

Arts of the Impossible: Violence, Trauma, and Erasure in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines how contemporary Anglophone, Hispanophone, and Francophone literature from Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and South Asia (1984-present) reconfigures historical archives to negotiate the ethics of representing state violence in repressive societies. I identify new literary forms politically conscious writers are devising to capture and contest human rights violations. Using an interdisciplinary decolonial feminist framework, I closely read works by Cristina Peri Rossi, Michael Ondaatje, M. NourbeSe Philip, Edwidge Danticat, Boubacar Boris Diop, and Roberto Bolaño— a diverse set of postcolonial and post-dictatorship writers never before compared in comparative literature. I call these writers’ endeavors to reframe traumatic history “arts of the impossible,” which defy the alleged unrepresentability of collective trauma to secure justice and forestall impunity. I compare representations of wide-ranging atrocities including forced disappearance, slavery, genocide, and femicide— crimes exemplifying what I term “ontological erasure.” At stake in ontological erasure are not simply lost perspectives from multiply marginalized victims, like women and queer people of color, but the very possibility of citizenship and the will to dissent state recognition enables. To resist the threats posed by the authorization of these crimes to political freedom, these writers, I argue, reinvent evidentiary forms historically suppressed by authoritarian states, including court transcripts, testimonies, forensic reports, and national archives. These authors’ innovations push the boundaries of what counts as “evidence” in acts of state violence that are uniquely determined by erasure; they also imagine new methods for remembering past atrocities without compromising recognition for stigmatized minorities in the future.

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Introduction: Ontological Erasure & State Violence in the Archives of Collective Trauma

While tracing the poet M. NourbeSe Philip's steps through the British archives of transatlantic slavery, I encountered an artifact that continues to haunt me. The "Book of Negroes" in the National Archives at Kew indexes horror in the tone of murderous rationality. A logbook of kidnapped Africans, this artifact participated in systematizing the erasure of humanity that made the slave trade possible; therefore, in a figurative sense, the book also exemplifies many of the concerns that engender this dissertation, "Arts of the Impossible: Violence, Trauma, and Erasure in the Global South." The same year for which the Book of Negroes is dated, 1783, a landmark insurance trial in Britain acquitted the crew of a slave ship, the *Zong*, for murdering over 130 slaves on a disastrous mission just two years before. Philip's poem bears retrospective witness to the massacre. I remember the oversized, leather-bound tome crowding the anesthetic gray desks where researchers like myself rifled through boxes. Inside, flawless cursive in vertical columns reduced human beings to property with the following details: ships' names and their commanders; destinations; captives'¹ names, ages and descriptions; claimants' names and residences; and "names of the persons in whose possession they now are." Most captives' names—Frank Peters, George Butler, Isaac Anderson—already bear evidence of the "civilizing" process that served to Anglicize, Westernize, and Christianize "Africans" (this specious identity category, in itself, a colonial invention used to obscure cultural differences across the continent).

¹ "Captive" is my preferred term for the people systematically kidnapped, beaten, tortured, and held hostage in this situation, not the logbook's. In many instances, I adjust terms for engaging with atrocity to reflect my own critical ethos, which seeks to at least partially restore dignity to the subjects that various governments, laws, and policies have either overtly or implicitly sought to eradicate. I realize that such a restoration would be inevitably not only partial but also figurative, given that the victims in almost every case are deceased. However, one of my arguments is that being wakeful to word manipulation and the power of euphemism to sway populations towards violence is an essential concern in contemporary decolonial literature.

The mechanisms for what I will call “ontological erasure” were thus already operative prior to their advent in this eighteenth-century inventory.² Ontological erasure is an insidious durational technology of dehumanization in which the very capacity to *be* a human is targeted for systematic eradication by an institutionalized power structure.³ Indeed, my emphasis on political disappearance as a hallmark of state violence in this dissertation throws into relief the interconnected histories of violence that Foucault claims guide biopolitical technologies of repression: “Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of contagions, of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder” (*DP* 191). I define “being human” as being a person whose rights to freedom of identity and to dignity for soul and body are recognized by the nation-state to which they belong.⁴ Scholars working on race and coloniality, like Achille Mbembe, Calvin

² I want to distinguish my terminology from a similar neologism that the queer-of-color critic Calvin Warren has coined, “onticide.” Although his notion has deeply informed my thinking, his investment in “onticide” applies to epistemological violence that he perceives to be all too common in mainstream feminism and queer theory. I agree that the historically utopian frameworks common to these discourses—celebrations of “resistance” and “reclamation,” for example—are not only inadequate but actually reductive for contesting political violence. However, I do not forswear intersectionality as a useful paradigm. Rather I maintain that identity politics have always depended on collective affirmations of who “they” are and who “we” are not; therefore, intersectional approaches to the study of decolonial literature must not merely recognize the effects of overlapping structures of oppression, displacement, and disenfranchisement on an individual’s life. More importantly, such critiques must also perceive the individual as part of a larger group wherein, marginalized or not, internal matrices of domination are always shifting.

³ Political scientist Mary Kaldor has claimed that the “new wars” of the twenty-first century are generally based on state-sponsored contestations over identity. Compared to traditional warfare focused on territorial acquisition, the “new wars” implement forced disappearance and femicide, two crimes I discuss in this dissertation, to attain ideological dominance for a certain kind of personhood in the minds of a greater population: “The aim is to control the population by getting rid of everyone of a different identity (and indeed of a different opinion) and by instilling terror. Hence the strategic goal of these wars is to mobilize extremist politics based on fear and hatred” (9).

⁴ I use the gender-neutral pronoun “they” to recognize all possible identifications when a referent is ambiguous. This plural alternative violates the norms of the English language to make room for indeterminacy; therefore, it reflects my ethos, which embraces disrupting discursive norms that shield

Warren, and Christina Sharpe, have theorized what I am terming ontological erasure from specific regional and cultural locations; however, none have explored the degree to which ontological erasure recurs in diverse forms as a tool for state violence and terror across modern, transnational, authoritarian contexts.⁵ Here I borrow from Ann Laura Stoler's conception of ontology in *Along the Archival Grain*, which she perceives as not a given condition but an "ascribed being or essence of things, the categories of things that are thought to exist or can exist in any specific domain, and the specific attributes assigned to them" (4). "Ontological" herein describes not being itself so much as a constructed logic for ordering different *possibilities* for being on a hierarchical scale. Thus, ontology inherently emerges not from any essence of the self but from relational and social interactions that are central to group identity formation, like culture and politics.

In this frame, ontological *erasure* is, first, a tactic for ensuring the limitation of rights only to citizens whose humanity the state authorizes (as a bearer of both culture and governance). Thus, ontological erasure begins with political-cultural erasure and thus reveals the interconnectedness of politics, the self, and the collective for defining "the human." In a conceptual sense, ontological erasure converts a person into an abstraction.⁶ When erasure works politically, it denies rights to sovereignty on levels of both self and society; when it works

insidious violence (for example, the grammatical convention to default to male pronouns as a "neutral" standard-bearer).

⁵ See Calvin Warren's work on onticide; Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*; and Christina Sharpe's discussion of the "ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging," epitomized in "our abjection from the realm of the human" in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (14).

⁶ Following Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy on the ethics of violence, Roberto Toscano argues that "to apply group violence to the neighbor as belonging to a category, the concrete individual's face has to be erased: the person must become an abstraction" in "The Face of the Other: Ethics and Intergroup Conflict" (68).

culturally, it effaces the traditions, norms and mores that bring solidarity to a minoritarian group. In the frame of Foucauldian biopolitics, ontological erasure is the consequence of the state's necropolitical "power to 'make' live and 'let' die" on the scale of cultural memory (Foucault, *Society* 247). Death is not merely the cessation of life but erasure from the living memory of the people, commenced in the present era of terror and sustained with prolonged injustice into the future. In this sense, ontological erasure works to eschew both group identities and the individuals who espouse them from the realm of "national" or "political memory," as Aleida Assmann defines this dual paradigm in *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity*.⁷ The agenda of political memory, institutionalized by the nation-state across generations, is not to validate the memory of 'the people.' Rather, political memory aims to ensure that each citizen within the state's purview will inherit the same (potentially repressive, often corrupt) status quo. Indeed, the desire to *extinguish* social and cultural memories of political violence from national memory has led to the ontological erasure that the authors in my study contest through the invention of absent archives.

⁷ Aleida Assmann articulates how the Holocaust has shifted from the center of memory studies as politics, culture, and history around the world become more interconnected. Commending the "conceptual and discursive expansion of research into trauma," represented in comparative inquiries like mine, Assmann maintains that this shift "signals a profound moral and cognitive transformation *in light of this event*, one that allows us to understand earlier incidences involving the excessive use of violence in new ways, and above all to describe and judge events for which there had previously been no language or public interest" (5; original emphasis). Her vocabulary for classifying memory study into at least four spatial-temporal formations—individual, social/group, political/national, and cultural memory—and three dimensions—neural, social, and cultural—has contributed to this project's intersectional methodology. I especially rely on her definition of political memory as a theoretical linchpin for my argument: "We can speak of a political or a national memory when history is put to the service of identity formation, when it is appropriated by citizens and attested to by politicians. Contrary to the plural voices of social memory, which is memory 'from below' and which repeatedly dissolved with generational shifts, national memory is a much more unifying construction that acts on society 'from above:' it is grounded in political institutions and invested in a longer temporal duration of survival" (23).

In this dissertation, I argue that contemporary writers from postcolonial and post-dictatorship countries in the Global South revivify the archives to experiment with modes of resistance against the threat that ontological erasure as a mode of state violence poses to political freedom. Ironically, they do so by reinventing evidentiary forms that colonial, authoritarian states have either produced or suppressed. These forms include court transcripts, testimonies, forensic reports, and other documents traditionally held in national archives, like official correspondence, newspaper articles, organizational reports, and political speeches. By reanimating documentary evidence of human rights crimes largely absent in national archives and, by extension, public memory, contemporary writers counter authoritarian narratives of history, law, and government on their own terms. When writers reappropriate the state's discursive tools of oppression, they ironically expose the state's failure to eliminate political dissidence. Furthermore, their inversions reveal how the systematic dehumanization of stigmatized racial, gender, and sexual minorities constitutes the organized tactic I have called ontological erasure. At stake are not simply lost perspectives from multiply marginalized victims but the very possibility of citizenship and the will to dissent that state recognition enables—in short, the dimensions of humanity that can *only* come with political acknowledgment.

The contemporary, diasporic, non-Western writers whose work I analyze in this dissertation—Cristina Peri Rossi, Michael Ondaatje, M. NourbeSe Philip, Edwidge Danticat, Boubacar Boris Diop, and Roberto Bolaño—confront the urgent ethical and aesthetic quandaries that evidentiary documents like the Book of Negroes open up. They do so by contesting the matrix of power relations that reinforces oppression across multiple and competing vectors of social difference, such as race, gender and sexuality, from a decolonial or anticolonial perspective. I retrace these authors' steps through actual, historical archives to understand how

they strategically preserve and suppress certain facts, discourses, narrative tropes and evidentiary forms to figuratively rewrite gaps in world history—a methodology never before applied to their works. I strive for the “*queer practice of the archive*” that Brent Hayes Edwards has described, “an approach to the material preservation of the past that deliberately aims to retain what is elusive, what is hard to pin down, what can’t quite be explained or filed away according to the usual categories” (970). Though diverse in both character and history, the crimes against humanity discussed in these works all depend on a “leave no trace strategy” whereby statist regimes deploy neocolonial policies against minorities perceived to be inferior, subhuman, and disposable. I chose this group of texts, which have never been drawn into comparison before, for three main reasons. First, each work emphasizes women, whose voices are so often the first suppressed in authoritarian histories, and their imbrication in nonnormative kinship structures, delimited by gender-based violence, sexual deviance, and refusals of reproductive futurity. Focusing on the interiority of female protagonists and the power that even well-intentioned men exert on women’s agency exposes how state violence is institutionalized in even the most microcosmic levels of everyday life, like the family, home, and the body.

Second, each author confronts state violence from standpoints of exile and unbelonging. Born in Tobago, Philip now lives in Canada, home also to Ondaatje, who migrated from Sri Lanka. Danticat emigrated from Haiti to New York City in her adolescence. Peri Rossi and Bolaño both fled military dictatorships in Uruguay and Chile, respectively, for Barcelona, Spain. Although Diop, a Senegalese writer based in Dakar, never permanently relocated to a Western metropole, his research for the novel I discuss in this project, *Murambi : le livre des ossements* (*Murambi: The Book of Bones*, 1999), came from his participation in a transnational working group of Francophone writers from other African countries. National otherness permits these

writers to criticize state power from the outside in. Diaspora conditions their positionalities as world citizens in ways that embolden them to surmount their own standpoints to comment on crimes elsewhere, thus “expos[ing] the nation-state as an insufficient boundary for both reading the archive and reading comparative literature” (Walters, *ABA* 3). As partial outsiders to crises in the lands they write about, they can only address human rights crimes from implicitly non-national, transnational, or even anti-national viewpoints.

Third, each of these authors resists the temptation to envision redemption. Instead, each considers the likelihood that the past is beyond repair—and *that’s* the reality we, as thinkers for the future, must contend with. In this regard, I see both these writers and my critical project contributing to the “wake work” that Christina Sharpe has called for; our gesture of solidarity is to “stay in the wake,” in the space of mourning and aftermath, “with and as those whom the state positions to die ungrievable deaths and live lives meant to be unlivable” through the perpetuation of structural violence, and of silence *as* violence (22). The black text against the backdrop of a vacuous white page in Philip’s book-length conceptual poem, *Zong!* (2008), for example, draws into stark relief the enduring presence of racial difference against a field of negation. As the black text dissolves into nearly incomprehensible glossolalia, the urgent need for reparations becomes ever more palpable. In Peri Rossi’s novel *La nave de los locos* (*The Ship of Fools*, 1984), the author exposes forced disappearance in Uruguay without ever mentioning the crime by name. Only by tracing the trajectory of a *desaparecido* through a series of images that directly recall the Holocaust, the limit-case for state-sponsored atrocity in the West, does the crime of forced disappearance in Uruguay come into view.

Each of the human rights crimes discussed in this dissertation persists in the absence of meaningful archives that validate victims’ claims for recognition in either abstract or concrete

terms. The authors whose works I examine reproduce evidentiary forms to recuperate cultural amnesia surrounding traumatic histories in at least two ways. The first method involves reworking hegemonic, public archives pertaining to the law, nation, and government that house documents like the Book of Negroes. These imperial and/or colonial state archives *do* catalog the crime against humanity at hand and yet fail to adequately acknowledge the state's complicity in satisfactory ways; they are "[l]ess monuments to the absence or ubiquity of knowledge than its piecemeal partiality" (Stoler 19). As Lisa Lowe notes in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*:

the archive that mediates the imperatives of the state subsumes colonial violence with narratives of modern reason and progress. To make legible the forcible encounters, removals, and entanglements omitted in liberal accounts of abolition, emancipation, and independence, [it is necessary to] devise other ways of reading so that we might understand the processes through which the forgetting of the violent encounter is naturalized, both by the archive, and in subsequent narrative histories. (Lowe 2-3)

Writers consulting these archives reproduce actual historical evidence to deform and then reform the dominant narrative surrounding the historical event in question. As aforementioned, Philip's *Zong!* reconstitutes the sole public record of notes from the landmark court trial that brought the issue of transatlantic slavery to international attention in 1783 after the British crew of a slave ship systematically massacred approximately 132 enslaved people to mitigate a water shortage due to their own negligence en route to Jamaica in 1781. Danticat and Diop's novels respond to genocides that have left primarily perpetrator testimonies and unidentifiable bones as evidence in national archives and memorials. Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) draws attention to an oft-forgotten genocide within the Dominican Republic's borders in 1937, when dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina championed the genocide of possibly as many as 20,000 Haitians within his nation's borders. Diop's *Murambi* reinvents testimonies from one of the most well-known intertribal genocides in world history, the 1994 attack on 800,000 Tutsis and Twas by the Hutu majority in Rwanda.

The second method involves inventing unverified, unofficial evidentiary forms to expose the ontological erasure that the suppressed record enables. Instead of reproducing existing records in a figurative form, these writers draw to light evidence actively concealed from public view while also pointing to the reverberations state violence creates across all levels of social life and culture. Peri Rossi's and Ondaatje's novels both deal with forced disappearance as an increasingly prevalent technology of terror by imaginatively reconstituting diverse pieces of evidence that prove state violence. They fabricate not only NGO reports, news briefings, eyewitness testimonies, and missing persons registries but also more esoteric cultural artifacts, like songs, encyclopedia entries, origin myths, poems, films, and tabloids, to suggest that terror influences every narrative within national borders. Peri Rossi's *La nave de los locos* responds to the forced disappearances of thousands of political dissidents by military dictatorships in the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay in the 1970s and 1980s. Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) confronts forced disappearance in Sri Lanka's decades-long civil war from the 1980s to the 2000s. In both cases, authoritarian governments have not only sought to destroy bodily remains but have also bowdlerized all records of nonconformist citizens' existences, such as birth certificates and identification cards.

In my final example, Roberto Bolaño rewrites forensic reports to expose the flaws in the genre itself—and, by extension, modern justice systems' handlings of rape and femicide. In *2666* (2004) and its companion novel, *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (*Woes of the True Policeman*, 2011), Bolaño confronts the most contemporary human rights of all those represented in this corpus: the disappearances and suspected and/or confirmed murders of over 430 low-income women and girls along the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez since 1993. For the dozens of descriptions of murdered women's bodies that occupy the better part of *2666*,

Bolaño drew on as many actual forensic reports on femicide from Mexican police departments, trafficked to him surreptitiously by a Mexican journalist. His revisions suggest that the originals spend more time objectifying corpses than tracing killers. Despite hundreds of journalistic exposés and studies by human rights campaigns and NGOs, justice for most victims has yet to be realized.

