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The Empathy Archive: History, Empathy and the Human Rights Novel in the Americas

By

Irina Popescu

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Francine Masiello, Co-Chair

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Abstract

The Empathy Archive: History, Empathy and the Human Rights Novel in the Americas

by

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This dissertation examines how a set of postmodern contemporary novels by women, queer, and writers of color in North and South America reframe the parameters of narrative empathy in order to revise what constitutes as an ethical human rights novel.

This project is part of a growing scholarly discourse connecting the evolution of the novel in the Americas with changing conceptions of human rights as connected to racial, ethnic, and gender identity in the Americas. The writers discussed reconfigure the relationship between reader and victim within the human rights narrative genre. This reconfiguration is founded on a critical reconstruction of the problematic use of sentimental empathy in the nineteenth-century rights novel. Since this former brand of sympathy joined the burgeoning discourse of rights in the Americas to the representation of racialized or gendered corporeal suffering, the reader's understanding of personhood in the nineteenth century was ethically misguided and predicated on the victim's indignity.

Chapter One details how Octavia Butler's *Kindred* critically rewrites nineteenth-century foundational nation-building texts. This chapter exposes the dangers of narrative voyeurism masking itself as empathy and instead points to an empathy devoid of identification through bodily suffering. Chapter Two looks at Sylvia Iparraguirre's *Tierra del Fuego* in order to deconstruct and revise both the colonial travel narrative and the South American nation-building genre. This chapter maps an alternative foundation for narrative empathy by fostering legal and temporal visibility for the indigenous subject and land. Chapter Three examines how Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* engages with nineteenth-century melodrama to define empathy as abject corporeality. This chapter defines empathy through psychological proximity and touch, demonstrating how the novel reforms political and gender identity at the cusp of Argentina's Dirty War. Chapter Four turns to an examination of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*. Here empathy is defined through the reader's understanding of how nineteenth-century legal practices devastatingly defined land, voice, bodies, and citizenship in the United States. Chapter Five discusses Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* through its documentation of hemispheric genocide. This chapter shows how aesthetics can ethically capture empathy through silences and voids, documenting indigenous historical and bodily trauma.

Human rights law and legal policy shapes and is shaped by the formal qualities of the novel and other art forms. The hemispheric human rights novel (1970-2009) uses narrative empathy to develop a closely interconnected relationship between law and literature. This, in turn, revises the relationship between the reader, the victim and national history by teaching readers how to ethically engage with the bodies and minds of the victims presented. First, the revision of the nineteenth-century melodrama and sentimentalism particular to the hemispheric context enables readers to witness the formal construction of an aesthetic model which uses absence and corporeal abjection in order to represent human rights abuses. And secondly, the use of legal documents and national history formally within the novelistic space allows readers to access literature vis-à-vis the national-legal space. Ultimately, as the reader beings participating in this process of decoding, their new responsibilities for the ethical reading practices demanded by the human rights novel are laid out, transforming the reader into an ethical witness.

*To my parents,
for teaching me about empathy.*

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Acknowledgments

When I first started this project five years ago, I found myself in a cold archive in Viedma, Argentina, rummaging through old newspapers in hopes that somehow, the idea for this project would appear. I wanted to take this chance to thank the individuals and institutions that made this work possible.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. Francine Masiello has challenged me to think about human rights and their relationship to the literary and cultural landscape of the Americas in ways I would have never imagined possible. She has changed the way I think about the novel as a form and encouraged me to use the power of aesthetics to connect the hemispheres. In always urging me to think broadly about inquiries that engage academics both in the United States and in Latin America, she has nurtured my on-going ambition to provide a line of discourse between North and South. Francine's advice, encouragement, and good spirits have constantly been inspiring my motivation. Estelle Tarica has been an incredible mentor and friend. Her relentless optimism and constructive criticisms made this project infinitely better. I have written her panicky emails, I have sent her some of the worst versions of drafts, the draft of drafts, and through it all she always found ways to encourage me, to push me and to help me define the often-tricky parameters connecting human rights and literature. She and Francine are constant reminders of the kindness in academia and the solidarity existing between female academics and mothers. Steven Lee's kind, steady advice made me constantly think of my work comparatively, reminding me of what is unique about this project, and what it can contribute to our understanding of the joint literary history of the Americas. He has constantly pushed this project further, forcing me into lines of inquiry that have made this project what it is today. Michel Lucey has constantly urged me reconsider fundamental ways in which I approach the novel as a form. His ability to close read a text is simply astonishing, as is his power to synthesize and urge me to cultivate the most important contributions made by this project.

I developed an interest in reading on my own to ameliorate how isolated I felt from my community and peers throughout my adolescence, as young immigrant in a new country. Though I fell in love with reading at a young age, it was not until my sophomore year at UT Austin that I realized this love of books could be something to pursue. I took my first World literature seminar with Brian Doherty, where he showed me how immigrant stories have the power to shape history. In his course, I finally saw myself reflected in my class materials. Then I went on to take classes with Adam Newton, Mia Carter and Joseph Kruppa, who became my mentors, urging me to tackle the complexity of modernism and postmodernism while also encouraging me to apply to graduate school. At UC Santa Barbara, Carl Gutiérrez-Jones taught me that literature can effect human rights, and encouraged me to think about the connection between cultural production and rights discourse.

The Departments of Comparative Literature, Spanish and English at UC Berkeley have been invaluable in shaping this project. The countless seminars and my extended

cohort of *latinoamericanistas* and *Americanists* have helped expand the ways in which I understand North and South, as well as helping me articulate what was unique about my own perspective. The Department of Comparative Literature has supported this dissertation before it even became an idea. They have funded summers of research and language travel, as well as providing me with Dissertation Completion Fellowship, which enabled me to fully dedicate my time to writing. I want to thank Sandy Richmond and Lauren Taylor, in particular, not only for always being on my side, but for their constant support throughout this long process of writing, teaching and even motherhood.

My friends, from near and far, have, through their constant encouragement kept me optimistic and sane throughout this entire process. Kristie Soares and Emily Scheines have, through their love and constant support, helped me through all of the ups and downs of graduate school and this dissertation. They have become integral components to my surviving graduate school by always listening and responding with love and open-mindedness. Miguel Nolla's ability to make even the heaviest of situations seem lighter through his inherent optimism, has helped me persevere and realize that anything you devote a decade to will have its rough edges and patches. My best friends Giulia Bettio, Deidra Mayberry and Sara Eftekhari, have always checked in, as if they knew exactly the right moment to call and lend an empathetic ear. Our friendship has been partly responsible for my deep belief in the power of empathy to change historical circumstances and individual consciousness. In Berkeley I have been lucky enough to meet some of my closest allies and friends. Jenelle, Mia, Megan and Molly, you punctuated the rhythms of graduate life with unparalleled culinary adventures timely happy hours, and contagious good spirits. Nicole and Antonio, you are family, lost brothers and sisters I was luckily enough to have found along the way. Jesse and Nate, your kindness and infinite wisdom have made every moment with we spend together utterly unique and stimulating.

I think that the seed for this project was planted when I was a child and began noticing how poetry, novels, art, and even the radio can be used by artists and scholars to impact real political change, even in the most frightening times. My parents, Tamara and Gelu, have not only constantly supported me, but through their love I began, at a young age, to understand that empathy is something that will make a difference in the way the world functions. No words can even capture the amazing qualities of my parents. Their determination, love and understanding are beyond comprehension. I will spend the rest of my life aspiring to reach even a fraction of their greatness. My mom's compassion, humor, supreme kindness, and her love of books all convinced me that a study of empathy and literature was worthwhile and could effect change in the world. She has also taught me that, as a woman, I have extra reservoirs of strength and patience that I can access in a time of need. My dad's constant support, in life and my academic whims, has gotten me through many trying times and convinced me to always take it one step at a time. He has taught me that failure is not really failing; you're still succeeding because at least you tried. Both have nurtured the idea that, as immigrants, we are lucky to have two cultures, two languages, and two identities constantly shaping us. My inherited Argentine family, Denise, Victor, Dani, and Andi (and the rest but you are too long to list), have emitted so much positivity throughout the years and their amazing capacity to make me laugh is something that I have cherished immensely. My two sisters (in-law), Heather and Sarah, thank you for your love and the immense kindness you radiate into the world.

My husband Javier should really get co-authorship. He has been my biggest reader, supporter and critic. He has always pushed and supported my ideas, even towards the end when the revisions seemed like they'd take my soul away. His knowledge of Argentina and willingness, even as a historian, to see that literature too shapes national constructions, has pushed this project forward. I don't think a kinder, more generous and perfect human being exists. And to my son Mateo, you have taught me that I do have superhuman strengths. I *can* write a chapter with you strapped to me in a carrier as I bounced on a yoga ball to make sure you remained asleep, while my fingers type away. I think you must have dreamt of human rights since you were born and, although you made this project seem impossible at times, you've taught me that motherhood and academia can go hand in hand.

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A few years ago, I traveled to Patagonia and spent over six months in Viedma, a windy city in southern Argentina, near the Atlantic coast. Part of my trip was helping out a fellow researcher with archival materials, and part of it was spent figuring out if I would need the archive for my own developing project. The first day I walked into the Archivo Histórico Provincia de Río Negro, I had no idea what to ask for, what to look for, or where to begin. All of the records were held in a small, cold, and windowless room near the back of the study area where a few scattered scholars peacefully sifted through the last two hundred years of Argentine history. Metaphors kept rushing to my mind as I looked in on these scholars, their fingers blackened by the newspaper clippings, nineteenth-century court cases, and other historical documents that left residues of the past on their searching flesh.

Sitting in that cold room, the latest novel I recently read on my trip to Bariloche came to my mind: Sylvia Iparraguirre's *Tierra del Fuego*. The novel discusses the relationship between Jemmy Button, a *yámana* native, and Jack Guevara, an Argentine *criollo*, providing the reader with a glimpse of indigenous history within Argentina. I remembered the novel for two reasons. First, the novel ends in a courtroom and Iparraguirre presents actual historical documents within the fictional universe she creates. And second, because in that moment I recalled reading that its author had spent time in Museo Etnográfico in Buenos Aires before she began writing the novel. I imagined her sifting through *yámana* artifacts, as the narrative began shaping around her. After a few moments, while choosing what was to be my seat in the archive's study room, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* also crossed my mind. Like *Tierra del Fuego*, it exposes the author's love of the archive. I remembered reading an interview with Butler some years ago, where she admitted to having spent time in an archive in Maryland before writing *Kindred*, hoping to paint a better picture of what plantation life was really like there. Though it had been years since I read it, I suddenly remembered that *Kindred* ended with the protagonist's travel to a historical archive in Maryland.

Archives entered into my mind in that reading room in Viedma and have been permanently inhabiting it ever since. Yet, as I sat rummaging through old newspapers, desperately hoping to trace the rise and fall of indigenous communities within Argentina in the late nineteenth century, I noticed no mention of these communities at all. Yet I knew they existed and continue to exist throughout Argentina. So why were these pieces of the historical archive, the ones leaving permanent marks upon my fingertips, as the years of accumulated dust sprinkled the air around me, marked by historical silences and voids? I wondered what Iparraguirre and Butler felt as they sifted through their own archives. Did they make the determination to use their own unsettling archival experience as a means of creating an alternative historical archive? An archive inhabited by the novels they wrote? I imagined that alternative archive, an archive of empathy and presence, one filling the silences designed by history.

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Novels across the Americas, since the nineteenth century, provide an alternative historical archive through their engagement with human rights discourse, which in turn provoke an intimate connection between fiction and history by fostering empathy between a reader and character. For instance, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) the reader actively learns how to piece together different aspects of the black experience vis-à-vis psychological and physical suffering. Likewise, in Peru, Clorinda Matto de Turner's *Aves sin Nido* (1889), exposes readers to a small segment of the Quechua community through representations of suffering and hardships in a small Peruvian village. These nineteenth-century novels aim to provide the reader with a full aesthetic experience, a realistic and often sentimental lens to better understand the communities and individuals they depict. Yet, as I sat in the archival reading room, I was grappling with an aesthetically disorienting experience, one preventing me from gaining full access to any one experience. I realized, as I sifted through the materials in front of me, that I hardly understood anything, and the subjects in front of me began to drift further and further away. As I read through several court cases, it dawned on me that I was treating subjects like objects, merely glancing through their hardships in an attempt to better understand Argentine law at the time. I was, admittedly, a mere observer, a voyeur, of individual suffering. Yet, when I read *Kindred* and *Tierra del Fuego*, something else happened. I approached an understanding of the deeply rooted historical circumstances affecting the subjects portrayed primarily in terms of psychological suffering. I was, in effect, denied access to physical suffering in these novels and that led me to questions about the ethics of reading. How does one ethically engage with the representation of human rights abuses? In reading these novels, I began to question my own ethical engagement with the victims of historical human rights abuses positioned before me on the page.

This positioning brought with it a flood of questions and inquires. How does one read ethically? What is the connection between ethics and empathy in literature? What is the connection between historical understanding and empathy? How does what I loosely term the 'postmodern' novel promote a path to ethical empathy, rather than an empathy grounded upon the faulty identification between reader and victim? If our access to sympathetic portrayals is blocked, what happens to the model of narrative empathy the novel, especially a novel representing human right abuses, constructs? How do late-twentieth century novels representing human rights abuses unmake the nineteenth century's reliance on sentimental portrayals that use physical suffering to convince the reader into providing the abused subject with personhood?

Since the 1970's, throughout the Americas, a surge of literature has emerged to represent human rights crimes perpetuated by the nation upon its citizens. Many of these novels turn back to the nineteenth century, reflecting on colonialism, slavery, and the struggle for independence, as they resituate their own version of the historical archive. Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1984), for instance, connects legal policy and discourse to the decimation of Anishinabe tribes in Minnesota. The novel maps a timeline of human rights abuses perpetuated on the American Indian subject and community ironically through the establishment of legal personhood. *Tracks* structures an alternative model of narrative empathy through its reconstruction of the historical archive, promoting the reader's ethical access to lives fundamentally different from their own. It is within this narrative structure that empathy emerges as a phenomenon bound by the practice of

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ethical witnessing. As readers begin understanding of how colonialism, race, sociopolitical and cultural beliefs, and gender destabilize the conceptual frameworks of both basic human rights and personhood, narrative empathy is constructed.

The hemispheric postmodern novel's path to empathy is complicated and often convoluted, a path where contradictions showcase the limits and new possibilities of narrative empathy. This dissertation investigates how, in the last few decades, literature has strived to become a crucial vehicle for representing human rights abuses. The novel seeks to eradicate pity so that an ethically bound empathetic understanding can emerge. From the 1970's to today, the hemispheric novel has taken up the history of colonialism, slavery and the formation of personhood within the newly formed national space. In both Latin America and the United States, the novel form goes back to the nineteenth century to explore these histories and revise them in hopes of creating an alternative national history. The complex network of histories, stories, and relationships explored in the hemispheric novels that this dissertation investigates showcase how empathetic encounters between the reader and the subject/s at hand promote a new understanding of personhood, corporeality, rights, and the violation of those rights within the aesthetic realm. I argue that this encounter is founded on a new model of narrative empathy, where empathy no longer requires one's identification with a victim's suffering, or a vicarious "experiencing" of corporeal or psychological pain, but rather involves an understanding of a victim's place within their own history and their nation's history.

As readers, our empathy starts as we begin understanding the unequal status of so-called "human rights" within the United States and Latin America, at the cusp of their nation building projects. The narrative empathy developed within these novels requires a level of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and historical understanding in order for its non-vicarious, ethical emergence. As this dissertation shows, the postmodern hemispheric novels develop what I call "ethical empathy:" an ethical approach to empathy requiring that corporeal and psychological dignity drive empathetic representation. Although theorists such as Frederick Jameson have argued that the postmodern novel is ahistorical, my take is that the postmodern novels I discuss are anything but ahistorical.¹ In fact, their mission is to revise the national archive in order to make room for alternative histories, stories, and bodies. I argue that the hemispheric novel representing human rights abuses written after 1973 revises the relationship between reader and victim by developing a new model for narrative empathy that breaks with the model of narrative empathy established within the nineteenth century novel across the Americas.

Hemispheric Empathy: Definitions and Scope

The brand of empathy established in within the nineteenth-century hemispheric novel created exclusionary borders of national identity, even as it led to the development of rights for the slave and the colonial subject. The nineteenth-century sentimental and melodramatic traditions across the Americas joined the discourse of rights to the representation of corporeal

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), introduction.

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suffering, limiting the reader's critical understanding of personhood. In contrast, the use of empathy in the five novels examined in this project push against the nineteenth-century literary tradition to redefine the relationship between the violated body, the nation, and the reader. A new form of narrative empathy is built within the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century novel representing human rights abuses. This form requires that readers be responsive to the trauma underscoring the historical atrocities represented before them while also maintaining an ethical distance from the victim's body and mind

The novels studied in this dissertation come from throughout the hemisphere, were written by writers on the "outside" of the dominant national cannon, and in their own way represent a part of the contemporary postmodern narrative empathy constructed after the 1970's. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (U.S., 1979) and Sylvia Iparraguirre's *Tierra del Fuego* (Argentina, 1999) offer a critical rewriting of foundational nation building texts in order to expose the dangers of narrative voyeurism. After rejecting national myths, both novels point to an empathy devoid of identification through bodily suffering. This ethical empathy enables the reader to gain access to historical understanding rather than voyeuristic aesthetic experiences of a body in pain. Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (U.S., 1988) and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (El Salvador, 2004) use legal policies and truth commissions to reconstitute the history of hemispheric genocide from the perspective of indigenous persons in the midst of witnessing their own bodily trauma. These novels add a reconceptualization of genocide to include slavery and forced indigenous assimilation and displacement throughout North and South America. Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (Argentina, 1974) employs the politics of bodily abjection to demonstrate how empathy for the body of the other can reform sexual identity.

Hemispheric literature representing human rights abuses in the late twentieth century creates a rift by keeping the reader at a distance from the victim's physical body. For instance, in both Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and Sylvia Iparraguirre's *Tierra del Fuego*, novels representing hemispheric colonialism and genocide, the reader is exposed to the indigenous subject through the assimilatory legal frameworks setting limits on indigenous cultural identity, and not through the subject's pain and suffering. Our understanding of human rights abuses, therefore, is not predicated on the representation of an undignified body, but rather on our historical, and in this case, legal, understanding of colonialism. This rift is necessary in establishing the ethical guidelines for reading novels representing the victims of human rights abuses as it urges a reader to engage with a victim empathetically but removing the lens of pity which surfaces through the representation of a victim's extreme suffering.

What stylistic and narrative choices do authors make in order to ensure that their readers engage empathetically with the history represented inside their works? How do gender, race, and political identity shape narrative empathy? How does the concept of human dignity, the foundation for human rights discourses in the last three centuries, get reconfigured within these texts? These are some of the main questions this dissertation engages with as it explores the connection between narrative empathy, the hemispheric novel, and human rights. Formally, all the novels play around with the formal qualities of the historical archive, taking to task the concept of historical "truth" or accuracy. *Tracks*, for instance, uses real government treaties and acts throughout its pages to enact a critique on the legal spaces enveloping the American Indian

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community at the turn of the twentieth century. *Tierra a del Fuego*, likewise, provides actual transcripts from the Jemmy Button case, interspersing the fictional world with the legal-historical world the novel recreates. Stylistically, a turn to silence and voids occurs as the victim abuses are described. The unwillingness to let the reader become a voyeur predominates through each of the works investigated here, as textual absences enable the racialized or gendered body to preserve its inherent dignity. It is important to note that all of these novels are written either by women, queer writers, or writers of color. As such, issues of gender and sexuality, race and politics are always prevalent in constructing the dignified bodies these novels present and historicize.

I provide a way of grouping hemispheric literatures by suggesting that the postmodern novel constructs an ethics for reading historical atrocity and personhood through the dismantling of the nineteenth century's sympathetic model and the aesthetic reconstruction of psychological and corporeal dignity. Using this framework national history in Latin America and the U.S. can be better approached through an understanding of the physical and psychological body, as a vehicle for transmitting new approaches to reconstructing notions of citizenship and the national project across the hemispheres. For the postmodern novel this means that readers sidestep the ahistorical debate altogether as they are taught, quite pedagogically, *how* to empathetically engage with a victim's trauma by resisting voyeuristic identification and engaging in historical understanding as a means of approaching empathy. For hemispheric studies this engagement enables a version of hemispheric aesthetics to emerge, defining the contours of an ethically grounded narrative empathy for the late twentieth-century postmodern novel.

Reading and Rights in the Nineteenth Century: From Abolition to Human Rights

Sympathy, a foundational principle for rights-based democratic societies in the Americas, is an essential, yet problematic engine for early liberal human rights discourse. Sympathy's requirement of pity, pain, and suffering lays a faulty foundation for nineteenth-century reading practices and, by extension, human rights discourse, in the Americas. In critiquing this tradition, the postmodern novels investigated in this project question the very foundation of human rights discourse and empathy, revising conceptions of legal personhood across the Americas. This revision, then, discovers a more inclusive and diverse understanding of national identity and history.

This project is part of a growing discourse connecting hemispheric American studies with the evolution of the novel and changing conception of human rights. Lynn Hunt's seminal *Inventing Human Rights*, which established the connection between the eighteenth-century novel and the emergence of right-discourses during the Enlightenment, defined the terms of this interdisciplinary discourse. Hunt argues that the epistolary novel and art (mainly art depicting tortured victims) led to human rights discourse and practice². She demonstrates how the novel effectively dispersed new ideas about humaneness and humane ethical actions by exposing

² Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, 1st Norton paperback [ed.] (New York ; London: W. W. Norton, 2008), Introduction.

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readers to different plots, characters, and situations. In viewing human rights as an evolutionary process rooted inside the world of representation, Hunt empowers the novel as an art form that has the capacity to impact law and society through its ability to distribute empathy. Yet for Hunt, empathy is rooted in the acknowledgement of difference and the reader or viewer's ability to emotionally respond to the torture and suffering of another, a response founded on aversion. This version of empathy, therefore, becomes aversion therapy. Although she contends that the rise of the novel greatly contributed to the development of empathy, her focus on difference and bodies in pain as vehicles for promoting human rights discourse reveals the central paradox to rights discourse: how can human rights, centered on dignity, emerge from an empathy centered on difference and corporeal indignity? If empathy in these novels is reached by establishing a reader's aversion to pain and suffering, then what happens when pain and suffering are removed? Do victims stop being victims if they are not physically or mentally abused? Can empathy be produced without the spectacle of suffering? The focus on representing corporeal indignity resonated throughout the nineteenth-century literary tradition across the Americas (perhaps even across the globe) as nations began to concretize their national boundaries by defining the contours of the national subject.

Nineteenth-century sentimental novels across the Americas, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (U.S., 1852) and Gertrudis de Avellaneda's *Sab* (Cuba, 1841) used narrative as a means of provoking feelings of sympathy from the reader. The primary ways through which these feelings arose were through the manipulation of the reader's heartstrings, so to speak. In representing abused bodies, bodies in pain, indigenous subjects forcibly removed from their lands, the backs of slaves beaten by their masters, the cries of women losing their young to the auction block, these narratives joined the burgeoning discourses on human rights to corporeal suffering and the overall theme of psychological and bodily indignity. The empathetic encounters taking place in these nineteenth-century novels were ones predicated on establishing a clear difference between "us" (the reader) and "them" (the victim). These encounters grounded themselves upon feelings of pity and false identification, rather than feelings of empathy as grounded on an ethical reading practice. If it is true that human rights discourse in the Americas arose out of the nineteenth-century's abolitionist movement, which was predicated on the visibility of a violated slave body, then rights discourse is inherently intertwined with an individual's violation and not an individual's self-determination.³ In other words, the liberal human rights model is founded on the objectification of a suffering body.

The danger with this, as historian Samuel Moyn reminds us with respect to the United States, is that "the history of human rights first emerged as something like the history of American morals," which are often embedded in the public vis-à-vis nineteenth-century sentimental novels and slave narratives.⁴ Yet morals founded on a violated body lose stability as soon as that same body seeks recognition in the absence of its violation. Furthermore,

³ Parts of this argument were alluded to by both Saidiya Hartman in her book *Scenes of Submission* and by Jenny Martinez in her book on *The Slave Trade and the Origins of Human Rights Law*.

⁴ Samuel Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (New York: Verso, 2014), 4.

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“sentimentalism was profoundly selective, not just in the kinds of problems it targeted but also in the types of people who deserved pity.” I address the questionable morality-driven nineteenth-century liberal human rights model by suggesting that the postmodern hemispheric novel, in revising the path to moral or ethical reading, likewise reconfigures how human rights discourse should work and what it should comprise. As this new hemispheric tradition critically engages with nineteenth-century slave and travel narratives, and the sentimental and melodramatic traditions, human rights discourse is altered to include psychology and physical dignity especially along racial, ethnic and gender lines.

Hemispheric Postmodern Revisions: Narrative Empathy and the Reader as Ethical Witness

In *Human Rights Inc.*, Joseph Slaughter connects the plot structure of the modern bildungsroman to human rights discourse, suggesting that both “human rights discourse and narrative theory draw upon much of the same conceptual vocabulary of plot, character, and setting in their respective analyses of the sociology of human development.”⁵ International human rights, therefore, follow the plot structure of the bildungsroman, partly because “the rise of the novel has been consistently implicated in the rise of human rights’ two primary persons: the individual and the state.”⁶ The connections drawn between the individual and the state reveal literature’s impact in restructuring national history through the margins. In telling alternative stories, from the perspectives of previously silenced victims of historical and present-day human rights abuses, “literature has the potential not only to narrate what is known and identify absences but to express the shifting, uncertain, and non-narrative relations between the two. This does not mean that literature should transform trauma into a coherent narrative and make it comprehensible. Human rights stories at times risk an uncomplicated, overly neat pattern of crisis leading to clarity, action, rescue and, eventually, healing and justice.”⁷

I intended to refrain from simply labeling the novels in this dissertation as “human rights novels” since that labeling term has come to represent the type of literature dealing with the version of empathy I write against. However, what my project does is recreate the ethical parameters of the human rights novel as going against the human rights bestseller. The human rights bestseller, “as Elizabeth Anker has astutely asserts, constructs an “idealized human body, [and] moreover, finds an important corollary in the construct of the unified, nuclear, impermeable body politic. However, both the myth of the integrity of the natural human body and the symbolic economy of the national body politic are paradoxically consolidated by the specter of abused, broken, and profaned bodies, which in popular human rights discourses are

⁵ Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 91.

⁶ Slaughter, 91.

⁷ Fernando J. Rosenberg, *After Human Rights: Literature, Visual Arts, and Film In Latin America, 1990-2010*, Illuminations: Cultural Formations of the Americas Series (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 104.

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often complexly raced and gendered.”⁸ It is this specter I write against. Not the specter of the abused bodies themselves, but rather the specter constructed through these abused victims which is then deployed to foster feelings of pity from the spectator who can then easily turn their eyes away from indignity in front of them. Human rights discourse can often foster the perpetual indignity of the victim’s body and as such the victim has no chance of gaining the very integrity the rights model promises. Therefore, the victim has no foundation for gaining human rights because its humanity has been forcibly removed. The human rights novel is inherently flawed because it promotes this version of indignity, while sidestepping in-depth psychological portrayals of the victim and focusing instead on representing corporeal suffering. It is this indignity that the novels I discuss seek to first illuminate and then correct.

The “specter of abused, broken, and profaned bodies,” is risky since it directly links bodily suffering to human rights, therefore proclaiming that certain bodies gain rights only through their suffering. These characters, usually women, people of color and/or queer individuals, gain representation inside the “human rights best-seller” only as abused, pained bodies who the reader then “grants” rights to as they begin negotiating the fine line between vicarious witnessing, pity, and empathy. These bodies then, as Anker suggests, neatly follow the path to justice, gaining an access to the rights denied them only after their bodies and minds have undergone ultimate destruction. This pattern is dangerous because it suggests that only through extreme bodily suffering is an individual previously devoid of rights allowed access to the rights that we hold as universal. The paradox here is that only through suffering can suffering stop, and only through pain are individuals seen as human entities deserving of rights. Dignity, therefore, is constructed through indignity and thus necessitates indignity in order to exist. Yet, what happens when a person’s dignity is left intact? In other words, can we empathize with a victim without entering inside their realm of suffering? Why should the human rights novel proclaim rights by first stripping them away entirely?

The novels in this project are not human rights novels in the sense described by Slaughter or Anker. However, they are novels that investigate human rights discourse and atrocities. They do so in order to restructure narrative empathy as a productive and ethically guided phenomenon for the reader. In other words, the novels presented here *teach* a reader how to ethically engage with historical atrocity and the victim in ways that prevent identification and the vicarious appropriation and objectification of a victim’s trauma. They do this in three distinct yet interrelated ways: (1) linking the trauma at the heart of national history (in this case the history of the Americas) to trauma of colonialism, slavery and citizenship laws (2) illuminating the reader’s internal desire for identification with a victim’s trauma while demonstrating, through their engagement with nineteenth century narrative models, how that desire fails to pave the road to empathetic understanding and (3) reconstructing corporeality through abjection and absence as a means of setting limits on a reader’s access to bodily suffering and encouraging empathy to form through historical understanding rather than identification with a body in pain, and lastly (4) the novels do not seek to provide stories of struggle and triumph, in fact most end rather

⁸ Elizabeth S. Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 16.

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ambiguously, lacking a clear resolution. These postmodern novels access the sentimental tradition of the nineteenth century in order to develop a new ethics of reading historical atrocity and personhood. In reconfiguring this relationship, essential in drawing the contours of the liberal human rights model in Americas, the five novels in my project offer a revised understanding of national identity and rights discourse through their manipulation of postmodern aesthetics. Therefore, the production of what I term “ethical empathy” inside the postmodern novel replaces the nineteenth century’s “empathy as narrative voyeurism” or sentimental empathy tradition. The hemispheric postmodern novel, written by writers of color, women, and queer writers demands a new ethical engagement for narrative empathy on the reader’s behalf which relies on the way the readers learns to read the body of the nation’s victim.

Structure and layout

This dissertation is composed of five chapters. In Chapter One, “Empathetic Trappings: Revisiting Nineteenth Century Empathy in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*,” I present empathy as dystopia, unleashing a critique of identification by exposing the dangerous pitfalls of narrative empathy within the American sentimental tradition. I offer critical re-readings of foundational works in that tradition, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in order to position Butler’s novel inside two temporal and literary spaces. What Butler offers is a new version of witnessing abuse devoid of bodily suffering and identification through pain. The novel’s rejection of the nineteenth-century slave narrative and sentimental novel criticizes sentimentality as a means of provoking public empathy. The essential problem with the nineteenth century version of empathy is that it relies on an intimate identification between reader and character founded upon sentimentality. In its place, *Kindred* reveals a new critical apparatus, essential for a mobilization of empathy centered on reason, understanding, and often, distance between reader and victim.

This investigation of empathy helps shed light on the problematic construction of the early liberal human rights model across the Americas. In this chapter I engage with Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking study of nineteenth-century American slavery, *Scenes of Subjection*, and direct the chapter’s focus to the central question underlying Hartman’s work: “what interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes.”⁹ In steering clear of the shocking spectacle and focusing on mundane and familiar scenes in Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative*, Hartman questions why pain is the conduit of identification and why the visibility of pain fostered the empathetic bond between white reader and black body in the nineteenth century. In contrast, bodies in *Kindred* are not characterized only through pain, torture, and violation. The novel then disconnects the material body from its ability to generate empathy through suffering by enabling the reader/viewer to vicariously experience atrocity from afar. In its place Butler constructs a new version of empathetic witnessing, redefining the relationship between the violated body, the witness, and

⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

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the reader. This relationship drove eighteenth-century human rights proclamations and propelled the abolition movement in the Americas throughout the nineteenth century. And it is the same relationship, the one nurtured between victim and observer, determining the liberal human rights model today. *Kindred* exposes this faulty foundation, establishing a critique of the novelistic empathy model and, in turn, liberal human rights.

The revising of nineteenth-century narrative models continues with my examination of Sylvia Iparraguirre's *Tierra del Fuego*, a South American novel investigating the relationship between indigeneity and colonialism as represented by both the colonial travel narrative and the nation building novel. In Chapter Two, "Reclaiming the Void: The Empathetic Recovery of Patagonia and Omoy-Lume," I demonstrate how the novel deconstructs and revises both Alexander Humboldt and Charles Darwin's travel narratives, as well as traditional Latin American nation building texts such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo*. In revisiting these narratives Iparraguirre writes an alternative travel narrative, grounded upon the empathetic relationship between a *yámana* native (Jemmy Button/Omoy-Lume) and an Argentine national (Guevara). As Jemmy Button gains corporeal and psychological visibility, Iparraguirre rewrites Argentina's colonial and national past to include the indigenous other. Furthermore, the friendship developed between Button and Guevara creates the foundation for narrative empathy.

Iparraguirre's construction of the empathetic encounter between the two men helps revise national history, in turn giving birth to a new kind of narrative and, subsequently, a new kind of reader, one contesting official history by becoming aware of how colonial and national abuses impact the body and mind of the indigenous other. In tracking a historiography of Argentina's relationship with its indigenous past, I argue that late twentieth-century Argentine novelists rewrite colonial and national stories in order to include otherwise excluded subjects, problematizing the myth of Argentine cultural homogeneity through their engagement with the indigenous community and individuals. This in turn suggests that Argentine identity is intrinsically tied to understanding, recognizing, and empathizing with indigenous culture. This is particularly important in a nation that, to this day, continues denying indigenous history and presence within its national space.

During the 1990's, artists and novelists inside Argentina relied on the production of public empathy to reclaim a silenced national past and foster visibility. *Tierra del Fuego* connects the production of narrative empathy to the market demand for empathy in Argentina during the late twentieth century, as the surge of indigenous portrayals, the refocusing on Patagonia as a landscape, and the then recent incursions into the Jemmy Button story, construct the impetus for *Tierra del Fuego*. Iparraguirre's choice to infuse Button's biography inside Guevara's autobiography enables her to construct two national histories dependent on each other for survival. The novel illuminates how the structures of the colonial travel and nation-building narratives in Argentina led to the objectification of the other. The novel constructs a model of narrative empathy by showcasing the unethical model of "speaking for the other" that these previous narratives employed in representing indigenous bodies. Like *Kindred*, it keeps readers distant from the victim's suffering, rejecting the nineteenth-century travel narrative and Argentine nation-building novel by showcasing their ethical limitations. Empathy in *Tierra del*

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Fuego is produced through this ethical awareness and through the process of revising and decoding the founding concepts of Argentina's national construction: civilization and barbarism.

Corporeality grounds the third chapter, "Empathetic Encounters: Melodrama, the Body, and Abject Aesthetics in Manuel Puig's *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*." In this chapter, I connect three distinct narrative enterprises, nineteenth-century melodrama, Hollywood B-films, and twentieth-century postmodernism, to demonstrate how political, sexual, and class-based empathy is constructed inside Argentina's first "Dirty War novel." I argue that Puig employs the politics of bodily abjection to demonstrate how empathy for the body of the other can reform both sexual identity and patriarchy, as tied to cultural *machismo*. The novel, published in 1974, explores the shift in representation occurring throughout the Americas in the 1970's, especially as human rights gained political, social, cultural and legal visibility globally. Novels representing human rights abuses, and written during this time, began focusing on the relationship between reading, the reader, pain, and the material body. A fundamental paradigm shift occurred within these postmodern novels as corporeal abjection and alternative sexualities gained representation, leading to a new aesthetic evolution of the individual during and after the 1970's, especially within Argentina just two years before the start of the Dirty War.

This representational shift also produced a previously unexplored version of narrative empathy dependent on the body as a means of marking a relationship between self and other. Empathy, therefore, becomes an act of learning how to read the other, bringing the other in close proximity to oneself to foster an eventual contact between self and other. At first glance it may seem that Puig suggests that empathy is approached via bodily suffering. This is not the case however. The two individuals sharing the jail cell learn to understand each other through their political, gendered, and social histories as impacted by their nation's structural pattern of patriarchy. As such, Molina and Valentin experience the body of the other *through* this understanding, an ethical understanding of the body. The reader, in fact, is maintained at a distance as the novel formally refuses to describe the suffering body, leaving voids and ellipsis in place of linguistic signification.

Contrasting the empathetic dystopia presented in Butler's *Kindred* in Chapter One, *El Beso* reconfigures corporeality through intimacy, leading to the construction of a political utopia, centered on sexual identity and empathy. What develops in *El Beso* is what I call "abject aesthetics," a model for narrative empathy centering on the body as a vehicle for empathetic connection, which in turn impacts the formal composition of the novel. This empathetic model gets mapped upon the body of the text through voids, silences, the use of the ellipsis, and a stream of conscious narration. In other words, the eventual contact of the prisoners' bodies, both mentally and physically, as both prisoners learn how to empathize with each other, is directly linked to the formal composition of the novel itself. This empathy is constructed in three ways: (1) through reading and the excess of identification, (2) through abjection and the diminishing of the self/other divide, (3) and through the surrender to touch and desire which subsequently shapes a new identity. Unlike Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*, which expose the limits of empathy, *El beso de la mujer araña* illustrates empathy's potential in transforming a rigid sociopolitical world. In fact, it is the only novel in this project that, instead of revising old models of narrative to expose the dangers of past empathetic models

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and through that exposure offer an alternative, uses those very narratives to construct a model for corporeal empathy which then transcribes upon the formal qualities of the novel itself through the employment of the ellipsis to mark the voids of representation at the moments when the body experiences abjection.

Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* reproduces the transformative power of abjection that Puig also emphasized. In Chapter Four, "Mapping Genocide through Empathy: Law, Storytelling and Historical Memory in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" I explore how assimilatory legal policies, abjection and trauma are used to reconstitute American history through the American Indian perspective. This chapter shows how law, specifically the Dawes Act of 1887 and the Indian Boarding School policy, thrusts the American Indian body into the world of abjection and trauma. In revisiting these legal practices through the individuals and communities affected, the novel compiles a version of a "truth commission," as it documents the historical and legal policies affecting the American Indian subject from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth-century. Within this truth commission setting, the novel challenges the conceptions of legal personhood, or path to citizenship for the American Indian, by suggesting that the burgeoning human rights discourse is incompatible with land allotment acts and the assimilation policies defining legal personhood at the time. *Tracks* subsequently constructs a model for narrative empathy grounded upon the construction of a reader as an ethical witness to law's perpetuation of indignity on both the individual and community.

Published in 1988, *Tracks* maps the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century assimilation period in the United States. The intersections between the nation, the citizen, and what constitutes as 'American' literature merge inside Erdrich's postmodern narrative. The construction of hybrid orality, through the use of two contrasting narrators, Nanapush (a tribal elder) and Pauline (a young woman on the verge of religious assimilation) develops a sociopolitical dialectic inside the novel. Both narrators expose how nineteenth-century legal practices devastatingly defined land, voice, bodies, and citizenship in the United States. This sociopolitical exposition uncovers what many recent critics have come to term the American Indian genocide. By illuminating the genocidal legal practices during this time, *Tracks* uncovers a new version of American history within its pages. This history is rooted inside an empathetic recovery of the past. The model of narrative empathy constructed inside *Tracks* restricts victim objectification by using two narrators who define their traumatic relationship to the past in ways that set limits on the reader's accessibility to suffering. Empathy inside *Tracks* is *not* founded upon a reader's identification with a victim's suffering. In fact, suffering is so subtly demarcated throughout the novel that it gains little to no representation. In turn, the reader is forced to witness how the objective world of history and law, the primary shapers of the American landscape, affect the characters, plot and the author's stylistic choices.

The intersection between the historical truth commission and fiction creates a foundation for Chapter Five. In "The Limits of Empathy: Catharsis, Persecution and Mediation in Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*," I establish how the novel challenges the ethics of reading and witnessing by merging the novel and the truth commission together. By historicizing the legacy of colonialism and genocide in Guatemala, this chapter claims that Guatemala's nineteenth-century nation-building period was built on the destruction of its Mayan past. In grouping

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Guatemala's Civil War with its nineteenth-century colonial model for nation building, this chapter claims that the bodily trauma requires a new method of ethical witnessing. This method refuses a reader's direct access to pain by repositioning the indigenous person at the center of his/her trauma. Echoing Butler's *Kindred, Insensatez* reveals how nineteenth-century reading practices continue to corrupt the models for ethical witnessing.

Insensatez uses truth commissions to reconstitute the history of the Guatemalan genocide from the perspective of an outsider, whose reading about the bodily trauma of indigenous persons physiologically (and even physically) transforms him. My argument is that the novel demonstrates how reading atrocity begets the impossibility of empathy. Within this impossibility, ironically, empathy develops as an ethically guided trajectory for reading trauma. The argument for empathy made by the novel is one that positions readers within a world of contradictions. It teaches us that empathy is about learning to maneuver between the realms of proximity and distance, while embracing our desire for understanding by substituting it with our utter lack of understanding. It is about becoming aware of the traps of both aestheticizing trauma and our growing desire for identifying with the victim. Inside these contradictions, empathy takes shape. This empathetic path designed by the novel unravels one of the fundamental building blocks of narrative empathy: awareness. The novel establishes that narrative empathy, by nature, always entails distance, proximity, understanding and lack of understanding and only by becoming aware of these contradictions can we "read for empathy." This type of reading ultimately means we face the limitations that traumatic testimonies bestow, thus resisting any attempt to identify with the victim's pain or to allow trauma to exist solely within the realm of aesthetics.

I contend that these authors' exploration of narrative empathy within the postmodern hemispheric novel enables a direct line of discourse to emerge between North and South. This line of connection demonstrates how the novel across the Americas was responsible for promoting the discourse of rights and the concept of personhood that continues impacting the hemispheres today. Furthermore, the model of narrative empathy from the nineteenth century to today, especially the changes within the world of novelistic representation and its relationship to narrative empathy, enables us to become more attentive to how our own reading practices can often impact burgeoning human rights discourses. This, in turn, suggests that reading ethically can productively impact the ways in which we interact with sociopolitical structures and legal norms. As outlined throughout this project, the ethical parameters encapsulating this new model of narrative empathy are constructed in four intersecting ways.

The postmodern hemispheric human rights novel revises national history in order to include previously silenced stories within the parameters of documentation. In turn, this showcases how national and literary history inform one another and continue to do so. The ethical template of representing human rights abuses, and the body of the victim tied to those abuses emerges and teaches the reader how to read the trauma of others. The first step in this process occurs with a revision of the nineteenth-century melodrama and sentimentalism, two genres particular to the hemispheric context, and two genres which employ sympathy as a means of generating reader affect. As this revision unravels, a new aesthetic model of representing human rights abuses emerges. This model turns to textual absences or voids, positions the reader

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at a distance to psychological trauma and uses instances of corporeal abjection in order represent the victim of human rights abuses. Within this process of aesthetic reconfiguring, a decoding of legal documents and/or national history occurs within the novelistic space and, as the reader beings participating in this process of decoding, the new responsibilities for an ethical reading practice are laid out, transforming the reader into an ethical witness of history and human rights.

Chapter One

Empathetic Trappings:

Revisiting Nineteenth Century Empathy in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

Following Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights*, which established the connection between eighteenth-century literature and the emergence of right-discourses during the Enlightenment, scholars have started paying close attention to the connection between literature, empathy and human rights legislation. The sentimental novel, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, created the foundation for nineteenth century nation-based rights as founded on a strong identification between reader, character and text. However, we have yet to fully understand how postmodern novels critique this tradition and subsequently problematize the very foundation of human rights discourse and empathy. Octavia Butler's 1979 novel, *Kindred*, revises the sentimental tradition and its empathetic foundation. In doing so, the novel constructs a new critical reading practice critiquing liberal, universalized human rights discourse, founded on sympathy, voyeurism, and sentimental identification with Black suffering.

Sympathy, as defined by Adam Smith, is a foundational principle for rights-based democratic societies, and as such becomes an essential engine for early liberal human rights discourse. Yet sympathy "is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner."¹ The imagination allows us to enter into another's suffering, forming "any conception of what are his sensations."² Smith terms this "our fellow-feeling for the misery of others."³ Empathy, like sympathy, works in a similar way. It too engages the imagination to provoke fellow-feeling, however, unlike sympathy, empathy means quite literally putting yourself in another's shoes, without the prerequisite of sorrow or pity. Empathy does not (or at least *should* not) necessitate pain. One can empathize with a dinner scene, a smile, or a strong body. Yet empathy and sympathy are often overlapped and were consistently swappable within the nineteenth century sentimental tradition. What *Kindred* fashions is their separation, unveiling a new ethics of reading redefining empathy as devoid of pity and pained subjects. Since sympathy's requirement of pity, pain and suffering, lays the foundation for nineteenth century literature and reading practices in the United States, promoting democracy and novel formulations of human rights,

¹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments: To Which Is Added, a Dissertation on the Origin of Languages*, ed. Dugald Stewart, Bohn's Standard Library (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1911), 3, <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004460984>.

² Smith, 3–4.

³ Smith, 4.

many contemporary scholars have developed a critical discourse with the problematic versions of nineteenth century narrative empathy. What does it mean for human rights if the foundation for a democratic rights-based society is predicated on pity and suffering? What does it mean for literature?

*

“I lost an arm on my last trip home” is how Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel, *Kindred*, begins. Dana, the fragmented protagonist, first travels from 1976 to 1815 to save her white ancestor, Rufus, from drowning, ensuring her own birth in the process. Dana is struggling writer living in 1976 Los Angeles with her white husband, Kevin, who is also a writer and joins Dana on one of her travels, inevitably getting stuck in the nineteenth century for years. As Dana continues traveling, over the course of twenty-six years in nineteenth century time (just a few hours in her own time), back and forth between the two temporal spaces, her body and mind undergo traumatic reconditioning: a limb is lost, bruises and scars appear, she is forced into an ethical compromise, urging her black ancestor Alice to sleep with Rufus, as her bloodline, her genetic composition, gain agency, determining her actions. In continuing to move between 1976 and the mid- nineteenth century, she slowly transforms from historical voyeur to active participant in history. This transformation establishes a new ethics of reading and understanding human rights violations. In other words, through Dana’s own empathetic transformation, the novel teaches us how to read atrocity without falling into voyeurism.

Kindred is Butler’s best-known and most widely read novel. In an interview with Randall Kenan Butler remarks that while writing *Kindred* she was dealing with “some 1960s feelings” in an attempt to draw a seamless connection between the present and the past.⁴ The novel’s focus on intersecting two historical moments and times, suggests that Butler uses the past to rediscover the present—one marked by the Civil Rights movement, the establishment of the Black Panthers, and a reclaiming of inalienable rights on the behalf of people of color during the 1960s and 1970s. Although the time travel component contributes to the novel’s categorization as a science fiction text, *Kindred* was the first of Butler’s novels to deal with nineteenth century slavery and the historical archive.

The version of empathy emerging in *Kindred* is akin to Dominick LaCapra’s definition of empathy in his work, *History in Transit*. LaCapra defines it as:

“empathy...involves not self-sufficient, projective or incorporative identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators and their victims...it involves virtual not vicarious experience- that is to say, experience in which one puts oneself in the other’s position without take the place of-or speaking for-the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice or suffering.”⁵

The novel’s purposeful movement away from identification problematizes the relationship between observer and victim, constructing a lens through which scenes of violence and suffering can be read and engaged with in a new way. Through this lens, the trap of one-dimensional

⁴ Octavia E. Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Conseula Francis, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 497.

⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2004), 134.

empathetic objectification provoked by the reader's exposure to scenes of pain and suffering, so central to the nineteenth-century sentimental tradition, is both exposed and avoided. In a 1994 interview with H. Jerome Jackson, Octavia Butler distinguishes between her original intention in beginning the novel and the end result: "When I wrote *Kindred*, for instance, I started out writing a lot of slave narratives and realized quickly that nobody was going to want to read the real thing. So that meant that I had to soften it a bit- what I call clean slavery, as opposed to the real thing."⁶ *Kindred*'s refusal to represent the pained body through direct narrative description depicts this "clean" version of slavery Butler alludes to. This refusal subsequently asks the reader to rethink how narrative empathy works if the body in pain is removed as the primary vehicle for reader-character identification. In other words, how can we identify, how can we empathize, in the absence of pain and suffering?

This postmodern slave narrative redefines the previous literary constructions of slavery in the United States by rejecting the nineteenth century's focus on sentimentality and the use of violated bodies as a means of provoking public empathy (as seen in the traditional slave narrative and sentimental novel, most famously in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). The rejection and marked skepticism of the empathetic register underlines the tension between the utopic vision of nineteenth century rights discourse and the inherent dystopia at the heart of postmodernism (and the science fiction novel).⁷ Joseph Slaughter has rightly suggested that certain literary genres perform a critical role in naturalizing sociopolitical norms. A commitment to both represent atrocity and undermine the critical, narrative, and affective tools condemning that atrocity is a central foundation for the postmodern literary movement. As such, the representation of historical atrocity inside *Kindred* enables the development of a critical apparatus, which condemns the use of an objectified pained body as an empathetic register used by the reader in order to negotiate, understand, and come to terms with slavery. Within this critical apparatus, a new ethics of reading atrocity emerges.

In positioning the reader as a vulnerable outsider, the novel suggests that the primary problem with the nineteenth-century version of empathy is the precarious and voyeuristic identification between reader and character. In its place, *Kindred* employs a dystopic treatment of empathy in order to redefine the relationship between the violated body, the witness and the reader. In reconfiguring this relationship, which was essential in drawing the contours of the liberal human rights model in the United States during abolition, the novel critiques narrative voyeurism by exposing the dangerous pitfalls of empathy grounded upon the objectification of the victim. Consequently, it also exposes the dangers founding nineteenth century formulations of human rights, rising in reaction to the sentimental novels and narratives of the time.

The body, as presented inside the very language of human rights, is both abstract and concrete, and often images of corporeal abuse are required to establish its worth. Subsequently, the representation bodies in pain have proven critical in defining legal rights. Elizabeth Anker's *Fictions of Dignity* argues that the language established inside liberal human rights discourse sets up a troublesome paradox surrounding the "contradictory status of the body within dominant

⁶ Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 43–44.

⁷ I am indebted to Samuel Moyn's discussion of the utopian dimension of the rights of man and of human rights in his groundbreaking book, *The Last Utopia*. Moyn suggests that the rights of man were inherently utopic, based on universal conceptions of man that predated the nation-state. What nineteenth-century rights constructions founded was the construction of the citizen, not the human.

definitions of human rights.”⁸ What Anker suggests is that literature can help negotiate this problematic paradox by reconstructing how bodies are thought of and what they constitute. Another study centering the body in pain within a human rights context is Saidiya Hartman’s work on nineteenth century American slavery, *Scenes of Subjection*. According to Hartman empathy is “a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or ‘projection of one’s own personality into an object, with the attribution of the object of one’s own emotions.’”⁹ However, if that “other” is characterized only through pain, torture, and violation, the material body becomes the predominant factor in generating empathy, enabling the reader/viewer to vicariously experience atrocity from afar. In suggesting that the slave body in the nineteenth century slave narrative tradition is transformed into a flesh-and-blood identifiable “human” body through its ability to feel physical and emotional pain, Hartman links the construction of the nineteenth-century American narrative to the development of human rights discourse in the post-bellum period. This connection illuminates a fundamental problem: the development of rights discourse during emancipation (and after) is subtly tied to the construction of the black body as a *violated* body.¹⁰ Rights discourse in the United States was predicated on the construction of an objectified other, a violated body gaining human-qualities only through its ability to feel pain and *not* through its ability to live and pursue happiness. It was, in other words, founded on vicariously witnessing masked as empathy. It is this vicariousness that *Kindred* rejects from its onset, thus initiating a revision of the nineteenth-century empathetic model for narrative construction while offering a new ethics of reading atrocity.

Moments of “prevention”: Negotiating between Empathy and Vicarious Witnessing

The empathetic revolution provoked by the rise of the nineteenth century sentimental novel promoted the relationship and forged connections between the newly developing liberal human rights model and its implicit marginalizing work. In other words, burgeoning nineteenth century human rights constructions in the United States depended on the marginalization of the slave, the very individual abolitionists sought to represent as a human being capable of holding inalienable rights. *Kindred* critically explores the empathetic relationship between reader, character and text promoted by the nineteenth-century slave narrative and sentimental novel tradition by limiting the reader’s access to Dana’s interiority, which, in setting limits on reader empathy, subsequently unveils the critical apparatus developed by the postmodern novel as it exposes the dangers of vicarious witnessing.¹¹ As Hartman reminds us, “abstract universality

⁸ Elizabeth S. Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 2.

⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

¹⁰ Hartman, 22-- “since the veracity of black testimony is in doubt, the crimes of slavery must not only be confirmed by unquestionable authorities and other white observers but also must be made visible, whether by revealing the scarred back of the slave- in short, making the body speak-or through authenticating devices, or better yet, by enabling reader and audience member to experience vicariously the ‘tragical scenes of cruelty.’” .

¹¹ There is a difference between “vicarious” witnessing and witnessing. Vicarious witnessing is experienced in the viewer’s imagination and little effort is made to understand a victim’s pain beyond the body. Witnessing, however, resists entrapment inside the imagination and an effort is made to go beyond the body. Witnessing

presumes particular forms of embodiment and excludes or marginalizes others,” pointing to a direct critique of the concept of universality buttressing the liberal human rights model.¹² *Kindred* trespasses the world of abstract universals by developing a protagonist whose body resists time and space, rejecting the reader’s access to Dana’s world, situating the reader as a permanent outsider. Furthermore, the reader has little access to Dana’s interior self; we hardly know what she feels, thinks, or desires due to the novel’s unwillingness to portray interior monologues and first person narrative moments.

This access to a character’s interiority is one that Lynn Hunt and others deem necessary for the reader’s flourishing of empathy. In removing this access, the novel asks us to focus on where, and under what circumstances, Dana’s few “interior” moments do surface. Since Dana’s interior moments all occur during periods of extreme bodily or ideological violence, the witness and the victim are placed in close proximity, allowing for a reconceptualization of the version of empathy derived through the vicarious witnessing of another’s pain. This is the version of empathy that *Kindred* critically negotiates with as it deals with nineteenth century heritage, shedding light on the empathetic trappings of sentimental novels and narratives.

If the novel as a genre is, as both Lynn Hunt and Joseph Slaughter suggest, responsible for creating identifiable characters thus leading to an empathetic bond between reader and the character and his/her struggles which in turn led to the development of the liberal human rights model, then the question is: what engagement is possible when the novel centers upon a pained and abused “other”? The problem with the nineteenth-century model for empathy, as represented by the sentimental novel and slave narrative tradition that work in similar ways as they manipulate public sentiment, is that the narrators of those texts are mediated and constrained. Dana, however, is not constrained by mediation, she, unlike the slave-narrator, is suspicious, and it is through her suspicions that we witness the novel’s parsing of nineteenth century empathy. She is neither victim, nor voyeur, but the embodiment of a mediating figure who holds the power of trespassing time, atrocity, and history. *Kindred* is fraught with temporal displacements, anachronisms, and a sensorial overload preventing a complete rendition of the body in pain.

The second time Dana travels to save Rufus from a house fire, she witnesses a beating as she hides behind a tree on her way back to the slave quarters:

“I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet. Why didn’t they stop! I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit. I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping. At one point, this last cowardice even brought me something useful. A name for whites who rode through the

involves a level of understanding and a conscientious effort to grapple with the conscious and unconscious pain of the individual in question.

¹² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 122.

night in the antebellum South, breaking in doors and beating and otherwise torturing black people. Patrols. Groups of young whites who ostensibly maintained order among slaves. Patrols. Forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan.”¹³

“I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath” and “I could see his body” are not “I smell/smelled his sweat” and “I see/saw his body.” This is the moment when the narrative distances itself from voyeuristic witnessing while also refusing the present tense narrative of direct witnessing, “I see,” yet also, simultaneously refusing the past tense, customarily found in the slave narrative, “I saw.” The narrative choice of “I could smell/see”, linguistically speaking, reveals a future potential, occurring out of time, between present and past, much like Dana’s own body. She “could” see the body in front of her, she was able to see it, but that ability does not enable her to narrate the man’s pain vicariously. The linguistic construction of the passage, therefore, mirrors Dana’s body as an out of place, out of time, entity. This makes it impossible to know when the seeing and smelling are occurring, or when they occurred. The instability in the passages is further demonstrated by Dana’s uncertainty (“I was probably less prepared for the reality...”); she simply refuses narrate her vision of violence as existing within a defined temporal framework. This temporal misplacement positions Dana as an uneasy witness, one who is not sure how to describe the scene in front of her. The word “literally” appears redundant here, since a first-person narrative clearly “sees” what it claims, yet the word reminds the reader that the character (unlike the reader) is in fact witnessing violation first-hand. “Character identification,” a key narrative technique fostering empathy, is absent here, forcibly removed as Dana’s closeness is characterized vis-à-vis the reader’s distance.¹⁴ Although defining empathy is always problematic, a working definition of empathy illuminates the way that the novel negotiates with the phenomenon:

“a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading. It need not be a conscious response: The neonates who cry at the sound of other babies’ cries are almost certainly unaware of their primitive empathy. Equipped with mirror neurons, the human brain appears to possess a system for automatically sharing feelings, what neuroscientists call a ‘shared manifold for intersubjectivity.’”¹⁵

The reader’s “spontaneous sharing of affect” undergoes dramatic reorganization throughout *Kindred*, especially seen in the beginning chapters. The rug is literally pulled right under us as the distancing phrase, “I could literally,” establishes a conscious divide between reader/witness/victim. The reader reads, the witness apprehensively views and the victim experiences pain, with little room for deviation. In other words, the word “literally” exposes the voyeuristic practice in the very moment that the reader is faced with the representation of a body in pain. *Kindred* refuses pain as the conduit of identification by not allowing us to see the victim

¹³ Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred*, 25th anniversary edition, Black Women Writers Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 36.

¹⁴ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Keen, 4.

firsthand. We watch Dana watch the whipping. We read *her* reaction to pain, and thus are kept at a distance.

This is right where the condemnation of empathy occurs. The reader, through Dana, is alerted to what it means to become an *active* witness to another's pain. The new ethics of reading atrocity involves: (1) engaging with the pain of another in a direct manner through one's own body, (2) realizing that voyeurism is a possibility that must be overcome actively and critically and (3) preventing the objectification of the victim by negating sensorial descriptions. Dana experiences the immediate impact of the witnessed beating *through her own body*, as she projects herself inside the suffering other physically, not just vicariously. Her "stomach heav[es]" and her eyes shut and her muscles tense as the urge to vomit takes over- all of these are bodily reactions *to* the body in pain she witnesses. However, the anachronistic mention of the "television" shatters this empathetic connection that Dana is forging with the victim: "I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me." The difference between the voyeuristic witnessing that occurs while watching a movie or reading is alluded to in this passage and immediately negated; "I had" literally becomes "I hadn't." It also here that smelling and hearing, the baser of the senses, trump sight, the higher sense, negating the visual objectification of the victim's pain. Moreover, since Dana does not tell us how the sweat smells or the screams sound, the lack of sensorial description detailing the victim's pain prevents objectification. She, in effect, demonstrates how to read the suffering body without falling into the trap of vicarious objectification.

The first description of pain, in the passage discussed above, focuses on the second-hand witness and her reaction to the victim's pain, and not the "real thing." As soon as Dana encounters the victim's pain, the very moment that she is aware that she is not viewing the representation of a body in pain but actually directly witnessing it, she sets a limit on her reaction: "And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping. At one point, this last cowardice even brought me something useful." The "something useful" is history itself. In connecting the Patrols to the Ku Klux Klan, she connects the past to the present, a movement illuminating both the temporal shift enveloping the novel and also, more abstractly, the interconnectivity of historical suffering. Just when the affective register opens, enabling the surfacing of empathy, Dana abandons the descriptions of her body *and* the body of the victim, deserting the empathetic register vis-à-vis pain. Butler's narrative technique, however, refuses that very version of identification, as Dana's consciousness turns away from pain abruptly. This turning away from pain provokes a more critical understanding of the injustice described, as Dana's reflection on the Patrols and the originators of the Ku Klux Klan, connects 1976 to its nineteenth-century predecessor. In other words, in order to escape the moment of witnessing, Dana removes the affective register and begins concentrating on the violator *in place* of the violated victim.

Dana's anachronistic reflection on television and film, as she witnesses an actual beating of slave, sheds light on our own voyeuristic reading practices in the twentieth-century, a century dedicated to representing atrocities. This phenomenon also unravels the multiple levels of reader identification with texts, suggesting that reading is an act, which can be dangerously voyeuristic and escapist, without the proper critical apparatus required for responsible textual engagement. Dana's awareness of an alternative world back in 1976, much like nineteenth-century reader's awareness of their own freedom while immersed in the world of the unfree, tempers both her

discontent and her willingness to enact change. The initial chapters in the novel demonstrate that initially Dana, like the reader, is merely a tourist of history and its atrocities. Her tourism stops only when she develops a better understanding of the nineteenth century history now comprising her reality. Touring historical atrocities through reading, without the development of a critical lens exposes the problematic construction of the victim as a pained, violated body, dignified only through its status as an abused entity. Furthermore, the line, “I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike,” immediately redirects Dana’s attention away from the television and movies, and back to the reality in front of her, back to Alice. It is only through the understanding her reactions as paralleled by Alice that Dana gains awareness that she is not merely viewing (or reading) the representation of a body in pain but actually directly witnessing it.

Dana’s physical and mental travel from her present/past (1815) to her future/present (1976) represents a break in historical continuity, revealing a foundational feature of the postmodern novel. According to David Harvey, the postmodern novel “simultaneously develop[s] an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb what it finds there as some aspect of the present.”¹⁶ Butler too “plunders” history in order to reconstitute it both inside Dana’s 1976 present, and also on its own nineteenth-century terms. Harvey’s statement foreshadows Terry Eagleton’s idea that “what postmodernism refuses is not history but History,” the cemented version of the past held up as an undeniable, objective truth.¹⁷ This further develops the relationship that postmodernism holds with the historical past, one which takes the past to task, forcibly redrawing its contours. *Kindred* sheds light on this relationship by manipulating the science fiction genre inside its postmodernist shell, investigating the History/history divide in order to unravel a non-teleological, non-linear approach to witnessing and understanding the past. In superimposing Dana’s 1976 onto her ancestor’s nineteenth century past, *Kindred* uses the method of narrative superimposition which, according to Brian McHale, is when “two familiar spaces are placed on top of the other, as in a photographic double-exposure, creating through their tense and paradoxical coexistence a third space identifiable with neither of the original two” which in turn leads to “a disorienting double-vision.”¹⁸ This disorienting double-vision occurs primarily as the novel unravels its scenes of witnessing, where the present and past meet, forcing an encounter between the witness, victim and the tourist of pain, or the reader.

The condemnation of empathy arising by transforming the reader into a witness of another’s pain continues through this initial passage as Dana physically and mentally travels from her present/past (1815) to her future/present (1976). This break in historical continuity demonstrates one founding aspect of the postmodern novel, which according to David Harvey, is that it “simultaneously develop[s] an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb what it finds there as some aspect of the present.”¹⁹ Butler too “plunders” history in order to reconstitute it both inside Dana’s 1976 present, and also on its own nineteenth-century terms. Harvey’s statement foreshadows Terry Eagleton’s idea that “what postmodernism refuses is not history but

¹⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1990), 54.

¹⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 30.

¹⁸ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 46–47.

¹⁹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 54.

History,” the cemented version of the past held up as an undeniable, objective truth. This further develops the relationship that postmodernism holds with the historical past, one that takes the past to task, forcibly redrawing its contours.²⁰ *Kindred* sheds light on this relationship by manipulating the science fiction genre inside its postmodernist shell, investigating the History/history divide in order to unravel a non-teleological, non-linear approach to witnessing and understanding the past. In superimposing Dana’s 1976 onto her ancestor’s nineteenth century past, *Kindred* uses the method of narrative superimposition which, according to Brian McHale, is when “two familiar spaces are placed on top of the other, as in a photographic double-exposure, creating through their tense and paradoxical coexistence a third space identifiable with neither of the original two” which in turns leads to “a disorienting double-vision.”²¹ This disorienting double-vision occurs primarily as the novel unravels its scenes of witnessing, where the present and past meet, forcing an encounter between the witness, victim and the tourist of pain, or the reader.

Dana experiences the immediate impact of the witnessed beating through her own body, projecting her own body inside the suffering other, evidently experiencing a vicarious sharing of affect. However, the anachronistic mention of the “television” shatters her initial attempt of empathetic projection and demarcates the divide between victim, literal witness and voyeur: “I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me.” The difference between the voyeuristic witnessing that occurs while watching a movie or reading is alluded to in this passage and immediately negated; “I had” literally becomes “I hadn’t.” Smelling and hearing, the baser of the senses, trump sight, the higher sense, negating voyeurism by forcing Dana’s other senses to react directly to the scene in front of her.²² However, those senses do not react. She does not tell us how the sweat smells or the screams sound but rather alerts us to a possible non-visual world, condemning the voyeuristic reading practice which fosters fleeting empathy founded on the objectification of a pained body. Her senses refuse to make sense of the scene they are confronted with, denying her the ability to reconstitute the history she witnesses. Furthermore, in redirecting her attention back to Alice, Dana establishes the little girl as the actual witness who, unlike Dana, is not an intruder traveling through time. Elaine Scarry’s pioneering formulation that pain destroys language, transporting the victim to a “state anterior to language,” does not account for the witness and certainly does not account for the second-hand witness (the indirect viewer/reader).²³ What this scene in *Kindred* demonstrates is that the witness is responsible for the narrating of pain that the victim often cannot narrate. This responsibility is what enables the postmodern reconstitution of History. As such, the novel refuses to objectify the violated body by problematizing the

²⁰ Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 30.

²¹ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 46–47.

²²For a discussion of the hierarchy of the senses see: Anne C. Vila, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Enlightenment*, A Cultural History of the Senses, volume 4 (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

²³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

relationship between observer and victim, setting up a critical lens which the reader can use to navigate through the scene of violence in a more alert manner, avoiding the traps of one-dimensional empathetic objectification central to the nineteenth-century sentimental tradition.

If the novel as a genre is, as both Lynn Hunt and Joseph Slaughter suggest, responsible for creating identifiable characters thus leading to an empathetic bond between reader and the character and his/her struggles which in turn led to the development of the liberal human rights model, then the question is: what engagement is possible when the novel centers upon a pained and abused “other”? The problem with the nineteenth-century model for empathy, as represented by the sentimental novel and slave narrative tradition, which work in similar ways as they manipulate public sentiment, is that the narrators of those texts are mediated and constrained. Dana, however, is not constrained by mediation, she, unlike the slave-narrator, is suspicious, and it is through her suspicions that we witness the novel’s parsing of nineteenth century empathy. She is neither victim, nor voyeur, but the embodiment of a mediating figure who holds the power of trespassing time, atrocity, and history. *Kindred* is fraught with temporal displacements, anachronisms, and a sensorial overload preventing a complete rendition of the body in pain.

In a 1994 interview with H. Jerome Jackson, Octavia Butler distinguishes between her original intention in beginning the novel and the end result: “When I wrote *Kindred*, for instance, I started out writing a lot of slave narratives and realized quickly that nobody was going to want to read the real thing. So that meant that I had to soften it a bit- what I call clean slavery, as opposed to the real thing.”²⁴ *Kindred*’s refusal to represent the pained body through direct narrative description depicts this “clean” version of slavery Butler alludes to. The first description of pain, as discussed earlier, focuses on the second-hand witness and her reaction to the victim’s pain. The novel creates a dystopia at the very moment it attempts to set up the utopic empathetic realm that Lynn Hunt has deemed necessary in fostering identification, upon which empathy depends.²⁵ Lynn Hunt’s reading of Samuel Richardson positions that the identification between reader and character through heartache and pain is necessary in establishing empathy. Butler’s narrative technique, however, refuses identification as Dana’s very conscious strain of thought turns away from pain and suffering as instances where reader empathy can emerge. This turning away from pain permits a more critical understanding of the injustice described, as Dana turns her concentration to piecing together the two moments of historical disorientation, enabling her to create a lineage between the Patrols and the originators of the Ku Klux Klan. This historical connection, tying the past to the present, also enables Dana to escape the moment of witnessing, removing the affective register altogether as she moves her concentration from the violated to the violator.

