*mata(r) el tiempo en tanto los campos de caña de azúcar necesitaban macheteros*—became a criminal offence.<sup>130</sup> Unproductive expenditure, to use George Bataille's phrase, was closely surveilled and each year was inaugurated with a mission: “Year of Agrarian Reform,” “Year of Education,” “Year of Planning.” After exhausting specific missions, the years were simply commemorated as “Year Thirty of the Revolution”.<sup>131</sup> Cabarets and beaches were closed so time and energy could be spent not just on the fields but, especially, missiles and radars.<sup>132</sup> With the advent of the 1962 Missile Crisis, “La Habana fue declarada campo de guerra que duraría décadas,” eventually becoming “parque temático de la Guerra Fría.”<sup>133</sup> According to our narrator, the revolutionary project was totalizing and, consequently, exclusionary. Invoking Fidel's famous 1961 speech to intellectuals, he writes, “Dentro la revolución, todo. Pero ¿quién conseguía estar adentro?”<sup>134</sup> The all-inclusiveness of Castro's original phrase, “Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada,” produces a grammar where what is not recognized as contributing to the aims of the Revolution is deemed valueless, “nada,” and therefore disposable. Put otherwise, its all-or-nothing logic demanded absolute devotion.

Citing the protagonist from Graham Greene's novel *Our Man in Havana*, the narrator states, “a Wormold tocaba cierta epifanía frente al apocalipsis: <<los crueles vienen y van

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 66, 126.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 66, 67.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 122.



como las ciudades y los tronos y los poderes, dejando detrás de sí sus ruinas. >>”<sup>135</sup> While the threat of the Missile Crisis in the form of spectacular nuclear bombs never came to be realized, its promise of ruins did in a politics of perpetual antagonisms and slow violence.<sup>136</sup> Wormold’s epiphany, regarding the powerful and what they leave behind, might be likened to what Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux theorize in their book, *Disposable Futures*. Following Zygmunt Bauman, they write:

Rather than seeing waste as politically useless, Bauman affirms that the production of wasted lives shores up the productivity of the whole system, as the very idea of progress requires the setting aside of those who don’t or are unable to perform in a way that would appear meaningful. Criminalization [...] performs a vital task by providing scapegoats [...] such scapegoats offer an “easy target for unloading anxieties prompted by the widespread fears of social redundancy.” [...] [T]he incessant drive to progress justifies a form of societal assay that allows for the casting aside of people [for] their own failure to have resources worth extracting.”<sup>137</sup>

Although Evans and Giroux’s analysis are largely based in contemporary capitalist economies, Cuba’s 1971 law against vagrancy and its 1960’s labor camps, *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción*, designed to rehabilitate homosexuals, religious believers, and those deemed anti-social are examples of this criminalization and casting

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>136</sup> “Jean Paul Sartre no se equivocó al conjeturar que, de no existir los Estados Unidos de América, la revolución cubana se los habría inventado. La proximidad norteamericana (proximidad que es peligro) es incesantemente recordada en las alocuciones revolucionarias. Y, para un pensamiento así, La Habana es menos ciudad viva que paisaje de legitimación política,” 204.

See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 2011). Within the context of Cuba we can point to the debilitating economic constraints imposed by the US embargo and (as per Ponte) the Cuban State’s willful neglect to improve living conditions as forms of unspectacular violence. As we’ll see further ahead, Ponte’s account is also a testament to processes of social death in the form of criminalization, expulsion, and censorship. The above quote speaks to a politics of clearly defined antagonists; such a binary distinction (recalling here Castro’s 1971 quote) produces a context of vigilance and policing.

<sup>137</sup> Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015), 45, 46.

aside.<sup>138</sup> Adding to Evans and Giroux’s insights on the production of wasted lives, it is useful to recall Bataille’s ecological theorization of excess energy in his work *The Accursed Share*. Observing that living organisms ordinarily receive “more energy than is necessary for maintaining life,” he argues that this excess should be spent luxuriously and unproductively; otherwise, the outcome will be catastrophic.<sup>139</sup> Material resources, in turn, exceed whatever instrumental work we might assign to them. Bataille writes, “Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters (a resolution which it has hastily had to define as an ideal), it assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have.”<sup>140</sup> To prevent a destructive and ruinous outpouring of energy, Bataille calls for a “general economy”—where transactions are considered within a larger framework that allows for expenditure without gain—against the instrumentality and productiveness of a “restricted economy.” In other words, the “erotic” aesthetic the bureaucrat in *La fiesta* complains against (cited in the introduction)<sup>141</sup> and the unpurposive festivities the state aimed to prohibit are not only “inescapable” according to Bataille, but serve an ethical function, allowing for a dissipation of energy before it manifests itself violently.<sup>142</sup> As though expressing this inevitable dissipation, in one of the novel’s parenthetical, sardonic, asides, we read that in 1971,

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<sup>138</sup> Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal’s documentary, *Conducta impropia*, (France: Eagles Editorial, 1984, 2008).

<sup>139</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volume I*, Translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 21.

<sup>140</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 21.

<sup>141</sup> See note #6 of this chapter.

<sup>142</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 25, 26.

assigned "The Year of Productivity," "En el país había más parásitos y gente ociosa que en toda la novelística rusa del siglo XIX."<sup>143</sup>

The casting aside of people that Evans and Giroux observe is operative in *La fiesta* in various ways. Following the verbal news of his suspension from the writers' union, the narrator is unable to recover any documents that would evidence his expulsion and censorship: "Mi etapa de fantasma comenzaba sin prueba alguna. [...] La orden, el documento oficial, el papel, no existía."<sup>144</sup> Juxtaposed to passages on the erasure of political identity and "civil death"<sup>145</sup>, Ponte narrates intimate, banal, and pathetic scenes in an imperturbable manner. In a less obvious instance of casting away, we learn about the decision to place his grandmother in a state asylum. "Encerrada cuando ya no cabía educación para ella, cuando no podía adaptarse a nada nuevo."<sup>146</sup> At the asylum:

Las deposiciones eran limpiadas al amanecer, el día comenzaba con el baño de los cuerpos y la hervidura de la ropa de cama. (Imagino los racimos de cuerpos en la desesperación del insomnio, el orine desparramándose por la explanada de aquellas camas unidas, el hedor de las viejas.) Y en una de sus visitas mi mamá encontró marcas de golpes en la piel de su mamá.<sup>147</sup>

In depicting the indignity these incapacitated figures endure, in choosing the word "bodies" instead of "individuals," and in occupying the foreground of the narrative with biological needs, Ponte underscores a bare life. Whereas the discursive boundaries of civic and national identities are considered stable markers of differentiation, immune to changing environments, bodies, as illustrated here, are exposed, contagious, and vulnerable, always in relation to and, at times, indistinguishable from other bodies. The narrator and his

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<sup>143</sup> Ponte, *La fiesta*, 127.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, 31.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

mother eventually bring the grandmother back home. Under institutional care she had ultimately been abandoned, exposed to violence and theft.<sup>148</sup> Through her bruised skin and defenseless body, unable to even shout, [*no alcanza a la defensa ni al grito*],<sup>149</sup> Ponte conveys an image of absolute dependence.

This foregrounding of corporeality is consistent throughout the text. We are reminded that like the leather produced from a cow's skin, the skin of a man also serves to line material goods: "La historia podría ser tan cíclica y terrible como lo aseguraban la cigarrera forrada de piel humana."<sup>150</sup> And yet the narrator notes that in particular historical accounts "algo más de fondo parecía existir [...] Notas de color [...] frases al parecer inesenciales."<sup>151</sup> The city itself is described as a mortal body: "tantos cortes como cicatrices puedan contener los antebrazos de un suicida obsesionado con la idea de acercarse cada vez más al final."<sup>152</sup> "La capital cubana se anima a implosión, late en sístole y sístole."<sup>153</sup> "[L]as ruinas son arquitectura torturada."<sup>154</sup> And with respect to the pages of a text whose errors were marked in red, the narrator tells us it appeared to have "blood ink" [*tinta en sangre*].<sup>155</sup> With this sample of citations, I mean to underscore an insistence on a shared and irreducible corporeality, be that between humans, animals, buildings, and the pages of a text. Ponte, furthermore, animates through this enfleshment what would otherwise be considered inert material sources, or simply a repository of history with no vitality of its own. We might consider the "notes of color" and "inessential phrases" the

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 65, 66.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

narrator points to, as that which cannot be subsumed, made a work of, or used as a means to an end. Against the Revolution's taming of time and its narrative of futurity, "something more underneath appeared to exist." I want to note, a shared corporeality, in contrast to an identity, is necessarily improper, it belongs to no one; the phrases "my body," "my text," "my city" could never fully encompass their referents. Accordingly, to treat a shared corporeality, or a cosubstantiality, in an instrumental and compartmentalized manner, as though it was distinct and reducible to a property, will have destructive consequences.<sup>156</sup>

In the novel's depiction of the Revolution's handling of prostitution and gambling we see the negative impacts of treating something in an isolated manner. Ponte illustrates how the state's mission to exterminate what it perceived as immoral and decadent failed to recognize a larger system, an ecology of which slot machines and pimps are only some of its perceptible effects. Instead of addressing poverty and unemployment, cabarets and casinos were closed leaving sex workers and gamblers to find more illicit and precarious venues.<sup>157</sup> During the Special Period, prostitution as a mode of survival returned with a vengeance. Curiously, Ponte describes it as an almost inoperative economy, or one whose transactions cannot be measured by monetary gain. Willing to work in exchange for the pleasure of a cold beer, the comfort of a couch, or the simulation of personal affect confused the distinctions between necessity and desire.<sup>158</sup> Alternatively, the inefficiency of this prostitution according to a restricted economy, the unproductive expenditure in the

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<sup>156</sup> On the destructiveness of compartmentalization and mere purposive rationality see Gregory Bateson, *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1972, 1982), 119, cited in Chapter 2. For the concepts *cosubstantial* and *enfleshment* see Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>157</sup> Ponte, *La fiesta*, 81.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

fulfillment of a desire for a cold beer, might be considered an inescapable, and necessary, outpouring of excess energy. Resources, as Bataille argues, cannot be reduced to the ends we assign them.

## **Inhabited Ruins**

The distinctions between what is proper and improper, or private and public, are further obscured when we consider the inhabited ruins.<sup>159</sup> The collapse between interiority and exteriority, as facades crumble, makes it difficult to determine the boundaries of these buildings. Their porosity and precariousness intensifies their relationship with their surroundings. And just as a body harbors other organisms like bacteria and microbes, the ruins are described as inhabited by parasitic dwellers. Ponte observes that while Havana does not expand its vertical or horizontal limits, the city grows from the inside.<sup>160</sup> With the migration of easterners to the capital, expanding families, a housing shortage, and the collapse of other buildings, Havana's inhabitants or dwellers [*moradores*] build walls, divisions, and lofts within existing structures. Notably, Ponte hardly, if ever, uses the word residents or individuals, heightening the image of the city as a habitat and eco-system. The proliferating smaller spaces are often described as corners, hideouts, or closets [*rincón, covacha*].<sup>161</sup> Even rooftops are converted into tiny rooms for which "one didn't know if it was humans or pigeons that should be accredited" [*no se sabría si adjudicar a humanos o palomas*].<sup>162</sup> While these inhabitants carve out spaces for themselves within these structures, chipping away at the buildings' foundations, they are also the ones to

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 167, 168.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

consistently repair its damaged roofs, patch surfaces, and drain rainwater.<sup>163</sup> In this continuous process of damaging and repairing, the inhabitants appear as integral parts of the buildings; they both animate the buildings and are a source of its destruction.<sup>164</sup>

Citing a Spanish essayist on the stages of ruination the narrator writes, “Durante el último acto aparecían los vegetales carroñeros. ‘No hay ruina sin vida vegetal; sin yedra, musgo o jaramago que brote en la rendija de la piedra, confundida con el lagarto, como un delirio de la vida que nace de la muerte,’ determinó María Zambrano.”<sup>165</sup> The cyclical link between “life” and “death,” the emergence of vegetation from within a crack, and the assimilation of its greenery to that of a reptile is, perhaps, a classic image of the persistence and indistinction of “nature.” What is not however classic is the assimilation of human reproduction, or filial expansion, to that of proliferating plant life: “Lo vegetal [...] comienza por un árbol dentro de la casa, el genalógico.”<sup>166</sup> In the poetics of this novel, human figures often cross into a zone of biological organisms, exhibiting qualities of rodents, insects and even algae. The inhabitants of ruins are described as “scurrying” [*escabullían*].<sup>167</sup> At another point, they emerge from a power outage drawn to the bright windows of a hotel, like moths to a light. And these illuminated panes of glass appear as “fish tanks” in the dark of night [*la gente [...] emergía del apagón para acercarse a esas peceras*].<sup>168</sup> In a passage

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 174. In addition to the novel, these processes and relationships are the subject of Ponte’s short story, “Un arte de hacer ruinas,” *Un arte de hacer ruinas y otros cuentos*, edited by Esther Whitfield (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005). See Florian Borchmeyer’s 2006 documentary, *Arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*, which features Ponte. See also Whitfield’s description of *solares* in texts by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, where she describes them as “animated” by their inhabitants, *Cuban Currency*, 106.