My interventions into the critical literature on contemporary writers from the Global South and, more broadly, to comparative approaches to the study of collective trauma, address both postcolonial and memory and trauma studies. This dissertation takes a decolonial feminist approach to representations of state violence in the Global South. I privilege the term “heteropatriarchy,” which I define as a power structure that privileges masculinity and heterosexuality as the essence of normativity, to describe the systemic force that each writer in my dissertation is opposed to. I zero in on intersections between memory, feminist, and race studies, particularly interventions surrounding Afro-pessimism and necropolitics, to explain why the authors I discuss decenter and sometimes even refuse to recognize the Holocaust as *the* epitomic reference point for understanding modern state violence.⁸ In this respect, my argument departs significantly from conventions in trauma and genocide studies, which take the Holocaust for granted as the most pivotal, *sui generis* atrocity in world history. To be clear, the authors whose work I discuss often *do* recognize the importance of the Holocaust as a limit case for understanding the totality of erasure for which the state can vie. But whenever they invoke the Holocaust, they also make concrete connections to historical atrocities in colonial outposts

⁸ Widely debated by scholars such as Fred Moten, Jared Sexton, Calvin Warren, Eric Stanley, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Frank B. Wilderson III, Afro-pessimism holds that it is unethical to promote hope for Black life in political contexts where flourishing is not only impossible but also actively sabotaged. Amabelle’s choices fit the framework of Afro-pessimism: rather than living out a triumphalist narrative of redemption from extraordinary violence, her abjection affirms the need for political reparations yet to be dispensed.

beyond the West. In doing so, they implicitly ask *why* these collective traumas have not garnered the same enduring degree of international attention. The writers whose work I discuss reappropriate conventional evidentiary forms as tools of objectification exhibited in the archives. Their representational strategy, an effort to oppose the ongoing invisibility of state crimes, ironically strives to access the content that is not and will never be present for justice.

A Decolonial Feminist Framework for Reading Violence in the Global South

My project bridges literature, law, history and critical theory across English, Spanish, and French contexts to study the neocolonial power relations enabled by the international rise of globalized terror, ethnic absolutism, ultranationalism, and the Far Right. In my terminology, “neocolonial” denotes state-sponsored efforts to impose colonial-era ideologies surrounding race, gender, sexuality and class within their own borders; “decolonial,” to the contrary, signals contemporary writers’ attempts to confront, subvert, and work through the enduring trauma of state violence. “Postcoloniality” has come under fire as an operative paradigm in recent years because it falsely implies that the material and ideological effects of coloniality have ended. The post-independence regimes in the Global South that are, technically, “post” colonial in historical and geographic terms uphold repressive policies against racial, sexual, and gendered otherness that largely mimic their colonial predecessors’ authoritarianism.⁹ In contrast, decoloniality actively deconstructs and opposes claims to power on the basis of “traditional” identities, such as nation and tribe, which perpetuate organized violence and political repression as a norm in many postcolonial and post-dictatorship nations. My project reflects the four concerns Margaret A. McLaren identifies for decoloniality as a critique of power relations in her introduction to a

⁹ This is the definition I am invoking when I use “postcolonial” as an adjective, often alongside “post-dictatorship,” to describe the current statuses of nation-states.

recent anthology, *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization*: to evaluate political structures on both micro- and macrocosmic levels; to prioritize historical specificity; to seek liberation from colonial structures that reinforce oppression across categories (race, gender, sexuality, class); and to recognize the insidious effects colonial legacies continue to have not only on social, political, and economic structures but also on epistemological frameworks for conceiving the world (4). Both my and McLaren's interpretation of decoloniality owes largely to the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who sees decoloniality as a "historical and collective process" that requires "profound transformations of self, community, and governance structures" and "can only be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination" (7). In my study, decolonial literature stages political disillusionment and personal transformation in the wake of state violence as conversion processes that work in tandem towards collective liberation.

The fiction and poetry I discuss spans Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. In working across literary genres and regions, I aim to map the force fields in which these writers contribute to a shared, international, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggle through cultural memory, even as their geographies and identities diverge starkly. Drawing texts into contact across diverse and irreducible cultural, geopolitical, and linguistic borders is absolutely necessary for understanding exactly how the human rights crimes at stake in each text transmute and interconnect into new forms, across contexts, and to heinous results. I acknowledge the dangers of comparison that Debarati Sanyal has so forcefully articulated in her monograph,

Memory and Complicity: Migrations in Holocaust Remembrance:

Memory's entanglements of distinctive and asymmetrical sites of trauma (slavery, the Holocaust, colonialism, or terror) can shake up established traditions of remembrance and belonging, allowing new ones to emerge. Yet it can also drive us to dangerous intersections, where differences eclipse into sameness, where identification leads to

appropriation, or where political uses of memory collide with the ethical obligations of testimony. (Sanyal 2)

My dissertation strives to discern meaningful ideological connections between historically and culturally nonaligned “sites of trauma.” In doing so, my research responds to and acts in concert with work by Sanyal and other comparative scholars like David Kazanjian, Marianne Hirsch, Michael Rothberg, and Max Silverman.¹⁰ Although each of these thinkers has contributed unique methods for drawing together colonial memory and historical trauma across diverse contexts, all ascribe to a “transcultural turn” that embraces plurality and multiplicity for negotiating seemingly competitive discourses on memory across wide-ranging contexts (Moses and Rothberg 32). The goal is to summon a vision of world history that proffers what Rothberg has called “a *differentiated solidarity*—that is, that allow us to distinguish different histories of violence while still understanding them as implicated in each other and as making moral demands for recognition that deserve consideration” (qtd. in 33; original emphasis).

I have found that different interpretive forms utilize similar formal strategies to trouble disturbingly similar attitudes towards political dissent that persist in starkly different places. In this respect, many of the works in my dissertation embrace a figuratively panoramic vantage point for assessing concrete patterns in state violence across political, social, cultural, and

¹⁰ Hirsch advocates for “connective” over comparative thinking to bring “different historical experiences in relation to one another to see what vantage point they might share or offer each other for confronting the past” (*GP* Loc. 3272). Another influential paradigm, Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory” represents cultural memory as being “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” that is “productive and not privative” (*MD* 3). Silverman prefers the palimpsest as a spatial metaphor that captures the past’s temporal and spatial superimposition on the present (and vice versa), so that “one layer of traces can be seen through, and is transformed by, another” to create “a chain of signification which draws together disparate spaces and times” (3). Kazanjian, on the other hand, constructs a new critical vocabulary for his comparative methodology. For him, reading “appositionally,” not connectively or comparatively, means perceiving ideas in tandem without necessarily insisting on a through-line, thus “plac[ing] two terms alongside each other, without a coordinating conjunction to explain how they are related” (9). My own methodology draws from all these paradigms selectively, when each pertains to the structure of the primary source at hand.

economic contexts. Their aims are not to problematically abstract all horrors everywhere as universally the same but, instead, to identify *specific*, meaningful overlaps that reinforce the likelihood for an unthinkable event to recur elsewhere. For example, in *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje's cosmopolitan protagonist, an American forensic investigator for the United Nations, cannot make sense of forced disappearances in Sri Lanka's civil war in the 1980s without recognizing her prior work on the Guatemalan civil war in the 1960s. At one point, an anonymous narrator interrupts *Anil's Ghost* to point out further resonances in the state-sponsored technologies for fomenting collective fear that gave millions of bystanders permission to look away from the U.S. dropping atomic bombs on Japan and Nazi Germany proliferating concentration camps in World War II. Ondaatje's point in drawing what Kazanjian has called "transversals" between these events, which cross any number of divisive, incommensurable contexts, is not to insist that each event revivifies the last wholesale. Rather, Ondaatje explores how each event bears an insidious conceptual inheritance to preexisting logics of terror.¹¹ Failing to reckon with the likely complicity of one's own nation in atrocities that rattle the world render even a "global citizen" like the U.N. investigator complicit by default.

In addition, the comparative nature of my project contributes a reflection on the neocolonial power dynamics underlying English, French and Spanish as colonial languages to postcolonial studies. In this dissertation, I prefer the term "Global South" for describing the ideological and geopolitical world-system in which the writers I discuss exchange their ideas.

¹¹ In Kazanjian's terminology, "transversals" signify "not simply a line that cuts across [geographical and historical contexts], but also an unruly action that undoes what is expected," like "unsettl[ing] commonplace conceptions of freedom" (7). When Ondaatje refracts the bombing of Japan into the Holocaust, he clues readers into a hitherto suppressed truth in the dominant narrative surrounding American exceptionalism in World War II: neither the hydrogen bomb nor the Holocaust was simply a strategic, rationalizable act of war, but a collective, state-authorized enactment of mass death.

The modern term “Global South,” like “Africans” in the *Book of Negroes*, is a neocolonial invention that oxymoronically separates the Southern hemisphere from the world-sphere. In this sense, I see the term enacting the distinction Argentine semiotician Walter D. Mignolo has made between “local histories” and “global designs.” According to Mignolo, “[g]lobal designs... are brewed, so to speak, in the local histories of metropolitan countries; they are implemented, exported, and enacted differently in particular places” (65). In this frame, the “Global South” actually represents a set of political attitudes located in the West (or, less figuratively, the Northern hemisphere) against the rest and extrapolated worldwide. Mignolo argues that coloniality, as a structure of power, intrinsically determines how global designs and local histories will be circulated, imported, and transformed in new contexts: “The colonial difference brings the concept of civilization back to the modern/colonial world system where the notion was invented and where it serves as a powerful tool in rebuilding its imaginary” (278). Thinking through postcolonial and post-dictatorship authors’ literary resistance to authoritarianism in the frame of the “Global South” thus incites me to remember both the geopolitical particularity of their individual locations as non-Western “others” and the ideological universality of the collective struggle against colonially-influenced state violence in which they are all participating.

The “Global South” encapsulates an ambiguous temporal, historical, and geopolitical paradigm without an obvious binary opposite, defining a deviation from a standard that never needs to be named (with “the West” being the preferred metonym for what would otherwise be termed the “Global North”). I recognize that this ambiguity lends the term dangerous connotations for flattening out important differences across starkly contrasting contexts—exactly the liabilities that Sanyal has articulated. Nevertheless, I argue that this ambiguity can also lead to a certain capaciousness of thought and identification that licenses displaced writers to indict

Western technologies of state violence that travel southwards. Indeed, modern authoritarian regimes have learned from Nazi Germany that obsessive documentation only certifies international infamy; the Holocaust was, after all, the atrocity that brought “crimes against humanity” into being as a legal category. But perhaps more importantly, the “Global South” as a psychological and ideological construct allows writers to imagine how repressive regimes in different contexts throughout the region are repurposing those legacies into new technologies for export. By connecting literary texts on a variety of interrelated human rights violations, it is not my objective to universalize them; rather, I aim to entangle the logics driving such crimes *despite* significant and nonpareil cultural, temporal, political, legal, social, and historical differences. For Sanyal, such “entanglement” is key to understanding the “interplay of identification and distance, of complicity and solidarity, [as] an essential feature of the moral imagination” (267).

Within the umbrella of the Global South, an increasingly popular category for distinguishing world literature in English, “Global Anglophone,” similarly distinguishes English, like the South, as a source of cultural *difference*, not hegemony. The formulation “Global Anglophone” places globalism first and language second, thus decentralizing the colonial language as a cultural standard. I read colonial language in a compound, hierarchical formulation like “Global Anglophone,” “Global Hispanophone,” or “Global Francophone,” all categories in which art in my project circulates, as a particular and secondary “local history” that gets reformulated and implemented differently in different places through a shared “global design.” Thinking in these terms reframes colonial languages in relation to the international project that the rise of international authoritarianism represents. Doing so also permits the question of whether producing art in a colonial language risks complicity with the very discourses these authors are striving to undermine. Even language inherently erases the meaning of a collectively

traumatic event because it evacuates the outrage that made the event impossible to truly express in the first place. How might it be possible to intervene in dominant narratives *without* reproducing their insidious ideological effects? And to what extent does producing art in an imperialist tongue *preserve* the blinders that colonial languages have imposed on colonized ways of knowing and being in the world? For example, Bolaño reproduces misogynistic hate speech in Spanish to critique its ubiquity amongst the very powers fighting violence against women, and Philip reconstitutes language from an insidiously racist trial transcript to refute it—yet, in both cases, the authors risk complicity by reproducing the very same language that they seek to disable.

Decentering the Holocaust: Colonialism as the Root of Ontological Erasure

To promote human rights for the future and on an international scale, historically complicit governments and other state actors must publicly acknowledge past atrocities within existing national borders. But how can contemporary literature remember crimes against humanity without exploiting violence that inherently exceeds comprehension? This excess, which positions collective trauma outside of the range of intelligibility, preoccupies the texts in my dissertation in at least two ways. On a psychological level, a traumatic event, by definition, ruptures one's experience of reality in a way that can never be fully or rationally "known." Meanwhile, on a material level, the archives of atrocity are either literally empty of content (as in cases where governments eradicated evidence, like the 1937 Parsley Massacre in the Dominican Republic, the setting for Danticat's novel, and forced disappearances across the Southern Cone) or figuratively illegible for grasping victims' lives, as shown in the *Book of Negroes*.

Methodologically, I depart significantly from conventions in memory studies that tend to position the Holocaust as a limit case that defines the severity of atrocities elsewhere. Even for

comparatists in memory studies, the Holocaust remains *the* central event, with slavery, colonialism, and genocide elsewhere as secondary phenomena that further enlighten our understanding of the former. State functionaries in the Holocaust may have systematized forced disappearance as a technology of political erasure, but the logic behind the technology itself began with colonialism, namely the mass eradication of indigenous peoples through genocide and Black Africans through the transatlantic slave trade. In this vein, my research echoes arguments made by Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, and Alexander Weheliye that the strategies of ontological erasure behind the Holocaust’s technologies of terror actually have their roots in colonialism.¹² The blueprints for concentration camps and taxonomic conventions for inventorying racialized captives exemplify interconnected technologies of violence germinated in the local histories of imperial provinces and then projected elsewhere.

Despite extensive work on the Holocaust in the contemporary imagination of the Global South, scholars have not yet sufficiently addressed how authors access archives of trauma and share representational strategies to resist repression across contexts. Comparing literary approaches to ongoing authoritarian violence across Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and South Asia, my dissertation evaluates the connections authors draw across atrocities *within* the Global South beyond the Holocaust. I attend to two major strategies characterizing decolonial

¹² In *Discourse on Colonialism (Discours sur le colonialisme)*, Césaire polemically argues that the Holocaust represented Europe’s moral malaise turning against itself as “a crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa” (36). Although I agree that the Holocaust reproduced “colonialist procedures” formerly imposed on colonized peoples, I disagree with his failure to see the Jewish minority as a racialized other within Nazi Europe, ghettoized and blackballed as essentially neither authentically white nor European. Less controversially, Fanon called Nazism “a colonial system in the very heart of Europe” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (33), a sentiment that Arendt also voices in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. See Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* for a more recent account of the colonial history behind the invention of the concentration camp system.

aesthetics: the propensity, first, to revise legal, historical, and national discourses that risk normalizing human rights violations, and second, to respond ethically to the crisis of representation surrounding collective trauma on an international scale.

Nation-states have, historically and presently, circumscribed definitions for humanity by unevenly distributing rights to representation according to social contestations over gender, race, sexuality, nationality, religion, and class. Not only escalating but, more importantly, *collectivizing* violence against stigmatized, systematically dehumanized groups reifies a narrow prototype for national identity through the negation of those deemed “other.” Authoritarian regimes demand complicity from its citizen majority. Complicity can take the form of percepticide in confrontation with femicide and forced disappearance in Latin America¹³ or active participation, as with the everyday purchase and sale of humans in the transatlantic slave trade. In either case, a majority of citizens conceding to withhold their dissent secures ontological erasure for stigmatized minorities in their midst as a new—perhaps even national identity-defining— norm. To this end, I contribute to ongoing debates in postcolonial studies about anxieties over shoring up national identity as borders continue dissolving, autonomy erodes on numerous levels (political, military, economic), and the very character of authority shifts with intensifying globalization. I also respond to critiques of repressive governments’ reactions to reassert national power by monopolizing “legitimate” organized violence and thus amplifying necropolitical tactics for controlling the population.

¹³ In *Disappearing Acts*, performance studies scholar Diana Taylor coins the term “percepticide” to describe the self-enforced refusal to see, hear, or speak out against state-sponsored crimes by the Argentine government during the Dirty War of the 1980s: “Spectacles of violence rendered the population silent, deaf, and blind... the self-blinding of the general population [amounts to] ‘percepticide’” (123).

Although memory theorists who take decolonial approaches to nation, race, gender, and sexuality, like Sanyal, Rothberg and Naomi Mandel, have deeply influenced my project,¹⁴ my corpus ultimately signals a major shift in the centrality of the Holocaust for conceptualizing collective trauma in the era of globalization that occupies the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. All the texts in my corpus ultimately look *within* the Global South and across transatlantic histories of colonialism, slavery, and more recent genocides to compare political violence in its extremes. Decentering the Holocaust as the ultimate modern atrocity refocuses attention on other crimes that the West has committed against other “others” both within and outside continental borders. These authors’ connections both within and beyond the Global South remind readers that colonialist, imperialist, and fascist wills to power, now *de facto* norms in repressive regimes the world over, found their conception in European modernity and all the “civilization” and “Enlightenment” it supposedly promoted. Ontological erasure is not just the effect of an unspeakable horror that happened decades past, like the Holocaust, but an ongoing process for perpetuating more disparate, diffused horrors linked to the past and alive in new forms every day.