Ethical Reading and Witnessing: Unmaking the Nineteenth-Century Liberal Model

Dana Franklin is an avid reader. Throughout the novel we encounter scenes of her reading, both to Rufus, her ancestor, and to Nigel, a young slave. Marisa Parham remarks that “Butler makes sure that we understand that reading and writing hold a central place in *Kindred*,” and that “the book was written to negotiate her own experiences of reading and consequently

²⁴ Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 43–44.

²⁵ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, 1st Norton paperback [ed.] (New York ; London: W. W. Norton, 2008), 55. “Empathy depends on identification.”

being haunted by slave narratives” and sentimental portrayals of the slave-subject.²⁶ These scenes of reading in *Kindred* reflect on the use of the trope and its construction in many slave narratives and sentimental novels of the nineteenth-century in their representation of slavery and abolitionist struggle in the United States. The negotiation between the experience of reading about slavery and the actual lived experience of slavery is one that all readers must account for and one that Butler draws our attention to quite dramatically throughout her novel. For Frederick Douglass, reading enables consciousness, the possibility of freedom, and animosity:

“I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out.”²⁷

Reading is a double-edged sword for Douglass, fostering understanding and knowledge on the one hand, while also unveiling the horridness of his condition and a rational anger toward his oppressors. Thus, reading, for Douglass, holds a different significance. His description of reading is incompatible with a nineteenth-century reader’s relationship to reading, as painted by Lynn Hunt: reading as a means of witnessing the lives of others and the world at large. This incompatibility is triggered by the mention of human rights in the passage, which suggests that reading provokes the construction of “human-ness,” and thus requires a certain level of ethical responsibility and understanding of the reader. Douglass realizes that rights discourse is incompatible with slavery and, therefore, human rights cannot exist within the slave-holding States. Yet at this very moment Douglass problematizes reading as something that gives him insight on his own “wretched condition,” not the wretched conditions of others. Reading, for Douglass, is a direct, conscientious, reflection of his own life, not a vicarious interpretation of the lives of others. His version of reading enables him to reflect his own violation, not the violation of others, starkly contrasting the empathetic reading practices of the nineteenth century American reader.

²⁶ Marisa Parham, “Saying ‘Yes’: Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler’s ‘Kindred,’” *Callaloo* 32, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 1321.

²⁷ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Classics, 2014), Chapter 6.

The reconfiguration of rights discourse during and after emancipation supports “that the history of enslavement and racism shaped the emergence of the social in the United States.”²⁸ The history of enslavement and racism are both responsible for fashioning human rights across the Americas, thus the reference Douglass makes to human rights, and their intertwined relationship to slavery, reverberates loudly. This is especially important since many believe the Universal Declaration in 1948 commemorates the inaugural moment of global human rights discourse and practice as we know it today. The problem with the rise of liberal human rights in the nineteenth century, arising from the abolitionist battle, is that it contributed to the creation of a state of exception inside a discourse of assumed universalism, where all men hold equal rights and are created equal. These universalizing claims clashed with the Constitution’s focus on particular rights for particular individuals belonging to the nation state, i.e. the citizen. One central systematic contradiction began to develop even before the thirteenth amendment was passed: everyone has the right to freedom, life and the pursuit of happiness; however, the pathways leading to those freedoms were cluttered with obstacles for some. Therefore, we were equal, but not quite. The first section of the thirteenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution, passed in 1864, demonstrates these obstacles as it states the following: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”²⁹ It is important to note that the amendment to abolish slavery contains, in its very formulation, a state of exception predicated on setting up a power struggle as the slave is now transformed into a “criminal,” and thus bound by law. Who has the power to “duly convict”? In *Crisis of Imprisonment*, Rebecca McLennan claims that this nineteenth century ideological crime and punishment system was created to hold the now free slave population in check, while also leading to the construction of the American penal system in the early to mid-twentieth century. It is this state of exception that Douglass’ reflection on reading alludes to as he prevents the reader from entering inside his “wretched condition,” and reminds us simply empathizing with a subject is not enough to grant that subject a full set of rights. This is the first time that anger appears to take hold over Douglass, a phenomenon that Richard Wright’s *Native Son* extends to its utmost capacity in the modernist era.

The reading trope found in these nineteenth century slave narratives goes hand in hand with the ability to shift the power structure looming over slave-holding society, while also uncovering the development of empathy between reader and character: the reader reads about the slave’s burgeoning awareness of his/her own self and, consequently, grants the slave with “human-ness.” However, it is only *after* the slave has “proved” worthy by detailing violence perpetrated on bodies, families, and minds, that the reader sees the slave as worthy of rights. The formulation of reader empathy, therefore, is deeply intertwined with the suffering body, or the body in pain. That said, the human rights Douglass demands throughout are likewise associated with bodies in pain. Bodies, therefore, must be marked by pain in order to receive the reader’s empathetic gaze and subsequent reconceptualization of rights discourse. The problem here is that, unlike white bodies, black bodies are marked, signaled out and objectified by pain and suffering in order to spark reader empathy. This marking further cements the black body as an

²⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 169.

²⁹ “The Constitution of the United States, Amendment XIII (Abolition of Slavery),” accessed February 13, 2015, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution>.

object “worthy” of rights, rather than a subject with an innate *right* to rights. *Kindred* unravels the transaction between reader and text by revealing this mimetic artifice and reevaluating the troublesome reading practices of the nineteenth century sentimental tradition which subsequently reflect the problematic configuration of the liberal human rights model.

Although the narrative molds of the nineteenth century slave narrative and sentimental novel in the United States take it as their mission to create empathetic reader-citizens who can feel sympathy for the “other” on one hand, they still enable the protection of a particular, national-subject who bears no resemblance to the wounded “other.” The nineteenth century sentimental tradition emphasizes how the institution of slavery leads to the tarnishing of the humane structure of American society, as reflected in the following passage from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*:

“A slave warehouse! Perhaps some of my readers conjure up horrible visions of such a place.... but no, innocent friend; in these days men have learned the art of sinning expertly and genteelly, so as not to shock the eyes and senses of respectable society....then you shall be courteously entreated to call and examine and shall find an abundance of husbands, wives...”³⁰

No other chapter in the entire novel starts by positioning the reader directly inside the scene, as done here in the beginning of Chapter Thirty. Yet the dreadfulness of the place hardly gains any description; the description centers on the immortal nature of the space where men, women, and child are sold, and how this horrid setting, in no longer shocking “the eyes and senses of respectable society,” contaminates American society. The “men, women, and children” inside the warehouse gain no identity, a phenomenon which occurs throughout the novel as the narrator reflects on the status of blackness:

“Tom got down from the carriage, and looked about with an air of calm, still enjoyment. The negro, it must be remembered, is an exotic of the most gorgeous and superb countries of the world, and he has, deep in his heart, a passion for all that is splendid, rich and fanciful; a passion which rudely indulged by an untrained taste, draws on them the ridicule of the colder and more correct white race.”³¹

Although Tom gains a representational identity in the novel, we see him in his home eating with his family, we hear him speak, we witness his surroundings, enabling the reader to forge the empathetic bond with the character, his identity is nevertheless limited by difference and inequality, mediated by the heavy mediation of the narrator, as reflected in the passage above. Readers, in other words, read Tom through a version of empathy which resembles pity, and are thus able to easily, subconsciously, differentiate themselves from him. This method of sentimental manipulation stems from the predominant intention governing the sentimental novel: to spark an emotional reaction, mainly from women readers. This emotional reaction was not a code for granting rights to all members of American society.

³⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly*, The Modern Library Classics (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 464.

³¹ Stowe, 233.

Although “law” and “rights” and even “human rights” appear throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, this progressive terminology is primarily used to portray the negative effects the institution of slavery has on American society and at no time does it propose to grant human rights to the freed slave or stipulate that the slave is dignified and therefore naturally deserving of rights and legal protection. Even St. Claire, in his most fervent discussion with Miss Ophelia on the subject, states:

“that ours is the more bold and palpable infringement of human rights; actually buying a man up, like a horse- looking at this teeth, cracking his joints, and trying his paces, and then paying down for him- having speculators, breeders, traders, and brokers in human bodies and souls- sets the thing before the eyes of the civilized world in a more tangible form, though the thing done be, after all, in its nature, the same; that is, appropriating one set of human beings to the use and improvement of another...”³²

In this passage “human rights” appear only in consequence of their violation, and no attempt is made to describe their potential. In fact, the landscape of “human rights,” depicted here is tied to buying and selling, the exchange of individuals as commodities which in turn demonstrates how that exchange is dehumanizing for the trader, not the victim. The traded victim, in fact, hardly gains visibility as anything but a commodity here, further perpetuating their status as a fragmented non-human: “his teeth, cracking his joints, and trying up his paces.” Therefore, since the narrative does not allow us to piece together the victim, “human rights” remain discreetly tied to the trader and the loss of humanity he endures as he continues this barbaric practice. In seeking to portray negative effects that the institution of slavery has on American society, Stowe’s narrative constructs an unsurpassable boundary between “us” versus “them.” The narrative struggle fashioned to provide individuals with citizenship status and rights was a battle for another generation of writers, who like Richard Wright, held empathy in contempt.

Unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, applauded for its ability to use a narrative mode which “thrusts into readers’ preexisting wounds, forcing them to ‘feel for’ slaves be re-experiencing their own painful separations and other forms of suffering,” *Kindred* uses another set of preexisting wounds---historical wounds rather than personal ones.³³ Historical wounds are those inherited by generations, a phenomenon which many twentieth century American writers, from Toni Morrison to Louise Erdrich to Junot Diaz incorporate into their narratives to demonstrate the effects of history on the present. Dana, oddly enough, is devoid of personal trauma, though fleeting references to her unaccepted interracial marriage do surface at certain points in the novel. Nonetheless, she is trampled by historical trauma, a vessel between the past and the present, treading lightly (at first) on both temporal spaces so as not to disturb the false sense of historical continuity. While Stowe’s narrative “forces a new mode of cognition upon readers, who are to understand slavery through their memories of sorrow rather than through reason,” fostering an empathetic utopia between reader and character, Butler creates an empathetic dystopia.³⁴ She, unlike Wright, does not hold empathy in contempt. Instead, she

³² Stowe, 327.

³³ Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 130.

³⁴ The empathetic utopia develops as the reader is presented with character who are positioned in sympathy-driven situation, often dealing with separation of families, the experience of cruel bodily pain carried out through whipping or other abuses, and/or emotional distress. The novel works to present these scenes in order to

blurs the bridges of empathetic possibility by creating a mode of cognition which disturbs temporality by superimposing multiple histories upon one another to demonstrate that *reason* is a necessary component to understanding historical atrocities and abuses. Feeling is not enough. It is not enough to provoke empathy as a form of re-experiencing one's own memories of sorrow. That implies that all sorrow, all trauma, is one-dimensional, leaving little room for the reader to witness the most important boundary: the one between freedom and slavery.

In a groundbreaking book on sentimental fiction in the United States, Jane Tompkins writes that "sentimental fiction was perhaps the most influential expression of beliefs that animated the revival movement and shaped the character of American life in the years before the Civil War."³⁵ Furthermore, she stipulates that "the sentimental novelists wrote to educate their readers in Christian perfection and to move the nation as a whole close to the city of God," suggesting that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* retold a "a central religious myth – the story of the crucifixion- in terms of the nation's greatest political-conflict- slavery- and one of its most cherished social beliefs- the sanctity of motherhood and the family."³⁶ Tompkins posits that the dramatization and vindication of religious conversion along with the intimate, domestic backdrop in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sets up a didactic model facilitating the reeducation of the reader.³⁷ Surely, as Tompkins argues, positive value can and should be attributed to such progressive cultural work. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction to *Sentimental Designs*, a rescuing of the sentimental novel reclaims the powerful "ambition of novels written by women, and specifically by women whose work twentieth-century criticism have completely denigrated."³⁸ My task is not to further denigrate these works but to posit an alternative understanding of the way they have helped shaped empathy and its tie to liberal human rights discourse and, subsequently, the understanding and narrative recuperation of historical atrocities. If the reeducation and empathetic revival of the reader occurs only as he/she enters into the world of religious conversion, and then is forced to revisit slavery from that unique lens, what happens when religion is absent? What happens when the slave in question is not Uncle Tom, but a loud-mouthed runaway who does not profess any religious affiliation? Does the cultural work of nineteenth-century sentimental literature, so instrumental in building a national community, abolishing slavery, and readdressing ethical and moral guidelines, stop?

Religion is entirely absent from *Kindred*. Such a void unweaves the sentimental tradition, arguing that the religious turn in novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* creates a version of reader empathy akin to reverence only though an exceptional depiction of slaves such as Tom. If the mobilization empathy is a prerequisite to societal changes in the mid-nineteenth century, the way that empathy is mobilized through the exceptional slave-as-Christ construction prevents ordinary

spark "memories of sorrow" rather than reason, sparking the reader's empathy. As such the pact made between reader and character is one of empathy. The utopia comes in as the reader's empathetic connection to the characters (especially the younger characters) is met with the promise of a new world of rights, a utopia. As such, the reader's emotional involvement is somehow "awarded" by a new set of promising outcomes.

³⁵ Jane P. Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 149.

³⁶ Tompkins, 135.

³⁷ Tompkins, Ch. 5 and Ch. 6.

³⁸ Tompkins, xv.

subjects from gaining the reader's empathy. Lynn Hunt reminds us that "empathy depends on identification," yet what identification is possible with a figure like Tom?³⁹ Identification is possible with a figure like oneself, an ordinary character, as Hunt goes on to suggest. Tom, however, is not an ordinary character. He is utterly extraordinary and the mobilization of empathy for someone like Tom *differs* from the mobilization of empathy in novels such as Richardson's *Clarissa*, where the reader resembles the characters. In other words, the mobilization of empathy for the other makes different narrative demands: the other is either represented as a body in pain/suffering, or as an exceptional saint-like, other-worldly figure. *Kindred* addresses these differences by thrusting Dana and the reader back into the nineteenth century in order to reassess and unveil the very mechanisms of empathy mobilization.

A reader's understanding of the structural components of slavery in opposition to freedom is something that Stowe's narrative mode inadvertently eliminates as it seeks to use the memories of the reader and superimpose them upon the history of the slave's struggles. As Gregory Jerome Hampton suggests,

"*Kindred* allows the reader to experience slavery with the protagonist, instead of merely identifying with the memoirs of an ex-slave second-hand. Dana carries us with her through time, through life threatening moments, including an attempted rape, and most importantly through her thoughts about the vulnerability of slavery."⁴⁰

Dana only understands the world of antebellum Maryland through her memories of history, not through her own personal sorrow.⁴¹ What Hampton alerts us to is that unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a text which asks readers to abandon reason for pure sentiment, *Kindred* maintains us in the world of reason, so that we understand the "vulnerability of slavery" rather than simply identifying with a body in pain. Empathy is a complex process here, demanding a new form of reader engagement where reason is combined with sentiment, so that a reader "experience" of slavery is one that demonstrates the lasting effects of slavery on the nation's contemporary sociopolitical landscape. As Dana makes new memories, actual memories, on her travels, she realizes that they have no place in her present time: "my memory of a field hand being whipped suddenly seemed to have no place here with me at home."⁴² This suggests that personal memories are dependent on their temporal space, while the recollection of history can often trespass the boundaries of time. Dana, like the reader, is forcibly transported into a world she thought she knew through history books and nineteenth-century literature; however, as she gains lived experience of the period she had only read about in books, her version of history changes.

³⁹ Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 55.

⁴⁰ Gregory Jerome Hampton, *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, aliens, and Vampires* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2010), 23.

⁴¹ Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, 130.

⁴² Butler, *Kindred*, 115.

Upon one of her many returns to 1976 Los Angeles, as she waits to be transported once more, Dana “read books about slavery, fiction and nonfiction.”⁴³ It is at this moment in the novel when she turns to make the following reference:

“Then, somehow, I got caught up in one of Kevin’s World War II books- a book of excerpts from the recollections of concentration camp survivors. Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation. As though the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked for at nearly two hundred.”⁴⁴ The connection Dana develops between slavery and the Holocaust reveals the extent to which her understanding of slavery is shaped by the outside knowledge of other historical atrocities. The concentration camp is placed alongside the plantation in this passage or, rather, the plantation gives rise to the concentration camp. In both places human beings are deprived of food, family, and control over their own bodies. In both places a line of division exists between human and what is considered non-human, those in power and those who lack it, further illuminating the connective tissue between the two historical atrocities. Just as time is traversed in the novel, historical atrocities are also traversed, forced to overlap, a phenomenon which, like time-travel, serves to create a palimpsest of atrocity which the postmodern novel represents, paving new pathways between moments of historical atrocity. As Raymond Williams reminds us in his reflections on science fiction as a genre: “it is part of the power of science fiction that it is always potentially a mode of authentic shift: a crisis of exposure which produces a crisis of possibility; a reworking, in imagination, of all forms and conditions.”⁴⁵ Dana’s character encapsulates the “reworking of all forms and conditions” as she is a witness and a victim, a voyeur and an active participant. The stories of the “other” she witnesses quickly envelop her own story; past traumas develop into present ones, revealing the violent marks left by past historical atrocities on one’s own present body and mind. In connecting slavery to the Holocaust, an event which led to new discourse on human rights, Butler also repositions slavery as a historical atrocity which needs to be reclaimed within her present Civil Rights era. In repositioning two past historical atrocities, slavery and the Holocaust, inside a present-day moment of sociopolitical change marked by the Civil Rights movement, *Kindred* lays bare the disparity between the historical documentation of slavery and Holocaust as human rights atrocities.

Yet no utopic realm is forged within the novel as these historical atrocities merge together; in fact, their merge demonstrates that reading about atrocity does not effect change. In effect, “the books depressed [her], scared [her], made [her] stuff Kevin’s sleeping pills into [her] bag. Like the Nazis, antebellum whites had known quite a bit about torture-quite a bit more than [she] ever wanted to learn.”⁴⁶ The books don’t urge her go back a start a revolution in antebellum Maryland; they hardly even fuel her anger; that anger is fueled only when her own body is at risk later in the novel. The books do however drive her to envision a new method of self-preservation: suicide. This is the vulnerability of slavery that Hampton mentions, a hopelessness suggesting that self-sacrifice, not mere empathy, is the only way to trespass the boundary

⁴³ Butler, 116.

⁴⁴ Butler, 116–17.

⁴⁵ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays*, Radical Thinkers, no. 11 (London: Verso, 2005), 200.

⁴⁶ Butler, *Kindred*, 117.

between freedom and slavery. It is this focus on vulnerability of slavery itself, and not the vulnerability of a free subject reading about slavery through stereotypical and often lionized representations of otherness, that is voided in nineteenth century sentimental representations which center on condemning the institution of slavery as unhealthy for national growth and morality. The nineteenth century reader, in other words, is never made to feel vulnerable and it is this vulnerability that drives a level of reasonable ethical understanding required for empathy to be mobilized effectively.

Dana does not participate in the world around her for most of the novel, even abetting the rape of her ancestor, Alice, in order to protect herself, an ethical compromise discussed later in this chapter. In fact, Dana hardly participates in her own 1976 Los Angeles world, a phenomenon demonstrated by the utter lack of socio-political commentary as she reflects on her present time. As many scholars have emphasized, there is a lack of attention placed on Dana's race and gender throughout the novel and, while many may find that void troublesome, it nevertheless highlights that Butler's characters "are never simply black or merely women, in the manner that whites are far too often represented as simply or merely male or female and devoid of any race. Their existences are always irreducibly complex..."⁴⁷ In other words, Butler is less concerned with forging new racial and gender-based stereotypes similar to those forged in nineteenth century representations of slavery, and more concerned with unmasking the problems and developing a critical apparatus (*Kindred*) to combat such representations. It is only toward the end of the novel that the hatred Douglass felt as he learned to read and write surfaces in Dana, encouraging her to stab Rufus and potentially sacrifice herself in the process. In one of her more self-reflexive moments, occurring near the middle of the novel, Dana reveals that both she and Kevin act out parts provided to them by the history and fiction they have accumulated throughout the years: "And I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren't really in it. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting."⁴⁸ Although her "acting" can be viewed as a defense mechanism eradicated to protect herself against the cruelties of antebellum America, much like the mention of the television in the previous section sought to disentangle her from a voyeuristic practice, the novel uses these defense mechanisms to outline a critique against sentimental reading and writing practices. The line "we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them," suggests a performative false empathy, a fabricated sense of understanding fostered in order to secure a sense of self-preservation in a world where the definition of one's humanity was directly tied to their racial composition. The passage's focus on the performance of empathy delineates the trivialization of empathy occurring as a reader/viewer gains access to the inner life of a particular character or individual. Dana's self-awareness as she "watch[es] history around [her]," is interrupted by a group of children playing a game which, like the child in the previous scene, forces Dana to gain awareness of her voyeurism. It is only as she gains awareness of her own performativity and voyeur-status that she begins to critically assess the scene forming around her.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Robertson, "'Some Matching Strangeness': Biology, Politics, and the Embrace of History in Octavia Butler's 'Kindred,'" *Science Fiction Studies* 37, no. 3 (November 1, 2010): 369.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Kindred*, 98.

Shortly after it dawns on Dana that she and Kevin are merely the spectators of history, after both are transported to the antebellum Maryland, they come face to face with a group of children playing an unusual game. The children play the roles of auctioned and auctioneer, reenacting the auction block so familiar to many slave families throughout the nineteenth-century, reproducing the same language they too often overheard: “She’s worth plenty money. Two hundred dollars. Who bid two hundred dollars?”⁴⁹ Although this scene is devoid of physical violence, it nevertheless demonstrates just how deeply the ideology of slavery penetrates and violates childhood innocence. Dana and Kevin both start as outsiders looking in, however, the “looking in” becomes strikingly different for both characters as they begin assessing the children’s playtime. While Dana walks away “tired and disgusted,” Kevin uses philosophical reasoning to suggest that “the kids are just imitating what they’ve seen adults doing,” going on to state that they simply “don’t understand.”⁵⁰ It is not Kevin’s lack of empathy upon viewing the scene that bothers and disturbs Dana, but rather his lack of understanding the larger ideological struggle played out by the children before his eyes. Kevin therefore, lacks interpretative power when violence is not demonstrated through bodily pain, a requirement for the emergence of the new, non-trivialized, version empathy that *Kindred* seeks to foster. He is, in other words, a bad reader of history in the making, the very history that spills over into his and Dana’s present late mid-twentieth century time. Dana, however, looks upon the scene and is immediately transported back to 1976 as she remarks that she “never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery,” a realization solidifying the on-going civil rights struggles during that most important bicentennial year. Finally, what this scene of witnessing reveals is that Kevin and Dana’s race and gender forcefully mark and define their identity in ways that they could calmly ignore in 1976 Los Angeles.

When Kevin tells Dana that she is “reading too much into a kids’ game,” her response, “and you’re reading too little into it. Anyway.... anyway, it’s not their game,” demarcates the deviation in their modes of understanding and experiencing history, while also debunking the myth of abstract universality.⁵¹ Not everyone reads ideological violence the same way, not everyone witnesses torture the same way, and not everyone empathizes the same. This scene, shared between Dana and Kevin, is a narrative tactic used in *Kindred* to refute both the slave narrative, on one hand, and the sentimental American novel, on the other, as two genres which solidified the representation of human suffering as a means of evoking an empathetic response. What the scene reveals is that empathy has to work on an ideological level, not only a physical one which churns the stomach or diverts the eyes. Empathy, in other words, should not only be constructed and fostered inside the novel as it represents the destruction of the human body. Since the auction block scene is merely performed by the children, Kevin can ignore the scene in front of him, and view it as merely a performance, unaware of the ideological struggle the children and their children’s children face and will continue to face. Unlike Dana, he cannot superimpose the scene upon his 1976 Los Angeles landscape, tracing a story of origin for inequality. However, if the children were being whipped by a master, Kevin would surely engage differently, reverting to a pity-based-empathy further dividing the spectator from the victim.

⁴⁹ Butler, 99.

⁵⁰ Butler, 99.

⁵¹ Butler, 100.

Without the physical pain, Kevin literally *cannot read* the violent scene in front of him. “Race,” Hartman recalls, “and blackness, in particular, are produced through mechanisms of domination and subjection that have yoked, harnessed and infiltrated the apparatus of rights.”⁵² Moreover, these mechanisms of subjection have also infiltrated everyday life, reading practices, and relationships. The diverging interpretation of the children’s game demonstrates that Dana reads between the lines, witnessing the non-physical, invisible violence performed by the children. “If through performance the enslaved ‘asserted their humanity,’ it is no less true that performance articulated their troubled relation to the category ‘human,’” an articulation that Dana understands even before she is thrust back into the nineteenth century.⁵³ Physical pain is not a prerequisite for Dana’s ability to witness historical atrocities. But it is for Kevin. The children do not perform pain; they perform the slave-holder’s ideology, a performance which calls upon a new kind of participation.

Unlike in the initial voyeuristic scene discussed in the first part of this chapter, this scene transforms Dana into a witness like Alice in the previous scene, while Kevin remains a mere voyeur. Dana transforms from inactive voyeur to an active, responsible, witness because she conscientiously understands the ongoing historical struggle that this scene demonstrates both for the children in question and for future generations. Although critics have marked the novel as lacking sociopolitical commentary in its dealing with 1976, this moment suggests that those commentaries are in fact subtly present inside Dana’s experiences in the nineteenth century. The narrative absence of such commentary demonstrates that the ethical witnessing of the past will reveal a new mode of interpreting and understanding the present. This is why the present 1976 rights battles, rise of the Panthers, race riots, and the rise of black feminism, are all deceptively invisible in the novel. The novel, after all, is not about 1976, *it is about how we arrived to 1976*. While Kevin states that “the kids are just imitating what they’ve seen adults doing...they don’t understand,” Dana refutes his claim with the following: “they don’t have to understand. Even the games they play are preparing them for their future- and that future will come whether they understand or not.”⁵⁴ The “future” she speaks of is both the “future” of the nineteenth century and the future of 1976. *Kindred*’s two settings force “the reader to consider how integral the past is in understanding the present and in constructing the future,” something that is demonstrated through this narrative absence of the present, and also further portrayed as Dana travels across time to save her ancestor Rufus and herself, her past and, subsequently, her present.⁵⁵ The past, however, comes first. She has no choice but to travel back in time, thus her freedom and freewill are immediately called into question. The past sets fetters on her present, both metaphoric and literal obstacles. She is forced to bear witness to the interconnectivity between past and present, forced to witness the invasive nature of slavery as it contaminated children’s games and as it continues to contaminate the future.

⁵² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 118.

⁵³ Hartman, 65.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Kindred*, 99.

⁵⁵ Angelyn Mitchell, “Not Enough of the Past: Feminist Revisions of Slavery in Octavia E. Butler’s ‘Kindred,’” *MELUS* 26, no. 3 (October 1, 2001): 53.

New Model for Reading Historical Atrocity: Bodies and Ethical Compromises

Nineteenth century slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs *Incidents*, and novels, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, provide a background for *Kindred*. However, *Kindred* detaches itself from the empathetic registers its ancestors provide by alienating the reader with respect to his or her access to the suffering and pain inflicted on Dana's body. This prevention inhibits the kind of vo. In doing so *Kindred* creates another kind of body within its bounds, one that is fragmented yet whole, violated yet unsullied, compromised, a hybrid calling into question previous historical representations of the one-dimensional slave-body grounded in sentimental portrayals. The nineteenth century sentimental tradition has remained the fundamental paradigm grounding liberal human rights, due to its ability of manipulating public sentiment by creating visible, often extraordinary bodies which, in undergoing physical and emotional torment, provoke the reader's empathetic response. *Kindred* challenges and reconstructs the relationships between the body, empathy, and the construction of narrative. Its novelistic challenge provokes a reexamination of the standards that nineteenth century sentimental tradition in the United States manipulated in order to fashion the liberal human rights discourse set up the Americas.

Dana's historical re-positioning calls into question the concept of "burdened individuality" discussed by Saidiya Hartman. This concept posits that even after emancipation, the enjoyment of liberal individuality was nevertheless contaminated by previous modes of domination and, in *Kindred*, Dana is the embodiment of a burdened individual.⁵⁶ She is a black woman, a struggling writer, who, after marrying a white man, lost the only family she knew, her aunt and uncle. This loss unveils Dana's status as an orphan, a forceful abandonment of her African American family and community in order to pursue her unaccepted interracial union. Scholars writing on *Kindred* have constantly focused on the novel as a novel of historical and personal recovery, which starts with the loss of an arm ("I lost an arm on my last trip home") and ends with the recovery of history in the books epilogue as Dana and Kevin visit a historical archive. However, as Ashraf Rushdy reminds us, "her memory is a performance of history, a performance of such potency that it incorporates her into the past, leaving [no distance] between her and the remembered events."⁵⁷ This suggests that reading itself is a performance of history; a phenomenon detailed both by Dana's constant reliance on books to make sense of the past and her "witnessing" of bodily and ideological suffering that she seems to equate with voyeuristic reading until she finally becomes a new type of participant who understands the patterns of historical atrocity. *Kindred* begs us to question how, through reading, we ourselves perform history and, more importantly, historical knowledge. Dana's character is the embodiment of a reader; however, unlike the rest of us who may simply shut the book or turn away from the film, Dana has to risk her life in order to be transported back to her present.

Dana's body thus becomes a historical vessel. The novel's first line "I lost an arm on my last trip home" problematizes the concept of home as it serves to reveal a fragmented, disassociated body with "an arm" not "my arm." The arm, now claimed by history, is no longer hers, yet "my last trip home" suggests a sense of wholeness, setting up Dana's duality from the very start. Bodily pain and rupture begin the novel, revealing a body that has undergone severe

⁵⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 121.

⁵⁷ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," *College English* 55, no. 2 (February 1, 1993): 137–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/378500>.

torment as it came into close proximity with history's abuses. However, from the novel's first lines and pages, the reader is left completely outside with no idea how the fragmentation happened or why. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* begins with the business arrangements made between Mr. Haley and Mr. Shelby, a masculine world engrossed in the selling and buying of slaves. It is during this business meeting that Eliza and Harry appear, as mother and child, interrupting the novel with their bodily, familial presence, creating the initial juxtaposition between law, economics, and slavery on one hand, and real flesh-and-blood human bodies on the other. The exterior world of men and their economic negotiations (which are supported by law) creates invisibility with respect to the human subjects being negotiated. The arrival of Eliza and Harry forces the reader to move from the world of the invisible to the world of the visible. It is within this visibility that Stowe, from the novel's onset, begins reshaping the reader's understanding of slave-as-commodity, an object to be exploited, to slave-as-a-mother/slave-as-a-child, individual entities holding precise, familiar, relationships that readers can recognize. The beginning of *Kindred*, on the other hand, leaves everything invisible, unknown, confusing, and fractured.

Since Dana's body is biologically connected to Rufus, a innate humanitarian impulse drives her actions as she enters the nineteenth century. The first time Dana travels back in time it is to save Rufus from drowning: "I reacted to the child in trouble. Later I could ask questions, try to find out where I was, what had happened. Now I went to help the child."⁵⁸ This is before she knows that in saving Rufus she is in fact saving herself. Her initial humanitarian reaction is to simply pull the boy out of water, a determination which suspends her disbelief. Shortly after this, Rufus's father, Tom Weylin, confronts Dana with "the longest rifle [she] had ever seen," and she immediately transports back to her 1976 living room. The sense of urgency she feels as she runs to save Rufus from drowning is mirrored by the sense of urgency felt at her own self-preservation. She must believe she is dying or on the verge of dying in order to travel back into the twentieth century. This phenomenon has been labeled "phantom pain" by scholar Marisa Parham and, initially, Dana's body undergoes only the threat of physical pain, a ghost-pain which, when strong enough, enables her to abandon the past. In its initial chapters, the narrative prevents the narration of pain. Pain is alluded to, yet it gains mobility inside the novel only when Dana becomes a victim to it herself. The phantom pain gains narrative presence as Dana herself gains a better understanding of her status inside the nineteenth century.

Pain becomes the conduit for time travel in *Kindred*. Not the witnessing of another's pain, not emotional pain and distress, but the physical experience of pain on one's own body. The reflections on personal physical pain throughout the novel seemingly contradict Elaine Scarry's belief that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."⁵⁹ In fact, Dana's first experience with physical pain, when a patroller beats and ultimately tries to rape her, unmakes Scarry's argument: "pain dragged me back to consciousness. At first it was all I was aware of; every part of my body hurt."⁶⁰ For Dana, pain *makes* language; pain *demands* narrative. Dana tells Kevin everything, after sleeping through the night: "I remember it for him in detail as I had the first time. Again, he

⁵⁸ Butler, *Kindred*, 13.

⁵⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

⁶⁰ Butler, *Kindred*, 44.

listened without interrupting.”⁶¹ The reader, however, having been there with her, does not receive this information once again. However, the reader’s witnessing of Dana’s pain is immediate and confusing, mirroring her own experience, a narrative technique bent on preventing the voyeuristic witnessing Dana herself fell victim to in the first section of this chapter. Pain gains agency in *Kindred* as Dana is able to physically cross historical time through her body’s experience of pain. Although Dana details her experience for Kevin, demonstrating how pain fosters the demand for personal narration, the reader receives no details apart from the ones Dana herself experiences. Pain, in other words, maintains its intimacy with the victim and resists objectification inside *Kindred*. No reflection is made, no subconscious moment revealed to objectify Dana’s pain. Dana’s pain, in effect, transcends textual representation not, as Scarry posits, because it destroys language, but because it destroys the objectifying process of narrating pain by detailing how Dana’s mind reacts to pain rather than by showing how her body receives pain:

“The man tackled me and brought me down hard. At first, I lay stunned, unable to move or defend myself even when he began hitting me, punching me with his fists. I had never been beaten that way before- would never have thought I could absorb so much punishment without losing consciousness.”⁶²

Dana’s pain, though told in the past tense, is nevertheless immediate, and her reflections turn to the absorption of pain and the loss of consciousness often provoked, not visible descriptions of blood, bruises, and welts.

In the nineteenth century slave narrative tradition, pain receives a narrative presence, a visibility promoting the empathetic reaction of the reader by setting the reader up as a witness to the victim’s pain. The whipping of Aunt Hester in Douglass’ *Narrative*, for example, arrives to the reader through a recollection which both describes and refuses description:

“I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rendering shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose....I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.”⁶³

The active destruction of language, as Scarry would remark, occurs in the previous passage as Douglass ends by refusing to continue narrating the “terrible spectacle,” a refusal which establishes that to witness is to participate. Douglass and the reader become witness-participants

⁶¹ Butler, 46.

⁶² Butler, 44.

⁶³ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, chap. 1.

to Aunt Hester's "most heart-rendering shrieks" to her "naked back" all "covered in blood." This scene is reminiscent of the scene of witnessing in *Kindred* described in the first section of this chapter, where Dana's inaction led her to both witness and participate in another man's destruction. However, as the novel continues, Dana begins to cross the witness-participant divide and her own physical pain, is left void, an empty signifier.

What does this mean for the reader? What kind of reading process is available to avoid participation and thus the re-objectification of the victim? Although these questions will undergo investigation in Chapter Five of this book with Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*, Butler's novel nevertheless begins investigating them. *Kindred* also answers the first question posed by Saidiya Hartman at the beginning of this chapter: the way we are called upon to participate in these scenes is by making pain immediate, confusing, fragmented and both accessible and inaccessible. This inaccessibility does not arise because pain is beyond language, as Scarry implies, but rather to set a limit on the reader's access to Dana's pain, preventing the voyeuristic reading. Douglass too sets a limit to our access by simply refusing to narrate further, however, the blood on Aunt Hester's back is still visible, her groans still hear- a narrative choice that Douglass himself seemed to struggle with, as witnessed by his immediate deviation from narrating the "terrible spectacle." Furthermore, Aunt Hester's pain is immobilizing, both on a narrative and literal level. Unlike Aunt Hester's, Dana's pain is a mobilizing force which provokes time travel. Pain is resituated as an active agent, an engine driving Dana across time. A reader can not physically feel the pain of a character, however, in *Kindred*, pain gains mobility, connecting the present with the past while also setting limits on narrative fluidity, as shown in the next section. All of these narrative reconstructions of pain with *Kindred* seek to prevent the reader's dangerous fall into voyeurism and the dangerous world of victim objectification.

The next time Dana experiences pain is when Tom Weylin discovers her teaching Nigel to read and write:

"I never saw where the whip came from, never even saw the first blow coming. But it came-like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin....I screamed, convulsed, Weylin struck again and again, until I couldn't have gotten up at gunpoint. I kept trying to crawl away from the blows, but I didn't have the strength or the coordination to get far. I may have been still screaming or just whimpering, I couldn't tell. All I was really aware of was the pain. I thought Weylin meant to kill me...by then, I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain. I vomited."⁶⁴

Once again, the action is immediate and wrought by confusion. This passage, like most of the book, is in past tense, a narrative choice which situates Dana as an outsider, even to her own pain. Most slave narratives also rely on past tense narration in order to establish a boundary between the free and the enslaved, a defense mechanism for the person retelling the past and a protection system for overly sensitive readers who need to maintain a certain level of distance from the events retold to them. The "I never saw" contradicts Douglass "witness and participant," as Dana can no longer say she is an "observer watching a show." Pain has transformed her into a nineteenth-century historical subject and the awareness of pain ("All I was really aware of was the pain") marks this permanent transition from voyeur, to witness, and now, finally, to victim. Once again, pain leads Dana back to Los Angeles, yet, unlike with the

⁶⁴ Butler, *Kindred*, 107.

patroller's violence, when she is transported back immediately, the next chapter following Weylin's beating, "The Fight," does not begin with her waking up in her apartment, but rather with a distant reflection on her past with Kevin, suggesting that the level of pain experienced refuses the reader a direct and fluid entry into the 1976 present. Dana does not describe her trauma as a victim would for a set audience but rather brusquely and immediately, with little room left for contemplation. The break in narrative continuity, as Dana goes back to an alternate past, refusing the present, formally demonstrates that her inability to access her immediate present is directly tied to pain. This version of pain refuses representation altogether, following the model of pain representation modeled by Elaine Scarry. As Dana's body undergoes more and more pain, a void takes over the novel, giving rise to a new reading process where silence becomes the primary mode of representing atrocity and the suffering body.

The level of pain experienced under Weylin's whip prevents her immediate transfer back into the present. It is only in the second section of this chapter that Dana awakes and witnesses the painful transformation of her body:

"My blouse was stuck to my back. It was cut up to pieces, really, but the pieces were stuck to me. My back was cut up pretty badly too from what I could feel. I had seen old photographs of the backs of people who had been slaves. I could remember the scars, thick and ugly. Kevin had always told me how smooth my skin was...I took off my pants and got into the tub still wearing my blouse. I would let the water soften until I could ease it from my back. In the tub I sat for long while without moving, without thinking, listening to what I knew I would not hear elsewhere in the house. The pain was a friend. Pain had never been a friend to me before but now it kept me still. It forced reality on me and kept me sane."⁶⁵

What is remarkable about this passage is that, even while experiencing her own wounds, Dana's mind travels back to the "old photographs of the backs of people who had been slaves," setting up a direct relation between her own wounds and those viewed in historical artifacts. She cannot come to terms with her own wounds without relying on her image-based knowledge of the antebellum past. Her knowledge of historical suffering is necessary in understanding her own physical pain. Furthermore, the personification of pain the previous passage as "friend" who keeps her "sane" since it "forced reality" upon her, begs the question: what reality does she speak of—her own reality as a wounded victim or the reality of historical wounds inflicted on the slave? Both realities are superimposed upon one another here (and throughout the novel) as Dana's wounds are immediately tied to historical wounds, existing on other bodies, in other times. Although Scarry posits that "physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content," Dana works to trace a lineage for her pain, establishing a historical referent for her pain.⁶⁶ She does not invent a linguistic structure to accommodate her experience of pain but does create a historical structure in which that pain can exist.

Soon after she fixes herself up to look "passably human," Dana begins packing her bags, preparing herself for the journey about to follow. In her days at home she continues reflecting

⁶⁵ Butler, 113.

⁶⁶ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 5–6.

upon her pain and, for the first time in the novel, she connects her own pain to the pain of a slave on the Weylin plantation:

“Tom Weylin had ordered brine thrown onto the back of a field hand he had whipped. I could remember the man screaming as the solution hit him. But his wounds had healed without infection. As I thought of this field hand, I felt strangely disoriented. For a moment, I thought Rufus was calling me again. Then I realized that I wasn’t really dizzy-only confused. My memory of a field hand being whipped suddenly seemed to have no place here with me at home.”⁶⁷

This is the first time the reader is made aware of this scene and subsequently we are forced to ask ourselves about what else is left out from Dana’s narration. Once again, we are trained in the art of reading silences, of treading softly across the landscape of atrocity forever unknown to us. This passage also reveals the “I could remember” moment reminiscent of Douglass’ narration of Aunt Hester’s whipping. It is in this moment that the reader is violently removed from Dana’s experience through the realization that her narrative is marked by silences and absences. Yet as soon as her memory of the field hand appears, and as soon as our own memory is compromised, Dana’s confusion sets in as the whipped field hand image becomes irreconcilable with her present 1976 Los Angeles living room. The representation of historical suffering and atrocity, even as it exists in her memory, has no place inside her present-day living room; the image simply does not make sense in her historical present. It is with this scene that the novel creates its most tarnishing critique of the reading as it relates to the retelling of painful historical abuses and their subsequent connection to empathy: to understand atrocity we must simply realize we cannot understand.

Similar to Dana’s time travel, the reader too time travels between worlds while reading. Yet the world of pain and historical atrocity never surfaces in the reader’s present world- it remains confined to the other world, perfectly enclosed and objectified. The only way out of this is to, like Dana, gain awareness that this phenomenon is occurring. It is this awareness that the postmodern novel’s critical apparatus fosters as it directs us to read beyond what is represented, allowing the silences and gaps of the unsaid to unveil the troublesome world of empathy as it relates to pain and victimhood. Although Dana’s reflections on pain teach us about the dangers of voyeuristic reading and the inevitability of falling into the voyeuristic trap, they also teach us how to read historical atrocities through this new interpretative lens. A skeptical interrogation of empathy does not mean the abandonment of the empathetic realm altogether. Rather, through this mixed process of interrogation and awareness, we avoid objectifying the victim- it is the least we can do- and perhaps come closer to witnessing atrocity in a more meaningful and productive way, enabling us to meditate on societal and historical injustice in the absence of the victim’s narrative abjection. *Kindred* does not build a narrative absent of empathy, it merely asks the reader to measure atrocity through multiple lenses, not one single, often objectifying lens.

Ethical Compromises: Empathy as Critique

In a chapter entitled “Seduction and the Ruses of Power” Saidiya Hartman uses Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a case study to discuss the inverted, seducing power play subtly sets up in the narrative through the use of empathy as a tool to “trick” the

⁶⁷ Butler, *Kindred*, 115.

reader: “the duplicity of the narrative lies in its appeal to the reader for sympathy and understanding, while actually deposing the reader as judge.”⁶⁸ Jacobs’ narrative creates a narrator who “guides us through the perilous passage in the slave girl’s life by documenting the constant obstacles that confront the enslaved female and the inevitability of her violation.”⁶⁹ Such a reading of Jacobs empowers the narrator with an agency that moves beyond merely seeking the reader’s identification and empathetic approval and recognition. Jacobs divulges the morally compromising decision to take on a white lover in order to separate herself from her master’s gaze and desire, revealing what Hartman describes as a “double bind.”⁷⁰ She suggests that Jacobs’ status as a “morally compromised” subject/actor works to her advantage since, by giving herself willingly to another, Jacobs reaffirms her status as property while also seeking to undo that title. Her ethical compromise is a battle for rights as she, the female slave, uses her sexualized body to her own advantage, creating the possibility for rebellion within the space of domination. An investigation of the ethical compromise in Jacobs’ *Incidents* sheds light on how empathy can be subtly used inside the nineteenth century slave narrative to incite a critique and reverse the power dynamic of the very society and individuals with whom it seeks to create an empathetic bond.

In generating new methods of reading which unearth new interpretative dynamics enabling the reader to scrutinize the use of empathy in nineteenth century sentimental novels and slave narratives, postmodern slave narratives reconstruct empathy as a method of critique rather than one of identification. Although the ethical compromise in *Kindred* is similar to Harriet Jacobs’ since, in both narratives, women strive to save themselves, while Linda Brent sacrifices her own body in order to avoid being raped by her master, Dana uses the body of another, Alice, to guarantee her own birth. Unlike Jacobs, whose decision to sleep with Mr. Sands, protecting herself from Dr. Flint, uncovers her savviness as she deliberately uses her own body as a commodity in order to resist a most unpleasant alternative, Dana’s ethical compromise reveals a complete lack of understanding. While Jacobs manipulates the institution of slavery through the commodification of her own body, Dana cannot come to grips with the very system Jacobs uses to her advantage. As soon as Dana goes to speak with Alice, divulging what Rufus intends to do, a lack of narrative affect emerges, furnishing a most un-empathetic realm between the two women: “well, it looks as though you’ve got three choices. You can go to him as he orders; you can refuse, be whipped, and then have him take you by force; or you can run away again.”⁷¹ This incredibly cut and dry narrative moment is not completely unfounded- Dana, after all, is upset with Alice for having called her a “white nigger,” as the latter finally got her memories back and remembered that Isaac, her husband, got his ears cut off and was subsequently sold to a chain gang. However, the scene between the two women reveals an utter lack of empathy on Dana’s behalf, stemming from one prevailing misunderstanding:

“I hesitated, shook my head. ‘I can’t advise you. It’s your body.’”

“Not mine.’ Her voice had dropped to a whisper. ‘Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn’t

⁶⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 107.

⁶⁹ Hartman, 106.

⁷⁰ Hartman, 106.

⁷¹ Butler, *Kindred*, 166.

he?’

‘Paid who, you?’

‘You know he didn’t pay me! Oh, what’s the difference? Whether it’s right or wrong, the law says he owns me now...’⁷²

Even her forced transportation to antebellum Maryland prevents Dana from fully understanding the basic organizing principle of slavery: bodies are paid for and owned by others. There is no “my body” for Alice, and Dana’s confusion, even after Alice tells her “not mine...he paid for it,” further demonstrates that nothing, not the books she carried with her, not her knowledge of history, not even her own lived experiences, can entirely make that principle clear for Dana. Dana still has a hard time fully understanding how one’s body can simply belong to another. She understands physical pain, but this version of emotional suffering is less readily available to her. This inability to understand fosters a lack of affect between two women, in the very scene where emotions should be present and discernable to the reader. Narrative affect, in other words, heavily employed by Jacobs, perpetuates the myth of understanding and identification between reader and character. “Law,” not appearing at any other point in the novel, appears in Alice’s dialogue for the first time, emphasizing that, unlike Dana, Alice is aware of the legal definition and distinction between free and bound subject. This focus on law is reminiscent to the discussion of law found in Chapter Ten of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents*, as she tells us of her own ethical compromise. Yet, unlike Jacobs who reflects on the inadequacy of law in order to demand a new moral landscape of judgment from her readers, Alice’s mention of law creates no such landscape; the reader is forcibly shut out of her world. In fact, not even Dana can fully understand Alice’s status as commodity.

Dana does not seek any form of approval from the reader as she plays the role of “match-maker” for Rufus. She simply acts, without reflecting on her actions or Alice’s. The novel does not dwell on Alice’s rape, nor does it create a narrative aside which enables the reader to come to terms with her violation; it merely states in the next section that “she went to him. She adjusted, become a quieter more subdued person. She didn’t kill, but she seemed to die a little.”⁷³ No narrative aside, no “making sense of things,” just a dry list of how the events took place without any attempt to seek empathy by identifying Alice’s pain and disgust. Unlike *Kindred*, Jacobs’s *Incidents*, contains many narrative asides the narrator unravels her ethical compromise. The reader is called upon to witness Jacobs’ actions with a kind eye: “And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do so honestly, let it cost me what it may.”⁷⁴ This formal address to the reader shapes the reader’s interpretation of Jacobs’ ethical compromise by provoking empathy from readers as they enter into the witness position. However, as Hartman argues, in exchanging her own body as a commodity with another man who is not her master, Jacobs protects herself, while also rebelling against the law which holds that her body does not belong to her. Unlike Alice, Jacobs says “no” to her master and lays a claim on her own body, cleverly dismantling the legal chains that also

⁷² Butler, 167.

⁷³ Butler, 168.

⁷⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Restored Version Complete and Unabridged* (S.I.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009), 39.

hold Alice captive. However, the reader is not established as a witness inside *Kindred*. In fact the reader exists further outside the world of understanding than Dana, in the realm of permanent ignorance.

One must read *Incidents* from a twenty-first century perspective to determine the hidden rebelliousness of Jacobs' act and, furthermore, decode her subtly covert narration of her compromising act. Dana's ethical compromise exposes three important narrative aspects that *Incidents* seeks to cover up: (1) the reader is a permanent outsider (2) the mobilization of empathy was (and continues to be) used to hide a text's veiled intentions and (3) no one is innocent; even the righteous narrator is implicated in a moral conundrum. In *Kindred*, the discussion between Alice and Dana demonstrates how, in the absence of narrative affect and empathy mobilization, the reader is refused the privileged witness position and forced back *outside*, as a non-witness, non-participant. The reader, therefore, holds no power of judgment over the character's choices and actions. In *Kindred* there are no morally innocent positions; everyone is implicated in some way, even Dana. This tampers with the easy mobilization of empathy, where the victim/perpetrator divide stands firm. In *Incidents* empathy is mobilized right before the ethical compromise is revealed and its mobilization promotes the appearance of a community of women which subsequently draws the reader back *inside* the text as a witness: "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely."⁷⁵ Jacobs calls upon women to refuse judgment momentarily since judgment should only be given when equality is the standard: "Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave women ought not to be judged by the same standard as others."⁷⁶ Jacobs enables the transition of reader-as-witness to reader-as-judge, a transition that *Kindred* simply refuses as it seeks to block the reader's access to the ethical compromise shared between Dana and Alice. The empathy produced through Jacobs' narrative is one that makes readers into judges. In the nineteenth century tradition, therefore, empathy is possible only if the reader is transformed into a judge, someone with the moral righteousness to validate certain actions and invalidate others. This is the version of empathy that *Kindred* rejects as problematic in that it bestows the reader with a power to objectify the victim and the victim's lived experience by suggesting that the reader resides in a morally innocent position.

Postmodern Reconstructions: Temporality, Personhood and the Historical Archive

Kindred use of temporality resists the manner in which the nineteenth century slave narrative manipulated the connection between time, empathy, pain and the body. Although nineteenth century slave narratives were generally narrated through the use of the past tense, inside each of these narratives a reflection on the past from the present moment of writing, enabling a temporal shift similar to the one *Kindred* makes evident. An example of this shifting temporality occurs as Douglass reflects, in chapter five of his *Narrative*, upon the following: "My feet have been so cracked with frost that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in

⁷⁵ Jacobs, 39.

⁷⁶ Jacobs, 40.

the gashes.”⁷⁷ The present moment of writing is superimposed on the bodily wounds of the past, suggesting that the body physically bears the marks of the history while simultaneously transforming into a vessel able to narrate the wounding past. Dana’s body bears the past in a similar way yet, instead of these moments of reflection enabling the mind to travel back in time, Dana literally travels back. Unlike Douglass, whose wounds are intimately connected to narration and his present moment of writing, Dana’s entire body exists as one large historical wound generating a different type of narration which sidesteps the first-person testimony. *Kindred*, like most slave narratives, is narrated in the past tense. However, in resisting the first-person narrative form, Dana hardly engages in moments of self-reflection which bear the wounds of history, subsequently urging sympathy from the reader. Although Dana experiences pain, loses an arm, undergoes severe beatings, the narration *never* gains a foothold in the present, not even for one fleeting moment, as happens in the Douglass. For the reader, Dana only makes sense inside the past; the present is, therefore, completely contained and contaminated by history. It is this contamination that *Kindred* brings to our awareness as we read, building the scaffold for understanding historical atrocity by showing how the past literally contaminates the present. A character or narrator’s moments of self-reflection, which resituate a sense of utopic historical hope inside the retelling of the most egregious past (Douglass) are completely absent inside Butler’s dystopic novel.

After Alice’s rape, Dana’s ability to focus her energies on 1976, a mini-utopia she could return to as long as she survives the nineteenth-century prison is finally called into question as she risks her own life for the first time. In her first and only attempt to run away, Rufus catches Dana in the middle of the night and, in their physical struggle, Dana finally expresses a desire to kill him, even if that means risking her own survival: “He would get something else too if I could reach my knife.”⁷⁸ For the first time in the novel, Dana’s innate desire and propulsion to save Rufus is negated by a larger desire: to protect herself from immediate pain and injustice. Her twentieth-century future no longer gains agency over her present moment of captivity inside the claws of history. Her desire to kill is further exacerbated as she finds out Tom Weylin, Rufus’ father, and Edwards, the plantation overseer, planned to use the cowhide on her: “I was totally beyond reasoning. I had never in my life wanted to desperately to kill another human being.”⁷⁹ These sentiments of revenge and self-defense are “beyond reason,” and thus are entirely absent from most nineteenth century American sentimental novels and slave narratives. The moment Douglass’ reflects on the horrid nature of slavery, the moment that hatred and dismay filters into his thoughts, he reigns those emotions deep within. The victim in these sentimental portrayals is always depicted, as mentioned earlier, as god-like, even in the face of violent abuse; the desire to kill the master simply has no place inside the purity of the victim’s unfortunate struggle. In revealing Dana’s desire to kill at this moment, the novel readdresses those problematic depictions of saintly slaves who simply took punishment without contemplating on their own agency and yearning for retribution.

Soon after Dana’s beating, Kevin returns to the Weylin plantation after, what for him had been, five years. They are both able, even as Rufus attempts to shoot them down, to return home

⁷⁷ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, chapter 5, page 16.

⁷⁸ Butler, *Kindred*, 173.

⁷⁹ Butler, 176.

together. Upon their return Dana realizes that she “had been away for only a few hours [and] Kevin had been away for eight days.”⁸⁰ As soon as Dana realizes that the time in 1976 simply went on without them, she hears a news story on the radio about South Africa:

“the news switched to a story about South Africa- blacks rioting there and dying wholesale in battles with police over the policies of the white supremacist government. I turned off the radio and tried to cook the meal in peace. South Africa whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth. In fact, they were living in the past as far as their race relations went. They lived in eases and comfort supported by huge numbers of blacks whom they kept in poverty and held in contempt. Tom Weylin would have felt right at home.”⁸¹

The connection to South Africa demonstrates just how present the history of slavery continues to exist in Dana’s modern-day society, a rather dubious reflection since Dana never reflects on the plethora of urban riots occurring across the United States and in her own Los Angeles backyard. Although the Soweto uprising of June 16, 1976 is commemorated here, Butler uses the South African example to subtly suggest that the United States, in not coming to terms with its slave-holding past, remains bound to its nineteenth-century timeline. While Dana reflects on World War II and South Africa, she refuses to engage in any reflection on the Civil Rights struggles continuing to engulf her own country. This refusal, or absence of contemporary struggles, establishes that U.S. history is so entangled with its nineteenth century past that a temporal demarcation is redundant. The nineteenth century, therefore, is the twentieth century; the two eras are mirror images of one another. Dana’s body exists between the two temporal spaces, demonstrating that these two spaces depend on one another for survival. In other words, time does not and cannot set them apart.

It is only upon Dana’s second to last travel back to Maryland that she finally gains awareness of her own legal status; an awareness that went unnoticed, or perhaps unknown, as Alice described her own body as “not mine. His.” “I had no enforceable rights,” Dana reflects, “none at all.”⁸² She reflects on her legal status after a conversation with Tom Weylin, as she demands that she be treated “a little more humanely” or she would stop saving Rufus’s life altogether.⁸³ She finally gains awareness that the power she holds over Rufus is the power of life and death - a life intertwined with hers yet, nevertheless, a life she can choose to save or let die. However, the knowledge she gains about her “enforceable rights” was not enough to prepare her for the selling of Tess, or Sam’s sentence, sparked by Rufus’ jealousy, of being sold to a chain gang so he would no longer have any access to Dana. It is the former that sparks Dana to cut her wrists, and return back to Los Angeles, choosing her own death over life for the first time. This is the first time Dana harms herself in order to return home, as she finally begins to understand her status inside the slave-holding society. Dana has thus transformed, finally, into a victim, and her newly understood status as victim becomes unbearable. Yet it is only after she understands

⁸⁰ Butler, 196.

⁸¹ Butler, 196.

⁸² Butler, 201.

⁸³ Butler, 201.

that she lacks any kind of legal status that suicide becomes a viable option; her choice to end her life parallels her realization that she lacks personhood.

Her last return to the nineteenth century occurs after Alice's suicide, a result of Rufus selling her children, as a temporary punishment for Alice having run away. This is the first time that Dana returns to find Rufus out of any sort of immediate danger; the first time she is not propelled to save his life. The only life she has to save at the end of the novel is her own as Rufus attempts to rape her, hoping to convince her to stay with him to raise his now motherless children. Right when Rufus tries to throw himself on Dana, she grabs the knife out of her bag and, in their struggle, twists the knife into his flesh. The last words that Dana hears as Rufus grabs her arm and she is transported back to Los Angeles for her final journey, are Nigel's: "Dana what.....? Oh no. God no!"⁸⁴ Dana finds herself back at home, "caught somehow, joined to the wall as through [her] arm were growing out of it-or growing into it." Still growing into or out of the past, Dana's body cannot come back whole. Each time she travels a small piece of her remains in the past, however, upon her last journey, a larger piece is literally grasped by Rufus: her left arm. As she pulls her arm towards her, pain, "an avalanche of pain," takes over and the chapter, for the first time, ends with her screaming.⁸⁵ Pain, finally, receives no description here, circulating back to corroborate Elaine Scarry's formulation that a body in pain traverses the language barriers, becoming pure sound. This is important to note since the novel makes it a point to have Dana articulate her pain throughout, as if she were a witness to her own body in pain. Yet, as soon as she begins to understand that she has no rights, she enters into the victim position and loses her ability to articulate her pain through language.

Nigel's lamentation, as we find out in the novel's epilogue, complicates the scene. As Dana and Kevin travel, this time by plane, back to present day Maryland in search of archival information, they discover that all three of Nigel's son's, Sarah, and most everyone else (aside from Sarah, Joe, Hagar, Nigel and Carrie) were sold after Rufus died. The "cost" of her "self-defense" was laid out for her in human bodies sold "at the brick building of the Historical Society."⁸⁶ Nigel's lamentation, therefore, represents a father on the cusp of losing his children. This further distinguishes the divide between Dana's knowledge and Nigel's; Dana still, even upon her sixth journey between past and present, does not fully understand the consequences of her actions. Dana's liberation came at a very high cost, further problematizing the notion of freedom that the novel juggles. Freedom is costly, and Dana's choice to save herself and kill Rufus reveals the level at which the past and present interact with one another, continuing to shape one another over a century later. Yet Butler, unlike Douglass, Jacobs, and Stowe, refuses the utopic ending. In fact, Dana and Kevin's desire to reconstruct an ending, for the individuals they met and lived with in Maryland, by traveling to the archive, further suggests that they believe in the existence of "solid evidence."⁸⁷ What the novel seeks to undermine is the very notion of solid historical evidence for this time period, an era promoting the invisibility of the slave as an individual endowed with any sort of historical claim.

⁸⁴ Butler, 260.

⁸⁵ Butler, 261.

⁸⁶ Butler, 264.

⁸⁷ Butler, 264.

Kevin has the last words in the novel, as he seeks to reassure Dana that they are both still sane after their journeys: “We are,” he said. “And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way.”⁸⁸ With these words he un-names Rufus, referring to him as simply “the boy,” negating his identity. Rufus’s last word, “Nigel” echoes loudly here— the slave’s identity and name prevails over the master’s, his name the last to leave his master’s lips, his name retold to us in the epilogue, preserved. Although Tom Weylin’s name gains textual presence in the epilogue, Dana only reflects on his name in relation to her scar: “I touched the scar Tom Weylin’s boot had left on my face, touched my left sleeve.”⁸⁹ Weylin is transformed into a mere object, a boot, stripped of agency, a thing empowered, long ago, to leave marks on Dana’s body. He, like his son, no longer gains permanence over the narrative, and their absence, along with Nigel, Sarah, Carrie, Joe, and Hagar’s presence in the epilogue, allow for the construction of an alternative historical archive, one held down by the power of narrative reconstruction. In erasing Rufus from the narrative, the power that the postmodern neo-slave narrative holds over history and its often faulty archival records is demonstrated: in effect, the Weylins are stripped for personhood while Nigel, Sarah, Carrie, Joe and Hagar are reequipped with personhood. Furthermore, as Dana reads the newspaper records, she finds out that the Weylin house had been set on fire the night she twists the knife into Rufus’ side. Subsequently, according to popular thought and the historical archive, Rufus had died in the house fire. She reflects that this intricate cover up was likely created by Nigel, and these actions enable the reconstruction of historical records that Dana now looks upon. Nigel, in effect, becomes an agent and creator of history, an active participant in the manipulation of history’s most trusted foundation, the archive.

Conclusion

If it is true the human rights discourse within the United States arose out of the nineteenth century’s abolitionist movement, which was predicated on the visibility of a violated slave body, then rights discourse is inherently intertwined with an individual’s violation and not an individual’s self-determination. In other words, the liberal human rights model is founded on the objectification of a suffering body. The danger with this, as Samuel Moyn reminds us, is that “the history of human rights first emerged as something like the history of American morals,” morals often embedded in the public vis-à-vis nineteenth century sentimental novels and slave narratives.⁹⁰ Yet morals founded on a violated body become ungrounded as soon as that same body seeks recognition in the absence of its violation. Furthermore, “sentimentalism was profoundly selective, not just in the kinds of problems it targeted but also in the types of people who deserved pity.”⁹¹ *Kindred* addresses the questionable morality-driven nineteenth century liberal human rights model through its critical engagement with nineteenth century slave narratives and sentimental novels.

Many scholars have described *Kindred* as a “postmodern slave narrative engaging in the dismantling of Enlightenment conceptions of history and identity and the narrative of Western

⁸⁸ Butler, 264.

⁸⁹ Butler, 264.

⁹⁰ Samuel Moyn, *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (New York: Verso, 2014), 5.

⁹¹ Moyn, 121.

culture superiority,” yet few have explored how novel’s dystopic treatment of empathy redefines the relationship between the violated body, the witness and the reader.⁹² It is this relationship that drove eighteenth-century human rights proclamations and propelled the abolition movement in the Americas throughout the nineteenth-century. And it is the same relationship, the one nurtured between victim and observer, determining the liberal human rights model today. *Kindred* exposes this faulty foundation, establishing a critique of the novelistic empathy model which Lynn Hunt deems essential to the rise of liberal human rights. Butler’s novel critiques the disengaged, nineteenth century version of narrative empathy, where the reader is transformed into a voyeur primarily through the witnessing of emotional and physical pain, while also positioned inside a moral hierarchy, able to pass judgment scenes of human atrocity. Although Hunt believes that the rise of liberal human rights can be attributed to the eighteenth-century novel’s focus on identifiable characters, many scholars focusing on the nineteenth century hold that slavery and abolition set the precedent for twentieth century human rights declarations. Historian Jenny Martinez makes the persuasive claim that, “even the phrase ‘crimes against humanity’—which came to modern fame based on its use at the Nuremburg trials of Nazi war criminals—was used in the nineteenth century to describe the slave trade.”⁹³ The attention placed on the nineteenth century as a precursor to the very language that twentieth century human rights discussions, courts, and declarations used, suggests there is still something to be learned and uncovered by the nineteenth century. What is left of human rights if this empathetic foundation is stripped? This is the question that *Kindred*, in directly dealing with the nineteenth century, seeks to unravel. The new critical apparatus emerging enables us to revisit the abolition era with a new set of eyes. It is with these eyes that we can finally witness how nineteenth century constructions of the body, pain, and empathy have shaped the construction of human rights today.

⁹² Hampton, *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler*, 9.

⁹³ Jenny S. Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

Chapter Two

Reclaiming the Void:

The Empathetic Recovery of Patagonia and Omoy-Lume

When Sylvia Iparraguirre entered the Museo Etnográfico in Buenos Aires, she saw, for the first time, a canoe and several everyday utensils and objects used by the *yámanas*, the original inhabitants of the southern part of Tierra del Fuego. She describes this tactile experience as a “shock,” a forceful thrust into the world of historical fiction that she builds inside her novel, *La Tierra del Fuego*. This novel tracks a *criollo* man named Jack Guevara, as he recounts the story of his friendship to Jemmy Button, a native *yámana* abducted by Robert Fitzroy in 1830 and transported to England for over a year. Iparraguirre’s desire to tell “la historia real Argentina muy poco contada,” (the true, yet less known, history of Argentina) leads her both to British colonial archives and to Ethnographic museums in Bariloche and in Buenos Aires.¹ Near the *yámana* objects she encounters in the Buenos Aires museum, another artifact surfaces: one of Fitzroy’s diaries, written during his travels through Patagonia.² These two historical objects map the contested histories of nineteenth-century Patagonia; a region fully incorporated into the national landscape only in the mid-twentieth century.³

They also outline the tensions between history and fiction in Latin America while shedding light on the effects that colonialism has had in constructing the citizen and the non-citizen within the national landscape of Argentina. Lastly, they determine the effects that travel narratives have had (and continue to have) on national literature and history across the Americas. The interaction between early nineteenth-century European travel narratives and mid-nineteenth-century foundational fictions has shaped many of the concretized notions of land rights and identity politics in Argentina. The discourse on national belonging and who has the right to land within Patagonia is one still very present today, as indigenous communities have begun laying their claim to land in region. Iparraguirre’s novel illuminates the role that literary and non-literary representations of the indigenous other have played in demarcating lines of difference between those individuals incorporated within the nation, as citizens with holding basic human rights, and those the nation refuses. As it illuminates the role that representation has played in the

¹ *Entrevista a Sylvia Iparraguirre*, accessed November 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2mufdhFY4Y>.

² Reina Roffé, “Entrevista a Sylvia Iparraguirre,” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, no. 603 (September 2000): 102.

++All Translations from Spanish to English are my own, unless otherwise stated++

³ Patagonia was treated as a set of colonies until 1956, when they became 4 provinces after Perón’s overthrow (and, one of them, La Pampa, had to be renamed, since the Peronists had called it Provincia Eva Perón). A history of the region and its incorporation into the Argentina nation is found in Susana’s Bandieri’s *Historia de la Patagonia*.

nineteenth century in organizing what now stands in for human rights discourse, the novel turns to an empathetic encounter between two very different men, to construct an alternative version of national history that includes indigeneity, claiming that Argentine identity is intrinsically tied to understanding, recognizing, and empathizing with the indigenous community and culture. The narrative empathy produced inside La Tierra del Fuego is one that involves both proximity *and* distance as necessary components in establishing a critical empathy between Guevara and Button.