<sup>165</sup> Ponte, *La fiesta*, 164.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 72.

referring to the state's response to an epidemic we read, "En vista de que las fumigaciones volvían irrespirable el interior de los domicilios, también nosotros, moradores, salíamos a la calle."<sup>169</sup> With that "también nosotros," Ponte's narrator implicitly situates himself and his neighbors alongside that which needed to be disinfected and purged; as part of the same environment they are also vulnerable to the fumes. In a phrase that expresses the height of abjection, we read: "los albergues estatales guardan una capa humana tan legamosa como lo que cubre las aguas estancadas."<sup>170</sup>

People are not the only ones to adopt other ontologies. In the rapid deterioration of buildings in Cuba, we can observe processes of change in materials conventionally perceived as solid and stable. As suggested in the section on corporeality, materials in *La fiesta* are charged with a vitality of their own. In Ponte's grammar, objects, such as a potted plant, a fan, or the Eiffel Tower, occupy the position of subject; they are agents of action.<sup>171</sup> The presumably inanimate are also depicted as the recipients of emotional injuries: "he insulted her" [la insultó], the pronoun her standing in for the Eiffel Tower.<sup>172</sup> In the following passage we see how an architectural structure fought with its last breath to stay alive, so to speak:

[E]l antiguo hotel Pasaje resistió el desequilibrio que le causaran. La vida pareció continuar igual que siempre por una noche y la mitad de una mañana. Hasta que la estructura no pudo más, lanzó un silbido, un chorro de polvo al cielo, y se vino abajo.<sup>173</sup>

That particles of dust should produce a stream [*un chorro de polvo*], transforming solid into liquid matter, is another example of how Ponte's poetics unsettle ontological categories.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 175,

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 28, 91, 15.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 161.



Illustrating the complex and delicate networks of which this structure is a part, heightened in its precarious state, the narrator surmises, in his characteristic parenthetical asides, “(El colmo pudo ser el cierre de una puerta, alguien que cerraba un refrigerador luego de servirse agua).”<sup>174</sup> The seemingly inconsequential and unselfconscious act of closing the refrigerator door has monumental affects, like the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.

Recalling George Simmel’s writings on ruins, the narrator explains that the German philosopher found inhabited ruins disquieting and blamed its inhabitants for abetting nature, a force they should have banded against.<sup>175</sup> For Simmel, ruins—that is, those not too demolished that their original form is imperceptible, and certainly not ones with people living in them—afforded the contemplation of nature’s vengeance over culture’s transcendental spirit. But to appreciate this dialectical relationship, these two antagonizing forces must remain distinct. The inhabitants of ruins, complicit with nature, collapse this distinction; “traicionaban a los hombres y demostraban cuán poca alma tenían.”<sup>176</sup> What, then, might be gained or revealed from a sustained attention to Havana’s ruins, a zone of indistinction, and abject living conditions?

As a self-identified ruinologist, Ponte’s narrator expresses ambivalence towards his trade. He acknowledges that in representing Havana’s ruins, in perpetuating this particular trope, he, inadvertently, not only contributes to an on-going process of the city’s museumification and its image as a Cold War theme park, but also supports the state’s

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

narrative of a permanent state of emergency.<sup>177</sup> However, as Whitfield demonstrates in her reading of *La fiesta* and other works by Ponte, these ruins in their very persistence are also for him a source of hope. She explains,

For Simmel, the people whom he saw living in Roman ruins were unambiguously agents of those ruins' destruction, parasites who could only weaken their host's structure and power to charm. Their very presence broke the spell of silence that surrounds a ruin proving them to be complicit with, as Ponte puts it, "one of the two adversaries," the one charged with destruction. [...] [T]he squatters had to be nature's accomplices. And yet, to what Simmel laments as the dilapidation of an aesthetic affect, Ponte opposes a hope that the buildings, and hence the life within them, will remain standing against the odds. [...] Rather than mere accomplices in the destruction of their dwellings, Ponte suggests, might not these survivors be double agents, in the service of both decay and hope?<sup>178</sup>

The imagined dichotomy that Simmel wants to guard between nature and culture buttresses the notion of human exceptionalism and its teleological projects. These modernizing and utopic projects, let us remember, have roots in Enlightenment rubrics and have relied on an instrumental and compartmentalizing logic to justify processes of exploitation and casting aside.<sup>179</sup> I want to suggest that in breaking the spell, in obstructing the distanced contemplation of "culture" and "nature," the inhabited ruins do *not* allow us to disavow a shared materiality with our environment; the inhabited ruins make evident that we are always in a relationship of interdependence.

While Ponte is certainly invested in exposing a system of censorship and social death—a mode of disposing those considered unproductive to the Revolution's ends—we have seen that intertwined with texts, buildings, and the city (all of which are associated with intelligent, discursive life), is the corporeal, the material, and the indistinguishable. In

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 205-239.

<sup>178</sup> Whitfield, *Cuban Currency*, 144.

<sup>179</sup> Symptomatic of this compartmentalizing logic, we might recall, in addition to the 1960's forced labor camps (UMAPS), the Cuban state's involuntary quarantines for those infected with HIV in the 1980's.

illustrating the simultaneity of being a political phantom, or politically “dead,” and being corporeally “alive,” the text draws our attention to the persistence of life underneath (or *zoē*), that which modernizing projects have strived to domesticate through “scientific education,” “culture,” and “progress.” Following Whitfield, it is the very parasitic ability of the dwellers to survive that gives Ponte hope and not, I would add, a reclaiming of national identity or the exhibition of heroic sacrifices.

As I noted earlier, *La fiesta vigilada* does not provide us with a cohesive structure that would constitute a recognizable literary work. In appropriating other novels, essays, films and historical events, assembled with seemingly insignificant accounts of invisible lives, Ponte, not unlike the inhabitants of ruins, expresses a symbiotic relationship; he destroys as he constructs, eating away at the integrity of other structures. The novel’s lack of biographical information and the space allotted to summaries of other narratives, reiterates a sense of impropriety. Inserting digressions and personal reflections between parentheses, the narrator appears to burrow spaces in a structure of which he does not belong. In effect, he produces and inhabits a ruin at the level of the writing. Where one might expect for Ponte to insist on an enduring humanism or the recovery of his civic identity through an edifying work of literature, he, instead, adopts the very techniques of the parasitic dwellers. On the last page of the novel, referring to a museum’s guest book, the narrator claims, “I managed to *scurry* away with out writing anything in it” [*logré escabullirme sin escribir nada en él*].<sup>180</sup> Such scurrying and slipping away recall Fabelo’s roaches on the exterior walls of the Museo Nacional. In place of leaving a legacy, his name for posterity, Ponte’s narrator, like the parasitic dwellers, opts for survival. And in the same

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<sup>180</sup> Ponte, *La fiesta*, 239.

way his narrative strategies emulate their parasitic practices, we might consider the dwellers, in turn, as anonymous writers, who leave their traces and recreate the city from within.<sup>181</sup> Ponte's text is no doubt aimed at exposing "dehumanizing" living conditions, but rather than appeal to a transcendental spirit he elevates the less-than-human, the discarded and the useless.

### Talking Trash

In her reading of Pedro Juan Gutierrez's novels, Whitfield explains how Havana's residential quarters appear as "habitats" animated by the "human beings" who live in them.<sup>182</sup> Returning again to Jane Bennett, I would like to suggest that in *La fiesta vigilada*, Ponte allows us to imagine an ecology where buildings are not simply animated by humans but by their very own "vibrant matter." Indeed, as we have seen, objects in the text are often depicted as having agency and a capacity to feel. In her book, *Vibrant Matter* Bennett aims "to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance," and argues, "vibrant matter is *not* the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God."<sup>183</sup> Echoing Bataille's theory of excess energy and material resources, she observes an "impersonal affectivity" of things that is irreducible to their instrumentality. Her book challenges anthropocentrism and calls for an attentiveness to "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities,

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<sup>181</sup> I want to thank George Allen for prompting me to consider the relationship between writing and the dwellers of the ruins.

<sup>182</sup> Whitfield, *Cuban Currency*, 106, 107.

<sup>183</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), xiii. Also discussed in Chapter 1, section "Vibrant Corpse."

or tendencies of their own.”<sup>184</sup> Early in her text, Bennett describes an encounter with some debris—a dead rat, a white bottle cap, a black plastic glove, and a piece of wood—in the following way:

[T]hese items shimmered back and forth between debris and [...] stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. [...] [The] stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me.<sup>185</sup>

Ponte offers us a similar scene in *La fiesta vigilada*. Following an epidemic that broke out in a neighborhood due to standing water, there was an official campaign to “throw out all that was useless from homes”; consequently, “accumulated junk started to float outside” [ *echar fuera de casa todo lo inservible y comenzaban a salir a flote los tarcos acumulados*].<sup>186</sup>

Expressing an affective attachment towards this junk, as well as a parallel between the inhabitants and the discarded, we read “Costaba dar adiós... nos amarraba a desechos.”<sup>187</sup>

The passage continues:

Un cascarón de huevo, una linterna rota, la suela despegada de un zapato: si en vida útil nos habían servido, deberían acompañarnos como restos.[...] Los almacenes de la calle Murralla vomitaban bienes. [...] Bernaza amanecía alfombrada de fichas de un juego de mesa que nunca llegó a imponerse, suerte de trivial materialismo dialecto. (El viento barajaba ahora las fichas.) [...]