Many postcolonial critics working on Afro-pessimism and necropolitics have influenced my contention that Western colonialism devised a system of dehumanization to liquidate humanity from the human being that predated—and indeed, helped imagine—the Holocaust. On

¹⁴ Mandel’s *Against the Unspeakable* examines “the unspeakable” as a phenomenon across post-WWII Jewish literature and the antebellum slave narrative tradition in America. Mandel defines the unspeakable as “the rhetorical invocation of the limits of language, comprehension, representation, and thought on the one hand, and a deferential gesture toward atrocity, horror, trauma, and pain on the other” (4). In other words, even as recognizing the “unspeakability” of taboo horrors like colonialism, slavery, sexual violence, and genocide affirms historical victimization as an incontrovertible fact, it also shuts down dialogue in the effort to vouchsafe the inviolability of victims’ suffering. Thus we can read the unspeakable as a paradigm that, despite its salutary intentions, actually risks *enabling* similar ontological erasure to the repression of political violence in cultural memory.

a fundamental level, certain marginalized ontologies (the whore, the Jew, the Muslim, the leper, the heretic, the lunatic, etc.) had certainly been liable to ostracization, inquisition, torture, execution, and other forms of terror prior to colonialism.¹⁵ But as Weheliye shows in *Habeas Viscus*, German colonialism actually began experimenting with techniques of systematic slaughter, medical experimentation, and concentration camp design with their little-known genocide of 80 percent of the Herero population in modern-day Namibia in 1904.¹⁶ Only in the wake of colonialism—and the slavery and genocide that accompanied it—did race, a defining discourse for the Holocaust, become an exceptional category for excluding humans from even the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. In the colonial frame, race is an abiding reminder “processes through which the human is universalized and freed by liberal forms, while the peoples who created the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten” (Lowe 6). “Race” did not merely serve to distinguish darker and lighter skinned humans; it separated the “natives” from their captors as fundamentally different species.¹⁷ In all the examples I cover in my dissertation, bestialization consistently precedes ontological erasure, even in the counter-intuitive context of assimilationist rhetorics, wherein competing ideologies

¹⁵ For an overview of these stigmatized ontologies in Western history more broadly, see R.I. Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*.

¹⁶ Weheliye’s brief counter-history for the Holocaust in *Habeas Viscus* follows a multidirectional pathway across geographies, politics, and times. He actually traces the first concentration camp used as a technology of state-sponsored dehumanization back to the “removal” of 22,000 Cherokee in the southeastern U.S. in the 1830s (35). Specifically for German colonialism, he points out that Imperial Germany’s genocide of the Herero population in Namibia involved both rampant slaughter and fatal medical experimentation; it was the laboratory for both the concentration camp’s “reconstitution as an industrialized killing machine” and Nazi eugenics during the Holocaust (36).

¹⁷ In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy claims: “Like the generic enemies, the invisible prison inmates, and all the other shadowy ‘third things’ that race thinking lodges between animal and human, their [natives’] lives are best administered under the flexible governance produced by special emergency rules and exceptional or martial laws. The lowly biopolitical status common to all these groups underscores the fact that they cannot be reciprocally endowed with the same vital humanity enjoyed by their rulers, captors, conquerors, judges, executioners, and other racial betters” (11).

overlap to imply that the proverbial “other” can be transformed into a member of the community. Césaire notes the nefarious effects of such a self-negating, internal contradiction on the colonizer, whose association with the other as animal unwittingly converts himself into the very brute he defames: “the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal” (41; original emphasis). In Rwanda, Hutus and Hutu sympathizers called Tutsis *inyenzi*, or cockroaches. Enslaved captives on board the *Zong* were treated as livestock in the court hearings on their mass murder. Insurgents in the Sri Lankan civil war dubbed themselves the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam only to become the minority group most frequently targeted for disappearance. With these bestializing logics of dehumanization in mind, Weheliye calls for an understanding of race as an index for sub-humanity:

If racialization is understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, then blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and limit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot. (Weheliye 3)

In this taxonomy, race is not primarily a qualifier for individuals belonging to a particular subset of humanity on the bases of culture or blood. Rather, the process of becoming part of a race—racialization—actually depends on “unequal structures of power” that serve to constantly fracture humanity and then reshuffle those distinctions onto a hierarchy of being that aggressively preserves some people’s “full” humanity while effacing others altogether.

Achille Mbembe additionally contends that dehumanized peoples thereby transition to nothingness—an ontological zero—in asking, “But what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?” (137). This is a central question for Ondaatje, Peri Rossi, Philip, Danticat, Diop, and

Bolaño. Each author seeks to capture the heinousness of violence in contexts where such putatively “unspeakable” crimes are actually routinely dismissed for their frequency, unremarkability, and practical impunity. When victims of human rights abuses are seen to inhabit not just the ‘lowly biopolitical status’ that Gilroy describes but, rather, no status at all, the systematic *negation* of being that Mbembe outlines, who, if anyone, in positions of power *can* recognize their victimhood anymore? Although Mbembe specifically discusses the state of colonial and postcolonial being in Africa in the long aftermath of the slave trade, I would argue that the propensity to become nothing is not necessarily limited to racialized embodiments that have been historically subject to colonialism and slavery. I would say that, contrary to the enduring afterlives of slavery, colonialism, and genocide in history, becoming nothing now rests on little more than any colonially minded state’s commitment to extinguishing its citizenry’s capacity to identify with biopolitical difference in deference to its own will towards absolute, sovereign power.

The Limits of Evidentiary Forms, Authority, and State Power in the Archives

The “evidence” recorded in remarkably well-preserved artifacts like the Book of Negroes at the start of this introduction creates a unique representational problem. On the one hand, such documents provide contemporary writers with fodder for challenging partial historical accounts that repressive regimes popularize to perpetuate ontological erasure. In an objective sense, the urtext betrays no self-consciousness whatsoever of its complicity in the transatlantic slave trade. It provides a strictly ordered, uncomplicated window into how the white, colonialist, implicitly masculinist imagination confronted humans he wanted to reduce to capital gain. But on the other hand, as far as recording any meaningful material about the captives themselves, the book primarily proffers evidence of their erasure, *not* their being: Western names, debasing

generalizations that emphasize physical stature, past captors, and, in a few cases, on the opposite-facing page, notes about past events that may subtract from their marketability. All of this information is funneled through the vantage point of the colonial functionary: his inventory is, in one regard, a tangible tool of ontological erasure, and, on the other, perhaps the only record we have that captives named Dinah or Sally ever existed.

Indeed, the conversion of political memory into ontological erasure in the Book of Negroes with which I opened this introduction is most evident in the odd *absence* of taxonomic specificity describing many captives, despite the detailed “inspection” practiced by the bookkeeper: most are “stout wenches” and “stout fellows,” undistinguishable even by the “stoutness” that will ensure their commodifiability. These people’s reduction to a few empty signifiers and objectifying figures represents an insidious act of epistemological violence, rendering access to intimate “knowledge” of their lives impossible. Through what representational strategies can contemporary writers commemorate lives lived in—and often, disappeared through—terror? In the epilogue for *Zong!*, Philip describes herself facing the paradox that confronts all the eclectic writers assembled in this study: how to tell the stories that can’t be told and yet *must* be told. How can these stories be communicated *without* appropriating unknowable suffering? Moreover, how can these stories be communicated in a way that exposes ontological erasure as a concealed, primary motivation for state violence?

In many ways, the archives at our disposal in the wakes of slavery, colonialism, and genocide ultimately preserve not much more than memory of the humiliation delivered in a victimized collectivity’s erasure. These collections certainly have immeasurable value for historiography—at least, for historians seeking to understand *perpetrators’* perspectives. The authors in my dissertation confront a predicament opposite to this possibility that has

preoccupied feminist, decolonial, and other oppositional writers and theorists: how can we recover the lost voices in history? For the purposes of this dissertation, I phrase the question slightly differently. How can we practice history and imagine alternatives through literature when the only records at our disposal are not only partial but rent with bias and distorted through violence? If we are willing to bear witness to absences in the archive as irreducible *losses* for history *and* the human imagination, are there *any other* means by which we can recover lost voices?

To expose the systematic suppression of atrocity in cultural memory through the eradication and/or inoculation of evidence, all of these authors have sought to challenge the glaring material elisions in past and more recent archives of slavery, colonialism, and genocide that supposedly “preserve” the memory of these horrors today. In each case, these authors recreate a wide range of evidentiary forms found in the archives—correspondence, diaries, secondary research, official reports, eyewitness testimonies, inventories, and more—to interrogate the vicissitudes of each evidentiary form itself. In alluding to the “vicissitudes” inherent to these forms, I mean that even the most foolproof evidence often does not garner justice. In each atrocity represented in these texts, state institutions—courts, police, functionaries, dictators—systematically expunge evidence of victims’ existences, destroying official records to shore up a corrupt status quo. For example, Amabelle Désir, a Haitian maid who survives the Parsley Massacre in Danticat’s novel, *The Farming of Bones*, tries to preserve her testimony with at least two statist institutions—the municipal courts and the Christian church—only to be callously rebuffed each time. The frustration of her speech shows that firsthand testimonies cannot secure reparations if the speaking subject is not considered a human

subject at all but, rather, a racialized object of stigma and scorn—indeed, the same double-bind Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulated in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” thirty years ago.

Near facsimiles of actual forensic reports from femicides litter almost every page of “The Part About the Crimes,” the middle section of Bolaño’s five-part novel, *2666*. Whereas this hyper-realist novel begins and ends with a red herring—three professors’ pursuit of their favorite author, the elusive recluse Benno von Archimboldi, in a fairly sedated detective story—the intervening narrative at the center of the novel spotlights the femicides as a mystery that, in contrast, *cannot* be solved. Police turn out not to be the sole bystanders in this atrocity who are not only failing to do their jobs but also actively participating in adjourning justice. Even seemingly natural allies for the victimized women traffic in the same racist, sexist, and homophobic behavior that fuels the toxic machismo behind the crimes. Óscar Amalfitano, a single father and closeted homosexual, becomes a neighborhood vigilante to protect his daughter, all the while defaming her mentally ill mother for leaving him for another woman. Azucena Esquivel Plata, a purportedly feminist congresswoman, advocates against the crimes in the register of hate speech— and at that, only once a friend of her own disappears. Thus the forensic reports persist in Bolaño’s archive—as well as real municipal archives— as little more than gruesomely detailed obituaries if all putative advocates for justice are literally or figuratively aligned with the woman-hating murderers whom they are striving to criminalize. In revealing these inconsistencies between evidence and justice, the writers I assemble expose the very incapacity of evidence as we conventionally define it to capture the realities of repressed, unrectified histories of political violence. Their work examines how deficient the evidence lockers that so many institutions of justice look to for verification today actually are.

Yet, in each case, their methods for exposing injustice carry immense risks since a fine line distinguishes creative reappropriation from complicit reproduction. To varying degrees, the writers in this project reappropriate and even sometimes reproduce evidentiary forms to expose what kinds of answers *could* have appeared in the archives of slavery, colonialism, and genocide, if individuals and institutions in collusion with the state had not systematically erased, suppressed, or manipulated their contents. Their imaginative reconstructions render the loss of evidence and the perpetuation of injustice even more palpable. But the very act of reusing the state's tools for oppression and erasure also draw these authors into an uncomfortable complicity with the very mechanisms of political violence that they are trying to disarm. Indeed, reappropriating the proverbial master's tools to dismantle his house is exactly the tact that Audre Lorde declared would *never* secure total liberation for marginalized women, queers, and people of color (10). Reappropriating tools that promote domination, privilege, and exclusivism risk duplicating the very same discursive structures that have led to state violence. For example, to contradict the structural violence that biases the subjectivities of police, politicians, and journalists dealing with femicide in Mexico, Bolaño must not only give voice to hate speech but also position it as an ordinary vernacular in his characters' milieu. Philip describes figuratively "murdering" her urtext, the judges' notes on the *Zong* trial, to re-perform the mass murder of slaves that was never punished. Danticat and Diop invent dozens of testimonies from genocide survivors only to emphasize and thus reproduce their silencing in history. These authors grapple with complicity in Sanyal's definition, as simultaneously a "structure of engagement that produces ethical and political reflection across proliferating frames of reference" and "a reading practice that is attuned to the unpredictable interactions of figure and context and to the movement of memory itself" (18; 16). In this frame, readers become uncomfortable co-creators

these authors' strategies work similarly to the "Holocaust effect" that Ernst van Alphen describes for performatively "reenacting a certain principle that defines the Holocaust as a *method*," such as ontological erasure (208).

At stake for each writer in testing the state's discourses for monopolizing power is thus not merely individual but collective freedom, what Paul Gilroy has called "the right to be human."¹⁸ In chapter one, I analyze the ways in which stories of unsolved forced disappearances emerge through fragments of myths, testimonies, human rights reports, news, and encyclopedias to materialize the impossibility of reconstructing statist violence in two novels, Peri Rossi's *La nave de los locos* from dictatorship-era Uruguay and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* on the Sri Lankan civil war. Each case boasts a strong, diverse body of evidence, ranging from myths that foreground political violence as part of the nation's origin story, NGO reports that list high numbers of forced disappearances within and outside the country, epistolary correspondences between dissidents, and even, in Ondaatje's case, the skeleton of a victim. However, in neither example does the protagonist secure justice for the victim whom s/he is trying to represent. By reconstructing inauthentic archives, these authors dramatize the greater futility of seeking truth within the parameters of current bureaucratic regimes.

In my second chapter, I argue that ontological erasure is foundational to the Western legal canon on which modern political attitudes towards normativity and civil society rest. In *Zong!*, Philip explodes a scant eighteenth-century court transcript sanctioning slave massacre into a highly experimental, conceptual poem that recalibrates the legal document's original alphabet into names and narratives rooted in African languages and Western myths. In a formal sense, *Zong!* begins with a series of fairly legible, grammatically conventional inventories of

¹⁸ See *Postcolonial Melancholia*.

injustice. Quickly, however, Philip's poem transforms into a highly discombobulated polemic *against* narrative rationality, full of ruptured syntactical constructions and half-finished words. Her anti-narrative mimics the dissolution of language and legal recourse in the face of unspeakability and state-sponsored impunity for the murderers. In the midst of this dissolving narrative, however, a feminine figure takes form: ruth [*sic*], whose biblical roots are metaphorically rent from "(t)ruth," emerges as a constantly shifting figuration for understanding how political violence acts upon differently racialized and gendered bodies. Manipulating colonial language in black text and visual blank space textually figures the absence of racialized justice in the face of state-vindicated, race-based mass murder.

In chapter three, I connect two works of historical fiction, Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, on the Haitian Parsley Massacre, and Boubacar Boris Diop's *Murambi : le livre des ossements*, on the Rwandan genocide, in terms of Raphael Lemkin's original definition of genocide: the systematic extermination of an ethnic group's identity, beyond the corporeal elimination of individual members.¹⁹ Danticat's and Diop's novels fictionalize victims' testimonies to voice how logics of racial purity are built into family customs and social norms and thus cannot be reversed through legal mandates alone. I close my dissertation by examining Bolaño's *2666* alongside *Los sinsabores del verdadero policia*. Nearly reproducing real forensic reports from unsolved murders of women in Mexico, Bolaño contrives a chain of evidence for the femicides stretching back to Nazi Germany. His comparative scale suggests that motives for femicide are not only organized but also deeply rooted in methods for ontological erasure

¹⁹ In *The Holocaust of Texts*, Amy Hungerford argues that reading contemporary genocide literature in light of the cultural implications Lemkin intended for the term "relies on and gives a special urgency to the claims that multiculturalism makes about the centrality of racial and ethnic identity to human subjectivity and to the claims about literature that follow in turn" (13).

epitomized in and present ever since the Holocaust. I argue that the novel ultimately reveals how entrenched misogyny and homophobia are in a collective psyche that condones femicide by inserting hate speech into the mouths of even female and gay protagonists.

The title for my dissertation, “Arts of the Impossible,” is a pun on a famous platitude coined by Otto von Bismarck, the founder and first chancellor of the German empire. In an 1895 newspaper interview, he stated, “Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable— the art of the next best” (248). Bismarck attained peace in foreign relations for two decades by normalizing a spirit of authoritarianism within his own borders. When he called politics the “art of the possible,” he was manipulating the language of hope and utopian discourse to gain public trust for the repressive policies that would eventually give rise to the Third Reich and, subsequently, Nazism. Thus, when I claim that contemporary writers from the Global South are striving for arts of the *impossible*, I see them as not merely trying to accomplish the impossible feat of representing collective trauma. Their methods also directly expose the ways authoritarian leaders like Bismarck—and the official records cataloging their efforts— deform language to suppress and even justify state-sanctioned violence against their own citizens. Moreover, the wordplay in my title participates in the same kind of formal, discursive inversion that I see decolonial authors instituting when they recreate evidentiary forms. These authors’ strategies for reconstructing the buried histories of atrocity constitute arts of the impossible that strive to defy the alleged unrepresentability of collective trauma. They aim to secure justice and forestall denial of human rights crimes in the future. Yet, they consistently stop short of pretending total defiance is ever possible. They recreate evidentiary forms aesthetically only to point out the deficiencies in their internal logics—deficiencies that continue ensuring impunity for so many human rights abuses in modern legal systems and enduring master narratives for world history. The literature that I

examine from the Global South not only exposes the hypocrisies concealed in platitudes coined by tyrants like Bismarck but also re-scripts those discourses that perpetuate group violence at the expense of a borderless compassion in the human imagination. Even as these literary works undertake meaningful and necessary gestures towards redemption, they nevertheless bear witness to a likely inalienable truth: that only “freedom” can only be restored to a deformed semblance of its intended self, so long as agency remains impossible under the onus of ontological erasure.

As a whole, my dissertation explores the capacity of literary works to challenge the logics of erasure motivating political violence across histories and borders. Recognizing the elisions conditioning dominant narratives of history and the law, the writers in my dissertation utilize literature to register both the legacies of genocide, slavery, and colonialism and the impossibility of full reparations. Connecting representations of organized political violence in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature from the Global South exposes modern nation-states’ reliance on the erasure of minority populations’ humanity to protect repression as a normal element of everyday life. I contend that writing within the rules of the evidentiary forms traditionally legitimized by the state ironically exposes invisible commonalities cohering logics of erasure in today’s collective imagination; in effect, by ironizing the state’s very own tactics of suppression, denial, and erasure, the authors in my dissertation disempower perpetrators. They also disempower the legally binding nature of archives and destabilize the truth claims vaunted therein.²⁰ Their innovations push the ethical boundaries of what counts as “evidence” in human rights crimes uniquely determined by erasure, and how to keep memories of past atrocities alive

²⁰ See Wendy W. Walters’ transnational case study in comparative literature, *Archives of the Black Atlantic*, which has deeply influenced my understanding of how authors from the Global South combat the coloniality of power in and through archives on slavery, colonialism, and state violence.

in a manner that protects ontological recognition for any number of stigmatized minorities in the future.

