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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8057h30g>

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Publication Date

2019-04-03

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English 184.6

20 March 2019

Can the Subaltern Speak?: The Ringing Feminine Silence at the center of Allende's "And of Clay are we Created?"

On the night of November 13, 1985, the Nevado Del Ruiz volcano erupted in Columbia. In the mayhem that followed, a 13-year-old girl, Omaira Sánchez, her legs trapped under the door of her house, locked by the intertwining arms of a dead aunt, waited to be rescued for three agonizing days (Treaster). Newspaper reports from the time confirm that Omaira remained lucid and communicative for much of that time. She talked to the rescue workers and journalists surrounding her. She drank coffee and ate sweets. She laughed and prayed and cried. As the effects of the prolonged exposure finally set in, Omaira said a last goodbye to her mother and requested to be allowed to rest. Right before the end, on the third morning, she started hallucinating, worrying that she will be punished for missing school. Her eyes had turned red, her skin white before she finally pitched backward in the muddy water. The intense media coverage focused on her ultimately ended when someone covered her with a blue and white checkered cloth (Nucilli). It is this strange truth that almost seems to lend itself to the genre of magical realism that Isabelle Allende tries to recover in her short story "And of Clay are we Created."

The harrowing ordeal and tragic death of Omaira Sánchez seems to belong to the realm of the marvelous¹. It seems “improbable” if not impossible for a girl to have suffered 60 hours surrounded by technological paraphernalia that broadcasted her suffering live to the world while the equipment required to excavate her from the muddy debris that will finally become her grave is never in sight. The endless nature of time manifests itself as it stretches around the comings and goings of the rescue workers, journalists, cameramen, even politicians. Reality merges into fiction and fiction into reality as Omaira slips between different levels of consciousness. Omaira herself emerges almost a supernatural being with astounding powers; her indomitable spirit and courage echoes in her words as she jokes and chats in a situation that would shatter the sturdiest adult. It is ironic that the courageous, angelic image of Omaira Sanchez presented by Frank Fournier’s award-winning photo, and the factual footage of her ordeal is fictively represented as the almost abstract Azucena in Allende’s “And of Clay are we Created.” “And of Clay are we Created” is the final tale in Allende’s collection of short stories titled “The Stories of Eva Luna” and together with the “Prologue” uses a meta-fictive stance to interrogate the role of visual as well as literary modes in the representation of suffering. I argue that though, Allende’s fictive depiction is very sensitive to and focuses on the voyeuristic male gaze of the modern media directed at Azucena (the character representing Omaira Sánchez), it in fact uses the figure of Azucena to do symbolic work crucial to the male bildungsroman at the center of the narrative.

¹ Carpentier is known for his theory of *lo real maravilloso*. In the prologue to *The Kingdom of this World*, a novel of the Haitian Revolution, he asks: "But what is the history of America but a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?" Situations that appear so extreme that the line between reality and fiction seems to blur adhere to Carpentier’s notion of “the marvelous in the real.”

The failure of the imagination, of words, of storytelling, in “saving” Azucena from the epistemic oblivion female objects of the camera’s lens suffer, contradicts the initial promise of the epigraph invoking Sheherzade’s “A Thousand and One Nights.”

Allende’s “Prologue” in *Cuentos de Eva Luna* (*The Stories of Eva Luna*) sets the stage for her intervention. It reveals a series of crucial dichotomies/binaries: the male gaze versus the female gaze, the power of words versus the power of an image, reality versus fiction, the spectator versus the protagonist, intimacy versus distance. The “Prologue” invests heavily in the juxtaposition of the male “visual” mode against the more female “literary” mode of decoding/perceiving the world. Written in the second person point of view, it ushers the reader intimately close to the focalization of a male photojournalist, Rolf Carlé. His intense gaze is trained on his lover, Eva Luna, a story teller. The prose opens with a particularly potent image of her undressing: “You untied your sash, kicked off your sandals, tossed your full skirts into the corner ... and loosened the clasp that held your hair in a ponytail” (Allende 3). This word choice that evokes a loudly feminine performance: “sash,” “sandals,” “full skirts,” and long “loosened” hair, seems to adhere more to the male imagination than a genuine female presence. Even if Eva Luna is indeed attired as described, the way she is posed by the opening lines suggests that the male gaze is imposing a preordained frame onto her presence, which traps her in a loudly performative femininity that seems to be unravelling in front of the male protagonist.