“Entonces todas las cosas desechadas que callan durante el día hallaron voces,” escribió Lord Dunsay. Cada uno a su turno, en una de sus historias hablaban los artículos de un basurero:

- a) un corcho crecido en los bosques de Andalucía,
- b) un fosforo incólume,
- c) una tetera vieja y rota que se decía amiga de las ciudades,
- d) un pedazo de cuerda maldita desde el origen (<<Fui hecha en un lugar de condena, y condenados tejieron mis fibras en un trabajo

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<sup>184</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>186</sup> Ponte, *La fiesta*, 145.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

sin esperanza. De entonces me quedó la mugre del ocio en el corazón>><sup>188</sup>

In Ponte's characteristic anthropomorphization, the stores "vomited" the material goods and fibers of a rope have a heart; these fibers, moreover, carry the sentiments of those who made them, "the filth of leisure." Arguably, Ponte is using a literary, allegorical device; however, we should note another theme of the novel: "miraculous static" [*estática milagrosa*]. As a term deployed by "experts" to account for buildings that remained upright against all knowledge of physics,<sup>189</sup> "miraculous static" is perhaps, in its mystery to human understanding, akin to "vibrant matter." With this inventory of random objects occupying space in the text and their becoming "remains," or auratic relics, in their very uselessness, Ponte illustrates, like Bataille and Bennett, how material resources exceed the utilitarian ends and even cultural meanings we ascribe to them. Ponte also shows how the "useless" does not go away. It floats on to the street. That which has been deemed trash has a power and affectivity of its own and continues to be a part of our environment. Tellingly, the narrator refers to the shuffled game cards as a "trivial material dialectic." Let us recall, historical materialism aims to demystify the fetishistic power of man-made things. Bennett, by contrast, proposes cultivating "a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—[...] to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought."<sup>190</sup> Bennett's vital materialism and ecological thinking upends the logic that would justify the sacrifice of the "useless" for instrumental ends.

### Stone versus Paper

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>190</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

At the end of chapter two with regard to Fabelo's installation of roaches, I made recourse to the sculptural murals of Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos in the Plaza de la Revolución. Returning now to the steel outlines of Camilo's and Che's handsome faces, monumentalized for all the city to see, we find the archetypes of a national identity. Interestingly, in her analysis of different aesthetic strategies, Natalia Brizuela notes "nation-building narratives that are themselves based on structures of exclusion, differentiation, and value of particular kinds of ideological identification are enacted through the language and the pathos of the face."<sup>191</sup> The ideological identification, as elaborated in Che's writing, is one of heroism and sacrifice for a providential future.<sup>192</sup> Such calls to sacrifice have at times manifested in the criminalization and disposability of those who did not correspond to the model of a morally and physically incorruptible New Man.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, the historical narrative that is invoked in the memorialization of the Revolution's martyrs, is one of sovereignty and human exceptionalism; it is a history grounded on a dialectical logic of clear antagonists, perhaps best epitomized by Cold War politics.

Roberto Fabelo's installation, on the other hand, presents us not with recognizable, historic figures, but with a swarm of roach-men. The hybridity of these creatures evokes a planetary threat, exceeding the discursive limits of the nation state and a politics of adversaries. Fabelo's statement that the piece is a "reference to today's world" alludes not

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<sup>191</sup> Natalia Brizuela, "Sense of Place: Paz Encina's Radical Poetics." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2017, 62.

<sup>192</sup> See note #30 of this chapter.

<sup>193</sup> See Mirta Suquet Martínez's dissertation chapter, "De testimonios y de reos: biopolítica y revolución. el seropositivo cubano," (2015) where she explains how Cuban Revolution's strong public health policy (and its corresponding moral codes) manifested itself in the medicalization of the New Man as an immune man, 303. <http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/383016> and the documentary *Improper Conduct*.

only to the psychic effects this future catastrophe has on the present moment, but also the material deprivation that such a threat generated. The Special Period in Time of Peace, as Ponte has argued in *La fiesta*, inaugurated a state of exception that demanded from its citizens extraordinary measures in order to survive. While the threat of nuclear war posed by the Missile Crisis did not come to fruition, Havana still bears its wounds and is, at present, surviving. Fabelo and Ponte thus complicate a linear temporality and counter the futurity of the state's rhetoric of sacrifice.

Like Fabelo's roaches, in Ponte's depiction of Havana's inhabited ruins—buildings whose facades (or faces) have crumbled away, exposing delicate networks—we do not find individual heroic figures, but a swarm of survivors. The anonymity of the ruin's dwellers, who leave their traces and recreate the city from within, who work for the pleasure of a cold beer with no consciousness of economy, might be said to *escribir* rather than *inscribir*.

## **Conclusion**

Portela's and Ponte's narrators are not "authors" or "historical agents" of their own accounts; they borrow, steal, and appropriate other texts, they inhabit bodies and spaces like unwelcome guests, they slip in and scurry away. Their *exscribing* leaves traces, but never a name or a legacy inscribed in stone. What I find most generative about both their texts is that art, literature, philosophical thought are imagined as forms of becoming-animal, as interdependent on a particular territory. These two writers elaborate tangled ecologies both on the level of their writing and representation. Against the national subject model of the Revolution as morally righteous, incorruptible, heroic and self-sacrificing, Ponte's and Portela's protagonists are vulnerable and motivated by survival. And it is in



surviving, in becoming-parasitic, that creative resourcefulness, creative transformation and minor, if invisible, forms of rebellion occur.

Ponte's and Portela's ambivalence towards non-human becomings, or "células rebeldes," lead us to consider the critical question how a literary or visual piece might do the work of protesting "inhuman" or "dehumanizing" conditions while not appealing to a transcendental humanism or resorting to the discourse of human rights. Through the language of their poetics, we are brought to imagine forms of relations that bypass and exceed conventional ontological markers; we are brought to imagine the material as having its own transformative potential outside of human agency. Given these dynamic relations, such thinking necessarily acknowledges the impossibility of mastery or of knowing absolutely. The corporeal vulnerability foregrounded in *La fiesta vigilada* and *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* undermines the presumptions of human sovereignty and calls attention to our communal interdependence, while the impropriety of their texts and the unbelonging of their characters insists on the impossibility of possessing *limpiamente*.

## Chapter 4

“The Body Politic and Immunitary Spaces: Hospitality and Friendship in *Fresa y chocolate*”

### Introduction

In the preceding chapters the focus has been on aesthetic strategies of opacity and impenetrability, rendering the identification of subjects, symbolic decoding, or the reproduction of a cohesive, linear narrative difficult, if not impossible. Antonio José Ponte and Ena Lucía Portela, as we saw in chapter three, largely forego conventions of plot and character development. The bodies of their novels are fragmentary, at times disjointed, assembled from other cultural works like prosthetic limbs or parasitic appropriations. Barring its readers entry through dense intersecting narratives threads, Portela’s and Ponte’s texts might be charged with inhospitality. Indeed, if the conventions of hospitality require an immunitary space of which the host is master,<sup>1</sup> hospitality in the context of Ponte’s inhabited ruins is then impossible, since the distinctions between what is proper and improper, or private and public, are obscured. With the crumbling of facades, the boundaries between interiority and exteriority collapse. In Portela’s novel, conventional hospitality is also foreclosed, as no space appears to be impervious to contamination, or the arrival of an uninvited guest that slips through under the door.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the film this next chapter examines would seem to offer its audience full, transparent access. The wide appeal and commercial success of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Recall the passage of cited from Ena Lucía Portela, *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china*, (Barcelona: Editorial Casiopea, S.L., 1998), 97, in the section “Inhuman Writings,” of chapter 3, where the writer is imagined to slip under the door like a Christmas card, as well as allusions to the unvaccinated body of Camila, and of writing operating as something that contaminates.

1993 film, *Fresa y chocolate*, is in part due to its adoption of the popular genre of melodrama. With clear protagonists and antagonists and an unambiguous plot, the producers of this film are no doubt hospitable to its audience. In fact, the paradigms of hospitality and friendship provide useful frameworks with which to analyze the film's narrative. Staged predominantly in a character's home, the drama of the film unfolds in the development of the unlikely friendship between a homophobic, militant communist and a gay, suspected counter-revolutionary. As such, *Fresa y chocolate* responds to the call of incorporating those who had been excluded by the Cuban Revolution, specifically its gay citizens. Its gay protagonist, Diego, is a sympathetic character, made consumable to a large audience and allegorically assimilated to the revolution's narrative.

While my readings of other texts and images have worked to undo the metaphorical use of the body, especially as a discrete organism, in turning to *Fresa y chocolate*, I also now turn to the trope of the body politic and its implications of interiority. Doing so allows me to complicate the imagined unity of the nation or that of a shared identity and its attendant politics of assimilation, incorporation, and consumption. Drawing from Roberto Esposito's conceptualization of "immunitas,"<sup>3</sup> as both a political and biological structure that includes by excluding and visa versa, I consider the dynamics of friendship and hospitality in the film through a corporeal and ecological lens, once again bringing to foreground relationships of interdependence, as well as fluid subjectivities.

In his text *Of Hospitality*, Derrida demonstrates how the lines between host and guest, hostage and hostile intruder are easily crossed. We see this in *El pájaro: pincel y tinta*

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<sup>3</sup> In its biological and political signification, the term refers to the aporetic structure in which "[t]he body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body." Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity, 2002, 2014) 8.

*china* when Fabián as “master” of the home rapes and tortures his guest Camila. Although states of porosity and precariousness are heightened in Portela’s and Ponte’s novels, these conditions are not exclusive to their particular contexts but always present, albeit by different degrees, in conventional modes of hospitality. In opening one’s home to the foreigner that space is no longer impervious. And were one to abide by the law of absolute hospitality, as Derrida argues, the host is in a relationship of unconditional obligation to the guest, paradoxically rendering the host hostage and collapsing the roles between host and guest.<sup>4</sup> While the larger narrative of *Fresa y chocolate* advocates for a politics of incorporation, paying close attention to expressions of vulnerability, dissymmetry, and irreducible difference, I aim to show how the film unworks the notion of community as a sovereign body made up of equal parts, and gestures towards an ethics of hospitality that demands risk, discomfort and becoming Other. Betrayals and disguised intentions between the two friends place them in danger of political persecution and exclusion from their respective communities. In my reading of *Fresa y chocolate*, the insecurity that hospitality and friendship necessarily entails provides a means for an extra-institutional and non-official ethico-political practice.

### ***Supermachos and Melodrama***

“¿Por qué tú eres así?” The question upsets; it is taken offensively, as a rejection of his lifestyle. It is his friend and guest that poses the question and later follows it with an accusation: “tú no eres revolucionario.” In this scene from *Fresa y chocolate* the disdain the militant student, David, expresses towards the effeminate mannerisms, or “monerías”, of

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<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 25.

his friend Diego, in part reflects a historical machismo inherited from the Spanish and cultivated in Cuban national identity formation since the late eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> However, for the interests of this chapter, I would like to point to another source of intolerance towards the feminine and accentuated gestures that Diego so emphatically exhibits from the start of the film. While many have looked to Cuba's post revolutionary militarization as a cause of its hyper-masculinity,<sup>6</sup> I would add, alongside critics such as José Quiroga, that the figure of the homosexual presents an unassimilable excess to the ends of totalizing nation-building.<sup>7</sup> With the revolution's promise of "El Hombre Nuevo," the birth of a new generation whose sense of civic obligation would surpass the pursuit of pleasure,<sup>8</sup> where would non-reproductive sexual behavior fit within the telos of this utopic project? If the institutionalized discrimination of gays served as a means to persecute political dissidents, designating their conduct as improper or counter revolutionary,<sup>9</sup> I suggest that in associating the figure of the homosexual with decadence, spectacle and extravagance—as indicated by the laws designed to persecute them, e.g. "Ley contra la extravaganza" and "Ley contra la vagancia"<sup>10</sup>—this figure represents an unproductive

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<sup>5</sup> Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Susan Sontag discuss the roots of homophobia in Cuba in Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal's documentary, *Conducta impropia*, (France: Eagles Editorial, 1984, 2008). See also Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "'Mariconerías' de estado: Mariela Castro, los homosexuales, y la política cubana," in *Nueva Sociedad*. N. 218 noviembre-diciembre (2008), 168.

<sup>6</sup> Sontag, *Conducta impropia* and Negrón-Muntaner, "'Mariconerías,'" 168.

<sup>7</sup> In his book, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), José Quiroga writes that the body of the homosexual "stands for an excess of signification" in Post-Cold war Cuba, 124.