Chapter 1: The National Archive and the People's Imagination: Reconstructing Forced Disappearance in Cristina Peri Rossi's *La nave de los locos* and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

A redheaded, deracinated firebrand, Vercingetórix is abducted from his home in an undefined location in the Southern hemisphere, where winter is grimly retreating into spring, under startlingly mundane conditions in Cristina Peri Rossi's 1984 novel, *La nave de los locos* (*The Ship of Fools*) (51). The novel, framed as a series of "journeys" taken by Vercingetórix's best friend, "X" (personified as Equis), narrates the two men's exploits with random interruptions from documents like news dailies, art criticism, poems, letters, encyclopedia entries, and foundation myths. Seven armed men, two of whom are casually chewing gum, bandage their captive's eyes, a common protocol for state-sanctioned kidnappings in Peri Rossi's dictatorship-era Uruguay from 1973 to 1985. They "take him away under a blanket," like a corpse (51).¹ According to the text, "on those few occasions when he referred to these things," Vercingetórix himself had declared, "*We are being disappeared [nos desaparecen]*" (51; original emphasis). The unclear antecedent "these things" both implicitly alludes to and deliberately obscures the unspeakable crime against humanity at hand: forced disappearance.²

¹ Here I refer to the published translation, which I have compared to Peri Rossi's original Spanish. I use brackets to insist on literalisms. In this dissertation, I generally defer to the published translation and include short quotes from the original to verify diction-based close readings. When there is a notable incongruity between original versions and translations, I indicate that the translation is my own and include the original text in italics. Lastly, I include full excerpts from the original and my or Hughes' translation of Peri Rossi's work for all block quotes to ensure sufficient context for the passage at hand.

² In the 1993 Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the United Nations General Assembly defines forced disappearance in far less uncertain terms: "persons are arrested, detained or abducted against their will" by government officials or affiliated individuals and organizations, who then refuse "to disclose the fate or whereabouts" of the disappeared, much less acknowledge the grave deprivation of liberty they have suffered, thus jettisoning them outside of the law (1). Indefinite detention is often followed by torture, executions, and mass burials on land or at sea.

The passive voice, *nos desaparecen*, is central, not incidental, to this passage and my close reading of it; the passive voice underscores the absence of agency integral to Vercingetórix's ambiguous political situation. By refusing to acknowledge the disappearance of civilians— and in some political contexts, taking measures to delete that person from official records and public memory— the state removes the victim from the protections of the law, thus “produc[ing] ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission” (Gordon 115). Forced disappearance seeks the power to control a political population on multiple ontological levels, placing constraints on imaginations, identities, and even “the meaning of death” (124). To be haunted into submission means being chased by the ghosts of what should be real or ought to be possible— as well as what could, figuratively or realistically, become of oneself. But in this scenario, the state exercises complete jurisdiction over modal verbs, the actions that typically imply moral obligation.

The free indirect discourse narrating Vercingetórix's disappearance claims that “[t]o disappear is no longer voluntary, but acquires passive form [*se convierte en una actitud pasiva*]” (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 51). The passive form, “to be disappeared,” is also transitive, underlining the terms through which the state can subjugate a civilian with impunity and render Vercingetórix— and the political opposition he represents— objects of erasure. Even more importantly, at stake are not just the individual and his political ideology but also the collective of which he is a part— the “we” in danger of disappearance. Beyond the scattered community of exiles with whom Vercingetórix associates from time to time, Peri Rossi never identifies the “we” to whom he belongs, leaving open the possibility that “we” signifies a category of potentially universal precariousness. But whereas the exiles in his milieu disperse of their own accord, any such possibility of “leaving” for him and dissidents like him has now “become an involuntary act

which catches us unexpectedly, just as we innocently postulate infinite time and space ahead” (51). Thus the only characteristics that delimit this captive “us,” this naive, forward-thinking “we,” are shared senses of unbelonging, unmoored from local histories. In the world of Peri Rossi’s novel, any subjects of an authoritarian regime who are nationally deracinated, socially nonconformist, and/or politically dissident are potential targets for the abduction, torture, and potential execution that forced disappearance entails.

In refusing to categorize his persecution as forced disappearance per se, Peri Rossi unmoors Vercingetórix’s subjugation from its particular historical and geopolitical context. Her decision not to ground Vercingetórix in a nation has key implications for representing state violence in this novel. Forced disappearance appears to be a tenable threat in all times and places where an authoritarian government restricts political expression explicitly through the control of unruly bodies like Vercingetórix’s. The global reach of the power struggles he faces is animated even in his name, an allusion to the Vercingetórix of ancient Gaul.³ The oddity of his red hair (Peri Rossi sardonically animalizes him as a “great orangutan”) combined with his historical namesake amongst Europe’s indigenous people, suggests that his own ancestral descent is split—European and native, human and bestial (19). His dissent also stems from feminist rage against the vestiges of state violence trafficked through women’s bodies in popular cultural forms. For example, while Equis is lusting after the rape scenes in the 1977 Julie Christie film, *Demon Seed*, Vercingetórix has the presence of mind to comment that “*el monstruo [es] invisible pero omnipresente, «como las dictaduras»*”—“the monster is invisible, but omnipresent, ‘like the

³ The historical Vercingetórix led a pivotal uprising against Julius Caesar’s conquest of his tribal land. Empowering the marginalized—his charisma in “lobbying among the poor and among tribes not his own”—contributed to his success (Riggsby, par. 1). Although Caesar ultimately executed Vercingetórix, he remains notable for having politically unified much of Gaul (albeit temporarily); he is remembered as a militant symbol of anti-imperial resistance.

dictators” — when the camera zooms in on her soon-to-be-assaulted face (*Nave* 23; my trans.). The dictator is “a bestial and omnipresent machine [*una máquina bestial y omnipresente*],” symbolic of “that heavy and clumsy, coarse and arrogant, machine [that] knows neither limit nor resistance: a great phallic symbol, a structure of invincible power [*esa máquina pesada y torpe, tosca y ensoberbecida no conocía el límite ni la resistencia, gran símbolo fálico, estructura del poder invencible*]” (Peri Rossi, *Nave* 24; my trans.). Whereas sexual violence titillates Equis, Vercingetórix abruptly leaves because he “can’t stand it anymore [*no la aguanto más*],” revealing his intolerance for heteropatriarchal violence in all its forms (23; my trans.). When Equis finally leaves the theater (after indulging in a second showing), Vercingetórix is drunkenly vandalizing the building and terrorizing a protest sign left behind by a women’s group, which states, “MAN IS WOMAN’S PAST” (*Ship* 18). When asked what he is doing, he answers, “I’m smashing man’s future to pieces [*estoy haciendo pedazos el future del hombre*]” (*Nave* 25; my trans.).

In Peri Rossi’s novel, bodies like Vercingetórix’s represent not only a singular, collective disposition of dissidence refusing an unjust status quo but also an assemblage of politicized subjectivities that do not conform to regulatory constraints on normativity in the public sphere. An ubiquitous condemnation of the embodiments and mindsets that threaten state power, forced disappearance removes its victims from social intelligibility.⁴ As the guards hoist Vercingetórix out of his house under a blanket, his neighbors “lock... their windows and doors,” afraid of becoming targets by proximity (51). Instead of recognizing his disappearance, they choose

⁴ As Elizabeth S. Anker has pointed out, even liberal discourses on human rights only endow certain identities and bodies with the capacity to attain recognition as legitimate human subjects; “corporeal integrity” precedes dignity and rights, and achieving corporeal integrity risks valorizing “a dangerously purified subject, one purged of the body’s assumedly anarchic tendencies” — one, in other words, neither rent by politics nor sexualized, tortured, or exposed for its irrationality (4).

“percepticide,” a violent refusal to recognize or identify with the human whose disappearance is “[giving] way to unauthorized seeing” (Taylor 121). By enforcing disappearances routinely and publicly, stealing political suspects like Vercingetórix from their front yards in broad daylight, the state creates a culture of palpable fright and “deathly consent” that burglarizes a population’s “will to dissent,” seeking “to destroy not just organized and overt opposition, but the *disposition* to opposition” (Gordon 131; 124; emphasis added). In other words, the novel suggests that in contexts like Uruguay, forced disappearance is inseparable from local history. The political inaction of so many witnesses, immobilized at the very thought of the violent repercussions that dissidence could entail, comes to signify a self-immolating kind of silence. Such silence authorizes the state to terrorize its own people through the very omission of dissent, and the absence of reprisal. Even the newspaper seller, whose job it is to peddle the truth, averts his gaze as the police remove Vercingetórix, who feels he must be “in another kind of race” (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 51).

And yet, Vercingetórix’s sensation of having achieved a state of complete alienation comes not merely from the aversion of the newspaper seller’s gaze but from the incongruity between the song the seller is humming and the former’s seemingly condemned fate. The song and the newspapers are two documents from the ever-evolving archive of survival under authoritarian terror that Peri Rossi subtly interjects into Equis and Vercingetórix’s story. The seller is whispering the tune to the spider *tango*, which first appears much earlier in the novel. In that instance, Equis begins pursuing a woman known only as the Beautiful Passenger. Seeing passengers dance like “spent fireflies” causes Equis to recall, in an entomological note, how Vercingetórix used to parody a popular lyric from a tango (5). Vercingetórix would replace the conventional reading of the lyric— “the lover’s nest”—with “the spider’s nest in your hair” (5).

Enfolded into Vercingetórix's adaptation of the tango, a passionate dance that celebrates heterosexuality in its performance, is an allusion to Peri Rossi's Argentine contemporary Manuel Puig's 1976 novel, *El beso de la mujer araña* (*The Kiss of the Spider Woman*). In Puig's novel, a homosexual indicted for having intercourse with a minor and an activist incarcerated for treason develop an unlikely erotic attachment in prison. By tucking into a footnote this allusion to another novelist from the Southern Cone who is similarly problematizing a normative politics of representation through gender and sexuality, Peri Rossi marshals an imaginary coalition of marginal voices as always foundational to *La nave de los locos*. As an allusion to one of Equis's many sexual conquests, the spider *tango* passing through a passive bystander's lips at the minute of Vercingetórix's disappearance compounds symbolisms. Inaction in this particular passage is not *actually* silent, as I suggested earlier, but transversal and multidimensional. The newspaper seller's hum in the absence of dissent certainly reflects Vercingetórix, who coined the spider *tango* as a deviation on the standard lyric. But it also evokes the political relationship between state repression and heteropatriarchal power, which Equis will spend the whole novel trying to comprehend.

In this chapter, I compare Peri Rossi's novel with Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000), another contemporary novel from a diasporic writer of the Global South who confronts forced disappearance in Sri Lanka's civil war. Both novels reconstruct the suppressed life histories of suspected victims of forced disappearance through various textual forms and the limited point of view of a well-meaning outsider who has been authorized to track down the disappeared. In Peri Rossi's novel, Equis's social privilege is invisible to him. He fails not only to keep up with Vercingetórix's whereabouts but also to recognize evidence of state violence accumulating within his country's borders. In Ondaatje's novel, a Sinhala-speaking, Sri Lankan-

born forensic investigator for the United Nations, Anil Tissera, and her counterpart assigned from the local government, Sarath Diyasena, work to identify the skeleton of a murder victim whom they name Sailor. Like Equis, Anil never realizes her First World privilege protects her from the compromising political situation in which she embroils herself and Sarath. The latter pays the consequences for seeking justice in an authoritarian context that has learned how to make empty gestures towards human rights within its own borders. For example, the government permits a forensic scientist from the U.N. to weigh in on an unsolved case while harboring zero intentions to expose the state's complicity.

I argue that Peri Rossi's and Ondaatje's paratextual interruptions into their own narrative reconstructions draw into question the partiality and incompleteness of official national archives surrounding forced disappearance. Their material interventions on the novel form metaphorically reconstitute national archives that only validate certain documents as useful and pertinent to the preservation of history. In both novels, evidentiary forms conventionally thought to be authoritative, such as federal government and local police reports, do not advance justice. Instead, the evidentiary forms that make history are actually the inauthentic, compromised, non-factual and informal ephemera fated for suppression, invalidation, or simply oversight. For Peri Rossi, evidence that needs to be factored into dictatorship-era Uruguay's resilient *machista* regime include not only popular cultural forms, like songs and films, but also the personal effects of everyday people (letters, diaries, fragments from notes to self) and origin myths refocused on women's roles in creation.⁵ Ondaatje, on the other hand, is interested in the unverifiability of

⁵ Evidentiary forms from *La nave de los locos* that I do not analyze in this chapter include a fragment from the biblical Eve's unpublished autobiographical confessions (153), a bulletin about the musical event on board the ship where Equis meets the "beautiful stranger" (12), and various written descriptions of the *Tapestry of Creation* and its disappearance in the Cathedral of Gerona (first occurs on page 20).

both oral history and first-person testimony. He also reveals the negligible impact of extraterritorial reports produced by international human rights organizations on justice *within* national borders. In what follows, I frame forced disappearance in Uruguayan and Sri Lankan history through the connections these authors make to the Holocaust, which systematized the “leave no trace” strategy that founds ontological erasure and makes even the fantasy of archival completeness impossible. I then perform close readings of Equis’s and Anil’s encounters with a few of the evidentiary forms that exemplify Peri Rossi’s and Ondaatje’s methods for reforming the archives of forced disappearance. I close by examining why victims in neither novel secure justice, despite the legions of evidence surrounding their disappearances and the panorama of transcultural, transnational, and transhistorical complicity each text ascribes to their immolation.

Embodiments of Erasure: Vercingétorix and Sailor as Victims of Forced Disappearance in Uruguay and Sri Lanka, via Nazi Germany

In the midst of its material intertextuality, *La nave de los locos* makes allusions between forced disappearance and a local history of state violence that it never overtly claims. These multidirectional resonances connect forced disappearance to the legacy of state terror emerging from the Holocaust, circling from Europe to the Global South and back.⁶ Both Peri Rossi’s and Ondaatje’s novels position everyday attacks on psychic life in dictatorship-era Uruguay and civil war-era Sri Lanka as symptoms of a greater global scourge that highlights “the impossibility for

⁶ According to Rothberg, multidirectional memory, although borne out of intersecting and potentially competing collective traumas, forges new avenues for dialogue and communal cross-identification by exceeding identitarian boundaries (“Locating” 654). Although locally situated public spheres channel discourse within their interiors, these spheres’ exteriors are not rigid. Thinking of memory in terms of its multidirectionality can loosen the boundaries on expression within a given public sphere, opening it up “as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually *come into being* through their dialogical interactions with others” (*MM* 5; emphasis added). Recognizing memory’s multidirectionality makes different modes of resistance both mutually regulatory and mutually constitutive, with discourse altering groups and groups altering discourse.

any given locality to escape and seal itself off from the determining influence of global forces, [which] at the same time, makes localized violence reverberate globally” (Bielsa 1).⁷ An assault on cultural memory lies at the center of the logic behind forced disappearance, which is “designed to prevent the formation of a concrete public memory with traceable evidence of state violence and terrorism” (Schwab 643). These novels respond to and invalidate the eradication of memory that repressive regimes sought during these historical periods. Their ethical projects address forced disappearance as a political crisis expedited through globalization, which has circulated not only neoliberal economic crises and cultural homogenization but also tactics of modern political repression.⁸

Indeed, Peri Rossi’s interventions on state violence in history are so subtle and unorthodox that few critics seem to notice the challenges to authoritarianism in her fiction. Most scholars look to Peri Rossi as a creative model for transgressing repressive gender and sexual norms in Latin America.⁹ In contrast to these critics, I believe Peri Rossi interrogates these norms

⁷ Military dictatorship in Peri Rossi’s Uruguay and civil war in Ondaatje’s Sri Lanka fit Esperanza Bielsa’s criteria for “the new wars” taking place on a global scale. Adding to Mary Kaldor’s work on the same subject, Bielsa claims that political ideologies primarily unite opposing factions, thus delegitimizing certain identities and not geopolitical territory per se. “[W]ar itself is a form of political mobilization” through which national politics can leverage forced disappearance *against* its own marginalized populations; moreover, the war itself depends economically on neoliberal globalization (3-4).

⁸ As Higgins and Leps claim of Ondaatje’s novel, it “repeatedly correlates such specific brutalities to those occurring in Guatemala, China, Kurdistan, and the Congo, implying that each conflict performs a version of the others, and of larger confrontations taking place at the transnational level— together forming what many now call a ‘global civil war’ of the governed against state-sponsored ‘wars on terror’” (202). The internal analogies drawn in *Anil’s Ghost* to other repressive histories, like *La nave de los locos*’ multidirectional connections to the Holocaust, reconsider how modern statist power operates within a mega-matrix of domination.

⁹ For a few examples, see Carmen Domínguez’s “Las mujeres en *La nave de los locos* de Cristina Peri Rossi,” Leah Fonder-Solano’s “Erotismo, actuación y la construcción de identidad,” Amy Kaminsky’s *Reading the Body Politic*, Gabriela Mora’s “Enigmas and Subversions in Cristina Peri Rossi’s *La nave de los locos*,” Margarita Saona’s “La búsqueda de la identidad en *La nave de los locos* de Cristina Peri Rossi,” and Mary Beth Tierney-Tello’s *Allegories of Transgression and Transformation*.

as synecdoches for a widespread political matrix of domination. In one example, one of Equis's love interests, Graciela, scorns the misogyny internal to both his perspective and conceits of universal subjectivity. When he describes her as "an idea free from historical circumstances," she retorts, "this 'idea *deprived*...'— sorry, '*free* from historical circumstances' might also be an idea free of objective reality: a reflection of your mind" (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 89; 88; emphasis added). Graciela's Freudian slip converts Equis's intended compliment into an imposition on her identity. He views her not for who she is but as an ahistorical reality of his own design, bereaving her of sociopolitical agency.