The text appears cognizant of this deliberate staging. Though, Carlé’s character exhibits a need for projecting/controlling his environment, he does not completely adhere to the rigid, imperialistic, archetypical male. He is introspective and sensitive of his own limitations. In the next reflective line, he acknowledges the limit of his own perspective; Carlé admits, “We were too close to see one another” (3). This examination of the inability to “see” each other, to

perceive, to connect even when we are particularly close to the object of our attention is a thread present throughout the “Prologue” and the short story “And of Clay are we Created.” Partly, this inability to “see” is imputed to their emotional and physical intimacy: “we were too close to see” (3). The narrator acknowledges this disconnect may also be due to the different modes of perception used by the male/female dyad. Hers is a feminine reliance on words, imagination, and creativity: “language is an inexhaustible thread you weave as if life were created as you tell it,” asserts Rolf about Eva (4). His is a nostalgic “memory” as well as an “intention captured on grainy paper or cloth” (4). Both try to create meaning in their worlds through memory: however, her form is more fluid, more open to ambivalence, while his is “frozen,” it may be “soft” or “warm” depending on the haze of his recollection, but still inflexible and implacable, like his gaze.

Though, the introspective male voice of Carlé admits (and submits) to the power of the female presence around him: “You pressed against me, you explored me, you scaled me, you fastened me with your invincible legs, you said a thousand times, come, your lips on mine” (3), the text acknowledges that this influence and power is limited, as it takes place in a highly erotic intimate setting which offers only temporary submission. Just as Sheherzade’s words only allow her a temporary reprieve, the feminine presence in Allende’s prologue has a fleeting power. This encounter, just as Sheherzade’s encounter, seems to occur on male terms; the silent Eva Luna in the “Prologue” is presented and caught in the still frames the male narrator Carlé prefers. “Tell me a story that you have never told anyone before. Make it up for me,” he insists just like the Emperor in “A Thousand and One Nights” (5). There is an acknowledgement right at the beginning of the collection that the storytelling proceeds at the request of and in service of a male narrative. Carlé’s insistence that the tale made up for him must be unique (“never told

anyone before”) and must serve him, (“for me”) his needs and desires, foreshadows that Eva’s storytelling will serve and, in some way, save him from his rigid perspective. Azucena, herself, will only appear as a conduit to his self-realization in the story that follows.

The dilemma of the silent feminine other finding a voice to represent herself in an ultimately male narrative frame has been a contentious issue within postcolonial and subaltern studies. Leading postcolonial scholar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes the double bind of the subaltern female: “It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (qtd. in Parry 28). Embedded in “an ideological construction” that keeps the “male dominant” the subaltern² female who is mostly spoken about and spoken for plays a peripheral role. Ritu Birla returning to Spivak’s original groundbreaking essay shows how within two opposing patriarchal discourses, the women’s voice is always “ventriloquized” as an absent presence (94). Azucena in “And of Clay are we Created” seems an absent present figure whose pain is ventriloquized through the news media and Rolf Carlé.

Let us focus first on the role of the camera’s lens in supplanting Azucena’s presence. Spivak in her more recent work has shown how accessibility (through technological advances in the media and globalization) has in fact worsened the appropriation of women’s voice and agency originally posed in “Can the Subaltern Speak”: “Because of the proliferation of proxies to speak for her in international civil society, the subaltern woman is in fact more restricted, more

² “Everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference. Now who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern.” (Spivak 1992, qtd. in De Kock 35).

muted today than she even was in an earlier moment of capital's globalization" (Birla 94). The camera's lens that claims to capture and "freeze" Azucena and package her in a single frame for the rest of the world can be thought of as one such proxy.