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La Tierra del Fuego offers visibility to the past atrocities committed against the indigenous communities in Patagonia and to the present misrepresentation of these communities by current media. Even well-established reporters and news personalities, such as Jorge Lanata who started the newspaper *Página 12* and now runs a highly watched news program *Periodismo Para Todos*, have maintained that indigenous communities within Argentina are not actually real, but rather are set up to trick the government into giving them welfare.⁴ The denunciation of indigenous communities within Argentina stems from its nineteenth century national construction, rooted in defining the nation and its citizens as predominantly European. The campaign for the Conquest of the Desert led by Julio Argentina Roca in the 1870's, where troops killed and displaced indigenous communities throughout Patagonia, to make room for ethnic European settlers, is still being debated and restructured within Argentina's current historiography. The highly controversial Conquest has been labeled as a genocide by some scholars while others view it as a necessary civilizing mission which did not exterminate the indigenous groups but rather made them "Argentine." Some even deny that there were indigenous groups in Argentina at all, believing that the Conquest of the Desert was a campaign that sought to eradicate Chileans from Argentine land. The controversial Conquest still defines twenty-first century politics, especially as more indigenous groups are gaining visibility throughout Argentina. The minister of education, Esteban Bullrich, in fact, released a statement in 2016 at the opening of a Veterinary school in the University of Rio Negro, that "esta es la nueva Campaña del Desierto, pero sin espadas con educación."⁵ This statement illuminates just how contested both the history of the Conquest and the present-day status of indigenous communities within Argentina remain.

The 1990's branded Argentina as a nation undergoing sociopolitical reinvention, as Carlos Menem sought to reverse the economic decline marked by the post-dictatorship period through free-market reforms. Although the first five years of the decade shows a rapidly growing Argentine economy, by 1997 the economy began experiencing sharp declines, entering into what many term the "Argentine great depression" spanning from 1998 to 2002.⁶ This period is also characterized by civil unrest both from the middle class and from poor communities, who

⁴ "Jorge Lanata Denunció Que Existe Una Comunidad Originaria 'Trucha' En Tucumán," *El Tucumano*, August 28, 2017, <http://www.eltucumano.com/noticia/242814/jorge-lanata-denuncio-existe-comunidad-originaria-trucha-tucuman>.

⁵ "Esteban Bullrich: 'Esta Es La Nueva Campaña Del Desierto, Pero No Con La Espada Sino Con La Educación,'" *La Nación*, September 16, 2016, <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1938454-esteban-bullrich-esta-es-la-nueva-campana-del-desierto-pero-no-con-la-espada-sino-con-la-educacion>.

⁶ "A Decline without Parallel," *The Economist*, February 28, 2002, <http://www.economist.com/node/1010911>.

protested throughout the country, marking another period of social protest similar to the one during the early 1980's. This tumultuous period also gives rise to a new novelistic style as novels merging borders between history and fiction, begin using the historical archive to subvert official national histories.⁷ Published in 1999, Iparraguirre's novel reimagines the role of forgotten indigenous histories inside Argentina's neoliberal state.⁸ The novel is a reflection on this tumultuous period as well as an investigation into Argentina's nineteenth century colonial and national past.

Novels such as Cesar Aira's *La Liebre*, Eduardo Belgrano Rawson's *Fuegia*, Leopoldo Brizuela's *Inglaterra. Una fábula*, and Antonio Elio Brailovsky's *Esta maldita lujuria*, all published during the 1990's, restage colonial history and national history. These novelists transform Patagonia into a central sociopolitical space where the nation as a whole can be deconstructed and reconstructed. A shift in the literary landscape of Argentina occurs during the 1990's as post-dictatorship fiction, embedded in human rights and the politics of memory, turns to a less evoked past: that of the nineteenth century. This turn to the nineteenth century also means a turn to the country's indigenous past, one previously silenced by the firmly held beliefs that Argentina was a country devoid of indigenous peoples and had no claims to an indigenous past. Several historians and anthropologists have remarked that an increase of ethnic visibility occurred during this time, leading to a reimagining of the nation, one that started including the previously excluded, "marking a new conceptualization of the relationship between ethnicity and national belonging."⁹ It is no wonder that in 1995 the "Law of Indigenous Rights," granting new legal status to all Amerindian communities within the national territory, became part of the newly drafted constitution.¹⁰

The nineteenth century in Argentina, and throughout the Americas, was marked by colonialism, the struggle for independence, nation-making, the creation of the citizen, and the exclusion of the "other." It is, in other words, an era of unmaking and remaking, of making invisible and making visible, of construction and destruction. If the concepts of nation and nationalism are forged during the nineteenth century, it is no wonder that Argentine writers readdress this century just before the catastrophic fall of the neoliberal model, one set in place following the period of ultimate national destruction, as characterized by the Dirty War. After a period of intense national reflection on the 1970's and 1980's, where art's primary focus was providing a history for the disappeared, Argentine writers turned to the nineteenth century in an attempt to unravel the official national construction founded on silencing and disappearing the indigenous populations. It is no wonder that David Viñas' quintessential work, *Indios, Ejército y Frontera*, argues that the Argentine national project led to genocide both in 1879 and the 1976. According to Viñas, the Dirty War should no longer be viewed as an aberration of Argentine history but rather as an ongoing process which began in the 1880's with Sarmiento's liberal

⁷ Especially those histories grounded in nineteenth century Argentine liberalism.

⁸ Ezequiel Adamovsky, *Historia de La Clase Media Argentina: Apogeo y Decadencia de Una Ilusión, 1919-2003*, 1a ed (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2009), 439-64.

⁹ Alejandro Grimson, "Ethnic (In)Visibility in Neoliberal Argentina," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 38, no. 4 (January 1, 2005): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2005.11724497>.

¹⁰ Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela R. Montaldo, eds., *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, The Latin America Readers (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 525.

project. If Viñas' claim is followed, then are all novels written after the 1880's post-dictatorship novels? His overarching question, "¿porque no se habla de indios en Argentina?" [why is there no talk of Indians in Argentina], reverberates loudly in *La Tierra del Fuego*, as the novel unsilences the history of Jemmy Button.¹¹ *La Tierra del Fuego* is essentially a novel about human rights in that it questions the liberal foundation of nineteenth century Argentina, a foundation denying the humanity of the indigenous subject. It is also a novel about empathy, about the burgeoning friendship between two very different men who learn to understand one another despite their sociocultural differences.

With the rise of border immigration in the 1990's, Argentina's mythical European racial melting pot faced a few revisions:

"Especially in the case of Paraguayans and Bolivians, they were perceived of and placed en masse in the same category as the invisible mestizo Argentines: cabecitas negras....This term had been used derogatorily since the 1990s to stigmatize, in a 'country without blacks,' the working class population of Indian ancestry that came from the provinces to work in Buenos Aires factories. In other words, any differentiation based on national origin or ethnic specificity tended to be dissolved into a racially tinged social class identification that covered both Argentine mestizos and border immigrants. The poor were 'black'....this regime of diversity invisibility explains the public uproar that followed a historian's statement that General San Martin was the son of a Guarani Indian."¹²

It is this de-ethnicizing process that Argentine novels written in the late twentieth century, such as Sylvia Iparraguirre's *La Tierra del Fuego*, begin deconstructing. In other words, these novels *re-ethnicize*, problematizing the myth of Argentine cultural homogeneity through their engagement with the indigenous community and individual. The 1990's were marked by xenophobic discourse, stemming from the discrimination of the migrant-worker which naturally led to an increase of ethnically-organized groups protesting for their rights. This, in turn, provoked several indigenous groups throughout Argentina to begin their own political participation.¹³ Invisibility was no longer an option. Artists and novelists inside Argentina relied on the production of public empathy to reclaim a silenced national past and foster visibility.

The artistic response to the neoliberal crisis of the late 1990s sought, in both the visual arts and in literature, to make indigenous history and present-day realities visible and accessible. Anahí Cáceres, an Argentine artist, began producing art in the 1990's which unveiled many rituals and cultural elements of the Mapuche and Araucanian Indians living in Patagonia and Southern Chile. Monica Girón, a Patagonian artist, started making knitted objects during the 1990's in order to criticize the historical land-taking practices in the Argentine South, primarily following the Campaign of the Desert in the 1870's. She and Cáceres problematize the idyllic image of Patagonia, as constructed by travel-writers such as William H. Hudson, by situating the

¹¹ David Viñas, *Indios, Ejército y Frontera*, Parabellum/Santiago Arcos Editor. Ensayo 4 (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Santiago Arcos Editor, 2003), 16.

¹² Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler, *On Argentina and the Southern Cone: Neoliberalism and National Imaginations*, Globalizing Regions, v. 3 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 119.

¹³ Grimson and Kessler, 137-38.

region inside a history of conquest, genocide, and erasure.¹⁴ The production of literature and art in the 1990's inside the country is marked by narratives which battle against historical amnesia as they begin rehistoricizing a misconstrued and often untold past. It is within this framework of recovery that *La Tierra del Fuego* functions as it, much like Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, travels back to the nineteenth century to revise two narrative traditions: (1) the European travel narrative and (2) the traditional nineteenth-century nation-building narrative in Argentina. This revision in turn gives birth to a new national narrative, one grounded upon an empathetic encounter between two very different men: a *criollo* and a *yámana*. From this encounter, a new reader is born, one who learns how colonial and national representations have inflicted historical abuses on indigenous subjects.

The Patagonian Novel: Revising the Nineteenth-Century National Narrative

La Tierra del Fuego is a hybrid novel, as much historical as it is literary, a text focusing on Patagonia as a space set against both nineteenth-century Argentine nationalism and British colonialism. "La novela," writes Silvia Casini, "se articula sobre distintos ejes raciales, culturales y geográficos, reflejando una problemática socio-histórica del sur argentino en relación con los centros de poder." [The novel is made up of distinct racial, cultural, and geographic axis points, and reflects on a socio-historical problem that the Argentine south holds in relation to those centers of power].¹⁵ Iparraguirre's own archival research, both in Argentina and in England, further illuminates the novel's intersection with the official history it wishes to expose and destabilize. In Argentina, the social transformation occurring during the 1990's is one marked by the rise and fall of the dictatorship, which led to the development of human rights discourse and subsequently gave way to the production of new systems of representation which used memory as a means of engaging with the disappearances and abused bodies the dictatorship left in its trail. This in turn led to a new method of detailing the nation's fraught history, one which sought to revise the exclusionary versions of national space (and who qualifies as a national citizen in that space) that nineteenth-century literary and historical works constructed. Argentine historians and social-cultural critics believe that a better understanding the nineteenth-century national project is an essential part of understanding how the new systems of representing human rights abuses were constructed and employed in the late twentieth century.

In an article on the representation of Patagonia in history and fiction, Iparraguirre recalls that her interest "es esbozar los comienzos de la literatura argentina en el siglo XIX, y, en paralelo, los orígenes de una historiografía patagónica que se remonta a un momento muy anterior"¹⁶ [is to sketch the origins of nineteenth-century Argentine literature and, parallel to that, the origins of a historiography of Patagonia which dates back to a previous moment in time]. She further illuminates that the determination to map out this historiography establishes "la novela

¹⁴ Arnd Schneider, *Appropriation as Practice: Art and Identity in Argentina*, 1st ed, Studies of the Americas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 172–90, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/berkeley/Doc?id=10150420>.

¹⁵ Silvia Casini, "Ficciones de Patagonia: La Construcción Del Sur En La Narrativa Argentina y Chilena" (University of Kentucky, 2005), 18.

¹⁶ Sylvia Iparraguirre, "Patagonia: Historia y Ficción. Documento Histórico y Novela: Una Experiencia de Escritura," *Páginas de Guarda: Revista de Lenguaje*, otoño 2006, 102.

patagónica argentina de fines del siglo XX”¹⁷ [the Patagonian-Argentine novel at the end of the twentieth century]. Iparraguirre also contends that the birth of Argentine literature in the nineteenth century is connected to the birth of politics, and that literature can become another means of writing, or in this case rewriting, national history:

“La literatura argentina- El matadero; Amalia; Facundo- nace como literatura política... Se escribe para ubicar en el discurso a personajes reales, para desacreditarlos, para mostrar a las víctimas, para denostar un régimen, para desprestigiar, para ensalzar un estilo de vida contrapuesto. Se incorporan al cuento y a la novela personajes y situaciones de la realidad inmediata. ¿Nace entonces, la literatura argentina como literatura histórica? ...A mi juicio, la respuesta es negativa. En textos fundacionales, no hay distancia histórica entre hechos y personajes reales y la ficción que los repone en el papel.”¹⁸

[Argentine literatura-El matadero, Amalia, Facundo-begins as political literature. The purpose of writing was to locate real-life people inside the literary discourse so that those same people could be discredited, so that the victims could be made visible, so that a regime could be insulted, so that a different kind of life could be praised and applauded. Real life individuals and situations are incorporated into the short story and novel. Does Argentine literature erupt as historical literature then? In my opinion, no. In the foundational texts, there is no historical distance between real life individuals and events and the fiction that places those individuals and events onto paper.]

Like Iparraguirre, David Viñas suggests that a reading of nineteenth century foundational texts exposes the silencing of the indigenous people inside Argentina. It is this same silencing that reoccurs during the Dirty War. Viñas’s claim that the Argentine national project led to genocide from its very inception revisits the Dirty War period as a continuation of the 1880’s Conquest of the Desert campaign. If the birth of Argentine literature is connected to politics and not to history, what happens inside a novel published in 1999, but set in the early to mid-nineteenth century? What politics are at play here? *La Tierra del Fuego* exists as a hypothetical foundational text. What if an indigenous man did gain an empathetic portrayal inside the literary-political spectrum of nineteenth century Argentina? What if Patagonia was applauded as a space for self-creation and literary production rather than silent vastness or objectified travel fantasies? What new politics would erupt out of such a literary enterprise? What new nation? What new reader?

Inhabiting Vastness: Birth of the Narrative and the Subject

La Tierra del Fuego begins with two epigraphs situating the novel inside its governing traditions:

“¿Dónde termina aquello que quiere en vana penetrar? ¡No lo sabe! ¿Qué hay más allá de lo que ve? ¡La soledad, el peligro, el salvaje, la muerte! (...) el hombre que se mueve en

¹⁷ Sylvia Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 1998), 102.

¹⁸ Iparraguirre, 104.

estas escenas se siente asaltado de temores e incertidumbres fantásticas, de sueños que le preocupan despierto – Domingo F. Sarmiento”

[Where does that which he, in vain, wishes to penetrate end? He does not know! What is out there beyond what he can see? Solitude, danger, the savage, death (...) the man who moves among these scenes feels assaulted by fears and fantastic uncertainties, by dreams which worry him when he is awake]

“Me atormenta una perdurable inquietud por las cosas remotas- Herman Melville”¹⁹

[I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote.]

The first citation comes from Chapter Two of Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, a chapter outlining Argentine originality and characters, and the second, from the first chapter of Melville’s *Moby Dick*. In situating her novel within these two nineteenth-century traditions, Iparraguirre alludes to the composition of Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, a text also starting with two epigraphs. Like Sarmiento, who purposefully miswrites the epigraphs in order to destabilize the European tradition, making room for his own narrative, Iparraguirre silences and revises Sarmiento, through the use of the ellipsis, and Melville, by rejecting the original English citation.²⁰ The space created here is one which embodies the

“hibridez cultural del narrador que pertenece, como dijimos, a dos ámbitos lingüísticos- el español y el inglés- y a dos espacios geográficos- la pampa y el mar. El narrador es, además, un ‘gaucho-letrado,’ conocedor de libros, para quien *Moby Dick* es uno de los libros preferidos desde que lo leyó en una fonda del puerto de Nueva York en el invierno de 1853. ¿Podría asumirse, entonces, que al colocar el texto de Sarmiento al lado de una lectura confesada y aprobada por el narrador, Sylvia Iparraguirre sugiere una lectura no confesada, un texto que Guevara conoce, pero no aprueba y por eso no nombra nunca?”

[cultural hybridness of the narrator, who belongs to two linguistic traditions- Spanish and English- and to two geographic spaces- the pampas and the sea. The narrator is, moreover, a ‘gaucho-letrado,’ knower of books, for whom *Moby Dick* is a favorite since he read it in a New York port in the winter of 1853. Can we then assume that in situating Sarmiento’s text next to a confessed and approved reading by the narrator, Iparraguirre alludes to the existence of a non-confessed reading, a text that Guevara knows but one that he has not approved and therefore has not acknowledged?]

A silencing of Sarmiento does in fact occur inside the novel, as the founding father of Argentine nationalism is not once mentioned by Guevara. This unveils the novel’s revisionary impetus, as it subtly exposes the problematic silencing tendencies of nineteenth-century Argentina’s nationalist project.

¹⁹ Iparraguirre, 9.

²⁰ The lengthy Sarmientian citation is interrupted by “(…)” a strange elimination of a concise phrase, “He aquí ya la poesía” [This then is poetry], which the author replaces with an ellipsis.

The Sarmientian citation is from a chapter in *Facundo* detailing the importance of national literature in the creation of a new Argentine society and citizen. It occurs following a discussion of the immensity of the pampas, one met with a revelation about the danger and poetic potential of uncharted territory: “¿Que impresiones ha de dejar en el habitante de la República Argentina el simple acto de clavar los ojos en el horizonte, y ver...no ver nada; porque cuanto más hunde los ojos en aquel horizonte incierto, vaporoso, indefinido, más se le aleja, más lo fascina lo confunde, y lo sume en la contemplación y la duda?”²¹ [What impression is left on the Argentine inhabitant by the simple act of fixing his eyes on the horizon and seeing...seeing nothing, because the more he sinks his eyes into the uncertain, indefinite horizon, the further away it gets from him, the more it fascinates and confuses, and plunges him into contemplation and doubt?] The only progress derived from immensity, from open –spaces, from Patagonia, is tied to the creation of poetry. Sarmiento’s vision of the country is disempowered by vastness. In order to have a functioning nation, these spaces must be controlled, surveyed and contained. Noé Jitrik asks if *Facundo* is a text which also furnishes the reader with an idea of what literature inside Argentina should be. Does *Facundo*, in other words, determine the requirements for writing within the newly developed nation? While Sarmiento believes that poetry surfaces from these vast spaces, partly due to the medium’s ability to contain multiple images concisely, Guevara, uses the images of vastness as a point of departure for the Argentine novel.²² If it is true that *Facundo* creates the rules for narrative within Argentina, then Guevara’s bends those rules from the very beginning suggesting that it is not the city-space that holds the potential for narrative production. The vastness of the hinterlands can also create national narratives. This destabilizes Sarmiento’s belief that only poetry, a lesser art with respect to the productive powers that narrative has in laying out the ground rules for national literature, should arise from the barbaric immensity of the pampas.

Guevara’s narration begins in 1865, at the height of the Paraguayan War, the deadliest in Latin America’s history which ironically also plays a key role in the foundation of Argentine nationalism. He begins his narrative inside the immediate present (1865) and not inside 1806 or 1830, a past he spends most of his time describing during the course of the novel: “Hoy, en medio de esta nada, sucedió un hecho extraordinario” [Today, in the middle of this nothingness, something extraordinary happened].²³ Guevara does not write *from* the past, he writes *about* the past *from* the present, much like Iparraguirre herself; the present moment gains the power over the construction of the past and thus from the present we can reformulate history. Furthermore, nothingness gives way to extraordinary events, a direct revision of the Sarmientian epigraph which stipulates that only danger, solitude, savagery, and death can be birthed by the immensity of the pampas. The narrator continues, stating that “es que puede llamarse impaciencia el mirar silencioso y obstinado *clavado en el horizonte*” [It can be called impatience, this silent and stubborn looking fixed upon the horizon]. This directly echoes the previously mentioned Sarmientian moment: “Qué impresiones ha de dejar en el habitante de la República Argentina el simple acto de *clavar los ojos en el horizonte.*” Guevara quite literally answers Sarmiento’s

²¹ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie*, ed. Roberto Yahni (Madrid: Cátedra, 2008), 78.

²² Tulio Halperín Donghi, ed., *Sarmiento, Author of a Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 181.

²³ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 13.

question. The impression left on the Argentine inhabitant as he fixes his eyes on the horizon is one which transforms the nothing into the impatience for something extraordinary. As Guevara continues his narration, he provides a new origin for the Argentine novel by relating his own history as one that is intricately connected to Jemmy Button's. In effect, *La Tierra del Fuego* ties indigenous histories to *criollo* ones- telling two simultaneous histories which merge and diverge, grounded upon a friendship and recognition between Jack Guevara and Jemmy Button.

The novel remaps the territory which both nineteenth-century European explorers and Argentine intellectuals utilized to enact a discourse on the dangers of barbarism and the benefits of so-called civilizing tactics. Geographical mapping, therefore, becomes an essential component for the creation of the nation-space and the exclusion of those unworthy of national representation. The nation

“relies for its legitimacy on the intensity of its meaningful presence in a continuous body of bounded territory...During the process of nation-building in Argentina and Chile, both countries claimed Patagonia as fundamental: the region's control and occupation were crucial not only for the economic future of each country, but also for defining their political and cultural communities. The first antagonists of these national claims were the numerous and diverse Amerindian tribes that populated the area and fiercely opposed Western intervention.”²⁴

Before traveling back to the past to begin his own story and Button's, Guevara resituates himself, and his reader, inside the space of Tierra del Fuego. He defines Tierra de Fuego as physical space existing on a map, unadorned by overly estheticized descriptions of the natural landscape: “Entre los 64 y 70 grados de longitud oeste del meridiano de Greenwich y los paralelos 52 y 56 de latitud sur, se extiende el ultimo fragmento de American del Sur: Tierra del Fuego, la *Terra Incognita Australis*, abierta...”²⁵ [Between 64 and 70 degrees longitude west of Greenwich and parallels 52 and 56 south latitude, the last fragment of South America extends: Tierra del Fuego, the Terra Incognita Australis, open...]. This moment both contrasts and echoes Chapter One of Sarmiento's *Facundo*, a chapter he initiates by placing “la República Argentina” on the map:

“El Continente Americano termina al sud en una punto en cuya extremidad se forma el Estrecho de Magallanes....La tierra que queda al Oeste....se llamó Provincias Unidas del Rio de la Plata, y en el que aún se derrama sangre por denominarlo República Argentina o Confederación Argentina... La inmensa extensión del país que está en sus extremos, es enteramente despoblada....el mal que aqueja a la República Argentina es la extensión...el despoblado sin una habitación humana...”²⁶

[“The American continent ends to the south in a point, at whose extreme end the Strait of the Magellan is formed...The land that lies to the east...is the territory called the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata, and there, blood is still being shed in order to name it

²⁴ Gabriela Nouzeilles, “Patagonia as Borderland: Nature, Culture, and the Idea of the State,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 37.

²⁵ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 21–22.

²⁶ Sarmiento, *Facundo*, 2008, 15–16.

either the Argentine Republic or the Argentine Confederation...the immense expanse of land is entirely unpopulated ...the disease from which the Argentine Republic suffers is its own expanse....a barren land with no human habitation....”²⁷

Yet, unlike Sarmiento, whose focus on this space leads him to conclude that vastness inflicts harm on the nation, Guevara lends his focus to the immensity Sarmiento fears and positions a hypothetical man within it from the very beginning: “si un hombre se plantara en la costa norte de Magallanes mirando al sur, tendría ante sí, en línea recta y a unas pocas millas, el punto extremo de este conjunto...” [if a man plants himself in the north Magellan coast, while looking to the south, he could have, before him, in a straight line and only a few miles away, the extreme point of this juncture].²⁸ Guevara, in other words, populates the abyss by positioning an individual within it, while also enabling that individual to contain the vastness through his own body. That body is the body of writing itself, a narrative body.

Guevara continues populating this so-called vastness even when recalling the origin of Tierra del Fuego’s name: “las costas a las que Pigafetta nombró como la tierra de los fuegos, por la cadena rojiza de las fogatas con las que los habitantes del país se avisaban del paso de extraños y enorme seres...” [the coasts which Pigafetta named the land of the fires for the reddish chain of bonfires he saw, the fires which the inhabitants of that country used to warn each other of the passing of strange and large beings....].²⁹ This passage creates what Mary Pratt calls a “contract zone,” a space where two cultures “meet, clash, and grapple with each other.”³⁰ There are two primary contact zones established in the novel. One deals with colonialism and the indigenous subject, and the other lies at the intersection of nineteenth-century nationalism and that same subject. Although Antonio Pigafetta holds the power of naming over the territory, that power is directly dependent upon his witnessing of the inhabitants’ actions. The inhabitants are undeniably present. Unlike the depopulated immense spaces throughout *Facundo*, Guevara’s descriptions of the both Tierra del Fuego, and the pampas, always contain human inhabitants. Perhaps, as David Viñas implies, Sarmiento’s depopulating tendency arises from his inclination to view the indigenous communities residing there as non-human. Space is not empty in *Tierra del Fuego*; space is populated. Perhaps it is this symbolic preservation of the illusion of emptiness which led to genocidal campaigns of the late-nineteenth century, and to the subsequent silencing of indigenous history in present-day Argentina.

Patagonia, from colonial times to the present, is constantly envisioned as a physical space lacking parameters, a borderland outside national limits. Therefore, the region becomes a

“paradoxical zone whose very lack of limits confounds a Reason dependent on limits and scales. This explains why, according to some, the experience of the Patagonia space implies the risk of ‘stepping out,’ of becoming civilization’s Other...If, in accordance

²⁷ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism (the First Complete English Translation)*, trans. Kathleen Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 45.

²⁸ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 20.

²⁹ Iparraguirre, 22.

³⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2 edition (London : New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.

with the historical assumptions of the West, moving through space implied moving forward in time (colonization as progress), then the experience of Patagonia was, on the contrary, 'to go back', 'to recede', to veer off the path of history."³¹

It is inside this paradox that Guevara's narrative is born. Guevara determines that the birth of narrative, the act of writing, must occur on the periphery, outside history, outside national, and inside the margins: "Por muchos años he vivido en los hechos dentro de la Historia. Ahora estoy al margen y puedo descifrar los acontecimientos del pasado como se descifra una escritura." [For many years I have lived inside historical facts. Now I am on the margin and can decipher the events of the past as one deciphers a piece of writing].³² The margins are not contained by history, but it is from the margins that history gains clarity. In pitting his own act of writing against history, writing is empowered with the ability of deciphering the past. Although Guevara's narrative is birthed through his interaction with the British Empire, as he starts writing back to the British Admiralty, the process of decoding both colonialism and the Argentine nationalist project is initiated.³³ Furthermore, soon after locating Tierra del Fuego on the map, Guevara begins narrating his own past: "Yo tenía dieciocho años y también estaba allí"³⁴ [I was eighteen years old and I was also there]. The vastness of the Patagonian landscape is transformed to a productive space which births narrative and, subsequently, identity.³⁵

The act of writing, however, is unruly, messy, and even violent for Guevara. "No tengo el hábito" he reflects, "de la escritura. El pensamiento va más rápido que la pluma y el orden de los párrafos no es, creo, el preciso. Las palabras son como animales cerriles que salen ciegame en estampida, juntándose una a otra, siguiéndose una a otra." [I am not in the habit of writing. Thoughts go faster than the pen and the order of the paragraphs is not, I believe, precise. Words are like wild animals that blindly stampede, joining each other, following one another].³⁶ Words are transformed into animals which cannot be controlled, leading into the creation of an imprecise, chaotic world. The moral duty Guevara undertakes from the very beginning, in exonerating Jimmy Button of any crime or perceived crime, resonates here as he reflects on his inability to form coherent thoughts. Guevara's relationship with the vast immensity of the landscape parallels that of his own personal history, which he begins piecing together while

³¹ Nouzeilles, "Patagonia as Borderland," 35.

³² Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 33.

³³ Guevara, as will be discussed in depth later in this chapter, is writing back to a letter he received from the British Admiralty which required his narrative as a means of unpacking the certain events surrounding Jimmy Button, primarily the massacre against several missionaries he was exonerated of a few years earlier.

³⁴ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 24.

³⁵ Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited during the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Round the World, under the Command of Capt. Fitz Roy, R.N* (London: J. Murray, 1870), 230, <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100641100>.

"I believe that in this extreme part of South America, man exists in a lower state of improvement than in any other part of the world." (230)

³⁶ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 24.

reflecting on Jemmy Button. Button's life, therefore, enables Guevara to piece together his own life, further cementing the interconnectedness between the two men and their histories.

Charles Darwin's perception of Patagonia was echoed by his contemporaries who saw the limitlessness of the landscape as an antidote to the ills of rational modernity. Darwin's journals provide an important context for the novel since they detail his first contact with the indigenous peoples of Tierra del Fuego as a spectacle into the unknown: "they seemed troubled spirits of another world" and were "the most curious and interesting spectacle [he] ever beheld."³⁷ He goes on to say that until he saw them he "would not have believed how entire the difference between savage and civilized man is. It is greater than between a wild and domesticated animal."³⁸ There are no identifiable traits that Darwin can find between himself and the indigenous inhabitants. This lack of identification provokes a lack of empathy on his behalf, as he states that they are closer to aliens than human. Of Patagonia he writes that,

"the first landing in any new country is very interesting, and especially when, as in this case, the whole aspect bears the stamp of a marked and individual character. At the height of between two and three hundred feet above some masses of porphyry a wide plain extends, which is truly characteristic of Patagonia. The surface is quite level, and is composed of well-rounded shingle mixed with a whitish earth. Here and there scattered tufts of brown wiry grass are supported, and still more rarely, some low thorny bushes. The weather is dry and pleasant, and the fine blue sky is but seldom obscured. When standing in the middle of one of these desert plains and looking towards the interior, the view is generally bounded by the escarpment of another plain, rather higher, but equally level and desolate; and in every other direction the horizon is indistinct from the trembling mirage which seems to rise from the heated surface."³⁹

The bareness of the plains and its desolate horizon does not generate anything productive. Like the inhabitants he meets later, Patagonia is not a land he identifies or attempts to understand. On the other side of the representational spectrum, William Hudson's *Idle Days in Patagonia*, explores how the Patagonian landscape gives way to silent contemplation through the abandonment of the modern world, celebrating emptiness. Even further from Darwin lies Alexander Humboldt, whose estheticized views of natural landscapes "provided a point of departure for moral and civic prescriptions for the new republics."⁴⁰ These travel narratives become a central point of departure for the new republics, and are "present as much in Sarmiento's *Facundo* and Lucio V. Mansilla's *Una excursion a los Indios Ranqueles* (Argentina,

³⁷ Matthew Day, "Godless Savages and Superstitious Dogs: Charles Darwin, Imperial Ethnography, and the Problem of Human Uniqueness," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1 (2008): 49–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/30139667>.

³⁸ Day, 56.

³⁹ Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle: Darwin's Five-Year Circumnavigation* (Santa Barbara: The Narrative Press, 2000), 173–74.

⁴⁰ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 172.

1877) as in Cirilo Villaverde's description of the sugarmill life in *Cecilia Valdés*.”⁴¹ Although this mediation did provide nineteenth century Latin America with a sense of self, a new search for knowledge and a redefinition of origins from within the continent, these authors continued relying on either the nostalgic travel logs or the quasi-scientific models to conceptualize the hinterlands, nature and the other. This further perpetuated the representative tropes of the colonial narrative, even inside texts seeking to define the new contours of the nation and its literature. Inside *La Tierra del Fuego* Patagonia becomes an exceedingly productive space primarily because it exposes the faulty process of mediation that nineteenth century Latin American authors turned to when seeking to redefine the national territories from within the city. This exposition illuminates a central criticism for nineteenth century literature: in mimicking writers like Hudson, Humboldt and Darwin, an utter lack of recognition and empathy for the actual individuals living within the regions they wrote about emerges. In voiding these individuals, national history within Argentina, like colonial history before it, is constructed by silencing of the indigenous other.

Writing, selfhood, and vastness are intricately linked throughout the novel in ways that make room for the subject to exist morally and ethically. “El mar,” he ponders, “es un exceso y cómo tal lleva cierto punto de sabiduría. Aunque nunca lo creí, de algún modo debo haber sido un típico hombre de mar que para su retiro eligió esta tierra como otra manera del exceso. Elegí la lengua de mi madre y esta llanura que como seno materno me acogerá algún día.”⁴² [The sea is an excess and as an excess it brings with it a certain level of knowledge. Although I never believed it, in some manner I should have been the kind of seaman who, for his retirement, chose this land as another kind of excess. I chose the language of my mother and this plain which, like a womb, will receive me one day]. Vastness is excess. This is not a metaphor, it is not a simile; it simply is. This excessive space marks the site of his birth and his death, thus enabling the pampas and the sea to gain contours through Guevara's own existence, much like the earlier mapping of Tierra del Fuego gained definition through the body of the man stretching in all directions. Vastness does not beget nothingness, or sublimity, or a contemplative abandonment of the modern world; it begets the nation and its subject. It begets identity and history. If we start with Pratt's convincing claim that Humboldt's writings provide a point of departure for the development of nationalism in the Americas, then what new point of departure is necessary for these new republics when Humboldt's esthetics are dismantled and reconstructed? *La Tierra del Fuego* turns its back on the Humboldtian tradition of sublime encounters with the natural world. Iparraguirre defines nature through its relationship to the individual, and demonstrates how the former does not exist outside of that relationship- sublimity has no place here.

Whenever Guevara does reflect on nature, he gives a *reason* for his reflection, a rationalization directly undermining the Humboldtian focus on the sublime uninhabited spectacle of nature, often overwhelming human understanding:

“La pampa, que miro a la luz de la luna desde mi ventana, es una inmensidad que provoca primero una nada y más tarde un sosegado pavor. Salvo los bárbaros y algunos gauchos, nadie se aventura en ese silencio. De vez en cuando, tropas de carretas

⁴¹ Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 103.

⁴² Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 87.

gigantescas, inclinadas hacia la tierra, cruzan el horizonte como barcos perdidos. Si hablo de la llanura es porque sigue siendo para mi algo recuperado. Nací y crecí en ella, me fui cuando empezaba a vivir, y ahora que he vuelto tengo necesidad de nombrarla.”⁴³

[The *pampa*, which I see out of my window in the moonlight, is an immensity which first provokes nothingness and later a peaceful terror. Expect for the barbarians and a few gauchos, no one dares adventure into this silence. From time to time, herds of giant carts, titled toward the ground, cross the horizon like lost ships. If I speak of the *pampa* it is because it continues to be something recovered for me. I was born and grew up here. I left when I started to live and now that I have come back, I must mention/name it.]

Unlike Humboldt, Guevara’s description of nature does not shy away from the mention of people, the “barbarous” and the “gauchos” as well as the “carts” appear, even at night, outside of his window. In fact, people appear as soon he begins reflecting on the pampas, and only after they appear does the first instance of figurative language occur, transforming the “carretas” into “barcos perdidos.” Although the image of vastness provokes a contradiction inside Guevara, “un sosegado pavor,” he manages this illogicality first by recuperating his own past within the space (his birth and childhood), and secondly, through act of naming [“nombrar”], which is a placeholder for the act of writing. While Sarmiento, as Mary Pratt determines, “rejects the Humboldtian celebration of these empty spaces [by] resymbolizing them as the ‘ill from which the Argentine Republic suffers,’” Guevara embraces an inhabited vastness as a productive vehicle driving narration and, even more importantly, selfhood.⁴⁴

Becoming a Witness: Destabilizing official history and Intellectual Colonialism

Before centering on his friendship with Jemmy Button and exposing the novel’s “verderera intención” of furnishing an empathetic space for the indigenous subject inside nineteenth-century Argentine narrative and history, Guevara first distances himself from British travel narratives, European civilizing missions, and the intellectual colonialism of Sarmiento and company. Reflections on illiteracy and literacy throughout *La Tierra del Fuego* unveil the unreliable border that the novel consistently traverses, a border forged between two conflicting subjects: those who have access to knowledge and those lacking that access. When Guevara goes into town to retrieve a letter he has received from an unknown sender, he begins reflecting illiteracy for the first time, as pertaining to the inhabitants of Lobos: “los presentes miraron el pliego lacrado con desconfianza analfabeta, como se mira un objeto capaz de desencadenar acontecimientos imprevisibles” [those present looked at the sealed letter with illiterate mistrust as if they looked upon an object powerful enough to unleash unpredictable events].⁴⁵ Guevara’s decision, towards the end of the novel, to teach his housekeeper how to read, a decision explored later in this chapter, seeks to remedy who has access to official versions of national and colonial

⁴³ Iparraguirre, 25.

⁴⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 183.

⁴⁵ Naomi Jacobs, *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction*, Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques. Third Series (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 15.

history. Literacy, as an act of reading and writing, therefore, becomes an agent for change and the primary destabilizer of the intellectual colonialism Guevara resists throughout his narrative. Iparraguirre suggests that it is through the act of writing, or in Guevara's case *re-writing*, that colonial and national histories are expanded to include alternative stories and previously silenced subjects.

Guevara receives a letter at the beginning of the novel that interrupts the quotidian monotony felt by the inhabitants of Lobos: "Aquí, en Lobos, la monotonía de los días es como un río poderoso y lento que desgasta los hechos hasta reducirlos a una piedra pulida, más tarde a un grano de arena, después a nada" [Here, in Lobos, the monotony of the days is like a powerful and slow river which erodes events until they are reduced to a smooth rock, and later a grain of sand, and then to nothing].⁴⁶ The letter inscribes our narrator inside history as a "witness" to historical events and he takes this role seriously, negotiating between what this "witness" position demands of him, what it demands of his narrative, and what it demands of the systematic representation of the other, in this case, Jemmy Button.⁴⁷ Guevara moves from a description of the illiterate masses of Lobos, a population he remains outside of, to a description of the monotony of the space itself, one he, and the illiterate residents, inhabit. Thus, he positions himself as history's insider and outsider from the beginning. It is through this privileged positioning that he is able to *become a witness* to the abuses, atrocities and exploitations that both colonial and national projects have inflicted on indigenous subjects. The reduction to nothing he emphasizes in the previous quote is combated by writing itself. The letter, which enters inside Lobos, the geographical outsider, from England, the geographical insider, provokes "el acto o la determinación de escribir" [the act or the determination of writing] in Guevara.⁴⁸ His determination to write back assures that his nation's history is not stabilized by an outside, colonial force, disrupting both the colonial travel narrative and the nineteenth century nation building genre. Furthermore, it urges him to become an essential witness to his own history and to Jemmy Button's: "Leí otra vez lo que ahora traduzco...*siendo usted un testigo privilegiado y directo de los hechos, deseáramos que realizara una noticia completa de aquel viaje y del posterior destino del desdichado indígena que participo liderando la matanza por la que ha sido juzgado en las Islas*" [I read again what I now translate...*being a privileged and direct witness to the events, we would like you to fashion a complete report of that voyage and subsequently of that unfortunate Indian who led the massacre for which he has been judged on the Islas*].⁴⁹ The complex process of mediation Guevara undergoes while struggling to make sense of the letter he receives is centered upon reading, rereading, translating, and finally creating anew. In choosing what merits focus, translation, and inclusion into his narrative, Guevara's "noticia completa" is forcibly *incompleta*; a report marked by absences, silences and revisions. Furthermore, the letter generates an unsettled feeling inside our narrator: "La carta generaba en mí un malestar creciente. ¿Cuál era la versión requerida del 'desdichado indígena,' de aquel hombre llamado Jemmy Button por los ingleses pero cuyo verdadero nombre, su nombre yámana, casi nadie

⁴⁶ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 15.

⁴⁷ These demands all construct the ethical components for Guevara's narrative, as he maps his empathetic relationship, grounded upon recognition, which will be discussed in the following section.

⁴⁸ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 15.

⁴⁹ Iparraguirre, 16.

supo?”[The letter produced an increasingly unsettled feeling inside me. What was the version summoned by the “unlucky Indian,” by that man named Jemmy Button by the English yet whose real name, his yámana name, hardly anyone knew?]⁵⁰ Thus Guevara finds himself between two worlds, two narratives, and two histories: the one expected by the British Admiralty and the one expected by Jemmy Button.

The history of the British inside Argentina is a fraught and complicated one. Diplomatic relations which had been established between the two countries in the early nineteenth century were abruptly cut at the onset of the Guerra de las Malvinas in 1982. Although the relationship between the two countries has improved, their claims to the Malvinas islands continue to increase the tension between them. The attention Iparraguirre gives to the British Admiralty in the novel is directly tied to this history of neocolonialism and to the increase of Argentine nationalism derived from Malvinas war, both heavily impacted the narrative choices of many Argentine authors writing in the latter half of the twentieth century. *La Tierra del Fuego* does become an essentially anti-British novel, especially as its narrator mocks the British Empire, while also illuminating the unethical tendencies of both Darwin and Fitzroy with respect to indigenous subjects. Guevara’s undermining of the colonial narrative is demonstrated by his “malestar creciente,” as he ponders on what version of history is expected of him by Britain, and what version he, as a witness, is ethically obliged to provide.

The illegibility of the sender’s name challenges and demeans the British Empire throughout the “noticia”: “...entre los sellos del Almirantazgo Británico, por usted, mister MacDowell o MacDownness. No alcanzo a descifrar su nombre en el doblez del papel, y esto, presumo, ya significa algo. El sello pomposo y los muchos trajines que ha sufrido la carta me impiden distinguir su firma con claridad.” [between the seals of the British Admiralty, by you, Mr. MacDowell or MacDownness. I can’t make up your name in the crease of the paper, and this, I presume, already means something. The pompous seal and many transports the letter has suffered through impede me from distinguishing your signature clearly].⁵¹ The material presence of the British Empire’s seal is ridiculed here, as the presumed reader of Guevara’s narrative is one with an illegible name. Unlike the illiterate inhabitants of Lobos, who simply can’t read and write due to their socioeconomic position, the literate Empire, makes itself illegible through its own material ornamentation. In fact, each time “mister MacDowell o MacDownness” appears inside Guevara’s narration, it brands the receiver as progressively irrelevant, thus demanding a new audience for the story he tells. This new audience, or reader, shaped by Guevara’s status as a writer and a witness (history’s insider and outsider) learns to question the accuracy of history’s proclamations, especially in its representation of the other.

What incites Guevara’s narrative, as mentioned earlier, are the *versions* of Jemmy Button that should gain representation, and not the versions of Button colonial (and national) history has unjustly represented up to now. Guevara’s determination to provide an adequate telling of Button’s story, a telling which, we come to find out, also seeks to reclaim Button’s innocence, redirects the blame upon the colonial empire towards the end of the novel. His narrative is divided into two parts, one detailing his friendship with Jemmy Button and his determination to provide Button with adequate representation as a historical subject, and the second part is an autobiography, where Guevara discovers own family tree through his journeys. Both parts are

⁵⁰ Iparraguirre, 16.

⁵¹ Iparraguirre, 18.

essential to Guevara's own self-fashioning, and their unity suggests that Argentine identity is intrinsically tied to understanding, recognizing, and empathizing with the indigenous community and culture. In a very telling stream of conscious questioning, Guevara determines how he will tell the first part of the story:

“¿O el salvaje del Cabo de Hornos, desnudo bajo la llovizna helada...la cara embadurnada de negro? O, por fin, el hombre avejentado y sereno que volví a ver años después en el banco de los acusados en el juicio de las Islas, cuyos ojos impávidos en las hundidas cuencas miraron por última vez a los blancos, a los hombres venidos del este. Había sido si un curioso destino el del Jemmy Button desde que el Capitán lo tomó del rehén a cambio de unos botones de nácar, pero no había habido ‘posterior destino’ para el ‘desdichado indígena.’”⁵²

[Or that savage from Cabo de Hornos, naked beneath the freezing drizzle...his face besmeared with blackness? Or, finally, the aged and serene man what I saw once more, years after, one the bench of the accused at the trial, whose courageous eyes settled in their deep eye-sockets, looked for the last time at the whites, those men who came from the east. Jemmy Button's destiny was a strange one from the moment the Capitan took him hostage in exchange for a mother-of-pearl button; but there had been no other destiny for the ‘unlucky Indian].

In this passage a series of questions culminates in one substantive claim which erases the “salvaje” label by renaming Button as “el hombre avejentado y sereno.” Button's status as a savage is revised here, a status constantly undergoing scrutiny by Guevara throughout the novel, and one which will be discussed in depth in a subsequent section of this chapter. In leaving the claim containing “el salvaje” in the question form, Guevara denies its existence as a substantive claim. Moreover, in focusing his attention on the version of Jemmy Button he sees in the courtroom, a man once again held hostage by the white world now casting judgment upon his innocence, Guevara demonstrates his unwillingness to write the kind of “noticia completa” requested by the Admiralty. According to Guevara, the “desdichado indígena,” as he is called by MacDowell o MacDowness, became unlucky the day his fate intertwined with the British Empire. In zeroing in on Fitzroy and the mother of pearl button he exchanged for the young Jemmy, Guevara blames on the British Empire for the massacre of the Christian missionaries that Button and fellow yámanas were accused of perpetuating.

Before beginning the “Segundo Pliego,” where he travels back to 1806, the period before Independence, Guevara makes his first confession, cementing his status as a witness⁵³:

“Le confieso que viajé a las Islas con el único propósito, con el secreto designio de ayudarlo, de dar testimonio en su favor, si fuera preciso. No sabía de qué modo o cómo

⁵² Iparraguirre, 16–17.

⁵³ The novel is divided into “pliegos” which come from the Portuguese ‘literature de cordel, or cordel literature also known as string literature: printed pamphlets containing popular folk stories, songs and/or poems. This type of literature originated in Spain and Portugal and then found its way to Brazil where it became extremely popular. These “pliegos” narrated historical events quite often, centering on popular themes such as love and adventure. Iparraguirre's choice of structuring her novel using these “pliegos” reemphasizes the notion that indigenous history should become part of popular culture in Argentina.

justificaría mi presencia, pero esta era mi verdadera intención aunque nadie la conocía; ahora, la escribo, de jo constancia escrita, míster MacDowell o MacDowness.”⁵⁴

[I confess that I traveled to the Islas for the sole purpose of helping him, giving testimony in his favor, to be precise. I didn’t know in what manner or how I would justify my presence, but this was my true intention although no one knew it; now, I write it, I leave written record of it, Mr. MacDowell or MacDowness]

The confession, occurring before Guevara officially begins his narrating the past, demonstrates alignment with Jemmy Button from the onset. In writing down his “verdadera intención,” he separates himself from the receiver, in this case, the British Empire. Soon after this confession, Guevara formally places direct blame on Britain for the massacre, implying that Fitzroy’s expedition was responsible for creating the space for violence in the first place:

“Hay dos modos de ver esta empresa, a mi modesto entender: una, la del progreso civilizador, posesión de los hombres que hacen la historia. En este caso, el fin justifica los medios ya que se trata de llevar la luz de la ilustración a tierras y seres hundidos en la oscuridad. El fin es noble; en consecuencia, los medios pueden no serlo. Otra lectura es contraria a la supuesta filantropía de los hombres venidos del este- así los llamaban los habitantes de la Tierra del Fuego, así los llamaban Button-; bajo esta manera de ver los hechos, esa supuesta razón civilizadora se transmuta en otra especie de barbarie, más refinada que la barbarie que combate, más taimada”⁵⁵

[In my humble opinion, there are two ways of seeing this undertaking: one, of civilizing progress, belonging to the men who make history. In this case, the end result already justifies the means since it brings enlightenment to the lands and people lost in obscurity. The end result is a noble one; however, the means may not be so noble. Another reading contradicts the supposed philanthropy of the men who came from the east- this is how the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego used to call them, this is how Button called them-; from this perspective, this supposed civilizing purpose transforms into another type of barbarity, more refined than the barbarity which it combats, more cunning.]

The path of barbarous civility taken by the “men who make history” is revoked as he lends his focus to the “inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego.” These inhabitants are granted the power of naming in this passage, a power which hundreds of years of exploration and colonialism consistently prevented. In allowing the name “the men from the east” to be the only name granted to the so-called civilizers, Guevara empowers Button, and his allies, with the act of naming their oppressors. The moment of feigned humility at the onset of the passage, detailing how the civilizers viewed their mission to “bring enlightenment” to those lost in darkness, is lost as the less noble, alternative path to so-called enlightenment is paved. It is within this historical contradiction that Button and the “inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego” begin taking shape, appearing for the first time through the historical margins detaining them. Within these margins, they name

⁵⁴ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 29.

⁵⁵ Iparraguirre, 33–34.

their oppressors and, more importantly, define civilization *as* barbarism, shaking the foundation of civility applauded inside the courtroom scenes toward the end of the novel.

Guevara continues reflecting on the intersection of civilization and barbarism, further disturbing the historical impulse to foster the enduring division between civilization and barbarism. “Civilización y salvajismo, he writes, “suelen ir juntos. Lo mismo pasa con la escritura y la barbarie...debo, sin embargo, reconocer algo: los libros que he leído se los debo a Inglaterra.”⁵⁶ [Civilization and savagery tend to go together. The same happens with writing and barbarism...I must, nonetheless, recognize something: those books that I have read I owe to Britain]. Writing and barbarism are intimately connected, as Guevara’s mind, like Sarmiento’s, is defined by the intersection between barbarism *and* civilization. However, unlike Sarmiento, Guevara confesses to his intellectual colonialization, admitting that he owes his reading to England. This confessed awareness of his own status as a colonized subject enables him to drastically reconfigure his narrative before proceeding. First, he makes a forceful determination to use the Spanish language instead of English and, secondly, he decides to overtly ignore his interlocutor and write for his own illiterate and marginal countrymen. These two narrative decisions enable him to fight against the intellectual colonialism he recognizes:

“¿Cuál es la lengua en que estas palabras deberían ser escritas? ¿La de aquí y, puedo decir, la mía, o la de la carta, es decir la de ustedes?... la decisión o el instinto de usar la lengua de mi madre y no de mi padre anula de antemano cualquier posible comunicación. En consecuencia, no escribo para usted míster MacDowell o MacDownness de cara desconocida, ni para el Almirantazgo Británico....escribo para los habitantes de esta llanura, mis compatriotas, que desconocen el extremo austral de nuestro país donde sucedieron los hechos.”⁵⁷

[In what language should the following words be written? The one from here, or rather, mine, or the one from the letter, or rather, yours?the decision and instinct in using the language of my mother and not of my father annuls, from the start, any possible communication. Consequently, I do not write for you, Mr. MacDowell o MacDownness, whose face is unknown to me, nor do I write for the British Admiralty...I write for the inhabitants of these plains, my countrymen, who are unfamiliar with the extreme south of our country where these events took place].

In blocking the access to communication between Britain and Argentina, Guevara determines that his narrative, like his reading, is initiated by his father’s country, however, the composition and end result is one directly tied to his mother’s country and tongue. A space is fashioned for a new Argentine narrative intent on dismantling the intellectual colonialism superimposed by Britain. In choosing to write back to the Admiralty by ignoring him altogether, he revises the power structure cemented by the official letter, which demands a response. Guevara writes for the marginal subjects inside his own country (“los habitantes de esta llanura”) whom we know are predominately illiterate. He writes to them about Argentina, a country they all share, unveiling the segments of unknown and exploited territories and peoples in the Patagonian South. Since most of the writing done about this region by European travelers, explorers and colonizers, it is

⁵⁶ Iparraguirre, 37.

⁵⁷ Iparraguirre, 36.

no wonder that his countrymen are so unfamiliar with the extreme southern region of their own country.

The Empathy Paradigm

Sharing Violence, Hybrid Nationals and the Process of Empathetic Recognition

La Tierra del Fuego collapses the set boundaries between barbarism and civilization by destabilizing the narratives of civilization perpetuated by national and colonial narratives alike. Empathy emerges inside this collapse as a viable alternative to historical representation and the other's inclusion into the national territory. This version of empathy develops through Guevara's own attempt at autobiography, as he outlines multiple lines of connection and difference between himself and Jemmy Button. Unlike the numerous authors, mentioned earlier in this chapter, who turned to Patagonia as a vehicle for their own sublime self-exploration and meditation, Guevara uses his autobiography to expose the history of his nation, while also avoiding the dangerous objectification of Button and other marginal figures (such as his live-in housekeeper, Graciana) who inhabit the historically misused territory. Writing becomes a generator for empathy as it is tied to the distribution of historical knowledge which, in turn, produces a version of narrative that embodies previously silenced communities and individuals. If the indigenous presence in Argentine history has been erased, then what the novel does, although it too traffics in the promotion of nationalism, is tell the story of Argentina through the timely encounter between Guevara and Button. Empathy is tied to storytelling and writing inside *La Tierra del Fuego* as merges two histories together, fashioning a hybrid identity the nation. The structure of narrative empathy inside the novel culminates in a friendship between two very distinct men, similar to that found inside Manuel Puig's *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*. The construction of Guevara's identity hinges on his burgeoning relationship with Jemmy Button. In fact, the *yámana* native is a vital instrument for Guevara's exploration of his own hybrid identity. Within these descriptions of hybridity, our narrator constructs a version of national personhood dependent on the incorporation of the indigenous other. The infusion of Button's biography inside Guevara's autobiography constructs two histories dependent on each other for survival. The path to narrative empathy is constructed as Guevara begins understanding his own self-construction *through* his recognition of Button first as an "other," then as a victimized historical subject, and finally, as a friend and compatriot.

Guevara's recognition of his own difference, as he maps his relationship to the Button, suggests that difference is a necessary and natural component of national identity. His navigation through this reciprocal relationship exposes the faulty foundation of a burgeoning Argentine nation in the nineteenth-century, where the "Indian problem" was solved through an "extermination and civilization" of the indigenous.⁵⁸ The "Indian problem," according to historian Rebecca Earle, was a firmly held "belief that a large indigenous population weakened the state and impeded the development of national identity."⁵⁹ *La Tierra del Fuego* destabilizes this belief by emphasizing that national identity is dependent upon the relationship of reciprocal recognition between these two subjects, producing a new set of responsibilities for civic life.

⁵⁸ Rebecca Earle, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810-1930* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 162.

⁵⁹ Earle, 163.

Guevara begins the narration of his own history in the first part of the novel, the “Primer Pliego,” immediately after linking Captain Fitzroy to his own father. This connection suggests that Guevara’s autobiography is deeply connected to the geography of Patagonia as a space provoking creation, the act of writing, and his own construction as a marginal, hybrid national subject:

“bajo los sellos y los lacres, estas escuetas palabras sobre el Capitán, que, traduzco: lamentamos comunicarle se quitó la vida, cortándose el cuello con su propia navaja, hace tres días, exactamente el 30 de abril de 1865. Esas frases finales, tan curiosamente precisas en una carta oficial, tal vez deliberadas, al margen de su propósito me conmovieron, porque el Capitán pertenece a esa raza de hombres a quienes no se puede imaginar muertos y menos degollados por su propia mano, pertenece a la raza de mi padre.”⁶⁰

[under the waxed seals, [were] these brief words about the Capitan which I now translate: we are sorry to inform you that he took his own life, cutting his neck with his own razor, three days ago, on the 30th of April 1865. This final remarks, so strangely precise in an official letter, perhaps deliberate, moved me since the Capitan belonged to that breed of men whom one could not even imagine dead, let alone beheaded by their own hand; the Capitan belonged to the same breed/race of men as my father.]

Guevara makes a distinction between “la raza de [su] padre” and his own “raza,” one remaining unnamed. As a hybrid entity, a product of a British father and an Argentine mother, Guevara does not pertain to the same socioeconomic and cultural sphere of Fitzroy or his own father. Unlike Jemmy Button, whose identity is first expressed through a plethora of questions meant to discredit the letter writer, the Capitan, much like the seal, is an object, a relic of the past.⁶¹ Furthermore, the Capitan’s violent suicide, translated by Guevara in a most rudimentary way, is contrasted against Button’s noble death, one constructed through the image of a peaceful burial inside the same region Fitzroy exploited years earlier:

“Ahora Jemmy Button está muerto. Juzgado por los blancos que le quitaron todo sustento que mostraron, finalmente, que nunca lo habían considerado un hombre, Button descansa en el Cabo de Hornos. Su aventura fue tragada por el hielo y el viento del fin del mundo. Pero yo la recuerdo. Por alguna razón que desconozco, mi historia no puede explicarse sin la suya.”⁶²

[Now Jemmy Button is dead. Judged by the whites who stripped from him all their means of support, and who never considered him a man. Button rests in Cabo de Hornos. His adventure was swallowed by the ice and wind of the end of the earth. But I remember his life. For some reason, which I do not know, my history can’t be explained without his].

⁶⁰ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 19.

⁶¹ A discussion of the first introduction of Jemmy Button inside the narrative occurs earlier in this chapter.

⁶² Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 50.

Guevara's autobiography requires Button's biography for a reason our narrator does not yet understand, but one which, through his writing, he will learn to comprehend. The relationship between these two histories alters the course of the past significantly, revising history's persistent use of Button as an "inert object," whose story undergoes constant modifications depending on "who told what part of [it], in what format, at which point in time, and with what goal in mind."⁶³ Furthermore,

"Jemmy Button's story is, thus, the story of Robert Fitzroy, of Charles Darwin, and of many other Western travelers who made it to Tierra del Fuego; it is the story of several generations of nineteenth-century explorers, scientists, missionaries, and social theorists, who met Jemmy Button under varying circumstances or speculated about the implications of his development."

Nonetheless, Guevara emphasizes that he, unlike those from "la raza de su padre" before him, recognizes and refutes the historical tendency of using the objectified image of Jemmy Button in order to establish the divide between civilization and barbarism.

Guevara's narrative destabilizes the border between civilization and barbarism by questioning the validity of colonialism's, and his own nation's, foundational dichotomy. In recognizing Jemmy Button both as a dynamic historical figure and a victim of official histories, the narrator learns to come to terms with his own identity. Although Guevara's memories of the past intermingle with Button's, he resists speaking for him. Even Guevara's use of 'Omoy-lume' (Button's real name) occurs only

"en diálogos con el indígena, cuando le habla a él; en cambio, en la narración, cuando cuenta su historia, es decir, cuando habla de él, recurre al nombre escogido e impuesto por los blancos. De esta manera, Guevara, a través de él, Sylvia Iparraguirre, reconoce la imposibilidad de hablar del otro...."⁶⁴

[in dialogues with the native, when he speaks to him; however, in the narrative, when he tells his history, that is, when he (Guevara) speaks about him (Button), the name selected for him by the whites is the one used [by Guevara]. In this way, Guevara, and through him, Sylvia Iparraguirre, recognizes the impossibility of speaking about/for the other].

Guevara resists speaking *for* Button, distancing himself from his nineteenth century predecessors, on both sides of the Atlantic, the narrative nevertheless is an act of speaking for the other. So how can one speak for the other while resisting speaking for the other? In representing the indigenous subject within a literary text, objectification occurs and there is no escaping it. However, in turning to narrative empathy and recognition as means of representation, the novel makes the reader aware of these objectifying tendencies, illuminating how subaltern voice-overs have structured the way in which indigenous peoples have been viewed for centuries. Guevara

⁶³ Ruth Mayer, "The Things of Civilization, the Matters of Empire: Representing Jemmy Button," *New Literary History* 39, no. 2 (2008): 193.

⁶⁴ Magdalena Perkowska, *Historias Híbridas: La Nueva Novela Histórica Latinoamericana (1985-2000) Ante Las Teorías Posmodernas de La Historia*, Colección Nexos y Diferencias, no. 19 (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2008), 205.

develops a critical awareness of this objectifying process, one inherently superimposed upon Button as the act of writing ensues. It is this awareness which structures the narrative empathy within the novel, one founded on the friendship between the two men.,

This awareness enables the narrator, and the reader by extension, to acknowledge the violence implicit in writing a narrative centering on Jemmy Button:

“Tal vez quiera recordarme que el motivo es Jemmy Button, no mi vida. No lo olvido, le aseguro que no puedo olvidarlo. Pero es mi historia la que me lleva hacia él, como décadas atrás el azar cruzo su camino con el mío...es posible que yo solo viera lo pintoresco...es posible también, es casi seguro, que todavía me sintiera un poco inglés y superior a él, y, en consecuencia, creyera que mis sentimientos eran los suyos, como si el no tuviera *derecho* a tener los propios”⁶⁵

[Perhaps I wanted to remember that the reason is Jemmy Button and not my life. I won't forget it, I promise I will not forget it. But it is my history that brings me to him, just as decades before, pure chance allowed his path to cross with mine...it is possible that I only saw the picturesque...it is also possible, almost certain, that I still felt a little British and thus superior to him and that, consequently, I believed my feelings were his, as if he did not have a right to his own.]

Guevara acknowledges that writing about the other implies writing for the other, yet his awareness of his own privileged status as one who has the ability to compose this history, or the “right” to this composition, is what differentiates him from those who came before him. The language of rights appears here to showcase who has the *right* to historical representation on their own terms, and who doesn't. Guevara's acknowledgement that he may have felt superior to Button, or believed that his feelings could be imposed upon the mind of the *yámana*, directly combats the representation of the indigenous figure inside most nineteenth century travel journals, from Darwin's to Fitzroy's, precisely due to the awareness and recognition of how unequal rights between individuals contribute to the construction of one version of official history which eliminates those who have little access to those rights. For instance, when Darwin first arrives in Tierra del Fuego, he describes the *yámanas* he meets as follows:

“Jemmy Button (whose name expresses his purchase-money), and Fuegia Basket. York Minster was a full-grown, short, thick, powerful man: his disposition was reserved, taciturn, morose, and when excited violently passionate; his affections were very strong towards a few friends on board; his intellect good. Jemmy Button was a universal favourite, but likewise passionate; the expression of his face at once showed his nice disposition. He was merry and often laughed, and was remarkably sympathetic with any one in pain...”⁶⁶

Recognition requires a critical engagement with the other and an acknowledgement of one's own limitation inside that negotiation. Darwin's encounter prevents the recognition that Guevara deems essential in establishing a relationship between himself and Button. Guevara recognizes

⁶⁵ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 49. (italics are my own)

⁶⁶ Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle: Darwin's Five-Year Circumnavigation*, 218.

the faulty constructions and objectifying tendencies of a narrative representing the other whereas Darwin perpetuates the objectification of the yámana through a system of representation that focuses only on yámana's physical attributes and outward disposition.

The assumption that the indigenous person has no claim, not even over their own feelings, further illuminates many nineteenth-century claims that the indigenous populations, who lacked so-called civility, were also stripped of their right to participate in civic life.⁶⁷ This lack established the idea that certain individuals simply do not have the psychological tools to represent themselves and therefore cannot be incorporated into a national, cultural space. In Argentina this steadfast belief led to the Conquest of the Desert in the late nineteenth century, where indigenous populations were both physically and ideologically exterminated. Spanish American countries spent much of the long nineteenth century denying the indigenous the right to enter inside their newly founded nation. In Argentina, from the nineteenth century on, these communities were often defined as barbarous and unfit for civilization, and indigenous men and women were not permitted access to citizenship or national inclusion unless they "became" Argentine, which generally meant ridding themselves of their indigenous culture.

This is the phenomenon that Guevara both recognizes and rejects as he focuses on Button's *right (derecho)* to his own sentiments and feelings. Unlike Darwin who adamantly and confidently describes Button as "a universal favorite" whose face "showed his nice disposition" and "was merry and often laughed," Guevara's narrative is stripped of such overarching and naïve descriptions.⁶⁸ Instead, his narrative is apprehensive and self-doubting as recognizing the limitations faced when representing the other, exposing underlined mimetic flaws that previous representations of the indigenous subject have utilized. The admission of mimetic doubt establishes a critical apparatus inside the novel, where the writer, Guevara, not only produces a new historical trajectory for Jemmy Button, but also sets the guidelines for representing the indigenous other cautiously. In transforming Button into man *through whom* another man can learn to understand himself, his country, and the system of flawed representation parading as official history, the yámana becomes a subject with a claim and a right to history for the first time. Yet Button is Guevara's instrument for self-construction so how does this enable Button to gain political subject hood? Simply put, it doesn't. It can't. What it does do is construct a version of narrative empathy that revises official history so that it includes the yámana as part of the national landscape. Furthermore, by critically examining national and colonial representations of the other, the novel establishes the impossibility of representing the other adequately. What is left in place of representation is the critical awareness of the objectifying and often misguided process that the indigenous other has been subjected to inside these colonial and national narratives.

La Tierra del Fuego is very accurate in terms of historical details. It demonstrates "a rigorous archival knowledge of different indigenous tribes and of the missionaries and travelers

⁶⁷ Earle, *The Return of the Native*. I am indebted to many of Earle's discussions throughout her book, particular to Chapter 6 which deals with "Citizenship and Civilization."

⁶⁸ Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited during the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Round the World, under the Command of Capt. Fitz Roy, R.N.*, 207.

who visited and ultimately contributed to the erosion of the Indians' ways of life and being."⁶⁹ Furthermore, in reconstructing "the atrocities committed both to indigenous bodies and cultures in the nineteenth century," it begins condemning previous representations of history by revealing how the many historical "facts" were grounded upon the colonizer's lack of recognition and understanding.⁷⁰ In order to ensure Button's status as a subject, Guevara continues destabilizing Fitzroy's credibility as a narrator by exposing the Captain's linguistic ignorance:

"Viene a mi memoria algo que no deja de ser un ejemplo del carácter del Capitán y tal vez, por extensión, del carácter general con que Inglaterra imponía sus reglas: la palabra Tekeenica, que el Capitán utilizo para dar nombre a la tierra de Button y a su gente. En realidad, como lo supe por el propio Button, ese sonido significa literalmente 'no entiendo lo que dice,' que era lo que los yámanas le respondían al Capitán:

-Teke uneka.

Pero como se lo decían sin cesar, el dedujo, de antemano, que estaban pronunciado el nombre de su patria, y así la bautizó"⁷¹

[Something comes to my mind which exemplifies both the Capitan's character and, perhaps, by extension, the general character of England and the way it imposed its rules: the word Tekeenica, which the Capitan used to name the land of Button and his people. In reality, as I can find out from Button himself, this sound literally signifies "I do not understand what you are saying," a phrase which the yámanas would say to the Capitan.

-Teke uneka

Since they said it without pause, the Captain deduced beforehand that they were pronouncing the name of their land, and so he named it.]

Guevara, who understands what "Teke uneka" means, easily separates himself from the ignorant Capitan, becoming the interpreter of the *yámanas*. Likewise, this passage illuminates the burgeoning relationship and the passing of information between Button and Guevara. It is Button, after all, who tells him what "teke uneka" means, and Guevara uses this knowledge to discredit both the Capitan and the British Empire. They are, quite literally, portrayed as illiterate fools, who name an entire territory based on a false linguistic assumption. This passage comically illuminates how history is fabricated by colonial presences through their ignorance of another's culture and language. In scrutinizing the Captain's power of naming a territory and a people, Guevara once again demonstrates how he approaches an understanding of the *yámana* through a complex system of knowledge, recognition and understanding of linguistic and cultural differences. This sets his narrative apart from the earlier narratives, such as Darwin's and Humboldt's where indigenous subjects are portrayed as if they were part of the landscape, alive yet lacking agency.

⁶⁹ Eva-Lynn Alicia Jagoe, *The End of the World as They Knew It: Writing Experiences of the Argentine South*, The Bucknell Studies in Latin American Literature and Theory (Lewisburg [PA]: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 172.

⁷⁰ Jagoe, 172.

⁷¹ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 90.

Guevara's peripheral status and hybrid identity is mirrored by the multiple genres and discourses Iparraguirre takes up while writing the novel. The novel's postmodern revising of nineteenth century narratives, inside and outside of Latin America, uncovers a larger debate on the status of modernity and how it ties to the misrecognition of the other as it sets up the divide between barbarity and civilization. Guevara's consistent questioning of the British Empire, along with his critique of "civilization," rejects the very definition of modernity as a concept, especially as he begins his empathetic engagement with the *yámanas* while in England. Enrique Dussel's discussion of modernity illuminates that the concept of civilization arises out of the "barbarous" other:

"1492 is the date of the 'birth' of modernity...the possibility of modernity originated in the free cities of medieval Europe, which were centers of enormous creativity. But modernity as such was 'born' when Europe was in a position to pose itself against an other, when, in other words, Europe could constitute itself as a unified ego exploring, conquering, colonizing an alterity that gave back its image of itself. This other, in other words, was not 'dis-covered' (descubierto), or admitted, as such, but concealed, or covered up (encubierto), as the same as what Europe assumed it had always been. So if 1492 is the moment of the 'birth' of modernity as a concept, the moment of origin of a very particular myth sacrificial violence, it also marks the origin of a process of concealment or misrecognition of the non-European."⁷²

If this is true, than no difference exists between the civilized and the barbarous; in fact, colonizers create their definitions of the world through their inherent lack of recognition and knowledge. Capitan Fitzroy's ignorance, as described earlier, is situated perfectly inside Dussel's claims. Iparraguirre's novel lays bare this very process of misrecognition and concealment, and asks us to ponder what would happen if empathy and recognition entered into this system of discovering new worlds. Though Iparraguirre unveils this process of misrecognition, she does not seek to unveil the "truth" of *yámana* culture. What the novel makes evident is this very impossibility. Our goal, as readers, is not to gain access to a culture or a people, but rather to understand how our desire for that access can become a productive means of empathy if met with the recognition of the limits of representation.