Although the fewest number of people have been reported missing in Uruguay of any country in the Southern Cone, the fates of almost 200 Uruguayans, including thirteen children reported missing in Argentina, are thought to have been victims of forced disappearance (Skaar 138). Most went missing outside of Uruguay's borders during Operación Condór, and the thirty who disappeared inside borders are thought to have died from the effects of torture on an individual basis, not as the result of premeditated mass murder (138). Ernesto Sábato, a novelist and President of CONADEP, the human rights organization that widely disseminated *Nunca Más*, a well-known report on forced disappearances from Argentina, has stated that the "ambiguous state of present absence is key to the crime's disruptive effects; individuality (or, more precisely, the empirical singularity of the individual) became an instrument of repression" (qtd. in Slaughter, *HRI* 168). In the Latin American context, the *desaparecidos* were actually more radically vulnerable as individuals than as a politically volatile collective. Sudden reappearances of anonymized, depersonalized, and even defaced dead bodies in public "hyperindividualized [*sic*] the victim to target the intersubjective relations of the community that give meaning to individual opinions, actions, and identity" (168). Intimate bodily violations

posed as a public spectacle singled out the victim as a uniquely socially unintelligible, ontologically illegible, and physically unrecognizable transgressor. When the newspaper seller's tune amplifies Vercingetórix's suspicion that he might be "thrown from a plane to the bottom of the sea," he is referring to the practice of drowning *desaparecidos* in mass graves, which was far more common to other parts of the Southern Cone, such as Argentina and Chile (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 55). This dissonance between historical and imagined realities distances readers from a national context before altogether extrapolating Vercingetórix's plight to the anachronistic frame of the Holocaust.

Although forced disappearance as a crime against humanity first registered for the U.N. with the civil war in Guatemala, the practice originated several decades earlier in Nazi Germany. Hitler and Wilhelm Keitel, chief of German High Command, enacted the *Night and Fog Decree* in 1941. Its "leave no trace" strategy evacuated political resisters, secretly ordering the kidnapping and deportation of "suspicious persons" in occupied territories to Germany (Schwab 642). Over 7,000 people were disappeared, including many executions, before the practice expanded to include abducting other "deviants"—the mentally ill, political dissidents, and German citizens of Jewish, Roma, and Sinti descent. These raids on individual homes evolved once again into forced removals to concentration camps and, eventually, genocide in gas chambers. Nazi soldiers were not primarily responsible for transferring these technologies of terror from Germany to the Southern hemisphere; American interventionism introduced the logic of indefinite detention via forced disappearance and accompanying practices of torture, interrogation, and sometimes execution to Latin American countries below the equator. The CIA employed former Nazis to help train torturers to repress communists throughout the Southern

Cone at the School of the Americas (643).¹⁰ In this historical scenario, the Holocaust made forced disappearance a transculturally portable system of ontological *and* corporeal evisceration. The successful systematization of individual disappearances made viable the annihilation of a people; that viability became translatable and even rationalizable across hemispheric borders in the hands of American soldiers.

Operating under an injunction to “leave no trace” of its targets, forced disappearance in Latin America began with the abduction of political dissidents and sympathizers into illegal detention centers. Following a precedent set by the Nazis, governments in the Southern cone renovated many of these sites from large manufacturing and recreational spaces (Sutton 22). Vercingetórix ultimately spends two years in one such detention center— a remote cement factory repurposed as a forced labor camp (54). Both the site and the people inhabiting the camp garner zero recognition from outside, with “nobody” knowing of their suffering and slavery, “trapped in the sands of oblivion and death, like a column of ants working their tunnels while the distant city slept” (55). Life goes on for others unimpeded, and somewhere, the international circus, recently in China, Africa, Japan, Oslo, and Rio de Janeiro that Vercingetórix had planned to see the day he was disappeared, still performs. This epiphany disillusiones him to the fact that “the world will not know of the existence of this phantasm, its rachitic, grey trees, its populations disintegrating from coughs, hemorrhages, electrodes and paralysis” (56). Such embodied metonyms— coughs, hemorrhages, electrodes, paralysis, all of which are signatures of torture— collectivize torture as the plight of whole peoples falling apart.

¹⁰ None of this is to diminish the particularity of Nazi genocide—whether to universalize it as an originary moment, or to cordon it off from correlative histories of collective violence; to do so would “potentially create a hierarchy of suffering (which is morally offensive) and remove that suffering from the field of historical agency (which is both morally and intellectually suspect)” (Rothberg, *MM* 8-9).

Having already broken away from the state through their conscription to the forced labor camp, these living “phantasms” of disappearance continue to break down social attachments *within* their confines. Vercingetórix’s body begins to dematerialize from the inside out as the dust in the factory and the effects of torture pigment him and his compatriots, a gesture both racializing and dehumanizing: “it colored them all alike with a greenish yellow tint until they looked like ghosts, spitting blood and dust, vomiting bile and dust, their bones, turned to dust, breaking under the blows” (55). Liminal, bilious ghosts, they invisibly haunt reality and paradoxically exceed the boundaries of their own bodies as manifestations of what Judith Butler has called “derealization.” She discusses derealization as a process of ontological erasure via which a vulnerable group’s identity, value system, and way of life become not only wholly undesirable, and recognizable as waste, but also unfathomable, virtually unrecognizable as anything, and undeserving of a rationale for their suffering. Forced disappearance is a double-pronged strategy that seeks both “to erase the very existence and name of the disappeared person and to intimidate the population with a hitherto unknown form of invisible terror” (Schwab 643). For members of a marginalized group like Vercingetórix to become so devalued, their dehumanization must result in their total derealization. Vercingetórix’s sudden release thus involves as little explanation as his persecution, delivering him back to the world as a living martyr, “the same age as Jesus at the time of His crucifixion” (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 57).

As Vercingetórix leaves behind the guards, he carries the knowledge that, no matter how peaceful his own life from this point on, there will always be another atrocity— “another camp, another hell, with its inmates dying without a trace, either thrown into the sea or buried in common graves, no name, no memory” (57). No name, no memory, and consequently, no identity can be asserted for the disappeared; effectively derealized, their presence is ubiquitous

and yet inaccessible for Vercingétorix. This paradox perverts his survival as a newly liberated martyr. He emerges from the camp with a “helpless” erotic predilection for young girls; thus, his constitutional inability to conform to his heteropatriarchal society has transformed for the worse (61). His pedophilia could be read as the dire consequence of attempting to assimilate an inassimilable political trauma into his everyday life. Vercingétorix’s arrested development provides at least one answer to Joseph R. Slaughter’s question about how political repression deforms normative narratives: “What happens to the story form of human personality development when the modern institutional guarantors of social order and meaning—the democratic state and public sphere that replaced Nature and Nature’s God— have been perverted?” (*HRI* 150). In Vercingétorix’s scenario, being unable to escape sociopolitical disorder and meaninglessness deeply warps his own personality development, inuring him with a logorrheic desire “to converse, be it with little girls or dwarf ladies,” and be heard (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 61). His “transgressive sexuality” becomes symptomatic of “political catastrophe,” marrying sexual and political exploitation (Kaminsky 131). In the aftermath of his traumatic disappearance, Vercingétorix becomes a local perpetrator, a predator of children in his own community, despite also being a martyr for his never-named political cause.

If Peri Rossi represents forced disappearance to highlight how dissent transforms into deviance at the cost of individual personhood, then *Anil’s Ghost* evaluates the toll of the very same ontological erasure on whole populations. In his novel, Anil and Sarath believe that Sailor, a nameless corpse, embodies the whole Sri Lankan populace’s deprivation of liberty. According to political historian Jagath Senaratne, turmoil in Sri Lanka’s civil war took on a Kafkaesque imaginary that featured “postmodern notions of the collapse of grand narratives, the fragility and impermanence of identity, the failure of history to provide us with a coherent account of our

origins, and the moral ambiguities of action and character in a world where cause and effect are endlessly complex” (qtd. in Scanlan 304). As early as 1956, ethnic tensions had begun to fester between Sinhalese and Tamil citizens when the postcolonial Sri Lankan government declared Sinhalese the official national language, implicitly impairing Tamils’ eligibility for the coveted civil service sector (304; Burrows 167). Contestations over national culture and legitimacy have thus been at the heart of ethnic strife in Sri Lanka. Governmental reactions to strife have had both cultural and economic implications; oppressing Tamils animated internal colonization schemes that sought to displace the minority to rural areas (Moses 29). By the early 1980s, the assault on Tamils’ cultural, economic, and political agency continued with their lowered admissions to universities (Scanlan 304).

If imperialistic impulses stem from a broader, masculinist “desire for invulnerability,” as historian A. Dirk Moses suggests, then the Sri Lankan government’s neocolonial attitude towards the Tamil population can be read as responding to “previous feelings of abjection” from colonial humiliations now concealed as postcolonial stability (30). In 1983, civil tensions culminated in mass murder when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the minority’s major guerrilla group, killed thirteen Sinhalese troops from the Sri Lankan military in a suicide bomb attack on northern Jaffna (Burrows 167). The victims’ public funeral resulted in a riot amongst 10,000 mourners in Colombo that left 1,000 Tamils dead and up to 200,000 homeless (Scanlan 304). Insurgent violence fanned out to other cities, and the government attempted to squelch Tamil resistance through militarization for three violent years between 1984 and 1987; thereafter, a deleterious cycle of violence emerged in which Tamil guerrillas killed Sinhalese civilians whenever Sinhalese troops murdered Tamil civilians (Schwab 645). In addition to both sides launching open warfare on unmilitarized civilians, the LTTE deployed hit-and-run raids, bombed

military and culturally symbolic public spaces, and assassinated both Sinhala and Tamil politicians perceived to be unsympathetic to the cause of national insurrection (McGonegal 90). The Sinhalese-majority government declared a state of emergency that suspended parliamentary elections, which imbalanced the system of proportional representation set in place, as well as human rights protections guaranteed in the 1978 constitution (304; Slaughter, *HRI* 188). Ultimately, three ethnically and religiously divided factions became principal actors in the war: the Sri Lankan government in contest with two oppositional groups, the Tamil separatists from the north versus government subversives in the south (Derrickson 150).

From the perspective of all three factions, then, the question of national revolution through civil war was never about upending the national political structure as it stood but reconfiguring the terms for legitimacy within the postcolonial national frame that already existed. In this sense, the bigger-picture blind spot beleaguering all this violence could parallel with Anil's in Ondaatje's novel: the insurgents did not want to upheave a repressive government as it stood but rearrange the pressures it placed on different groups. Internecine strife in Sri Lanka was "the continuation *in extremis* of normal life, in all its taken-for-granted certainties and truths that bind individuals to their identities" (Higgins and Leps 207). The government's attitude of total annihilation towards oppositional groups (and vice versa) meant to root out not just real and imagined resistance. The war reached its heights in the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, the time frame within which *Anil's Ghost* falls and which partially overlaps with forced disappearance taking a very different form in Uruguay. *Anil's Ghost* is set a few years after the passage of the Indemnity Act No. 20 of 1982, which authorized the military to suppress resistance using formerly illegal means, like "government-sponsored 'good-faith' execution,

torture, and disappearance” (Slaughter, *HRI* 189).¹¹ These emergency regulations rendered even foolproof forensic evidence of government crimes, like victims’ corpses, politically unspeakable— even if socially legible— and therefore, legally untouchable.

Whereas Sailor is a metonym for the inexorably eviscerative logic behind forced disappearance, Sarath, Anil’s local counterpart, experiences that logic’s all-encompassing nature, which can wipe out any individual, regardless of his privilege. In many ways, his role in *Anil’s Ghost* is homologous to Vercingétorix’s in *La nave de los locos*: he is the faithful sidekick whose ruination politically disillusiones the novel’s protagonist in her search for identity. In contrast, Equis and Anil see themselves as universal subjects who can “belong to the whole of something,” potentially to everywhere and in all times, without declaring group affinities (*OED*). They never realize that universal standards, commonly interpreted as white, heteropatriarchal, European, and bourgeois, exclude them. On the other hand, Vercingétorix and Sarath know exactly who they are— and therefore what makes them vulnerable to erasure.

For Sarath, precarity is a universal condition for everyone living in Sri Lanka who remembers how much “worse” the government was “when there was real chaos,” the true anomie that preceded Anil’s advent to the country (Ondaatje 150). In one pivotal moment when Sarath is helping Anil transport Gunesena, a victim of torture whom they almost drove past, to a hospital, Sarath nevertheless refuses to disturb the open secret exemplified in Gunesena’s seemingly random dehumanization. Unlike Vercingétorix, Sarath is not a flagrant dissident; in

¹¹ Slaughter quotes the Indemnity Act, No. 20 in full, and the ambiguity of its ‘good faith’ wording is worth noting: “No action or other legal proceeding whatsoever, whether civil or criminal, shall be instituted in any court of law for or on account of or in respect of any act, matter or thing, whether legal or otherwise, done or purported to be done with a view to restoring law and order...., if done in good faith, by a... person holding office under or employed in the service of the Government of Sri Lanka in any capacity” (qtd. in *HRI* 189).

fact, Anil's conviction in human rights eventually activates his dissidence and, subsequently, his demise. Because civil war has unilaterally jeopardized survival across Sri Lanka, Sarath scoffs at the uselessness of Anil's "rules of Westminster" that promise to preserve democracy and autonomy (150). His rueful reprisal takes on a gendered bent as he likens the impossible choice facing aware but powerless people like him to a marriage between psychopaths: "It was like being in a room with three suitors, all of whom had blood on their hands. In nearly every house, in nearly every family, there was knowledge of someone's murder or abduction by one side or another" (150). What Sri Lankans share in this historical context, then, is not identity or community but complicity in keeping the secret safe so as to save oneself. The secret is nevertheless so tangible that it constitutes a dowry, the price for being wed to the country's fate.

Sharing only the desire to save themselves means that perpetrators of forced disappearance in Sarath's Sri Lanka have fewer boundaries since there is no shame to be incurred from public knowledge. Sarath's recollection of watching two insurgents assault, abduct, and blindfold a man:

Why transport a blindfolded victim on a bicycle? It made all life seem precarious. It made all of them more equal. Like drunk university students. The blindfolded man had to balance his body in tune with his possible killer. They cycled off and at the far end of the street, beyond the market buildings, they turned and disappeared. Of course the reason they did it that way was so none of us would forget it. (Ondaatje 150)

The uncanny image of these insurgents transporting their captive on a bicycle in broad daylight recalls the dissonance in reality that Vercingétorix feels when seven gum-chewing policemen pick him up. "Equality" in Sarath's morbid memory means total codependence between victim and perpetrator: the victim must "balance his body in tune with his possible killer," in complicit harmony, for all to ride unscathed. Moreover, the purpose of their spectacle is to create a memory that *cannot* be erased—to imprint the unforgettable image of two unpunishable criminals

pedaling away with their intended kill. By fleshing out narratives for historical events that defy reason and lay bare the irrationality of mass death in contexts where “[t]he reason for war was war” in Anil’s words, Ondaatje and Peri Rossi expose the logical gaps that perforate “reason” itself (39; original emphasis). Antonio Aguilera puts the quandary of resistance under authoritarian repression another way: “If one becomes a rogue in order to combat rogues, one is also giving them legitimacy” (76). Desires for political legitimacy in the face of national disintegration undergird the violent logic that gives rise to atrocities like these.

Sarath does not merely question Anil’s faith in the signifying power of bones like Sailor’s but recognizes that knowledge is vulnerable to abuse both within and outside of the nation, possibly even within his and Anil’s small circle. *Anil’s Ghost* suggests that power struggles in the Sri Lankan civil war are not poised for upheaving the government but for simply reproducing the mechanisms of oppression that are already in place; thus, “the book diagrams coming-to-dominance of new power-knowledge networks across national and ideological divides” (Higgins and Leps 202). Anil, as an outsider and U.N. human rights ambassador, represents one such power-knowledge network and believes epistemological exchange can effect political change. However, the will to power in Sri Lanka is so rampant that knowledge is impotent; with murders happening in broad daylight, “[t]he only chance [for the country] was that the creatures who fought would consume themselves. All that was left of law was a belief in an eventual revenge towards those who had power” (Ondaatje 52).

Whereas Anil also has no personal memory whatsoever of the Sri Lankan crisis, Sarath is haunted by particular and recurring events that he admittedly did nothing to curtail: interrogations by night, roadside abductions by day, mass disappearances, mass graves, and even grave robberies cropping up across the country in Ankumbura, Suriyakanda, Akmeemana,

Hokandara, and Muthurajawela (152; 154). Sarath has seen lawyers as well as schoolboys subject to the same torture while “[t]he country existed in a rocking, self-burying motion” (154). The possibility of Sailor’s identification unburies “half the world,” not just Sri Lanka’s skeletons, with “the truth hidden by fear, while the past reveal[s] itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush,” the dry branches of which stoke the fire in the country home where Sarath and Anil are carrying on their clandestine forensic work (152). But unlike Sarath, Anil does not see how “new vengeance and slaughter” could result from an international body like the U.N. making “a flippant gesture towards Asia” (152). Whereas Sarath, like Vercingétorix, recognizes his inner phantasm, his guilt for having been an idle witness, Anil has not yet detected her own invisible stranger—the dark underside of her institutional affiliations. Locating Sailor’s identity would not simply identify him but reassert his social intelligibility, thus rescuing him from ontological erasure and even accruing legal recognition for others like him.