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto "Che" Guevara, "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba," cited in Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé, "Lecciones de cubanía: identidad nacional y errancia sexual en Senel Paz, Martí y Lezama Lima." *Cuban Studies* 29, (1999), 133.

<sup>9</sup> *Conducta impropia*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

expenditure,<sup>11</sup> a certain baroque aesthetic that is antithetical to the aims of monolithic communal projects—especially one that had become increasingly Sovietized<sup>12</sup>—and the establishment of a national subject. This becomes all the more evident when we consider that the 1960’s labor camps designed to rehabilitate homosexuals, religious believers, and those deemed anti-social was called *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción*.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the effort of making the figure of the homosexual a productive member of the community through forced labor and later attempts to incorporate this figure within the national narrative through representations, such as *Fresa y chocolate*, are symptomatic of reading non-heteronormative modalities of sexuality in excess to national unity. The confinement of gay citizens within the UMAPs not only implied they were unproductive, but also a contaminant to society. The medical discourse that circulated within the camps pathologized homosexuality as an incurable disease and societal reintegration was sought through the disciplining of “ostentatious” behavior, rules of comportment, and quota requirements.<sup>14</sup> *Fresa y chocolate’s* deployment of the codified and accessible genre of melodrama, might be seen as another form of disciplining the figure of the homosexual,

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<sup>11</sup> In his text "The Accursed Share, Volume I." Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), Georges Bataille uses the term unproductive expenditure to describe the consumption, waste, or expenditure of energy that does not operate within a productive or useful economy. He arrives at this concept in part by looking at the gift economies studied by Marcel Mauss. See Chapter 3, section “Unproductive and De/composing Bodies.”

<sup>12</sup> Ted Hencken, *Cuba: A Global Studies Handbook* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO: 2008), 246.

<sup>13</sup> Hencken, *Cuba*, 248. See also Abel Sierra Madero’s interview of Dr. Lillian Guerra, a psychologist who participated as a researcher and in the presumed rehabilitation of “anti-social” citizens in the UMAP camps. “Lo de las UMAP fue un trabajo ‘top secret’: Entrevista a la Dra. María Elena Sol Arrondo,” *Cuban Studies* 44 (2016).

<sup>14</sup> Madero, “Lo de las UMAP,” 358, 359.

making what presents a threat to the integrity of the body politic consumable to even its more *machista* audience.

Critics familiar with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's experimental films, in which confrontational techniques, decentered narratives, and the use of collage demand an active viewership, were quick to note the stylistic shift *Fresa y chocolate* presented within his corpus. Having a straightforward narrative structure, clear protagonists and antagonists, and no brechtian interruptions of the filmic illusion, *Fresa y chocolate* has been described as overly demonstrative and comparatively less complex.<sup>15</sup> In interviews, both Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, with whom he co-directed the film, have accredited its "universal" appeal to its denunciation of intolerance and promotion of the "comprehension of difference."<sup>16</sup> With regard to his stylistic shift, Gutiérrez Alea explains he felt the imperative to reach the largest audience possible and celebrates the accomplishment of doing so noting, "I've seen people you could call *supermachos* who left the film crying. If you cry, it's because you identify with Diego, who is not a macho. That's very important for me."<sup>17</sup> Although Gutiérrez Alea calls for the "comprehension of difference," the cathartic experience he holds dear entails a process of assimilation and, tellingly, he elaborates that in his adaptation of Diego's character from Senel Paz's short story, he left out the exaggerated effeminate behavior of the "loca" or "homosexual escandaloso" so that more

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<sup>15</sup> Enrico Mario Santí, "Fresa y Chocolate: The Rhetoric of Cuban Reconciliation," *Institute for Cuban & Cuban-American Studies Occasional Papers*, (University of Miami Scholarly Repository, 2001), 16-17. Laurence Chua, "I Scream You Scream: Lawrence Chua Talks with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea," *Artform* 33, 4 (1994), 62.

<sup>16</sup> Chua, "I Scream You Scream," 63. Gemma Casadevall, "Con o sin el embargo, la película se estrenará en Estados Unidos," *El Mundo* (España), February 22, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Chua, "I Scream You Scream," 63.

viewers could self-identify with Diego.<sup>18</sup> In response this image of the gay man made palatable, queer theorists have critiqued the film's attempts to domesticate the homosexual, neutralizing its oppositional charge.<sup>19</sup>

Notwithstanding the film's melodramatic structure and directorial aims to make its characters identifiable, in this chapter I will sustain my attention on interactions and visual components that remain extraneous to a project of incorporation and its presumptive elimination of a threat to national unity. If, on the level of the larger narrative, Senel Paz's script realized by Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío's direction advocates for a politics of assimilation, I suggest there are aspects of the film that signal irreconcilable differences—for instance, Diego's devotion to the Virgin Mary and David's dialectical materialism—and, in so doing, challenge the notion of community as a shared property or identity. Returning to the scene referenced above between Diego and David, I would like to take this confrontation where penetrating gazes intersect, as an instance of friendship that questions the unity of the subject and provokes a self-othering. In the exchange of verbal jabs and unsettling stares, the staging of friendship here entails a vulnerability and risk that calls for an ethics of hospitality towards the foreigner and potential enemy. Set in 1970's Cuba, a political context of high vigilance and self-policing,<sup>20</sup> the interior of the home becomes a site for ethico-political practice and personal interactions acquire the revolutionary significance of public demonstrations.

## **Philosophies of Friendship**

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See Quiroga and Cruz Malavé, which I will discuss in more detail further ahead.

<sup>20</sup> See Hencken and especially *Conducta Impropia*.



In its Greco-Roman formulations, friendship is conceived as a filial bond established through similitude. Aristotle tells us that just as a father loves his son, or a brother loves another, friends love each other for being “other selves of theirs...having grown from the same sources.”<sup>21</sup> Cicero would later write, “él que mira a un verdadero amigo, mira, por así decir, un modelo de sí mismo.”<sup>22</sup> With its self-identical subjects, the paradigm of classical friendship produces an aesthetic of harmonious geometry, achieving equilibrium through mutual reciprocity. For Aristotle the balance between giving and receiving is essential. And yet, as Derrida underscores in the *Politics of Friendship*, within this very model of reciprocity there is an irreducible dissymmetry.<sup>23</sup> Curiously, while Aristotle valorizes mutuality, he also argues that it is preferable to love than to be loved, to give than to receive. In his reading of these passages, Derrida argues, “The friend, the being-friend...is to love *before* being loved.... What is proper or essential to friendship, can be thought and lived without the least reference to the *be-loved*, or more generally to the *lovable*...”<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, friendship becomes an imperative to love without the expectation of it being corresponded, a unilateral act without measure. If we consider friendship not between identical or exemplary beings, if we depart from a filial model, this allows us to avoid the trap of producing centric structures—androcentric, phallogentric, or anthropocentric—and their inevitable exclusions. Moreover, recalling that for thinkers such as Cicero the ideal friend is confident, virtuous, wise and totally self-sufficient, the model exemplary friend is

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<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 221.

<sup>22</sup> Cicerón, *Lelio: sobre la amistad. Sobre la vejez, Sobre la amistad* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2009), 120.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politics of friendship*, translated by George Collins. (London & New York: Verso, 2005), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Politics of friendship*, 9.

thus an absolute and immutable figure: having no need of or reliance to something outside of himself, he is invulnerable to an Other.<sup>25</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari offer another useful reading of classical friendship and point to a necessary departure from its paradigm. Greek philosophy, they observe, emerged not from hierarchal or vertical relationships but from the horizontal interconnections that are formed in the society of friends, the society of equals.<sup>26</sup> And amongst these friends, there are rivalries, opinions and antagonisms—the very stuff that generates concepts. As the persona of thought, the figure of the friend comes to signify a division within thought itself: “Thought needs the thinker-as-friend to actualize the concept.... Thought and thinker become claimant and rival and vice versa.”<sup>27</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, friendship as a splintering, or difference, continues to be the condition for the exercise of thought. However, after the catastrophe of totalitarian states, after the shame of Auschwitz—in a statement that markedly departs from the above quote by Cicero—they write, “friends can no longer look at each other, or each at himself, without a ‘weariness’ ....”<sup>28</sup> Friendship can no longer be “a simple rivalry” or a contest among equals for it is those selfsame homosocial institutions that led to incalculable atrocities.<sup>29</sup> As such, friendship and thought must “mutate”: “After an ordeal too powerful...[there are] not two friends who communicate and recall the past together but, on the contrary, who suffer an amnesia or aphasia capable of splitting thought, of dividing it in itself. Personae proliferate and branch

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., chap. 10, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, translated by Hugh Tomlison and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 87.

<sup>27</sup> Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 60.

off..."<sup>30</sup> The shame that follows these catastrophes, "the shame of being human," does not arise from feeling "responsible for the victims but responsible before them."<sup>31</sup> If we consider that shame indicates feelings of inadequacy and constitutes an affront on dignity,<sup>32</sup> then Deleuze and Guattari's call for a new friendship, is not only one that makes the relation between identical subjects untenable but insists on an insufficiency and "a vital relationship with the Other."<sup>33</sup>

Following Deleuze and Guattari's lead, I want to suggest that the legacy of the 1960's forced labor camps in Cuba, which worked to excise all that did not correspond to the exemplary revolutionary subject, compels us to consider alternatives to traditional models of friendship based on similitude and shared interests. Indeed, the shame of this legacy demands rethinking friendship in such a way that does not reiterate institutional collectives or social memberships. Against an androcentric model that produces exclusive allegiances and insists on mutual reciprocity,<sup>34</sup> the depiction of friendship in *Fresa y chocolate*, as we shall see, inverts classical norms, placing difference, vulnerability and

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<sup>30</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 71.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood, eds., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1196.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Guillermina De Ferrari's study of friendship in the post-soviet Cuban novel illustrates another sense in which classical formulations of friendship have served totalitarian ends. She observes that the rhetoric of the Cuban state has "coopted values commonly associated with male friendships" and in so doing retained the loyalty of its citizens even after failing to comply with its social contract. In the novels she looks at, artistic integrity, revolutionary compliance, and friendship are simultaneously unsustainable. The three cannot coexist not only because of "the high demands placed on individuals by the socialist government, but also the fact that all three social formations feed off a common fund of virtues: loyalty, honor and courage [...] the very definitions of manliness." "Embargoed Masculinities: Loyalty, Friendship and Role of the Intellectual in the Post-Soviet Cuban Novel," *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol 35, No. 69 (Jan.-Jun., 2007), 84.

relations of dissymmetry at the foreground. The mutation and proliferation of personae Deleuze and Guattari observe “after an ordeal too powerful” is also operative in the film.

### **Incorporating *las locas***

Based on Senel Paz’s story “El Bosque, el lobo y el hombre nuevo,” *Fresa y chocolate* presents us with a friendship between a young militant communist, David, who claims he only believes in dialectical materialism, and Diego, an older man who describes himself as “maricón”, “religioso” “[y con] problemas con el sistema.”<sup>35</sup> Produced in 1993 by the Cuban film institute, the film was lauded for its criticism of the state’s rejection of its gay citizens.<sup>36</sup> The film not only aims at integrating this excluded community, but also a body of cultural production that had been stigmatized as superfluous to the revolution’s project. References to José Lezama Lima and his baroque novel *Paradiso* abound in the film.<sup>37</sup> However, alongside the praise, other critics have dismissed the significance of the film’s political critique as too little, too late—never explicitly apologizing for the state’s incarceration of gays and dissidents in the labor camps.<sup>38</sup> Emilio Bejel, among others, has pointed to the film’s heteronormative ending, where David hooks up with Diego’s neighbor

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<sup>35</sup> Senel Paz, “El Bosque, el lobo y el hombre nuevo,” (Biblioteca Era, 1991, 2007), 19. While the focus of this chapter is on the film adaptation, I will also cite relevant passages from Paz’s text. Any dialogue that is not footnoted is taken from the film.