Iparraguirre's novel, in effect, becomes a generic composite as he uses multiple narrative forms to write his report. He effectively intertwines "su propia vida desdibujando sin cesar las categorías genéricas en un relato que fusiona el formato de una carta con el de un testimonio, la autobiografía con el relato etnográfico, la crónica de viajero con el relato de aventuras" [his own life drawing, without pause, the generic categories of a story which fuses the letter form with that of a testimony, autobiography with that of an ethnographic report, the travel chronicle with that of an adventure story].⁷³ The inscription of his own life into a novel detailing the historical misrepresentation of Jemmy Button connects the two men and their histories. Guevara and Button share the status as peripheral-subjects, cemented through own histories as outsiders, and further illuminated as they travel to London for the first time. It is during this journey that Guevara's visions of civilization undergo relentless scrutiny, as he witnesses London's poverty,

⁷² John Beverley, Michael Aronna, and José Oviedo, eds., *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 66.

⁷³ Perkowska, *Historias Híbridas*, 184.

dirtiness and the population's general unhappiness. The friendship he develops with Jemmy Button promotes the belief that barbarity is a viable and often preferred option for his nation to adopt. If London is the epitome of civilization, then Guevara wants nothing to do with it. His cultivation of empathy goes hand in hand with his burgeoning awareness that England's capital lacks the civility promised to him by the literature he read and his own father's principles. This in turn enables him to reflect on his own nation without the trappings of intellectual colonialism demarcating the grounds and prerequisites for civility. If civility fails, as he witnesses in London, then the very dichotomy establishing the differences between us and them, civilization and barbarism, collapses. Empathy emerges inside this collapse as a viable alternative to historical representation and the other's inclusion into the national territory.

One of the first moments of empathetic recognition in *La Tierra del Fuego* occurs during Button and Guevara's first act of communication, soon after Button's kidnapping, as they exchange names. This moment is the first step in destabilizing the inherent hierarchy inside what Mary Pratt calls the "contact zone":

"Lo primero que el Capitán enseñó a Button fue: "Pueden llamarme Jemmy Button", y él lo repetía sonriente... Se paró frente a mí y repitió por centésima vez: "Pueden llamarme Jemmy Button." Lo miré y le toqué el pecho con el índice:

-Jemmy Button,

Toqué el mío y dije:

-Jack.

Su cara se iluminó. Entendió que el nombre dado por los blancos era solo Jemmy Button y no 'Pueden llamarme Jemmy Button.' Para mi sorpresa, de inmediato dijo tocándose el pecho con el pulgar:

-Jemmy Button, yámana- y señalando mi pecho-, Jack, blanco.

Fue la primera vez que nos comunicamos y que supe el nombre de su pueblo."⁷⁴

[The first thing that the Capitan taught Button was: "You can call me Jemmy Button." And he repeated it, smiling... he stopped right in front of me for the hundredth time and say "You can call me Jemmy Button." I looked at him and touched his chest with my index finger:

'Jemmy Button'.

I touched mine and said:

'Jack.'

His face illuminated. He understood that the name given to him by the whites was only 'Jemmy Button' and not 'You can call me Jemmy Button.' To my surprise, he immediately said, touching his own chest with his thumb:

'Jemmy Button, yámana'- and signaling to my chest- 'Jack, white.']

This scene once more portrays the impossibility of coherent communication between Fitzroy and Button, while establishing Guevara as a mediator between the two distinct cultural groups. In teaching Button that his name is in fact "Jemmy Button" and not "You can call me Jemmy Button," Guevara demonstrates that Button understands Guevara and learns to correctly state his new name, developing a literacy and comprehension surpassing Fitzroy's understanding of the

⁷⁴ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 93.

yámana. The intimate moment of touch in this scene, as each touches the other, Guevara with his index and Button with his thumb, draws them closer by enabling a corporeal recognition to intersect with the linguistic one. While touch and language draws them together, Button's racial proclamation toward the end (*blanco/yámana*), further their ability to recognize their differences, a necessary component of the empathetic recognition unveiled throughout the novel. As difference enters into this scene, the narrative makes a claim that proximity *and* distance are necessary components in establishing a critical empathy between Guevara and Button. This critical empathy uses both the familiar and the unfamiliar to foster a non-vicarious version of identification. In this manner, identification does not occur only through the easily recognizable traits shared between two people but rather through a complex balance between what we recognize in ourselves and what we don't. The contact zone built by Guevara outlines how this type of unsettling recognition is necessary in fashioning empathy for the other.

What makes Guevara's narrative different from early to late nineteenth century narrative representations of Jemmy Button in particular, and of the indigenous 'other' in general, is this precise tracing of the familiar and the unfamiliar. In the novel, empathy occurs only through the recognition of the other as simultaneously different from you and similar to you. Whereas nineteenth-century travel journals sought to expose the fantastic and often sublime version of the wild "other" throughout Latin America, Guevara remedies this exposure by redefining the contact zone between himself and Jemmy Button. Pratt defines the contact zone as a social meeting space where disparate cultures, in asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination, meet and clash with one another.⁷⁵ Guevara's narrative uses the process of empathetic recognition to restructure the asymmetrical relationship between himself and Button, fostering a symmetry which enables them to witness their differences and similarities during their trip to London. The novel presents the idea that there exists a contact zone between an Argentine *criollo* and a *yámana* Indian, laying the groundwork for their empathetic relationship. The notion of shared colonialism, although strikingly different for both men, nevertheless appears in the novel as it revises nineteenth-century Argentine history by connecting Argentina's silenced indigenous history to its national foundation. What intricately links these two histories is their shared relationship to violence, one Guevara exposes as he considers Button's history alongside his own. This shared violence is also a facet of the post-dictatorial literature surfacing throughout the country, seeking to expose the dictatorship, as Viñas would argue, as a continuation of the genocidal campaign grounding the Conquest of the Desert. Guevara, unlike his countrymen at the time, turns to colonialism as a means of situating himself alongside Button, especially as both men find their way inside a strange and unwelcoming London. This tactic is dangerous since the version of shared colonialism experienced by Button and Guevara is drastically different. However, the novel showcases the similarities between the two men by establishing a contact zone predicated on violence and reframed by empathy.

Guevara maps his own dual-identity through a hybridity that becomes the manifestation of intense violence: "No puedo dejar de sentir la violencia que su introducción ejercerá sobre lo escrito."⁷⁶ [I cannot cease in feeling the violence that its introduction exercises upon the written word]. The violence discussed here is the violence of occupation and colonialism. It is the violence existing inside the contact zone. Guevara's awareness writing is a violation, and writing

⁷⁵ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

⁷⁶ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 41.

about the other means enacting violence upon the other. The connection between violence and writing uncovers a critique of the cultural, oral and traditional *criollo* life in Argentina. As William H. Kattras recalls in an article on the intersections between race and identity inside Sarmiento's *Viajes*,

“little survives today of what must have been an extensive oral tradition treating the *montoneras* and traditional creole culture; in large part, the positive heritage of the country's popular caudillos of the interior has all but been effaced....on the other hand, the texts of literature and history written by and for the Europeanized population of Buenos Aires are encountered everywhere still supreme is an official culture and history that has been propagated throughout the world as the only true history of the Argentine nation.”⁷⁷

Guevara's reflection on his own hybridity demonstrates how the “true history of the Argentine nation” combines the traditional culture and oral traditions with other European models. Guevara uses knowledge of his own hybridity to critique official history and offer several alternatives. In fact, in a moment self-reflection, he reminds us that he is

“John William Guevara, un hombre de cincuenta y tres años, nacido en un punto de la llanura de lo que hoy se llama la Confederación Argentina. En un país primitivo, fue criado lejos de casi todo; habla y escribe dos lenguas y asumió, sin saberlo, una suerte de doble identidad, la de su madre: criolla, católica, devota; la de su padre inglés, protestante, blasfemo.”⁷⁸

[is John William Guevara, a fifty-three year old man, born in a spot inside the plains that today make up the Argentine Confederation. In a primitive country, he was raised far from everything; he speaks and writes two languages and assumed, without his knowledge, the luck of having a dual identity. His mother's *criolla*, catholic, devout. And his father's: British, protestant, blasphemous.]

In positioning his mother and father on opposite ends of the spectrum, Guevara inhabits the space of hybridity. Oddly, in naming Argentina “la Confederación Argentina,” the name of country from 1831 to 1852, when the provinces of Argentina were organized as a confederation without an immediate head of state, Guevara sidesteps Sarmiento's vision of “La República Argentina.”⁷⁹ In addition, the shunning of Sarmiento occurs inside a passage detailing two conflicting aspects of his own identity and Sarmiento's: the primitiveness of the motherland versus the developed fatherland. Both men navigate through European models in order to achieve the kind of writing, the kind of representation, which the newly fledged nation can use to develop its system of historical discourse. However, unlike Sarmiento, Guevara embraces the

⁷⁷ Halperín Donghi, *Sarmiento, Author of a Nation*, 95.

⁷⁸ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 42.

⁷⁹ Sarmiento, *Facundo*, 2008, 55–56. [“se llamó Provincias Unidas del Río de la Plata, y en el que aún se derrama sangre por denominarlo República Argentina o Confederación Argentina... La inmensa extensión del país que está en sus extremos, es enteramente despoblada....el mal que aqueja a la República Argentina es la extensión...el despoblado sin una habitación humana...”]

familiar, the unfamiliar, and violence, all inherent within this duality. The starting point for his narrative on Jemmy Button, a narrative Sarmiento deemed irrelevant inside the developing nation, is also the starting point for any narrative on Argentine history. Not Spain. Not England. Not even Buenos Aires. Guevara uses his hybrid status to breach the distance between himself and Button, seeking to remedy the official historical discourse within his country by drawing a line of connection between two diverse, yet frequently disjointed histories.

Empathy as a Model for Unmaking “Civilization”

The confrontation of difference propels the empathetic recognition of Jemmy Button as an individual necessitating his own history. This occurs when Guevara witnesses Button’s compassion for the first time. Before this moment, Guevara admits to being blind, trapped by the fixed definitions of “civilization” and the “civilized subject” determining his intellectual landscape: “En aquellos días yo estaba ciego. Miraba por mí y apenas alcanzaba a entrever el mundo de Button. También me reía de él con los otros marineros y hacia bromas obscenas sobre la desnudez de las mujeres. Hasta que un día sucedió algo que me empezó a cambiar.”⁸⁰ [In those days I was blind. I looked around, barely able to make out anything in Button’s world. I also laughed at him with the other sailors and made obscene jokes about the naked women. But one day, something happened which made me change]. What happened was that a fellow sailor trapped and killed a small seal along with some ducklings. Upon seeing this massacre, Button begins gesticulating wildly, angrily, pointing to the sailor’s bloody bundle while yelling incomprehensibly:

“Era en bulto sanguinolento al que el yámana apenas podría mirar. Cuando se dio cuenta de mi presencia, vino hasta mí y me habló, gesticulando, a pocos centímetros de mi cara. Con total claridad, me dio a entender que eso no era posible, que se había cometido un acto irremediablemente malo, que no se podía matar animales pequeños... y que innumerables tormentas se nos vendrían encima como castigo.”⁸¹

[It was the bloody bundle that the *yámana* could hardly look at. When he realized that I was near, he came towards me and began to speak, gesticulating, a few centimeters from my face. With complete clarity, he made me understand that this was not possible, that something irremediably awful had been committed, that one could not just kill small animals...and that innumerable storms will arrive to punish us].

This passage determines that language was not necessary for the communication between Guevara and Button. In fact, body language becomes the vehicle of communication they predominately rely on, solidifying their mutual understanding and recognition. Button, in fact, “estaba tan dotado para la mímica que, muchas veces, pasaba un largo rato en el que nos habíamos entendido perfectamente gracias a ese don, sin necesitar de las palabras”⁸² [he was so gifted in mimicry that, many times, and for a long while, we understood each other without

⁸⁰ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 98.

⁸¹ Iparraguirre, 99.

⁸² Iparraguirre, 94.

relying on words]. Guevara's previous blindness is remedied right as Button, through his gestures and sounds, exposes the inhumanity of the sailor's act. In killing a baby animal, Button perceives the sailor as killing for sport, not for food. The act is one which Button views as barbaric, an ignorant killing of a baby animal for no purpose. Guevara and Button begin communicating inside another realm altogether: the bodily realm. In relating the sailor's barbaric inhumanity outside of language, the passage enables the reformulation of the barbarous/civilized divide. Button's gestures are what make Guevara understand that the sailor's act was wrong. Rationality, as codified inside the linguistic system determining the divide between the civilized and the barbarous, is turned on its head here as Button's instinct defines rational, humane actions. Consequently, Guevara's clarity enables him to reposition Button as the rational, humane subject, demonstrated by his ability to understand the sailor's act as inhumane. The sailor's ignorant inhumanity, moreover, mimics the system of colonial exploitation forced upon Button and his fellow *yámanas* as they too are taken and misused by Fitzroy's crew.

It is soon after this moment that Guevara determines, for the reader and for "míster MacDowell o MacDownness" that his story cannot ever be impartial because he and Jemmy were friends ("fui amigo de Jemmy Button").⁸³ After this declaration of friendship, Guevara directly connects his status as a hybrid subject to Jemmy Button's status as a colonized other. They are united in London through their similar isolated status, a unification illuminated through their shared geography:

"Veníamos de los bordes del mundo, de los confines, de un lugar insospechado y bárbaro, que a pesar de mi buen inglés y mi crencha rubia emanaba de mí y me rodeaba, de igual manera que rodeaba a Button."⁸⁴

[We came from the edges of the earth, from the confines, from an unforeseen and barbaric place which, despite my good English my blonde parting, emanated and surrounded me, as it surrounded Button].

The radical pronoun shift, depicted as "I" of the first-person narration is demolished by the communal "we," determines that Guevara no longer connects himself with the other sailors, but with Button. This connection is not a racial one, but a geographic one, further cementing the importance of *criollo* and indigenous connectedness. Their geographical otherness is what finally solidifies this connection. "Barbarism" is applauded over the inhumane methods that "civilized" European sailors employ, causing pain and suffering to innocent natural creatures for pure entertainment. The importance of their geographical connection sheds light on a new historical trend, elaborated by historian Mónica Quijada in her work on nineteenth century nation building in Argentina. Quijada suggests that that late nineteenth century elaborations of nationhood in Argentina, established by the writings of Francisco Moreno, Vicente Fidel López and Manuel José Olascoaga, situate the nation's "origin story" inside a geographical space rather than an ancestral, genealogical space.⁸⁵ In focusing on geography as a means of connection, nationalism

⁸³ Iparraguirre, 102–3.

⁸⁴ Iparraguirre, 103.

⁸⁵ Mónica Quijada, "¿"Hijos de Los Barcos" o Diversidad Invisibilizada? La Articulación de La Población Indígena En La Construcción Nacional Argentina (Siglo XIX)," *Historia Mexicana* 53, no. 2 (2003): 469–510.

emerges as an association surpassing the ethnic divisions separating them, revising the exclusionary tendencies of Argentine nationalism in the nineteenth century.

While in London, Guevara feels at home only in the presence of the *yámanas*. His distaste for London and its civilians further cements his status as an outsider, joining him to the captives:

“Quise imaginar que era capaz de cumplir con lo que el Capitán me había ordenado, pero la verdad es que el único lugar en el que me sentía seguro era en aquel cuarto con los *yámanas*...Lo que iba conociendo de Londres no me gustaba, y su gente, menos. Nunca había visto en Lobos gente tan sucia.”⁸⁶

[I wanted to imagine that I was capable of doing everything that the Captain had ordered to do, but the truth is the only place I felt safe was in that room with the *yámanas*...What I got to know of London I did not like, and its people I liked even less. I have never seen such dirty people in Lobos].

The change of geography solidifies the feeling of otherness in Guevara, a feeling marked by his ability to witness the injustice of colonial exploitation. His solidarity with the *yámanas* enables him to witness the injustice perpetuated upon them as he revisits the kidnapping he silently participated in: “habían sido traídos para nada. Se los había hecho cruzar el océano por capricho o para llevar a cabo un experimento que yo no alcanzaba a desentrañar.”⁸⁷ [they were taken for nothing. They were made to cross the ocean for a mere whim or to carry out an experiment that I could not figure out]. Much like the sailor who ignorantly kills innocent creatures, Guevara positions Captain Fitzroy as endorsing a similar moment of ignorant violence as he, for unknown reasons, took individuals out of their natural habitat in order to live out a selfish fantasy of progress and exploration. London, in fact, is transformed into a barbarous space, positioned against the cleaner and cheerier space of Argentina. “Londres,” Guevara writes, “me mostraba una miseria que yo no conocía. En mi país eran tal vez más barbaros y pobres, pero me atrevía a pensar que más felices.”⁸⁸ [London showed me a misery that I did not know before. In my country perhaps we have more barbarous and poor people, but I dare say that are happier] “Barbarism” is revisited once again, pinned against the “civilization” of London which Guevara dismantles by questioning “para quienes era, me preguntaba ingenuamente, las riquezas y los dominios que los ingleses conquistaban y retenían a toda costa en los lugares más remotos del planeta?”⁸⁹ [for who, I asked myself in disbelief, were all of the riches and power that the British conquered and retained at all cost throughout the most remote places on the planet]? In questioning London’s claim on civilization by illuminating the socioeconomic discrepancies witnessed during his stay, Guevara revises the foundation of the British travel narrative, as centered on “civilized” spaces investigating a plethora of “barbarous” geographies. What

⁸⁶ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 113–14.

⁸⁷ Iparraguirre, 115.

⁸⁸ Iparraguirre, 121.

⁸⁹ Iparraguirre, 122.

Guevara effectively portrays through his line of questioning is how London's socioeconomic poverty destabilizes the British Empire's control in defining what comprises a civilized nation.

Guevara's reflection that his countrymen were "más felices" than the individuals he saw in London further shapes his critique that the civilized/barbarous divide means nothing if most of the "civilized" nation's citizens are abandoned to a state of miserable poverty. "Civilization," therefore, only exists by establishing a concrete hierarchy between socioeconomic classes, firmly segregating the rich from the poor. Yet, even the drunks, the prostitutes, and the beggars, Guevara remarks, upon seeing Jemmy Button and the others, would, without doubt, label them "caníbales...sintiéndose con derecho a hacerlo por la sola razón de sentirse superiores... El poder genera malnacidos que abusan de los indigentes en todas partes del planeta. Esta es una categoría que nunca podrá aplicarse a los yámanas, ni a Button ni a sus hijos..."⁹⁰ [cannibals... feeling that they have a right to name them this for the sole reason of feeling superior....Power generates undesirables who abuse the destitute in all parts of the planet. This is a category that could never apply itself to the yámanas, nor to Button or his sons....]. It is this ingrained belief in civilization's hierarchical superiority that promotes the power structure defining barbarism as "otherness" in need of occupation. Guevara immediately defends Button and his children, who were deemed responsible for the massacre by creating a categorical hierarchy between the "malnacidos," the people of Britain, and the yámanas, the "indigentes" of Tierra del Fuego. These reflections, ironically, empower Guevara to stop drinking wine, a direct refusal of his own British father's alcoholic consumption and a symbolic rejection of Britain itself. As he candidly reminds the reader that "esta noche el vino no me ha embriagado...la escritura y el vino no se llevan bien," [this night wine did not intoxicate me....writing and wine do not get along well], a subtle critique of colonial writing ensues. How can we trust the histories told to us by such a civilization who murder innocent creatures while maintaining its own citizens in a state of miserable poverty? Guevara's paternal displacement surfaces as he uses his own writing to revise the faulty borderland between civilization and barbarism; a borderland he often navigates. Right after Guevara determines to stop drinking, he looks in on Graciana, his live-in housekeeper, whose identity is ambiguous and whose illiteracy pushes her outside the borders of official history. While Guevara uses his writing to reexamine his empathetic connection to Jemmy Button, revising his conception of nation, identity, and his own lineage in the process, Graciana gains more and more visibility. In fact, she becomes a physical manifestation of Guevara's empathy, one which provokes him to teach her how to read and write towards the end of the novel, correcting another injustice and perhaps enabling another one of history's "barbarous" outsiders to enter into historical discourse.

Guevara's disillusionment with London perpetuates the deep connection he feels for Button and the yámanas, one grounded by their shared sense of place and violence. This space exists outside the boundaries of nation and so-called civilization: "De donde nosotros veníamos," writes Guevara, "no había tiempo, no se sabía cómo había transcurrido porque la vida parecía volver siempre a la tierra sin dejar huella...la historia estaba por empezar, mientras que allí, en Londres, años, siglos, épocas, pretéritas retrocedía vertiginosamente por el solo hecho de mirar."⁹¹ [From where we came from, there was no time, no one knew how time passed because life always seemed to return to the land without leaving tracks...history was about to happen,

⁹⁰ Iparraguirre, 138–39.

⁹¹ Iparraguirre, 124–25.

while there, in London, years, centuries, times past, dizzyingly receded back into time simply by looking]. Space, once again, creates community, as Guevara's "de donde nosotros veníamos" separates him from his actual British lineage while connecting him to the *yámanas*, an imaginative lineage. In understanding history in this bifurcated way, Guevara determines that that European history, bound by concrete moments in time, is not comparable to his nation's history. This new conception of history is one which Latin American historical novels work in producing:

"while the earlier historical novel was concerned with teaching the reader about history and subscribed to the belief that there was a definable set of historical facts, the more recent historical novel recognizes the subjectivity of history and the existence of different versions of the same events linked to individual experience."⁹²

Guevara's empathy, provoked by witnessing the contrast between Jemmy Button's (and the *yámanas*) inherent humanity and the sailor's transgression against nature's innocents, develops into a moment of self-recognition. In recognizing the other, Guevara learns to recognize the difference between humanity and inhumanity. In other words, he recognizes the *yámanas*' humanity by witnessing the British soldier's inhumanity. In recognizing this link, he begins understanding himself as an "other," a recognition cemented by Fitzroy when he tells our narrator that "de tanto estar con salvajes se está convirtiendo en uno" [you've spent so much time with the savages that you have become one].⁹³ His interpellation as "other" by the Capitan does not startle or unsettle him; it leads him to observe Fitzroy and his men in a new light, similar to how Button must have observed them when they entered inside Tierra del Fuego: "Yo no podía dejar de mirarlos con curiosidad: aquellos eran los poderosos de la tierra. No me impresionaron demasiado."⁹⁴ [I could not stop looking at them with curiosity: those were the powerful, rulers of the earth. They didn't impress me much]. Finally, Guevara completely disassociates himself from Fitzroy and the other men on the ship, finding solidarity only with the *yámanas*.

This disassociation allows him to revisit his own moments of incomprehension throughout his many interactions with Button. A telling scene occurs as Button begins describing the teachings of his elders. Guevara's transcription of this moment demonstrates how the act of writing provokes an empathy grounded upon unfamiliarity, recognition, misunderstanding and finally understanding:

"Ante todo, nosotros, hombres y mujeres, debemos ser buenos y útiles a la comunidad. Cada hombre y cada mujer debe tener autoridad sobre sí mismo....Aprende a renunciar a todo exceso. Todos y cada uno, sea hombre o mujer, deben mostrar el mayor respeto por los ancianos. Ancianos saben cómo construir el wigwam y la canoa, como luchar con la ballena...esto no era para blancos..."⁹⁵

⁹² Helene Carol Weldt-Basson, ed., *Redefining Latin American Historical Fiction: The Impact of Feminism and Postcolonialism*, First edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 27–28.

⁹³ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 140.

⁹⁴ Iparraguirre, 141.

⁹⁵ Iparraguirre, 152.

[Before anything, women and women, must be good and useful to our community. Each man and every woman must have authority of themselves. Learn to renounce all excess. Each and every one, man or woman, most show utmost respect for their elders. Elders know how to construct the wigwam and the canoe, how to fight against the whale...this was not for the whites...]

The focus on goodness, usefulness, and community, are the aspects missing from Guevara's memories of London and its people. These teachings provoke Guevara's understanding, as he dramatically shifts back inside his present moment of writing in order to mark the exact moment that his understanding surfaces: "ahora, con los años, puedo entender aquel momento" [now, with the years, I can understand that moment].⁹⁶ The "ahora" takes the reader back inside the present 1865 moment, suggesting that temporality in Argentina is defined by a constant merging of past and present. This new temporality surfaces as Guevara, after remembering Button's "enseñanzas," recalls that "esa tarde se restituyó nuestra amistad y quedó sellado como en un pacto" [this afternoon our friendship was restored and remained sealed, like a pact].⁹⁷ The reader does not know whether "esa tarde" belongs to 1830 or to 1865. Soon after this moment Button shares his real name with Guevara for the first time, "Omoy-lume," sealing their friendship.

Guevara's shift from past to present in the very moment he begins understanding Button's teaching resists the notion that history must have a consistent temporal foundation. His empathetic recognition and a newfound understanding of Button enable him to restructure the way that narrative itself is composed by refusing the traditional temporal frameworks developed inside the travel narrative and nineteenth century historical novel. It inside this traditional framework that the systematic order defining civilization and barbarism reproduces itself. Through Guevara's relationship to Jemmy Button, his direct witnessing of London's socioeconomic scarcity and the acts of ignorant violence perpetuated by its citizens, he gains a newfound understanding of the *yámana* way of life. That understanding provides a critical restructuring of colonial hierarchies; one Guevara begins using inside his narrative as a means to rewrite his own nation's history.

Empathy in the Legal Sphere: Shifting Civic Responsibilities and Legitimization

Patagonia was incorporated into the Argentine nation in 1885, as the Conquest of the Desert came to an end. Yet, this incorporation of physical space did not go hand in hand with an incorporation of individuals. All settlers in Patagonia, indigenous and otherwise, gained full citizenship only in 1955, seventy-years after the regions' incorporation into the Argentine nation. Argentine nationalism and citizenship were not predicated on the full inclusion of its nation's people but on the exclusion of Patagonia, a space deemed barbarous by many nineteenth and early twentieth century statesmen, historians and writers. Tierra del Fuego had an even harder time gaining access to nationhood, existing as a national colony without political rights until 1991. It is quite significant that a novel, written 1999 and entitled *La Tierra del Fuego*, spends a good part of its pages unraveling the legal battle between Jemmy Button and the British Empire. The setting for this is the Malvinas Islands, another problematic territory that, even today, exists within a national tug-of-way between Britain and Argentina. Through these two settings, the

⁹⁶ Iparraguirre, 154.

⁹⁷ Iparraguirre, 154.

Tierra del Fuego and the Malvinas, two versions of colonialism appear, British and Argentine, disturbing frontier spaces and the traditional lives of their inhabitants. By paralleling Argentina's own nationalist ventures with Britain's control of the Malvinas, *La Tierra del Fuego* unleashes yet another critique on Argentine nationalism, as predicated upon the obliteration of its native inhabitants. In positioning the trail of Jemmy Button, who holds no rights on either side of the national divide, inside this contested territory, Guevara sheds light on the barbarity of the legal system and on his own civic responsibility to witness and transcribe.

Guevara describes the purpose of his writing as a legal one from the beginning. The novel commences with the legal origins of Button's case, revealed to the reader through Guevara's determination to write back to history, redraw the image of Jemmy Button, and secure his innocence while demonstrating Britain's culpability. *La Tierra del Fuego* aligns itself with the historical and legal archive in order to revise it; a phenomenon Roberto Echevarría Gonzalez believes structures many Latin American novels:

“Archival fictions, then, return to the law as origin in order to delve into the structure of mediation as the constitutive structure of Latin American narrative, or perhaps of the Latin American imagination. These novels reach back to the legal origins of the narrative to pry into the relationship between power and knowledge, or better yet, the empowerment of knowledge through language in the legalist, hence ritualistic, act of writing.”⁹⁸

The connection between law and writing in Iparaguire's novel destabilizes the version of citizenship and national identity constructed by nineteenth century Argentine nationalists and colonial exploiters. For Guevara, national identity is dependent upon the relationship of reciprocal recognition between the *indígena* and the *criollo*, and thus a new set of responsibilities for civic life are unraveled as Guevara travels to the Malvinas in 1860 to witness Button's trial. These responsibilities do not stop there. Guevara's civic responsibilities, as mentioned earlier, also provoke him to teach Graciana how to read and write in his present time, making her, an illiterate Argentine woman, the rightful reader to his narrative and not mister MacDowell o MacDownness. This is extremely noteworthy since Guevara effectively writes a narrative to the British Admiralty and then refuses to provide him that narrative. This refusal suggests that the history he tells is one which must stay within his own nation, accessed by its own individuals, in particular those marginalized by socioeconomic and cultural factors. The novel establishes new defining contours for nationalism and the nationalist project at a time when the nationalism was on the rise in the country, actively responding to both the Malvinas War and to the military dictatorship.

What Button's trial demonstrates is that violence is inherent to law, especially within a colonial context where “violence is encrypted within the legal system and regularly emerges whenever the empire of the law is challenged, while law-preserving violence carries out its daily tasks in the name of its violent origin.” Law and violence “are intertwined and contaminate each other.”⁹⁹ Guevara's “Sexto Pliego” reflects how this inherent violence contaminates even the

⁹⁸ González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive*, 176.

⁹⁹ Costas Douzinas, *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (London ; New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 252.

physical structure housing the legal system. As he travels to the Malvinas in 1860 to witness Button's trial, he sees the "Palacio de Justicia" for the first time:

"nada más peregrino que aquel cobertizo de madera y piedra llamado Palacio de Justicia, en el último rincón del Atlántico sur, habilitado para que las autoridades investigaran el asesinato de aquellos hombres que, románticamente, como señala Rennie en la carta al Times, se largaron a ejercer su propio derecho sobre la vida y la libertad de otros seres....."¹⁰⁰

[nothing is stranger than that wooden and stone shed called the Palace of Justice, set in the last corner of the south Atlantic, authorized so that the authorities can investigate the murder of those men who, romantically, as Rennie signals in his letter to the Times, started to exercise their own right over the life and liberty of other beings...]

Similar to irony-laden description of the Admiralty's seal, in converting the Palace of Justice to a muddled, stone and wood shed, the very possibility of actual justice is questioned. The "authority" on the matter is a man named Rennie who wrote a letter to the Times newspaper describing how a group of *yámanas* killed a group of missionaries. In positioning Rennie next to a structure of makeshift justice, Guevara undermines the newspaper writer's authority and all authority over the matter. The descriptions of the Palace of Justice continue, further underlining the faulty construction of the so-called justice system, which, in effect, become absurd within its geographical context. "El viento antártico" writes Guevara "descuelga por el tubo de la estufa de hierro produciendo ese gemido particular y lúgubre que los que hemos vivido en el sur conocemos, y al cual uno se acostumbra o se vuelve loco. Ese es el Palacio de Justicia de Puerto Stanley" [The Antarctic wind picks up through the iron tube of the heater, producing a very particular and mournful howl which those of us who have lived in the South know, and one which you either get used to or go crazy from. This is the Palace of Justice in Puerto Stanley].¹⁰¹ Once more Guevara connects himself to Button, the accused, suggesting that they share a knowledge of nature having lived in the South, as he calls it, and can understand the sound of the wind and thus can prevent impending insanity. Those who do not understand, much like Fitzroy, are those who run the system of justice in Puerto Stanley, intruding into a geographical space they hardly comprehend.

This subtle critique also unveils the deep connection that Guevara continues to have with Button, one which forces him to act: "Hay noches en que siento el peso insostenible de la historia de Button, de su gente, como si yo mismo, como si mis acciones hubieran tenido responsabilidad sobre su vida y su muerte" [there are nights that I feel the unsustainable heaviness of Button's history, of his people, as if I myself, as if my actions had been responsible for his life and his death].¹⁰² The history of the *yámanas* is something which Guevara now *feels* inside his own body, an empathy strong enough to provoke his actions and promote his civic responsibility to witness and, more importantly, to narrate the history and preserve. As Guevara sees Button, after many years, inside the courtroom, he, for the first time, uses Button's real name: "Alli estaba

¹⁰⁰ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 214.

¹⁰¹ Iparraguirre, 220–21.

¹⁰² Iparraguirre, 218.

Omoy-Lume, venido del Cabo de Hornos a declarar por su propia voluntad” [There was Omoy-Lume, coming from Cabo de Hornos in order to testify out of his own volition].¹⁰³ This is the first time that Guevara uses Button’s real name. The use Button’s real name inside the Palace of Justice legitimizes Button’s actual identity inside Guevara’s narrative, a narrative which, up until this moment, always referred to him as “Jemmy Button.” Moreover, the use of “Omoy-Lume” alongside the legal act of testifying and the concept of free will situates the *yámana* inside a new historical trajectory. “Omoy-Lume” is a being capable of acting through his own free will, of testifying, and of existing inside a legal space as a legally bound subject. Does “Omoy-Lume” gain a status as a quasi-citizen here? Perhaps. But more significantly he gains status as historical subject acting through his own volition, a status both Britain and Argentina has refused him for years. Yet that status is gained only through Guevara’s interpellation of Button as Omoy-Lume, suggesting that, once more, when one speaks for the other, even in an attempt to legitimize the other, something is lost. Perhaps that is why the novel stages the use of Button’s real name within the spectacle of the courtroom, to illuminate the impossibility facing Button as he strives to represent himself. What the novel does do is suggest that there is a new narrative responsibility has emerged, one which should go back to the past and revise the versions of previous narratives contributing to misrepresentation of indigenous subjects and their particular history. This will at least begin illuminating those subjects and histories in a new way, while also defining the problematic structures violating them within the world of representation.

The first footnote appearing inside *La Tierra del Fuego* further contextualizes the narrative’s newfound responsibility:

“Una copia en inglés de las actas estaba adosada a los siete pliegos del relato de Guevara. Se ignora como llegó a su poder. Los testimonios de Smyley, de Coles y de Jemmy Button son textuales. No nos consta, en cambio, que el Rev. Despard, su mujer y Parker Snow hayan asistido al juicio. Las palabras que les atribuye Guevara, sin embargo, se ajustan casi puntualmente a cartas y documentos del *Public Record Office*, de Londres (nota de editor).”¹⁰⁴

[An English copy of the records was attached to the seven *pliegos* of Guevara’s account. How he got them is unknown. The testimonies of Smyley, of Coles, and of Jemmy Button are exact. However, they do not tell us that Rev. Despard, his wife, and Parker Snow had assisted the trial. The words which Guevara attributes to them, however, match perfectly to the letters and documents from London’s Public Record office (editor’s note)].

The footnote assures the readers that Guevara’s narrative represents the past more accurately than the British records which neglect to mention the testimonies of the three individuals mentioned above. Guevara’s account, in other words, fills in the blanks of recorded history and *La Tierra del Fuego* becomes an alternative archival document. In returning to the Archive, *La Tierra del Fuego* aligns itself with Echeverría’s claims about late twentieth century Latin American narratives as ones which “return to the Archive, the legal origin of the narrative in Latin America” in order to question demonstrate that a new, metahistorical discourse arises out

¹⁰³ Iparraguirre, 227.

¹⁰⁴ Iparraguirre, 223.

of literature's involvement with the Archive.¹⁰⁵ Guevara's narrative makes room for marginal geographies and individuals to gain visibility inside a history predicated on writing them off as invisible.

Jemmy Button's testimony is first provided in English, and then subsequently translated into Spanish by Guevara. The reason for this, our narrator reminds us, is that he wanted to use the language that Button himself used. However, this means that this is the first time that Guevara uses his father's language, a realization he calls "una de las grandes ironias de esta historia" [one of the great ironies of this history].¹⁰⁶ Yet the irony also unfolds in a different manner. When Button finally speaks for himself he can only do so in English, a language completely disconnected from his own. Moreover, his speech requires a subsequent translation, into Spanish by Guevara, another colonial tongue superimposed upon Button. This messy process of translation illuminates the even messier composition of the legal battle portrayed inside *La Tierra del Fuego*. The transcription of these court proceedings is what composes the historical archive Iparraguirre herself turned to as she began writing the novel. Button can never properly represent his own account of things because he is forced into two linguistic systems which are nowhere near his own. Perhaps this is why Guevara begins, for the first time, using the parenthetical as a means of supplementary interpretation inside his narrative. He quite literally becomes Button's interpreter, rather ironic since Button is speaking in English and Guevara has already translated that speech into Spanish. What is there left to interpret?

The interpretation occurring inside the parenthetical mode is not one relying on translation or signification. It relies on empathy as a means of deciphering specific historical events: "(Es decir: Button aceptaba el enojo de los suyos ante la requisita, ya que hubiera sido absurdo negarlo, pero involucraba al reverendo Despard y de paso echaba la culpa a sus ancestrales enemigos, los Oens, a los que mostraba como feroces)." [It's to say: Button accepted the anger of his own before the requisition, since it would have been absurd to negate it, but involved Rev. Despard in the situation and then cast the blame on his ancestral enemies, the Oens, who he characterized as ferocious].¹⁰⁷ Button already told us about Despard and the Oens. In fact he told us twice, once in English and once Spanish through Guevara's translation. Therefore, the parenthetical, occurring three times, reads like an alternative narrative. It contains something that Button's English/Spanish testimony does not: a justification for his actions. Button does not tell us he accepted the anger of his own people, or that it would be absurd to negate this feeling, nor does he tell us that he casts blame on his ancestral enemies for this stroke of bad luck. In fact, the reader has no idea who the Oens are until Guevara mentions them inside his parenthetical remark. Button's actions and feelings are thus supported and elaborated by Guevara through the parenthetical. The historical archive, holding the official record of the court proceedings, does not offer enough evidence or contextualization for an individual to properly piece together Jemmy Button's guilt nor innocence. What offers contextualization, what serves as evidence, is Guevara's empathetic reconstruction of the proceedings. This culminates in his redefinition of the word "massacre," used by court to define the fate of the missionaries: "Lo que el Jurado llamaba 'la masacre' era para Button la fatal consecuencia del encadenamiento de los

¹⁰⁵ González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive*, 153.

¹⁰⁶ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*, 274.

¹⁰⁷ Iparraguirre, 275.

hechos y el punto de donde confluía el odio contenido durante décadas. El precio había sido pagado.” [What the jury called a ‘massacre’ was for Button the fatal consequence of a string of events and the point from which contained hatefulness gathered for decades. The price had been paid].¹⁰⁸ In unsettling the definition of massacre, Guevara unsettles history, legality and truth. He nuances the events of November 6, 1859, contextualizing them within the messier history of colonial exploitation.

Guevara’s internal monologue toward the end of the court proceedings turns to descriptions of the body and to pain as a conduit, not of identification, but of final understanding and recognition. Button’s body hardly gains representation inside the novel until this point, suggesting that Guevara’s focus on friendship and geographical connectedness sparked an empathy devoid of identification through a body’s violation:

“¿No sabían que otros hombres de apariencia más inofensiva llamados científicos les aplicaban una pasta blanca en la cara para tomar sus moldes y llevarlos a exhibir en países lejanos y que esta práctica se había realizado incluso hasta la muerte por asfixia o la humillante prueba en los genitales o en los pechos de las mujeres o los muchachos que inocentemente se les había acercado? Se mostraron desnudos y se los califico de desprovistos de toda moral.”¹⁰⁹

[They had no knowledge that other apparently inoffensive men named scientists applied a white paste on the face to make molds and take them to be exhibited in far off countries and that this practice took place up to the moment of death by suffocation or the humiliating test of the genitals or in the breasts of women or men who innocently had gotten close to them. They were shown naked and they were labeled completely devoid of morals].

This internal line of questioning occurs right as the jury goes into deliberation mode. The questions, in fact, mimic the deliberation process however, in focusing in on the harm done to bodies like Button’s, Guevara proposes a new method of deliberation which involves understanding the history that has led up to this point. Much like the redefinition of the word “massacre” required a subtle unpacking inside the legal sphere, Guevara also implies that the lack of knowledge perpetuating the court room (“no sabían”) involves an absence of historical awareness. This absence suggests that those in charge of Button’s fate simply fail to understand the exploitative pain and suffering that colonial exploitation superimposed on Button, a suffering which Guevara witnessed firsthand. The immorality meant to define the *yámanas*, now defines the legal system and the historical abuses it unavoidably maintains.

Conclusion

Jemmy Button was pardoned and set free. The two men met for the last time outside the courtroom, on the beach. Although he only referred to Button as “Omoy-Lume” in their last interchange, Guevara’s internal consciousness continued referring to him as “Button,” a choice cementing the orality of his real name, “Omoy-Lume,” a name resisting a permanent residence

¹⁰⁸ Iparraguirre, 279.

¹⁰⁹ Iparraguirre, 278.

inside Guevara's written narrative. "Jemmy Button" is that permanent resident, an inhabitant of dozens of constructed histories and interpretations throughout the nineteenth-century. Yet, as the two men grab each other's forearms towards the end, in a quasi-embrace while saying their goodbyes, a moment of intimacy prevails; a closeness bringing them together for the last time. It is this intimacy that Guevara turns to as he adamantly determines that the new reader of his narrative will be Graciana and not the British Empire: "Si este es un relato para nadie quizá yo mismo deba crearle un lector, y tal vez sea ella, míster MacDowell o MacDowness, la que algún día pueda alcanzar el sentido de estos papeles sin destino" [If this a story for no one perhaps I myself must create a reader, and maybe it's her, Mr. MacDowell or MacDowness, she who one day will be able to reach the meaning of these papers without destiny].¹¹⁰ The novel ends with a demand for a new readership and thus the creation of new kind of reader. In determining that Graciana is this new reader, Guevara implies that only she can give meaning to the history he has told. What kind of new readership can evolve from Graciana, an illiterate housekeeper? One that reaching a new interpretation, a new meaning ("alcanzar el sentido") to the alternative history he tells.

Graciana appears and reappears throughout the novel, always in the margins, always there but hardly present, a briefly defined character hardly gains concrete representation. As Guevara pieces together Button's history he also begins understanding Graciana's status as a marginal figure. When he first sees her fumbling through his writing materials, unable to understand the traces of words, he laughs.¹¹¹ Her illiteracy is something he initially cannot comprehend, something borderline humorous and absurd, similar to *yámanas* way of life, their nakedness and their customs, which all seemed comical to the sailors and scientists studying them. Graciana is another marginal figure inside nineteenth century Argentina and the globe, both as a woman and as someone whose inability to read and write prevents her from contributing to the history containing her. Guevara's decision makes her the ideal reader of his narrative, using his pages to also make her literate, demonstrates the extent to which his reflections and writings on Button have changed the way he understands his own environment. An understanding of historical complexities, a rediscovery of history through writing and self-exploration has the power to affect one's interpersonal relationships and thus alter the present historical moment by demanding that individuals have a civic duty to help marginal identities gain access to national and global spaces and, most importantly, history.

¹¹⁰ Iparraguirre, *La Tierra Del Fuego*.

¹¹¹ Iparraguirre, 169. "Me reí con ganas, lo que le produjo una gran ofensa."

Chapter Three

Empathetic Encounters:

Melodrama, the Body, and Abject Aesthetics

in Manuel Puig's *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*

Human rights gained political, social, cultural and legal visibility during the 1970s in both Latin America and the United States. Novels representing human rights abuses, and written during this time, began focusing on the complicated, and often problematic, relationship between reading, the reader, pain and the material body. Postmodern novels representing human rights abuses contain a fundamental paradigm shift with respect to an individual's representation: pain, abjection, bodily excretions, unheroic actions, compromises, genetics, and alternative sexualities, become essential focal points in the aesthetic evolution of the individual during and after the 1970's. This shift in representation also signals a shift in the emergence of empathy within the novel, a phenomenon deeply dependent upon corporal representations marking a relationship between self and other. Empathy, therefore, becomes an act of reading the other, bringing the other in close proximity to oneself to foster an eventual contact between self and other. Empathy no longer relies on one's ability to vicariously identify with the other through instances of corporeal suffering and pain; it now demands a new form of identification marked by the transcendence of sexual, political, social and cultural differences.

In the United States the 1970's were marked by the booming Civil Rights movement, which went hand in hand with a restructuring of societal norms and standards, as the national incorporation of women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans and other ethnically diverse communities was sought. In Latin America the 1970's was defined by increased conflicts between right wing and military governments, indigenous rights movements, feminist movements, and social communist activists seeking to reconstruct national politics. The two hemispheres, under the shadow of the Cold War, witnessed the dismantling of a national utopia promised by the Cuban Revolution and the Civil Rights movements of the previous decade. The 1970's, therefore, mark a period of hemispheric dystopia defined by military regimes, political violence, wrongful imprisonment, repression and the destabilization of political and social rights. This repression generated new kinds of identities, new platforms for political discussion and, often, new ways of understanding liberation. Liberation no longer meant being free from constraints; it began representing an alternative sociopolitical context for understanding one's place inside the nation.

The novelistic genre evolves to gain new contours inside this hemispheric dystopia, as new relationships emerge between representations of the body, human rights abuses, the construction of narrative empathy and history. In chapter one, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* demonstrated how the novel works within the landscape of dystopia to reshape the reader's understanding of empathy by outlining the subsequent dangers of sentimentalism utilized within

the nineteenth-century American tradition. Manuel Puig's 1974 novel, *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*, demonstrates quite the opposite. It shows how the mobilization of empathy erupts as two strikingly different individuals share a jail cell in Buenos Aires, two years before the official outbreak of Argentina's Dirty War. Puig's novel demonstrates the potential of empathy, as it reforms cemented individual identity, both conscious and unconscious. One of the prisoners, Molina, turns to the art of nineteenth-century melodrama to describe twentieth-century Hollywood B movies, engaging in a detailed storytelling practice juxtaposing Valentin's militant, Marxist political agenda and speech. An intimate emotional and physical relationship develops as the two prisoners learn to navigate between these two worlds. Furthermore, as Valentin's body is poisoned by the state, Molina's physical acts of kindness (feeding, cleaning, sharing, and caring for him), along with "his" narration of six films, produce a potent empathetic encounter between the two men within the bounds of the prison cell.

This strangely ironic setting permits empathy to occur and, as Ricardo Piglia recalls, "in the place where most repression is carried out, the main gesture of liberation occurs."¹ Liberation occurs where we least expect it, endowing the prison-cell with the power of generating new identities, even as it places constraints upon the bodies generating those identity shifts. The cell-space exists both inside (as a product of) and outside the sociopolitical landscape (away from). In this space, the ideological, cultural and sexual differences distancing Molina and Valentin from ever encountering one another in the outside world lose traction, as the two are forced into a close and intimate proximity. They share food, bodily fluids, speech-acts, abjection, illness, and sexual acts; the body, in other words, becomes the primary vehicle employed in the production of empathy. The novel maps the eventual contact of their bodies, both mentally and physically, as both prisoners (who are quite literally polar opposites) learn how to empathize with each other. This empathy is constructed in three ways: (1) through reading and the excess of identification, (2) through abjection and the diminishing of the self/other divide, (3) and through the surrender to touch and desire which subsequently shapes a new identity.

This chapter centers on how the novel constructs and manipulates empathy inside the bare and dystopic cell-space. The physical, unembellished, and abject bodies of Molina and Valentin intersect with the novel's material body, one marked by excessive footnotes, Molina's melodramatic narrative telling, and moments of stream of conscious narration mimicking the unconscious, mapping the relationship between empathy and the body. Empathy is politicized and assigned transformative powers in *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*. As the empathetic connection between Valentin and Molina develops, the two prisoners begin overcoming political, sexual and class differences, casting a negative light upon Argentina's traditional models of patriarchy, masculinity and class structure. The initial struggle between the two ends with each granting basic "human rights" to the other: right to thought, speech, sex, food, shelter/comfort, etc., enabling a most unpredictable political partnership to develop. *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* exposes, not the limits of empathy, as do Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*, but empathy's potential in transforming a rigid sociopolitical world.

Molina's referencing of WWII, slavery and colonialism through his film retellings, creates a global network of abuses, connecting Argentina's shifting political landscape to previous moments now marked as historical atrocities. The novel engages with the history in explicit ways, particularly through its engagement with early Hollywood B films and, less

¹ Daniel Balderston and Francine Masiello, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman*, vol. 97, *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* 97 (New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America, 2007), 23.

directly, through its stylistic engagement with the tradition of Latin American melodrama. *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* is a postmodern novel best described as a metafictional hybrid using methods of historical production (films, letters, and footnotes) and melodramatic elements of narrative production (detailed descriptions Molina uses to transform both the cell space and Valentin's imagination and ability to identify with another), to expose the faulty landscape of pre-dictatorship Argentina (under Isabel Perón), a country on the verge of waging war against its own citizens. Puig's version of postmodernism uniquely unites metafictional and melodramatic narrative techniques together, permitting the development of a new "technology of telling."² These two temporally distinct narrative enterprises illuminate how empathy for the other becomes a productive means of restructuring identity politics within Argentina.

Melodrama and the Production of Affective Empathy in Cat People

-¿Y qué hay que hacer para salvarse de un destino melodramático?

-Nada, porque no depende de uno. Te cae y te electrocuta como un rayo; basta no pienses más en eso"

-No señorita, a mí me da miedo, voy a rezar mucho todas las noches para salvarme de un destino melodramático"³

[-And what does one have to do to save one's self from a melodramatic destiny?

-Nothing, it does not depend on you. It shuts you up and electrocutes you like a ray; stop thinking about this.

-No, Miss. It scares me; I will pray a lot each night in order to save myself from a melodramatic destiny.]

Puig wrote previous excerpt, "Un Destino Melodramático," in one of his journals, published in 2004, several years after his death. The inevitability of a melodramatic destiny is revealed as the conversation between teacher and student evolves; this melodramatic destiny depends little on individual desire and ambition. Peter Brooks suggests that melodrama "comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern."⁴ The Argentine landscape of 1974 was one where morality was indeed thrown into question, just two years before the official beginning of the military dictatorship, when "being gay and being a leftist revolutionary certainly exclude[d] one from the myth of nation."⁵ Puig's novel enables the nation's most opposing and threatening "exclusions" to gain representation inside the very space created to exclude them from society: the prison cell. Valentin, the leftist militant and Molina, the feminized homosexual, gain

² Francine Masiello uses this terminology to describe the various narrative techniques in *El Beso*.

³ Julia Romero, "Cine Inédito: Los Manuscritos de 'El Beso de La Mujer Araña,' de Manuel Puig," *Hispanamérica* 27, no. 80/81 (August 1, 1998): 26.

⁴ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess: With a New Preface* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 15.

⁵ Carlos Riobó, *Sub-Versions of the Archive: Manuel Puig's and Severo Sarduy's Alternative Identities* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 113.

physical, emotional and political visibility in this novel. This visibility, as many Latin American cultural critics and avid readers of Puig have suggested, generates the potential for a new political landscape shaped by alternative communities.⁶ Furthermore, as the two prisoners gain visibility throughout the novel, the political atmosphere of a nation in turmoil arises as a dystopic space ironically contrasting against the cell's constructed utopia. In other words, although the novel spends little time describing the actual cell and prison-climate, Valentin and Molina's bodies explore these boundaries while simultaneously illuminating Argentina's dark reality during the early 1970's.

Many Latin American cultural critics believe that melodrama is the mold upon which the consciousness of Latin America is forged, a foundational building block to nation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "History," write Paula Felix Didier and Andres Levinson, "—the scholarly approach to History that still reigns—is one of the greatest matrices of melodrama. Heroes give their lives for others and walk with a steady pace toward the scaffold or the firing squad because they know that they will be reborn in the gratitude of their compatriots."⁷ The connection between history and melodrama traced here is one which *El Beso* unpacks throughout its pages, both through Molina's carefully selected film retellings, his death-sacrifice at the end of the novel and, most importantly, through the burgeoning empathetic relationship between the two prisoners, one founded upon their physical bodies. Melodrama is deeply connected to the physical body and its excesses, a connection explicitly portrayed with the narration of the first film, *Cat People*. Although the metaphor of excess will outline this entire chapter, this section focuses primarily on sexual and emotional excess as productive instruments triggering the imagination through narrative in order to develop a melodramatic reading practice that fosters empathy, or the "excess" of identification. The excess of identification drives nineteenth-century Latin American novels in their endeavor and 'duty' to represent the other, predominantly through images of suffering, violation, and abuse. It is this excess that Molina strives to ingrain in Valentin by relying heavily on melodrama throughout his narratives.

The origins of melodrama, Peter Brooks argues, "can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath," a claim binding melodrama not only to human rights discourse, but also to the construction of empathy that Lynn Hunt connects to the burgeoning novelistic form of the late eighteenth century.⁸ Following the shattering of many myths cemented by representative institutions such as the Church and Monarch during the French Revolution, Brooks claims that melodrama appeared as an alternative discourse combatting the invalid literary forms "tragedy, comedy of manners" fostered by the pre-revolutionary society.⁹ Likewise, Puig turns to melodrama in the midst of a collapsing society, marked by the fall of Peronism and the subsequent rise of the military government. Molina's melodramatic film narration becomes the primary means of reconstructing the relationship between "himself" and Valentin, refashioning the repressive cell-space into something bodily,

⁶ Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 85.

⁷ Darlene J. Sadlier, ed., *Latin American Melodrama: Passion, Pathos, and Entertainment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 45.

⁸ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.

⁹ Brooks, 15.

performative, theatrical, and visually stimulating.¹⁰ In turning to melodrama, Puig effectively turns back to nineteenth-century literary models, and questions the foundation of Latin American nation-formation and political identity. He does so at a time when the nation is in dire need of questioning. In directly addressing the nineteenth-century literary sphere that, according to Doris Sommer, combined eroticism and politics together in order to foster a stable domestic space, which could then extend itself to the nation-space, *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* shatters the normative heterosexual, domestically-centered standards, so central in creating the national-subject.¹¹ It shatters these standards by exposing them, ironically, through the gendered desires of a homosexual male and the political desires of a leftist activist. Molina wants to be a woman, sure, but the *kind* of woman he desires to become is one akin to the stereotypical 1950's housewife, as Valentin remarks early on in the novel. Though the use of stereotypes, Puig destabilizes the foundation of the nineteenth-century Argentine novel, grounded on fostering a social political space emphasizing the heterosexual patriarchal family structure, the assimilation and subjugation of the other, and a narrative empathy dependent on the objectification of the other.

Historians have traced the cemented connections between melodramatic mass culture in Argentina (in both film and radio) and Peronism, suggesting that Argentina's tie to melodrama exceeded its nineteenth-century origin. In *The New Cultural History of Peronism*, Matthew Karush discusses how melodramatic narrative structures were developed to empower the poor, creating the moral categories which reigned over Peron's first presidency and which are still deployed in present day Argentina as class struggles persist. Tango, for example, joined the melodramatic discourse by establishing itself as an artistic medium which was: (1) located in the past, (2) situated within the world of melancholy and (3) rooted in popular rather than elite culture.¹² Similarly, the films (and *bolero*) narrated in *El Beso de la mujer Araña* employ analogous melodramatic structures, determined to generate new moral categories, where a leftist militant and a homosexual who self-identifies as a woman can discover a common ground within the national space constructed to exclude them: the prison. Inside the novel the melodrama is two-fold: it first occurs inside the films themselves and then travels inside the cell, seen through Molina and Valentin's dialogues and body language.¹³ The connotations of the word melodrama include: "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking periphery"¹⁴

¹⁰ Molina's desire to be/become a woman complicates the pronouns used to describe "him." Since "he" does not refer to "himself" using the female pronouns, and since "his" desire for femininity is collapsed with "his" homosexuality, I will use quotes to refer to Molina as "him" throughout this chapter.

¹¹ Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, Latin American Literature and Culture 8 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), introduction, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft4h4nb215>.

¹² Matthew B. Karush and Oscar Chamosa, eds., *The New Cultural History of Peronism: Power and Identity in Mid-Twentieth-Century Argentina* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 35.

¹³ Subsequently, with Molina's release and Valentin's subconscious at the end of the novel, outside the cell, but my focus in this section is what happens within the cell.

¹⁴ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 12.

Melodrama permeates Molina's film-narrations, the cell, and the outside world, forging a new set of moral categories, founded upon empathy, abjection and excess, in an otherwise immoral national landscape.

Transforming Desire: Teaching Valentin to Read Melodrama

El Beso de la Mujer Araña begins with a disembodied voice, in an unknown setting, narrating to an unknown audience, anxiously describing an unknown and rather strange woman:

“A ella se le ve que algo raro tiene, que no es una mujer como todas. Parece muy joven, de unos veinticinco años cuanto más, una carita un poco de gata, la nariz chica, respingada, el corte de cara es...más redondo que ovalado, la frente ancha, los cachetes también grandes pero que después se van para en punta, como los gatos.”¹⁵

[Something a little strange, that's what you notice, that she's not a woman like all the others. She looks fairly young, twenty-five, maybe a little more, petite face, a little catlike, small turned-up nose. The shape of her face, it's...more roundish than oval, broad forehead, pronounced cheeks too but then they come down to a point, like with cats.]

This initial description focuses primarily on the woman's facial characteristics, which the narrator seems to trace from memory. Right after this physical description, the first speaker is interrupted by another's question: ¿y los ojos? (9) [and the eyes?]. The reader is immediately alerted to another presence, an additional disembodied voice who demands more physical description, which the initial speaker provides:

“Claros, casi seguro que verdes, los entrecierra para dibujar mejor. Mira al modelo, la pantera negra del zoológico, que primero estaba quieta en la jaula, echada. Pero cuando la chica hizo ruido con el atril y la silla, la pantera la vio y empezó a pasearse por la jaula y a rugirle a la chica, que hasta entonces no encontraba bien el sombrero que le iba a dar el dibujo.”¹⁶

[Clear, pretty sure they're Green, half-closed to focus better on the drawing. She looks at her subject: the black panther at the zoo, which was quiet at first, stretched out in its cage. But when the girl made a noise with her easel and chair, the panther spotted her and began pacing back and forth in its cage and began to growl at the girl, who up to then was still having trouble with shading in the drawing.]¹⁷

¹⁵ Manuel Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1976).

++All English translations are by Thomas Colchie, from the Vintage International version of 1991++

¹⁶ Puig, 9.

¹⁷ Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 1st Vintage International ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1991),

The bodies of the two speakers remain unknown, unnamed, lacking a concrete physical presence. The lack of physical bodily description also extends to the woman being described: while her face gains some semblance of description, no mention is made of her body as a whole. As soon as the attempt is made towards a more full-bodied description, the second speaker abruptly interrupts the first:

“Sí, es cierto, ella esta ensimismada, metida en el mundo que tiene adentro de ella misma, y que apenas si lo está empezando a descubrir. Las piernas las tiene entrelazadas, los zapatos son negros, de taco alto y grueso, sin puntera, se asoman las uñas pintadas de oscuro. Las medias son brillosas, es tipo de malla cristal de seda, no se sabe si es rosada la carne o a la media.

-Perdón pero acordarte de lo que te dije, no hagas descripciones eróticas. Sabes que no conviene.”¹⁸

[Yes, that’s right, she’s all wrapped up in herself, lose in that world she carries inside her, that she’s just beginning to discover. She has her legs crossed, her shoes are black, thick high heels, open toed, with dark-polished toenails sticking out. Her stockings glitter, that kind they turned inside out when the sheen went out of style, her legs look flushed and silky, you can’t tell if it’s the stockings of her skin.

-Look, remember what I told you, no erotic descriptions. This isn’t the place for it.]¹⁹

The desire to “express *all* seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode,” and it with this desire in mind that the first speaker, Molina, starts piecing together the body of Irena, the principal character of the 1942 horror film *Cat People*, directed by Jacques Tourneur.²⁰

As soon as Molina’s desire to “express all” occurs, it is reined in, interrupted by Valentin, the listener and second speaker. Right as Molina begins describing Irena’s physical body, “la carne” or flesh, Valentin interjects, demanding that erotic descriptions be eliminated from Molina’s narration. Hence, at the novel’s onset, Valentin acts as the mediator of melodramatic description, curtailing desire as designated by excessive bodily descriptions. Moreover, Valentin refuses to get close to the narrative by refusing allow Irena to gain visibility in his mind’s eye. If narrative empathy can be construed as an act of reading and coming to terms with the other through a description which makes that other visible, then Valentin’s initial response acts as an antidote to empathy. “Ya en la segunda página,” remarks Roberto Echavarren when reading this scene, “la observación: ‘no hagas descripciones eróticas, sabes que no conviene’, alude a la separación entre un eventual placer y las necesidades del momento, las circunstancias del encierro y el régimen de poder y verdad que los retiene allí.”²¹ Valentin’s initial mediation of

¹⁸ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 10.

¹⁹ Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 4.

²⁰ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 4.

²¹ Roberto Echavarren, *Margen de Ficción: Poéticas de La Narrativa Hispanoamericana*, 1. ed, Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortiz (México: Editorial J. Mortiz, 1992), 87. Translation: On the second page of the novel, the observation: ‘don’t use any erotic descriptions, you know that they have no place here,’ alludes to the separation between an eventual pleasure and the necessities required by the particular moment, the circumstances of being locked up and the regime of power and truth that holds them both there.

melodramatic desire, stimulated through bodily descriptions that subsequently provoke pleasure, separates the film world from the world of the cell. However, in refusing description, he also mediates his own empathy, a mediation that begins collapsing by the end of *Cat People*.

Although Valentin limits Molina's excessive bodily description, Molina continues describing the woman's hands, her fingernails, her heavy coat, and the man who winds up on the scene behind her. When Molina describes her curly hair, Valentin interrupts once more, this interruption differing greatly from the previous one: "Yo me la imagino morocha, no muy alta, redondita, y que se mueve como una gata. Lo más rico que hay."²² [I picture her dark-looking, not too tall, really nice figure, and she moves like a cat. A real piece].²³ As Valentin begins imagining the woman on his own terms, he permits a desire for physicality to enter his thoughts, the same desire he deemed too sensual and forcefully put an end to only a few moments earlier. While Molina's narration paints Irena's physical features, a space opens inside Valentin's imagination, allowing pleasure and desire to make demands on his otherwise adamantly politically objective consciousness. As a leftist militant spending most of his time reading political treatises, pleasure and sentiment are rejected as too subjective, not appropriate vehicles for contemplation inside the political realm he encompasses. Molina's narrative moments exist as an alternative to Valentin's reading practices. As such, "la representación del sentimentalismo de los excluidos, el homosexual y el guerrillero marxista, los dos 'fantasmas' para el autoritarismo estatal.... Mata un orden genérico que se inmiscuye con el Orden estatal. El homosexual cuestiona las dictiomas como la acción del activista Valentín, que cuestiona el mensaje estatal."²⁴ It is in within these moments that the reader too begins witnessing the empathetic potential of Molina's melodramatic narration, one combatting the dystopia of the state's normative structure with respect to accepted identities and desires.

As Molina continues narrating Irena's story, Valentin's interruptions become less concerned with the prevention of eroticism and more concerned with Molina's ability to accurately *remember* the film in its entirety. "Hacé memoria, [try to remember]," Valentin insists as Molina's detailed memory falters while recalling what happened at an art show Irena attended with her architect boyfriend.²⁵ "Ay, no me exijas tanta precisión" [Hey, don't take me so literally], Molina snaps at Valentin's continual questioning the details.²⁶ This initial interaction, before we are even privy to the men's names, setting and their relationship to one another, marks their fundamental difference as readers and interpreters. Molina's narrative vision, unlike Valentin's, is a combination of his own imagination and the films he remembers. Narration provides Molina with a means of escaping the cell's imaginary limits through melodramatic invention, where he can narrate his own desires. Narration, in other words, allows Molina to construct an alternative world within the cell, making Valentin's desire for precise of details and ordered thoughts unnecessary hindrances to the melodramatic retelling of *Cat People*. Valentin's desires for clarity and precision contrast with Molina's desires for a more unconscious telling,

²² Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 11.

²³ Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 5.

²⁴ Julia Romero, *El Mapa Del Imperio: Del Escritorio de Manuel Puig Al Campo Intelectual*, 1. ed, Colección Éntasis (La Plata, Bs. As. [i.e. Buenos Aires], Argentina: Ediciones Al Margen, 2009), 64.

²⁵ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 12. (English versión, page 6)

²⁶ Puig, 12.

enabling him to both momentarily escape the cell while also reinventing the social dynamic within the cell: “Puig accordingly looks for another space where a different definition of politics is possible, thus heralding the postmodern emphasis on forms of affiliation outside state interpellation and on the task of constructing these new identities. Molina’s politics is a local politics, unlike Valentin’s world-scale political designs. While Valentin wants to change the world, Molina wants only to change his cell.”²⁷ Puig, as Piglia reflects, once said in an interview that “the unconscious has the structure of a soap opera, that is, a structure of unspeakable desires, sexualized relationships, imagined crimes, and displaced perversion.”²⁸ This soap-operatic structure is reminiscent of the structure Molina constructs in the novel’s opening pages, situating both Valentin and the reader inside the world of cinematic reproduction as ordered by melodramatic elements that destabilize previously held moral constructions shaping normative identity within Argentina during the 1970’s.

Molina continues, describing a pet store Irena and her architect visit, focusing on the caged birds looking out, drinking water, and eating lettuce. It is here that we are first alerted to the men’s physical, bodily needs, as an alien third presence enters the narrative space that Molina constructs:

“-Perdona...¿hay agua en la garrafa?
 -Sí, la llene yo cuando me abrieron para ir al baño.
 -¿Querés un poco?, está linda, fresquita.
 -No, así mañana no hay problema con el mate. Seguí.
 -Pero no exageres. Nos alcanza para todo el día.
 -Pero vos no me acostumbres mal. Yo me olvidé de traer cuando nos abrieron la puerta para la ducha, si no era por vos que te acordaste después estábamos sin agua.”²⁹

[-Wait a minute...Is there any water in the bottle?
 -Mmm-hmmm, I refilled it when they let me out of the john.
 -Oh, that’s all right then.
 -You want a little? It’s nice and fresh.
 -No, just so there’s no problem with tea in the morning.
 -Don’t worry so much, we have enough for the whole day.
 -But I’m getting into bad habits. I forgot to bring it along when they opened the door for showers, if it wasn’t for you remember, we’d be stuck without water later on.]³⁰

The need for water is directly tied to the third party who opens doors. Up until this point we have no idea where these men are, yet the description of the bird cage inside the film world meets with the men’s bare necessity for water inside the prison world, a necessity left unmet unless a third party opens the door to provide them with water. This scene is extremely important because

²⁷ Balderston and Masiello, *Approaches to Teaching Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 97:96.

²⁸ Balderston and Masiello, 97:23.

²⁹ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 14.

³⁰ Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 8.

breaks the illusion for the reader. Basic bodily needs, and thus the body, appear and juxtaposing the melodramatic, desire-centered narration of Irena and her architect against Molina and Valentin's physical, thirsty bodies. Fantasy quite literally meets reality in this moment. The intruding third party- the door-opener- interrupts Molina's narrative, contaminating the melodramatic world with the stark bareness of the prison-world. The filmic cage-image escapes, *becoming* real inside the bounds of the actual prison containing the two prisoners. Molina's melodramatic narration escapes into the world of the cell, altering the reality of the cell itself.