Although Equis and Anil take for granted their inalienable dignity and sovereignty over their own lives, their confrontations with forced disappearance through Vercingétorix and Sarath make them realize their shortsightedness. Drawing their epiphanies into contact materializes the “border gnosis” that Walter Mignolo has advocated: to “bring the diversity of local histories into a universal project, displacing the abstract universalism of *one* local history [the West’s]” as the standard by which legitimacy and peace become viable (92).¹² Put another way, the rising action

¹² Border gnosis describes epistemologies forged from competing perspectives exterior to “the modern/colonial world system,” thus merging “modern colonialisms” as a disciplinary paradigm with “colonial modernities” from the Global South on a geopolitical level (11). Peri Rossi’s and Ondaatje’s novels scrutinize “global designs” (of war and terror) that become apparent when “local histories” (in this case, forced disappearance as a tool of state violence) circulate and become recognizable in other places (65). A “colonial difference” inflects these authors’ perspectives, splitting their apprehensions of the privilege they have encountered in the First World from the bloodshed underway in their homelands; ultimately, that difference furnishes a “powerful tool in rebuilding [the nation’s] imaginary” through a reckoning with what civilization means across these divided lines (278). Rebuilding an imaginary in this way converges two potentially competing stances on the meaning of civilization—the exile’s, thriving in

in these novels depends on Equis and Anil each realizing universal subjectivity is implausible in the face of such a derealizing technology like forced disappearance. Equis's cosmopolitan masculinity does not exempt him from cultural and social alienation; he cannot enter an alternative community like some of his fellow exiles until he relinquishes the power of his own virility, the heteropatriarchal privilege from which he has benefited and that has shored up state power. Anil's refusal to identify with her home nation, Sri Lanka, predisposes her to deprioritizing conceptions of truth, knowledge, and justice regarded in local myths and testimonies above her Western education.¹³ She believes recovering the identities of the disappeared reinstates them in the historical record. However, she does not realize that their identities simply will never be able to signify in a national frame whose stability depends on the continued void of that disappeared person's memory.

The Creation of Counter-Factual Archives in Ondaatje's and Peri Rossi's Novels

In postcolonial and dictatorship-era contexts like Ondaatje's Sri Lanka and Peri Rossi's Uruguay, narrative in the aftermath of forced disappearance assumes a new purpose.¹⁴ The

the First World, and the stranger's, divorced from home. Border gnosis therein reestablishes a "coeval" structure for conceiving of history that removes the impetus to see civilization as a civilizing mission, predicated on singular, universal, teleological concepts of forward-moving progress, presentness, and modernity (285).

¹³ Indeed, memory exists in a dialectical, inextricable relationship with identity. If it follows that "memory both shapes the content of what is communicated by the socialization process and is formed by that process," then cultural memory is imbricated within cultural identity, revealing the ways in which multiple facets of an individual identity—the social, the political, etc.—constitute and are constituted by collective memory (H. Hirsch 133). According to Herbert Hirsch, sociopoliticizing identity specifically aligns an individual identity with echelons of power that stratify group identifications into dominant and subordinate positions (134).

¹⁴ Trauma narratives inherently involve fragmentation, occlusions, and other contradictions that implicitly defy standards for communication set by law and government in the public sphere: "the narrative rendition of traumatic experience will tend to defy realistic, mimetic, teleological, truth-oriented genres of storytelling—although those are precisely the modes of narration required by the law's evidentiary-based procedures" (Anker 30). Heeding Victoria Burrows' warning that trauma studies, as a discipline, remains "largely neocolonial in focus and thereby disinterested in the traumas of postcolonial nations," I explore collective trauma as a common theme in Peri Rossi's and Ondaatje's works rather than advocating trauma

objective is to recover not merely untold and fundamentally untellable stories of state-orchestrated suffering, but also the complicity lodged in the wormwood of politics. Roles of victim and perpetrator interchange so that neighbors become strangers, informants, activists, bystanders, torturers, and persecutors. The impunity surrounding ontological erasure makes anyone a political target and instrument of fear. According to Joanne Lipson-Freed, the power of novelizing forced disappearance is thus a matter of reinserting the disappeared into representation, so as “to reconstruct the disappeared from fragmentary records as emotionally real, three-dimensional individuals, and strategic works of invention, which strive to make the disappeared legible as victims to international audiences” (26).¹⁵

To make the disappeared legible through the novel form, Peri Rossi and Ondaatje recreate archives that the state strove to unmake. Interpellating a “fact” from the public sphere, like a statistic, into a fiction of forced disappearance draws the number’s facticity into tension with the imagination behind the retelling. Injecting passively accepted evidentiary forms into their narratives point out those forms’ actual indeterminacy in contexts of legal impunity. Privileging ambiguity over historical and geopolitical specificity to singularize and individualize collective suffering may seem counterintuitive.¹⁶ However, an aesthetics of indeterminacy allows these

studies as a hermeneutic for thinking through these decolonial writers’ representational strategies (164-165).

¹⁵ While I agree with Freed that making victims legible on a near-global scale has representational and epistemological power, I do not agree with her rationale for how power congeals. In Freed’s view, these novels have a practical aim: to muster international support for victims that effects real political and legal reform. In my view, the point of expanding the scope of legibility for the disappeared globally— all while observing ethical limits on universal subjectivity— is not to instigate tangible, programmatic action. Instead, the aim is to train local, blindered imaginations to recognize— and never to condone— the conditions of repression that make intolerance, torture, and eventually, mass death possible.

¹⁶ Philosopher Bruno Bosteels observes one major risk in reifying the ambiguity that has come to characterize many discussions of the ethics and politics of representation surrounding state violence: “the specificity of the ethical experience in this context is frequently lost, as the line of demarcation between ethics and politics seems to have become indiscernible” (17). While I agree that conflating ethics and

writers to represent a more affective, psychological perception of what we might call the tragic reality of the present—one that takes into account that “[t]he marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the twentieth century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world,” as the late English novelist J. G. Ballard states in the epigraph for Peri Rossi’s novel. Peri Rossi and Ondaatje vitiate the perverse marriage between reason and nightmare in these novels on forced disappearance. In doing so, they reject universalist paradigms that reduce collective terror to caricature—what Victoria Burrows, discussing *Anil’s Ghost*, derisively terms “the postcolonial killing-fields of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries” (169).

In a key example, Ondaatje provides the most concrete information about the politics of national disintegration in Sri Lanka in the sidelined space of a prefatory author’s note. Rather than hard “facts,” the note offers a vague date range for the civil war, “from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s” (loc. 56). The epigraph does not name the political factions fighting for legitimacy; instead, it lays out three nondescript antagonists: “the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south, and the separatist guerrillas in the north,” remarking briefly that the government was the enemy of both splinter groups. And the note’s admission that “[e]ventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents” sounds noncommittal and blasé—a classic example of the passive voice cloaking the agent(s) who dispatched the mercenaries.

Ondaatje concludes his ambivalent author’s note by insisting that history and politics have been “invented” in the novel. Cryptically, he concludes that “[t]oday the war in Sri Lanka

politics can immobilize social change in a pragmatic sense, I would also argue that writers like Peri Rossi and Ondaatje are challenging the consequences of that conflation on an imaginative level. Their novels provoke readers to fathom foreign contexts in which the line between ethics and politics seems not only indiscernible but practically invisible and, effectively, negligible.

continues in a different form.” His refusal to ascribe any historicism or political realism to his own work has led to accusations that he is “apolitical,” “irresponsible,” and complicit in shoring up a “silence on class and religion and ethnic prejudice [that] can comfort those with historic or recent privilege” (LeClair 32). While *Anil’s Ghost* may not “inform” readers about Sri Lanka’s complicated political history like a textbook, I would argue that textbooks do not accomplish this goal, either. Indeed, Ondaatje’s critics miss some patent subtext in the author’s note: for Ondaatje, ambivalence *is* a representational strategy that can affectively inform readers. The reverse of ambivalence need not be indifference but exposure to the simultaneous capaciousness and inadequacy of historical narratives. Ondaatje’s vague date range does not dismiss history but instead affirms the *unverifiability* of the timeline for violence that *has* occurred as the “true” fact. The nebulous identifiers for the three hostile groups he mentions suggest anonymous civilians and government officials alike cross sides; thus, his list of perpetrators justifiably refuses to assign blame to any single faction. His admission that there was a response, eventually, supposedly, for some-not-quite-known reason, indicates that the political dynamics of the war remained unrepresentable even when the war was presently happening. The violent instability of those dynamics, Ondaatje’s final words insinuate, haunts the real present ubiquitously, in yet another new and “different form” that eludes representation.

Argentine writer Julio Cortazár has applauded Peri Rossi for her “ability to project onto the high plains of imagination the historical present in all its tragic reality,” a sentiment that reflects Ondaatje’s statement that “today the war in Sri Lanka continues in a different form.” Accurately recognizing history’s tragic reality requires acknowledging master narratives that erase the experiences of so many individuals. By focalizing access to counter-factual interpretations of evidence, historical events, and gaps in dominant narratives through

individuals, these novels “narrate the unofficial, unauthorized, and disqualified stories of war— stories of people's unremitting engagement with violence in everyday life” instead of converting official, authorized, and qualified histories into fiction (McGonegal 88). These novels’ dissonance with verisimilitude suggests that “facticity” and “justice” simply may not share the same political agenda in reality as it stands.

Fragmented textualities comprise these socially coded novels, which are punctuated with familiar evidentiary forms that interface allusions to other texts and cultural traditions while also critiquing authoritarian power and manifesting dissidence. A wide range of documents interrupts Equis’s and Anil’s narratives of identity crisis in the face of state violence and dredge to the surface “suppressed textualities [that] hover all around the newly dominant ones, disrupting the latter’s colonized presence by indicating their grounding on the former’s incomplete erasure” (Lifshey 15-16). Adapting an evidentiary form— whether it be an NGO report, a news brief, or a world atlas— partially destabilizes the power imbalance keeping gendered or deracinated characters like Anil and Equis from denouncing repression with authority. More intimate paratexts, like poems, confessions, and letters, also enfold multiple voices into Equis’s and Anil’s soul-searching to remind readers of the need for interdependent solidarity to resist state terror.

Gender, Identity, and Power in Peri Rossi’s Reassembled Archives

The multilayered textuality of *La nave de los locos* materializes the psychological fragmentation of the self and historical dislocation from national identity at stake in Peri Rossi’s politics. Indeed, her novel’s generic indeterminacy carries an androgynous potential that conveys her own queer identity and affirms plurality as a desirable, not compromising.¹⁷ As a feminist writer, Peri Rossi counters Latin American literary traditions that typically reduce women to

¹⁷ For more on androgyny in Peri Rossi’s life and work, see Tierney-Tello, Cochrane, and Kaminsky.

passive objects and manipulated presences.¹⁸ However, not a single critic has conducted a feminist reading of Peri Rossi's novel that evaluates state violence, even though allusions between authoritarianism and women's oppression constantly surface in *La nave de los locos*. In 1972, on the eve of Uruguay's military dictatorship, which would last for twelve years after her departure, Peri Rossi left her birthplace, Montevideo, for a lifetime of exile in Barcelona, Spain (Tierney-Tello 174). She became one of many Uruguayans living in voluntary or forced exile—comprising as much as ten percent of the population—who were the primary mouthpieces for speaking out against dictatorship from abroad (Skaar 171). Unlike Argentina and Chile, Uruguay had no tradition of applying international human rights law to its interior. Moreover, the international press took little notice of human rights violations there and thus did not mobilize shame (177). The military government deliberately kept the definition of political imprisonment (i.e., grounds for forced disappearance) vague.¹⁹ Ambiguity enabled both flexibility—widening what could count as subversion—and impunity—allowing the government to shirk responsibility for violence as being “for the good” of political stability (125).²⁰

¹⁸ For more on the status of women writers in Latin America during Peri Rossi's heyday, see Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández's article, “Posmodernismo de resistencia y alteridad en *La nave de los locos*, de Cristina Peri Rossi.”

¹⁹ Avery Gordon quotes the original language in Uruguayan law: “actions, violent or not, with ultimate purposes of a political nature, in all fields of human activity within the internal sphere of a state and whose aims are perceived as not convenient for the overall political system” (qtd. in 125).

²⁰ Not once but twice, during and even after the dictatorship, Uruguayan citizens have democratically ratified referendums that grant amnesty to the military, making it the only country in world history to do so (Skaar 171; 137; 146). The same year when the law was democratically approved for a second time, in 2009, Uruguay's Supreme Court made a historic leap by deeming the Ley de Caducidad unconstitutional, potentiating a new era of judicial action against human rights abuses (Skaar 184). However, despite this gesture, as of 2018, the law is still in force. The Ley de Caducidad (in English, the Expiry Law) safeguards military and police forces from legal prosecution for crimes against humanity committed between 1978 and 1985; perhaps even more crippling for human rights, the law also makes any punitive action outside of this timeframe a matter of executive, not judicial, purview, thus limiting the possibilities for justice to presidential decree (Skaar 145). In the last decade, Uruguayan presidents have worked within the constraints of the law to bring some justice to victims and families affected by forced disappearance. In 2000, President Jorge Batlle put together a peace commission with the aim of

Internationally circulating mass media, which included realist novels, war diaries, memoirs, and gritty urban erotica from the U.S. and Europe, heavily influenced Peri Rossi as a writer in Latin America's literary Boom.²¹ Morris, one of Equis's neighbors, meta-parodies the multi-textual form of *La nave de los locos* when he states of his own manuscript at a publishing house: "I don't know whether my work is a short novel, a long story or a narrative essay. It is just a piece of prose, with some poetic fragments, to be exact, perhaps an epic" (128). The fictitious, archival fragments from personal correspondences, autobiographical confessions, news dailies, community bulletins, ekphrastic meditations on art history, questionnaires, discursive footnotes, maps, poems, appendices, songs, and chain letters lend Peri Rossi's novel its "epic" nature—its international scope on violence and sweeping view of a cultural imaginary under siege.

Even the title, *La nave de los locos*, frames exile as an errant journey for the marginalized and the undesirable, or any "individuals who do not adjust themselves [*no se ajustan*] to the general model of society" (Saona 149; my trans.). The ship of fools historically alludes to a barbaric sixteenth-century practice when ships, filled with mentally ill people, were abandoned at sea. This primeval form of forced disappearance sought to eradicate degenerate presences from "normal" society. One of Equis's favorite paintings—implicitly, the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch's "The Ship of Fools," circa 1500, though Peri Rossi never names it—depicts the scene (Figure 1.1). Equis remembers the spectacle of a crowd pushing to watch the ship while a "cargo

discerning the fate of all Uruguayan victims of forced disappearance; in particular, he emphasized the fates of four disappeared children still missing from their families, though the effort promised only investigative, not punitive, action (161). Because the law only grants amnesty since 1978, Uruguayan presidents have investigated cases prior to this date. As of 2007, President Tabaré Vasquez exempted forty-seven cases from impunity and "opened up the possibility of legal action against some 600 active and former members of the armed forces in connection with crimes committed *before* the coup" (179; original emphasis). Thanks to renewed executive interest in prosecuting forced disappearance excavations of mass graves have begun on military sites across the country (181).

²¹ See Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*.



Figure 1.4. Hieronymus Bosch, “The Ship of Fools” (1490-1500)

of mad souls” slinks along the waves towards death (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 49). His memory actually suppresses the diversity of “degenerate” presences native to the original painting, in which drunks, monks, nuns, lepers, nudists, and lunatics sing to a mandolin on an overcrowded ship. His memory confuses this “cargo” of damned souls for the motley hoard of people whom he misremembers stampeding them. Indeed, Equis’s failed memory projects the direness of his own time into the painting, where the ship of fools has apparently failed its mission—washed ashore, the eccentrics in Bosch’s painting survive. Equis’s confusion suggests that conscripts and sane spectators are more interchangeable in his contemporary political context than anyone realizes. His diction relates their damnation to

the transatlantic slavery that will eventually trademark the “cargo” of human souls, which I will examine in more detail with M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* in chapter two.

Overlaps between half-realized genres and Equis’s sometimes seemingly directionless narrative collages an “imaginary space” seeking alternatives to representing subjectivity alongside “a reconceptualization of the human body and its erotic-sexual functions within social space [*una reconceptualización del cuerpo humano y sus funciones erótico-sexuales dentro del espacio social*]” (Rodríguez-Hernández 132; my trans.). Invented archival and narrative fragments shuttle Equis from one decontextualized perspective to another. According to Margarita Saona, no “port of arrival [*un puerto de llegada*] [or] definitive response” to

disorientation lies in Equis's future; rather, the meaning of his journey only becomes intelligible "in the fissures of the fragments of this destinationless journey" (150; my trans.). In other words, meaning becomes clearer not in the fragments themselves but in the narrative gaps that perforate them, not in the body of the text itself but in the subtext those fissures imply. In some ways, it is "a story without progress," in Equis's words, a story that does not promise change so much as revelation of the abscess that was, politically, always already there, but absent from view (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 41). His position can only be articulated in fragments: "A stranger. Ex. Estranged. Expelled from the bowels [*las entrañas*] of earth. Unraveled [*desentrañado*]: once more to give birth. *Thou shalt not oppress a stranger*" (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 2; *Nave* 10; original emphasis). The assonant enfolding of the noun *las entrañas*, the "entrails" where the dispossessed stranger is expelled as waste, into the verb *desentrañar*; "to unravel," converts his embodiment into political potential waiting to be mobilized. The commandment not to oppress a stranger is clearly powerless to make sense of the paradox that Equis, the unapologetic exile, presents for normative society as a "stateless citizen" (142). Because his identity is generic, nondescript, and plastic, Equis becomes a pliable cipher for thinking about individual identity constructions in collective and universalizing terms.²²

Only through his erotic entanglements does Equis realize that his toxic masculinity participates in social death for others. His most pivotal and most precarious relationship concerns an abortion seeker named Lucía who, by the end of the novel, is working as a transvestite queer

²² Tierney-Tello explains the multiple registers of meaning that Equis's personal development undergoes across the span of the novel: "[B]y providing Ecks with such a generic and synthetic identity, his personal transformations take on wider, more social significance and the text can thus continually relate the personal realm to a more collective struggle... [B]y allegorically staging both gender identities and national identities as similarly nonorganic, binary, and politically charged *constructions*, the blatant critique of oppressive gender relations... can become a critique with more far-reaching implications, suggesting an overall, 'macro' denunciation of the dangers and violence of binary thinking" (175).

burlesque performer. As long as Equis pursues social recognition through the same channels that systematically refuse it to others, he cannot access a more utopian kind of “intersubjectivity whereby the other's subjectivity and agency is not obliterated or suppressed but recognized and respected” (Tierney-Tello 176). Moreover, the evolution in his political attitude towards women draws them into parallel with *desaparecidos* like Vercingetórix to align authoritarianism and heteropatriarchy. Gender is the battleground for breaking down “the underlying system of binary logic that governs our social system [*el sistema subyacente de lógica binaria que rige sobre nuestro sistema social*]” (Fonder-Solano, par. 19). As Peri Rossi’s exilic perspective systematically dismantles dualistic thinking inherent to state power, she unveils the vicissitudes in the binary logic (re)produced by a status quo that effaces oppositional ways of life.