It is significant that "And of Clay are we Created" opens with a scene of suffering that like all catastrophic events on news media seems dramatically staged. Allende places Azucena, the "lily" of the mudslide in the center and focuses our attention on the television cameras trained on her (319). "In that vast cemetery ... the odor of death" was attracting "vultures from faraway" (319). Thus, Allende aligns the television audience consuming distant images of suffering with "vultures." The voyeuristic male gaze in the "Prologue" that fastidiously captures its prey in a staged frame is replicated here by a distant television news audience. The narrator's who is now ironically Eva Luna herself depicts a canvas of acute suffering and terrible apocalyptic destruction behind a television screen. For the viewer's instant titillation appear the dramatic images of villages buried in "unfathomable meters of telluric vomit," beneath which lie "twenty thousand human beings and an indefinite number of animals putrefying in viscous soup," and in the midst of this spectacular "immense desert of mire" is Azucena her "head budding like a black squash from the clay" (319-320). Both the deliberately dramatic imagery and the matter of fact tone in which the description is delivered replicates actual media news footage which focuses on the spectacular to attract and retain viewer attention.

The dangers inherent in using photojournalism to capture images of suffering (specifically in the context of war) have been forcefully elucidated by Susan Sontag in her work *Regarding the Pain of Others*. She says that "(i)t seems the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked" (28). The hunger of the camera trained on Azucena resonates with Sontag's sentiment that the modern "tele-intimacy

with death and destruction” has made suffering a part of “domestic, small-screen entertainment” (14). Sontag asserts that “(p)erhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it” (29). The extensive technical paraphernalia itemized by Eva Luna: “spools of cable, tapes, films, videos, precision lenses, recorders, sound consoles, lights, reflecting screens, auxiliary motors” plus personnel, “electricians, sound technicians, and cameramen” is extremely effective in transmitting sharper footage of Azucena’s pain to “millions of screens around the world” (Allende 326). What such equipment cannot do is to alleviate her pain. Conspicuously absent is the pump needed to save Azucena’s life. Allende’s indictment of the role of news media and bureaucracy, as well as the complicity of a passive television audience whose response is limited to their own fleeting emotional needs, aligns with Sontag’s examination of the image as an essentially problematic medium for representations of suffering. About the spectator of these images of suffering Sontag asserts, “The rest of us (apart from those who view pain to alleviate it) are voyeurs, whether we like it or not” and Allende’s depiction of the role of photojournalism and the distant viewer seems partly to re-echo this.

Let us now turn to the second proxy. Rolf Carlé, with the camera as an extension of his male self, also speaks for and instead of Azucena. To an extent, Allende’s text uses the figure of Rolf Carlé to stage the fascination the modern audience has with images of the heroic male savior. He makes his appearance dramatically, descending in a “television helicopter” to the heart of the chaos (320). Though, Eva Luna as Carlé’s lover is not exactly a typical distant television viewer, her reactions to Carlé seem to replicate a fan’s adulation. In a “*bedlam* (my emphasis) of lost children, wounded survivors, corpses and devastation” his is the “calm voice” of reason (320-321). Reporting “with awesome tenacity,” we are informed that “nothing could

shake his fortitude or deter his curiosity” (321). The secret of his superpowers, we are told by Eva Luna, the narrator is “the lens of the camera” (321). The magical “lens” creates a “fictive distance” that allows him to safely observe from a comfortable vantage point (321). Thus, behind the camera’s lens, he appears almost emotionally inoculated from the pain he witnesses, feeling no pressure to participate vicariously through empathy.

This initial “fictive distance” collapses, however, as Carlé chooses to remain beside Azucena. His emotional growth, occurs slowly, as he forsakes the camera, depicted as the male mode of perception in the “Prologue,” and relies on words and stories to reach and console Azucena. At the beginning of the short story, we see Carlé amazingly active. He “film(s)” the volunteers and the first responders, “his camera zoom(s) in on the girl, her dark face, her large desolate eyes, the plastered down tangle of her hair” (321). Here the “object” of his curiosity is broken down into her constituent pieces; the camera consumes her surface piecemeal, face, eyes, hair, with no hint at the complex interiority within. The mud or clay in which Azucena, the Lily, is “rooted” is an important motif within the text. It appears to be the symbol of the common humanity we all share as the title establishes: “And of Clay are we made.” Only after Carlé submerges himself in the same mud, does his emotional/spiritual connection to her, begin to blossom. As he “slowly work(s) his way forward with mud up to his waist” he forsakes his camera and is talking to Azucena to distract her (321). This is the first step towards a change in his perspective.