The basic need for water and bathroom use are instances of what Giorgio Agamben refers to as "bare life," in which the centrality of the body and its processes become central to understanding the stripping away of basic human rights under the State.³¹ The language of the nation-state is pinned against the language of melodrama in this scene. The state's presence, as an entity preventing thirsty men from drinking water, controlling their bathroom access, the bareness of their dialogue, contrasts with Molina's initial unrestrained description of Irena's strange features, where time and setting are uninhibited. Although we receive little to no description of their physical appearance throughout the novel, the bodies of Molina and Valentin ironically gain visibility through the very reduction of their bodies. Frederick Jameson, in referencing Émile Zola's use of characters writes to "his people begin to exist as bodies first and foremost, despite their identification as character in the older sense."³² Puig's characters also exist as bodies, yet ironically the novel refuses the reader full access to the men's corporality by keeping Molina and Valentin in the dark, at least with respect to their physical attributes. In other words, we have no idea what they really look like due to an absence of physical depiction. This absence, however, is filled by descriptions focusing on their basic bodily needs (water, bathroom use, food, sex) as well as bodily excesses (waste, vomit, fluids), creating a new kind of body, one gaining visibility through its existence as bare biological entity; an unadorned body. Much like the cell which "appears only negatively.... that is, there are no descriptions of the cell and the characters mention it only in projecting their desire to transcend it," the bodies of the prisoners materialize through a similar void, or bareness.³³

Another example of the void, or bareness, occurs throughout the many instances of silence penetrating the novel. Although most of these instances transpire later in the novel, and will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter, the first instance of silence occurs in the middle of Chapter One, as Molina tells Valentin he is a bit tired and forgetful, preferring to continue his narration in the morning. Valentin responds with: "No, mejor a la noche, durante el día no quiero pensar en esas macanas. Hay cosas más importantes en que pensar." [No, it's better at night than during the day I don't want to be thinking about such trivia. I've got more important things to think about.]³⁴ Molina's response is marked with "...", a silence reverberating loudly especially since, up until this point, Molina's voice predominates. "El silencio, en la novela de Puig," writes Julia Cuervo Hewitt, "señala que la palabra, el significante, ha sido falsificado por una retórica detrás de la cual se esconden otros significados. Y la cual, en vez de revelar,

³¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998), introduction.

³² Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 76.

³³ Santiago Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1994), 85.

³⁴ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 15.; English version: 9.

pospone o desplaza el momento de la revelación.”³⁵ The hidden realm described by Hewitt determines that silence operates both to hide and to reveal. In fact, Valentin’s depreciating remarks are met with the end of Molina’s description. If we take Molina’s narrative as an instance of escapism, enabling both men’s imaginations to wander outside the cell, then it is no wonder Molina’s silence forces Valentin to readdress his statement and immediately revise his distaste: “Si yo no estoy leyendo y me quedo callado es porque estoy pensando. Pero no me vayas a interpretar mal.”³⁶ [If I’m not busy reading and I’m still keeping quiet, it’s just because I’m thinking. So don’t take it personally]. The “no me vayas a interpretar mal” directly responds to Molina’s silence, one beckoning Valentin to *correct* the rashness of his first comment and react in a more empathetic manner while still maintaining, kindly, that he did not wish to be bothered. Valentin not only gains awareness that Molina’s feelings were hurt, he starts to feel bad upon realization that his cellmate’s silence was provoked by his deriding comment. In other words, Valentin *reads* Molina’s bodily demeanor, and subsequently *changes* his reaction based on that reading. In fact, the following scene opens with Valentin’s voice reminding Molina where the melodrama stopped the previous night: “Habíamos quedado que el entró a la pajarería y los pájaros no se asustaron de él. Que era de ella que tenían miedo”³⁷ [We left off where he went back into the pet shop and the birds weren’t scared of him. It was her they were scared of] to which Molina responds with: “Yo no te dije esos, sos vos que lo pensaste”³⁸ [I didn’t say that, you thought that up yourself]. The fact that Valentin’s voice not only begins the next scene, silencing Molina, but also attempts to revise Molina’s previous narration demonstrates that Valentin’s imagination has been penetrated by Molina’s storytelling so much so that the former begins narrating on his own terms.

The melodramatic context and retelling of *Cat People* transforms and shapes Valentin’s desires and his subsequent acceptance of melodramatic mass culture texts as compelling alternatives to his own political readings and beliefs. The “B” films are uncomplicated texts that, in appealing to a mass audience through their delineation of extreme human actions and emotions, use melodrama as a means of fulfilling “the classical function of catharsis by articulating-furnishing a set of images for- emotions that otherwise might have remained repressed.”³⁹ The confrontation between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in the novel demarcates the line between melodrama and the sentimental arts on the one hand, and intellectual, political philosophies grounded in “reality” on the other:

³⁵ Julia Cuervo Hewitt, “El Texto Ausente En ‘El Beso de La Mujer Araña’ de Manuel Puig: Silencios y Reticencias de Una Época,” *Chasqui: Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana* 19, no. 2 (November 1, 1990): 54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/29740273>. Translation: Silence, in Puig’s novel, signals that the world, the signified, has been falsified by a rhetoric behind which hide other signifieds and which, instead of revealing, postpones or displaces the moment of revelation.

³⁶ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 15. English versión: 9.

³⁷ Puig, 15.

³⁸ Puig, 15.

³⁹ Stephanie Merrim, “Through the Film Darkly: Grade ‘B’ Movies and Dreamwork in ‘Tres Tristes Tigres’ and ‘El Beso de La Mujer Araña,’” *Modern Language Studies* 15, no. 4 (October 1, 1985): 300–301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3194672>.

Kiss of the Spider Woman establishes the confrontation between ‘high’ culture and the culture of sentiment as set forth in an explicit and polemical way through the confrontation of the two protagonists. Valentin Arregui Paz is effectively a good representative of the culture of the upper bourgeoisie due to this social origin and his advanced education. He is the typical intellectual of the Left, who is only interested in ‘serious things’ - that is, politics- and he disdains, in very good conscience, the popular culture of the sentimental song, Hollywood movies, and women’s magazines. He disdains them because he considers that all these things are the macanas (nonsense) of women. Molina, on the other hand, given his dual condition as a lower-middle-class manual laborer and as a homosexual of feminine sensibilities, specifically represents the culture of the petite bourgeoisie: the housewife with artistic inclinations and sensibilities, an avid radio listener and romance-magazine and movie buff.”⁴⁰

The novel dramatically distinguishes between art and politics, furnishing images of sexuality, politics, men, women, and sex which, when repositioned inside the cell shared between Molina and Valentin, generate new meanings. Valentin’s “pervasive masculine urge to read, interpret, control” is unmade by his new desire to enter into the melodramatic space of Molina’s narration where catharsis becomes possible. Valentin’s political agenda is not abandoned here, but his desire for the sentimental art world enables him to rethink his own political identity.⁴¹ The *macanas* of popular culture that Valentin attempts to steer clear from begin stimulating him. In one revelatory moment he curiously asks Molina what a particular hairpiece is (“¿Que es banana?” [What’s a sausage roll?]),⁴² a question signaling his craving for more description as the novel progresses, even if that description positions him inside the “nonsensical” world of women’s hairpieces. His budding interest in the world of minute narrative description demonstrates the initial change in Valentin’s desire for excess. This desire for excess becomes an alternative discourse where personal catharsis is no longer repressed by political belief. The intersection of politics, desire, and personal catharsis fractures the world of reason, and empathy, as rounded upon one’s emotional response to the other, becomes a possible alternative.

Valentin’s constant interruptions rein Molina’s melodramatic narration in by unsettling the moments of narrative excess; these interruptions subsequently hold Irena’s sexuality in check, seeking to redefine her cursed sexuality as prudish rather than excessively dangerous. “Bueno,” Valentin interrupts, “yo creo que ella es frígida, que tiene miedo al hombre, o tiene una idea del sexo muy violenta, y por eso inventa cosas.”⁴³ [Well, I think she’s frigid, she’s afraid of men, either that or she has some idea about sex that’s really violent, and so she invents things]. As Valentin continues to mock Irena’s sexuality, Molina’s frustration grows and he responds by restraining the excess, putting an end to his narration, silencing it completely. As soon as the narration of *Cat People* ceases, Valentin stops laughing, composing himself long enough to demand that Molina continue with the story. As Molina continues, Valentin interrupts once more

⁴⁰ Milagros Ezquerro and David Draper Clark, “The Culture of Sentiment,” *World Literature Today* 65, no. 4 (October 1, 1991): 649, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40147607>.

⁴¹ Shari A. Zimmerman, “‘Kiss of the Spider Woman’ and the Web of Gender,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 23, no. 1/2 (November 1, 1988): 109, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1316690>.

⁴² Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 16.

⁴³ Puig, 21.; English, 15.

to ask how “he” pictures Irena’s husband’s mother. A fight quickly erupts between the two and Molina, for the first time, makes the reader aware that the space they share is a prison cell: “Mira, tengo sueño, y me da rabia que te salgas con esos porque hasta que saliste con eso yo me sentía fenómeno, me había olvidado de esta mugre de celda, de todo, contándote la película....¿por qué cortarme la ilusión, a mí, y a vos también?”⁴⁴ [Look, I’m tired. And it makes me angry the way you brought all this up, because until you brought it up I was feeling fabulous, I’d forgotten all about this filthy cell, and all the rest, just telling you about this film....why break the illusion for me, and for yourself too]? The prison setting is made visible to the reader at the exact moment that Valentin attempts to take control of the narrative through his commentary on Irena’s sexual nature and his constant interrupting and silencing. Molina’s (and our own) illusion is broken as soon as Valentin intrudes inside the melodramatic vision and begins transforming it. The novel figuratively manifests the break of the melodramatic illusion by erecting the prison walls around the two prisoners. Moreover, Molina continues breaking the illusion of the melodrama and by detailing another moment of sexual excess, this time “his” own: “bueno, te conté que estoy acá por corrupción de menores, con eso te dije todo, no la vayas de psicólogo ahora.”⁴⁵ [Well I told you what I’m in for, corruption of minors, and that tells it all so don’t start playing the psychologist now]. The lines between reality and fiction blur as Molina’s actual sexual crime is set against the Irena’s potential sexual curse. As the law and punishment enter into the narrative, the melodramatic edifice set up by Molina up until this point loses its foothold. Furthermore, Molina is named by Valentin for the first time after this blurring of reality and fiction occurs, further breaking the illusion to elaborate the reality inside the cell: “Nada, contame, dale Molina.”⁴⁶ [Nothing, tell it to me, go ahead, Molina]. “His” name first appears in relation to the act of narration, to speech itself. The fact that Valentin names Molina further represents the constant struggle for narrative power in the first two chapters, indicating that both must willingly allow the other discursive power before their empathetic relationship can flourish.

Melodramatic Embroidering: Gender, Identification and the Rise of the Emotional Body

Through “his” narration of *Cat People*, Molina recalls how ambiguity marks all forms of narrative: “No, yo no invento, te lo juro, pero hay cosas que para redondeártelas, que las veas como las estoy viendo yo, bueno, de algún modo te las tengo que explicar.”⁴⁷ [No, I’m not inventing, I swear, but some things, to round them out for you, so you can see them the way I’m seeing them....well, to some extent I have to embroider a little]. In pointing out that “his” own discourse is one based on embroidering, a conscious act of narrative telling which seeks to eliminate the difference between the two prisoners’ way of seeing the world, Molina admits to consciously weaving a world of multiplicity. Francine Masiello suggests that this ambiguity and weaving of multiplicity in Molina’s descriptions helps him position “dual interpretations of any given image,” and that “metaphor and simile sustain this approximation, but remind us that, far

⁴⁴ Puig, 23.; English, 17.

⁴⁵ Puig, 23.

⁴⁶ Puig, 24. English, 18.

⁴⁷ Puig, 25. English, 18.

from a single ‘truth,’ multiplicity abounds in all readings.”⁴⁸ In each of Molina’s narrative moments the reader witnesses how the multiplicity of truths begin deconstructing Valentin’s one-dimensional structured version of political history and individual identity. In other words, identity is manipulated through Molina’s embroidering, as “he” suggests that transformation of identity, even the most politically concrete identities, can occur inside the melodramatic narrative genre. In positioning a discussion of identity politics inside Molina’s melodramatic retelling of film plots, a new space is furnished for the alternative identities to develop in moments of national turmoil and distress.

Narrative description is marked by emotional, linguistic excess, set against Valentin’s well-reasoned political readings and beliefs. However, the cell world relies on the excesses provided by Molina’s melodramatic description to transform the brutal political climate entrapping them. *Cat People* outlines two excesses that Valentin himself struggles with as a political activist: desire and empathy. It does so by positioning Irena’s desire as dangerous and life threatening. Her sexuality is cursed as she is fated to turn into panther woman right after she kisses a man, most likely killing him in the process. In connecting her sexuality to an animalistic transformation, an excess of uncontrollable sexual desire emerges, and this uncontrolled excess of sexuality has damaging consequences as it erupts. Along a similar vein, Valentin’s desire for Marta, his true love, must be forsaken so as not to clash with his political identity. Valentin’s ability to empathize with the other is also curtailed, especially as he gains access to Molina’s sexuality, one he mocks at the novel’s onset. Consequently, Valentin’s ability to empathize is deeply connected to a freeing of his own sexual desires on one hand, and to his willingness to enter into the world of excessive description, on the other.

The metaphor of excess inside the novel manifests on a material level through the footnotes, a discussion that will occur later in this chapter. However, no footnotes occur in the first two chapters, leaving the entire narration of *Cat People* uninterrupted. Why is *Cat People* allowed free rein? Why do the footnotes appear only in Chapter Three, right after *Cat People* has been narrated in its entirety? *Cat People* is the only film that remains within the cell completely, unadulterated by outside sources narrating the psychoanalytic history of homosexuality. If the footnotes draw our attention away from the cell, the narration of *Cat People* demands that our attention be maintained entirely within the cell. The only interruptions within the first two chapters occur when Molina forgets, when he goes to sleep or, most importantly, when he is interrupted by Valentin. What *Cat People* enables, and perhaps this is why the novel begins with its narration, is a vision of a prison cell furnished by the rise of empathy as Valentin begins learning how to understand Molina’s melodramatic telling of the film. This subsequently promotes the transformation of his identity as a heterosexual leftist militant bent on controlling his desires and limiting any and all moments of excess. As he begins abandoning the model of political and sexual identity he unquestionably follows, a new identity is shaped.

Molina reveals to Valentin that “he” identifies with Irena at the end of the first chapter, a revelation followed by Molina’s naming of Valentin: “¿Y vos Valentín, con quien?”⁴⁹ [And you, Valentin, with who?] Whereas Molina’s naming by Valentin was directly associated with Valentin’s desire to hear more and Molina’s power as a narrating presence, Valentin’s name is associated with second-hand identification, permitted to him only through Molina’s “embroidering.” Molina does not assign any control over to Valentin. In fact, when Valentin

⁴⁸ Masiello, *The Art of Transition*, 86.

⁴⁹ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 31. English, 25.

attempts to reimagine, or embroider, on his own terms, asking Molina “si vos también pones de tu cosecha, ¿por qué no yo?”⁵⁰ [If you embroider why can't I too] Molina ignores the question, continuing on with *Cat People*'s narration. If we take embroidering to mean the desire to get others to see as you see, as Molina suggests, then it seems quite significant that Molina is allotted with that power while Valentin is denied that power. “Embroidering” can also be defined as a type of narration grounded in the kind of empathy promoted by the melodramatic medium. Within this medium, empathy becomes a process of identification, a “feeling with” or “thinking with” another, a phenomenon Molina exploits.⁵¹ Since the process of identifying with a character relies on empathy, it is quite significant that Valentin interrupts Molina in order to ask him who he identifies with and not the other way around. Unlike in previous chapters of this project, where identification is deconstructed and removed from narrative empathy, Puig's first step in constructing narrative empathy occurs through identification. *Cat People*'s melodramatic mode has signaled an initial change in Valentin: he begins thinking that the process of identification is a legitimate avenue for self-exploration. In a recent study on Spanish American Bildungsroman, Julia Kushigian discusses the relationship between Molina and Valentin as demonstrating the process necessary in overcoming sexual and political prejudices: “The relationship is based on an innate trusting of the other, rather than on spontaneous and revelatory conversation. The novel assumes, significantly, the exposing of prejudices and stereotypes to the point that a reversal of roles or a politicization through revolution of the homosexual figure and the feminization of the revolutionary figure takes place.”⁵² Rather than “the feminization” of the Valentin and the “politicization” of Molina, the novel seeks to promote empathy- the ability for both individuals, as different as day and night, to identify with one another much like they do with the characters in the movies related by Molina.

During the narration of *Cat People*, sexual identity is readdressed, and excess becomes a productive means of reconceptualizing national identity. Irena's sexuality is excessive in that, when let loose, she transforms into a murderous animal. However, in sidestepping her heterosexual nature (she turns into a panther only if she enters into a heterosexual relationship, kissing a man, assumedly), she will assumedly live on as a human. The novel thus explores, through this first film, how traditional female behavior (marriage, sex) is not always what is best for society at large. Molina's self-definition as a woman, which occurs in Chapter One as he exclaims that “las mujeres son lo mejor que hay....yo quiero ser mujer” [a woman's the best there is... I want to be one] only to be interrupted by Valentin's lack of understanding, marks the beginning of both their transformations, one that the reader witnesses throughout the course of the novel.⁵³ Critics have argued the novel is “also an exploration of traditional female behavior, defamiliarized and exaggerated in the feminized voice of the biologically male Molina.”⁵⁴ *Cat*

⁵⁰ Puig, 29. English, 23.

⁵¹ Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, eds., *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*, Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature 31 (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

⁵² Julia Alexis Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood: Strategies of Reading for Culture and Gender in the Spanish American Bildungsroman*, The Bucknell Studies in Latin American Literature and Theory (Lewisburg [Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2003), 187.

⁵³ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 25. English, 19.

⁵⁴ Zimmerman, “‘Kiss of the Spider Woman’ and the Web of Gender,” 106.

People defamiliarizes the normative structure of a heterosexual relationship by having the woman's sexuality be linked to a curse, making room for Molina's self-acclaimed femininity to flourish in this alternative space where heterosexual normativity is dangerous and life threatening.

In a groundbreaking work on the cultural emergence of melodrama as a genre, Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou posit that "the capacity of melodrama to simultaneously incorporate the discourse of imperialism, nationalism, and class and gender conflict points not only to the genre's structural malleability but to the role it played in approaching and 'resolving' the historical complexities that lie behind its interesting horizons."⁵⁵ If we take 1974 Argentina, the setting of Puig's novel, as time in need of "resolving" particular historical complexities, we begin witnessing how the nation's control of gender discourse served to eradicate difference, thus limiting what qualified as "the right kind" of national identity or "the right kind" of citizen. In her book on gender and nation during Argentina's Dirty War, Diana Taylor remarks that the period right before the war was marked by an intense desire to eradicate "excess" (i.e. the political excess of the guerilla movements, the gendered excess of the gay movement also taking place in the early 1970's). "No matter how much patriarchy's defenders might try to fix 'woman' as a controllable category," Taylor writes, "they were threatened by the various ways that women and gay men performed gender in unpredictable ways."⁵⁶ "The perception of women as enemies of the state," she goes on to say, "was one of the cornerstones of the junta's national security doctrine of 1976," a stern assessment of the Dirty War's process of "unfeminizing" the nation, made especially vivid as the military coup finalized on March 24, 1976 by removing Isabel Perón, the first female Argentine president, out of the Casa Rosada.⁵⁷ Historians are just now beginning to understand the link between "youth, sexual deviancy and subversion" circulating across Argentina during the mid-1970's, which led the Argentine army to create an image of "the enemy within Argentina" similar to "developments worldwide during the Cold War" which also circulated inside the United States as "fears of 'deviant sexuality' [led] to a politics of containment of both political and sexual liberation."⁵⁸ What *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* showcases through its attention to both Irena's and Molina's sexual identity in the first two chapters, and throughout the novel as Valentin's "deviant" *machismo* gains representation, is the promotion of "deviant" sexuality as a plausible alternative to the dangerous (in the case of Irena) normative sexualities which imprison the body and, in effect, can endanger the lives of others.

Unlike the beginning of Chapter One, starting in medias res with one dominating voice obscuring the time and place of narration, the second chapter begins with a conversation between Molina and Valentin; a conversation about food. The scene opens on the two men sharing a meal together, a domestic moment deconstructing the traditional familial dinner scene. Valentin begins discussing his political views with Molina, positioning those views against Molina's

⁵⁵ Michael Hays and Anastasia Nikolopoulou, eds., *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), Introduction, X.

⁵⁶ Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 39–40.

⁵⁷ Taylor discusses this image in chapter 3 of her book (above) feature in *La razon*, a daily newspaper which printed a photograph of the military helicopter taking Isabel Peron out of the Casa Rosada.

⁵⁸ Valeria Manzano, "Sex, Gender and the Making of the 'Enemy Within' in Cold War Argentina," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 47, no. 01 (February 2015): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X14000686>.

melodramatic imagination: “No, no te lo podes imaginar... Bueno, todo me lo aguanto... por qué hay una planificación. Está lo importante, que es la revolución social, y lo secundario que son los placeres de los sentidos”⁵⁹ [No, you can’t imagine... Anyway, I put up with all of it... because there’s a purpose behind it. Social revolution, that’s what’s important, and gratifying the senses is only secondary]. His attack on sentimentalism is combatted by Molina’s belief that “pero si todos los hombres fueron como mujeres no habría torturadores,”⁶⁰ [But if men acted like women there wouldn’t be any more torturers] a statement breaking the illusion once more by repositioning the reader inside the world of prison-torture. In connecting the world of sentimentalism to the world of women and the world of political action to the world of men, this scene at first follows the gendered guidelines underlining Argentine society at the time. However, Valentin does not abandon melodramatic sentimentalism completely; he merely positions it in second-place after political struggle. He even agrees with Molina that if men acted more like women there probably *would not* be any more torturers: “Molina... pero vos decís que si todos fueran como mujeres no habría torturadores. Ahí tenés un planteo siquiera, irreal pero planteo al fin.”⁶¹ [Molina... but you did say if they all acted like women then there wouldn’t be any torturers. You’ve got a point there, a flimsy one, but still, it’s a point]. In accepting the possibility that torture is incompatible with this particular female sensibility, Valentin stages a debate between politics and the cultivation of sense gratification or desire. In other words, a line is drawn between politics, men, and torture on one hand, and sentiment, desire, women, and the lack of torture on the other. Valentin’s sensibility continues to flourish as he asks Molina not to “punish” him (“no me castigues”) with his remarks. This discussion of punishment and torture with respect to masculine world of politics and the feminine world of the senses reveals that Valentin’s defense against the sensibilities of women is one that he begins to adopt right after the discussion of torture. The mention of torture as a phenomenon existing solely in man’s political world, reveals, to Valentin, the future torture-less possibility of the excessively “sensitive” woman’s world he previously shunned. Many critics have discussed the novel as a demonstration of the social constructedness of gender, and this scene effectively portrays just how easily socially constructed gender patterns and ideals are traversed inside the prison walls as the melodramatic narrative promoting identification with the other buzzes in the background.

During Molina’s narration of *Cat People*, Valentin’s empathy surfaces more concretely as he directly identifies with the female assistant (stalked by Irena), by connecting her with his own “girl.” This is the first time we get any emotional response from Valentin and the first time we peek into his own personal world outside the cell, gaining identity beyond his prisoner-status. Molina’s embroidered melodramatic narration of *Cat People* allows for Valentin’s moment of identification to arise as he a character inside the film to a real person from his own life. The association enables him to reveal personal information to Molina while also unveiling his emotions and fears, gratifying his senses for the first time; a gratification he, until recently, positioned as second behind the social revolution. Peter Brooks posits that “melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional

⁵⁹ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 33. English, 27-28.

⁶⁰ Puig, 29. English, 35.

⁶¹ Puig, 29. English, 29.

patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue.”⁶² Melodrama draws attention to the need for change in these traditional orders of morality. Through Molina’s narration of *Cat People*, Valentin begins to unconsciously witness his society’s repressive moral structure, which subsequently leads him to develop a close sentimental (and later political) partnership with an individual he would never otherwise accept. Soon after Valentin discusses his “girl” with Molina, he is renamed by Molina as “niña Valentina,” a label Valentin rebukes: “Y no me llames Valentina, que no soy mujer” [Don’t call me Valentina, I’m no woman], to which Molina replies, “a mi no me consta” [How can I tell?].⁶³ This particular exchange, occurring right after Valentin’s cathartic exposure, reveals how Molina pushes the boundaries of “his” own melodrama onto the real world of the cell by feminizing Valentin, renaming him “woman” in an attempt to strip him of his masculinity. Valentin’s stern yet seemingly calm response, “no soy mujer,” holds Molina’s power to “embroider” inside the cell-world in check. Yet the question remains: why doesn’t Valentin define himself as a man? Why, in other words, is the statement “no soy mujer” not “soy hombre”?

Through the melodramatic narration of *Cat People*, which positioned normative sexuality as dangerous to society, Valentin’s masculinity undergoes a subtle change: he does not identify as a man or as a woman. “De película en película,” writes Roberto Echavarren, “la subjetividad de los personajes va siendo modulada según un conjunto abierto de permutaciones que enriquecen continuamente las posibilidades de interpretación de su circunstancia concreta.”⁶⁴ *Cat People* sets up an initial space for these permutations to take place, as we witness Valentin’s masculinity transform before our eyes. When Molina finally finishes narrating the movie, Valentin responds with: “que me da lástima porque me encariñé con los personajes. Y ahora se terminó y es como si estuvieran muertos” [I’m sorry because I’ve become attached to the characters. And now it’s all over, and it’s just like they died].⁶⁵ This moment of identification becomes a profound moment of empathy, one produced through Molina’s initial choice of film-narration, a choice that strategically dealt with a woman on the verge of losing her human sensibility. *Valentin finds his sensibility as Irena loses hers.*

The strong emotional response produced by the movie not only enables Valentin to reveal personal information to Molina about his own life, he also begins moving inward, to his own body, comparing affective emotions to bodily digestion:

“-Al final Valentín, vos también tenés tu corazoncito. Por algún lado tiene que salir...la debilidad, quiero decir.
 -No es debilidad, che.
 -Es curioso que uno no puede estar sin encariñarse con algo...Es...como si la mente segregara sentimiento, sin parar...
 -¿Vos crees?

⁶² Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 20.

⁶³ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 43–44. English, 38.

⁶⁴ Roberto Echavarren, *Manuel Puig, Montaje y Alteridad Del Sujeto*, 1a ed, Monografías Del Maitén 4 (Santiago, Chile: Instituto Profesional del Pacífico, 1986), 82. “From movie to movie, the character’s subjectivity undergoes transformation through an open subset of permutations that continuously enrich the possibilities of interpretation.”

⁶⁵ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 47. English, 41.

-...lo mismo que el estómago segrega jugo para digerir.
 -¿Te parece?
 -Si, como una canilla mal cerrada. Y esas gotas van cayendo sobre cualquier cosa, no se las puede atajar.
 -¿Por qué?
 -Qué se yo...porque están rebalsando ya el vaso que las contiene.”⁶⁶

[-I’m sorry because I’ve become attached to the characters. And now, it’s all over, and it’s just like they died.
 -So, Valentin, you too have a little bit of a heart.
 -It has to come out of some place...weakness, I mean.
 -It’s not weakness, listen.
 -Funny how you can’t get along without becoming attached to something...It’s...as if the mind had to secrete affection without stopping...
 -You think so?
 -...same way your stomach secretes juices for digestion.
 -You really think so?
 -Sure, like a leaky faucet. And those drops continue dripping on anything, they can’t be turned off.]

Valentine’s empathetic identification is deeply intertwined with the body; empathy, therefore, works through the body. Valentin’s emotions, his “weakness” as he calls them, are activated by Molina’s melodramatic narrative, leaving Valentin to mourn the loss of the characters as his cellmate finishes narrating the film. In associating his emotional response and attachment to a concrete bodily process such as digestion, he overlaps the mind and body divide, emphasizing that emotional response and empathetic attachments, are in fact innate, unstoppable, and unavoidable. Affective, empathetic identification, like the juices secreted for digestion, is a necessary component for making sure the body functions as it should; turning this identification off would mean a literal shutting down of the body.

Melodrama and the world of excess it produces build Valentin’s empathetic response by triggering his emotional response to character, activating his ability to identify with the other. Valentin’s subsequent conception of affection as a necessary bodily process which keeps the body functioning further illustrates the extent to which Molina’s narration has brought Valentin closer into the world of reading and identification. He is so close in fact that the proper functioning of his body depends on the empathetic response. Yet the empathetic response is, according to Valentin, emotional excess, much like the secretions of bodily excesses during digestion. Excess, therefore, is necessary for the proper functioning of the body and empathy, and it is through Molina’s excessive melodramatic narration that empathy can flourish by promoting identification with the other. This is quite the lesson to learn as both men, society’s “dead,” are locked up together in a prison world which they begin converting into an affective utopia where sexual boundaries and norms are trespassed through their empathetic awakening.

Postmodern Excess and the Body: Abjection, Footnotes and Sex

⁶⁶ Puig, 47.

Abject Sensibility: Catharsis, Empathy and the Body

El Beso de la Mujer Araña details several scenes of abjection. Although these scenes primarily focus on Valentin, the experience of abjection greatly affects both men. What these scenes reveal is that the experience of abjection and the formation of the abject body are both necessary for promotion of empathy between the two prisoners. A new empathetic sensibility emerges as the bodies of Molina and Valentin undergo what Julia Kristeva would deem a loss of distinction between object and subject.⁶⁷ This loss of distinction transforms the you/other divide into one that is less concrete, enabling identification between Molina and Valentin for the first time in the novel. Abjection cultivates empathy, promoting the deconstruction of masculine identity inside the novel while also giving rise to cathartic speech-acts, which effectively break Valentin's commitment to silence (his "no decir" policy). Similar to the footnotes that stretch the text beyond Molina's narrations, these scenes of abjection enable the physical body to be stretched beyond its borders. The use of the abject corporeality enables us to see the human body as an unadorned, simple, and bare entity. This body eats, sleeps, relieves itself, and these actions foster a visibility that focus on a new kind of physicality; one untethered to aesthetic or gendered descriptions of character. This vision of bareness fosters basic identification with the other as it represents the body's vulnerability (a body as something which eats, sleeps and produces waste). Since the abject body is the basic unit of humanity we all share (regardless of our class, race, culture, and gender) the possibility of distinguishing between Valentin's biological body and his political body is no longer evident after his entry into the world of abjection. Giorgio Agamben believes that this distinction, in the post-camp world, is impossible.⁶⁸ What emerges out of the state of exception (i.e. the prison world) is a world of abjection where a new subjectivity is born. This new subject abandons masculinity, femininity, political ideology, and all other societal structures superimposed upon its body by the nation, in order to develop a new subjectivity altogether. The subjectivity developed by this newly constructed subject is one founded on acts of human kindness, where two strikingly different individuals learn to care and nurture one another at the sacrifice of their own comfort. The novel, in other words, suggests that abjection is the birthplace for empathy.

"Me muero de hambre" [I'm dying of hunger], a frustrated Valentin tells Molina as they wait for prison food. Valentin, who has just told Molina he is dying of hunger, nevertheless gives Molina the bigger plate because he knows Molina likes rice. This is a most unusual moment of food-sacrifice coming from the man who has just recently admitted, in complete frustration, that he is beyond hungry. This act of kindness goes unnoticed by most critics, particularly due to the fact that soon after this moment, Molina gets violently ill; having sacrificed "his" body by eating the prison food "he" knew would poison "him" in order prevent suspicion from "his" bunk mate.⁶⁹ Valentin's anger builds at the sight of Molina's powerlessness, even as Molina begs Valentin to tell him something about the book he is reading to take his mind off his bodily discomfort, giving Valentin narrative-rein:

⁶⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1–5.

⁶⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 127–35.

⁶⁹ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 93. English, 83.

“-Contame qué estás leyendo.
 -¿Cómo te voy a contar?, es filosofía, un libro sobre el poder político.
 -Pero algo dirá, ¿no?
 -Dice que el hombre honesto no puede abordar el poder político, porque su concepto de la responsabilidad se lo impide.
 -Y tiene razón, porque todos los políticos son unos ladrones.
 -Para mis es todo lo contrario, quien no actúa políticamente es porque tiene un falso concepto de la responsabilidad. Ante todo mi responsabilidad es que no siga muriendo gente de hambre, y por eso voy a luchar.
 -Carne de cañón. Eso es lo que sos.
 -Si no entendés nada cállate la boca.
 -No te gusta que te digan la verdad...
 -¡Que ignorante! Si no sabés no hables.
 -Por algo te da tanta rabia...
 -¡Basta! Dejame leer.
 -Está bien. Algún día que vos estés mal yo te voy a hacer lo mismo.”⁷⁰

[-Tell me something about what you are reading.
 -What can I tell you? It's philosophy, a book concerning political power.
 -But it must say something, doesn't it?
 -It says that honest men cannot deal with political power, because their concept of responsibility prevents them.
 -And that's true, because politicians are all a bunch of crooks.
 -To me it's just the opposite. Only a flawed conception of responsibility makes one stay away from political involvement. Rather, my responsibility is precisely to stop people from dying of hunger, and that's why I go on with the struggle...
 -Cannon fodder, that's what you are.
 -If you can't understand than shut your mouth...
 -You don't like my saying truth...
 -What an ignoramus! When you know nothing, then say nothing.
 -It's no accident you're so angry....
 -Enough! I'm reading!
 -You'll see. One of these days you'll be the sick one and I'll get even.]

The previous dialogue demonstrates Valentin's inability of furnishing a cell-utopia through narration, while also providing a context for Valentin's act of kindness in Chapter Four (giving Molina the larger plate of food). In stating that his responsibility is to prevent others from going hungry, we reread his act of kindness as an act of political struggle. At first this appears to undermine the novel's empathetic potential and Valentine's emotional transformation, however, in equating acts of kindness with acts of political struggle, the novel proposes that kindness and empathy gain political traction and can effect significant political change if employed within the national space.

Masculinity, for Molina, is tied to the lack of shame; to be a man, in other words, is incompatible with the feeling of shame arising with the image of bodily excess and abjection

⁷⁰ Puig, 108. English. 104.

experienced by Valentin. The next morning opens on a completely different scene: a now sick Valentin tells Molina about seconal, a drug offered in the infirmary which he believes prisoners get “hooked” on in order to be broken by the interrogators. This scene demonstrates how bodily and emotional closeness between the two prisoners is fostered through bodily abjection. Valentin becomes a borderline subject, losing the distinction, as Kristeva notes, between object and subject as he distressingly witnesses the evacuation of his bowels. Valentin tells Molina he feels embarrassed and ashamed while Molina urges him to ‘be a man’: “No decías vos que hay que ser hombre...¿que ese so de tener vergüenza...” [Weren’t you the one who said you have to be a man?...So what’s this business of being embarrassed?].⁷¹ Molina revises the definition of masculinity as something that incorporates shame and abjection, allowing bodily excess and the abject to be subtly repositioned inside the definition at the very instant that Valentin’s weakened state forces him to rely on his cellmate’s aid. Kristeva reminds us that the abject “has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.”⁷² The abject, in other words, is the other; the other you yourself give birth to and create. Furthermore, the abject forges a loss of distinction between the object and subject, “excrements and its equivalents stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.”⁷³ What is threatened in this scene is Valentin’s belief that masculinity is tied to the lack of shame. His own excrement, in other words, forces him to come to terms with, accept, and seek the help of an alternative identity, Molina’s, something he was unwilling to do at the end of Chapter Five. Nevertheless, that alternative identity also encompasses Valentin’s own identity, one his experience with abjection finally reveals. This revelation suggests that Molina represents the outside, the other who is “opposed to I”, and now becomes part of Valentin. It is at this moment of bodily weakness where Valentin’s masculinity shifts, identification with the other occurs, and empathy arises.

Valentin’s dream sequence is made available to the reader for the first time right after this moment of abjection occurs. The reader’s entry into Valentin’s subconscious supports Kristeva’s belief that in approaching abjection we are likewise approaching the unconscious mind. Borderline subjects, she states, are subjects who, in experiencing abjection, “make the conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant” and their speech is marked by a “sublimating discourse (‘aesthetic’ or ‘mystical’) rather than a scientific or rationalist one.”⁷⁴ It is no wonder that soon after this scene we are taken inside Valentin’s dream world, a world combining elements of Molina’s narration of the South American racecar film with Marxism, a direct amalgamation of melodrama and politics. Valentin’s subconscious gains textual representation; he is, in other words, exposed completely from the inside out. His dream sequence begins by repeating the phrase “un muchacho” and ends with the repetition of a new phrase, “una muchacha.”⁷⁵ Much more description and narrative space is provided to describe the *muchacha*, forcing the reader to ask: Who is the girl and who is the fellow? Are they one and the same? Is

⁷¹ Puig, 124. English, 121.

⁷² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

⁷³ Kristeva, 71.

⁷⁴ Kristeva, 7.

⁷⁵ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 128–33. English, 124–129.

this subconscious manifestation meant to demonstrate that Valentin's brush with abjection has in fact shifted something deep within him, a shift now enabling him to view himself as both masculine and feminine? Has he, in other worlds, come to terms and identified with the "mujer adentro"?

This substantial shift in Valentin's character is portrayed further after he wakes up from his fever dream and tells Molina how much he appreciates his help:

"Yo no te he contado pero yo en vez de contarte una película te voy a contar una cosa real. Te mecanicé de lo de mi compañera. De la que te hable es otra, que yo quise mucho, de mi compañera no te dije la verdad y vos la querías, porque es una chica muy simple y muy buena y muy corajuda." [I haven't told you, but instead of my telling you a film I'm going to let you in on something real. I was putting you on about my girlfriend. The one I told you about is someone else, whom I loved very much. As for my woman, I didn't tell you the truth, and what's more you'd really like her, because she's a very simple girl and very sweet and very brave.].⁷⁶

Valentin's "mujer adentro" is a *real* woman named Marta, and this revelation of the "real," shows how Valentin's state of abjection promotes catharsis. This catharsis arises as soon as Valentin begins unburdening himself to Molina by telling his cellmate about his lost love. Before this moment, Valentin's discourse is marked by secrecy and the absence of elaboration, described as a discourse that *speaks without speaking*:

"ese discurso de un decir 'no diciendo' es uno de los recursos narrativos más importantes de *El beso de la mujer araña* de Manuel Puig. 'No hablemos más de eso,' 'no me se explicar' 'no se' responden una y otra vez los personajes de Puig; como si desde el vacío de sus omisiones, con la brevedad, la frase trunca, y las reticencias de los personajes, el narrador dejara implícito otro texto en el que se advierte el vacío en función de *significante*."⁷⁷

Valentin breaks with his "no decir" philosophy by *telling* Molina about Marta. This moment of telling represents an excess of information, a dangerous zone for a political prisoner to enter. Does Valentin share this information as a way of thanking Molina for nurturing him through his state of abjection? Does Molina's empathy convince Valentin to access the deeply hidden part storing his love for Marta? Valentin's experience as an abject body, his reduction to the bareness that is the human body in its most vulnerable state, allows him to develop a new sensibility which ironically transforms the necessary silence of the political rebel into a cathartic speech-act. Valentin's political ideology is founded on preserving the 'no decir' both as means of protest and, most importantly, a means of protection. His catharsis goes against his firmly held political ideology, which employs silence as a means of safeguarding his comrades and loved ones. However, his catharsis, an excess of emotion and sentiment, like his inability to control his

⁷⁶ Puig, 135. English, 130-131.

⁷⁷ Hewitt, "El Texto Ausente En 'El Beso de La Mujer Araña' de Manuel Puig," 51-52. "This discourse of speaking without speaking is one of the most important narrative methods in Puig's *El Beso*. 'Let's not talk about this anymore,' 'I don't know how to explain myself,' 'I don't know, are phrases that Puig's character constantly respond with; as if from the emptiness of their omissions, with the character's brevity and their reluctance, the narrator subtly provides another text inside which emptiness functions as a signifier."

bowels, enables empathy. This empathetic switch in Valentin is further represented by promise of trust exchanged between the two men at the end of Chapter Six (“Yo te tengo confianza. Vos me tenes confianza a mi, ¿verdad?”/ I trust you, you trust me, right?).⁷⁸

Abjection, however, gives rise to a formal phenomenon: the ellipsis. It is within the ellipsis that abject aesthetics develop, engulfing the novel’s form. Valentin’s speech-act is converted to silence as the second bout of discomfort and evacuation occurs. When Molina begins cleaning Valentin, the latter responds with “...”, an empty signifier. It is here that language first begins to fail and the body begins to speak in its place. Valentin’s silence occurs right as Molina begins touching him, cleaning his body from its own excess, removing abject material. This bodily contact between the two demonstrates, once again, that empathy works through the body, and it is the body that creates its own system of non-verbal signification. The corporeal body is necessary engine for empathetic production in *El Beso*. In fact, Molina’s touch provokes Valentin’s silence as they enter into close proximity with one another, a proximity transposing Valentin beyond the world of linguistic representation, a strange world to inhabit for rebel militant. Yet abjection situates empathy as a phenomenon occurring between speech and silence. Although, empathy first arises as a speech-act, nestled inside the symbolic realm, as represented by Valentin’s trust of Molina, leading to the cathartic release upon admitting his desire for Marta, it here sidesteps signification. This means that empathy is not produced through language alone; it requires both signification and the lack of signification to prosper. Furthermore, it necessitates a close proximity to another body; a level of intimate, almost maternal human contact, where one body is weakened and healed by another. Upon first experiencing the abject, language becomes a necessary engine driving catharsis forward, however, Valentin’s second experience of abjection forces him into the world of silence where he no longer reveals any information:

(1) “Vos quédate tranquilo, y si te parece que ya largaste todo, cagón que sos, decime así te limpio. [You just relax, and don’t worry. You’re usually such a pisser anyway. Tell me when you’re finished and I’ll help you clean yourself up]

-....”

(2) “-Cállate, Otra punta mojada la sabana...así... [Be quiet. Now I’ll wet some more of the sheet...like this...]

-...”⁷⁹

This refusal of language inside the scene of abjection reminds the reader that the abject is not a definable object; it exists on its own terms, in its own realm and subsequently has the power to build an alternative subject from its bounds. Valentin’s verbal impotence marks a great shift in his character. No longer does he interrupt, no longer does he criticize Molina’s sexual identity, and no longer does he overemphasize his own political identity and practice. Inside, he allows himself to be touched and does so in complete silence and submission. The state of abjection creates a sense of powerlessness in the subject that becomes essential in remapping the relationship between self and other. Valentin’s inability to speak for himself here, marked by the use of the ellipsis, demonstrates that he loses a part of his self-identity. This loss is an essential component to his ability and willingness to identify with the other. This loss is where empathy

⁷⁸ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 136. English, 131.

⁷⁹ Puig, 145. English, 141-142.

becomes possible. Nothing is revealed in this scene because the novel has trapped the reader inside a world beyond language, a post-cathartic world where previously held patterns and beliefs come to die. Valentin's entry into a world beyond language provokes his empathetic reconstruction, allowing him to identify with Molina both physically and emotionally.

Abjection forces Valentin into the world of cathartic speech-acts and into the world of silence, crossing the borders between two very different worlds: one world structures and represents the subject symbolically, through language, while the other is nestled outside language, shaped by touch and body language. These two worlds merge together even after the stabilization of Valentin's condition, as Molina begins narrating a Caribbean zombie film, marking the permanent return of the abject, this time as living corpses:

“trabajan y trabaja, sin hablar, porque [ellos] no hablan, ni piensan, aunque sí sufren, porque en medio del trabajo cuando la luna los ilumina se los ve que se les caen las lágrimas, pero no se quejan, porque los zombis no hablan, no tiene ya voluntad y lo único que pueden hacer es obedecer y sufrir.”

[...work and work, without any talk, because zombies don't say a word, or think, even though they suffer so much, because in the middle of working, when the moon shines down on them you can see the tears running down their faces, but they never complain, because zombies can't talk, they haven't any will left and the only thing they get to do is obey and suffer].⁸⁰

The zombies cannot speak nor think and lack control over their bodies, but they *can* suffer. It is through this suffering that they are brought back to life, even if their current state of abjection, as literal corpses, obfuscates their humanity. Valentin too suffers as he loses control over his own body. He too can no longer speak or disobey since his well-being depends on Molina's support, both physically (i.e. through cleansing), and emotionally (i.e. as the witness to his catharsis). The language used inside the passage is marked by melodramatic descriptions detailing a portrait of suffering and to gain reader sympathy.⁸¹ This focus on the zombie's suffering connects empathy for another's pain to ultimate abjection, proposing that abjection is a prerequisite to empathy. A now stable Valentin, having traversed his own pain and bodily suffering, stands at the border of abjection and empathy. Abjection disturbs the boundaries between self and other, allowing this border to gain political potential as gendered hierarchies and normative visions of masculinity and femininity tied to those hierarchies undergo immediate revision. First abjection strips the body to its bare-state, then, as empathy prevails, that same body is reconstructed as something unknown; a body we must learn to reconceptualize altogether.

Valentin's own status as a tortured political prisoner is brought to light soon after his experience with the world of abjection. He abandons the world of silence and returns to language writing a love letter to Marta, interrupting Molina's narration of the zombie film to directly reference his own torture. His status as an abject body provides him with the linguistic powers and tools he needs both to understand and narrate his own suffering and victimhood through the melodramatic lens Molina constructs:

⁸⁰ Puig, 173. English, 167.

⁸¹ The passage is highly reminiscent of the language used in Gertrudis de Avellaneda's nineteenth century novel *Sab*.

“adentro estoy todo llagado, y solamente vos me vas a comprender... porque vos también fuiste criada en tu casa limpia y cómoda para gozar de la vida, y yo como vos no me conformo a ser un mártir, Marta, me da rabia ser mártir, no soy un buen mártir, y este momento pienso si no me equivoqué en todo... Me torturaron, y no confesé nada... claro que me ayudaba que yo nunca supe los nombres verdaderos de mis compañeros, y les dije los nombres de batalla, porque con eso no podían avanzar nada, pero adentro mío tengo otro torturador... y desde hace días no me da tregua... Es que estoy pidiendo justicia, mirá que absurdo lo que te voy a decir, estoy pidiendo que haya una justicia, que intervenga la providencia”⁸²

[...Inside, I'm all raw, and only someone like you could really understand... because you were raised in a clean and comfortable house like me and taught to enjoy life, and I'm the same way. I can't adjust to being a martyr, it infuriates me, I don't want to be a martyr and right now I wonder If the whole thing hasn't been one terrible mistake on my part... They tortured me, but I still didn't confess anything.. I didn't even know the real names of my comrades, so I only confessed combat names, and the police can't get anywhere with that, but inside myself there seems to be another kind of torturer... and for days he hasn't let up... And it's because I seem to be asking for some kind of justice. Look how absurd what I'm about to say is: I'm asking for some kind of justice, for some providence to intervene...]

He describes his desire for narration as a bodily urge, “hasta que me duele el cuerpo de ganas... de sentirla cerca” [my whole body aches for her... to feel her close], dramatically combining erotic desire, political ideology and torture in one overlapping landscape.⁸³ Valentin's gesturing toward a new type of providential justice speaks directly to Kristeva's claim that “abjection accompanies all religious structuring and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the through the letter he attempts to purify the abject-state by envisioning a justice system which combines love with politics, a connection evoking nineteenth-century foundational fictions across Latin America, as well as images of liberation theology primarily tied to Che Guevara.⁸⁴ The “adentro” starting the passage suggests that the purification sought by Valentin is internal, moving beyond the skin-barrier. Catharsis arises through the purification of the self, a purity obtained as he narrates his letter to Marta, which, since he is too weak to hold a pen, Molina records. The orality of Valentin's letter further demonstrates the internal nature being cleansed, as he does not allow the written word to contaminate the fluidity of his oral performance. Narrative, whether oral or written, is a necessary component for the purification of the body after abjection and Valentin detaches himself from the image of the silent zombies who can merely cry, obey and suffer by narrating his own political melodrama.

As soon as Valentin is entirely cleansed (Molina gives him a sponge bath), leaving the world of abjection behind, the letter is destroyed as he tears it up, refusing to explain his behavior as a stunned Molina stares back incredulously. The fear of the prison guards finding the

⁸² Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 182. English, 177.

⁸³ Puig, 180. English, 176.

⁸⁴ Doris Sommer's work on foundational fictions emphasizes the notion that politics and eroticism were brought together by nineteenth-century nation-building narratives across the continent.

letter may have led Valentin to act in this way, but the novel makes no attempt to explain the letter's destruction. Perhaps the emotional and physical boundaries trespassed during his brush with abjection are rebuilt as soon as his outer body is cleansed thoroughly. Or perhaps he merely chose to eradicate his cathartic, artistic and creative output out of anger. We cannot know for certain. What the novel does make evident is that his experience with abjection has considerably impacted the way he envisions the world and himself:

“-Molina
-¿Uhm?
-Mirá las sombras que echa el calentador.
-Sí, yo siempre las miro, ¿vos nunca las mirás?
-No, no me había dada cuenta.
-Sí, yo me entretengo mucho mirando las sombras mientras está el calentador prendido.”⁸⁵

[-Molina...
-Mmmm?
-Look at the shadows that the stove's casting on the wall.
-Mmm, I always watch them. You never saw them before?
-No, I never noticed.
-Mmmm, it helps me pass the time, watching shadows when the stove's lit.]

Things previously left unnoticed now affect him; he slowly begins to see the world as Molina sees the world, paying more attention to the details of his surroundings, such as the aesthetic markings of his prison landscape. Shadows appear as contained objects; small bodies moving to the spectacle of light, yet they are pure illusions, disappearing as soon light ceases to project. In noticing the shadows, Valentin leaves a part of his imagination, a part of his '*adentro*' unharmed, unlike the letter that met its destruction only a few moments earlier. The intimate cleansing scene in the previous passage is merely alluded to, preventing the reader's access to signification, as Molina sets a kettle of water to boil in preparation for what we know will take place.

The Metafictional Divide: Footnotes and the Diminishing of Political Utopias

Footnotes inside *El beso de la mujer araña* provide the reader with extra information, a deliberate authorial choice made by Puig in order to explain “to the average reader, the theories, controversies, and misconceptions surrounding homosexuality to date- which grow and grow until at one point they nearly take over the whole page, at the same time pushing the (didactic) author down to the bottom of the page.” Furthermore, the use of footnotes suggests that “Manuel did have a political mission: to educate both the victims and the perpetrators of homophobia in Latin America.”⁸⁶ Alongside their didactic political mission, the footnotes also mark a type textual surplus and irony as they represent an alternative system of objective, scientific knowledge in direct opposition to the subjective, melodramatic film narrative constructed by

⁸⁵ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 185. English, 181.

⁸⁶ Suzanne Jill Levine, *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 258.

Molina. Unlike the version of melodramatic excess, centered upon emotional identification, found in the excessively emotional films Molina details, as well as the private discussions developing between the two prisoners, the footnotes mock identification by creating an ironic commentary, which quite literally gives the novel its support system, or its feet. This commentary is masked by statements of scientific “truth” and objective excess, combatting the excess of identification erupting inside the cell. As such, the footnotes ask the reader to question the relationship between empathy and objectivity: What kind of empathy is permissible and possible inside the world of science, politics and law? Is empathy possible inside Valentin’s political readings? Or is empathy possible only inside the subjective construction of narrative?

In representing an alternative technology of telling, the footnotes jolt the reader outside Molina and Valentin’s narrative subjectivity (and subsequently outside of the cell). In other words, they interrupt the reader’s narrative pleasure as a didactic narrator violently steps in, establishing a dialogue with the fictive text.⁸⁷ The footnotes enable the development of an analytical reader who navigates between two worlds: the world of narrative subjectivity and the world of scientific objectivity, at the same time. Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of “historiographic metafiction” stipulates that postmodernism remains tied to the historical and the political precisely through its paradoxical rejection of both. “The postmodern,” she writes, “then, affects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. This is another of the paradoxes that characterize all postmodern discourses today.”⁸⁸ The postmodern apparatus rises in *El beso de la mujer araña*, just as the footnotes begin taking over the page, positioning an alternative system of knowledge alongside Molina’s subjectivism, shedding light on the multiple version truths the novel seeks to unravel with respect to sexual identity. What the footnotes ultimately reveal is that subjective emotions and sentiments are directly related to the composition of sexual identity, and that the world of objective determinism determined to shape sexual identity is obsolete.

The first footnote occurs halfway into Chapter Three as Molina interrupts his own narration of the Nazi propaganda film to discuss Gabriel, the heterosexual waiter he adores. Valentin interjects in a most unusual way, pleading that Molina reveal more about his intimate, personal life: “Creo que para comprenderte necesito saber qué es lo que te pasa. Si estamos en esta celda juntos mejor es que nos comprendamos, y yo de gente de tus inclinaciones sé muy poco.”⁸⁹ [I think I have to know more about you, that’s what, in order to understand you better. If we’re going to be in this cell together like this, we ought to understand one another better, and I know very little about people with your type of inclination]. The first footnote details three

⁸⁷ Elías Miguel Muñoz, *El Discurso Utópico de La Sexualidad En Manuel Puig*, Pliegos de Ensayo 21 (Madrid: Pliegos, 1987), 71. “un dialogo con el texto ficticio. Este dialogo queda potenciado por la eventual participación de un(a) lector(a) que cuestiona, analice, rechace, acepte, recrea, piense y se descubra a si mismo/a en la utopía sexual de la novela....en el ensayo a pie de página se sugiere que la utopía es posible solo cuando el hombre haya liberado a su mujer interior [a dialogue with the fictional text. This dialogue remains empowered by the eventual participation of a reader who questions, analyzes, rejects, accepts, recreates, thinks and discovers him/herself in the sexual utopia developed inside the novel....in the footnoted essay it is suggested that the utopia is possible only when man liberates his inner female].

⁸⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 89.

⁸⁹ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 65–66. English, 59.

principal theories on the physical origins of homosexuality, interrupting the dialogue between Molina and Valentin as if responding directly to Valentin's problematic "gente de tus inclinaciones." The borders of fiction, as Lucille Kerr suggests, are called into play by the footnotes as they create an alternate discourse which merges with the dialogue between Molina and Valentin.⁹⁰ Kerr proposes that the notes develop a relationship between "'body' and 'foot'", establishing a point of contact between the subjective realm of empathetic discourse arising out of Molina's melodramatic film narratives and the objective theoretical world of science and psychology.⁹¹

If the footnotes are indeed the "feet" to the "body" of the burgeoning relationship between Molina and Valentin, this signifies that they are essential for that body's proper functioning. The footnotes, like the two prisoners, are dependent on the reality inside the cell, evolving alongside the cell's reality: "The footnotes thus foster the impression of a theoretical development that progressively accounts for more and more of the reality of the cell. This development mirrors the development of the characters that appear to expand their self-images to include characteristics they previously rejected."⁹² The footnotes are a metalanguage- a language taking another language as its object; in the novel, scientific objectivism takes empathetic melodrama as its object. Inside the footnotes an alternative world is offered, contesting the novelistic world set up for the reader in the first two chapters.⁹³ Ironically, the footnotes detail the "excessive" nature of homosexuality while being physically excessive themselves, taking over pages and pages of the novel, mimicking the moments of bodily excess that begin engulfing the novel as Molina and Valentin merge together.

The footnotes also equip the novel with irony by mimicking the bodily and empathetic excess the novel unravels. With the first footnote, as soon as Valentin demands to know more about Molina's love life, scientific objectivism interrupts, preventing the moment of closeness from fully developing. The three theories of homosexuality provided inside the first footnote deal with physical origins, relegating homosexuality to hormonal levels, endocrinal gland secretions, hermaphroditism, fertilization, and hereditary determinants. In other words, the scientific bodies appearing inside this footnote starkly contrast against the emotional body we witness as Molina begins describing Gabriel. Molina continues telling Valentin about Gabriel, and biological gender (the one discussed inside the footnote interrupting this very discussion) is refuted entirely: "Sí, perdóname, pero cuando hablo de él yo no puedo hablar como hombre, porque no

⁹⁰ Lucille Kerr, *Suspended Fictions: Reading Novels by Manuel Puig* (Urbana [Ill.]: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 219.

⁹¹ Kerr, 219.

⁹² Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America*, 92.

⁹³ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, New Accents (London ; New York: Routledge, 1984), 4, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/berkeley/Doc?id=5001577>. : "The linguist L. Hjelmslev developed the term 'metalanguage' (Hjelmslev 1961). He defined it as a language which, instead of referring to non-linguistic events, situations or objects in the world, refers to another language: it is a language which takes another language as its object. Saussure's distinction between the signifier and the signified is relevant here. The signifier is the sound-image of the word or its shape on the page; the signified is the concept evoked by the word. A metalanguage is a language that functions as a signifier to another language, and this other language thus becomes its signified." (4)

me siento hombre.”⁹⁴ [Listen, I’m sorry, but when it comes to him I can’t talk about myself like a man, because I don’t feel like one]. Hutcheon alludes to this very passage in her discussion of postmodern novels:

“Postmodern novels like Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* point to the problematic nature of these designations of speaker and listener (I/you) as revealed through the dialogue format in which one of the male characters refers to himself in the third person and as female. Molina claims: “I can’t talk about myself like a man because I don’t feel like one” (Puig 1978, 1979, 60). Benveniste articulated the consequence of this enunciative act of self-identification through language in terms of a definition of subjectivity as the ‘capacity of the speaker to posit himself as ‘subject’ (1971, 224). In other words, subjectivity is a fundamental property of language: ‘It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality.’”⁹⁵

Language, not scientific discourse, establishes the concept of the self. Therefore, the footnotes stand in stark contrast to the identity formation occurring within the cell, one based on such acts of enunciation, like Molina’s “no puedo hablar como hombre, porque no me siento hombre.” Molina does not say “porque no soy hombre” (because I am not a man) but instead “no me siento hombre” (I don’t feel like a man), thus removing gender-identity from biological definitions altogether. Feeling and sentiment are directly related to the composition of sexual identity, a phenomenon occurring inside language, enabling Molina to constitute himself as a subject outside of the problematic world of determined sexual-identity promoted by footnote’s excessive objectivism. If read through a metafictional lens, this particular scene develops a theory of novelistic reading which holds that the subjective, empathy driven world of the postmodern novel empowers subject formation, promoting a refashioning of identity, while the objective world of scientific discourse refutes this act of self-creation.

The first footnote stretches along several pages, long enough to confront a discussion about masculinity where Valentin is unable to define himself as masculine: “No sé, no lo tengo muy claro, en este momento. Me agarraste desprevenido. No encuentro las palabras adecuadas. Otro día, que tengo las ideas más claras podemos volver al tema. Contame más del mozo de restaurante.”⁹⁶ [I don’t know myself, right this minute. You’ve caught me off guard. I can’t seem to find the right words. Some other time, when my ideas are a little clearer on the subject, we can go back to it. Tell me more about your waiter at the restaurant]. Valentin’s inability to describe masculinity contrasts with Molina’s determined self-identification as a woman. It also recalls an earlier scene, in Chapter Two, where Valentin merely stated he was not a woman but refused to define himself as a man. Valentin’s relationship with masculinity as a heterosexual male is one he never questioned, one preventing him from having “ideas más claras” on the matter. Language fails him at this point. His inability to describe masculinity (in general and his own) demonstrates that, like the footnotes, Valentin’s mind is repressed by an objective version of heterosexuality, which, although excessive in its linguistic composition, acts like an empty

⁹⁴ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 69.; English, 60.

⁹⁵ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 224.

⁹⁶ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 71.; English: 63-64.

signifier. He has no concept of the self that is not founded on his own repression. An objective definition of masculinity and male sexuality controls his self-definition even as he seeks to combat his own nation's political project, which he considers outdated and in need of change. Molina, in denying the objective, biological definition of masculine/feminine, uses sexual liberation to combat another form political repression.

Interrupting the dialogue between the two men at the precise moment that Valentin's desire to know more about Molina's personal life flourishes, the footnote interferes with Valentin's first commitment to the empathy. The excess of information carried inside the footnote disturbs the body of the text at the exact moment that Valentin's empathetic desire erupts, suggesting that the footnote's excessive body arises precisely when Valentin's sentimental excess begins developing. Valentin's desire to know more about Molina's sexuality undermines the dominant tone of the footnote which merely posits a scientific, most un-empathetic, explanation for homosexuality. All of the footnotes, except one (discussed below) follow this same pattern, detailing the objective nature of sexuality as positioned against the backdrop of Molina and Valentin's subjective world, where sexuality and sexual identity undergo redefinition.

Unlike with *Cat People*, Molina's narration of the Nazi propaganda film is rushed; the film receives less textual space and far less attentive details than the former. The second footnote, appearing in Chapter Four, is the only footnote that does not deal with psychological and quasi-scientific explications of human sexuality. This footnote, instead, is a summary of the movie that Molina narrates. Additionally, as Puig reminds us in an interview, the second movie is invented by the author himself:

“La primera es una síntesis exacta de la historia de *Cat People*, de Jacques Tourneur, que en español se tradujeron como La marca de la pantera. La segunda es totalmente imaginaria, aunque su correspondiente ‘Boletín publicitario’ lo redacté en un estilo sacado de documentos nazis: pasé dos semanas en la Biblioteca Pública de Nueva York, la de la calle 42, leyendo literatura de propaganda nazi. Así es como, por ejemplo, las ‘citas’ de parlamentos adjudicados al Führer y a Goebles son reales. La tercera está tomada tal cual de la película de John Cromwell que en español se dio con el título de Milagro de amor. La cuarta, la de los guerrilleros, es totalmente inventada. La quinta tiene elementos- pero también importantes variaciones, -de *I walk with a Zombie*, también de Jacques Tourneur. La última, como podrá apreciarlo el lector medianamente aficionado al cine, es una especie de denominador común del cine mexicano de los años 40. Las tres no inventadas son películas de mi infancia, de ese periodo en que yo era infatigable espectador de cine...”⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Manuel Puig and Julia Romero, *Puig Por Puig: Imágenes de Un Escritor* (Madrid : Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana ; Vervuert, 2006), 142. “The first (film) is an exact synthesis of *Cat People*, by Jacques Tourneur, translated into *The Mark of the Panther* woman in Spanish. The second is completely imaginary, although it does correspond with a daily brief that I encountered and drew up from Nazi documents when I spent two weeks at the New York public library reading Nazi propaganda literature. This is how, for example, the direct quotations of the Führer and Goebles are in fact real. The third was directly from John Cromwell's movie, which was titled the *Miracle of Love* in Spanish. The fourth, the one about the guerrilla fighters, was completely invented. The fifth has certain elements- but also certain differing variations- from *I walk with a zombie*, also by Jacques Tourneur. The last, as any reader who is mildly aware of cinema who appreciate, is a kind of common denominator in Mexican

The Nazi propaganda film, in other words, is a combination of two realities: narrative invention and historical truth (as held by the historical archive). In the middle of this film telling, a conversation erupts between the two men, highlighting the two opposing realities they inhabit: “Puede ser un vicio escaparse así de la realidad, es como una droga. Porque escúchame, tu realidad, *tu realidad*, no es solamente esta celda. Si estás leyendo algo, estudiando algo, ya trascendés la celda, ¿me entendés? Yo por eso leo y estudio todo el día.”⁹⁸ [It can become a vice, always trying to escape from reality like that it’s like taking drugs or something. Because, listen to me, reality, I mean *your reality*, isn’t restricted by this cell we live in. If you read something if you study, you transcend any cell you’re inside of, do you understand what I’m saying? That’s why I read and why I study every day]. Scholars define metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”⁹⁹ Furthermore, the metafictional text, in exposing the system of narrative construction by problematizing the boundary between fiction and reality, “examine[s] the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, [and] explore[s] the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.”¹⁰⁰ The scene between Molina and Valentin, much like the composition of the Nazi propaganda narration which combines fictional elements and the historical archive, draws attention to the intersection between Valentin’s reality (politics) and Molina’s fiction (narrative/art). This is especially noteworthy since empathy requires understanding the world of another as one’s own, profoundly relying on the cultivation of the imagination to provoke a connection between two diametrically opposite individuals.¹⁰¹ Although Valentin warns Molina against escaping the cell, which is their present reality, he nevertheless determines that transcending the cell/reality border is something occurring through reading. Valentin mutes his initial claim, as his first warning, (“eso como una droga”), is silenced by his final statement (“ya trascendés la celda”). His rationality shifts here as the world of the imagination, one activated by Molina, appeals to him.

The second footnote appears soon after Valentin says good night and provides a transcript of the 1939 film *Her Real Glory*. Although a film entitled *The Real Glory* does exist, released in the weeks following Germany’s invasion of Poland, it deals with the Moro rebellion during the American occupation in the Philippines, centering on a love affair between Linda, daughter of an American officer, and Canavan, an Army doctor. Therefore, the transcript of the film inside the novel’s footnote has nothing to do with the aforementioned movie. The only thing *Her Real Glory* (*Destino* in Spanish) and *The Real Glory* have in common is the backdrop of

cinema for the forties. The three non-invented movies are movies from my childhood, from this period in which I was a tireless spectator of the fil...”

⁹⁸ Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 85. English, 78.

⁹⁹ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Waugh, 2.

¹⁰¹ Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Cosmopolitan Minds: Literature, Emotion, and the Transnational Imagination*, First Edition, Cognitive Approaches to Literature and Culture Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014). In this book Mossner discusses, quite convincingly, the importance that many philosophers and scholars of empathy have given to this cultivation of the imagination which allows “us to have empathic emotions also for members of an out-group, people who do not resemble us closely but with whom we nevertheless share many traits, not least the capacity to love and suffer” (3).

Nazism. This backdrop in fact ties together many other aspects inside and outside the novel, two realities Puig continually connects and problematizes for his readers. Both the footnotes and the films “may bear political implications: taken together, the footnotes (which also treat bisexuality), narration (with its ‘feminine’ sensibility) and dialogue (establishing the popularity of Nazi films during Perón’s reign) surrounding ‘Destino’ draw a trenchant, if clearly, ironic, equation between homosexuality, Peronism and Nazism.”¹⁰² Peronism, as Santiago Colas suggests, though not explicitly mentioned in the men’s dialogues, is alluded to here as the conflict of utopia inside the novel is mimetic of the same utopic promise made by Perón in the 1940’s and the subsequent disillusionment of that promise throughout the 1970’s.¹⁰³ The Peronist allusion begs the question: what is Valentin’s relationship to Peronism?¹⁰⁴ The political fragmentation of Argentine society by 1974 was such that Valentin could have been a Peronist leftist guerilla (*Montonero*) or an anti-Peronist leftist guerrilla (*ERP*).¹⁰⁵ The Peronist utopia, in so much as it ever existed, had by 1974 shattered into squabbling factions, descending into the kind of state terror reminiscent of Nazi Germany.¹⁰⁶ Valentin notes that the film interests him “cómo material de propaganda...es un documento en cierta forma” [as propaganda...it serves as a document].¹⁰⁷ Molina’s narration is turned into a document by Valentin, much like the archival documents that Puig himself rummaged through while crafting the plot details for this invented film. As a document, Valentin treats Molina’s act of telling similar to the political books he reads in order to “transcend” the cell, implying that, narrative can be treated as a means of official historical and political documentation.

While Molina stories and the dialogue between the two prisoners embody subjective body of the novel, the footnotes become its objective feet- the foundation upon which it stands. The footnotes do not work on the empathetic register; instead they reveal the social, political and cultural development and subsequent transformation of both Valentin and Molina. In other words, while the men’s dialogues bring the reader into close proximity with their bodies, ideas, and emotions, the footnotes create distance, conspiring against the version of empathy the novel strives to establish as Valentin and Molina gain closeness. Footnotes document the objective world, juxtaposing against the subjective empathetic imagination the novel fashions as it brings the prisoners’ bodies into close proximity through touch, emotions (positive or negative), states of abjection and finally, states of pleasure.

¹⁰² Merrim, “Through the Film Darkly,” 305.

¹⁰³ Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America*, 85.

¹⁰⁴ Although the novel is ambiguous about Valentin’s relationship to Peronism, a political prisoner in 1974 Argentina would most likely be part of one of the myriad of leftist Peronist guerrillas.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan C. Brown, *A Brief History of Argentina*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2010), 234–35.