Equis’s attachment to Lucía radicalizes his attitude towards power. Allusions to the Holocaust, like those in Vercingetórix’s narrative, proliferate alongside strident challenges to the corrosive power and global reach of heteropatriarchy. A newspaper daily inserted into the novel, titled “It Takes Two to Get Born But Only One is to Blame,” foreshadows the cruel irony of Lucía’s predicament (159). An abortive woman, her own body and financial penury seem to have enchained her destiny. In this snippet, a woman in Scotland who “allowed herself to become pregnant,” as if biology obeys free will, is accusing her doctor of advising her against contraception (159):

FROM THE DAILIES

A judge from Dalry (Scotland) passed judgment yesterday against a young woman who had allowed herself to become pregnant despite knowing of and having access to contraceptives. Twenty-two-year-old Christine, mother of a girl of three, had filed suit against a former boyfriend of hers, as father of the child. The judge condemned the mechanic Robert McCurdie to pay nominal child support of 1.00 per week, while severely reprimanding Christine for her negligence. She defended herself by saying that her doctor had advised against use of the contraceptive pill. (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 159)

DE LOS DIARIOS

Un juez e Dalry (Escocia) declare ayer culpable de negligencia a una joven que quedó embarazada, pese a conocer la píldora anticonceptiva y tener acceso a ella. Christine, de veintidós años y madre de una niña de tres, demand a un antiguo novio suyo como padre de su hija. El juez condenó al mecánico Robert McCurdie al pago simbólico de una libra seminal y recriminó duramente a Christine por su negligencia. Ésta se defendió diciendo que su medico la había aconsejado prescindir de la píldora anticonceptiva. (Peri Rossi, *Nave* 155)

The article underscores the reality that women’s subjection through reproduction is a global design played out in local histories. This fragment precludes the news that Equis drives abortion-seekers like Lucía to a clinic outside of London for his new job (167). Behind the wheel, a figurative reminder of his agency, Equis wishes to “simply disappear, wiping out his share of responsibility in the whole event” (169). The abortions invoke in him an excessive sense of complicity that, not uncoincidentally, mirrors perpetrators’ refusals to accept blame and resist erasure in forced disappearance. Moreover, both the van and clinic share the look of a “ghetto” that inverts the context of the kindertransports in World War II, which removed children from Nazi territory to the United Kingdom (169) .

In Peri Rossi’s adaptation, the objective is not to rescue children but women who resist motherhood and are not pregnant by choice. It is a queer condition, “like being born with dark skin, in Canaan, exiled, red-haired or maimed [*como tener la piel oscura, haber nacido en el Canaán, ser exiliado, pelirrojo o manco*]” (169; my trans.). Peri Rossi herein draws these women’s condition into contact with Jewishness (being born in Canaan), Vercingétorix (being red-headed), and physical disability (being maimed). Moreover, Equis’s approval of the clinic receptionist being “an immigrant who speaks the same language” as the women seeking abortions— a language that implicitly is *not* his— suggests the women are immigrants

themselves (170). The abortive immigrant woman hides her stigma as a victim of heteropatriarchal oppression and biological chance.²³

As soon as Lucía enters Equis’s narrative, parenthetical allusions to experiments that the Nazis performed on pregnant women begin interrupting Peri Rossi’s third-person limited point of view. When José, Equis’s boss, tries to turn Lucía away at the door of the transit center for being beyond her first trimester and unable to pay for the procedure, Peri Rossi interjects a parenthesis from a letter about how a German pharmaceutical company (the Boyer Company specifically) once acquired over three hundred pregnant Jewish women from the Nazi authorities as early as 1938:

“We gratefully acknowledge receipt of your latest cargo,” wrote the company directory in 1938. *“We have carried out tests with a new chemical substance. No survivors. However, around the end of October we are planning a new series of experiments, for which we shall require another three hundred subjects. Could they be provided on the same conditions as previously?”* (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 172; original emphasis)

« Hemos recibido el cargamento solicitado »— escribe el director de la empresa, en 1938—; «le estamos muy agradecidos. Realizamos experimentos con un Nuevo compuesto químico. Ninguna sobrevivió. Para fines de octubre están previstos nuevos ensayos. Necesitaríamos otro cargamento de trescientas mujeres. ¿Podrían facilitárnoslo, en las mismas condiciones que el anterior envoi? » (Peri Rossi, *Nave* 169; original emphasis)

Enfolded within the parentheses is a second paratext— a letter that explains how all the captured women died in an experiment to test the efficacy of what was intended to be a non-lethal drug: “none survived [*ninguna sobrevivió*]” supposedly because they were already infirm (170; my trans.). Even before World War II, Jewish women were thus already undergoing ontological erasure as disposable test subjects. Pregnant women like Lucía now have no value— scientific, financial or otherwise—to elicit sympathy from authoritarian figures like José. The narrator

²³ See the work of Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba.

resumes this historical anecdote from the Holocaust when Lucía, bereft of any alternative, accepts Equis's offer to sleep at his place. In a forthcoming letter from the Nazi-era pharmaceutical director, again tucked inside parentheses, it is clear that the women have come from concentration camps— they are “very thin and weak” and overrun with “infectious diseases” (173). Nevertheless, they still carry use-value for the drug lab, which runs its tests with “no survivors” and requests another batch of victims (174).

Immediately after these parentheses, Equis and Graciela read a letter from another expatriate friend, Morris, about female genital mutilation in his new home, Africa, while Lucía silently listens. Equis mocks the “delicate system [*delicado sistema*] through which all these sexually exploitative phenomena traffic (171; my trans.). He juxtaposes “coach-loads of pregnant women” with “infibulated girls” and “whales committing suicide” in poisoned waters— the very same waters where he once remarked to Morris that the bodies of *desaparecidos* could be found (*Ship*, 175). Thus he fails to distinguish women seeking reproductive rights from girls subjected to ritualistic violence. He conflates both with endangered species acting against their nature. Indeed, his lack of political consciousness becomes clear when he callously comments that he could have traded his “job as an abortion guide” for one as an “official infibulator” if he was invited to join Morris in Africa (175).

When Equis sacrifices his seat on the abortion transport to Lucía, he begins to connect sexual oppression existentially to state violence. He finds himself listing unintended conception alongside historical examples: “Transports to London by bus or by plane, trucks loaded with women from the camps to the Boyer offices, incredible births in apparently closed-down wombs, disappearances en masse, the sinuosities of chance in a condom [*Transportes a Londres en autobus o en avión, camiones cargados de mujeres del campo a las oficinas de la Boyer,*

increíbles nacimientos en úteros aparentemente clausurados, desapariciones en masa, las sinuosidades del azar en un condón]” (Peri Rossi, *Nave* 174; my trans.). The abortion transport thus parallels female technicians facilitating other women’s dehumanization in Nazi pharmaceutical factories and forced disappearances in the contemporary era— “the chain of the condom” a carceral bind, indivisible from that “of destiny” (179). Through this list of inhumanities delivered upon women, Peri Rossi collapses the intimate (the condom’s failure) with the political (forced disappearances, Nazi experiments) to argue that these injustices share the same spectrum of dehumanization.

At the edge of the city, Lucía replies to Equis that heteropatriarchy is only one deeply flawed system responsible for her predicament:

“The real humiliation is to know that you are the victim of chance, one more form of oppression. I’ll never sleep with a man again. It’s through them that fate enters our lives, subjugates us, poisons our beings. Never, never again. Men bring about our slavery, forge the chains. Never again.” (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 180)

—La humillación es saberse víctima del azar, otra opresión. Jamás, jamás volveré a acostarme con un hombre. A través de ellos el azar entra en nuestras vidas, sometiéndonos. Venenosa intromisión. Jamás. Jamás. A través de ellos la esclavitud se propaga, se difunde, nos encadena. Jamás, jamás.” (Peri Rossi, *Nave* 176)

From Lucía’s beleaguered point of view, sex for women living under political repression catalyzes only further objectification and enslavement. Lucía promises to visit Equis but sternly forswears any future sexual encounters, and he thinks to himself, “We know nothing about those we love, except our need for their presence*” (181). Whereas knowledge implies identity, presence offers a more ambient promise of human contact that cannot be erased. Indeed, in the analeptic footnote attached to the asterisk in Equis’s statement, he thinks back to the grounds for their compatibility: “‘Between us there was a perfect match,’ thought Ecks later. ‘I loved her for reasons which had only to do with me, and she did not love me for reasons which had only to do

with herself” (181). He realizes that the dissonance between his love and her lack thereof signifies their shared desire for self-actualization through social equality with the other (181).

Equis next recognizes Lucía as a performer in an advertisement for “sensational transvestites” on the street (196):

SENSATIONAL SPECTACLE
THREE CONTINUOUS SHOWS
OF PORNO-SEX
SENSATIONAL TRANSVESTITES
ARE THEY MEN OR WOMEN?
SEE THEM AND DECIDE
FOR YOURSELVES
(Adults Only)
(Peri Rossi, *Ship* 195-196; my trans.)

SENSACIONAL ESPECTÁCULO
TRES PASES CONTINUOS
PORNO-SEXY:
SENSACIONALES TRAVESTIES
¿HOMBRES O MUJERES?
VÉALOS Y DECIDA USTED
MISMO
(FRANJA VERDE)
(Peri Rossi, *Nave* 189)

By now, Graciela has left Equis for Morris’s African utopia; a note she leaves behind explains that she would prefer not to live on “some strip-tease in the transvestite bars,” the very occupation Lucía now holds (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 183). On stage, Lucía embodies a sordid trinity of cinematic icons in Equis’s imagination: Charlotte Rampling, as a pornographic porter in *The Night Porter* (Figure 1.2); Helmut Berger as a Nazi commander in a 1969 eroto-psychodrama, *The Damned* (here confused with the Wagnerian opera, *Twilight of the Gods*, to which the Italian original refers) (Figure 1.3); and Marlene Dietrich as a nightclub singer in *The Blue Angel* (197; Figure 1.4). Lucía’s transvestite masquerade thus collapses together Dietrich’s queer androgyny

and Rampling’s eroticism with Berger’s Nazi violence in one unruly, self-stylized embodiment of sociopolitical transgression.²⁴ Lucía’s parody enables agency by “offering a model of social



Figure 1.2. Charlotte Rampling in *The Night Porter* (1957)



Figure 1.3. Helmut Berger in *The Damned* (1969)



Figure 1.4. Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel* (1930)

subjectivity whereby the individual would be not only subject to cultural norms but also subject of his/her own cultural production” (Tierney-Tello 201). Lucía is also clearly aware of the politics in her aesthetics; playing Dietrich, she references Joseph von Sternberg, the Austrian film director who, she announces, “took Marlene to the United States where she became the great star, saving her from the Nazi gas chambers,” during her burlesque act (Peri Rossi, *Ship* 199).



Figure 1.5. Dolores del Río

Ultimately, Lucía’s genderqueer, on-stage sex acts with her fellow performer demonstrate how androgyny, an embodied, intimate, and local intervention on normative identity, can break open limits inherent to the universal subjectivity that Equis desires. Her unidentifiable collaborator, an impersonator of the Mexican actress Dolores del Río (Figure 1.5),

²⁴ In Leah Fonder-Solano’s view, their parodic impersonations of strong public personae suggest “that their transgression of norms, far from being a simple exhibition of monstrosities, pornography, or perversion, teaches a characteristic duality of every human being [*que su transgresión de normas, lejos de ser una simple exhibición de monstruosidades, pornografía, o perversión, enseña una dualidad característica de todo ser humano*]” (par. 5). However, this view implicitly creates a new version of the sort of despotic, dualistic thinking that I have argued is explicitly the object of Peri Rossi’s critique.

appears to be “a man dressed up as a woman, or a woman, a transvestite, one who had changed the signs of their identity to assume the identity of their fantasies, someone who had decided to be who s/he wanted to be and not who s/he was determined to be [*un hombre disfrazado de mujer, o una mujer, un travesti, uno que había cambiado sus señas de identidad para asumir la de sus fantasías, alguien que se había decidido a ser quien quería ser y no quien estaba determinado a ser*]” (Nave 191; my trans.). In transforming her body to reflect, implicitly, her own fantasy, she has liberated herself from the norms and forms of sociality available to men like Equis.²⁵ As Lucía and her partner visibly enjoy oral sex in their roleplay as Marlene and Dolores, their complete absorption in each other’s pleasure disappears the male spectators in the room. Thus their new occupation reverses the conditions of the sexual fetish for which men, who remain objectionable reminders of women’s subjugation, paid.

After the show, Equis corners Lucía in her dressing room. He is rattled from witnessing Lucía’s pleasure while male gazes pressed on her and her partner’s bodies. When he sees her looking androgynous in front of her mirror, he finally fathoms the despotic dualities that have organized his own life: “Discovered and developed for him, in all their splendor, two simultaneous worlds, two different calls, two messages, two costumes, two perceptions, two discourses, yet indissolubly connected so that the predominance of one would have caused the extinction of the two [*Descubría y se desarrollaban para él, en todo su esplendor, dos mundos*

²⁵ Borrowing Judith Butler’s terms, Dolores’s ambiguously gendered drag constitutes a “signifying absence” that weakens any conviction in “an internal core or substance” (GT 185). Her drag thus disorganizes principles of identity that would normally attribute performative acts, misapprehended as essences, to particular identity constructions. Lucía’s and her partner’s parody, a public performance, initiates a “perpetual displacement” between reality and construction that reveals the fluidness of identity. The setting of the strip club “suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization” that “deprives hegemonic culture” of the power to naturalize certain gendered identities as normal (188). Indeed, drag reveals how gender is not only inherently imitative but also contingent to cultural perceptions (187).

simultáneos, dos llamadas distintas, dos mensajes, dos indumentarias, dos percepciones, dos discursos, ero indisolublemente ligados, de modo que el predominio de uno hubiera provocado la extinción de los dos]” (Peri Rossi, *Nave* 195; my trans.). The answer to the riddle from his dream about rescuing a damsel in distress dawns on him: “virility” is the greatest “tribute” a man can give to a woman (196, 195).²⁶ Virility denotes both “his masculine procreative, productive power” and all the ancillary entitlements attached to “the male prerogative, the privileged access to phallic power he enjoys” (Tierney-Tello 203). Giving away his virility means surrendering his putative birthright to superiority over women.²⁷ It also means embracing Lucía’s androgyny as a sign of her will to reenter public as her authentic, dissident self, dismantling “the male monopoly over the phallic power of the (re)production of meaning” (Tierney-Tello 203). The power that inures identity thus is not part of a “fixed and immovable structure [*una estructura fija e inamovible*]” but an orientation towards the other that can be reconfigured (Saona 153; my trans.). Indeed, Lucía’s first words upon seeing Equis, reiterate her last words to him in person: “Never. Never again. [*Jamás. Jamás.*]” (Peri Rossi, *Nave* 195; my trans.). In this new context, “never again” figures a wide range of meanings: never again, the disappearances; never again, the shackles of reproductive futurity; never again, relegation to a heteropatriarchal world order or corrupt status quo.

One final fragment closes the novel and resurfaces the aforementioned dream about kings and suitors that prompted Equis’s quest for knowledge. The chivalric romance at work in his

²⁶ When Equis offers his own virility as a present, he inverts the normative logic of ‘the gift’ that holds women as objects of exchange— in Hélène Cixous’s terms, as “the desire-that-gives” without knowing how disposable she is in her own signifying economy (893). Lucía also is no longer subject to a seemingly intractable, reproductive economy of meaning wherein her only “job is to tend the seed man ‘gives’ her,” in Luce Irigaray’s terms, and preserve the product of his investment— a child (75).

²⁷ For a more thorough interpretation of Equis’s “gift,” see Cochrane.

subconscious exemplifies the gender stereotypes that need to be uprooted from the collective unconsciousness to which he belongs: “Old kings, in love with their daughters. They invent difficult-to-solve enigmas. Suitors in love. Without knowing the answer. They die with their throats cut. Old kings. In love with their daughters. On delirious nights. They confuse the name of the queen or the slave [*Viejos reyes, enamorados de sus hijas. Inventan enigmas de difícil solución. Pretendientes enamorados. Sin saber la respuesta. Mueren degollados. Viejos reyes. Enamorados de sus hijas. En noches de delirio. Confunden el nombre de la reina o de la esclava*]” (196; my trans.). Syntactical fragmentation points out the insensibility of these twisted power relations through love, which conflate “queens” and “slaves,” or queens *as* slaves. When Equis triumphantly answer’s the king’s question with “virility,” the king, a timeless symbol of heteropatriarchal authority, melts into an unidentifiable mass (204). The king’s decomposition dissolves “all the aggressions that are described (the detention of persons, disappearances, verbal and physical violence against women)... as a breach of what is ‘natural’ and a way of ending harmony” (161). Unregulated self-expression reestablishes collective harmony by the novel’s denouement. True escape from an “oppressive patriarchal binary [*asfixiante binarismo patriarcal*]” requires one to remap the norms that undergird the oppression of all who thrive in the margins (Rodríguez-Hernández 133; my trans.). Aberrant individuals may not be able to eradicate heteropatriarchy from civil society on a local or global level. However, licensing individuality in opposition to state-sanctioned normativity can destabilize binary thinking—a first step to raising a collective consciousness capable of perceiving heteropatriarchal state violence and its panoramic effects.