<sup>36</sup> Reynaldo González’s article, “La cultura cubana con sabor a fresa y chocolate. Un artículo salido del closet. *La Gaceta de Cuba* n.2 marzo-abril (2007), is one example of the more celebratory readings of the film.

<sup>37</sup> While there were not explicit policies against a particular aesthetic, Eloy E. Marino explains in his essay, “Los usos del almuerzo lezamiano en *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* de Senel Paz,” “la visión barroca ante la vida, de exceso, [fue] reputada tradicionalmente de femenina, contra una austeridad, de tirante contención masculina, que la Revolución auspicia en sus abanderados.” *Chasqui*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (May 2004), 43. More significantly, the UMAPS and the laws designed to persecute gays reflect a desire for standardization and utilitarianism, which is antithetical to a Baroque aesthetic.

<sup>38</sup> Santí, “Fresa y Chocolate,” *passim*.

Nancy, in the place of offering “a more committed gay politics.”<sup>39</sup> Significantly, Diego’s character “is from a social class inherently opposed to the film’s basic ideology” and has “internalized some of the other prejudices of the society that discriminates against him.”<sup>40</sup> He is, in Bejel’s reading, racist, eurocentric and fetishizes high art, all of which “prevent [the film] from becoming a full blown treatise on the repressed.”<sup>41</sup>

José Quiroga and Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé offer strong critiques of the film in its effort to incorporate the figure of the homosexual through the construction of a national allegory. Quiroga aptly posits that the film produces a typology of characters where the figure of the homosexual is subsumed in the larger narrative of the revolution, legitimated as the nation’s cultural producer, or the one who “bear[s] culture from one generation to the other.”<sup>42</sup> Diego is not only stereotypically gay with effeminate and dramatic overtures, he is seen in a “positive light,” as Quiroga says, and imparts to David a much needed education on national and international artists: Maria Callas, John Donne, and Lezama Lima to name a few. And not unlike Emilio Bejel, Quiroga also observes that Diego is “a conservative culture queen.”<sup>43</sup> Drawing from Néstor Perlongher’s essay “La desaparición de la homosexualidad,” Quiroga succinctly states, “Si la sociedad no ha podido acabar con las locas, lo que resta entonces es incorporarlas.”<sup>44</sup> He cautions against identitarian politics and the aims of making marginal figures visible in ways that are easily consumable by a

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<sup>39</sup> Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 160.

<sup>40</sup> Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, 165.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 160, 165-169.

<sup>42</sup> Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire*, 132.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>44</sup> José Quiroga, “Cuba: la desaparición de la homosexualidad,” in *Una ventana a Cuba y los estudios cubanos*, edited by Amalia Cabezas, Ivette N. Hernández-Torres, Sara Johnson and Rodrigo Lazo (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Callejón, 2010), 193.

dominant public, ultimately rendering these figures knowable and unthreatening.<sup>45</sup>

Looking at Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's filmography, Quiroga explains that *Fresa y chocolate* serves as another progressive marker in the revolution's teleological narrative. If *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968) addressed class-consciousness, *Fresa y chocolate* does the work of erotic liberation. For all its critique of the state, the film operates within the revolution's dialectic.<sup>46</sup>

In a similar vein, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé demonstrates how the homosexual in *Fresa y chocolate* represents an allegorical restitution. In his reading, the film and Paz's story aim to incorporate the error of the revolution as part of the formation of a national subject.<sup>47</sup> The young communist David is no longer homophobic thanks to Diego's tutelage and comes to represent the new revolutionary man. In what Cruz-Malavé sees as a Christian *telos* in Che Guevara's promise of *el hombre nuevo*, the revolution's initial rejection and persecution of gays is subsumed as an originary sin, or necessary transgression, in a narrative of redemption.<sup>48</sup> Citing a well-known phrase by Antonio Pérez, Cruz-Malavé illustrates the logic of incorporation in another way: "Sólo los grandes estómagos digieren veneno."<sup>49</sup> Calling to mind the process of inoculation, I want to suggest that perhaps Cruz Malavé's and Quiroga's concern—the elimination of a threat posed by an oppositional figure through its integration—may better be understood and also complicated through the metaphor of the

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<sup>45</sup> In regards to the political and cultural status of gays in the 90's, Quiroga writes: "En este nuevo capítulo en la historia de la homosexualidad con la revolución cubana, el hombre homosexual va adquirir un significado diametralmente opuesto al de la "escoria" con el que había sido identificado. Primero, va a representar la alegoría de una restitución, para finalmente convertirse en una identidad avalada por el estado, despojado de su carga opositora y rebelde." "Cuba: la desaparición de la homosexualidad," 195.

<sup>46</sup> Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire*, 131, 132.

<sup>47</sup> Cruz-Malavé, "Lecciones en cubanía," 143,144.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

immunitary mechanism. Before engaging with immunization's contradictory nature, we could say that on a characterological level, David has been inoculated by Diego; he is no longer threatened by gay men while Diego, forced into exile, is excised and disappeared from the body politic.

### **Inclusion through exclusion**

In a description that links its biological and political significations, Roberto Esposito writes of the immunitary logic:

Evil must be thwarted, but not by keeping it at a distance from one's border; rather, it is included inside them. The dialectical figure that thus emerges is that of exclusionary inclusion or exclusion by inclusion. The body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body.<sup>50</sup>

Significantly, Esposito tells us "This homeopathic protection practice—which excludes by including and affirms by negating—does not consume itself without leaving traces on the constitution of its object."<sup>51</sup> As Cruz-Malavé himself notes at the very end of his essay, despite attempts, it would be impossible "depurar el excedente homosexual de la nación, de devorarlo, de despedirse de él."<sup>52</sup> Remembering that the early 1990's was an especially vulnerable time for the Castro government with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some have considered the film's production as a strategy to redeem the country's image abroad.<sup>53</sup> If *Fresa y chocolate* aims at immunizing the body politic by allegorically incorporating the figure of the homosexual, given "the structurally aporetic character of the

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<sup>50</sup> Esposito, *Immunitas*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Cruz-Malavé, "Lecciones en cubanía," 145.

<sup>53</sup> Santí, "Fresa y Chocolate," *passim*.

immunitary process,”<sup>54</sup> I suggest the film inadvertently affirms this figure’s oppositional charge. Put differently, in trying to vaccinate the body politic against the poison of the revolution’s error, the film affirms what it never explicitly addresses, the legacy of the camps and the institutional discrimination against gays.

*Immunitas* is an especially productive metaphor to understand the context within which friendship happens in the film. In its effort to protect the integrity of the body from an outside, or the limits of an identity from foreign incursion, Esposito explains, “immunity is a condition of particularity: whether it refers to an individual or a collective, it is always ‘proper,’ in the specific sense of ‘belonging to someone’ and therefore ‘un-common’ or ‘non-communal.’”<sup>55</sup> Recalling that individuals were sent to the UMAPs for “*improper* conduct,” the camps may be interpreted as trying to preserve a collective identity, to maintain the boundaries of its properties in the most violent defense of an immunitary impulse. In the film, the perceived threat of a foreign incursion, specifically US imperialism, is made evident when David’s friend Miguel exclaims “el enemigo está a 90 kilómetros.” It is perhaps no coincidence that Diego’s suspected counter revolutionary art exhibit is linked with a foreign embassy. More accurately, it is Diego’s supposed dealings with a foreign embassy that compel Miguel and David to investigate him. Recounting his initial encounter with Diego, David says: “Primero me enseñó unos libros extranjeros.... El tipo tiene la casa llena de cosas raras, unas esculturas rarísimas... Quieren [él y su amigo] hacer una exposición y una embajada lo va a ayudar.” To which Miguel responds, “¿Una embajada? ¡Coño, David eso sí es grave!”

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<sup>54</sup> Esposito, *Immunitas*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



In an early scene, when David looks out the window of a cheap motel room, where he expects to finally sleep with his girlfriend, he sees a CDR billboard, signaling that even private spaces do not escape this penetrating surveillance. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution provide another manifestation of an immunitary impulse, as Ted Henken explains, these were “neighborhood-based organizations...intended to monitor potential dissidents and pass information on to state security, further consolidating government power by turning the entire population into informants.”<sup>56</sup> The fact that these are neighborhood-based organizations does not negate their non-communal operations, for as we shall see *immunitas* and *communitas* are inextricably linked. What I would like to highlight about this context is its high level of vigilance and inevitable paranoia,<sup>57</sup> which make a friendship like the one that develops between David, a card carrying communist, and Diego, a religious fag, not only unlikely but, as I aim to demonstrate, especially risky.

Reiterating this sense of surveillance, references to “la vigilancia” become a common refrain throughout the film. All three main characters at some point remind the other not to say certain things out loud, or raise the volume of the music to mask their conversation. Before entering Diego’s apartment for the first time, Diego pulls David under the stairs presumably to hide from “la vigilancia” about to cross their path and who happens to be singing the verse, “yo perjudico tu reputación.” As we later discover, this in fact is Nancy, Diego’s black-market dealing neighbor and good friend. Nonetheless, this scene frames the gesture of hospitality that follows within a context of neighbor informants. Upon entering the apartment, Diego makes clear its desired exclusivity, “Bienvenido a la guarida. Este es

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<sup>56</sup> Hencken, *Cuba: A Global Studies Handbook*, 210.

<sup>57</sup> Various accounts in *Conducta Impropia* recount the extensive policing, paranoia and distrust that these committees generated within the Cuban community.

un lugar donde no se recibe a todo el mundo.” “La guarida,” Diego’s name for his apartment, has been associated to the proverbial closet, generating readings of the film as “la salida de la guarida.”<sup>58</sup> Drawing from its significations—den, hide out, refuge, or cover—I would like to read “la guarida,” as an immunitary space, or an attempt thereof.

### **La guarida: Johnnie Walker, Marilyn Monroe and El Che**

As viewers, we rarely see the apartment from a comfortable distance; the camera is placed from the actors’ perspective, providing us with intimate and partial views of the sunlit space, brimming with objects. The building’s architecture is classic baroque and the interior of the apartment exhibits an array of mix-matched antique furniture, patio fold out chairs, art works, cultural memorabilia, and religious iconography. Music is almost always playing. Objects from abroad, others off the street, like a fragment of an elaborate wrought iron gate—a quintessential Cuban architectural fixture—form an assemblage of personal identitarian markers that act as a boundary between him and the outside. Diego has, in effect, created a visual and sonic enclosure. And yet in bringing these objects within the walls of his apartment, he is producing a contact with the outside. Doors are notably left unlocked; we see Nancy and David come in and out of Diego’s apartment unannounced. When Diego sits by his typewriter to compose a letter—his act of parrhesia<sup>59</sup> against government censorship—he is exposed through a large open window. Drawing once again

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<sup>58</sup> Emilio Bejel, “*Fresa y chocolate o la salida de la guarida: hacia una teoría del sujeto homosexual en Cuba*,” *Casa de las Américas* 35, No. 196 (1994), passim.