¹⁰⁶ It is important to note that unlike Molina’s telling, the footnote does not ever gain an end. The word “sigue” or “continues,” wrapped by parenthesis, ends the footnote. Naturally the reader expects Chapter Five to contain the footnote’s continuation, which it most certainly does not. In fact the footnote, unlike Molina’s narration of the film, is forever left unfinished, further diminishing the utopic propaganda of the film’s “official” summary.

¹⁰⁷ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 85. English, 79.

Empathetic Surrender: Silences, Pleasure and Final Transformations

Valentin's sexuality gains visibility towards the end of the novel, and his body appears, not as an abject entity, but as a body revived, refurbished, and one described as an "exceso de energías" or "an excess of energy." As he awakens, he finds himself fully recuperated, with newly heightened spirit:

“-¿Por qué no probas a caminar, a ver qué pasa?
-No porque te vas a reír.
-¿De qué?
-Me pasa una cosa.
-¿Qué?
-Algo que le pasa a un hombre sano, nada más. Cuando se despierta a la mañana y tiene exceso de energías.
-¿Se te para?, que genial...”¹⁰⁸

[-How about getting on your feet a little, to see how it feels.
-No because, you'll start laughing.
-At what?
-Something you'd notice.
-What would I notice?
-Something on any healthy man, that's all, especially when he first wakes up....and has a little energy in the morning.
-A hard-on, well that's healthy...]

Ironically, this excess occurs right after his body has been quite literally voided of its own excess. His masculinity 'rises,' if you will, only after his body undergoes the process of extreme emptying, or voiding, a process mended by Molina's empathetic and nurturing touch as he transports Valentine out of abjection. Empathy and closeness enable Valentin to recuperate his masculinity. The veiled cleansing scene previously mentioned, allows for a literal unveiling of Valentin's recuperated masculinity, where his newly energized body enables him to regain the language he had abandoned for the silent ellipsis in the previous chapter. Additionally, Valentin's inability to read his political books (he is too dizzy to read as the letters dance in front of his eyes ("me bailan las letras")) requires that Molina continue his narration of the zombie film, demonstrating that Valentin now willingly chooses the world of cinematographic, melodramatic excess over his politically contained world.

The shift from linguistic scarcity to excess gains momentum in the last few chapters through the use of the ellipsis, an embodiment of silence and the lack of signification. In her reading of Molina and Valentin's first sexual encounter, Masiello remarks that the absence of language, marked textually by the ellipsis, "obliges us to reflect on the universal projects of language. Ironically, then, the scene of sexual encounter is almost devoid of words; the space of the text filled with ellipses and silence. Speech is thinned to the point of disappearance in order to express the paradoxical density and revelation of this dramatic encounter."¹⁰⁹ Valentin's

¹⁰⁸ Puig, 187. English, 182.

¹⁰⁹ Masiello, 91.

abandonment of language appears once more as he angrily demonstrates that he no longer needs Molina's nurturing and empathy after his morning erection bolsters his masculinity:

“-...
-Pero mirá lo que hiciste...
-...
-Si nos quedamos sin calentador, estamos listos. Y el platito...
-...
-Y el té...
-Perdóname.
-...
-Perdí el control. De veras, te pido perdón...
-...
-El calentador no se rompió. Pero se volcó todo el kerosén.
-...
-Lo principal es que la hornalla no se quebró.
-...
-Molina, perdóname el arrebato.
-...”¹¹⁰

[-...
-Look what you did...
-...
-If we don't have a stove, we're done for. And the plate...
-...
-And the tea...
-I'm sorry...
-...
- I lost my head, I'm sorry, honestly.
-....
-The stove isn't broken. Nut the kerosene got knocked over.
-...
-Molina, please forgive my damn temper.
-...]

This scene demonstrates visible switch between Valentin and Molina's speech-roles: Valentin's silence becomes Molina's as soon as the former apologizes for his misdeeds. Valentin tempers his anger by turning to language as a means of remedying his reaction in order to gain control over his emotions. Molina's incessant offering of marble cake provokes his anger, as a now healthy Valentin no longer understands the empathetic cake offering. Molina's kind actions and offerings are no longer *read* by Valentin in the same way, as he steps out of the world of abjection, regaining control over the divide between himself and the other. Empathy no longer makes sense and kindness seems dubious and perplexing. The marble-cake scene forces Molina inside a linguistic void, as he abandons language entirely for the first time in the novel. This void constructs an alternative system of discourse, where linguistic scarcity prevails over narrative

¹¹⁰ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 198. English, 194.

excess; our talkative narrator has simply stopped speaking. Molina's silence is interrupted, not by a voice within the cell, but by a lengthy footnote detailing several theories of bisexuality. The footnote's lengthy meta-text takes the place of the silent narrator, a warning that the objective world defining acceptable versions of sexuality permanently lurks, waiting for moments of narrative silence to impose its normalizing structure. Yet, unlike many of the other footnotes in the novel classifying homosexuality, this one focuses on sexual liberation by claiming that each man has a woman he keeps deep within him: "es la mujer que cada hombre lleva encerrada en los calabozos de su propia psiquis" [is the woman which every man keeps locked inside the dungeons of his own psyche].¹¹¹ Although this "mujer adentro" gains visibility through Valentin's experience with abjection, this same woman is placed under lock and key as he is reminded of his unyielding biology upon waking.

As he begins envisioning the cell as a space of freedom, much like Robinson Crusoe's desert island, Valentin directly reveals that his fear of empathy is connected to societally conditioned version of identity:

"En cierto modo estamos perfectamente libres de actuar como queremos el uno respecto al otro, ¿me explico? Es como si estuviéramos en una isla desierta. Una isla en la que tal vez estemos solos años. Porque, si, fuera de la celda están nuestros opresores, pero adentro no. Aquí nadie oprime a nadie. Lo único que hay, de perturbador, para mi mente...cansada, o condicionada o deformada...es que alguien me quiere tratar bien, sin pedir nada a cambio."¹¹²

[In a sense we're perfectly free to behave however we choose with respect to one another, am I making myself clear? It's as if we were on some desert island. An island on which we may have to remain alone, together for years. Because, well, outside of this cell we may have our oppressors, yes but not inside. Here no one oppresses the other. The only thing seems to disturb me...because I'm exhausted, or conditioned or perverted...is that someone wants to be nice to me, without asking anything back for it.]

The idea that one person would want to be kind to another just for the sake of kindness, with no ulterior motives, frightens Valentin. Empathy disturbs through its selflessness and by allowing individuals to engage with another in a way that requires their own abandonment. Although Michel Foucault might consider his praise of the cell-space naïve, given the highly regimented and surveilled prison world, Valentin nevertheless has a point: no one oppresses the other inside the cell because that is the state's job.¹¹³ Ironically, the prison cell furnishes a community of strikingly different individuals by forcing them into close proximity with one another. What these individuals always share is their status as unfit citizens, stripped of their basic rights as punishment for their criminal activity. After Molina finds out he will be moved to another cell, he returns crestfallen and Valentin, for the first time in the novel, begins nurturing Molina through touch, giving into the very empathetic response he finds disturbing only moments prior. Valentin begins touching Molina, massaging him, undoubtedly demonstrating his concern vis-à-

¹¹¹ Puig, 200. English, 196.

¹¹² Puig, 206. English, 202.

¹¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

vis his new-found ability to physically and emotionally comfort his anxious cell-mate. Valentin's empathy arises during this moment of nurture, established as he massages away the knot in Molina's throat. This is reflected by his own verbal acknowledgment, in which he surrenders to the fact that he no longer thinks about himself: "debe ser porque no pienso en mí" [maybe because I'm not thinking about me].¹¹⁴ Furthermore, not only does he not think about himself, he reveals that touching Molina makes him feel better as well ["a mí también me hace bien"], demonstrating how the bodies of both have in fact, even before the sexual act occurs, become one. Valentin's own well-being is now attached to the well-being of his cellmate, a phenomenon representing his complete surrender to empathy.¹¹⁵

The following scene is wrought by Valentin's silence, a silence he breaks only occasionally, mainly to ask Molina to be quiet as their sexual act unravels. In one revelatory break of silence, however, Valentin admits the following: "No sé... no me preguntes... porque no sé nada" [I don't know, don't ask questions... because I don't know anything].¹¹⁶ His world has been turned inside out and upside down, so much so that he loses the knowledge he firmly held, both as a man and as a political being. Similar to the blurry words on the page of political philosophy he attempts to read after his illness, Valentin's entire physical and mental foundation is called into question in this scene of sexual intimacy. His mind, like his speech earlier, has been voided and refurnished by the absence of previously held knowledge and identity constructs. Later on, as Molina request a kiss, asking if Valentin is repulsed by the idea, intimacy and repulsion come together just as they did during Valentin's brush with abjection. Valentin tells him he is not repulsed, only scared that Molina will turn into a panther, a fear suggesting that, Molina's desire, like Irena's, holds transformative powers. As Valentin surrenders to his own desires, he renames Molina as "la mujer araña que atrapa los hombres en su tela" [a spiderwoman that traps men in her web], proving that he now sees Molina as *she* wants to be seen.¹¹⁷ This shift in perception is further demonstrated as Valentin calls Molina "Molinita" a few moments later, using the diminutive form to concretize Molina as a woman. Valentin has finally learned how to read and identify with the other. Furthermore, he now accepts Molina's identity and gender, an acceptance enabling him to transform his own beliefs about heterosexual desire. Elias Miguel Muñoz terms this acceptance Valentin's "humanization": "el beso traicionero de la mujer pantera, que destruye, se convierte en el beso de la mujer araña; una araña cuya tela, lejos de atrapar a Valentín, le ofrece la oportunidad de humanizarse."¹¹⁸ This humanization occurs as soon as he allows Molina to become Molinita, or "la mujer araña," suggesting that his previously held beliefs surrounding gender, desire, and identity have indeed transformed. Though this transformation arises through the many aspects discussed throughout this chapter, it is crystalized through Valentin's physical and emotional surrender to touching, being touched, and accepting alternative desires as he surrenders to his own empathetic sensibility, one requiring both emotional and bodily identification.

¹¹⁴ Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 220. English, 217.

¹¹⁵ Puig, 220.

¹¹⁶ Puig, 221. English, 219.

¹¹⁷ Puig, 265. English, 260.

¹¹⁸ Muñoz, *El Discurso Utópico de La Sexualidad En Manuel Puig*, 78.

Conclusion

The novel's last chapter combines pain with the unconscious, alerting the reader to the physical and mental shift in Valentin's character and notion of self. In his book on Puig, Johnathan Tittler focuses in on the burns Valentin is forced to receive during a session of torture appearing in the novel's the last chapter. Valentin's mental transformation, according to Tittler, is accompanied by a physical one: "those burns in the groin area, for instance are they not the mark of a castrato, of a man who is not a man (in the conventional sense), of a man who is perhaps Molina, or more precisely both Molina and not Molina?"¹¹⁹ Valentin's body, like his mind, portrayed here through his delirious dreams, alters. Tittler determines that Valentin transforms into a "selfless self," having developed a sense of altruism causing a shift and reconstruction of his subject-hood.¹²⁰ Valentin no longer speaks in the last chapter, his only intelligible words are "over...there" followed by grunts and silence as the person (we assume a prison doctor) asks him questions. This void, as Tittler suggests, reduces Valentin to a character that is nothing more "than a simulacrum."¹²¹ However, this stream of conscious narration, unlike previous glimpses into Valentin's mind, contains the pronoun "I." Valentin has, at least subconsciously, discovered a self, one strong enough to enable his use of "I" rather than "a fellow" or "a girl" or the slew of other depersonalized labels he previously utilized as his subconscious unraveled. As he reflects on Molina's death, he is indeed saddened, pensive and regretful of never being able to invite Molina over to dinner upon gaining freedom. His mind begins reclaiming particular linguistic constructions that Molina used such as, "porque el fin es enigmático" [the ending is enigmatic], to directly echo and embody Molina's voice.¹²² Valentin's body, self-identification, and speech incorporate elements of Molina, as if the *spiderwoman* really has trapped him in her web, leaving internal and external cobwebs which seek to redesign the man entirely. Valentin continues to dream with the *spiderwoman* while speaking to "Marta," effectively combining both Marta and Molina into one entity: Marta, who continues holding the power of speech, and Molina, who, now dead, requires a bodily vessel. As Valentin remembers his own body, a hungry body desiring food, the image of the desert island reappears as the narration meets its end, a stark reminder of Valentin's old fear and the empathetic bond the two men lay a claim to inside the prison cell as soon as that fear was surpassed.

The connection between author, reader and text is one that Puig purposefully plays with in most, if not all, of his novels. In *El Beso de la Mujer Araña*, this play is exacerbated through the multiple modes of telling through footnotes, dreams, interruptions, silences, and the absence of a primary narrator. This "discursive patchwork" emerges to position the reader as an active participant for whom, like Molina and Valentin, "reading has been turned into a technology for the formation of subjects."¹²³ The abandonment of the author makes possible the birth of the

¹¹⁹ Jonathan Tittler, *Manuel Puig*, vol. 836, Twayne's World Authors Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 55–56.

¹²⁰ Tittler, 836:56.

¹²¹ Tittler, 836:56.

¹²² Puig, *El Beso de La Mujer Araña*, 285. English, 281. At the end of Chapter 13, Molina ends the zombie film narration with "such an enigmatic ending" a direct echo of Valentin's ending stream of conscious delusion.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 69-70.

reader, a phenomenon which, in a novel driven by empathy, produces an empathetic reader by devising a new method of narrative discourse.¹²⁴ This method centers on descriptions of the physical body, even in its most abject state, melodramatic reading practices which promote the development of emotional empathy, and metafictional narrative techniques such as intrusive footnotes which undermine the role of the outdated third person narrator altogether. Therefore, the transformation of Molina and Valentin enables another transformation: that of the reader. “The difference between the text and its footnotes” writes Rosa Perelmuter, “is thus akin to the difference between the subjective experience of a phenomenon and an attempted objective description of it. In the end, the reader is faced with two juxtaposed views that must be somehow reconciled or understood as a consequence of the contrast struck between them.”¹²⁵ These two juxtaposed views cultivate a new kind of reading where the reader must negotiate between multiple genres ranging from melodrama to postmodernism, systems of discourse ranging from simple discourse to scientific explications of homosexuality, various identities and identity constructions, abject bodies experiencing pain to bodies experiencing pleasure, and various historical events, from WWII to the politically tumultuous period predating Argentina’s Dirty War. This negotiation sheds light on one of the novel’s most important contributions: the furnishing of empathy between two drastically different characters in a jail cell absent from society’s normative structures. What *El Beso de la Mujer Araña* asks us to ponder is what happens to identity when one surrenders to empathy for another?

¹²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath, Noonday Press ed (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 142–47.

¹²⁵ Balderston and Masiello, *Approaches to Teaching Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 97:62.

Chapter Four

Mapping Genocide through Empathy: Law, Storytelling and Historical

Memory in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*

Published in 1988, Louise Erdrich's novel, *Tracks*, records the indignity perpetuated on the American Indian body and community during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States. The novel challenges the conceptions of legal personhood, or path to citizenship for the American Indian, by suggesting that the burgeoning human rights discourse is incompatible with land allotment acts and the assimilation policies defining legal personhood at the time. Erdrich documents the historical and the legal policies affecting American Indian bodily and psychological integrity, and subsequently constructs a model for narrative empathy grounded upon the construction of a reader as an ethical witness to law's perpetuation of indignity on both the individual and community.

Through the use of two contrasting narrator's, Nanapush, a tribal elder, and Pauline, a young woman on the verge of religious assimilation, Erdrich develops a sociopolitical dialectic exposing how nineteenth century legal practices devastatingly define land, voice, bodies and concepts of personhood in the United States. This sociopolitical exposition uncovers what many recent critics have come to term the American Indian genocide.¹ A reconceptualization of genocide, and human rights discourses, takes place within the novel as it illuminates how the forced abandonment of cultural identity and space instigates the death of community and loss of the self. Storytelling, and the oral tradition, becomes an important part of this illumination, used by Erdrich to document the genocidal legal practices at the turn of the century. *Tracks* uses the storytelling method of transmitting information down to the generations to also illuminate the genocidal legal practices impacted the American Indian subject and community, uncovering a new version of American history within its pages. This history is rooted inside an empathetic and ethical recovery of the past, one told by two contrasting, yet interconnected, victims of law's abuses: Nanapush and Pauline.

The model of narrative empathy constructed inside *Tracks*, restricts victim objectification by setting limits on the reader's accessibility to trauma. Within these limits trauma gains visibility as a phenomenon contaminated by historical and legal structures, rather than through the medium of corporeal suffering. Empathy, as Dominick LaCapra recalls, is generally

“bound up with a transference relation to the past, and it is arguably an affective aspect of understanding that both limits objectification and exposes the self to involvement or implication in the past, its actors, and victims. An empathic response requires the recognition of others as other than mere objects of research unable to question one or

¹ MariJo Moore, ed., *Eating Fire, Tasting Blood: Breaking the Great Silence of the American Indian Holocaust* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006).

place one in question. And it does not substitute for, but on the contrary must be articulated with, normative judgment and sociopolitical response.”²

Defining empathy in this way suggests that empathy is something we learn to understand and navigate and should not be conflated with the arousal of pity as generated through the witnessing of bodies in pain. Empathy inside *Tracks* is *not* founded upon a reader’s identification with a victim’s suffering which is predicated on a reader’s “knowledge” of a victim’s circumstance. In fact, suffering is so subtly demarcated throughout *Tracks* that it gains little to no representation, abandoned to the world of silence and loss, implied rather than explicit. Erdrich creates a model for narrative empathy in the novel (especially within Pauline’s narration) which arises through the reader’s *understanding* of how the novel engages with the objective world of law, as a primary shaper of the burgeoning American landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how this history affects the characters, plot and the author’s stylistic choices in representing American Indian land loss, assimilation and physical trauma. Empathy, LaCapra illuminates, has largely been “eliminated from discussions of historiography in the recent past both by historians and by philosophers of history. This is the case despite the widespread turn to the question of experience, including memory, among historians. By and large, the turn to experience has not yet renewed interest in the role of empathy or even affect in general in historical understanding.”³ Erdrich outlines how narrative empathy, as produced through the act of storytelling, revises previous versions of historical understanding and documentation.

Erdrich’s construction of narrative empathy develops what Dominick LaCapra calls “desirable empathy” or “empathetic unsettlement.”⁴ Empathetic unsettlement is the version of empathy arising through the lack of identification, involving a virtual and not vicarious experience, similar to the one discussed in Chapter One, with respect to Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, where the reader is prevented from becoming a secondary witness to bodily suffering and becoming vicarious witness to trauma. Although an in-depth discussion of “empathetic unsettlement” will occur Chapter Five, in this chapter narrative empathy begins working through the realm of inaccessibility and invisibility. Much like Octavia Butler’s own construction of narrative empathy, Erdrich relies on establishing a lack of identification between reader and character by making the character’s traumatized body, and implicit suffering, inaccessible to the reader. This inaccessibility is reproduced by storytelling, which further distances the reader by suggesting, at least within Nanapush’s narrative, that the story is for Lulu, and no one else. Also, while Lulu hears the story, the reader reads it, unable to access the orality produced by Nanapush. As the two narrators battle for reliability and truth, trauma gains representation through voids, silences, and absences, especially as the storytelling medium battles against signification’s forced visibility. What Erdrich does leave visible are the ways in which assimilatory legal policies mark the physical and psychological body of the characters. Erdrich suggests that the reader’s ability to understand the effects of law on the body is what produces

² Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2004), 135.

³ LaCapra, 133–34.

⁴ LaCapra, 135.

empathy, and not the reader's viewing of violated bodies and subsequent identification through vicarious pity.

Although the controversies surrounding Erdrich's 1986 novel, *Beet Queen*, sparked by a scathing review by Leslie Marmon Silko, condemned Erdrich's writing as politically ambivalent and non-communitarian due to its postmodern aesthetic concerns, *Tracks* is anything but politically ambivalent.⁵ The postmodern novel becomes an essential engine driving the phenomenon of empathetic unsettlement forward, specifically through, as Linda Hutcheon remarks, postmodernism's "commitment to doubleness, or duplicity."⁶ Postmodernism "manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge."⁷ These dueling abilities are enacted within *Tracks* not only through the employment of two contradicting narrators, but through the novel's commitment to historical subversion and subsequent reinterpretation of the past as redefined by the non-static oral tradition. Additionally, the novel's attachment to loss and silence, to not-telling, complicates our understanding of the written word and the oral medium, shedding light on the silencing mechanisms outlining the historical representations of past events. For instance, Pauline's attachment to silence paradoxically enables her to construct a new version of the past, while Nanapush's subtle portrayal of a declining socioeconomic landscape teaches the reader how to decipher the historical silences superimposed upon his community. Although Silko denounces Erdrich's novels as texts which chose the fragmented postmodern aesthetic over the oral tradition, the complicated composition of orality and silence inside the postmodern medium provokes a momentous confrontation. The confrontation explored by postmodernism, "where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody," revises the historical trajectory of the nation's imagined sense of inclusivity at the turn of the century.⁸ *Tracks* develops a discourse on narrative empathy in order to create an intersection for storytelling and law. As Peter Brooks reminds us, since the late 1970s, a movement arose within the humanities, as literature began invading law in order to address both law's future potential and past digressions.⁹ By documenting the effects of the late nineteenth century allotment acts, the Dawes Act of 1887, the American Indian boarding schools and problematic status of citizenship inclusion through assimilation, the focus on land, storytelling and traumatic psychological and physical memories, reconstruct the legal spectacle surrounding the national project at the turn of the century. In turn, this reconstruction begets model for narrative empathy grounded upon a reader's understanding of the historical and the legal policies affecting American Indian bodily and psychological integrity. To read the American Indian postmodern novel involves becoming ethical witnesses to the traumatic silencing of cultural identity as determined by law masquerading under the banner of human rights.

⁵ Susan Pérez Castillo, "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy," *The Massachusetts Review* 32, no. 2 (1991): 285.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁷ Hutcheon, 1-2.

⁸ Hutcheon, 1.

⁹ Peter Brooks, "Law, Literature: Where Are We?," in *Teaching Law and Literature*, ed. Austin Sarat, Cathrine O. Frank, and Matthew Daniel Anderson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2011).

Nanapush's Telling: Decoding Paper Legality and the Resistance to Personhood

By temporally grounding *Tracks* between 1912 and 1924, Erdrich lays a claim on what the American historical novel should cover, situating her novel during the height of American Indian cultural assimilation, and ending it with the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. Her method of writing the historical novel demands that readers understand how history and law foster indignity by rupturing the concept of personhood, so essential in human rights discourse at the turn of the century in the United States. Erdrich constructs a new version of the historical novel by documenting the legal-historical context framing the novel for the reader. The infiltration of this context informs the ethical reading practice that the novel shapes through its aesthetic manipulations of the oral medium and the historical-legal experiences it exposes. Erdrich's method of writing the historical novel starkly contrasts with the classical form of American nation building novels erupting throughout the nineteenth century. Although novels such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Mark Twain's, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and even Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, map the historical changes concerning progressive national developments such as emancipation, abolition and sociopolitical shifts, conceptions of citizenship (i.e. who belongs inside the nation as a fully protected citizen) remain exclusionary, especially toward the American Indian. Furthermore, the use of history inside the nineteenth century tradition does not concern itself with offering the reader an ethical understanding of historical change but rather, as we see with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and even the earlier historical novel, James Fenimore Cooper's *the Last of the Mohicans*, in developing a narration grounded upon the process of vicarious identification between reader and other. In other words, for the nineteenth century reader empathy is framed as knowing, whereas for the postmodern reader, empathy is framed as understanding.

Knowing requires the representation of an undignified body in order for the reader to feel that they are 'witnessing' injustice, whereas Erdrich's readers are urged to understand, not the body in pain, but *how* history and law are the prime culprits fostering indignity in the first place. The sentimental tradition relied on the representation of broken, fragile and suffering bodies in order to promote human rights discourse within the burgeoning national landscape. However, using the body of the suffering other to provoke human rights discourse, implies that certain individuals gain rights only through suffering and corporeal indignity; therefore, the demand made for their rights ironically occurs through the destruction of their bodily integrity. However, in Erdrich's tetralogy, history and law become characters, making it, as Arnold Kupat and Michael A. Elliot suggest, "impossible to extricate the historical consciousness of the community she portrays from either the history of the United States or the history of U.S.–Native relations. Her characters, after all, fight in foreign wars, respond to the changing policies of the federal government, and even react to the shifting cultural attitudes of whites toward indigenous peoples."¹⁰ In uncovering the legal-historical context framing the novel for the reader, Erdrich constructs a postmodern historical novel that documents the effects of federal law and policy upon the American Indian community and individual in concrete physical, emotional and cultural ways. The infiltration of this legal context informs the ethical reading practice that the

¹⁰ Arnold Krupat and Michael A. Elliot, "American Indian Fiction and Anticolonial Resistance," in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States since 1945*, ed. Eric Cheyfitz, *The Columbia Guides to Literature since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 148.

novel shapes through its aesthetic manipulations of the storytelling medium and the historical-legal experiences it exposes.

Nanapush's narration is best described as a *telling* to Lulu, his granddaughter who has just come back from an Indian boarding school, in order to accurately shape her knowledge of her mother, Fleur, and their community. This *telling* combats Lulu's amnesia, represented by loss of her mother and community by exposing the detrimental impact that allotment policy and other assimilatory legal policies had on the Anishinaabe.¹¹ Consequently, paper, a permanent physical object determined to define legal personhood, is positioned against the impermanence of the storytelling tradition. Through Nanapush's *telling*, Erdrich recreates the community ravished by years of illness, land treaties and forced relocation, exposing the trauma produced by the socioeconomic downfall of his community, this telling initiates a process of healing historical wounds by exposing an alternative, and too often silenced, version of national history as a means of reclaiming the sense of identity he, and more importantly, Lulu, have lost.

In 1887 the United States Congress passed the General Allotment Act, or the Dawes Act, which held that American Indian tribal land would be surveyed by the government and divided into allotments for individual members of the respective tribe. The goal of the Dawes Act was to begin the intense practice of assimilating American Indians into the capitalistic agricultural system, attempting to remedy Andrew Jackson's violent Indian Removal Act of 1830. The allotment period opened up the discussion of American Indian citizenship. However, with the question of citizenship also came sense powerlessness, cultural loss and a disadvantaged colonial relationship reducing communities to commodified labor units.¹² Furthermore, "by linking land to citizenship, the U.S government, through its numerous naturalization acts, made property a definitional quality of Americanness."¹³ In other words, land and citizenship go hand in hand. The burgeoning conceptual framework for defining personhood in the United States was intricately linked to land ownership. Figuratively, personhood was also linked to a paper trail, a direct negation of the oral trail guiding virtually all American Indian communities. Therefore, not owning land, meant not gaining representation on paper, thus sidestepping the condition of personhood and the subsequent rights attached that status. The focus on land and paper throughout *Tracks* gestures to this relationship yet, more notably, signals a permanent loss. Loss, (of land, of orality, of identity) becomes an engine driving both Nanapush's (and Pauline's) narrative forward.

Allotment policies attacked constructions of traditional American Indian identity by translating communal land into property, converting communal systems of ownership into

¹¹ The Anishinaabe is the for the group of indigenous peoples in Canada (Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba) and U.S. (Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Kansas and Oklahoma). Ojibwe, or Chippewa, are part of the Anishinaabe, and are primarily based in parts of Canada and the northern U.S. (particular to Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota). Throughout this chapter I will use both names, but it is important to note these groups are not the completely identical.

¹² For a comprehensive account of the Dawes Act and Allotment, see Jason Edward Black, *American Indians and the Rhetoric of Removal and Allotment*, Race, Rhetoric, and Media Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), <https://muse.jhu.edu/books/9781626744899>.

¹³ Black, 10.

individual property ownership.¹⁴ This in turn, established the parameters of personhood vis-à-vis individualism and ownership, dismantling the aspects of communal land sharing building American Indian cultural identity. The result of the allotment policies, annulled in 1934 with the Indian Reorganization Act, was a loss of 90 million acres of land and the development of deeply impoverished and fragmented American Indian communities struggling against depleting economic circumstances and starvation.¹⁵ *Tracks* paints this socioeconomic landscape, representing these dire conditions by uniting them to the legal treaties emerging at the turn of the century. Erdrich uses the novel to reform American history by writing against the contradictory laws that, while promising basic human rights to the American Indian, merely infringed on those rights by connecting the burgeoning conceptual framework of American Indian personhood, which later became ‘citizenship,’ to the necessary fragmentation of land and community.¹⁶ In other words, *Tracks* unleashes a critique on the model of liberal human rights grounding the process of nation building (soon after the post-abolition period) and reformation through the construction of citizenship for the ‘other.’

Jace Weaver’s term “communitism” describes a fundamental aspect of American Indian literature: the employment of a combination of “community” and “activism” in order to reconstitute the fractured cultural identity left both by early colonialism and modern assimilation tactics.¹⁷ Simon Ortiz considers this rewriting a responsibility that American Indian writers have in advocating “for their people’s self-government, sovereignty, and control of land and natural resources” while also looking “at racism, political and economic oppression, sexism, supremacism, and the needless and wasteful exploitation of land and people.”¹⁸ American Indian literature, Ortiz goes on to say, develops a character of nationalism and through this character a new story of the United States emerges.¹⁹ The development of a new nationalism is one which many literary scholars have brought attention to, especially after the American Indian literary renaissance, sparked by Scott Momaday’s 1968 publication of *House Made of Dawn*. As Ortiz and others have shown, the use of history and law inside American Indian novels has greatly impacted the reader’s understanding of what comprises national identity and how actively law regulates what qualifies as legal personhood, and by extension identity. Novels such as *Tracks* and *House Made of Dawn*, help readers become aware of how easily the historical archive shifts when the silences are filled by new conceptions of identity, community and the past.

Tracks has two beginnings. The first beginning presents two etchings of Nanapush’s and Pauline’s family trees. The second beginning erupts with Nanapush’s voice, as he starts telling his reluctant adolescent granddaughter, Lulu, about her mother and her history. In the first

¹⁴ Cheyfitz, *Columbia Guide*.

¹⁵ Cheyfitz.

¹⁶ It was not until 1924, the date Erdrich choose to end *Tracks*, that the Indian Citizenship Act was passed.

¹⁷ Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 246.

¹⁸ Simon J. Ortiz, “Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism,” *MELUS* 8, no. 2 (1981): 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/467143>.

¹⁹ Ortiz, 12.

beginning a change from traditional Ojibwe marriages to sexual affairs is portrayed as a rupture within the traditional American Indian family composition, or impossibility of a functioning domestic family unit. The two family trees contrast one another: Pauline's troublesome sexual liaison with Napoleon Morrissey is positioned directly against the traditional marriage of Nanapush and Mirage, the wife he loses to illness brought on by the socioeconomic and legal exploitation the novel investigates. This familial rupture reappears as Nanapush begins his narration by intersecting tribal death with law:

“We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long fight west to Nadoussioux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible.”²⁰

Erdrich's decision to have her narrator immediately launch a communal tone through the word “we,” establishes the concept of an inclusive narrator who is able to foster community through an alternative *telling* of history.

Nanapush's doomed beginning concentrates on the words “dying” and “die” to exemplify the decline of American Indian populations during the early 1900's. This decay is immediately attributed to three things: sickness, land treaties and government papers. Historically this decline is represented by the period of intense assimilation, between 1879, when the Carlisle Indian School opened, to 1934, with the passage of the Wheeler-Howard Act which decreased federal control, granting American Indians an increased level of self-governance. These events, according to Beth Piatote, “inaugurated and suspended the two most dominant policies of the era: the forced removal of indigenous children from their families to attend government-funded boarding and day schools and the allotment of reservation land in severalty.”²¹ The legal allotment treaties dominate the narration as Nanapush details the loss of his family and tribe to Lulu: “I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a belt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take our woods and lake.”²² Legal treaties and papers intersect with the fading natural world Nanapush narrates entirely in the past tense. A subtle accusation is made against law as the predominant cause of the “last buffalo/bear/beaver” and thus the reason for Lulu's status as “the child of the invisible.”²³ Furthermore, through the constant use of the pronoun “I,” Nanapush establishes a sense of active personhood and identity that even the government treaties cannot erase, shifting from the community-centered “we” which begins his *telling*. The formal shift to “I” begins constructing a new version of American Indian identity that builds personhood through a denial of legality. In fact, the combination of

²⁰ Louise Erdrich, *Tracks: A Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 1.

²¹ Beth H. Piatote, *Domestic Subjects: Gender, Citizenship, and Law in Native American Literature*, The Henry Roe Cloud Series on American Indians and Modernity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 1.

²² Erdrich, *Tracks*, 2.

²³ Erdrich, 1.

Nanapush's voicing of the legal documents with his refusal to sign the settlement papers demonstrates his status as a figure of resistance who constructs his sense of self by first by understanding and then by undermining the demands made by the 'legal' allotment policies.

"Settlement papers" and treaties distribute ultimate loss throughout *Tracks*, and most of Erdrich's novels, destroying all paths to the political rights they promise. The dire effects of legal papers and structures upon the Anishinaabe is further demonstrated in Nanapush's introduction as he remembers the "official quarantine sign" given to Edgar Pukwan by the government agency to nail on the Pillager home as a warning against consumption. The Pillagers, Fleur's family and the family Lulu has ultimately lost, represent the unspeakable. Both Nanapush and Pauline's narrations revolve around telling Fleur's story, one readers can never fully access since, as Maria DePriest recalls, "she can't tell her own story precisely because she signifies the unspeakable - she signifies what we can never access: that is, her voice, her point of view on the dispossession of a traditional Anishinaabe way of life."²⁴ Thus an ethical engagement with *Tracks* requires *not knowing* on the reader's behalf, which in turn constructs an entry into the world of non-representation. In other words, the nineteenth century historical novel in the United States relied on educating a reader to engage in a vicarious witnessing in order to gain access, or *knowledge* of a victim's suffering. Images of suffering within this tradition grant the victim with problematic version personhood predicated upon indignity and corporeal pain. Therefore, the acceptance of the other grounding liberal human rights model which goes on to forge the image of national inclusivity is dependent on indignity. *Tracks*, however, exposes how legal policies led to a problematic restructuring of American Indian personhood through individualism, and relied on cultural (and also violent) genocidal practices to set limits on the nation's narrative of inclusivity. In *Tracks*, Erdrich constructs the alternate path towards historical understanding by blocking a reader's access to vicarious empathy. This narrative empathy constructed within the novel is founded on the lack of representation, so that the reader can begin ethically engaging with the body and mind of the victim vis-à-vis historical understanding, and not through the representation of a victims' corporeal suffering and indignity. This engagement enables the reader to witness how the construction of American Indian personhood is first and foremost established through community and the domestic family unit, and not through the version of American individualism that both allotment and assimilation policies culminating in American Indian citizenship act held as central principals.

The web of apocalyptic collapse, sickness, death and disappearance weaved by Nanapush combats the historical amnesia his granddaughter inevitably faces. Lulu's identity is woven together with Nanapush's family history as well as the sociopolitical history his narrative undeniably constructs. Storytelling meets law to create two diverging yet intersecting discourses affecting Nanapush's community and Lulu by extension. The direct addresses to Lulu throughout the novel, as James Flavin notes, "reminds us that Nanapush's narrative is oral, that he sits before a specific audience to tell his story. Thus, the relationship here between narrator and narratee in the novel mirrors the performance situation of traditional Native-American song."²⁵ Furthermore, the establishment of Lulu as listener is one paralleled by the reader, who is also overhearing a

²⁴ Maria DePriest, "Once Upon a Time, Today: Hearing Fleur's Voice in 'Tracks,'" *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 2 (2008): 252.

²⁵ James Flavin, "The Novel as Performance: Communication in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 3, no. 4 (1991): 2.

one-sided conversation, attempting to piece together both Nanapush's and Pauline's silences in order to form one cohesive narrative.²⁶ Yet the very concept of the oral tradition undergoes threat as law violently enters the scene, attempting to replace orality with what many critics have termed a "paper trail."²⁷ Paper is the antithesis of the storytelling, something which by nature cannot be preserved or inscribed; each time law enters inside Nanapush's narrative, it begets destruction. "Nanapush," he reminds Lulu, "is a name that loses power every time it is written and stored in a government file."²⁸

Erdrich purposely connects law to loss throughout the novel, especially as Nanapush reflects on the Beauchamp Treaty signing, the Indian Schools, the allotment acts and the Dawes Act. Chapter Five, for instance, showcases how legal allotment policies contributed to the socioeconomic collapse of the American Indian community. After Fleur banishes Lulu's father, Eli, from her home for sleeping with Sophie, the narrative turns to paint a socioeconomic scene where Nanapush shares his scraps of food with a ravenously hungry Eli. "I suppose," says Nanapush, "he could see for himself that the meat in the pot was only one poor gopher that should have hibernated while it could."²⁹ A subtle scene of starvation emerges as the two men divide a meager meal. This scene not only reflects an intimate act of food-sharing, but also enables Nanapush to develop bond with Eli, reconstructing the familial bonds, or the domestic-family unit, he himself has lost with the death of his wife and all of his children.

However, as law (and the paper inscribing it) enters the scene, the internal emptiness created by hunger intersects with the forced emptiness produced by the government's purchase of allotment lands:

"I took my chair to the window for the fading light and looked at some catalogues and some letters from the land court that had come by mail. A system of post was still a new and different thing to Indians, and I was marked out by the Agent to receive words in envelopes. They were addressed to Mr. Nanapush, and I saved every one I got. I had a skin of them tied and stowed beneath the bed."³⁰

The name "that loses power every time it is written and stored in a government file" echoes throughout this scene, but now it is finally written on an envelope: Mr. Nanapush. Erdrich forces the reader to directly witness the loss of power such an inscription holds through this narrative echo and the systematized language it provokes. "I continued" says Nanapush, "to turn the dry, sharp pages of my papers. Between this unpromising winter, the pain in my hip that made me feel so poor I could not hunt, and the wholesale purchase of our allotment land by whites, the

²⁶ Sheila Hassell Hughes, "Tongue-Tied: Rhetoric and Relation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *MELUS* 25, no. 3/4 (2000): 90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468238>.

²⁷ Flavin, "The Novel as Performance," 11.

²⁸ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 32.

²⁹ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 96.

³⁰ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 97.

problems of Eli Kashpaw were of thin consequence.”³¹The “sharp pages” are contrasted against the “tender beef” on the following page, where Nanapush describes Eli’s joy upon eating the gopher stew.³² The image of paper is incessantly positioned next to the language of inability (“could not hunt”) and pain (“pain in my hip”) throughout Erdrich’s work, while the scenes of communal food sharing counter the dire socioeconomic landscape created by law and the word of law. The connection between survival and sacrifice juxtaposes the impact the government papers had on the construction of legal personhood as a phenomenon disconnected from cultural identity. As Eli devours the gopher stew, Nanapush reminds Lulu, and the reader by extension, that beef had disappeared as a commodity: “He gulped it all down as if it held tender beef, which we had not seen since the government issue. When he was done he leaned back and, without meaning to, his face registered the flat spoiled taste of the gopher meat. And with that, the first hint of pity for me. But I wanted none.”³³ The mention of the government issue occurs right as Eli finishes his stew and comes to term with the spoiled taste in his mouth, thus making the government papers culpable for the food scarcity epidemic within American Indian communities at the time. Moreover, even in this grim backdrop, Nanapush sacrifices his own portion so that Eli can eat, a sacrifice which Margaret, Eli’s mother, also makes later on in the novel, constructing yet another moment of resistance within the narrative where the communal is placed above the concept of American individualism.

The dangers of writing and the physical and emotional harm inflicted by paper continues unraveling in *Tracks*, problematizing the rights-based version of legal personhood used in defining citizenship at the turn of the century:

“So many other things were on my mind. I had already given Father Damien testimony on this Anishinabe land, which was nibbled at the edges and surrounded by farmers waiting for it to go underneath the gavel of the auctioneer. There were so few of us who even understood the writing on the papers. Some signed their land away from thumbs and crosses. As a young man, I had made my reputation as a government interpreter, that is, until the Beauchamp Treaty signing, in which I said to Rift-in-A-Cloud, ‘Don’t put your thumb on the ink.’ One of the officials understood and I lost my job.”³⁴

The Beauchamp treaty of 1867 sought to concentrate the Ojibwe population in one single place, encouraging them to farm through allotment practices which redistributed land to individuals rather than communities. This enabled the dense pine forests around Minnesota to be opened up for profitable logging enterprises. Although some individuals were given up to 160 acres of land, that land soon came under threat with the passing of the Dawes Act and Nelson Act, which made lands available for sale, often supporting developing timber interests.³⁵ The novel formally

³¹ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 98.

³² Erdrich, *Tracks*, 99.

³³ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 99.

³⁴ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 99–100.

³⁵ U.S. Government, “1867 Treaty with the Chippewa of the Mississippi,” November 2, 2008, <http://treatiesmatter.org/treaties/land/1867-ojibwe>.

intersperses these legal treaties throughout its pages, demonstrating how ink and paper are directly connected to the loss of land and cultural identity. However, through Nanapush's ability to read and write, Erdrich positions him as a historical insider, one who understands the trespasses of the legal system and legislation. The paper treaties discussed above are set to contrast a powerful scene where Eli, with the spiritual guidance of Nanapush, hunts a large moose in the snow. Through Nanapush's narration, Erdrich enables a shift in signification to take place, as legal *tracks* become natural *tracks* composing the very landscape that these treaties have condemned. Erdrich demonstrates that law's permanence is nothing but an illusion, an impermanent marker like the tracks rapidly erased by snow before Eli's eyes. Interestingly enough, as nature takes over law in this scene, yet another moment of resistance emerges as Nanapush recalls instructing members of his community to resist the legal tracks determined to take their land away.

As Nanapush begins narrating the loss of land through government treaties, he and Eli join forces to secure food. The moose meat is described as "an armor," one Eli straps on his own body as he walks back to Nanapush's cabin: "the meat stood on its own in pieces, a moose transformed into the mold of Eli, an armor that would fit no other."³⁶ This natural armor is what protects both men from starvation, while providing them with the pleasure of tasting roasted meat, an indulgence they have not experienced for some time. The armor also represents a new body, enabling Eli to rebuild himself after his sexual misadventures with Sophie. This body, however, also merges animal with man quite literally, an absorption reconnecting Eli and Nanapush together as a domestic family unit and one revising the loss Nanapush describes at the beginning of the novel with the demise of the animals, and thus the lack of food-sources. As Eli merges with the moose's body, a kind of power emanates, linking the two men in a familial relationship as they begin process of rebuilding their community.³⁷

This construction of the domestic family unit enables a rehabilitation of community, and occurs through the depiction of a most intimate and empathetic interaction, occurring between the two men. Nanapush painstakingly cares for Eli who, at this point, is frozen and exhausted from his hunting experience:

"I removed the kidneys and heart from Eli's pocket and cut them into smaller sections. My hands shook as I prepared the pieces with salt. My mouth watered as I put them in the fire and at the smell of meat roasting. I almost wept. I gave the first cut to Eli, who fell on I gratefully. As I put my share into my mouth, as I swallowed it, I felt myself grow solid in the chair. Lit by the burning stove, everything around me sharpened. Thoughts

³⁶ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 104.

³⁷ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions: With a New Preface* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 22–23. "The concept of power," Paula Gunn Allen remarks, "among tribal people is related to their understanding of the relationships that occur between human and nonhuman worlds. They believe that all are linked within one vast, living sphere, that the linkage is not material but spiritual...Among this magical things are transformation of objects from one form to another, the movement of objects from one place to another by teleportation, the curing of the sick, communication with animals...."

returned.

‘You’re my son,’ I said, moved by the scorched taste, ‘you’re my relative.’”³⁸

This scene of intimate food gathering and food sharing is positioned near the moment in which Nanapush narrates destructive power of Beauchamp Treaty. Their proximity demonstrates how the rebuilding of community and family occurs even in dismal socioeconomic conditions. The meat, described as a communal entity or “share,” enables Nanapush’s thoughts to return back to him upon ingestion, as he begins overcoming the historical amnesia trapping him, and by extension, Lulu. During this moment, he refers to Eli as his son, forging a new familial unit, one further cemented later in the novel as he and Margaret, Eli’s mother, engage in a romantic relationship. The scene of sharing and eating starkly contrasts the legal treaties breaking both families apart while also resulting in the food scarcity on the reservation. Erdrich uses contrast as a narrative strategy throughout *Tracks*, pitting legal policies and the figure of law against the traditional American Indian traditions and community. Through these contrasts, Nanapush redirects Lulu’s attention away from her mother, and to the real culprit of her pain, alienation and frustration: the US government and the paper running it. Subsequently, the reader, as an extension of Lulu, is exposed to the specific effects that these legal policies had on the community and the individual. This exposition, however, does not rely on representing a victim’s suffering body in order to condemn law’s misgivings, but rather on structuring an understanding of legal policy and historical circumstances, which in turn affect American Indian identity.

The disastrous, virtually post-apocalyptic scene starting the novel reflects the destruction of colonialism and forced assimilation leading to cultural and historical amnesia. As Nanapush bites into the moose’s heart and kidneys, reconstructing the family and community he has lost, a process of recovery ensues. The kidneys, organs charged with the filtration, absorption and reabsorption of water, demonstrate how Lulu’s memory is activated and filled through Nanapush’s *telling*. The moose’s heart likewise plays a symbolic role as it provides oxygen and blood necessary for life preservation. Lulu’s refusal to speak to her mother mixed with the lack of understanding the reasons behind her forced relocation to the Indian boarding school, are the elements of her memory Nanapush strives to activate and reframe. If it is true that Erdrich’s conceptualization of individual identity is innately connected to family systems and socio-political history, then new definitions of American Indian personhood arise as the social, economic and political realms are unmasked through Nanapush’s and, as the next section of this chapter will demonstrate, Pauline’s, narrative. The version of history crafted through the narrative strategies Nanapush develops as he begins relating his memories to Lulu, is one that also anticipates a new position for the reader. As an active witness to the stories being told, the reader, like Lulu, is expected sit silently and witness Nanapush’s *telling*. In positioning the reader as an ethical witness to the *telling*, *Tracks* initiates a reading practice where the act of storytelling revises and decodes legal and historical discourse in order to uncover previously untold histories.

Erdrich establishes the two diverging primary listeners for her novel: Lulu and Pauline. The author’s implied agenda, perhaps, as Catherine Rainwater remarks, “is to make such an invisible reader-listener aware of both responsibilities and liabilities incurred in hearing

³⁸ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 104–5.

stories.”³⁹ The question is what does illuminating the irresponsibility on behalf of the listener do? What responsibilities and liabilities does *Tracks* expect from the reader? One way to begin answering these questions is to assess the demands made storytelling (which mimics orality) within the American Indian novel and how these demands reconfigure both the reading process and the reader’s responsibility within this process. Erdrich, through Nanapush, instructs the reader, and Lulu, how to develop, as Rainwater terms it, an “ethics of listening” by endowing speech with transformative, life-giving powers.⁴⁰ *Tracks* reveals how there are two types of writing. One, in the shape of land treaties and assimilatory legal doctrines, which leads to destruction of community and family, and the second, takes the form of storytelling and initiates healing through memory. Within this second form of writing, a system of resistance emerges. Nanapush rebuilds his now extinct family unit by talking to Lulu and carefully compiling an empathetic lens through which she can understand both her mother’s motives and her own American Indian background. This is the same lens the reader uses to maneuver through the novel, as they begin tracing the historical, social and political trajectory outlined throughout.

Nanapush associates the act of storytelling to survival and recovery on multiple occasions throughout the novel, whereas the objectivity and dehumanizing system of legal representation, or the ‘legal word,’ silences and wreaks havoc on the individual and community, even as it feigns to administer rights. These types of linguistic contrasts direct the reader’s empathy towards a style of signification, establishing the boundaries for a conscientious and ethical reading practice. In recognizing these contradictions, the reader witnesses destructive force that government treaties and laws masquerading behind human rights discourse inflicted upon the American Indian at the turn of the twentieth century. Whenever law is referred to inside the novel, it contaminates the landscape, the images provoked and the individuals within the scene Nanapush relays to Lulu. Consider the following two passages, one detailing the healing power of storytelling as signification and the other condemning the destructive power of the ‘legal word’:

“My tongue grew thick in my mouth when I’d sipped all the water. My throat clutched and my eyes itched for sleep. I did not stop. I talked on and on until you lost yourself inside the flow of it, until you entered the swell and ebb and did not sink but were sustained. I talked beyond sense- by morning the sounds I made were stupid mumbles without meaning or connection. But you were lulled by the roll of my voice.”⁴¹

“Then he pulled out the annual fee lists and foreclosure notices sent by the Agent and showed us how most families, at the end of this long winter, were behind in what they owed, how some had lost their allotments. We traced the list until we found the names we sought- Pillager, Kashpaw, Nanapush. All there, figures and numbers, and all impossible. We all stared without feeling at the amounts due before summer. We watched as Damien unfolded and smoothed the map flat upon the table. In the dizzy smell of coffee roasting, of bannock cooking, we examined the lines and circles of the homesteads paid up-

³⁹ Catherine Rainwater, “Ethnic Signs in Erdrich’s *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace*,” in *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, ed. Allan Richard Chavkin (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 145–46.

⁴⁰ Rainwater, 148.

⁴¹ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 167.

Morrisey, Pukwan, Hat, Lazarres everywhere. They were colored green. The lands that were gone out of the tribe- to deaths with no heirs, to sales, to the lumber company- were painted a pale and rotten pink. Those in question, a sharper yellow. At the center of a bright square was Matchimanito, a small blue triangle I could cover with my hand.”⁴²

The mouth gains physical agency in the first passage, where law and legality have no space to roam and contaminate their surroundings, enabling the imagery of the tide to sustain itself throughout and evoke the natural landscape. Nanapush’s “stupid mumbles” gain meaning not through any preordained systems of signification, but through their ability to heal Lulu’s pain and establish her identity (and his by extension). Here, the reader formally witnesses an evolution of individual identity and freedom vis-à-vis storytelling. The legal constructions of personhood inflicted upon the community in the passage that follows removes this version of agency and individual freedom, enabling the reader to witness how law contaminates not only the narrative style, and Nanapush’s imagery, but Fleur, Nanapush, Eli and Margaret’s individual freedom as they “trace” the list of condemned names. “We traced/we all stared without feeling/we watched/we examined” are the actions provoked by the written word. These actions lack the capacity for empathy (“stared without feeling”) instead relying on objective, quasi-scientific (“traced/examined”) bodily responses. Legality sets limits on empathy and understanding, replacing it with law’s objective scaffold which names and divides individual and collective communities into quantifiable sections. While Nanapush’s *telling* heals, just as it healed Lulu’s illness after she nearly froze to death in the woods, legal discourse confines and condemns, breaking identity apart in order to make room for the new version of personhood anticipated by the land allotment acts and the government treaties set in place to craft ‘acceptable’ American Indian citizenship.

The construction of personhood through paper instead of flesh is a phenomenon alluded to as Nanapush throughout the course of his narration. Legality continues contaminating Nanapush’s storytelling and natural imagery, and once more the image of paper predominates the overall critique that a paper personhood has nothing to do with actual identity:

“...but once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying, a blizzard of legal forms, a waste of ink by the gallon, a correspondence to which there is no end or reason. That’s when I began to see what we were becoming, and the years have borne me out: a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-space documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match.”⁴³

Pens are weaponized to end “the lives of Indians” while paper provokes a blizzard, freezing everyone in their place. “There is no end or reason,” says Nanapush as he removes the rationality grounding the bureaucratic process by showing that in the end the community and its individual actors become nothing but the paper inscribing them: “a tribe of pressed trees.” The Indian quite literally becomes an object inside law’s version of acceptable personhood. Nanapush’s realization that his tribe was literally becoming paper, stored inside an indiscriminate

⁴² Erdrich, 173.

⁴³ Erdrich, 225.

government office, positions his narrative as the only alternative to utter silencing and destruction of his community. Eric Cheyfitz makes the bold claim that “until the 1980s the dominant approach in the field of American Indian literatures was the ethnographic-formal. It places a strong emphasis on the formal or aesthetic properties of Native texts in limited cultural contexts, while deemphasizing or ignoring the social, political, and historical contexts in which U.S. American Indian literatures take shape.”⁴⁴ A turn to the social, political and historical contexts not only enables the reader to better comprehend how these contexts affect community life and individual survival, they also incite the ethical listening, and reading, previously mentioned.

Erdrich’s choice to have Nanapush enter inside the very legal system he spends most of his narrative blaming for the destruction of his community and lifestyle reveals that resistance *to* the law can often start from law. Nanapush willingly enters into the legal system, using paper as proof of a different kind of possession: Lulu, and by extension his newly formed family unit:

For I did stand for tribal chairman, as you know, defeating Pukwan last year. To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home. Against all the gossip, the pursed lips, the laughter, I produced the papers from the church records to prove I was your father, the one who had the right to say where you went to school and that you should come home.”⁴⁵

The word “right” ironically condemns the false documentation Nanapush searches for, a falsity that the reader is immediately aware of, since we know he is not Lulu’s father, or grandfather for that matter. The paper proofs, the “records” of Lulu’s history, are entirely false, thus initiating another subtle critique on the language of rights codified inside these “official” documents. Erdrich mocks the very idea of ‘legal proof’ reemphasizes the novel’s derisive undertones as it defines the legal sphere as inherently faulty and fabricated. Since law-keeping records are eons away from actual truth here, the “official” marker immediately collapses and all history becomes unofficial.

The novel begins with loss and ends with a reunification, a strengthening. The invisible ones are made visible once more, oddly enough through Nanapush’s scheming ability to infiltrate the government and produce the papers he so fought against. The law, in other words, is subject to its own unmaking as its subjugated others learn how to manipulate it for their own ends. A scene of reunification ends the novel as Nanapush, Margaret and Lulu embrace one another: “We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind.”⁴⁶ The “creaking oaks” and the “fierce dry wind” leave the reader in the world of sound and nature, as the bodies of Nanapush and Margaret become oaks, actual trees, and not the paper-tribe he fears becoming. Storytelling, as Nanapush consistently reminds the reader, contains healing properties, able to save individuals and communities from the brink of

⁴⁴ Eric Cheyfitz, “The (Post)Colonial Construction of Indian Country: U.S. American Indian Literature and Federal Indian Law,” in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States since 1945*, ed. Eric Cheyfitz, *The Columbia Guides to Literature since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3–4.

⁴⁵ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 225.

⁴⁶ Erdrich, 226.

extinction, while the law transforms individuals into paper-objects. While the Dawes Act and multiple allotment treaties placed legal and financial limits on land, seeking to break up tribal life for communities across the United States, storytelling became a necessary engine fighting against invisibility. Yet the historical trajectory of land loss and socioeconomic disparity run parallel to a developing a storytelling practice which transforms the reader's ethical interpretation of historical and legal developments, forcing us to reconceptualize the version of personhood perpetuated upon these communities as the only means through which to gain access to the rights promised by the nation.

Reframing Empathy through Pauline: Dual Identity, Traumatic Witnessing and New Historical Consciousness

The conflicting narrations inside *Tracks* reveal how dual identities are constructed and imposed by the assimilatory sociopolitical landscape of the early-twentieth century. Pauline's narration provokes a reconceptualization of citizenship and civic identity with respect to the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 (when *Tracks* ends) and the assimilatory practices grounding the American Indian boarding schools, while also defining the borders of the citizen/non-citizen divide. Furthermore, her narration exists in stark opposition to Nanapush's, establishing yet another Erdrichian contrast for the reader to begin the process of witnessing. While Nanapush's narration was charged with mapping the legal and historical trajectory of American Indian decline and community, Pauline's focuses on contamination, corporality and abjection. She details the mental and bodily effects upon the individual within the sociopolitical history Nanapush traces. The duality of inclusion/exclusion expressed by the legal version of controlled citizenship perpetuated by the reservation system, citizenship acts, and assimilatory legal policies, was built slowly, over the course of sixty years and continues to infect American Indian and US relations for many years.⁴⁷ Pauline's narrative makes this duality, and its negative impact on individual identity, visible in ways that Nanapush's narration leaves obscure at times.

Historians view allotment as intimately connected to citizenship since, as Jason Edward Black argues, "allotment opened up the question of whether or not American Indians could attain citizenship and exemplified the identity duality of US citizenship logic for American Indians wherein the government posited a rhetoric of assimilation alongside a policy of segregation. The Dawes Act answered this question by effectively blocking Native empowerment through full inclusion in the US civic sphere."⁴⁸ Although the metaphor of duality and dual identity is initially represented through the dueling narrations inside *Tracks*, within Pauline's narrative the reader begins witnessing the traumatic effects of cultural assimilation on the body and mind of a sexually confused and disturbed young American Indian girl. The connection between assimilation, confused sexual desire and bodily mutilation initiates a new understanding of the novel's traumatic register as it relates to the history of assimilation policies, as the physical body is transformed and mutilated by law and the sociopolitical assimilatory landscape.

While Nanapush's narrative sheds awareness on the destruction of the American Indian community and culture within the discourse of legal personhood desired by the US government, Pauline's provokes a different kind of awareness on the reader's behalf. The reader is made to

⁴⁷ Black, *American Indians and the Rhetoric of Removal and Allotment*, 14.

⁴⁸ Black, 102.

witness the how assimilation and the legal policies Nanapush discusses cause irreparable damages to an individual's (the American Indian woman, specifically) sense of self-identity, both physically and emotionally. This intense focus on the individual is important in a novel seeking to expose the failures of the very legal policies set in place to construct a version of nationally accepted personhood for the American Indian. Ironically, the path to citizenship grounded upon individualism is the one that Pauline follows, and through her path we witness the utter destruction she leaves behind. Pauline's linear, and outwardly more 'western' narrative becomes the evidence of the historical trauma promoted by the legal policies Nanapush's storytelling presents and battles against. The two narrators work side by side to create a fuller and richer picture of law's impact upon the American Indian subject, from the community to the specific individual.

Within Pauline's narrative, an intense trauma emerges, and with the construction of this trauma, new demands are made upon the reader. Whereas Nanapush's narration provoked a model of narrative empathy grounded upon a historical understanding of legal policy, Pauline's narration urges that we witness the physical and emotional violence perpetuated by those policies. Pauline's trauma originates through her self-perceived racial and cultural invisibility, and culminates with her witnessing Fleur's rape when she is at the gateway of puberty. Her narration requires a version of narrative empathy where a reader becomes a responsible witness to the effects of history and law upon an individual. However, this witnessing is predicated on limiting the reader's access to the objectification of, and identification with, the victim or victims. Pauline's crude and often abject characterization resists identification altogether, provoking a different model for narrative empathy, one LaCapra defines as "desirable empathy" or empathy that promotes the feeling of "unsettlement."⁴⁹ As discussed earlier, this new version of empathy requires a level of historical understanding and an abandonment of the vicarious reading experience predicated on a victim's suffering. Erdrich uses Pauline, a most unlikeable protagonist, to prevent a reader's appropriation of a victim's suffering by constructing a version of narrative empathy grounded upon a profound understanding of the past and its effects on the individual.

Empathetic unsettlement, according to LaCapra, is the experience of trauma that resists identification with the victim's position. Although "one may imaginatively put oneself in the victim's position," one nevertheless respects "the difference between self and other, recognizing that one cannot take the victim's place or speak in the victim's voice."⁵⁰ Empathy, in other words, "takes one out of oneself toward the other without eliminating or assimilating the difference or alterity of the other" and should not be conflated with "an incorporation of the other into one's own self or understood instrumentally as a means of discovering one's own 'authentic' identity."⁵¹ An empathetic response requires recognizing the victim's suffering and understanding the history which led to suffering but actively refusing identification with the victim or superimposing that victim's suffering upon one's own version of suffering, no matter how similar they may seem. Pauline's narrative reflects LaCapra's desirable empathy since her characterization purposely resists the reader's access to identification and objectification. Simply

⁴⁹ LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 135.

⁵⁰ LaCapra, 125.

⁵¹ LaCapra, 76–77.

put: we do not like her or understand her. Yet, her narration establishes a model of narrative empathy for reading trauma that avoids a reader's desire for identification with the trauma victim and focuses on understanding trauma as a product of history and, in this case, law. Nanapush's narrative helps establish this model of empathy as his engagement with legal policy and history provide the subtext for Pauline's traumatized body and mind. Her body becomes the body of trauma, the body upon which traumatic experiences and memories are written upon, but at no point is this made outwardly evident through signification. There is no direct representation of the traumatized body and mind in *Tracks*. However, Pauline's disjointed narrative style and the experiences she relates through representational voids are ways in which trauma enters the novel. Reading Pauline as a victim of cultural trauma illuminates how the process sociopolitical and cultural assimilation causes a traumatic identity lapse, producing a confused identity that, like a violation, was perpetuated upon the American Indian woman during the early part of the twentieth century. Pauline's narrative showcases how, with the establishment of an assimilated personhood, the American Indian subject is destroyed entirely, physically and emotionally.

Traumatic witnessing

Trauma scholars have consistently linked traumatic experience to bodily harm, even if the victim's physical body was left undamaged. As Kai Erikson recalls,

“trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body- or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind- that results in injury or some other disturbance. Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape... The classic symptoms of trauma range from feelings of restlessness and agitation at one end of the emotional scale to feelings of numbness and bleakness at the other. Traumatized people often scan the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger, breaking into explosive rages and reacting with a start to ordinary sights and sounds... Above all, trauma involves a continual reliving of some wounding experiences in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, and in a compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances.”⁵²

From the moment Pauline begins her narration, the process of “reliving wounding experiences” is initiated, as she narrative begins with Fleur Pillager, the center of her turmoil, trauma and frustrated sexual identity. Although Pauline, like Nanapush, begins narrating the past, using the past tense to evoke a sense of history, she soon reverts to the present tense as she warns against Misshepeshu, the lake man/monster: “Our mothers warn us that we'll think he's handsome, for he appears with green eyes, copper skin, a mouth tender as a child's. But if you fall into his arms, he sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins.”⁵³ What this temporal inconsistency demonstrates is that she, unlike Nanapush, has no audience, no listener, for her story. Yet she is telling this to someone, a reader-witness who is immediately brought into her web as she unravels a community setting at the beginning by refusing the “I” pronoun like her predecessor. Moreover, her temporal

⁵² Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 59.

⁵³ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 11.

inconsistency perhaps reveals a confused narration/narrator, one who the reader instantly mistrusts, especially after Chapter One. This mistrust solidifies as Pauline undermines the sense of community she builds almost immediately, at the end of the opening passage when she sets her story against the story others might expect (i.e. Nanapush's):

“**We** know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, **we** followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out... the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night **we** heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough. By day her silence and the wide grin she threw to bring down **our** guard made **us** frightened. Some thought that Fleur Pillager should be driven from the reservation but not a single person who spoke like that had the nerve. And finally, when people were just about to get together and throw her out, she left on her own and didn't come back all summer. That's what **I'm** telling about.”⁵⁴

As the “we” drastically changes to “I” near the end of this passage, an elimination of community occurs, an erasure we experience throughout Pauline's narration as her physical and emotional identities lose shape entirely. The sense of communal exchange and belonging open the narrative, and are soon lost as she recalls Fleur's rape in the same opening passage. In recalling the rape, her traumatic moment of witnessing sets in and marks a loss of the communal ‘we.’

Pauline reflects on her racial composition and cultural identity throughout Chapter Two, reflections opening the traumatic wounds she seeks to defend through her dire methods of assimilation later on in the novel. During her first mention of racial identity, she connects her own individuality to her community's, to the Puyats: “We were mixed-bloods skimmers in the clan for which the name was lost. In the spring before the winter that took so many Chippewa. I bothered my father into sending me south, to the white town. I had decided to learn the lace-making trade from nuns.”⁵⁵ The initial description of her racial identity is interjected by a memory of her father telling her she will “fade out there,” and “won't be an Indian once [she returns].” This is the first and only mention of her father in the novel and Pauline concludes this interaction through an adamant refusal to return to her community as desire to become white heightens:

‘Then maybe I won't come back’ I told him. I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside of us. I would not speak our language. In English, I told my father we should build an outhouse with a door that swung open and shut.”⁵⁶

The refusal to speak “our language” and her yearning for privacy (as reflected through the outhouse with a closing door) are two initial ways she sets herself apart from her American Indian community, and her father. Erdrich represents this desire for whiteness through a shift in

⁵⁴ Erdrich, 12.

⁵⁵ Erdrich, 14.

⁵⁶ Erdrich, 14.

narrative tone, a mutation that gives rise to the autobiography genre. After Pauline reveals her desire to be like her “pure Canadian” grandfather, the community shaping her disappears and her narrative unravels into a linear autobiography: “I was fifteen, alone, and so poor-looking I was invisible to most customers and to the men in the shop...I blended into the stained brown walls, a skinny big-nosed girl with staring eyes.”⁵⁷ Pauline’s narration begins right after she detaches herself from her father, her language and her racial composition. It is also at this very moment that the “we” vanishes and with it any chance for communal identity.

The American autobiographical genre has been defined as a genre determining who is a ‘real’ person, suggesting that genre is responsible for qualifying a definition of personhood as grounded upon individualism.⁵⁸ Pauline’s narration differs greatly from Nanapush’s *telling*, whose goal is to reestablish communal ties and integrate Lulu back inside those ties. Pauline, on the other hand, uses her narrative to position herself as an individual, set apart from the community. This positioning reveals the relationship between autobiography and the abstract principles of democratic nationalism becomes central to understanding American autobiography and also suggests that American autobiographies have political and ethical designs.⁵⁹ Pauline’s desire to craft an autobiography, as she removes herself from her racial and cultural identity, demonstrates how only the erasure of the self can emerge through the incorporation of assimilation’s core principles. The power of self-creation, so important in establishing a model for civic identities, is ironically defined through Pauline’s invisibility and abandonment of personhood. “I melted back to nothing,” she writes, “part of the walls and tables,” detaching herself from the flesh-and-blood individuals surrounding her.⁶⁰ If the autobiographical genre is about the act of self-representation, what happens when that self is eliminated? What is left?

Although Nanapush initiates the focus on loss in the novel’s first chapter, Pauline’s narrative continues this description, first by describing her own invisibility, and later by representing Fleur’s rape through the absence of signification. Erdrich uses Pauline’s narration to enact a critique on legal assimilation policies by showcasing her collapse of self, as fostered by invisibility and the promotion of spiritual death. Pauline’s descriptions of her own physicality, permanently are always positioned next to the language of absence, loss and invisibility, to further illuminate that dislocation and isolation from the community leads to a confused identity. Unlike Nanapush, through whom Erdrich is able to refashion a new understanding of American Indian history within the national project, she uses Pauline as a case study to demonstrate how the focus on the individual driving assimilatory policies (from allotment to the boarding schools), caused irreparable emotional, spiritual and cultural damage, making the path towards individualism impossible.⁶¹ Erdrich uses Pauline’s religious calling as a means of exposing the

⁵⁷ Erdrich, 15–16.

⁵⁸ Rachael McLennan, *American Autobiography*, BAAS Paperbacks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 4.

⁵⁹ McLennan, 8.

⁶⁰ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 19.

⁶¹ Seema Kurup, *Understanding Louise Erdrich*, Understanding Contemporary American Literature (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 14.

trauma forced upon American Indian youth as the U.S. government began setting up the Indian boarding school system in the late nineteenth century. Although Ward Churchill's work, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*, did a great deal to uncover the horrendous treatment and conditions of American Indian children who were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in these schools, there is still much to be learned about the impact that these schools had both on individual children and on their communities. Erdrich uses Pauline's traumatized identity to represent the debilitating mental and bodily toll (on the individual) taken by religious and cultural assimilation policies. Although Pauline "chooses" to leave her father and her home, "choosing" also to become a religious follower, through her failed autobiography, the reader gains awareness of what these "choices" truly entail.