Carlé’s efforts to rescue Azucena force him to leave his comfortable position behind the camera, but it takes him longer to leave the comfortable role of the heroic reporter. We are told that the “reporter” is “determined to rescue her from her death” (322). After finally just settling down to radioing for a pump, it still takes him several hours to accept that he is not in a position

of control. As the constant movement of rescue efforts and media coverage whirs around him, he himself has to slow down, trapped like Azucena and finally accept that “time ha(s) stagnated and reality ha(s) been irreparably distorted” (323). This move away from certainty to ambiguity allows him to open himself (his present and past) to a self-examination. The first step to this self-scrutiny is done by going down memory lane. However, this time his recollections are not entirely frozen in images, as he asserts previously in the “Prologue.” The narrator, who is interestingly now Eva Luna instead of Carlé, shares: “To pass the hours he began to tell Azucena about his travels and adventures as a newshound, and when he exhausted his memory, he called upon imagination, inventing things he thought might entertain her” (323-324). He appears to have started relying on “words” to perceive and decode the world. He has adopted Eva Luna’s role as a story-teller to help sustain himself and Azucena.

The second day finds Carlé like a mirror reflecting Azucena’s pain. She is “greatly weakened” and he looks “near exhaustion” (325). He can no longer look at her through a lens. Her symbolic appropriation is not a burden he is willing to carry anymore; it is the other reporters who transmit her images now (325). Rolf Carlé is metamorphosing slowly under Eva Luna’s intense gaze. He is no longer the Emperor asking for tales made up specifically for him. He is the feminine story-teller distracting death by repeating “the stories” Luna has shared in “a thousand and one nights” with him (327). He is the feminine nurturer singing “Azucena to sleep with old Austrian folk songs” (327). As the night intensifies, so does his doubling with Azucena: “Azucena had surrendered her fear to him” and “had obliged Rolf to confront his own” (327). Facing his past demons, the horrors of a concentration camp and the embedded trauma of domestic violence, “he found himself trapped in a pit without escape, buried in life, his head barely above ground” (327). Guilt, fear and pain of a traumatic childhood leads to a moment of

epiphany: “he had come face to face with the moment of truth” (328). The camera’s frozen frames were just a weak protective ploy to bury his past. He has to become Azucena, in order to face, like her the ultimate terror of certain annihilation and endless pain: “He was Azucena, he was buried in the clayey mud, his terror was not the distant emotion of an almost forgotten childhood, it was a claw sunk in his throat” (328). The clay, the viscous connecting soup, from which we are made, has merged the victim and the survivor into one. Rolf’s metamorphosis, his transformation, from a staunch male perspective intent on frozen certainties and stringent frames, has changed to a female perspective empowered with the flexibility and creativity of words.

Allende’s choice to focalize her narration from the point of view of a distant viewer, specifically Eva Luna, is a deliberate inversion of the “Prologue.” Since, the text seems to elevate the literary mode of representation above the visual mode, Allende’s choice of Eva Luna, the story-teller as the narrator for Carlé’s bildungsroman seems fitting. In an interview with John Rodden, Allende shares that she wrote three different versions of “And of Clay we are Made.” She first wrote the story from the viewpoint of the trapped little girl (Omaira/Azucena). She said she was not satisfied with that effort and tried re-writing the story from the perspective of the man who tried to rescue the little girl (Carlé). She still found something “phony” in that story and re-wrote it from the perspective of the woman behind the television screen watching the man trying to rescue the little girl (Eva Luna) (Rodden 353-354). The woman Eva Luna is also incidentally the character with whom Allende, herself, identifies the most. As such, she does not appear like any other ordinary television viewer and the text depicts her positively. She is in many ways an “exceptional” witness like Carlé. She attempts to rescue Azucena almost as vehemently as Carlé does. At “National Television” headquarters she makes desperate phone calls to obtain the pump and issues urgent pleas for help through the radio (324). Unlike other