<sup>59</sup> See Michel Foucault’s “*The Meaning and Evolution of the Word Parrhesia*,” in *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia*, edited by Joseph Pearson, Digital Archive: Foucault.info, 1999. Drawing from Foucault, my use of this word is meant to invoke the event of truth telling, in plain speech, and the political dangers it entails.

from its aporetic structure, Esposito provides us with an apt description to think through this immunitary space:

[T]he *clivage* that at the same time juxtaposes and connects immunity and community, mak[es] one not only the contrasting background for the other, but also the object and content of the other.... Immunity as a private category, only takes relief as a negative mode of community.... Immunity, in short, is the internal limit which cuts across community, folding it back on itself in a form that is both constitutive and deprivative: immunity constitutes or reconstitutes community precisely by negating it.<sup>60</sup>

Following Esposito's logic, in trying to create a personal sanctuary, Diego initiates a boundary, a point of touch between the private and the public, or *immunitas* and *communitas*. Significantly, la guarida, as an enclosure, is nowhere near sealed, but dynamic and porous. We may read the composition of the apartment as expressing, what Esposito has described as, "immunity in a nonexcluding relation to its common opposite," "a conception of individual identity...[where] the body is understood as a functioning construct that is open to continuous exchange with its surrounding environment." In other words, identity and the body are not conceived as closed and monolithic units.<sup>61</sup> Alongside items that would bring Diego's revolutionary loyalty into question, such as bottles of Johnnie Walker ("la bebida del enemigo") and images of Marylyn Monroe, are photographs of national Cuban icons.

This nonexcluding relation is perhaps best expressed in the shrines to the Orishas and La Virgen de la Caridad we find in both Diego's and Nancy's apartments. As the art historian Donald Cosentino has noted, almost any object may be appropriated and converted into a sacred icon in the process of Afro-Atlantic altar making; that is, new

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<sup>60</sup> Esposito, *Immunitas*, 9.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 18.

objects may always be incorporated into the spaces of these altars.<sup>62</sup> This aesthetic—accumulative, proliferating and unrestricted—is reiterated not just in the building’s baroque architecture,<sup>63</sup> but also in the arrangement of Diego’s apartment. We see this especially when David adds photographs of Fidel and El Che to one of Diego’s displays on a wall. Ideologically incompatible as they may be with the Virgin Mary and pictures of Julián del Casal, at the level of the composition, these additions are easily accommodated. I suggest that when David places these images alongside Diego’s other objects we have what Tom Roach calls “non-dialectical mingling.”<sup>64</sup> We will return to this concept in more detail further ahead. Suffice it to say that the ethos expressed in these arrangements is one of hospitality to the foreign Other.

It is in Diego’s apartment, “llena de cosas raras” and where national and international cultural objects cohabitate that the large majority of the film is shot. Staging the friendship that develops within the conventions of hospitality, Diego and David are both placed in vulnerable positions. Foregrounding this perilousness, David first refuses Diego’s invitation: “Yo no voy a casa de gente que no conozco.” Crossing the lines between host and guest, hostage and hostile intruder,<sup>65</sup> the first time David enters Diego’s home it is due to a trick, a bet between Diego and his friend German; the second time, David enters with the intention of covertly investigating and reporting Diego to the authorities. While the conventions of hospitality would in principle require an immunitary space of which the

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<sup>62</sup> “Lespri Endependan: Discovering Haitian Sculpture,” exhibition catalog, Frost Art Museum, Miami Florida, 2004.

<sup>63</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora uses these same adjectives to describe the Baroque in her book, *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 25.

host is master,<sup>66</sup> in opening one's home to the foreigner that space is no longer impervious. This precariousness is made all the more palpable in the film, not only because of the CDR's presumed monitoring, "violating the inviolable" principle of the home,<sup>67</sup> but also because the roles of host and guest are initially performed by Diego and David with ulterior motives.

### ***Tocar la tecla que no se podía tocar: The Shame of Becoming Other***

Whereas for Cicero virtuousness, transparency and self-sufficiency are the defining features of an exemplary friend,<sup>68</sup> in *Fresa y chocolate*, disguised intentions, moments of weakness, desire and need are the engines that propel friendships. In their first interaction at an open-air café when Diego takes a seat at David's table, David is visibly annoyed. He gestures to switch seats but finds himself corralled. Diego, with his many shopping bags and effeminate mannerisms is perceived as an intruder, an uninvited guest in this public setting. Undeterred, Diego makes a spectacle of savoring his strawberry ice cream, complains about the country's status quo and invites David to his house on the pretext of lending him some hard-to-find books. Just before this encounter we see Diego walking with German. When the two see David they exchange looks that suggest an understanding. These two like-minded friends conspire together. And when Diego finally approaches David we suspect a scheme. As the narrator in Paz's story, David says "Sentí como si una vaca me lamiera el rostro. Era la mirada libidinosa del recién llegado... y se me trancó la

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Cicero, *Lelio: sobre la amistad*, 123.

boca del estómago.”<sup>69</sup> The expression of discomfort and exposure to the other’s gaze are indicative of the friendship that will ensue. In this initial encounter David feels like hunted prey: “me di cuenta de que se trataba de una carnada, y no estaba dispuesto a morderla.”<sup>70</sup> He refers here to the contraband books Diego has deliberately removed from his bag to call his attention. What begins as bait will later become gifts. Notably, David’s references to ingestion, with mention of his stomach, bait, and biting, can be linked back to our reading of incorporation and inoculation operative in the film.

Behind all the dissimulation and pretext, there is a genuine desire on Diego’s part to know David. This desire of course is not mutual, but unilateral. We learn, especially in Paz’s story, that Diego has admired David since long ago when he saw him perform on stage in a production of Ibsen’s *House of Dolls*. Although the production as a whole was a fiasco, David’s acting and improvisation were very good. Nonetheless, when Diego makes a reference to the play, David tells his readers “de haber sabido el efecto que me iban a producir sus palabras, Diego hubiera evitado aquel lance. Tocó la tecla que no se podía tocar.”<sup>71</sup> For David, his participation in the play is associated with profound humiliation and he finally accepts Diego’s invitation to go to his house in order to recover photos that Diego claims to have taken of the performance. David explains, “Eso fue lo peor, la lástima con que me aplaudieron.... [I]luminado por los reflectores, rogaba con toda mi alma que se produjera un efecto de amnesia total sobre todos... y que nunca, jamás, *never*, ¿me oyes, Dios?, me encontrara con uno de ellos, alguien que me pudiera identificar.”<sup>72</sup> Curiously, in this moment of desperation, the militant atheist appeals to god and uses the language of the

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<sup>69</sup> Paz, “El Bosque, el lobo y el hombre nuevo,” 11.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

enemy. As we shall see, calls to gods and saints that seem to go un-responded will be a recurring device throughout the film.

Although the friendship between the two has not yet developed, there are various aspects of these initial encounters I would like to highlight as they signal a different friendship to come. That Diego's interest in David should be his creative talent, works against classical models where shared moral values are considered the bonds between friends.<sup>73</sup> As a "culture queen" (Quiroga) Diego would predictably esteem artistic talent above all else; however, it bears worth considering that for Plutarch acting is the craft of the adulator not the exemplary friend.<sup>74</sup> Significantly, what Plutarch finds threatening about the adulator's mimetic skills is the malleability of his or her subjectivity, the ability to adapt and transform. And, in so doing, destabilizes meanings and commonly held beliefs.<sup>75</sup> In a complete inversion of these values, I suggest that is precisely what Diego and David's friendship brings about: instability and transformation. When Diego sits at David's table at the open-air café and addresses him as "compañero Torvaldo," Ibsen's lead character, we may read this moment as "solicit[ing] a becoming."<sup>76</sup> In her text *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler formulates subjectivity in relation to an Other; it is in the address and in the request to be recognized that initiates a new sense of self. Butler writes:

When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for

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<sup>73</sup> Plutarch, *Obras morales y de costumbres: (Moralia) / Plutarco. 1, 1*, (Madrid: Gredos, 2007), 73.

<sup>74</sup> Plutarch, *Obras morales*, 125.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>76</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 44.

the Other that takes place.... To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other.<sup>77</sup>

Not only is one's sense of self constituted in the encounter but, consequently, questioned, made vulnerable: "It is also to stake one's own being, and one's own persistence in one's own being."<sup>78</sup> The fear "of becoming foreign to oneself"<sup>79</sup> is perhaps expressed when David repeatedly says "no soy yo" to Diego's claim, "Yo a ti te conozco. Te he visto muchísimas veces." Removing his Communist Youth Union ID from one front pocket to the other, David insists on being identified in a particular way. And yet when Diego asks him "¿Te interesa Vargas Llosa?" David reveals to the reader that he was in fact more than curious about this notoriously critical author of the revolution, "Yo estaba loco por leer su última novela."<sup>80</sup> Against the persona of an obedient and loyal revolutionary who would abstain from reading such contraband books, Diego instigates and calls forth the possibility of an Other self, "Lo forras, viejo. Ten imaginación."

Remembering that for Derrida what is proper to friendship "can be thought and lived without the least reference to the be-loved, or more generally to the lovable,"<sup>81</sup> I want to highlight that the initial link between David and Diego is a shared sense of shame. Diego later confesses that his experience as an audience member at David's performance was, "la vergüenza más grande que he pasado en mi vida.... No hallaba cómo esconderme en la

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<sup>77</sup> Butler, *Precarious life*, 44.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> This phrasing is taken from Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 30.

<sup>80</sup> Paz, "El Bosque, el lobo y el hombre nuevo," 12.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 9.



butaca, la mitad del público rezaba por ti... Por eso fuimos tan pródigos en los aplausos.”<sup>82</sup>

In Barbara Cassin’s definition of the word, *vergüenza* implies a failure to fulfill a duty. To feel shame one must first have a sense of commitment and obligation. We might describe Diego’s *vergüenza* for David as “*vergüenza ajena*,” which “captures the feeling of shame that is experienced in the face of the incompetent or inadequate conduct of another person.”<sup>83</sup> Cassin continues,

The feeling of shame in this case has nothing to do with the subject’s actions, for he or she has not done anything and cannot feel responsible or be held guilty. It is precisely because there is no direct relation to the person for whom one feels shame that the sentiment of *vergüenza* exhibits and constructs a tie. *Vergüenza* in this instance helps build a sense of community.<sup>84</sup>

Drawing from this definition, what Diego and David share even before their first interaction is an experience of inadequacy and an instance of community that has nothing to do with the security of belonging or a shared identity.

When David is recognized by Diego as the actor in the play, something which he desperately wished would never occur, he is placed in a vulnerable position, obligated to recall aspects of himself he had repressed in favor of his identity as an engineering student. After all, performing foreign plays is no way of serving the revolution. In a later scene when Diego asks David why he is studying engineering when what he really wants to do is write, David responds that he owes it to the revolution. Pursuing a vocation that is “unpurposive” would mean failing on his obligation to be a productive member. More importantly, recognizing this desire or potential self would mean becoming Other. In effect, Diego’s words are like a “lance.” The touching of “una tecla que no se podía tocar,” will occur more

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>83</sup> Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 1196.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

than once in the trajectory of their friendship. In one of the few scenes where the camera pans back, we see Diego and David sitting across from each other listening to melancholic music. Moments of silence transpire between them as Diego adoringly stares at David, whose gaze is turned in the opposite direction, possibly avoiding direct eye contact. When their eyes finally do meet, following a comment Diego made about the affective quality of the music, David antagonistically asks Diego, “ven acá chico, ¿Por que tú eres así?” What ensues is a series of questions that reproduce heterosexist myths of homosexuality as a medical condition that is treatable. Diego finds himself not only correcting these views but also defending his revolutionary commitment. Before asking him to leave, Diego does a parody of Cuban macho men and calls David “un comemierda.” In the section that follows, I aim to show that these confrontational and unsettling exchanges might be understood as fulfilling “an ethics of discomfort.”<sup>85</sup>

### **Non-Dialectical Mingling, Betrayal and Discomfort**

Drawing from Foucault’s late work, Tom Roach formulates a mode of friendship in which discomfort and estrangement realize an ethical imperative: “to annihilate identity [and] to transform the self and the friend.”<sup>86</sup> Identities, we’ve seen, can produce exclusive communities and violent immunitary impulses. Roach’s conception of friendship as “the space of the in-between...a zone of unbelonging, a property of the property-less”<sup>87</sup> allows us to imagine more fluid and transformative relations where coming together never

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<sup>85</sup> Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 45, 47. See also Luis F. Avilés, “En los límites de la amistad: silencio, risa, honestidad,” *80grados.net*, May 8, 2015, for an analysis on the ethics of discomfort, truth telling, and the capacity of transformation in friendship.