Soon after she moves to Argus, she meets Fleur, who takes Pauline under her wing so to speak. Pauline's relationship with Fleur is fraught with jealousy and admiration. She tracks Fleur's every movement and is initially inspired by her ability to maneuver inside the world of men, gambling and winning night after night in their nighttime card matches inside Kozka's Meats store, where both women worked. One night, while the men drank themselves into a stupor, the card game turned violent, as the men followed Fleur into the stockpen where she was about to feed a sow. Pauline's witnesses the men's violent intentions as she recalls that "they drank, steeped in the whiskey's fire, and planned with their eyes things they couldn't say aloud."⁶² What follows is a virtually incomprehensible and lengthy scene which tells as much as it obscures, hiding and silencing the violence perpetuated on Fleur Pillager:

"Fleur had backed into the angle of splintered wood just beyond and when Lily tried to jostle past, the sow raised her powerful neck and suddenly struck, quick and hard as a snake. She plunged at Lily's thick waist and snatched a mouthful of shirt. She lunged again, caught him lower so that he grunted in pained surprise. He seemed to ponder, breathing deep. Then he launched his huge bulk in a swimmer's dive. The sow screamed as his body smacked over hers. She rolled, striking out with her knife-sharp hooves and Lily fathered himself upon her, took her foot-long face by the ears, and scraped her snout and cheeks against the trestles of the bin. He hurled the sow's tight skull against an iron post, but instead of knocking her dead, he works her from her dream. She reared, shrieked, and then he squeezed her so hard that they leaned into each other and posed in standing embrace. They bowed jerkily, as if to being. Then his arms swung and flailed. She sank her black fangs into his shoulder, claspng him, dancing him forward and

"In many of Erdrich's texts, dislocation and isolation from the community is evident. Many Ojibwe ultimately distanced themselves from their Native roots and embraced a decidedly Western way of being. Where many elders remain elegiac and reverent when describing the terrific loss suffered by their people, the younger generation has found interests outside of the community, in the world at large. Instead of putting emphasis on the "we" of the clan, their focus is on "I," the individual apart from the community, in characteristic "each man for himself" Western, capitalist fashion. This privileging of the self—this self-centeredness—is in direct opposition to the traditional Ojibwe idea of communal living. Part of this emotional and cultural retreat from Ojibwe values resulted initially from Catholic mission schools and then from the Indian boarding school experience of many Ojibwe children, an assimilation practice adopted by the U.S. government with the goal of deracination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The emotional, spiritual, and cultural toll on these children, their progeny, and the generations to follow is a key concern in many of Erdrich's texts."

⁶² Erdrich, *Tracks*, 24.

backward through the pen. Their steps picked up pace, went wild. The two dipped as one, box-stepped, tripped one another. She ran her split foot through his hair. He grabbed her kinked tail. They went down and came up, the same shoe and then the same color until the men couldn't tell one from the other and in that light Fleur was able to vault the gates, swing down, hit gravel. The men saw, yelled, and chased her at a dead run to the smokehouse. And Lily too, once the sow gave up in disgust and freed him. That is when I should have gone to Fleur, saved her, thrown myself on Dutch the way Russell did once he unlocked my arms.... I closed my eyes and put my hands on my ears, so there is nothing more to describe but what I couldn't block out: those yells from Russell, Fleur's hoarse breath, so loud it filled me, her cry in the old language and our names repeated over and over among the words."⁶³

Fleur and the sow merge together here, as the struggles of the woman become the struggles of the animal. Throughout *Tracks* the descriptions of Fleur are "almost always animal-like; she is Erdrich's character who acts most out her own transformational power or who, we might say, is most herself."⁶⁴ Many scholars, such as Paula Gunn Allen, have alluded to this concept of transformation, a relationship developing between human and nonhuman worlds linking humans to animals.⁶⁵ In coupling Fleur with the sow in this scene, a spiritual reality takes over the violent material reality facing her as the men unleash their attack. Furthermore, the reader is made aware of this scene through Pauline's narration: we see what occurs as *she* sees it. Her refusal to name exactly what happens to Fleur, her unwillingness to describe the rape leads her to focus on sow's struggle with Lily. In redirecting her focus, she emphasizes her existence between two worlds: the spiritual and the material one. Does she link Fleur to the sow in order to make sense of the traumatic witnessing she cannot comprehend? Or does she seek the world of the non-human in order to protect her own innocence (and by extension Fleur's) by entering inside a new system of representation?

Erdrich sets Pauline up as the victim of secondary trauma, constructing the initial foundation for Pauline's confused sexuality, her sexual misuse of Sophie and Eli, and her conversion and horrific methods of self-punishment. The absence of Fleur's physicality from this scene, and throughout the novel, intersects with another absence: the act of rape itself remains unnamed and silenced. In refusing to focus on Fleur's body and in not naming the traumatic violation, the violence lacks textual presence, preventing the reader's vicariously witnessing, yet nonetheless entering into historical discourse by exposing the violation in new way which resists the rape victim's objectification. Moreover, although Fleur becomes pregnant soon after, the perpetrators have no claim upon her pregnancy or Lulu's fatherhood; in fact, Lulu's father is conflated either with Missepeshu, the waterman spirit, or Eli, Fleur's lover. The silent mode of narration filtering through this scene of violence, however, breaks as soon as Pauline "close[s] [her eyes] and put[s] [her] hands on [her ears]" attempting to block both sound and vision.

⁶³ Erdrich, 25–26.

⁶⁴ Annette Van Dyke, "Of Vision Questions and Spirit Guardians: Female Power in the Novels of Louise Erdrich," in *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, ed. Allan Richard Chavkin (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

⁶⁵ Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 22–23. Fleur is constantly linked to the animal world, both in this scene, and throughout the novel. As she gives birth, for example, she is linked to the bear.

Fleur's breath and cry erupt, demanding an attention Pauline can no longer block out or reconstruct using animalistic transformations, allowing for the violence to finally be heard and experienced by the young witness. As a direct witness to a Fleur's pain and suffering, Pauline's first sexual experience is embedded in the world of violent rape and struggle, an experience with lasting effects on her psyche and burgeoning identity.

The reader is prevented from directly witnessing a victim's violation here, as Fleur's violent attack gains but a hazy, altered description, uncontained by a clear system of signification. Narrative, or written, representation remarkably fails as Pauline relocates her focus on the harsh sounds made by Fleur, sounds contained by the "old language" and not by the one the reader faces on the page. The refusal to textually represent the corporeal violence perpetuated upon Fleur prevents vicarious witnessing of pain on the reader's behalf, making the version of vicarious empathy (as driven by the other's suffering) inaccessible. The lack of representation surrounding her bodily suffering enables Fleur to begin signifying "the unspeakable- she signifies what we can never access: that is, her voice, her point of view on the dispossession of a traditional Anishinabe way of life."⁶⁶ Fleur's history signifies the absence and loss of her community, land and traditions. The scene detailing her rape ends with a cry, contained by an ancient language the reader cannot comprehend. Pauline's narration of Fleur's violation regulates the reader to the periphery, where representation, and any attempt to understand, is yielded. Pauline prevents the reader's facility of identification with a victim by obstructing representational access to the victim's pain and suffering. Pauline's narrative mode proposes that the written experience of trauma should run parallel to an emerging historical understanding, or historical consciousness, on the reader's behalf; one embedded inside a newly found awareness that images of loss and violation often lack a concrete, textual representation, imitating the silencing mechanisms employed at the cusp of America's assimilation era. In limiting Fleur's objectification, Pauline provokes a rethinking of empathy grounded upon a reader's newly forged historical consciousness. As LaCapra suggests, the conflation of empathy with identification can lead to "compassion fatigue or numbing, which is presumably caused by the excess of media images or representations of violence and trauma."⁶⁷ In not permitting this conflation to occur, Erdrich asks her readers to understand suffering as it is connected to historical change, to legal policies, and to forced assimilation.

Oddly enough, this reformulation of narrative empathy sets Pauline up as a traumatic subject, and, through her, we learn how the body and mind suffer the extreme limits of trauma imposed by the contradicting tug of war perpetuated on by both Christian and Native beliefs. Her un-likeability obstructs the process of identification and through this obstruction a new version of empathy rises. This version is founded on understanding how specific sociopolitical, sociocultural, and religious policies corrupt both body and mind. Pauline ends her first chapter with three strange narrative instances:

"Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted. Big spidery, and rough, with

⁶⁶ DePriest, "Once Upon a Time, Today," 252.

⁶⁷ LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 134.

sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards. It comes through the eyes, too, belligerent, darkest brown, eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person”

“In my dreams, I look straight back at Fleur, at the men. I am no longer the watcher on the dark sill, the skinny girl. The blood draws us back, as if it runs through a vein of earth.”

“It comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning. They get the middle wrong too. They only know they don’t know anything.”⁶⁸

The revelations made by the previous passages are threefold: (1) Pauline is haunted by Fleur’s rape as the scene infiltrates her subconscious dreams, (2) the connection of the bloodline to perseverance and a refocus on the pronoun “us,” demonstrates an attempted reconstruction of community through suffering (3) and the infiltration of the “they” that do not know how to transcribe history, the “they” that lack historical consciousness. Although Pauline’s narrative loses its coherence when she detaches herself from the very bloodline and community she deems necessary in overcoming trauma, this moment of subconscious introspection, as she details her dreams, reveals her as a victim of secondary trauma. There exists a clear disconnect between ‘the history they write’ and ‘the history we tell’ in the last passage above, implying that the outsiders, those not part of the powerful bloodline she details, simply get the story wrong. This is perhaps one of Pauline’s most lucid moments, a lucidity that fades as she further disconnects herself from her community, becoming the outsider she describes. Oddly enough, the line “Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth,” mirrors, while strikingly contrasting, something Nanapush says to Lulu: ““Power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick and liable to deceive.”⁶⁹ In this instance Pauline’s version of innate power as connected to the bloodline, her bloodline, demonstrates her desire to be part of an ethnic community. The problem, however, is as Nanapush reveals: what happens when the community’s power is diminished? How can one survive in a state of powerlessness? This powerlessness is what turns Pauline against herself and her cultural roots. Her ‘choice’ to become an outsider, to convert and experience self-inflicted bodily pain and suffering, all contribute to the fragmentation of her self-identity. This breaking down of identity is, on one hand, perpetuated by the sexual trauma she witnessed when just fifteen years old and, on the other, by the sense of powerlessness she felt as she witnessed her caregiver’s rape.

Trauma scholars posit that an individual’s “lack of proper integration of intensely emotionally arousing experiences into the memory system results in dissociation and the formation of traumatic memories.”⁷⁰ Although trauma can create community, as Kai Erikson recalls, Pauline’s sense of identity is shattered through her position as witness, and while the potential of community arises in the beginning, it is quickly abandoned as she has her first unsuccessful sexual encounter with Napoleon and begins pursuing Eli, Fleur’s lover, in an

⁶⁸ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 31.

⁶⁹ Erdrich, 177.

⁷⁰ Beseel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 163.

unexpected way.⁷¹ In other words, she replicates her own sexual becoming by turning to the only alternative she knows: one marked by distress and powerlessness. The first time she and Napoleon encounter one another, Pauline describes the scene in the following manner:

“With my clothes gone, I saw all the bones pushing at my flesh, I tried to shut my eyes, but couldn’t keep them closed. Feeling that if I did not hold his gaze he could look at me any way he wanted. So we pressed together with our eyes open, starting like adversaries, but we did not go through with it after all. He stopped for some reason, nothing we said or did, but like a dog sensing the presence of a tasteless poison in his food... In my picture, we coupled in a blinding darkness, moved too fast to think.”⁷²

The incomplete sexual act is met with a recreation of the act inside her head. As she reinvents the scene, she focuses on pleasure and desire, feeling the actual encounter lacks and something that, upon further reflection, she realizes she can never attain: “I hadn’t liked seeing myself naked, plucked and skinned. I had already satisfied my yearning curiosity.”⁷³ The prevalence of animal imagery inside Pauline’s first sexual experience (the dog/plucked/skinned) recalls the scene inside the sow’s pen, where an animal’s body acts as a stand in for Fleur’s victimized body. Furthermore, as she begins lusting for Eli, she devises a scheme in which Sophie, Bernadette’s young daughter and someone Pauline watches over and cares for (a role reminiscent to Fleur’s with respect to Pauline), becomes a necessary engine for her to live out her sexual fantasy. In describing her intentions, we notice that Pauline understands sex only through objectification. In other words, she detaches the individual from the sexual encounter while also making herself into the perpetrator:

“...as I crouched in the cove of leaves, I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself. I stood her in the broken straws and she stepped over Eli, one leg on either side of his chest... I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits. I let them stop eventually, I don’t know how or when...As if cut from puppet strings, Eli lunged to the bank and clutched his trousers to his stomach, worked his way through the reeds and staggered past me, so close I could have touched him, and on into the darker trees.”⁷⁴

Her pitilessness demonstrates a turning off of emotions, a distancing from the empathetic register as she puppeteers the lovers into submission. Additionally, this pitilessness directly contrasts with Nanapush’s expression of pity as he finds himself unable to avenge Margaret’s vicious perpetrator, Lazarre, (after he cuts off her braids): “Then” Nanapush recalls, “pity entered me. Even to erase Margaret’s shame, I couldn’t do the thing.”⁷⁵ This juxtaposition serves to underline

⁷¹ Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 183–99.

⁷² Erdrich, *Tracks*, 73.

⁷³ Erdrich, 74.

⁷⁴ Erdrich, 84.

⁷⁵ Erdrich, 122.

how the ability to feel pity for another, even for a perpetrator, preserves Nanapush inside the moral realm, a realm dictated by his communal beliefs. Pauline becomes a vehicle for the reader's empathetic understanding of Fleur as well as herself, as subjected to the process of legal assimilation and policies dictating acceptable versions of personhood. Therefore, Pauline's abandonment of her community and her immoral decisions, can be read as existing within the boundaries of empathy, as Erdrich composes her as a destabilized subject vis-à-vis the documentation of the legal policies affecting personhood.

Oddly enough, Nanapush feels pity for an actual perpetrator, a man who cut off Margaret's most prized possession, a braid she has grown for decades, while Pauline turns off her ability to feel anything for an innocent Sophie, a child on the verge of losing her virginity due to Pauline's trickeries. Pity and empathy are not the same, however, pity does predicate the ability to feel empathy. Without pity, there can be no compassion, as Adam Smith states in his theory of moral sentiments.⁷⁶ Furthermore, one's ability to imagine another's pain or sorrow is the source of the fellow-feeling building the foundation for a democratic society. Pauline's pitilessness, in other words, demonstrates how her traumatic witnessing and her desire to assimilate destroy her capacity to nurture the moral sentiments grounding a functioning society. In other words, the long process of attaining citizenship for the American Indian, and thus gaining the personhood required for the attainment of basic human rights, involves a process of destroying empathy for one's own ethnic community. Erdrich uses Pauline's journey to critique individualism by suggesting that it destroys one's empathetic capacity, or the fellow-feeling necessary in building the democracy envisioned by the U.S. governments' assimilation policies during the early twentieth century. In fact, the only individuals these policies effectively construct are ones who lack moral grounding and empathetic capabilities. The "I don't know how or when" throws Pauline into the world of the outsider once and for all, the same world she distinguishes between at the end of Chapter Two, when separating "those who don't know anything" from Fleur and herself. Furthermore, she also detaches herself from the sexual experience by becoming an observer, one who watches, mimicking the witness position she inhabited during Fleur's rape. The difference now is that she wills the encounter between Sophie and Eli, gaining power over the situation by becoming the perpetrator. She crouches isolated behind a bush, as an object, unable to experience on her own; an object necessitating others in order to live out a deviant sexual fantasy whose sole purpose is to destroy relationships, romantic connections and ultimately, lives. Sophie is but a young girl, unprepared for the adult scene her body unwittingly partakes in. Likewise, Eli is devoted to Fleur, and thus risks his family for something he does not even want. Yet Pauline's mission is clear: to ruin Sophie's innocence, just as her own innocence was tainted years ago, while also devastating the family unit (Fleur-Eli-Lulu) being established as a plausible alternative to assimilatory individualism.

Stylistically, Pauline's permanent shift to the outsider position is detailed through a shift in tone, temporality and focus, sharply contrasting Nanapush's storytelling style. Jace Weaver remarks that Pauline's chapters are linear and thus the reader can witness her how easily she moves from the reservation to the convent. Weaver concludes that this movement between places that drives her narrative forward, especially as she abandons herself and welcomes her new faith

⁷⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments: To Which Is Added, a Dissertation on the Origin of Languages*, ed. Dugald Stewart, Bohn's Standard Library (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1911), 5, <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004460984>.

and assimilated status, following a rather straight path to Christianity.⁷⁷ Although these shifts are clear throughout the novel, her straight path to gates of a Christian heaven is less convincing. Her path is anything *but* straight. In fact, it is her constant struggle with this path that makes her a compelling character and, more importantly, a subject for trauma studies within the American Indian context. Pauline's dreams replay the scene of sexual violence over and over, without pause. "Every night," she writes, "I was witness when the men slapped Fleur's mouth, beat her, entered and rode her. I felt all. My shrieks poured from her mouth and my blood from her wounds."⁷⁸ Her dreams also connect her back to the past, to Fleur and to her community, once again her mouth and blood are connected to Fleur's, inspiring a sense of traumatic community she quickly undermines as she awakes. Only inside her dreams does Pauline envision being connected to Fleur, and by extension to a community. Upon waking, that connectivity vanishes and she works hard to weaken every twinkling of its reappearance. What the novel teaches us through Pauline is how to listen to and access an unnamed trauma. As many trauma scholars have pointed out, "empathy plays a central role in listening to stories of trauma," and Pauline's movement away from the empathetic register suggests that her empathy has been tampered with by her status as secondary witness to the violence perpetuated against Fleur.⁷⁹ Unable to make sense of the past, she manifests her trauma outwards, contaminating others with her confused sexual identity.

On the Brink of Abjection: Cultural Trauma and the Problematic Personhood/Citizen Divide

Pauline is both a victim of secondary trauma and of a cultural trauma perpetuated by the assimilation policies employed inside late nineteenth to early twentieth century definitions of personhood (as connected to citizenship) in the United States. The constant allusion to her invisibility, her conversion to Christianity, her conflation of sex and violence, the refusal to acknowledge her daughter Marie, and her self-inflicted bodily suffering, all serve as evidence of the cultural trauma the novel maps. Cultural trauma "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."⁸⁰ Pauline's movement away from her community, marked by her shifting

⁷⁷ Jace Weaver, *Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law, and Culture*, American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series, v. 39 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 98.

"Pauline's [chapters] are much more clearly textual, self-authored, and linear. She is more of an outsider to the tribe, and she basks in this particularity. While she sojourns temporarily in a liminal space, moving back and forth between the worlds of the reservation and the convent, her ultimate direction is clear: she is moving out of the Native community, and upward, to the cloister on the hill and to the gates of a Christian heaven. This direction provides the linear drive to her entire narrative."

⁷⁸ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 66.

⁷⁹ Debra Jackson, "Answering the Call: Crisis Intervention and Rape Survivor Advocacy as Witnessing Trauma," in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*, ed. Monica J. Casper and Eric H. R. Wertheimer (New York: University Press, 2016).

⁸⁰ Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

pronouns and communally-grounded dream-world, demonstrate that she represents more than just an unlikeable character who prefers to assimilate in the most drastic of ways. In fact, through Pauline,

Erdrich offers a character who serves as a testament to those Ojibwe who suffered untold humiliation, confusion, and psychological, emotional, and spiritual fragmentation trying to balance on a cultural hinge between two diametrically opposed worlds. The poignant struggle to come to terms with one's "nativeness" in light of encroaching Western Christian culture and to survive in this new culture is effectively depicted in Pauline's narrative. Her identity crisis, though framed in terms of religious fanaticism and psychological instability, represents a very real part of Ojibwe existence during the time period of the novel. However, the true impact of this kind of emotional struggle can only be felt when considered in the context of the numerous and varied political and economic hardships of the Ojibwe."⁸¹

By understanding Pauline as a product of the assimilatory sociopolitical temporal landscape characterizing the early twentieth century, a body which personal and communal traumas are engraved upon, the concept of cultural genocide begins emerging. The notion of cultural genocide, presented by Ward Churchill, is deeply connected to the policies of assimilation founding the American Indian residential schools.⁸² Pauline's struggles with racial and cultural invisibility shed light on these assimilatory policies, especially she separates further from the members of her community, as she begins her religious conversion. "I must dissolve," she remarks. "I did so eagerly."⁸³ In another instance, soon after she gives birth to Marie, the daughter she never claims, she fuses her religious transformation to a racial mutation: "I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white."⁸⁴ The implicit link drawn between religious conversion and ethnic disappearance underscores the novel's preoccupation with the United States' government colonizing ideology and legal policy. In other words, Pauline becomes a historical case study alerting the reader to the dangers of forced individualism as defined through one of the predominant assimilation requirements: religious conversion.

As a victim of early onset psychological trauma, both through her witnessing of rape and through her self-proclaimed invisibility, Pauline's desire to separate herself from her father and later from Fleur, Margaret and Nanapush (and even her daughter), parallels the rational guiding most the nineteenth-century's liberal constructions of American Indian personhood in the United States. As Churchill suggests, three principle themes guided the formulation of federal Indian policies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "(1) the 'need' for inculcation of individualism among native peoples, (2) that to achieve this end Indians should be universally 'educated' to hold euro-western beliefs and that, (3) all Indians, duly educated and thus

⁸¹ Kurup, *Understanding Louise Erdrich*, 43.

⁸² Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2004), 6–7.

⁸³ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 137.

⁸⁴ Erdrich, 137.

individualized, should be absorbed as citizens into the body politic.”⁸⁵ Through Pauline, Erdrich demonstrates the dangers both of individualism and of body politic absorption through conversion (i.e. religious education). Furthermore, Pauline’s “individual fusion of Christian and Native beliefs leads her to intense, but contradictory and confused, feelings, especially with regard to her sexuality.”⁸⁶ Her sexual confusion marks the initiation of her psychological trauma, yet this trauma also provokes an unstable identity which she attempts to stabilize through religious conversion. Abandoning her cultural ties and communal identity were the only remedies Pauline had, inside her sociopolitical climate, to reconstruct herself. Unfortunately, Erdrich demonstrates that Pauline’s desire to overcome her psychological damage and establish a version of personhood (at least on her own terms) is met with resistance. As an American Indian woman, she simply cannot gain access to any claims on personhood or her own identity. Her identity struggle exposes the overlying cultural trauma arising from legal policies defining citizenship and inclusion within the nation, one responsible for dislocated cultures and individuals. Cultural trauma

“refers to an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole. The Protestant Reformation qualifies as a cultural trauma because of the fundamental threat it posed to the integrity and dominance of the Catholic cultural worldview. The imposition of Western values on colonial societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides additional examples. The exposure of migrating groups to the cultures of the host societies into which they migrate provides still more.”⁸⁷

Part of establishing a national culture, particularly in the United States and Latin America, required the imposition of what is culturally appropriate, thus defining what enters inside a national culture and what is not permitted entry. These cultural delineations also established the boundaries of citizenship, regulating who gains representation and entry inside the national space and who does not. What is significant about the American Indian version of cultural trauma, say as positioned against the African American version, is that it has not been exposed as such. In other words, whereas slavery has secured its “status as trauma” the “seizure of Native Americans’ lands and the partial extermination of their populations” is “not as secured as is slavery.”⁸⁸ Through the characterization of Pauline, Erdrich illustrates how the sociopolitical system governing American Indian subject formation at the turn of the twentieth century led to a deep cultural and psychological trauma, which prevented the formation of self-identity. Pauline, in other words, is a subject destined to fail inside the very system of individualism the historical setting containing her applauds.

⁸⁵ Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man*, xvii.

⁸⁶ Nicholas Sloboda, “Beyond the Iconic Subject: Re-Visioning Louise Erdrich’s Tracks,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 8, no. 3 (1996): 20.

⁸⁷ Neil Smelser, “Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 38.

⁸⁸ Smelser, 36.

The exposition of cultural trauma through Pauline's individual psychological trauma inside *Tracks*, is evidence of the empathetic unsettlement that LaCapra views as necessary for an experience of trauma (on the reader's behalf) which resists voyeuristic identification with the victim, as mentioned in the previous section. Moreover, Erdrich uses abjection to construct Pauline and her physicality, further destabilizing her status as a subject. Julia Kristeva defines abjection as the intermediate realm between the subject and object, characterized primarily by the subject's opposition to itself, or rather, "that of being opposed to I."⁸⁹ Her entry into this world is one which reshapes the reader's relationship with the human body, while also emphasizing the role that assimilation plays in pushing the body outside the limits of subjecthood. The "abjection of the self," Kristeva continues, "would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being."⁹⁰ The question Kristeva asks at the end of her essay reverberates loudly: "What is the point of emphasizing the horror of being?"⁹¹ What does abjection add to our understanding, and more specifically I ask, what does it add to the formulation of narrative empathy? What does pushing the human body to its limits add to a discourse on human rights? Kristeva answers her question by reminding us that "to catch a glimpse of the abyss of abjection" we may perhaps better equipped to understand the "religious, moral and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies."⁹² What abjection does, in the context of *Tracks* (and in *El beso de la mujer araña* and *Insensatez*) is demonstrate how sociopolitical factors alter previously solidified conceptions of personhood. Narratively, this style of writing is opaque in that it rejects representing the body as an undignified entity upon which abuse is perpetuated. Inside, readers are able to understand a character's psychological construction so that the physical body can take shape from that understanding, and not vice versa. For her existence to be plausible, Erdrich constructs Pauline's body as that of a victim and perpetrator, as she imposes violence against herself and others. What is left, is the very understanding that Kristeva calls for: an understanding of the national codes, social, political, religious and moral, which call for a reshaping of the individual before they can become "proper" citizens.

The following descriptions of bodily pain demonstrate Pauline's transgression into the world of abjection, as she begins viewing her body as an object necessitating pain and suffering in order to exist. Through these descriptions the reader begins understanding how, in constructing an abject body, Pauline mimics the "successful" process of assimilation:

"I confessed that I had made a set of underwear from potato sacks, and when I wore it the chafing reminded me of Christ's sacrifice...Suffering is a gift to God. I have given away everything I owned. All I have left is my body's comfort and pleasure...There was a small bit leftover which she gave to me. I drank it down before I saw that she had taken

⁸⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

⁹⁰ Kristeva, 5.

⁹¹ Kristeva, 208.

⁹² Kristeva, 209.

none for herself...One afternoon Nanapush was there when I entered, and of course he noticed the ingenious reminder of Christ's imprisonment I had devised, that of wearing my shoes on the wrong feet...My inner foot ached, I lurched, wore painful sores into my skin...The toothless ruin had discovered my most secret practice which was to allow myself only two times of the day for that function, dawn and dusk."⁹³

"My routine was both simple to follow and terribly hard, as I set new limits. At night, I did not allow myself to toss or turn for comfort, but only to sleep on my back, arms crossed on my breasts...I used my hand and no spoon. I drank only hot water, took the thinnest cut of bread... put burrs in the armpits of my dress and screwgrass in my stockings and nettles in my neckband...I let my toenails grow until it ached to walk...the potato sacks I wore beneath by woolen gown were malodorous..."⁹⁴

While wearing shoes on the wrong feet, a practice preventing her from getting anywhere without experiencing pain, the primary focus of her suffering "routine," as she describes it, revolves around genital discomfort (set of underwear from potato sacks which causes chafing and withholding her bodily functions). Once again this points to Pauline's inability to move beyond her as a secondary witness of sexual trauma, an occurrence she learns to embody and "make sense of" by imposing a version of extreme suffering on her own body. Since Kozka's Meats market marks the scene of sexual exploitation, it is no wonder that Pauline turns to marking her own flesh in order to devise a self-imposed "remedy" for the violence she witnessed. Pauline is unable to heal through her communal ties, since she has abandoned those ties and the world of orality those ties help build. Paula Gunn Allen reminds us that the oral tradition is a vital component in healing a community from the wounds of the past, and Pauline's entry into the world of self-imposed suffering, and subsequent divergence from her community and orality, prevents any attempts of self-recovery and identity construction from occurring.⁹⁵ The only way she can heal is by wounding herself. In grounding those wounds inside a religious context, she creates a logical explanation for her illogical desires. In using the language of confession, she further details how the process of religious assimilation transports her body into the realm of the abject, the only realm inside which she can make sense of her past identity and her newly found present one. These dueling segments of her identity can only coexist inside her abject reconstruction of personhood. Paradoxically, although her characterization is one which represents an individual devoid of community, the novel's focus on her emotional and bodily struggle defines the battle for rights and representation that the Ojibwe community undertook during the early twentieth century, as its members fought against the economic, social and legal hardships this chapter has described. Pauline's abjection details the way in which assimilation created a new identity, a new version of personhood, where, ironically, the subject gains acceptance inside the national sphere by relinquishing its subject-hood.

The only moment of true sacrifice in the scenes depicted above, something Pauline strives for corporeally but can never fully achieve spiritually, occurs, not with Pauline, but with

⁹³ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 143–47.

⁹⁴ Erdrich, 152.

⁹⁵ Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 45.

Margaret: “There was a small bit leftover which she gave to me. I drank it down before I saw that she had taken none for herself.” Margaret refuses to eat so that Pauline can have extra food. *That* is true sacrifice. Pauline’s mentioning of this demonstrates that she recognizes the sacrifice as it relates to her own imposition of corporal suffering. Yet, Margaret’s innate, non-performative suffering, which abandons individual sustenance for communal sustenance, contrasts with Pauline’s entirely. This contrast reveals that Pauline’s spiritual fragmentation, as she enters into the final stage of her religious assimilation, not only alienates her from her community and her own body, but also from her ability to understand the religious teachings she holds so dear, ones disseminated by the assimilatory policies held in place throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with respect to the Ojibwe tribal community. In other words, Pauline is also alienated from her ability to understand what she reads with respect to “Christ’s teachings.” Unlike Margaret, who truly sacrifices, Pauline’s sacrifices of bodily discomfort are ones she thoughtlessly makes to impose a level of harm on her material body in order to trick herself into believing she is closer to God. Margaret’s food sacrifice, however, she makes to better the lives of others, abandoning her body to hunger without. Pauline’s alienation and fragmentation of self suggest that the accelerated path to assimilation leaves irreparable damages on an individual’s body, mind and ability to understand their place within the sociopolitical and cultural landscape.

Pauline’s relationship to pain culminates in the last chapter of her narrative, where she conflates Napoleon with the devil, killing the former in the midst of her confusing hallucination. The chapter ends with an abandonment of the human realm, a transformation which can best be described as a transformation into the worlds of death and horror. Kristeva’s analysis of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s attraction to these worlds of abjection reveals that the author essentially believes that “death and horror are what being is.”⁹⁶ She continues to say that “when reading Céline we are seized at that fragile spot of our subjectivity where our collapsed defenses reveal, beneath the appearances of a fortified castle, a flayed skin; neither beneath the appearances of a fortified castle, a flayed skin; neither inside nor outside, the wounding exterior turning into abominable interior...”⁹⁷ When reading Pauline’s narrative a similar reconstruction of subjectivity occurs as the delicate borders of identity rip Pauline apart, annulling her humanity. This annulment comes soon after she kills Napoleon and returns to the convent. “I was nothing human,” she states, “nothing victorious nothing like myself. I was no more than a piece of the woods.”⁹⁸ Although the following scene reveals her “marriage” to the church, as she finally becomes a Sister, the abandonment of her humanness, her human form, suggests that she is indeed, as Roberto A. Morace remarks, “the abject hero” of *Tracks*.⁹⁹ Strangely enough, she first connects her new bodily form, not to God, but to “the woods,” the land. Once more Erdrich alludes to Pauline’s fragmented identity, one shaped by a repulsion and attraction to her own

⁹⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 134.

⁹⁷ Kristeva, 135.

⁹⁸ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 204.

⁹⁹ Roberto A. Morace, “From Sacred Hoops to Bingo Places,” in *The Chippewa Landscape of Louise Erdrich*, ed. Allan Richard Chavkin (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 51.

community and land. After her religious convergence is finalized, changing her name to Leopolda, this connectivity is finally lost.

Conclusion

Pauline's ends her narration by summarizing the Pillager's demise as she traces the effects of capitalist lumber ventures brought about by the allotment acts and the disruptive assimilatory tactics employed by the Indian boarding schools:

“The land will be sold and divided. Fleur's cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves. The place will be haunted I suppose, but no one will have ears sharp enough to hear the Pillagers' low voices, or the vision clear to see their still shadows. The trembling of old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened.”¹⁰⁰

Her focus outlines what many historians and critics are beginning to term “the American Indian Holocaust.”¹⁰¹ This new understanding also provides us with a new conceptualization of genocide. What Pauline's ‘summary’ recounts is an erasure of a community, their land, and their future potential as their children are forcibly transferred to Indian boarding schools. The United Nations approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948, and with that approval came a definition of genocide:

“Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”¹⁰²

Tracks redefines our understanding of genocide, suggesting that nineteenth and early-twentieth century legal treatment of American Indians was in fact a cultural genocide. Lulu and Nector come back into their diminishing community “blinded and deafened,” unable to fit back inside coherently. Like Pauline, their identities are fragmented, altered, as they exist on the borderlands between two irreconcilable subject positions. It is no wonder Nanapush spends his narrative teaching Lulu how to *hear* and *see* her mother and her own history anew, as storytelling becomes the engine used to fight back against cultural extinction and the deadening of cultural identity.

¹⁰⁰ Erdrich, *Tracks*, 205.

¹⁰¹ See Moore, *Eating Fire, Tasting Blood*.

¹⁰² Pamela J. Kingfisher, “Just One Dress to Walk 800 Miles,” in *Eating Fire, Tasting Blood: Breaking the Great Silence of the American Indian Holocaust*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 201.

Whereas Nanapush's narrative reclaims orality as the primary vehicle combatting against historical amnesia, Pauline's narrative turns to the trauma and the status of the abject body as a means of demonstrating the assimilation's detrimental effects on the body and mind of American Indian women. By exposing legal practices that laid claims to the land, voice, bodies and citizenship of the American Indian in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Tracks* becomes a fictional truth commission. It asks its readers to track the remains of cultural identity, traditions, in hopes of relocating the bones of a community, identity and untold histories. The novel's engagement with the genocidal legal practices, ingrained inside the assimilation policies emerging at the turn of the century, constructs a new version of American history. This history is one told from the margins by those forcibly marginalized. A new historical model develops as the two victims, Nanapush and Pauline, illustrate the damaging effects of law on the community and the individual body.

Chapter Five

The Limits of Empathy:

Catharsis, Persecution and Mediation in Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*

During the 1980's and 1990's, a surge of violent and genocidal tactics employed by governing military forces gave rise to two new methods of representing violence in Central America: the *testimonio* and the truth commission. These methods of representing violence vis-à-vis *truth-telling*, developed as a response to the genocidal tactics employed by several Latin American governments against their own populace, often directed towards indigenous groups. Horacio Castellanos Moya takes up the difficult questions surrounding the representation of genocide in his 2009 novel, *Insensatez*. In this novel, we meet a man in charge of editing a truth commission's report on the Guatemalan genocide, which is deliberately unnamed. As readers, we spurn him, frustrated as he aestheticizes trauma, using actual testimonial fragments as if they were poetic snippets useful in grappling with his own mundane reality. Nonetheless, as the unnamed narrator continues to record testimony, we see him deriding the process itself, using the words of the traumatized victims to relate his own story of paranoia and false empathy. Within this process, a new model for reading atrocity is constructed. Castellanos Moya's positions his narrator in such close proximity to violence that it begins to dramatically alter him, mapping the physical and physiological repercussions arising from reading atrocity for the reader. What emerges within *Insensatez* is an ethical roadmap for narrative empathy as relates both to the representation of traumatic testimony and to the practice of reading trauma.

Insensatez uses truth commissions to reconstitute the history of the Guatemalan genocide from the perspective of an outsider, whose reading about the bodily trauma of indigenous persons transforms him in a psychological (and even physical) way. What the novel demonstrates is that reading atrocity questions possibility of empathy by setting limits on the representation of genocide. This impossibility is marked by the way that the novel represents trauma and genocide by denying the reader's access to narrated traumatic episodes, as would occur within a truth commission report or even a *testimonio*. Readers are warned against the aesthetic consumption of trauma and through this a model of narrative empathy develops. This model prevents the traumatic representation of the victim while also denying identification between reader and victim, ethically guiding an empathetic trajectory for the practice of reading historical trauma.

The model of narrative empathy constructed by the novel positions readers within a world of contradictions. The principal contradiction is the novel's development of two realms: proximity and distance. What evolves is a model of narrative empathy that instructs readers how to maneuver between the realms of proximity to trauma and distance from it. The reader's *desire* and *drive* towards the understanding and capturing of traumatic experiences through the representation of the violated body exists within the realm of proximity, mimicking the reader's

desire for identification with the victim through physical, gendered, socioeconomic or even cultural similarities. The lack of comprehensive understanding develops within the realm of distance, where representation of corporeal pain and suffering is either voided entirely or represented in less concrete way, preventing the process of identification from occurring. *Insensatez* illuminates the unethical trap that an aestheticization of trauma promotes, one situated within the reader's growing desire for identifying with the victim. As the reader grows aware of this desire, and the ethical compromise it creates, a path towards empathy is paved. This empathetic path constructs one of the fundamental building blocks of narrative empathy: awareness. *Insensatez* establishes how narrative empathy, by nature, always entails distance, proximity, understanding and lack of understanding- only by becoming aware of these contradictions can we "read for empathy." This type of reading ultimately means we face the limitations that traumatic testimonies bestow, thus resisting any attempt to identify with the victim's pain or to allow trauma to exist solely within the realm of aesthetics.

The Guatemalan Genocide and the Truth Commission Report: An Overview

In Guatemala, the army executed a scorched earth campaign, from 1981 until 1996, killing over two-hundred thousand people, most of them Mayan.¹ More than four hundred indigenous communities were razed and the killings taking place were "brutal beyond the imagination."² The Guatemalan genocide was a continuation of the colonial regime and later nation-building project of the nineteenth-century, when similar attempts were made to reconfigure the ways in which individuals, and communities, existed within the nation-state. As Greg Grandin points out, "starting in the mid-nineteenth-century, at different speeds depending on region, the rapid spread of a plantation economy roiled villages and peoples, leading in some areas to migration and the formation of new communities, and in other places to a reconfiguration of the ways individuals related to each other and to the state."³ The process of nation-building in Guatemala, therefore, is intricately tied to the destruction of the other. For the world of human rights, this meant that "...increasing appeals to abstract and individual rights were always defined in relation to more encumbered social and cultural identities," reemphasizing the tragedy of abstract universality when applied to cultural groups.⁴ The construction of abstract universals, in other words, while important for unifying human rights discourse, became determinetal for the specific cultural groups throughout Latin American, whose distinct cultural identities were pertinent to their individual identity. For the world of representation, Guatemala's destructive nation-building process gave rise to new forms of narrative, seeking to document trauma and preserve the voices of those silenced and distinct cultural identities.

The truth commission report emerged as a means of compiling testimonies centered on human rights abuses in which a victim has a certain amount of time to tell his or her trauma to a

¹ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

² Grandin, 3–4.

³ Grandin, 182.

⁴ Grandin, 183.

listener or group of listeners who either electronically (to be transcribed at a later date) or manually record the telling. Truth commissions allow the victim to tell his or her trauma, a testimony that, like a forensic police file, creates and establishes oral evidence for particular crimes against humanity. These testimonies can then be transformed into evidence demonstrating human rights abuses; evidence that could potentially one-day may be used in court to persecute those responsible.⁵ The notion of persecution and trial, of naming the guilty, however, is not a priority or even an intention for the truth commission's recording. Although assigning responsibility is something all truth commissions engage in, the Guatemalan case, especially as Rio Montt's party had a dramatic win in the 1999 presidential election, and his nomination for president once again in 2003, reveals how the lack of juridical proceedings and naming continued to affect Guatemala's history years after the *Informe de la Memoria Histórica* (REHMI report) was released (1998). It was not until 2012 that Montt's immunity finally ended and he was indicted for crimes against humanity and convicted in 2013 of these crimes and sentenced to 80 years in prison, a sentence soon overturned by Guatemala's Constitutional Court on the basis of senility.

The Guatemalan truth commission's intention was to create and preserve a body of evidence and subsequently permit the victim's access to history by recording the trauma endured, beginning the cathartic process of healing for nation and victim, by enabling the latter to fill in the gaps of history that genocide obliterates. Although it can be argued that the truth commission simulates a cathartic effect through its documentation of trauma, it is this notion of catharsis that *Insensatez* forcefully prevents and argues against. The novel uses the legacy of the truth commission to question the way in which traumatic episodes and victim testimonies get represented inside a linguistic medium. Furthermore, the novel destabilizes the dangerous possibility of catharsis developing through reading accounts of violence, questioning the truth commission and the *testimonio* as a genre for provoking national catharsis. In its place, the novel represents the victim's trauma in ways that resist narrative and the aesthetic exploitation of a victim's suffering for the purposes of documenting genocide.

The narrator's own relationship to the testimonial language he encounters demonstrates how the editing of trauma through ordering, mediating, and appropriation, while essential for the historical-legal "story" constructed to represent the violence of the 1980's, is undermined by the very representational process it takes part in. In other words, the novel critiques the practice of reading trauma by unveiling the process required by the editors who, like our narrator, oversee the victim's trauma and put it into words that others will read and comprehend. *Insensatez* establishes fiction as the alternative system that can better contain these testimonies by showcasing the failure of narrative empathy within the realm of objectivism, as developed by the truth commission historical account of human suffering. The novel subsequently merges the aesthetic realm to the ethical one as it teaches readers *how to read* trauma empathetically by becoming aware of the traps of identification and aesthetic representation entailed by a documentation of genocide through the traumatic retellings of its victims. *Insensatez* is not an actual *testimonio*, yet in bordering the fiction/non-fiction divide, the novel uses these two interconnecting realms to document genocide: (1) aesthetic space, or the space of the narrative, which, when bombarded by these *real* testimonial fragments from actual victims, transforms into

⁵ Although many of these truth commissions were explicitly designed to not be used in court, it is important to note that some still were used as evidence with the legal sphere while others were used as historical evidence, or archival evidence to document the genocide.

(2) the ethical space where the reader is forced to confront the borderland where the narrative fiction meets actual human rights abuses. This borderland between fiction and reality begins to construct the model of narrative empathy that *Insensatez* establishes in order to provide a new life for the testimonies it holds within its pages. This unsettlingly blurred space, as real testimonial fragments make their way inside the novel and the narrator's own relationship to the trauma he reads, create an ethical template for reading the traumatic suffering of genocide victims.

This template involves deconstructing the process of a reader's engagement with two forms of representation, the *testimonio* and the truth commission, developing within Latin America during the latter half of the twentieth century. Like the truth commission, the *testimonio* arises out of violence, and begins constructing a counter-narrative, responding to the genocide by enabling victim-witness to speak out against human rights abuses inflicted by their own nation as they narrate the traumatic events they both observed and experienced. A *testimonio*, as John Beverly and Mark Zimmerman define it, is a

“novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode (e.g., the experience of being a prisoner). Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist. The word suggests the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense.”⁶

Insensatez reads like a fictionalized *testimonio*, especially since Moya himself worked on editing such testimonies in the late nineties. What the *testimonio* and the truth commission share is a propensity for ‘truth-telling’ as a means of evoking empathy on the reader's behalf, exposing a realm of violence while simultaneously enabling the victim to gain a voice and body. *Insensatez* directly questions the connection between empathy, violence, and the victim's voice, illuminating the ethical dangers facing readers as they encounter such texts. It really begs the question: how can the distant act of reading about genocide become an ethical, empathetic act? What I suggest here is that the novel constructs a world where aesthetics meets ethics and thus produces a new form of writing *through* trauma, rather than *about* trauma. This new form of writing that its readers understand that victim testimonies encompass this in-between space, the aesthetic and the ethical- it is between the blurry divisions encompassing these realms that narrative empathy gains traction. As readers read the novel, therefore, they are exposed to the system of documenting genocide that often leads to the over-aesthetization of trauma, and through this exposure readers get the story of the Guatemalan genocide by preserving the victim's body as whole and signified, rather than as broken and made vulnerable by the perpetrators (as occurs in the REHMI report).

As Celina Manzoni recalls, “como en *Estrella distante* de Roberto Bolaño, *Insensatez* trata de responder a una pregunta que compromete la pulsión ética y la búsqueda artística: ¿Cómo narrar el horror?” [like in Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante*, *Insensatez* tries to answer a

⁶ John Beverly, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, ed. Marc Zimmerman, 1st ed, New Interpretations of Latin America Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 173.

question compromising both the ethical impulse and the artistic search: How can one narrate horror?]⁷ For the narrator of *Insensatez* the reading of human rights atrocities underlines the very impossibility of representing those atrocities through narrative, as the narrator's exposure to traumatic testimonies prevents his representation of those testimonies within the novel. What is left, then, is a novel that uses fiction both to disguise and reveal the problematic nature of "ordering" and "organizing" traumatic testimonies within a larger framework (in the case of the truth commission, a historical framework, and in the case of the novel, the framework of our narrator's own history). As the novel interweaves testimonial fragments into its pages, readers are forced to witness the violence perpetrated by the narrator (the editor) upon indigenous testimonies in the form of mediation, appropriation, and out of context extraction for the purposes of aesthetics, as these testimonies enter into the narrator's own aesthetic project. This, in turn, suggests that although the truth commission makes room for previously silenced voices to enter within the historical narrative, these voices undergo a process of editing and reconstruction in order to fit within that narrative. As such, these voices gain representation only by being subjected to another system of oppression.

The narrator's problematic aesthetic appropriation of the testimonies he reads serves as a warning sign to readers as they too engage with real testimonies of indigenous subjects during their reading. The road map for empathy provided by the novel calls for the abandonment of voyeuristic reading as the reader learns, through the narrator's relationship to the trauma he reads, how resist the desire for understanding trauma and surrender to the suffering of another without the trap of identification. Irony promotes this abandonment by disturbing the reader's access to a linear and comprehensive traumatic testimony, one grounded within a particular time and place. Likewise, irony, and the narrator's sarcastic demeanor, draws attention to the trap of identification, which masks itself as empathy within the novel, as the narrator starts confronting traumatic representations. In preventing this access, the novel demands that the reader begin reading testimony as an outsider looking in, using distance as a means of ethically approaching historical trauma. The novel does this in order to promote an understanding of genocide, which is grounded within the realm of ethical empathy that prevents a reader's full access to the violence perpetuated upon the victim. Genocide, therefore, is understood not through constructions of corporeal indignity but rather through the careful construction of a victim's dignity. This dignity is constructed as Moya instructs readers how to interrogate the historical archive by questioning the fraught process through which traumatic testimonies and memories enter inside historical discourse. Like *Kindred*, *Insensatez* suggests that voyeuristic empathy is dangerous and offers an alternative that takes shape within the contradictions mentioned previously. However, unlike *Kindred*, *Insensatez* offers a new structure for reading empathy vis-à-vis *actual* traumatic testimonies. In bordering the fiction/non-fiction divide, much like *Tierra del Fuego*, the novel expands the boundaries of its own genre as it unleashes a critique on the historical representation of trauma (as constructed through the truth commission and *testimonio*). How does the novel, as a genre, design versions of narrative empathy to teach readers how to ethically engage with the trauma of others?

Rehabilitating Empathy: Truth Commissions, Representation and Literary Ethics

⁷ Celina Manzoni, ed., *Errancia y Escritura En La Literatura Latinoamericana Contemporánea* (Alcalá la Real: Alcalá, 2009), 116.

Truth commissions create order out of the chaos that violence leaves behind. The practice of ordering is essential to the creation of a truth commission report, and within the ordering paradigm a return to narrative occurs, as personal stories are collected and situated inside a larger historical frame, fashioning a different kind of history, one less monological and more polyphonic.⁸ The use of personal stories and testimonies inside truth commission reports launches a move away from objectivism, as historical representation turns to the subjective- to a victim detailing his or her trauma. This is one of the many constructive aspects of the truth commission, the ability to allow the silenced to finally speak, entering their own stories and voices inside the historical narrative that, in the case of Guatemala, has sought to prevent their entry for decades.⁹ However, the process of ordering necessitated by the reports remains problematic. *Insensatez* interrogates and critiques the legacy of the truth commission report by asking the following questions: what kind of violence is inflicted on the testimonies themselves as order is imposed for the purpose of organizing a truth commission report? How can trauma, violence, and genocide be ordered systematically within these reports? How does the process of reading shift when one is confronted with traumatic testimonies? *Insensatez's* critique of the truth commission model maps out a new system of reading ethically and empathetically, one that abandons identification with and objectification of the trauma victim's telling. Furthermore, it makes a claim that literature has ethical potential and is in fact the space within which trauma is best contained and represented. Oftentimes historical reports of documenting human rights abuses can strive for narrative cohesion, leading to a structured and comprehensive view of trauma which often dehumanizing the victim by objectifying their suffering into comprehensive units which showcase a cause-effect-model. Yet trauma is never that clear, and victimhood never that accessible. The novel showcases the trajectory a reader must follow when faced with real-life historical trauma inside the fictional realm, by constructing an ethically compromised narrator whose process of reading testimony we mistrust and thus learn from. In other words, in teaching us how *not* to read, we are taught *how* to read with an empathetic awareness.

As the narrator grapples with the editing of a truth commission report for what the reader surmises is the Guatemalan genocide, the reader begins understanding the process that such a compilation requires. *Insensatez*, after all,

“puede ser leída como una puesta en escena de periodo de posguerra en Guatemala. La voz del narrador y protagonista provee una descripción ficcional detallada del proceso de elaboración del Informe REHMI. AL mismo tiempo, el lector es confrontado permanentemente con extractos de diversos testimonios de dicho informe, los cuales

⁸ Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions*, Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 76.

⁹ Onur Bakiner, *Truth Commissions: Memory, Power, and Legitimacy*, Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 73. “One of the key claims of truth commissions is to give voice to those experiences and memories that were forced into silence and oblivion. The appeal of truth commissions as tools of transitional justice and the preservation of historical memory owes partly to the fact that post-conflict societies face serious obstacles to instituting processes of dialogue free of intimidation, exclusion and manipulation.”

expresan verbalmente el horror de los sobrevivientes. Estos fragmentos testimoniales son incorporados textualmente en la novela y por lo tanto circulan en la escritura nuevamente. Así el lector es obligado a leer algunos retazos de testimonios del Informe REHMI, aunque en un nuevo contexto y del algún modo extrañados o desfamiliarizados.”¹⁰

[can be read like a scene from the postwar era in Guatemala. The voice of the narrator and the protagonist provides a fictional description detailing the process of creation of the REHMI report. At the same time, the reader is permanently confronted with diverse excerpts from testimonies of the REHMI report, excerpts expressing the horror of the survivors. These testimonial fragments are incorporated inside the novel and begin to circulate inside the writing in a new way. In this way the reader is forced to read some of the actual testimonial fragments from the REHMI report in a new, less familiar, context].

The collection of fragments, which Castellanos Moya recorded in his own notebook as he worked as an editor for a human rights organization in 1997 and 1998, work their way inside *Insensatez*, appearing as the very first words of the novel: “Yo no estoy completo de la mente.”¹¹ This phrase appears six times over the course of fifteen pages, receiving the most attention by the cynical narrator who engages in a process of mediation and appropriation as he collapses the “yo” of the testifier into his own concept of selfhood. The “yo” which starts the novel, similar to the testimonial *yo* which allows one individual to speak for a collective, sets up, from the very beginning, the main ethical dilemma facing the reader while reading *Insensatez*: how do we read these real-life traumatic fragments which enter inside the literary medium?

The beginning fragment infects the language used by the narrator, and thus two types of language come into contact within the novel—the language of trauma and the language of narrative:

“*Yo no estoy completo de la mente*, decía la frase que subrayé con el marcador amarillo, y que hasta pasé en limpio en mi libreta personal, porque no se trataba de cualquier frase...”¹² [I am not complete in the mind, said the phrase that I underlined with the yellow highlighter and which I even recorded in my notebook, because it wasn’t just any other phrase].

“*Yo no estoy completo de la mente*, me repetí, impactado por el grado de perturbación mental en el que había sido hundido ese indígena cachiquel testigo...”¹³ [I am not complete in the mind, I repeated to myself, impacted by the level of mental perturbation that the indigenous testifier had been sinking in...]

¹⁰ Valeria Grinberg Pla, “Memoria, Trauma y Escritura En La Posguerra Centroamericana: Una Lectura de *Insensatez* de Horacio Castellanos Moya,” *Istmo. Revista Virtual de Estudios Literarios y Culturales Centroamericanos* 15 (2007): 3.

¹¹ Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, Colección Andanzas 582 (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 2005), 13.

¹² Castellanos Moya, 13.

¹³ Castellanos Moya, 13.

“Nadie puede estar completo de la mente después de haber sobrevivido a semejante experiencia”¹⁴ [no one could be of complete mind after having survived a similar experience]

A progression occurs within the first three instances of the first phrase, “yo no estoy completo de la mente,” mapping the contact between the two linguistic enterprises. As the testimonial fragment begins the narrator’s telling of his own experience, the power of speech (“decía”) is immediately allotted to the testimony. In other words, the testimonial snippet speaks before the narrator does, existing as a disembodied voice. This voice is interrupted by the narrator but only after it has a chance to speak and direct the reader’s entry into the novelistic space. The interruption occurs as the narrator’s hand underlines the phrase with a yellow highlighter, once again marking its importance. However, this fragmented testimony, the first voice in the novel, has no meaning until our narrator tells us where it comes from, guiding us toward the history of the indigenous man who has lost his children. The phrase appears unmediated at first, until the actions of underlining and transcription (the narrator transcribes the phrase in his personal notebook) interrupt it. Soon after this moment, the nameless protagonist tells us of the “labor” facing him in the editing of these “mil cien cuartillas,” which brings to light the relationship between testimonies and the *work* involved in organizing them inside a narrative, both in this novel and in the truth commission: “...para que me fuera haciendo una idea de la labor que me esperaba” [so that I could begin forming an idea of the labor awaiting me].¹⁵ The connection between labor/work and reading is ever present in these first few pages as our narrator conflates reading and labor together. Reading testimonies is, in other words, work; the work of sifting through the trauma of others in order to condense, organize, and make sense of it inside a structure report detailing human rights abuses. However, it is also work in another sense. For the reader this work begins with the first line and is grounded upon the reader’s own desire to understand the context of that phrase. However, the work done by the reader when faced with traumatic testimony is not to gain comprehension of the victim’s trauma, or gain full access to the abuses the victim experienced, but rather to allow the testimony to contaminate the novel with its real-world presence. The fragment creates its own trajectory, but that trajectory does not lead us to the version of understanding we desire as readers. To read empathetically means becoming aware of empathy’s limitations through this distancing mechanism Moya employs from the very beginning of his novel. This awareness occurs (1) as we begin understanding that testimonies become objects as soon as they are inscribed into language (2) as we begin interrogating our own bodily and psychological responses to the trauma we face on the page in front of us (3) as we begin dismantling our desire of any kind of identification with the victim or full-access to their traumas. This is the “work” that *Insensatez* does from the onset as it constructs the path of narrative empathy for the reader precisely by demarcating the dangerous ethical dilemmas facing the readers of victim testimony.

The connection between reading and labor initiates the lesson that *Insensatez* distributes throughout its pages: in order to read ethically one must read laboriously, constantly aware of the objectifying process that aesthetic reconstructions of trauma produce. The phrase “yo estoy completo de la mente” begins this process of ethical, laborious reading, as its anaphoric rhythm

¹⁴ Castellanos Moya, 14.

¹⁵ Castellanos Moya, 13.

continues reappearing throughout the novel, purposely drawing the reader's attention to the dangers occurring when real testimonies enter into the space of aesthetics, especially as we witness the narrator's problematic manipulation of the testimonies he encounters. This danger is further established by the phrases' second appearance, which showcases how the power of telling allotted to the phrase at the beginning of the novel has now been stripped by the aesthetic realm: "*Yo no estoy completo de la mente, me repetí, impactado por el grado de perturbación mental en el que había sido hundido ese indígena cachiquel testigo...*"¹⁶ Here the reader witnesses how the narrator's repetition of the phrase quite literally takes over the testimonial voice. The illusion of empathy, which stems from the narrator's use of the phrase for detailing the phrase's "impact" upon his own mind, corrupts the traumatic testimony, and alludes the process of mediation that testimonies endure within the truth commission model. The narrator repeats the phrase by stripping it of its overall traumatic context, while nevertheless claiming he is impacted by the trauma it relates. Furthermore, he chooses this phrase over all of the others, a choice that severs the victim's testimony, preventing the voicing of trauma (in its complete form, as tied to the whole) from occurring. This superficial "impact" is where empathy gets skewed as it saddles the realm of identification. Since the phrase, in relation to the violence it describes, perturbs the narrator, inflicting a kind of violence upon his own body as a reader of testimonies, an identification occurs between actual violence and violence as aesthetically represented (the kind "felt" by the narrator while reading the testimony). It is the latter that the novel alerts us against.

The phrase, in other words, works affectively upon the narrator, so much so that his body and mind shift the further he engages with it. Affect, as Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg remind us, "is the name we give to those forces- visceral forces insisting beyond emotion- that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought, and extension, that can likewise suspend us across a barely registering accretion of force relations, or that can leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability."¹⁷ This transmission of violence from testifier to narrator through reading demonstrates a problematic, yet affective trend: the narrator's reading of violence experienced on the bodies of others is mimicked by a violence "experienced" through reading- as if the flesh-and-blood experience were easily transferable through print. The *work* a reader must do to maintain themselves inside an ethical realm while reading through the trauma of others is one that *Insensatez* structures through the narrator's fraught relationship to the violent testimonies he reads. This is the work represented by a resistance to the pleasure of aesthetic seduction-this kind of pleasure has no space in a novel detailing human rights abuses. This problematic experience of aesthetic pleasure within the context of documenting human rights abuses within narrative generally occurs when a reader is able to 'make sense' of a particular trauma, understanding the roots of the trauma, the reasons for it (no matter how abstract and horrendous), the victim's background, and the suffering endured. As the testimonies continue to be manipulated, pulled apart, and aestheticized by the editor of the truth commission report, we engage with the testimonies in a way that defies identification, the desire to 'make sense' of the human rights abuse, and aestheticization of that abuse. As the reader comes into close contact with the unlikable narrator, we witness how easily he falls into these very traps – traps the novel trains the reader to resist. Trauma, therefore, begins contesting

¹⁶ Castellanos Moya, 13.

¹⁷ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

the process of objectification forced upon it as it is transcribed into words. Moreover, in becoming aware of the transmission of violence exchanged between our narrator and the traumatic testimony, the reader begins maneuvering inside the contradictions and impossibilities that trauma creates, and thus the world of narrative empathy, grounded within the awareness of empathy's limitations, emerges.

Misha Kokotovic reminds us of this "transmission" when stating that,

"Insensatez, then, is marked by a double tension: between the narrator's postwar cynicism and the structuring presence in the novel of the nonfiction, politically committed genre of testimonio, and between the two different ways that testimonio manifests itself in the text, as a seemingly parodic formal allusion and as a direct quotation. The result of this combination of disparate, even contradictory elements is a kind of fictional, meta-testimonial narrative that represents not the experiences of oppression recounted by properly testimonial subjects but rather the experience and effect of reading such accounts."¹⁸

The next version of the phrase, "nadie puede estar completo de la mente," further demonstrates this notion of "transmission" as it relinquishes the indigenous voice altogether, allowing the testimonial fragment to be rewritten and appropriated by the narrator as he generalizes one particular experience. The replacement of the "I/yo" with "no one/nadie" erases the individual altogether, a process of erasure occurring before the narrator reminds us of "la pertinente corrección de estilo" he engages in with respect to his "work." This process of "correction" is directly connected to a system of erasure which obliterates what does not "fit" into the overall narrative. In this case, what does not "fit" is the indigenous subject. The novel subtly illuminates Guatemala's national project, one that was not inclusive and remains exclusionary even as it attempts to refashion the nation with an alternative history: "it is certainly true that the Guatemalan state, compared with most other Latin American nations, was much less successful in creating a national identity and establishing political legitimacy. A brutal model of capitalist development combined with profound ethnic divisions to prevent the evolution of an inclusive national project."¹⁹ Understanding and sifting through these "corrections" opens up the space for the indigenous subject to exist and becomes the fundamental building block of the laborious ethical reading practice the novel demands of its readers.

This process of sifting through also destabilizes the boundaries of genre by blurring the divide between fiction and testimony. From the onset, the novel's first phrase was "desglosada de un testimonio atribuido a un indígena cachiquel sobreviviente del desastre y escrita en bastardilla, instala otro límite borroso, esa zona en la que parecen ponerse a prueba los frágiles bordes genéricos que separan el testimonio de la ficción."²⁰ [taken from the testimony of an indigenous survivor and written in italics, establishes another blurred limit, a zone in which the fragile borders of genre separating testimony from fiction are no longer as clear]. In

¹⁸ Misha Kokotovic, "'Testimonio' Once Removed:: Castellanos Moya's 'Insensatez,'" *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 43, no. 3 (2009): 548.

¹⁹ Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 8.

²⁰ Manzoni, *Errancia y Escritura En La Literatura Latinoamericana Contemporánea*, 114.

superimposing testimony upon the world of fiction, the novel resists generic classifications and makes room for another system of representation, a zone found in-between aesthetic experience and historical understanding of the events retold. Inside this zone the new reading practice for historical trauma emerges, one critically nestled somewhere between affect and ethics. This “meta-testimonial narrative” draws attention to the act of reading itself. How one reads trauma, how one reads something like a truth commission effects how history gets preserved and retold. Therefore, the narrator’s reading practice, his objectifying and identifying tendencies, is shrewdly ridiculed by the novel, demonstrating that *that* kind of reading does not lead to anything productive. The relationship built between reading, trauma and the representation of traumatic histories is one that the narrator tracks through the manipulation of the testimonies he encounters.

The italicized phrase, in its original form, appears once again in the first chapter. This time, however, the phrase does not begin a new sentence but rather nuzzles itself inside the narrator’s words, in the middle of the sentence which started out with the “nadie” recently discussed:

“un testimonio que comenzaba precisamente con la frase *Yo no estoy completo de la mente* que tanto me había conmovido porque resumía de la manera más compacta el estado mental en que se encontraban las decenas de miles de personas que había padecido experiencias semejantes.”²¹

The experience of the indigenous man disappears as the “decenas de miles de personas” that have experienced a similar violence take over the first-person testimony. Unifying a wide array of individuals was one of the missions of the truth commission report, especially since in Guatemala most had “become even more alienated from one another as a result of the violence and oppression.”²² What this particular example in *Insensatez* reveals is a critique of this unification process by demonstrating that the process of *truth-getting* grounding the truth commission report often alienated a victim from his or her telling. The narrator’s cutting and reappropriation of the phrase “yo no estoy completo de la mente” demonstrates this alienation quite clearly by showcasing how easily additional layers of violence are inflicted upon testimonies as they undergo the ordering and editing process that the truth commission reports require. As the testimonies are sorted, ordered, shortened, edited, a historical narrative is superimposed upon personal traumas of indigenous subjects. This process is mimicked by the narrator of *Insensatez* as he too makes sense of the testimonies *vis a vis* his own life and work. While his engagement with the testimonial fragments seems disturbingly misguided (in a way that the truth commission report is not), the novel nevertheless uses his relationship to the testimonies to reveal what occurs when trauma enters into the realm of historical and fictional aesthetics and how our own reading practices contribute to the process of victim objectification. Awareness of this adulterated and limiting reading process opens up the doors to narrative empathy as it instructs the reader how to resist the objectification of the victim by dispersing trauma as a fragment so that it is not accessible to the reader or easily contextualized. Nevertheless, the consistent reappearance of these fragments continues contaminating the novel,

²¹ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 14.

²² Phelps, *Shattered Voices*, 81.

forcibly removing the reader from the world of fiction through the interjection of real testimonies. The reader, therefore, is constantly forced to enter the aesthetic realm and to abandon the realm as the fragments continue interrupting the narration. This provokes the act of distancing that is required for the reader's ethical empathetic engagement.

The violence described by the first testimonial fragment is one of "descuartizamiento," or dismembering. This disembodiment serves as a metaphor for the cutting apart of the testimonial fragment itself- one piece detached from the whole, reappearing in new contexts each time. This is what happens when we read a truth commission report. We enter into moments of testimony easily, traversing from one voice to another in hopes of piecing together the "big picture" in order to make sense of the violence described. What *Insensatez* promotes, as the title suggests, is the utter lack of sense when it comes to historical trauma. It is only in the world of senseless abandonment that the violence described can exist. Moreover, by refusing to offer any testimony in its entirety and relying on fragments, the novel denies the complete version of documenting trauma that historical narratives often demand. History's desire for ordering the chaos left behind by violent regimes is exposed as a problematic impossibility here. The truth commission report's reliance on the process cutting and ordering develops a methodological approach for organizing violence by taking out phrases and paragraphs which best represent the theme of violence (types of rape and murder) in the particular chapter or segment.²³ Within the novel, however, the words of the narrator, as literary critic Emanuela Jossa articulates, "se entrelazan con las citas sacadas de Guatemala: nunca más, de-semantizando y de-contextualizando el testimonio, con un procedimiento decididamente sarcástico" [join with the quotes taken from *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, but they are de-contextualized and taken apart, in a decidedly sarcastic manner].²⁴ The use of sarcastic irony in the novel disturbs the reader because irony has no place inside the truth commission report. It disarms us and confuses our reading process as we come face to face with actual testimonies that have been indiscriminately cut off from their cohesive whole. Irony cuts through testimony and disfigures it. The connection between *Insensatez* and *REHMI report* is evident from the very beginning so much so that one can read *Insensatez* as a novel exposing the ethical tribulations, dilemmas and production of the report. Yet, the questions remain: how do documents tell a story? Does a truth commission report tell a story? Is the story linear? Does it have a plot? What kind of story is it? How does a reader engage with the truth commission report in an ethically viable way? While these questions may seem belittling to the truth commission report, as it is no doubt an incredibly *important* means of documenting historical atrocity, they nevertheless interrogate the process through which these reports are constructed for the reading public.

The narrator's relationship to the testimonies he reads trace this process quite literally, subsequently unveiling the levels of violence that both the process of ordering/editing and the act of reading a truth commission report necessarily perpetuate upon the victim. As the narrator continues reflecting on the phrase "yo no estoy completo de la mente," he has moment of reflection in which he joins the perpetrator, victim and editor together:

²³ For example, in *Nunca Más Guatemala* we have many instances of "thematized violence," with chapters such as "La violencia contra la infancia," detailing, usually though fragmented testimonies, this particular form of violence. To give a few more examples we also find segments/chapters like the following: "violencia frente a la religión y la cultura," "la violencia contra las mujeres," "violando cuerpos y dignidades," etc.

²⁴ Emanuela Jossa, "Transparencia y Opacidad: Escritura y Memoria En *Insensatez* de H. Castellanos Moya y *El Material Human* Por R. Rey Rosa," *CentroAmericana* 23.2 (2013): 43.

“debo reconocer que no es lo mismo estar incompleto de la mente por haber sufrido el descuartizamiento de los propios hijos que por haber descuartizado hijos ajenos, tal como me dije antes de llegar a la contundente conclusión de que era la totalidad de los habitantes de ese país la que no estaba completa de la mente lo cual me condujo a una conclusión aun peor, más perturbadora, y es que solo alguien fuera de sus cabales podía estar dispuesto a trasladarse a un país ajeno cuya población estaba incompleta de la mente para realizar una labor que consistía precisamente en editar un extenso informe....”²⁵

[I need to recognize that being not complete in the mind for having suffered the dismemberment of one’s own children is not like being incomplete in the mind for having done the deed of dismemberment, as I had told myself before arriving to the conclusion that it was in fact all of the people in this country who were not complete in the mind, which led me to an even more disturbing conclusion which is that only someone out of their mind would be disposed to move to another country whose population was not of complete mind in order to carry out a job that consisted precisely of editing an extensive report....]