reporters and viewers, she is actively seeking the disaster's footage because of her emotional connection with the event. She seems to experience the torment of that quagmire almost as acutely as him: "I was there with him. The child's every suffering hurt me as it did him, *I felt his frustration, his impotence* (My emphasis)" (324). Luna, therefore, almost doubles Carlé here. Notice again how the focus is still on Carlé's feelings. Even, through the gaze of a distant viewer, Azucena is almost invisible. The two different levels of proximity that Allende enacts between Azucena and her witnesses, Carlé and Luna, with one behind a camera and the other behind a screen, stage the same dynamic: the replacement of a female narrative with a male narrative.

This male bildungsroman is partially positive as it depicts a world where feminine pain symbolized by Azucena, who is oppressed not only by a collapsed social structure meant to protect her (her house's wall) but also ancestral traditions (her aunt's hands wrapped around her legs), is able to mold male perspective like clay through the process of empathy/identification. This empathy, however, seems a double-edged sword in some ways. In identifying with Azucena, Rolf almost dons her like a garment. She appears hollow within, as Rolf is able to occupy/invoke her body. Saidiya Hartman's work *Scenes of Subjection* warns against the precariousness of empathy in exactly this way. Describing the unintended consequences of an imaginative exercise by anti-slavery activist John Rankin, in which he imagines he, his wife and children as enslaved, Hartman concedes that although Rankin's imaginative flight, allows him to vicariously share the experience of a lash, condemn the master's pleasure in wielding it, as well as "unleash indignation and resentment" against the institution of slavery, it is "complicated, unsettling and disturbing" because "slipping into the captive's body unlatches a Pandora's box and surprisingly what comes to the fore is the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy" (18). This

slipperiness of empathy is evident in Allende's depiction of Carlé's identification with Azucena. Empathy according to Merriam Webster's is defined as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another" not the action of replacing the "feelings, thoughts, and experience of another" with one's own. Thus, right after Carlé's transformational epiphany, Azucena noting his grief, consoles him: "Don't cry. I don't hurt anymore. I'm fine," she says (329). Carlé's reply is note-worthy: "I am not crying for you," he says, "I am crying for myself" (329). Thus, Azucena's female trauma is smothered and replaced by Rolf's male trauma. In trying to understand, ameliorate Azucena's pain, Carlé's depiction seems unintentionally to replace it. The star male witness of female suffering can only reach an understanding of it by projecting those feelings onto himself. The dependence on this male conduit/male ventriloquist stages in some ways the impossibility of imagining or comprehending or representing the feminine body in pain.

For Spivak the role of literature and the imagination is to try to comprehend/understand "radical alterity³." The image of Azucena is an image of the other, the third world girl-child caught in an environment disaster - most probably brought on by a global environmental exploitation that is the price of progress - whose cries for help are globally consumed. Spivak contends that "radical alterity – the wholly other- must be thought through imagining. To be born human is to be born angled towards an other and others" (qtd in Birla 97). The way in which Allende's text presents the subaltern figure Azucena, this radical alterity, within the narrative of

³ "In *Totality and Infinity* (1969) Emmanuel Levinas re-positions the problem of alterity by thinking of the other not as another subject like me, but as radically Other, the one who puts me in question and calls me to my responsibility. This ethical relation is asymmetrical in the sense the Other is accessible only starting from an I. However, the Other is no longer defined by his or her differences from me, but by the way he or she exceeds this relation in absolute separation from me" (Borges).

“And of Clay are we Created” actually elides any effort at imagining or angling towards this female other. The text though cognizant of how the terrible distance and proximity created by the mass media focuses a voyeuristic gaze on scenes of suffering, does not acknowledge the silencing of the feminine other Azucena. Both Rolf Carlé and Eva Luna, one behind a camera, the other behind a further television screen, seem “too close to see” Azucena. It is ironic then that the photographic news footage of Omaira Sanchez though it can only really give the viewer a fleeting image of her suffering, appears to provide more space to her presence than a fictive depiction which is supposed to be enlaced with the power of words and imagination.

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