<sup>86</sup> Roach, *Friendship as a way of life*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 15.

coagulates into institutional bodies. He writes, “involving attraction and resistance...a friendship resists dialectical fusion in favor of non-dialectical mingling.”<sup>88</sup> Collapsing the distinction between friend and enemy, Roach valorizes the act of betrayal, as it forces one to rethink their sense of self and produces a distance between friends that would prevent a fusion, or the Other being reduced to the Same. For Foucault, Roach explains, the concept of friendship “is anything but utopian”:

Betrayal, distance, brutal honesty, indeed, an impersonal intimacy founded on estrangement are its making. [...] This is, to be blunt, the shit of friendship. When the most troubling aspects of relationships become the very foundation of a friendship, however, new subjective, communal, and political forms can be imagined. [...]The friend-enemy dichotomy, which holds considerable sway in the philosophical canon from Aristotle through Carl Schmitt, is shattered when the betrayal of secrets is part and parcel of friendship. In this sense, the true friend—the friend who will push one beyond historically determined identity, the friend who will help another think and relate differently—is the betrayer.<sup>89</sup>

What betrayal affords is the discovery that I am other. This is critical for Foucault whose interest in “care of the self” as practiced by the Greeks provided a way to work against current identitarian or “out politics,” while attending to an ethos, or a way of life on an individual level.<sup>90</sup> In same way that Nestor Perlonger and later José Quiroga were concerned with the “disappearance of the homosexual,” Foucault saw coming-out-politics and its aims of self-discovery as working within the medicalization of sexuality and the institutions of bio-power.<sup>91</sup> For him, care of the self “is the care of the activity and not the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 7, 8.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 94, 95.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

care of the soul-as-substance.”<sup>92</sup> Care of the self is an aesthetic approach that does not assume there is anything to reveal about the self, but rather something that is wholly constructed through a principle of activity.<sup>93</sup> Friendships can facilitate these activities; push one away from their presumed sense of self to adopt other ways of beings, other ways of life.<sup>94</sup>

Returning to the heated scene between Diego and David we can see here not just a discomfort, but also a betrayal. In response to Diego’s expression of pathos with regards to the affectivity of the music, and thus at a moment of exposure and emotional vulnerability, David betrays Diego’s friendship and hospitality by trying to provoke him with heterosexist comments. The dialogue that ensues—each accusing the other of “monerías” and “payaserías”—demonstrates the performative and fictive quality of their self-representations. In addition to this confrontation, there are a series of deceptions and betrayals that carry a great risk and destabilize the binary between friend and enemy. As he later confesses, Diego befriends David as part of a bet he makes with his friend German to lure and seduce him. David, we know, returns to Diego’s house on the pretext of friendship as part of his strategy with Miguel to investigate and denounce him to the state. These betrayals never come to full fruition. However, had David completed his mission to report him for presumably working with a foreign embassy, as Miguel had instructed him, we learn that Diego could have faced a 15-year prison sentence. And though Diego had already jeopardized himself with his letter protesting the censorship of German’s art

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<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, et al., (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 25.

<sup>93</sup> Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 25.

<sup>94</sup> Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, chap. 2, passim.

exhibition, it is possible to imagine that Miguel's inquiries into Diego might have led to his forced exile. David's decision not to report Diego places him in a precarious position, as Miguel threatens to have him kicked out of school for colluding with an enemy. The threat of being exposed and reported to the authorities is reiterated in the various immunity gestures referenced above. The film's allusions to the CDR suggest that the presumed inviolable space of the home is transgressed, making hospitality politically dangerous. In her treatment of friendship, Leela Gandhi explains that for friendship to have an ethical capacity it requires taking a risk: "the risk to become foreign to 'one's own' and above all to oneself." Friendship with a foreigner (or in this case someone outside of one's social milieu) is "unquestionably political... involving the potentially 'agonizing' risk of self exile."<sup>95</sup> For Gandhi, an ethico-political friendship is "extra-institutional"; it does not valorize the "relation of same with same" nor "privileges commitments to those who are either 'proximate' 'given' or in some inalienable way 'our own.'"<sup>96</sup> In effect, hospitality, risk and exile are the defining features of an ethics for Gandhi, all of which, as we have seen, are operative in *Fresa y chocolate*.

The risk of becoming foreign to one's own is, perhaps, best exemplified in the distance that develops between the original pairs of friends: Diego and German, and David and Miguel. These other friends with whom Diego and David conspire, each represents the identitarian community that corresponds to them at the beginning of the film; these are friendships based on similitude. Through David and Diego's friendship, one marked by instances of deception, betrayal and discomfort, both characters transform and adopt different personas. David, as the narrator of Paz's story becomes a writer (as opposed to an

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<sup>95</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 30.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 17, 25.

engineer) and Diego is now referred to as “la Loca Roja” by his former friends. Notably, at the end of this story both Diego and David have produced texts. Although Diego always insisted on his revolutionary commitment, it is nonetheless surprising that it should be his text (the letter protesting censorship) that is the explicitly political one and David’s a work of fiction—given that Diego is the “conservative culture queen” (Quiroga) who values art for arts sake and David the dialectical materialist.

### **A Matter of Honoring the Gods: Gifts, Debts, and Failings**

David privileges his friendship with the “enemy” of the state over his commitments to Miguel and his obligation to report counter revolutionaries. In so doing, David fails to reciprocate on his debt as a benefactor of the revolution. He fails to complete the mission that Miguel adamantly claims is his duty above all else. These failures to reciprocate or dissymmetrical exchanges, as I have been pointing to throughout this chapter, are staged on another level of the film. Much like David’s plea to god in Paz’s story “¿me oyes, Dios?”, in the film we see Diego and Nancy regularly make appeals to the various Virgins and Orishas assembled in their home. Diego and Nancy, will ask for favors, share intimate details, joke, reprimand, beg and threaten these deities in such a way that reproduces the same conversations the friends have amongst themselves. Of course, these are monologues since the statues never respond. And in this regard the relationship with these statues is completely unilateral. Although Aristotle valorized mutual reciprocity he also recognized instances where this is not possible: “Where it is a matter of honouring the gods or one’s parents...no one could ever render them the honour they deserve.... [T]he son must repay the debt he owes, and since there is nothing he can do that is worthy of the benefits he has

already received, he is always a debtor.”<sup>97</sup> Accordingly, Diego and Nancy are always in a relationship of dissymmetry with these Virgins and Orishas, unable to ever adequately repay the debt they owe for their existence. It is significant that what surrounds the space of hospitality are these figures, to which we are forever indebted and vulnerable to their whims. Nancy and Diego are often seen making offerings of flowers, drinks, food and candles to the statues. We also see these same offerings made between the three friends. I suggest that in the same way that Nancy and Diego are in a relationship of incommensurable debt to the gods, as Aristotle would have it, following Butler, the three friends, whose subjectivities are constituted in the encounter, are always in a relationship of incommensurable debt to each other. Recalling Derrida here too, friendship is an imperative to love without it being corresponded, a unilateral act without measure. The inability to ever adequately return the favor—be it David’s donation of his blood to save Nancy’s life after having attempted suicide, or Diego’s invaluable tutelage—is what makes community. It is in the debt, the owing of the gift where community happens.<sup>98</sup>

Untying the concept of community from its historical association to the semantics of *proprium*, it is from a sense of debt, the absence of a property, the negative, or to use his word, the concave, that Esposito aims to engage the notion of community. His text, *Communitas*, answers the call of philosophers, such as Jean Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, who argue for the exigency of rethinking community not as a work, a unified, or coherent body of subjects but through its incongruousness, its exposure to loss and the sharing of mortality. If community has been misconceived as a fullness, an interiority, the

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<sup>97</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 225.

<sup>98</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: the Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), Introduction, *passim*.

unity of individual subjects forming a larger subjectivity, he insists that what we have in common “is an otherness that withdraws us from our subjectivity.”<sup>99</sup> Honing in on its etymological implications of gift, obligation and duty, *communitas*, Esposito demonstrates, is calibrated on a “‘debt,’ ‘guilt,’ ‘failing,’” and thus expresses “a defective condition” and “insurmountable incompleteness.”<sup>100</sup>

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy explains that the failure of communist projects wasn’t that its ideals were betrayed, but that its main ideal was problematic: “human beings defined as producers...human beings defined at all.”<sup>101</sup> He presents the humanist archetype of the indivisible self as a totalitarian form since its articulation can only be achieved through a work of death. That is, the desire for immanence, an interiority without relation—the closure of the absolute—or communion of individuals within a mystical body, or head of state—calls for the “the extermination of the other,” as it seeks to eliminate all that is extraneous to its circumscribed identity.<sup>102</sup> Through his reading of Heidegger’s “being-with,” Esposito arrives at the conclusion that community is, it is existence, ontological, that is to say, community is not something that was lost, to be recovered, or a teleological end, but the awareness that I am insufficient, that “I owe you.”<sup>103</sup>

## Conclusion

If *Fresa y chocolate* aims to incorporate the figure of the homosexual through a national allegory, there are aspects of this film that remain in excess to any totalizing

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<sup>99</sup> Esposito, *Communitas*, 10.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>101</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Vol. 76., edited and translated by Peter Connor, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>102</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, *passim*.

<sup>103</sup> Esposito, *Communitas*, 95.



narrative. The film may do the work of sexual liberation, but the question of religious faith—evoked in the film through the ubiquitous statuettes and offerings—remains outside the telos of a Marxist-Leninist project. These statuettes and offerings, moreover, are reminders of debts that may never be adequately repaid, reminders of insufficiencies and excesses that make a “society of equals,” or the symmetry of mutual reciprocity and unity under shared identity, untenable. Significantly, the character of Nancy, who is not in Paz’s short story, referred to affectionately by Diego as “puta de mierda,” is not easily subsumed within the Revolution’s dialectic. Nancy provides a counter figure to David’s first girlfriend who feigns purity and prudishness when they are about to have sex, and hypocritically marries someone for financial stability. In contradistinction, Nancy is sincere in her courting and financially self-sufficient. In this respect, her character works within the narrative of progress, inverting gender stereotypes. However, Nancy generates income through the black market. And when Diego asks her to sexually initiate David, she responds “ya no hago eso,” allowing us to suspect she has also sustained herself as a sex worker. While some have dismissed the relationship that develops between Nancy and David as a heteronormative ending,<sup>104</sup> I offer that there are provocative aspects about their pairing. She is not only a criminal according to the state; she is religious and notably older than David. Most significantly, she has attempted to take her own life on various occasions. Nancy’s character makes visible those lives unincorporated by the revolution. Her illegal, monetary self-sufficiency puts her outside the economy of debt and obligation between citizen and the revolutionary state and, at the same time, she expresses “a defective condition” and “incompleteness” (to use Esposito’s words), a need and desire for the Other.

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<sup>104</sup> See Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*.