This dubious moment suggests that everyone, perpetrator, victim, and narrator (editor), work in an interrelated way. The novel’s own meditations upon the editing system materialize here as the act of ordering that the truth commission “work” our narrator does become a means of representing trauma. A tri-part system of violence is revealed in this citation: (1) the perpetrator enacts violence, (2) the victim remembers and retells it, and (3) the editor transcribes, revises, and gives a form to that telling. The reader is caught up in the in the space between, much like the editor, a passerby “making sense” of the traumatic testimony within the realm of aesthetics. This situates the victim between two kinds of violent acts; the actual physical/psychological violence experienced, and the violence inflicted on the testimony, on the telling itself, as it undergoes the process of editing and, subsequently, reading. The latter is what *Insensatez* explores quite explicitly by demonstrating a way of representing violence aesthetically through voids and distancing techniques that limit a reader’s access to trauma while still enabling the trauma to be documented inside the fictional archive the novel fashions.

As historian Virginia Burnett contends, “the retelling of violent acts can quickly degenerate into a type of pornography, as sympathetic readers are unwittingly transformed into voyeurs.”²⁶ The narrator experiences a similar transformation as he fully appropriates the testimonial fragment by rewriting it to “fit” his own situation: “Yo tampoco estoy completo de la mente, me dije entonces, en ese mi primer día de trabajo.”²⁷ [I am also not complete in the mind, I told myself then, on my first day of work]. In editing this fragment and situating it within his own narrative, our nameless protagonist demonstrates how reading, collecting, correcting, and editing testimonies can violently alter individual testimony in order to make it *fit* within particular narrative constructions. It also warns against the dangers of identification, as the narrator uses the victim’s words to describe his own mindset. Here we notice that the victim’s

²⁵ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 14.

²⁶ Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala Under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982-1983*, Religion and Global Politics Series (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

²⁷ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 15.

trauma is forgotten, erased, as the narrator takes the words out of context and uses them to describe his own mundane work-reality. In other words, the novel alludes to the dangers of voyeuristic empathy, an empathy grounded in identification. Additionally, a critique of the truth commission report emerges here as the narrator-editor demonstrates how a historical system constructed to contain and explain trauma, cannot represent it without first violating it:

“...y que con suerte podría utilizar posteriormente en algún tipo de collage literario, pero que sobre todo me sorprendían por el uso de la repetición y del adverbio, como esta que decía *Lo que pienso es que pienso yo...*, carajo, o esta otra, *Tanto en sufrimiento que hemos sufrido tanto con ellos...*, cuya musicalidad me dejó perplejo desde el primer momento, cuya calidad poética era demasiada como para no sospechar que procedía de un gran poeta y no de una anciana indígena que con ese verso finalizaba su desgarrador testimonio...”²⁸

[and with luck I could use it later in some kind of literary collage, but above all I was surprised by the use of repetition and adverbs, such as in this one which says *what I think is what I think....*, shit, or this other one, *so much in suffering that we have suffered so much with them....*, whose musicality left me perplexed from the first moment, whose poetic quality was too much to not suspect that it came from a great poet and not an old indigenous woman who, with this phrase, finalized her piercing testimony].

The violation in this case is an aesthetic one. The narrator strips apart the testimony of the indigenous subject and his focus on the use of adverbs and repetition undermines the trauma the woman's words hold. Ironically, however, by not providing the reader with anything but the aesthetic 'appreciation' of a few lines of the testimony, the actual trauma contained within that testimony is preserved intact, devoid of full representation documenting the trauma in its entirety for the reader's consumption. Consumption of the woman's trauma, therefore, is prevented entirely. Her trauma enters into the representational void that Moya fashions throughout his novel, suggesting that only way a reader can ethically and empathetically access trauma is through tactics of prevention, which are meant to evade the problem of identification leading to a reader's voyeuristic consumption. Empathy emerges in this representational void. In not representing the woman's anything but a fragment of the woman's trauma, in other words, the novel opens up with possibility of an empathetic reading practice where a reader is aware of their inability to comprehend or access the trauma they read. Furthermore, in demonstrating how easily the narrator aestheticizes trauma, Moya displays the objectifying tendencies of documentation, once more staging a critique against the truth commission's cutting and ordering process by showcasing how the editors of such commissions often strip testimonies apart in order to fit them inside the report.

Moya warns that reading *about* trauma is dangerous since it can lead to problematic identification with, and an aesthetic appreciation of, trauma. Victims who finally voice their pain to an outside listener paradoxically undergo a process of silencing as their traumas are misunderstood within the reader's own system of understanding (*vis-à-vis* representation) historical violence. The narrator's manipulation of real testimonies inside the novel unveils this trap of misappropriation and misunderstanding, constructing a space for the novel as an

²⁸ Castellanos Moya, 44.

alternative means of empathetically representing traumatic history.²⁹ To witness how a testimony is made into an artifact is to learn how to read inside the realm of narrative empathy, which becomes a realm of resistance to the objectifying tendencies of historical documentation. For the reader, this requires a burgeoning awareness of the desire for both consuming the victim's trauma and identifying with the victim, and, subsequently, the deliberate resistance to that desire, which in turn illuminates the unethical nature of traumatic aestheticization. Moya uses the novel to draw the reader's attention to these things as he uses fiction to represent traumatic testimonies in ways that paradoxically resist fully gaining representation within the novelistic space. As such, he often situates trauma within a void, while also positioning the reader within the realm of narrative empathy as traumatic fragments from the truth commission report contaminate the narrator's narrative arc. Within this realm, both the identification and aestheticizing tendencies readers often rely on when reading the trauma of others are brought to the foreground and implicitly interrogated. The narrator's constant reflection on the manipulation of both form (the testimonies are translated into "legible" Spanish by the editors) and content (the testimonies are edited and cut in order to fit inside a particular framework) further shapes the realm of ethical narrative empathy for the reader:

"...frases contundentes dichas por indígenas para quienes seguramente recordar los hechos que ahí relataban significaba remover sus mas dolorosos recuerdos, pero también entrar a una etapa terapéutica al poder confrontar su pasado, orear a esos fantasmas sanguinarios que acechaban sus sueños, como ellos mismos reconocían en esos testimonios que parecían cápsulas concentradas de dolor y cuyas frases tenían tal sonoridad, fuerza y profundidad que yo había apuntado ya algunas en mi libreta personal"³⁰

[forceful phrases spoken by indigenous subjects for whom remembering the events they narrated here surely meant that their most painful memories stirred within them, but also it meant that they entered into a therapeutic phase in being able to confront their past, airing these bloody ghosts that haunted their dreams, as they themselves recognized inside their testimonies, which seemed to be concentrated capsules of pain which also held a tone and profound power that I have already remarked on in my personal notebook].

Unlike the narrator, the reader has little to no access to the testimonial voice, except for the few italicized quotes scattered throughout the narrator's exposition. The narrator mediates everything we come in contact with, structuring the way we engage with trauma. This mediation cognitively alters the manner through which readers come into contact with the trauma of others by drawing awareness to the aesthetic factors ("cápsulas concentradas de dolor y cuyas frases tenían tal

²⁹ Wilfrido H. Corral, Nicholas Birns, and Juan E. De Castro, eds., *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel: Bolaño and After*, First edition (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 124. "...[Senselessness] models how the archive comes into being, and how it is used, or rather deployed. The narrator not only demonstrates the transformation of indigenous people's oral witness statements into written text through the labor of, especially, North Americans and Europeans he also explicitly discusses the manipulation of the statements' form and content in the course of such work. *Senselessness* shows then, how a testimony is 'made' as an artifact."

³⁰ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 29.

sonoridad, fuerza y profundidad...”) involved in the process of reading trauma as a phenomenon that can be represented inside language. The constant tug-of-war between historical trauma and aesthetics questions the “etapa terapéutica” allotted to the victims as they confront their past. What the novel suggests is that such a catharsis is rendered impossible as soon as the testimonial voice gets transcribed, objectified, in this case, within the pages in the truth commission report.

Dominick LaCapra defines traumatic realism as an attempt “to come to terms affectively and cognitively, with limit experiences involving trauma and its aftereffects.”³¹ Within these limit experiences, the narrator’s mediation of trauma provides a lesson in understanding trauma inside the novel’s aesthetic composition. *Insensatez* is a novel that, in bordering the fiction/non-fiction divide, encompasses a borderland akin to traumatic realism that becomes essential in the mapping of narrative empathy. When read through the lens of traumatic realism, the novel instructs readers how to read testimony and approach an understanding of genocide by revealing the ethical dilemmas (identification) and dangers (objectification) facing readers as they engage with the trauma of others. This instruction occurs as the reader’s desire for identification is obfuscated through the construction of an unsurpassable divide between victim and reader, mirrored by the narrator’s fraught relationship with the testimonies, as his desire to identify himself with the victim warns readers against similar tactics. “Unchecked identification,” as LaCapra suggests, “implies a confusion of self and other which may bring an incorporation of the experience and the voice of the victim at its reenactment or acting out. As in acting out in general, one possessed, however vicariously, by the past and reliving its traumatic scenes may be tragically incapable of acting responsibly or behaving in an ethical manner involving consideration for others as others.”³² The narrator’s unchecked identification at the beginning of the novel starts to change, suggesting that the novel requires an alternative method of reading the testimonial voices captured within it. This method involves the abandonment of reason and sense since Moya does not allow an objective ‘making sense’ of trauma within his novelistic boundaries:

“From the very first page *Senselessness* insists metatextually that the events in Guatemala cannot be recorded, understood, or communicated through the categories of enlightened rationality alone- which is why the novel’s first sentence also sounds grammatically awry. That is the second layer of meaning in the title, suggesting that the narration of events exceeding the conceivable is itself a nonsensical, unreasonable undertaking, outside of any edifice of rules”³³

What we do notice is that trauma begins to take over everything in its path. The trauma read by the narrator quite literally takes over his body, his language and his environment: “...leídos esa mañana, habían conmocionado mi imaginación enfermiza, reconocí ante mi compadre Toto, quien bebía su cerveza demasiado deprisa.....”³⁴ [read this morning, they had moved my

³¹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Parallax (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 26.

³² LaCapra, 28.

³³ Corral, Birns, and Castro, *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel*, 124–25.

³⁴ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 28.

sickened imagination, I admitted to Toto, who drank his beer too quickly]. Even his sex life gets corrupted by the testimonies he just cannot seem to shake: "...*Quiero ver al menos los huesos, pero en este instante me percaté de que Pilar no estaba disfrutando de mis frases, la expresión estupefacta de su rostro lo decía y su inmovilidad también...*"³⁵ [*I want to at least see the bones, but in this instant I realized that Pilar was not enjoying my phrases, the stupefied expression on her face and her immobility suggested that much*]. The narrator's inability to distance himself from trauma he reads is no longer attached to his desire to identify with the victim, as occurred with the phrase opening the novel that I discussed earlier. Now, testimony consumes him entirely, body and mind and this consumption affects the novel's formal aesthetics, as the italicized fragments continue contaminating the narrative, mimicking the narrator's own contamination. He is, in other words, slowly moving away from his desire to identify with the victim and, instead, uses starts positioning the phrases within the aesthetic sphere, sounding them out, reading them aloud, in an ethically ambiguous attempt to make sense of the trauma he spends all day reading and editing.

As the trauma of others continues consuming the narrator's psychological and physical worlds, a new model for narrative empathy emerges that turns away from objectivity entirely. LaCapra notes that the problems with narrative empathy, and in turn, an empathetic reading practice, stem from the faulty identification tactics, which produce a conflation between victim/reader and thus prevent the very empathy they seek to establish:

"one reason for the eclipse of concern with empathy was the relation of the ideal of objectivity to the professionalization of historiography along with the tendency to conflate objectivity with objectification. A closely related tendency, which facilitated the dismissal of empathy, was to conflate it with intuition of unproblematic identification implying the total fusion of self and other. Any attempt, however qualified, to rehabilitate a concern with empathy in historical understanding must distinguish it from these traditional conflations."³⁶

Moya produces a rehabilitation of empathy within the aesthetic trajectory he designs for the testimonies engulfing his novel, where they are prevented from entering into the purely objective medium of historical representation. In other words, in not giving us anything but a fragment, there is little room for the fusion of the self/other to occur. This rehabilitation of narrative empathy within the world of traumatic representation involves sidestepping the reader/victim desire for identification entirely. However, it this in turn suggests that both identification with the victim and understanding the trauma the victim tells is rendered impossible. Within this realm of the unknown and unapproachable, the reader witnesses the dismantling of objectification.

The novel renders objectification illusionary and unproductive by deconstructing the narrator's tactile engagement with the brutal testimonies he encounters and rendering it powerless: "...me llevó a concluir que era mucho más rentable desenterrar huesos de indígenas que corregir cuartillas con sus testimonios..."³⁷ [*I came to conclude that it was much more worthwhile to dig up the bones of the indigenous victims than to correct sheets of paper*

³⁵ Castellanos Moya, 48.

³⁶ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 38.

³⁷ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 121.

containing their testimonies]. A line is drawn between the “work” of a truth commission editor sifting through trauma to produce a historical archive documenting trauma (which necessitates the objectification of trauma in order to exist) and the “work” of a forensics archeologist who, in digging up the actual bones of the victims provides a physical representation of the abused body. The narrator’s realization of these two kinds of “work” suggests that two systems of representation are in play here: one represents trauma on the page and the other is the proof of trauma, the physical proof of genocide. Oddly enough, he views his “work” as powerless. Moya attributes this powerlessness to the system of corrections that the testimonies necessarily endure in order to gain access to *the kind* of representational requirements permitting their access to history. Bones, on the other hand, unlike words, exist without requiring any “correction” work.

Yet bones, as purely physical artifacts of the human body, are also objects. What the narrator’s remark showcases is that objectification is a necessary avenue for the historiography of genocide. LaCapra too notes that historiography itself always involves “an element of objectification, and objectification may perhaps be related to the phenomenon of numbing in trauma itself. As a counterforce to numbing, empathy may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others.”³⁸ The impossibility of numbing trauma resonates throughout the novel as the testimonies contaminate our narrator’s world from top to bottom, debilitating him both physically and psychologically. The counterforce to numbing in this case is the novel itself, in both form and content. In other words, the process of reading demanded by *Insensatez* is the counterforce to the traumatic numbing that historical representation demands. This process requires abandoning the desire for identification and the appropriation of another’s trauma in order to “make sense” of traumatic histories in a linear and structured manner. What LaCapra comes to term as “empathetic unsettlement,” as discussed throughout this project and especially in Chapter Four, once more resonates here. Empathetic unsettlement, in placing harmonizing or “spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit” in jeopardy, maps out a new model of narrative empathy which resists a reader’s desire for understanding and closure.³⁹ Inside *Insensatez*, we are not allowed an easy exit. In fact, we cannot leave the world the novel has built at all. Nor can we take a step back to logically comprehend the snippets of trauma our narrator relates. In realizing that the more the narrator reads, the less in control he is of his own paranoia, the reader too becomes bewildered by the lack of contextualization surrounding the real-life testimonies scattered throughout the novel’s pages. In this way, the novel resists the objectification of trauma as a necessary means for the production of history. The testimonies presented, in other words, in lacking contextualization and a linear narrative structure, refuse the objectifying demands of historiography and thus allow trauma to exist in a less structured and more dynamic way. In scattering testimonial fragments throughout its pages, we are constantly confronted with the bits and pieces of trauma, denied a complete picture, denied a complete body. This denial of representation fosters a model for narrative empathy that abandons objectification as the only means of representing a victim’s trauma.

³⁸ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 40.

³⁹ LaCapra, 40–41.

By demonstrating how narrator begins losing his mind when exposed to trauma of others, the novel reveals how an ethical reading of the trauma of others requires a new conceptualization of empathy:

“...mi mente comenzara a perturbarse al grado de que una misma imagen se me imponía en los momentos de descanso, una imagen que se repetía en varias partes del informe y que poco a poco me fue penetrando hasta poseerme por completo cuando me ponía de pie y empezaba a pasearme en el reducido espacio de la habitación, entre la mesa de trabajo y la litera, como poseído, como si yo fuese ese teniente que irrumpía brutalmente en la choza de la familia indígena...”⁴⁰

[my mind began to go crazy from seeing the same image replay in my moments of rest, an image that repeated throughout the various sections of the truth commission report and which, little by little, penetrating me until it possessed me entirely when as I stood up and started to walk around in the tiny room, between my work desk and my typewriter, like one possessed, as if I was the lieutenant who brutally burst into the hut of this indigenous family].

Reading affectively, within the ethical bounds of narrative empathy, alters his body and mind as the trauma takes over his mind and body the further he engages with testimonies. Reading trauma, subsequently, is contagious like a disease infecting the narrator’s mental state, while also forcing this body into frantic movement (as we see in the above example). *Insensatez* creates distance between the trauma, the reader and the representation of trauma: only by distancing ourselves from our desire to capture the trauma, to consolidate it and order it, can we approach empathy while reading. Narrative empathy, therefore, arises as a reader realizes that “virtual, not vicarious, experience” is what reading traumatic accounts requires, as LaCapra accounts, where the reader’s emotional response “comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own.”⁴¹ The distancing mechanisms produced by Moya within his novel help garner this respect for the other and this ethically guided realization.

Towards the end of the first chapter the narrator remarks that through reading about the tragedy befalling the indigenous man, whose quote “yo no estoy completo de la mente” he returns to time and time again, he too is impacted, mentally altered by the testimony he reads:

“...impactado por el grado de perturbación mental en el que había sido hundido ese indígena cachiquel testigo del asesinato de su familia, por el hecho de que ese indígena fuera consciente del quebrantamiento de su aparato psíquico a causa de haber presenciado, herido e impotente, cómo los soldados del ejército de su país despedazaban a machetazos y con sorna a cada un de sus cuatro pequeños hijos y enseguida arremetían contra su mujer, la pobre ya en shock a causa de que también había sido obligada a

⁴⁰ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 137.

⁴¹ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 23.

presenciar cómo los soldados convertían a sus pequeños hijos en palpitantes trozos de carne humana.”⁴²

[impacted by the amount of mental disturbance drowning the indigenous testifier as he told of the murder of his family, more so since he was conscious of the shattering of his own physical body having been present, hurt and impotent, a witness to how the soldiers of his own country tore his four small children to shreds while also attacking his wife, the poor woman already in shock after having witnessed who the soldiers converted her young sons into throbbing pieces of human flesh].

Yet, what this lengthy paragraph unveils is that the trauma he reads pushes beyond his mental state, engulfing the writing itself. Trauma takes over aesthetics. The lack of punctuation, the run-on sentences and scattered thoughts mark the novel dramatically throughout, refusing the ordered nature that the systematic organization of a truth commission demands. In effect, *Insensatez* is the antithesis of the truth commission, which by nature develops a system of organizing trauma into readable, cohesive chunks. The refusal of grammatical and narrative coherence with respect to the traumatic snippets inserted throughout the novel makes reading the novel, though beautiful, incredibly tasking. A reader is never in control of the narrative, so much so in fact that even stopping the reading (i.e. putting the book down) is utterly impossible until the section breaks, since each chapter is flooded with several run-on paragraphs that continue for pages at a time.

Although the narrator’s desire for maintaining the trauma he reads within the realm of aesthetics predominates the first half of the novel, by the end a drastic shift occurs:

“...en esas intensas figuras de lenguaje y en la curiosa construcción sintáctica que me recordaba a poetas como el peruano Cesar Vallejo, y entonces procedí a leer con mayor firmeza y entonces procedí a leer con mayor firmeza y sin dejarme intimidar por la marimba que de nuevo arrancaba, un fragmento más largo...”⁴³

[in these intense linguistic compositions and in their curious syntactic construction I recalled poets like Peruvian Cesar Vallejo, and then I began to read the testimonies in a more determined manner without allowing myself to be intimidated by the marimba that once again spewed out a longer tune....].

This citation illustrates our narrator’s initial captivation with the aesthetic qualities of the testimonies, as he compares several of them to Vallejo’s poetics. The reference to Vallejo becomes a paradox of hope and hopelessness. Of aesthetics and ethics. Moya mentions him in order to construct the realm of the impossible, one productive in garnishing meaning for the history of genocide the novel maps. This aesthetic realm goes against the truth commission’s method of constructing a readable, comprehensible, and ordered version of national trauma. Vallejo’s mention also suggests that literature holds an ethical potential, as it seeks truth. This potential attracts the narrator more and more, especially as his focus on syntax and sound, and his strange desire to make sense of the trauma he reads by superimposing upon Vallejo’s lines,

⁴² Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 13–14.

⁴³ Castellanos Moya, 32.

undergo transformation towards the end of the novel where those aesthetic associations, while not abandoned, are readdressed and reconceptualized:

“...una frase que a primera vista no parecía tener nada especial, pero que a la velocidad de mi huida, tomó el ritmo de esos cantos que los contingentes de combatientes gritan para encenderse a medida que marchan, la frase *herido sí es duro quedar pero muerto es tranquilo* se convirtió pues en el grito de guerra que yo entonaba mientras iba trotando por la carretera, una frase que quizá vino a mi memoria porque encajaba cabalmente en el ritmo de la marcha, de tal manera que pronto mi vi entonando en voz alta *herido sí es duro quedar, pero muerto es tranquilo*, como si yo hubiese sido un guerrero dispuesto a inmolarme...”⁴⁴

[a phrase that at first sight did not appear to hold anything special, but after my quickened fleeing began adopting the rhythm of those songs that troops would yell out in order to fire themselves up while they marched, the phrase *it's hard to stay hurt but dead is peaceful* converted itself into a war cry that I sang while I walked along the road, a phrase that perhaps entered inside my memory because it fit the rhythm of my march exactly, in such a way that I soon saw myself singing the phrase loudly *it's hard to stay hurt but death is peaceful*, as if I had been a warrior willing to sacrifice myself....].

Here, the narrator no longer admires the tonality of the traumatic snippet, using it as a basis of aesthetic comparison, but rather uses it to make sense of his own situation, as he begins understanding his own status as a political refugee. At first this seems like the type of dangerous identification LaCapra warns us against, however, if we map the narrator's progress, as seen inside these two opposing citations (the one here and the one which starts this paragraph), we notice that in connecting “*herido si es duro pero muerto es tranquilo*” to his own movements, and thus to his own body, our narrator sidesteps the world of aesthetics for the world of corporeality. The words of the victim, therefore, are now applied to his own body, as it exists within the new context that those same words have forced him inside. The testimonies have quite literally *made* him into a political refugee and it is due to his new status that he can begin to comprehend, even slightly, the “work” he had done months prior. What is different here is that the narrator no longer views the testimonies through the realm of aesthetics. He now incorporates the words of the victim inside his own context, inside his own body, as he travels through the estranged space those same testimonies have forced him to inhabit. The traumatic testimonies, in other words, gain traction through his movements. Like his body, his voice is also taken over by the fragment as he no longer controls the eruption of sound perpetuating from his mouth as it *sings* the phrase loudly, leaving the world of speech behind. Whereas he appreciated the musicality of many of the testimonial fragments he wrote down in his notebook throughout the novel, now that musicality is an embodied essence of the trauma itself, something that demands a new register if it is to gain any sort of representation. Irrevocably, the trauma has taken over his body in a concrete, physical way, and its abandonment is rendered impossible as the narrator's status as a political refugee is concretized.

The end of the novel demonstrates an altered the relationship between trauma, aesthetics and the narrator's own being in the world. After having consumed historical trauma for months,

⁴⁴ Castellanos Moya, 141–42.

it has altered the way he interacts with the new world he inhabits. He no longer identifies with the victim on a superficial or voyeuristic level but rather has become the secondary witness that LaCapra deems necessary for the narrative empathy to function.⁴⁵ The narrator begins to open himself up to empathetic unsettlement towards the end. Yet, perhaps more significantly, the novel itself has surely paved the path for empathetic unsettlement. The stylistic effects that LaCapra demands for an ethical and empathetic understanding of trauma surfaces throughout *Insensatez*. “Memories of horror are not accurate,” as Nora Strejilevich recalls, “and witnesses who testify in front of a jury have to reshape their traumatic recollections to fit the requirements of the law, which demands precision. A truthful way of giving testimony should allow for disruptive memories, discontinuities, blanks, silences, and ambiguities; it should become literary.”⁴⁶ In revealing the problems of mediation involved in any kind of attempt to represent violence through oral testimonies, such as found in the truth commissions, *Insensatez* engages with the very things that Strejilevich finds necessary, allowing the testimony to exist through the silences, blanks, and disruptions, providing it with a new representational space. The space for poetry, although seemingly aestheticizing at first, also enables the testimonial fragments to gain a new interpretative lens, one denying the objectivity determined for them by the historical narratives they end up in.

“Yo no estoy completo de la mente” appears, in its original italics two more times in the first chapter. Both times it is reduced to a slogan devoid of its history: “...ubicada ni más ni menos en la parte trasera de la Catedral Metropolitana, otra muestra de que yo no estoy completo de la mente” and “con la vista fija en la frase de marras, *Yo no estoy completo de la mente*.”⁴⁷ The phrase never returns to the beginning of a sentence, no longer tells of anything, it instead merges with the narrator’s own speech, a transmission that strips the phrase of its violent past, transforming the original testimony into something disconnected from its own history: a mere aesthetic object containing traces of trauma. The phrase appears one last time, in the middle of the second chapter, as an artefact devoid of its original meaning: “...o a escarbar en los testimonios para encontrar frases como *Yo no estoy completa de la mente*, que apenas era una de las muchas que me iban asombrando a medida que avanzaba la lectura.”⁴⁸ Although the phrase itself has been manipulated, edited and removed from its original context, becoming a mere

⁴⁵ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 78. “Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathetic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of this position and hence not taking the other’s place. Opening oneself to empathetic unsettlement is, as I intimated, a desirable affective dimension of research and analysis. Empathy is important in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may (I think, should) have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems. It places in jeopardy fetishized and totalizing narratives that deny the trauma that called them into existence by prematurely returning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios.”

⁴⁶ Nora Strejilevich, ‘Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 28 (2006), 701–713 (p. 704).

⁴⁷ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 16,19.

⁴⁸ Castellanos Moya, 30.

simile in the previous citation, its trajectory nevertheless continues haunting the narrator and the book. As the most repeated phrase in the novel, and the one undergoing the largest process of editing and ordering, it maps out the process of objectification and identification that traumatic testimonies endure as they enter inside historical discourse. “The fact that those snippets have been said by people who could barely speak Spanish,” Moya tells an interviewer in the fall of 2008, “and who had a different vision of the world gives them their poetic character, and to me it also gave me the liberty to use them as a rich and malleable literary material.”⁴⁹ The transformation of testimonial fragments into “malleable literary material” containing “poetic character” is something the novel engages with quite explicitly. Since actual testimonies, by necessity, required both translation and correction, we never get the actual testimony- we get a revised version. This does not mean that the testimony is less true in describing the events; it merely suggests that the words we so cling to are often not the actual words said by the victim. What does the transformation of testimonial fragments into poetry attempt to do in this novel and for Moya’s own artistic method? It seeks to provide a different life, a different trajectory, for these testimonies, one enabling them to exist on another medium, in another realm. Although readers realize the danger involved in reading them as poetry, especially as the narrator becomes more and more intrigued with this particular poetic process, the novel argues that it is equally dangerous to allow for their complete abandonment in the objective compilation and editing employed by the truth commission. In dispersing these fragments within a literary medium, Moya intricately disperses actual traumatic testimonies throughout the novel thus enabling the voices of the indigenous victims, and the history of the genocide, to consistently mark the text with their presence. In other words, the novel refuses to construct a coherent narrative for trauma and, instead, shows how trauma consumes everything in its path. It is senseless to try to make sense of testimonial fragments. There is no hidden message within them. Our responsibility, as readers, is not to understand the trauma presented, but rather to become aware of the impossibility of understanding. In other words, to read empathetically requires abandoning our desire for structure, a desire mimicked by the narrator and one that the chaotic formal qualities of the novel drastically prevent.

The Structure of Narrative Empathy: Impossible Catharsis and the Case of Teresa

One of the primary reasons for the creation and establishment of the truth commission, in Guatemala and in other countries, was to allow the victim to speak, permitting the voice of the victim to enter inside the larger historical narrative, often for the first time in the country’s history. The ability to voice trauma holds a cathartic power, as the victim is empowered with the ability to narrate their experience to another person. This act of narration allows the traumatic telling to gain recognition in the eyes of another, an important step in the reconfiguration of a victim-driven historical discourse. This process can be dangerous and productive for the victim and listener. The danger ranges from posttraumatic stress, which many victims experienced, to the violence imposed upon the testimony itself by the process of editing and “correcting.” Yet many scholars of truth commissions believe that often victims do not have enough time to tell their story and are often not given any support after they have told it, which can lead to intense

⁴⁹ Mauro Javier Cardenas, “The Horacio Castellanos Moya Interview,” *The Quarterly Conversation* 13 (2008): 29.

post-traumatic stress episodes.⁵⁰ Additionally, the language of the testimony itself (especially true with respect to the indigenous groups in Guatemala providing testimony) was sometimes tweaked and edited to such an extreme that erasures became a way to normalize indigenous speech, making it “comprehensible” to the masses. This was less common for the REMHI report but was rather common other Central American truth commissions. Moya manipulates the victim’s testimony throughout the novel in order to illuminate the process of reconstruction that commissioners relied on as while constructing the truth report. Alternatively, the novel is established as the primary genre for representing trauma, set up as an substitute space for representing trauma in a less ordered, less linear, and most importantly, less identifiable way.

Insensatez engages with catharsis both on a metaphorical level, with the narrator’s body serving as a vessel upon which we can encounter the residues of trauma (and subsequently the inability of personal catharsis he himself experiences as his reading of violence begins contaminating his own mind and body), and literally, through the narrator’s reflections on the traumatic testimony he reads. These two levels of catharsis work side-by-side inside the novel to forcibly prevent our own catharsis as readers. By denying our access to the complete picture and, following LaCapra’s model of empathetic unsettlement, refusing any glimmer of hope or understanding, *Insensatez* provides a new representation of genocide. Since genocide resists any method of interpretation and representation, as it can never be fully described, the novel leaves all trauma fragmentary and decontextualized, refusing to shape a narrative around the victim’s words. Subsequently, catharsis is rewritten as contamination. The cathartic power of testimony anticipated by the novel begs readers to question if the victim can in fact realize catharsis or if it is merely something superimposed upon the sufferer in order to justify a reader’s *own* desire for catharsis. This notion of “making sense out of the senseless” is something Moya makes explicit in both titling his novel “senselessness” and in allowing the phrase “*todos sabemos quienes son los asesinos,*” a phrase filled with conviction yet one that paradoxically has no power to convict, to haunt over the reader in the last few pages. In questioning the possibility of catharsis, *Insensatez* critiques the truth commission’s claims on cathartic reparation, demonstrating the danger that the commission itself faces if catharsis is not followed by legal action (persecution of the guilty). This line of questioning allows Moya to position the novel as a new space for representing trauma in an ethical manner, one blocking catharsis and opting for an empathy-driven reading of testimonies, structured by the ethical reading practice the novel develops throughout. The version of narrative empathy developing inside the realm of contamination requires the abandonment of three things, all of which structure the reader’s desire for catharsis: (1) order (2) reason and (3) identification.

A direct mention of catharsis occurs near the beginning of the novel (one addressed in the previous section) as the narrator states that:

“frases contundentes dichas por indígenas para quienes seguramente recordar los hechos que ahí relataban significaba remover sus más dolorosos recuerdos, pero también entrar a una etapa terapéutica al poder confrontar su pasado, orear a esos fantasmas sanguinarios que acechaban sus sueños, como ellos mismos reconocían en esos testimonios que

⁵⁰ Eric Brahm, “Uncovering the Truth: Examining Truth Commission Success and Impact,” *International Studies Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (February 1, 2007): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2007.00267.x>. Truth commissions often provide victims with only a few minutes to tell their story and no follow-up support after their testimony. Under such conditions, there is a contradictory anecdotal evidence that truth can rekindle anger and trigger posttraumatic stress.”

parecían capsulas concentradas de dolor y cuyas frases tenían tal sonoridad, fuerza y profundidad que yo había apuntado ya algunas de ellas en mi libreta personal...⁵¹

The mixture of a quasi-scientific language that can be “proven,” with words such as “seguramente” and “significaba” mixed with “etapa terapéutica,” generates an ironic portrait of the version of catharsis our narrator describes here. His certainty that the indigenous voices, in remembering, are able to confront and surpass their traumatic pasts, is interrupted by his own transformation of their voices into sonorous phrases which he writes in his personal notebook. Nothing is questioned in this phrase, the narrator’s assuredness and grouping together of all traumas reveals the leading problem with the truth commission as a form of representing trauma: it seeks to provide comprehension and order, to “make sense” of genocide for its readers. Moya, on the other hand, demonstrates how comprehension through testimonial representation is problematic in that it seeks to construct a narrative for the otherwise non-representable. This is not to say that we should not attempt to represent genocide and the traumatic experiences of thousands or that we should not gather testimony from the victims, it is simply crucial to realize that such representations, by necessity, inflict their own violence. As Strejilvich recalls, “it is only by first making peace with the impossibility of comprehension that one can ever begin to comprehend at all.”⁵² *Insensatez* directly engages with the impossibility of comprehension- it is within the realm of the impossible that empathy flourishes.

Yet trauma is not rendered sublime within the novel- the sublime has no place within the realm *Insensatez* builds. Rather, in refusing to allow the testimonial fragments to tell a coherent story on their own or as a collective, the novel demonstrates how a lack of coherent representation (with respect to the testimonial snippets) constructs an alternative system of representation within the novel-space where trauma is accessed, rather paradoxically, through a reader’s *awareness* of the lack of understanding the senseless violence portrayed. It is this awareness of our own lack of understanding that drives the ethical reading practice paving the path to narrative empathy. The unordered and incomplete fragments create their own representational space, one denying a reader’s complete access to the trauma they recall, thus establishing a barrier against the reader’s desire for comprehension and the catharsis stemming from it. As mentioned in the previous section, the narrative itself is built around these fragments. They provide a structure for the novel by directing our understanding of the narrator’s relationship to his job, the country he is in, his body and his burgeoning paranoia. In fact, in realizing how his relationship with the testimonial fragments shifts, these fragments also take on a temporal quality since through them we can witness time passing with respect to the narrator’s own psychological struggle as he continues editing the truth commission report. These fragments, however, due to their focus on dismemberment and fracturing, also position the reader within the world of the abject. The world of abjection, as I discussed in Chapter Four, as it comes into contact with the world of aesthetics, begins resisting language and representation, shaping representation voids which serve to access, in this case, historical trauma, on an alternative register. The connection between the abject and aesthetics here, further shapes the relationship between the self and the other, resisting the dangerous drive for identification that readers often fall upon, to assure themselves that are reading empathetically. Yet the abject

⁵¹ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 30.

⁵² Strejilvich, “Testimony,” 705.

bodies throughout the novel contaminate all in their path as they resist comprehension, both physically and narratively. Moya draws our attention to the relationship between contamination and empathy, as the narrator's own body and mind, the more he reads, undergo extreme fragmentation and adulteration, as if innately mimicking the fragmentation of the testimonial snippets he relies on to make sense of his work and life during this time.

The narrator recalls in chapter eight that “el infierno es la mente y no la carne,” [hell is the mind and not the flesh], as he reflects on how his mind has been affected through the reading of the testimonies.⁵³ The phrase occurs as he lies next to Fatima, the woman engaged to an Uruguayan military official, who the narrator sleeps with and who, consequently, contaminates his body with an STD and his mind with a debilitating paranoia: “Estaba tirado en la cama, con el cuerpo recién poseído roncando a mi lado, sorprendido por una idea que de súbito me había cegado, la idea de que el infierno es la mente y no la carne, tal como comprobaba yo en ese instante...”⁵⁴ [I lay on the bed with the recently possessed body snoring next to me, surprised by an idea that all of a sudden blinded me, the idea that hell is the mind and not the flesh, just as I realized it in that instance]. The narrator's own body, his inability to hold an erection, the STD like symptoms he faces after his love-making with Fatima, and the agitation provoked by the paranoia he feels both as he journeys further into his work and as he begins fearing Fatima's fiancé, all promote the impossibility of catharsis. As the narrator continues reading more and more accounts, violence begins contaminating and altering an otherwise healthy body and mind. Consequently, the representation of violence is enough to pollute and violate even the body of one who did not experience it upon their own flesh. Reading and contamination go hand in hand here. What the novel claims is that in order to read empathetically one *must* become contaminated. Contamination is a pollution of the reader- it is the opposite of identification in that the reader is prevented from accessing the victim's pain, suffering and life story. There is no room to identify with the victim, since the victims receive no physicality, for the most part, and even their traumas are revealed as fragmentary. Yet as the reader reads, more and more fragments appear, contaminating the aesthetic reading experience with actual human suffering. Although our narrator's ethical compass is problematic to say the least, as he strips testimonies apart in an attempt to garnish them with poetic thrills for his own aesthetic appreciation, the transformations occurring upon his physical body and inside his mind showcase that his reading moves beyond a mere engagement with aesthetics. The more he reads, the more his body and mind begin to suffer. Paranoia, in fact, becomes a primary symptom for him (and one also felt by many of the testifiers who knew their persecutors would not face legal action). It contaminates everything he comes into contact with, so much so that his paranoia forces him out of the country, across the Atlantic, as the novel comes to a close.

The contamination of the narrator's everyday life by the trauma he reads showcases how national trauma can impact even an outsider. Conversely, it exhibits the ethical dangers that reading trauma often entails. The affective response of narrator's body and mind as he engages with victim's world, therefore, teaches readers how to approach trauma from the outside, at a distance, understanding its impact without the necessity of identifying with its victims or comprehending the “whole picture/story” of genocide. It also teaches readers about their own inevitable ethical failings when faced with traumatic discourse and the representation of trauma

⁵³ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 93.

⁵⁴ Castellanos Moya, 93.

on the page. Awareness of these failings, and the necessary distance required as one engages with traumatic testimonies, become the central building blocks for empathetic understanding and an empathy-driven reading practice. In thinking about his notebook, as it sits on his kitchen table, the narrator demonstrates how everything has been contaminated by the trauma he reads: “y la coloqué abierta sobre la mesa, junto a mi plato de sopa: Mis hijos dicen: mamá, mi pobre papá dónde habrá quedado, tal vez pasa el sol sobre sus huesos, tal vez pasa la lluvia y el aire, ¿ dónde estará? Como que fuera un animal mi pobre papá. Esto es el dolor...., leí entre sorbos, y después busqué una frase....”⁵⁵ [and I placed it open on top of the table, next to me soup bowl: My sons said: mama, where did my poor father end up, perhaps the sun is passing over his bones now, perhaps the rain or the air passes, where is he? As if he were an animal, my poor father. This is what pain is...I read between sips, and then I looked for a phrase...]. The fusion of the horrific trauma detailed by the children begging to know where their father’s remains lay with the narrator’s sipping of soup displays how easily trauma can enter into the realm of the trivial. The narrator’s reading process mimics our own process when we are confronted with the trauma of others. Our lives continue. We too take pauses to take a drink of water or use the restroom as we engage with traumatic episodes on the page in front of us. However, as we witness the narrator’s engagement, or rather dis-engagement, we immediately feel disconcerted, outright uncomfortable with the ordinary world built around the victim’s testimony. How is it that he can sip soup while the world of pain lies in front of him? This moment in the novel demonstrates that our ethical responsibility, while reading the trauma of others, is not to let go of those pauses but to realize our limitations by preventing the desire to identify with the victim and to create a coherent, linear “story” for the trauma we read. Our ethical engagement, in other words, demands that we recognize that our narrator’s process of reading mimics our own and that we too are incapable of escaping the trappings of aesthetics. On the other hand, it also demonstrates how easily everyday life (i.e. the sipping of soup) is contaminated by the pain of others. It is within this awareness of our limits as readers (and subsequent contamination of our everyday lives) that empathy surfaces.

Cynicism, the adulteration of hope, becomes an aesthetic tool used to map contamination and one essential in establishing the version of narrative empathy demanded by the novel. In fact, the postwar novel in Central America forces the reader to come face to face with cynicism. Thus the portrait of Central American society is one wrecked by chaos, violence and corruption. Cynicism, in effect, becomes an aesthetic form driving the Central American novel.⁵⁶ The

⁵⁵ Castellanos Moya, 48.

⁵⁶ Beatriz Cortez, *Estética Del Cinismo: Pasión y El Desencanto En La Literatura Centroamericana de Posguerra*, 1. ed (Guatemala, Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2010), 5.

“pone frente al lector un espíritu de cinismo. Este tipo de ficción pinta un retrato de las sociedades centroamericanas en caos, inmersas en la violencia y la corrupción. Se trata de sociedades con un doble estándar cuyos habitantes definen y luego ignoran las normas sociales que establecen la decencia, el buen gusto, la moralidad y la buena reputación. El cinismo, como una forma estética, provee al sujeto una guía para sobrevivir en un contexto social minado por el legado de violencia de la guerra y por la pérdida de una forma concreta de liderazgo. El periodo de posguerra en Centroamericana es un tiempo de desencanto, pero es también una oportunidad para la exploración de la representación contemporánea de la intimidad y de la construcción de la subjetividad.”

[places the spirit of cynicism in front of the reader. This type of fiction paints a portrait of Central American society that have left in chaos, immersed inside the realms of violence and corruption. It

subjectivity constructed inside *Insensatez* is a fragmented and paranoid one. The novel is not hopeful in the least; in fact, cynicism permeates all in its path and suggests that the only thing left after genocide is an utter destruction of the subject and, by extension, the nation. The catharsis envisioned by the truth commission, and one the reader too desires, is rendered impossible here. Catharsis is replaced by the world of contamination. Our narrator “expresses no general sympathy or commiseration for the surviving victims of the massacre, although he doesn’t put their account of the atrocities they suffered in doubt. However, these testimonies, indeed an expression of unfathomable suffering under brutal injustice, simultaneously frighten and captivate him; but he remains distant not only from any political stance but primarily from any empathy upon which a political alliance might be predicated.”⁵⁷ His lack of empathy is evident throughout the novel; however, it is inside this lack that we learn how to read empathetically by resisting the traps of identification and our desire for comprehending the totality of trauma. What does shock him are not the testimonies themselves “but rather the indifference of its audience- those national and international activists and professionals involved in a unified common sense- to the particular inflections of indigenous speech...”⁵⁸ This indifference lays the foundation for the cynicism engulfing the novel as the narrator’s obsession with the victims’ testimonies falls on deaf ears.

One episode intricately links catharsis, contamination and the empathy. It describes the rape of a woman named Teresa, the only victim named in the entire novel. As the narrator reflects on her testimony, he recounts: “que la tortura es la medida de la inteligencia en los militares, y que ahora, diecisiete años después, era un respetable general que se paseaba orgulloso y ufano por esta misma ciudad donde la mujer que recorría el pasillo del Arzobispado lo reconocería con el mismo terror de entonces.”⁵⁹ [that torture is the measurement of intelligence for the military men, and that now, sixteen years later, it was a respectable general who proudly strolled through this same city where the woman who traveled through the hallways of the Archbishop’s office recognized him with the same terror as before]. What the above observation demonstrates is that psychological torture endures, and Teresa’s body becomes a permanent landmark of trauma, specifically of sexual abuse. Her torture is endless especially since she is forced to come face to face with her perpetrator with knowledge that he still roams free. This knowledge, in turn, prevents catharsis while also promoting her fear and paranoia. The episode directly links the absence of persecution to the impossibility of catharsis, implying that the latter cannot be reached without the former, thus staging another critique against the truth commission’s claims to cathartic release on behalf of the victim. Moya indirectly asks the

represents societies that hold a double standard whose inhabitants define and later ignore those societal norms that establish decency, good taste, morality and a good reputation. Cynicism, as an aesthetic form, provides the subject with a guide for survival in a social context undermined by the legacy of violence and by the loss of a concrete form of leadership. The postwar period in Central America is a time of disenchantment, but it is also an opportunity for the exploration of the contemporary representation of intimacy and the construction of the subjectivity].

⁵⁷ Fernando J. Rosenberg, *After Human Rights: Literature, Visual Arts, and Film In Latin America, 1990-2010*, Illuminations: Cultural Formations of the Americas Series (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 87.

⁵⁸ Rosenberg, 89.

⁵⁹ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 109.

reader to question the possibility of catharsis through testimony if that testimony is not met with legal persecution of the abusers. Teresa testified and it is her testimony that the narrator recalls throughout the chapter, one that, through its gruesome details, alters his own belief in the powers of the truth commission report. Here, the novel claims that a victim's catharsis depends on the persecution of their perpetrator; otherwise, as is the case with Teresa, the victim constantly meets the perpetrator and is reminded of the lack of justice continuing to envelop her nation.

Insensatez demands a call to action here, stressing the importance that legal measures play in finally punishing the promoters and inflictors of genocide, and thus finalizing the path to reconciliation and healing. Yet, perhaps more significantly, the Teresa episode demonstrates a marked divergence from the previous representations of trauma inside the novel.⁶⁰ Teresa's traumatic experience exists but her words do not. Unlike the other testimonies, hers does not get stripped apart for the purpose of aesthetics. Interestingly enough, the narrator, in a truth-report style narration, details the extent of her humiliation and abuse, by narrating the violence perpetuated on her in a direct and comprehensive way. The narrative voice shifts here for the first and only time, as the narrator's aesthetic appreciation for the "poetic nature" of the testimonies is abandoned entirely. No longer does narrator manipulate the fragments of testimonies as a means of engaging with the trauma facing him as he reads. This is the first time in the novel where a victim's trauma is not aestheticized in any way, but rendered in a narrative fashion. Teresa's flesh-and-blood body resists the process of aesthetic engagement that the narrator relies on while mediating through the trauma he encounters, and thus a new engagement with traumatic testimony emerges, where Teresa's lack of voice is another method of distancing used by Moya to establish the void of testimony that best represents historical trauma.⁶¹ The episode illuminates the narrator's desire for *distance* when finally faced with the flesh and blood victim.

This is strikingly different from his desire for proximity, as seen through his relationship with the citation which began the novel, "yo no estoy completo de la mente," a phrase he appropriated multiple times and reinvented to fit his own state of mind. What the novel adeptly illuminates here is how the facility of reading traumatic testimonies is compromised when one faces the actual victim. The narrator's desire for proximity is prevented here as he willingly steps back from this desire when Teresa emerges in the flesh. The act of reading trauma and "making

⁶⁰ Jossa, "Transparencia y Opacidad: Escritura y Memoria En *Insensatez* de H. Castellanos Moya y El Material Human Por R. Rey Rosa," 46. "Pero el episodio y la presencia de la mujer superviviente constituyen un revelamiento para el narrador....: por primera vez el narrador ve, concretamente, la realidad y la permanencia del trauma. Por esa razón, hay una diferencia marcada entre el tratamiento de esta anécdota y las demás: primero, el narrador no utiliza ni se apropia de las palabras del testigo y, segundo, aquí aparecen los nombres (ficticios) de la víctima y del victimario, en contraposición con los demás testigo..." [But the occurrence and the presence of the survivor make up a revelation for the narrator....for the first time, the narrator concretely sees the reality and the permanence of trauma. For this reason, there exists a marked difference between the treatment of this anecdote and the others: first, the narrator does not use nor appropriate the words of the victim, and secondly, the names (though fictional)of the victim and the perpetrator appear here, in contrast to the other testifier...]

⁶¹ Jossa, 46. "a pesar de esa indecibilidad, ahí está Teresa, la superviviente, quien denuncia la permanencia del dolor y la ausencia del condenado: el corrector no quiere conocerla, por el contrario, «me mantendría lo más alejado posible de ella». Pero la distancia ya no es posible: la mujer está allí, prueba viviente de una representación vicaria, eso es, del vacío del testimonio." [despite that unspeakability, there is Teresa, the survivor, who denounces the endurance of pain and the absence of the accused: the editor does not want to meet her, on the contrary, 'I would distance myself as far from her as possible.' Yet the distance is no longer possible: there is the woman, living proof of a vicarious representation, that is, of the void of testimony].

sense” of it, both for the purposes of a REHMI report and for one’s own understanding as a reader, prevent the construction of narrative empathy. The ethical version of empathy Moya constructs within *Insensatez* occurs at a distance, and as such demands a step back from identification and from our desire to fully comprehend the violence we read as one that can be easily transcribed within any kind of written medium. As the narrator reflects on Teresa, he decides to leave her voicing of trauma in an aesthetic void; demonstrating his first and only attempt at empathy. Whereas in earlier episodes the testimonial fragments were used as a means of superficially identifying with the victim’s pain, there is no identification plausible for the narrator here. LaCapra suggests that unproblematic identification, further victimization since often the self is collapsed upon the victim. “By contrast,” he writes, “empathy is a counterforce to victimization and-without giving empathy an exclusive or primordial position- one may argue that its role is important both in historical understanding and in the ethics of everyday life. Indeed, the role of empathy is an insufficiently explored avenue through which one may inquire into the connection between historical understanding, social critique and ethic-political activity.”⁶²

Appearing at the beginning of chapter nine, Teresa’s physical presence consumes the narrator. Coincidentally, it is also in this chapter that his STD infection starts to surface, a physical consumption matching his psychological one. Teresa, unlike the other bodiless victims whose testimonies are interspersed throughout the course of the novel, appears in the flesh, and is therefore undeniably present:

“Vaya sorpresa la que tuve cuando esa mañana me enteré de que una mujer guapa y misteriosa a la que apenas veía de vez en cuando recorrer los pasillos del palacio arzobispal era la misma chica cuyo testimonio yo estaba corrigiendo y que me había conmovido a tal grado que no pude terminar la tarea de un tirón y había preferido salir al patio del palacio con el propósito de tomar aire y un poco de sol matutino; ...era la misma chica cuyo testimonio yo estaba comentándole con el mayor de los estremecimientos, habida cuenta de que ella relataba las infamias que había sufrido diecisiete años atrás a manos de los militares, luego de que fuera capturada en el desparpajo de la represión contra una protesta estudiantil en pleno centro capitalino, una chica que entonces tenía dieciséis años y que fue conducida a las mazamorras del cuartel de la policía, donde padeció los peores vejámenes, incluida la violación diaria y sistemática por parte de sus torturadores, un testimonio contado con tanto detalle y tan impactante que me había obligado a abandonar la oficina de monseñor donde yo trabajaba en busca de aire y emociones menos malsanas.”⁶³

[Imagine my surprise when I realized this morning that the pretty and mysterious woman that I saw from time to time walking about the hallways of the archbishop’s palace was the same girl whose testimony I was correcting and whose testimony had moved me to such an extent that I could not finish my work, preferring to go out on the patio in order to take in some air and a bit of morning sun; she was the same girl whose testimony I was commenting on while shuddering because she related the disgraces she had suffered

⁶² LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 219.

⁶³ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 107–8.

sixteen years ago at the hands of the military men, relating how she had been captured during a student protest in the middle of the capital, a girl who was sixteen years only and who was taken to the police dungeons, where the harshest punishments were inflicted upon her, including daily and systematic rape by her torturers, a testimony so impactful, told in such detail, that I was forced to abandon the office where I worked in order to take in some air and less unhealthy emotions].

Teresa takes up space, encompassing a large block of text, separated by a few commas and a semicolon, one refusing to allow the reader a breath of fresh air, so to speak. What happened to her is not detailed for us using a testimonial voice but rather narrated for us. The narrator does not appropriate her voice at any point and her testimony is told to us through a structured narrative lens, and thus protected from the realm of identification with and aestheticization of the previous testimonies. Her voice is protected by the aesthetic choice to not represent her testimony directly, refusing the fragmented direct quotation that the other victim's testimonies were subject to. The narrator distances himself from Teresa during the narration of her abuses and this prevents him from using her words inside the aesthetic realm he has utilized thus far to comprehend the trauma encountered. Her trauma is not poetic. Her trauma cannot be cut and appropriated. Her voice resists the realm of representation and as such the reader is left with brief listing of what she endured but is denied any further description. We have no room for identification here and its prevention furnishes the space for empathy. We see Teresa continuing with her life, her body walks around throughout the city, carrying her trauma beside her. Hers is a body that has been abused beyond comprehension. And beyond comprehension she remains for us and for the narrator as she encompasses the void: a space beyond words and beyond representation. Yet we do get a very clear sense of what happened to her, a narrative representation of her abuses more akin to the REHMI report model, which structures victim testimony objectively. Yet the narrator's ethical journey to Teresa enables the reader to finally read the objective account of her abuse in an ethically guided manner. Teresa's trauma is one that the reader has learned how to access cautiously and ethically, especially since it is found near the end of the novel, when the model of ethical narrative empathy has already been established.

Throughout the novel the narrator expresses little empathy for the victims he encounters, yet he does while reflecting on Teresa's suffering while maintaining himself at a distance. The space of historical understanding opens here, as does LaCapra's vision of empathetic unsettlement, which holds "a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of this position and hence not taking the other's place."⁶⁴ While the other testimonies he relies upon throughout the novel express intense, often unimaginable physical and psychological suffering, which he is aesthetically drawn to, Teresa's trauma draws him in differently. Now, he uses a distancing tactic as a means of access her trauma, demonstrated physically through his constant stepping outside for some fresh air, and aesthetically, through his refusal to use her actual testimonial voice. Empathy predominates the Teresa episode, as the narrator, for the first time in the novel, encompasses the space of the secondary witness that LaCapra suggests is necessary for empathetic unsettlement to occur. In allowing Teresa's testimonial voice to resist the confines of literary representation, while positioning himself at a distance from her trauma, the narrator transforms himself into a

⁶⁴ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 78.

secondary witness who reads a testimony but refuses to aestheticize or identify with it. In understanding that testimony belongs to a woman who is alive in the world, an actual victim who he can see and interact with (though does neither), he establishes the foundation of narrative empathy vis-a-vis trauma. Narrative empathy appears here for the first time and it requires three things: (1) the void of the testimonial voice as a system of representation trauma aesthetically, (2) the awareness of one's physical and psychological distancing from the victim's suffering, i.e. the impossibility of identification (the distancing occurs twofold as our narrator tells Pilar he would rather not meet Teresa: "prefería que me la presentaras otro día"⁶⁵), and (3) the stylistic decision to flood the reader with a relentless documentation of systematic violence by denying punctuation.

As the narrator reflects on his desire for escape and his inability to continue reading Teresa's account, another form of distancing ensues, setting him further apart from the victim's testimony:

"Y entonces se me reveló con la mayor contundencia la imagen que me había concentrado en la corrección del informe que contenía el testimonio de la chica una y otra vez violada, la imagen que me puso los pelos y el alma de punta a grado tal que no pude seguir con la lectura y únicamente se me ocurrió escapar hacia el patio en busca del sol y el aire...sentí de nuevo el escalofrío de aquella chica que caminaba con dificultad por los sótanos del cuartel de policía, jalada por el teniente Octavio Pérez, con la vagina y el ano desgarrado apenas podía dar paso sin saber de la infección gonorreíta que comenzaba a carcomerla ni del semen putrefacto que estaba haciéndose feto en su útero, paralizado por el terror...porque me mantendría lo más alejado posible de ella a lo largo de mi estadía en el palacio arzobispal."⁶⁶

[And then, then image that I had concentrated on while reading the testimony of the girl who was raped over and over, was forcefully revealed to me, the image that set my hairs and soul on edge so much so that I could not continue with my reading of the account, and the only thing that occurred to me to do was to escape on the patio in search of some sunshine and air...I felt, once more, the shivers of that girl who walked with difficulty through the basements of the police headquarters, yanked by lieutenant Octavio Perez, with her vagina and anus torn so much so that she could hardly walk without the knowledge that the gonorrhea infection was starting to eat away at her, nor of the putrid semen which was creating a fetus in her uterus, paralyzed by terror....].

The citation above occurs over two pages and lacks any kind of pause or interruption, as a period would provide. The reader has no breathing room here. Unlike the narrator who interrupts his own reading of Teresa's account, stepping outside for fresh air, the reader is flooded with a grotesque systematic portrayal of sexual violence. The stylistic effects within this episode appear within the block of text that details Teresa's abuse without allowing the reader the chance to pause his or her reading. For the first time in the novel, the narrator refuses to manipulate Teresa's words as a means of illuminating his own aesthetic desires for sound and poetics. This refusal also prevents the fragmentation of trauma, as we witness with the other testimonies. Her

⁶⁵ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 109.

⁶⁶ Castellanos Moya, 110–11.

case is not an end to his aesthetic desires, but rather exists on its own, devoid of the narrator's aestheticization. This may have something to do with the version of sexual trauma she relates as well as with the fact that she is a victim who he can come face to face with, one continuing to live and act within the post-war period; a victim of the genocide permanently present within the world corrupted by national violence.

Whereas most of the other testimonies he relates, though horrific, deal with death and mutilation, hers is the only trauma that speaks to the sexual traumas experienced by many women during the Guatemalan genocide. Strangely enough, until the 1990's, sexual violence was not a topic dealt with in earlier truth commissions:

“Another prominent example of truth commissions' attentiveness to emerging global human rights norms has to do with the way different commissions have dealt with sexual violence across time. While earlier truth commissions largely ignored the issue of sexual violence on the grounds that this category of crimes did not fall within their mandate, the worldwide recognition of sexual violence as a distinct category of human rights violations throughout the 1990s led some of the later truth commissions (e.g. South Africa, Guatemala, Peru, and Chile) to address the issue specifically.”⁶⁷

Teresa occupies an important place within the novel and within the general trajectory of the truth commission report *specifically because* she is not dead. Her body still encompasses the space of the living, a direct and permanent reminder of the genocide and the permanence of the living victims it left behind. Perhaps this is why the narrator refuses to cut up her testimony into flashy snippets for his aesthetic engagement. She still lives, breathes and walks around with her trauma, and her visibility confronts him, and the nation, quite dramatically. The narrator does not turn her testimony into an object. If the manipulation of the testimonies he corrects represents a kind of personal catharsis, one he, as a truth commission editor who spends his days immersed inside the trauma of others requires in order to continue with his work, then Teresa embodies the impossibility of catharsis, for him and for the country. It is within this impossibility that empathy emerges as a productive mechanism that holds the power to shape future discourses on national trauma and violence precisely because it resists the objectification of the victim's testimony.

We find out a lot more about Teresa than we do about any other victim whose trauma he relates. Her father was a lawyer who defended union workers and we gain several glimpses of the sexual violence perpetuated on her. Yet those glimpses are presented as vignettes, interspersed through the narrator's only realization that the woman continues existing within the world he is commissioned to edit and correct. Most importantly, her perpetrator is named in this episode. The name Octavio Perez Mena appears for the first time here and then once more in the novel's last chapter. Naming becomes a driving metaphor for the entire novel and opens a discussion about the truth commission's ability to provide a legal catharsis for the victim. Although the truth commission situates the Guatemalan genocide within the larger history of the country, a history grounded within racist colonial ideologies, thus assigning blame by naming a few of the perpetrators within the report itself, its inability to enforce punishment within the juridical system goes against the version of personal catharsis (and national catharsis) that many scholars view as essential for national reconciliation. *Insensatez*, in explicitly dealing with both catharsis and persecution, creates the space for justice within literature. In naming Octavio Perez

⁶⁷ Bakiner, *Truth Commissions*, 75.

Mena (who stands for Otto Perez Molina, the head of the Guatemalan military) the novel begins engaging in its own version of persecution as it begins to name the perpetrator and systematically describe his horrific acts against the female victim. Why did the novel not name Otto Perez Molina explicitly, as it does Rios Montt later? Why leave only the initials OPM intact but change the name? In denying the name Otto Perez Molina entry inside the narrative, the novel mimics the truth commission report, which did not name each perpetrator, especially those accused of sexual violence. Also, perhaps more optimistically, in preventing Otto Perez Molina from gaining full representation with respect to Teresa's testimony, the novel denies him power while also protecting her testimony from the shackles of representation by keeping the reader at a distance as it demarcates the boundary between reality and fiction.

The novel explicitly names Rios Montt who, until 2012, had immunity from legal punishment: "para revivirlos y que pudieran votar a favor del partido del general Rios Montt, el criminal que se había hecho del poder a través de un golpe de Estado y ahora necesitaba legitimarse gracias al voto de los vivos y también de los muertos..."⁶⁸ The naming of Montt inside the literary work is odd, especially since the Moya refuses to directly name Teresa's perpetrator:

"In an indication that Castellanos Moya's novel shared with the REMHI report the objective of ending such impunity, *Insensatez* names a rather significant name of its own. It inserts a military officer called Octavio Perez Mena into the testimonial account of torture and castration that impacts the narrator so profoundly though no such individual appears in the actual account published in the REMHI report. On several subsequent occasions, the narrator sees, or imagines that he sees, the torturer Octavio Perez Mena stalking him, even in the German bar. It happens that his name is remarkably similar to that of General Otto Perez Molina, former head of the Guatemalan Presidential Military Staff, one of the control centers of repression during the war."⁶⁹

The novel determines, especially in its call to action at the end as the repeated "todos sabemos quienes son los asesinos" reverberates, how literature can begin demanding justice when other forms of representation have not succeeded in establishing it. It is not that Castellanos Moya is unable to name General Molina explicitly, he does, after all, name Rios Montt, but rather that he *refuses* to name. As soon as Octavio Perez Mena is mentioned we encounter a meta-literary moment which serves to collapse the divide between fiction and reality: "Octavio Perez Mena estaba perpetrando contra la memoria y el trabajo de tantos, una idea que prendió la mecha de mi entusiasmo mientras bajaba por la carretera, pero que enseguida mostro toda su insensatez..."⁷⁰ The mention of the book's title alongside the fictionalized General Otto Perez Molina demonstrates this collapse, suggesting that the title of the novel is directly related to the naming and describing of the perpetrator. The phrase "todos sabemos quienes son los asesinos" thus becomes a call for sense and a move away from *insensatez*. The refusal to name General Molina explicitly may in fact demonstrate the senselessness the novel directly addresses in this moment:

⁶⁸ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 72.

⁶⁹ Kokotovic, "'Testimonio' Once Removed," 557.

⁷⁰ Castellanos Moya, *Insensatez*, 142.

how senseless it is to not name and condemn, even though the perpetrators are right in front of us.

Conclusion

The lack of persecution and prosecution, the lack of legal measures in the Guatemalan genocide promotes forgetfulness, something Castellanos Moya directly confronts in *Insensatez* by having his narrator repeat “Todos sabemos quienes son los asesinos” five times in the last three pages of the book, making sure we, as readers, do not forget. The narrative that Moya’s narrator works to create and organize during his time, as an editor of the truth commission, cannot be completed since his own burgeoning paranoia prevents him from remaining in the country. What the novel, and literature by extension, promotes are memory and a new version of national history. The novel showcases the dangerous of objectification, identification and aestheticization of a victim’s trauma, yet, through this also constructs a space of an ethical and empathetic reading practice which promotes a new version of national history and an understanding of genocide as something that, ironically, cannot be understood but that can be remembered.

Truth commission reports have been an invaluable tool for post-dictatorship and post-genocide healing and reconciliation. As such they have promoted projects of national rebuilding by allowing previously silenced groups and individuals to contribute to the historical narrative they have been forcefully isolated from. Horacio Castellanos Moya takes up the truth commission, as a project and as a means of recording trauma in *Insensatez*. In doing so the novel becomes a means of both criticizing and applauding the REHMI report, allowing us to witness the layers of mediation, the erasures, and the complicated process of catharsis in the absence of persecution. In turn, it showcases how the representation of trauma on the page can lead to an unethical reading process while illuminating the path required for an ethical and empathetic reading of traumatic testimony. This path requires a distance from the desire for identification and from aesthetic misappropriation and objectification, often masquerading as understanding. The novel does not stand in for the truth report, it does however attempt to define itself as an alternative means of representing the unrepresentable, of recording the silences, and does so by shedding light on the inadequacies any material representation of genocide may hold.

Epilogue

Throughout the Americas the nineteenth century was grounded by an intense process of nation-building and reformation, where nations had to define not only their borders but their citizens. The novel became an engine for defining the new citizen as well as defining the contours of human rights discourse needed for a democratically-functioning new nation. In fact, the novelistic form was the greatest contributor to the creation of human rights discourse in the nineteenth century. Within these nineteenth-century novels, the employment of narrative sympathy became an essential component for establishing a close relationship between the right-holding reader and the abused, right-less victim portrayed. Narrative empathy, in turn, was used by authors to propel human-rights discourse forward by relying on the reader's ability to empathize with the portrayal of a victim's suffering. To take this one step further, narrative empathy was a necessary tool in nation-building across the Americas, one that writers and artists turned to as they reconceptualized the new national landscape and its people.

Yet, when I found myself in that national archive in Patagonia, I was disturbed by the lack of empathy I felt while sifting through the people-objects I came across in court cases, newspaper clippings, and other legal documents. These individuals were not quite subjects in front of my eyes, they were people whose trials and errors I had to continue sifting through in order to get a better idea of how they suffered and why and where. I realized I was looking to find an Uncle Tom or a Sab, perhaps a Jemmy Button or a Harriet Jacobs. I was searching for victims and their stories of suffering, their pain. I wanted their violated bodies to do the work for me. I needed these stories to populate the human rights narrative I was starting to build in my head. I realized I was searching for nineteenth-century representations of suffering which I could then use to construct the narrative I needed for indigenous persecution in Patagonia. As I took a step back, I noticed that corporeal indignity, the kind I admittedly searched for, went against the very dignity promised by the human rights discourses I had spent years taking for granted.

It was in literature that I found the answers to my own dilemma, my own problematic search. Aesthetics still drive many discourses forward and can do so more ethically than we can even imagine. Yet, aesthetics within the human rights genre can also contribute to misguided perceptions of the victim, even structuring unethical representations which can, willingly or not, perpetuate the victim's voicelessness and bodily indignity. In the human rights novel, battles are still being fought. Histories are still being revised and questioned, and bodies and identities take control of their own narratives, illuminating the new archive I imagined all along. What this project has taught me is that corporeal and psychological dignity are necessary components for the human rights novel, if it seeks to ethically document a victim's historical plight. The human rights novel can and should be employed to propel human rights discourse forward, to shed light and awareness on a nation's history and the struggles often still facing its people. It is no wonder that each of the novels in this project work from the nineteenth century outward, revising the initial model of narrative empathy captured by the sentimental and melodramatic traditions across the Americas. From there, they begin to reexamine the reader's role as a witness to the human rights atrocities documented.

Readers are mobilized to responsibly reengage with national history and human rights discourse as soon as they begin to capture the ethical parameters required by these novels as they document historical and contemporary human rights abuses within their pages. As outlined throughout this project, the ethical parameters encapsulating this new model of narrative empathy are constructed in four intersecting ways.

All the novels in this project revise national history and showcase how national and literary history inform one another. Yet, in turning to the realm of aesthetics as a means of documenting human rights atrocities, an ethical template of representation emerges. First, through a revision of the nineteenth-century melodrama and sentimentalism particular to the hemispheric context. This revision, in turn, leads to formal construction of an aesthetic model which uses absence and corporeal abjection in order represent human rights abuses. Subsequently, this new aesthetic model, formally decodes legal documents and/or national history formally within the novelistic space. Ultimately, as the reader beings participating in this process of decoding, new responsibilities for an ethical reading practice are laid out, transforming the reader into an ethical witness.

The evolution of the novel intersects with the changes in how we interpret understand human rights discourse in the last two centuries. Human rights law and legal policy shapes and is shaped by the formal qualities of the novel and other art forms. The hemispheric postmodern novel (1970-2009) representing human rights abuses constructs this new model for narrative empathy in order to develop a closely interconnected relationship a new relationship between law and literature, predicated on reconstructing the relationship between the reader, the victim and national history.

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