David's donation of blood to Nancy, as I suggested above, is indicative of an incommensurable gift of friendship. From a biological viewpoint, the transfusion also evokes contamination by a foreign body and, as such, the process of inoculation to which I have alluded throughout this essay. The notion of being contaminated is further reiterated when Nancy claims "Dentro de mí hay una cosa limpia que nadie ha podido ensuciar." Although this statement might be interpreted as sustaining a part of the self that is immune, what I want to underscore about the exchange between Nancy and David, is an interdependence and vulnerability that counters the hubris of the Revolution's impervious and heroically righteous New Man.<sup>105</sup> If the figure of the New Man represents a future community, a telos realized through the logic of sacrifice,<sup>106</sup> then the relationships in *Fresa y chocolate* bring to the fore a consubstantiality and an "irreducible and inoperative difference."<sup>107</sup> Given that queer theorists have strongly critiqued *Fresa y chocolate* as an attempt to neutralize the oppositional charge of the homosexual figure,<sup>108</sup> I have argued, through the logic of inoculation, that *Fresa y chocolate* affirms what it aimed to deactivate. In its desire to incorporate the figure of the homosexual, to immunize itself against the poison of the revolution's error, it necessarily corrupts the integrity of the body politic. Moreover, we might also consider the film's failure to adequately address the legacy of the

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<sup>105</sup> Marta Hernández Salván, *Mínima Cuba: Heretical Poetics and Power in Post-Soviet Cuba* (Albany, New York: Suny Press, 2015), 48, 49. See also Mirta Suquet Martínez's dissertation chapter, "De testimonios y de reos: biopolítica y revolución. el seropositivo cubano," (2015) where she explains how Cuban Revolution's strong public health policy (and its corresponding moral codes) manifested itself in the medicalization of the New Man as an immune man, 303. <http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/383016>

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 203.

<sup>108</sup> See Quiroga, "Cuba: la desaparición de la homosexualidad" and Cruz-Malavé, "Lecciones de cubanía: identidad nacional y errancia sexual en Senel Paz, Martí y Lezama Lima."

UMAPs, never explicitly apologizing, as indicative of the “amnesia or aphasia” that Deleuze and Guattari observe in the shame that arises not from feeling “responsible for the victims but responsible before them.”<sup>109</sup>

Shifting our attention from how Diego may or may not be a consumable representation of gay men, to the dynamics of a post-classical friendship, has allowed us to find another politics at work in the film that does not reiterate self-same models of community. Considering again Derrida’s statement, “What is proper or essential to friendship, can be thought and lived without the least reference to the *be-loved*, or more generally to the *lovable*,” Diego and David may be deeply flawed (or for that matter the film itself), but that does not negate the potential to tease from their relationship an ethics of friendship. In fact, it enhances this potential given that we are privileging what is inadequate and insufficient. In its representation of friendship and the risks it necessarily entails, Gutiérrez Alea’s film points to experiences of insecurity and un-belonging as that which create the possibility for political transformation.

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<sup>109</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 108.

## Conclusion: Disarticulating *Cubanity*/Humanity

In Rachel Price's assessment of contemporary cultural trends in Cuba, visual and literary works express not so much a disenchantment with the socialist project, characteristic of the 1990's, as a weariness with-all-things Cuban, with the discourse of national exceptionalism and identity, recently revived by the new tourist economy. Aptly titled, *Planet/Cuba*, Price's 2015 book looks at works that both refer to immediate localities (e.g. neighborhoods, factories, subcultures) and evoke planetary concerns: accelerating capitalism, rising sea levels, toxic waste, and deforestation among others.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1990's, Cuba has drawn the interest of environmentalists abroad. The loss of Soviet subsidies and resources, such as petroleum, necessarily led to deindustrialization, organic farming, and sustainable practices across all levels of society. Yet poverty and food scarcity continue to be prevalent and there is no assurance the country's environmental advances will be sustained. In addition to tourism, the Cuban economy relies on mining and oil exploration, with the state's newest development, through the assistance of foreign-owned companies, being the renovation of now the largest port in the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> Price's project considers how cultural production might contribute "any new thought about, or solutions to, our contemporary crises."<sup>3</sup> To this end, she studies the emerging "ecological aesthetics" of the last decade, citing Cuban artists and writers engaged with environmental themes and issues.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Price, *Planet/Cuba: Art, Culture, and the Future of the Island* (London & New York: Verso, 2015), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Price, *Planet/Cuba*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Although the focus of the book is contemporary cultural production, Price draws upon a history of environmentalism that emerged with colonial deforestation, ecological essays published in the 1930's, as well as artists from the 70's and 80's. *Ibid.*, 34-37.

*Touching Impenetrable Bodies: Material Ecologies in Cuban Literary and Visual Work* shares similar aims and observations. However, with the exception of Roberto Fabelo's drawings and sculptures, the texts and images explored here do not expressly address nor appear motivated by environmental concerns. Indeed, one could reasonably ask what does Nicolás Guillén's 1930 poetry collection, *Motivos de son*, have to do with material ecologies. The works selected for this dissertation have each in different ways allowed me to consider how particular aesthetic practices might generate new and imaginative ways of relating. Irrespective of their iconographic representations, aesthetic forms, as organizing structures, compositions, patterns, systems, and networks, can tell us a lot about ecology. And ecology, in turn, as a philosophical and analytical lens, can generate different practices of reading and engagement with cultural works.

At the introduction of this dissertation, I describe a guiding thread throughout my project as an ecological thinking. Such a thinking is not exclusively concerned with vegetation, wildlife, or climate change, but entails an awareness of complex webs of interdependences. If we consider how an ethos of production and a logic of compartmentalization have justified the exploitation of some bodies and landscapes for the benefit of others, emphasizing nodes of connection over models of autonomy becomes a critical ethico-political task. Accordingly, eco-feminists encourage us to imagine the material as irreducible to instrumental ends, as having its own transformative potential outside of human agency. Doing so not only highlights the imperceptible impacts of, say, non-biodegradable or nuclear waste, but also undermines a rhetoric and ordering of the world that has, at various historical moments, legitimated the commodification and disposability of people (e.g. black, indigenous, and colonized folks). I have also found that

locating existence, at the point of touch, or where bodies meet, reorients attention from individual self-actualization, or national development, to that of co-constitutive relations, to collectivities and networks that exceed discursive boundaries. Guided by these philosophical expositions, *Touching Impenetrable Bodies* has focused on the work of writers and artists who draw our attention to the shared materiality of what we often think of as different kinds of bodies; and, in so doing, challenge dominant models of national subjectivity and belonging, soliciting more expansive and ecological forms of thought and practice.

Whereas Price observes a move away from a nationalist discourse in contemporary Cuban literature and art, adopting a materialist oriented ontology, I have returned to early canonical texts traditionally associated with *Cubanidad*, Guillén's *Motivos de son* and Severo Sarduy's *Gestos* (1963), and traced aesthetic tendencies that work against identity formation. By underscoring the sonorous materiality of *Motivos de son* and exploring how that sonority potentially affects its readers, I suggest reading the racial difference Guillén makes the object of his poetry not as a (mis)representation of an already existing subject or a cultural property, but as a surplus that refuses to be subsumed. In this reading, Fred Moten's theorization of the aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition has been especially generative. Where one might expect his analysis to entail the political insistence on black human subjectivity, Moten's instead locates this tradition's radicality in an animated materiality, in that which registers as illegible and improper and, consequently, upends systems of subjection, exchange value, semiotics, and other such sciences of equivalence.

Indeed, thinking alternatives to a shared humanism has been another ecological goal of this dissertation. While national identity might be thought of as a particular in

relation to the universalism of human identity, both operate as markers of membership within a community. And however inclusive these memberships aspire to be, they produce inevitable exclusions, establishing “normative standards of legibility against which all other are read, measured, controlled, disciplined, and assigned to fixed and hierarchical social statuses.”<sup>5</sup> Deconstruction has taught us that an identity is defined against its opposite; the presence of the term humanity will always imply its inverse. As long as rights and protections are conferred upon those deemed “human” there will always be people—dissidents, slaves, refugees—that fall outside its margins. The historical elaborations of a universal human subject, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are tethered to notions of developmental progress.<sup>6</sup> The Cuban Revolution and its promise of an ideal man, is one variant of these utopic projects. The imposition of an androcentric, militarized national subject model and a discourse of sacrifice for the teleological fulfillment of the nation have resulted in the discrimination of gays, religious believers, the sick, the lazy, the extravagant, and anyone deemed in excess or unproductive to its ends. It is no surprise then, that in literary and visual works from Cuba we find disarticulations of the human figure and an effort to adopt non-anthropocentric perspectives.

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<sup>5</sup> Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein, “Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of Trans\* Life,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, V. 2, N. 2, May 2015, 195.

<sup>6</sup> Talal Asad, “Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism” *Critical Inquiry* [http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/reflections\\_on\\_violence\\_law\\_and\\_humanitarianism/#\\_ftn13](http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/reflections_on_violence_law_and_humanitarianism/#_ftn13). Asad notes the trope of humanity was “born and nurtured in the crucible of early modern conquest and settler colonialism.” Though later elaborated in secularist terms, its Christian underpinnings of universal conversion, redemption and salvation, which justified early colonial exploits, were later redeployed as human progress and liberty to legitimate imperial expansion. The eighteenth century interest of literary writers in developing the interiority of their characters was not just an expression of a modern self, but also a need to distinguish the human from the “interchangeability of the commodity, the self-possessed individual from the dispossessed slave.”

In my second chapter where I pair Severo Sarduy's novel *Cobra* (1973) and Roberto Fabelo's contemporary artworks, I examine their depiction of interspecies bodies, the way they intersect the organic and the synthetic, the inanimate and the animate. I have aimed to show that more than just present us with fantastical figures, Sarduy and Fabelo unsettle modes of knowledge production and ways of seeing and classifying bodies. While Fabelo's allusions to the threat of a nuclear disaster and ongoing environmental depredation more adequately corresponds to what Price considers planetary and ecological art, I find that although Sarduy, writing in the 1970's, might not have been attuned to these specific concerns, is responding to and working against similar structures, economies, and logics.

The literary texts of Ena Lucía Portela and Antonio José Ponte, produced after the fall of the Soviet Union, challenge the legacy of the Revolution's productivist mentality and the government's efforts to domesticate "nature." In my reading of their texts, I underscore their deliberate strategies of impropriety, their uneconomic verbosity, their refusal to provide self-identifying subject models, and their predilection for non-anthropocentric perspectives. Specifically, I consider how their texts at once protest "inhuman" or "dehumanizing" conditions, while not appealing to a shared humanism or a politics of representation. Where cultural products have traditionally been cited as evidence of a transcendental human spirit, the rising above mere material subsistence, I argue both writers link writing and creativity to becoming-animal. Ultimately, their novels destabilize dominant modes of seeing, knowing, and relating, and challenge the limits of what constitutes the political.

In ending with the seminal film, *Fresa y chocolate*, I shift to a more characterlogical based reading and consider how subjects that had been deemed in excess to the national



body, specifically the figure of the homosexual, are allegorically incorporated through the paradigms of friendship and hospitality. Where queer theorists have strongly critiqued the film as an attempt to neutralize the oppositional charge of the homosexual figure—a threat to the integrity of the body politic—I draw from Roberto Esposito’s aporetic elaboration of *immunitas*, in order to complicate our understanding of incorporation and reconsider the political potential of the film. Significantly, Esposito tells us “This homeopathic protection practice—which excludes by including and affirms by negating—does not consume itself without leaving traces on the constitution of its object.”<sup>7</sup> Following Esposito’s thinking, in its incorporation of the gay man through a national allegory, *Fresa y chocolate* affirms the oppositional charge it aims to deactivate. And the foreign bodies it wished to expulse necessarily contaminate the body politic.

In the very diverse works studied here we find the prevalence of non-normative sexual behavior, criminal activity, unproductive citizens, trans-species anatomies, as well as sick and disfigured bodies. In their attention to material and territorial forms of dependency, these writers and artists undermine the presumptions of human sovereignty and illuminate the hubris of modernizing national projects. As such, *Touching Impenetrable Bodies* proffers alternative ways of thinking community: Departing from the notion of human exceptionalism and its willingness to sacrifice the non-conforming for future ends, community here is imagined as a shared vulnerability and difference.

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<sup>7</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity, 2002, 2014) 8.

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