Identifying a “Representative” Victim as an Art of the Impossible in *Anil’s Ghost*

Equis's slow awakening to his heteropatriarchal privilege in Peri Rossi's novel allegorizes the insidious asymmetries in power that support the ontological erasure at work in forced disappearance. Like Equis, the titular protagonist in *Anil's Ghost* wrongfully presumes herself to be an ideal universal subject—cosmopolitan, westernized, and educated. She dismisses any obstacles that might face her as an unmarried woman, another man's mistress, a female scientist of color, and a diasporic Sri Lankan. Like Ondaatje himself, Anil's descent from both Dutch colonial ancestry and the Sinhalese majority implicates her ancestral history in the country's current political turmoil. When Anil first arrives in Sri Lanka, a young airport official jokes to her that her advent is "the return of the prodigal," a Sinhalese coming back to her country after fifteen years abroad (5). Ondaatje, like Anil, was educated in Britain before moving to Canada at age nineteen, and he has been called a "prodigal-foreigner" whose barriers to national belonging never completely lift (Knowles 432). Anil's Sinhalese heritage positions her as both a reflection of Ondaatje's biography as a displaced outsider and the Sinhalese majority's history in Sri Lanka, marking her an heir to authority within the interior. But Anil's firm faith in the Western justice and its international purchase, particularly her resistance to tolerating differences in Sri Lanka's approaches to law and legality, compromises her mission. Anil sees virtue in rendering Sailor, the body of a disappeared day laborer, "representative of all those lost voices" (52). The fallacy that any individual's loss *could* move the state not only sabotages her project but also instigates the forced disappearance of her counterpart, Sarath. Whereas Lucía's voluntary removal from normative society incites Equis to rethink his attitude towards justice, Sarath's state-sanctioned murder motivates Anil.

Like Peri Rossi, Ondaatje embraces archival fragmentation and multidirectional allusions in Sarath's tragedy and Sailor's mystery. Flashbacks to mass graves in other countries, temples

being destroyed, confessions of indecent love affairs, and the disappearances of loved ones, excerpts from world atlases and faux Amnesty International reports, and a random letter to a celebrity film director piece together the death of Sailor, the purported representative of all subjugated Sri Lankans. The fragments enable perspectival shifts that ascribe agency and responsibility solely to the subjects who possess these privileges (42). Vadde explains how Ondaatje marshals perspectives through fragmentation to multidirectional ends:

Ondaatje elaborat[es] collective pasts that move outward across multiple traditions rather than simply moving backward within a single tradition. At a formal level, his archival method thus disturbs the sense of national cohesion that classic versions of the historical novel helped to foster. At a historical and an ethical level, such disturbances pivotally adapt the genre to the global age by asking us to decouple our sense of what constitutes a collective past— and by extension a shared future— from a bounded communal form. (Vadde 259-260)

By crossing genres, Ondaatje's fragmentary aesthetic redirects the archives of Sri Lankan law and history across transverses that reconstitute incoherent, unverifiable local histories with internationally circulated fictions that at least partially answer the trauma of forced disappearance. Trauma's tendency to interrupt narrative and identity formation animates Ondaatje's fragmentary aesthetics: partial views perform a "habit of detour" that mirrors the tendency on the part of "the developed world [t]o *turn away* from the experience of trauma that so often blights the existence of postcolonial subjects" (Burrows 162; original emphasis). Shifting perspectives through focalized fragments, which punctuate Anil's more linear narrative, "shows how isolated and opposing characters, who inhabit a 'planet of strangers,' are interconnected by the inner stranger"— the repressive political context in which they exist, the omnipresent dictator whose open secret they are protecting (Staels 984).

Unearthing forced disappearance as a global design preoccupies the novel from the start. Anil first appears in a flashback to her first forensic dig for a human rights initiative in

Guatemala. The country's ongoing civil war started in 1954, when a U.S.-backed military coup overturned the country's first democratically elected government shortly after its independence from Spain. Atrocities emerging from this war inspired the U.N. Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. With 200,000 lives lost, Guatemala remains the Latin American country with the highest number of forced disappearances accrued over the shortest span of time—45,000 since 1960, with most arising from massacres in indigenous Mayan villages (Freed 170). Sri Lanka has the second highest number, with 55,000 people disappeared in the last twenty-five years (170). Through Anil's involvement as a human rights worker, "[l]ocal politics is thus shown in its systemic connections to global economics, and local subjectivities and collectivities become entangled with the subjectivities of international humanitarian aid workers and the complex transferences that emerge between the two populations" (Schwab 647). Opening a novel about Sri Lanka's crisis with a look back to Guatemala anchors Sri Lanka's civil war in a transhistorical, transcultural, and transnational cycle.

Moreover, while recalling lessons from Guatemala, Anil reflects on the intimate, interpersonal consequences of forced disappearance, thus setting up the impact of state violence on relationships, marriages, and families as the novel's concerns. She remembers the trepidation families expressed when called to identify bodies at her excavation site. Like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, these relatives face the grave knowing that any conclusions will be dispiriting. Either they will recognize the body, and their son will be confirmed dead, or they will not, and then the search will prolong until it becomes, in Anil's words, "clear that the body [is] a stranger"—not kin, not of the same flesh, and therefore not worth recognizing (1). The result is that "[t]he possibility of their lost son [is] everywhere," a possibility lingering ubiquitously in

every disinterred site, where hope is everywhere and nowhere at once (1). From the outset of the novel, then, Ondaatje cuts a transverse across Guatemala and Sri Lanka; weighing each nation's crimes against the other heightens the comparable immeasurability of human loss witnessed in both contexts.

Sarath tells Anil soon upon meeting her that unidentified bodies surface weekly, and political violence is both omnipresent and irremediable: "Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it's secret gangs and squads" (13). In an "unofficial" war, definitions for political murder loosen, and many casualties go uncounted. Even though institutionalized unaccountability features in the government operations of both Uruguay's military dictatorship and Sri Lanka's civil war, Sarath explicitly differentiates Sri Lanka's local history as "[n]ot like Central America" (13). Indeed, in the Southern Cone, the political implications of forced disappearance were widely known because military dictatorships openly abducted citizens in the name of defending national security. In contrast, Sarath's Sri Lanka has not publicized its tactics even as "bodies ke[ep] being found burned beyond recognition" (13). Thus, although forced disappearance in Sri Lanka also works to obliterate identity on the levels of both body and ontology, the political motive remains unspoken. There remains "no hope of affixing blame" even if the bodies could be identified, because the very logic behind the erasure remains unknown (13).

In their pursuit to identify Sailor, individual and collective concerns coalesce. Much to Sarath's apprehension, Anil is convinced that reasserting one victim's identity will prove the government's crimes against the Sri Lankan populace more universally. Her conviction follows Freed's claim that "[t]o make the disappeared legible and accessible to a global audience, the novel must first construct them in universalistic terms as victims of violence" (39). Yet, under

these conditions, the discovery of Sailor's identity would ironically depersonalize him; in Anil's configuration, he would become mere synecdoche for all the state violence represents. A single modern bone in Sarath's lab fuels Anil's suspicion of state involvement. This fragment becomes the part of a whole body that Anil expects will stand in for the body politic. The fragment leads them to the "government-protected zone" near the Bandarawela caves where they recover the body of Sailor and three others (Ondaatje 16). Trained as a Western scientist, Anil sees truth as universal objectivity, and rights and justice as inalienable truths, static across borders. In contrast, Sarath situates his perspective on the truth pragmatically and locally. Their stances diametrically oppose each other so that "the globalist sutures collective memory to the universal category of the human, while the localist brings it back into an enclosed narrative of the nation" (Vadde 267). The binary split between their points of view— Anil's optimistic universalism versus Sarath's pessimistic relativism— does not imply whether either logic is "right" but rather whose interests will be represented, and at what stakes. Anil and Sarath thus interpret Sailor through the lenses of the "recognizable collectivities" with which they associate their own versions of the truth (international law in Anil's case, and national complicity in Sarath's) even as they assemble "discrepant geographies of loss" through archival fragments (271).

One fragment that literalizes a geography of loss appears from the National Atlas of Sri Lanka. The atlas foreshadows the challenge that Sailor's discovery will pose to Anil's and Sarath's polarized principles for searching out the truth. The atlas illustrates Sri Lanka with 73 "true" versions of the island, "each revealing only one aspect, one obsession," and therefore failing to represent the island *in toto* as a multidimensional place (Ondaatje 35). Marinkova explains that these maps, as "instance[s] of supposedly omniscient representations, not only replicate the objectification of Sailor's body that Anil's medical report enacts, but also reiterate

the colonial reduction of the island to its natural riches and trade potential” (117); thus, the maps are an analog for the impending objectification of Sailor, who is an evidentiary instrument in Anil’s forensic investigation of forced disappearance. The maps also scale the geopolitical impact of the crime committed against him, which is not removed from neoliberal globalization. However, even as the map objectifies and flattens the world, the dissonance between reality and its historical representations reveals the shifts in power that have brought Sri Lanka to its present moment. Whereas “*old portraits show the produce and former kingdoms of the country,*” the country’s precolonial, natural wealth, “*contemporary portraits show levels of wealth, poverty, and literacy*” (Ondaatje 35; original emphasis). Money and education, hallmarks of neoliberal privilege in a globalizing world, have become the predominant means for social mobility in war-torn Sri Lanka.

Sailor’s discovery in a particular Sri Lankan setting— “a sacred historical site,” which, as Sarath reminds Anil repeatedly, is also “a site constantly under government or police supervision”— roots the trauma of his forced disappearance in his ancestral homeland, which also features in the civil war landscape (47). Sarath’s temerity in politicizing Sailor’s death sways Anil’s trust; she worries that Sarath “could make [Sailor] disappear” a second time (49). For Sarath, Sailor’s identity augurs death (probably his and Anil’s) because his exposure would upset the open secret that sustains in his country’s tumultuous status quo. For Anil, Sarath’s willingness to preserve stability by *not* looking into Sailor’s demise problematically valorizes “the public secret of disappearance,” reserving power for terrorists and therein “normaliz[ing] the impossibility of living in a constant state of fear” (Gordon 75). What Anil never realizes is that her conviction in maintaining her own morality is, intrinsically, a privilege of her context. Sarath

looks past traces of collusion because percepticide drafts “a secret contract that allows life to go on” at the expense of a moral self (Schwab 648).²⁸

On the heels of the atlas, a second realistic fragment from a fictionalized Amnesty International report catalogs Sri Lankans who went missing between November 1989 and January 1990. The report collapses personality, “the color of a shirt,” and culture, “the sarong’s pattern,” with the exacting temporality of social death, “the hour of disappearance” when personality and culture were effaced (37). The names on the report represent an inventory of “pasts that defy assimilation into the narrative of historical continuity that Anil equates with justice and that Sarath considers unattainable under present conditions” (Vadde 271). By and large, the named victims seem to lead normal lives— abductions happen mostly outside of private homes or during recreational activities. But the names themselves echo each other; in some cases, they share syllables (Prasantha, Prasanna) or mirror names of important characters who have yet to appear— Kumara, Sailor’s real first name, and Gunesena, the victim of torture whom Anil and Sarath rescue on the highway while searching for Sailor’s identity (37). These names create an echo chamber, suggesting that these identities *are* verifiable in the text and, indeed, ubiquitous, directly contradicting the state’s refusal to recognize victims of forced disappearance. Disinterring bodies can become a spectacle in itself, staged to affirm the fiction that the state *does* care to learn of its citizens’ demises until “an ID card [is] found in a shirt pocket unexpectedly,” and suddenly, the initiator of the excavation becomes the subject of police aggression (38).

²⁸ It is worth noting that Sarath’s percepticide does not have the intended effect of reinforcing stability. Instead, his percepticide actually fans paranoia and deadens Anil’s trust, so that “[t]he triumph of the atrocity was that it forced people to look away— a gesture that undid the sense of personal and communal cohesion even as it seemed to bracket them from their volatile surroundings” (Taylor 122-123).

The institutions that Sarath and Anil represent are thus in direct conflict. Whereas the state aims to keep the disappeared invisible, the U.N. wants to bring forced disappearance to light. Anil's train of thought immediately after the Amnesty International report summarizes the history and politics behind the war in fragmented terms:

There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses.

It was a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. '*The reason for war was war.*' (Ondaatje 38)

Guerrillas vying for home, insurgents for sovereignty, and governmental special forces for social order all possess their own political motivations for aggression. Ultimately, however, this summary offers no more political or historical knowledge than the novel's epigraph. In place of factual conviction stands the reality of a body toll, people burned or drowned like garbage. Like its predecessor, this new "Hundred Years' War" promises innumerable casualties in pursuit of the right to a kingdom where internal disputes are irreconcilable. But unlike the original Hundred Years' War, which was bounded firmly within the feudal West, the borders of corruption in Sri Lanka's war are always expanding, as international weapon and drug dealers strengthen factions from outside.²⁹

An inert body like Sailor's is bereft of integrity; parts forcibly removed and buried, his remains reflect "the impossibility of a unitary and coherent self" amidst state violence and the

²⁹ These transnational interlopers on the war— heirs of "neoliberalism, with its emphasis on market and consumption"— are not just hindering a national economy but advancing "a new form of civilization," in Mignolo's terms, which discredits local histories by supplanting them with neoliberal globalization (22).

ontological erasure it employs (Marinkova 113). Anil wants Sailor to become a universal representative of “the unhistorical dead,” those who have fallen victim to the ontological erasure inscribed in forced disappearance (Ondaatje 52). Anil believes U.N. affiliation empowers her to convert “bodies into representatives of race and age and place” who become powerful metonyms for political controversies that reach far beyond their individual identities (51). And if Sailor stands in for the extent to which “the disintegration of the nation-state entails a correlative disarticulation of the life story of the person,” then reassembling Sailor’s body and narrative could also, in Anil’s view, reverse progress *against* national disintegration (Slaughter, *HRI* 162). It follows that, if Anil could re-articulate Sailor’s life story, then she could also remove constraints on the narratability of *all* disappeared people’s stories—the very constraints that foment Sarath’s fear.

On the other hand, forcing bodies like Sailor’s into identifiable contexts also implicates Anil in representational violence. By categorizing deaths as natural or political and then assigning corpses new status as evidence of political crimes, Anil becomes complicit with the law in a context where readers know the law is deranged. Anil would like to believe that “[t]o give [Sailor] a name would name the rest” (Ondaatje 52).³⁰ But her compulsion to “give” him a name in the first place means *imposing* a real identity on him, thus forcing his unrepresentable death into a sociopolitically intelligible frame. In a figurative sense, her objective is regulatory and neocolonial: she wants to root Sailor, the native, in an epistemological frame that makes sense to her, an officiant of international human rights law. Anil may be oblivious to this

³⁰ In other words, Anil wants “to reincorporate him [Sailor] as an instance of a particular group’s vulnerability and personality... to repersonify, rehistoricize, and reanimate the dead by giving Sailor back a name, a face, and a voice... that can speak for itself, testify to the crimes against it, and implicate the government in his torture and execution” (Slaughter, *HRI* 190).

situational irony, but Ondaatje certainly is not. Anil closes a manifesto on the necessity of identifying Sailor with a decontextualized, covert allusion to *The King and the Corpse* by Heinrich Zimmer—the provenance of which the text does not announce, as if to cloak the full reach of Anil’s westernization, which finds inspiration in a German Orientalist scholar of Indian philology. Juxtaposing Anil’s conviction in Sailor with Zimmer’s fragment, which describes “*fetch[ing] a dead body*” as such “*a curious task,*” dramatizes the depersonalizing violence that occurs when a well-meaning spectator like Anil confronts the condemned: the bystander “*cut[s] down the corpse of an unknown hanged man and then bear[s] the body of the animal on one’s back,*” treating the criminal like a fresh kill, even if she is intending to show respect by removing his body from public view (52; original emphasis).

In their efforts to manifest the face of Sailor as that of the condemned, Sarath and Anil hire Ananda, a sculptor whose wife has disappeared, to reconstruct his face from his skull. Instead of rediscovering Sailor’s cheekbones and eyes, Ananda fleshes out the lost contours of his own wife’s face to reconstruct domesticity itself. Sailor’s skeleton thus provides a blank slate for recognizing crossovers between crimes even as it also flattens out the identity of one victim and his gendered, ethnic, and socioeconomic difference through another. This conflation universalizes the total human costs of these crimes. When Anil beholds Sailor’s face, she sees “a specific person,” not an estimation of a possible reality (179). The death mask is another material artifact that Ondaatje inserts into his archive. The person captured in the mask, of course, turns out to resemble Ananda’s disappeared wife, whom Anil cannot recognize. Instead, recognizing Sailor with a face— even if the wrong semblance— reinscribes him with personhood. His face draws Anil into a closer sense of intimacy with him than she has ever experienced before, despite having guarded him and traveled “alongside him now in his posthumous life” across the country

(179). She and the corpse bear witness to each other in “an embodied process of reciprocal exchange and affect;” his peace in sleep is hers, her restlessness and itinerancy are his, culminating in a shared experience of vulnerability (Marinkova 122). Evident to her is “every mark of trauma from his childhood,” every violent experience that has marred his bones, his autobiographical record (179). Metaphorically, the rudiments of a face— mouth, eyes, nose— bring him one step closer to being able to tell the tales of traumas old and new.

In an affective sense, the death mask thus conveys the evidence that really matters—the resemblance in methods for erasing disappeared people. But because the justice system is not built to recognize collective trauma and, instead, only valorizes harm against a concrete individual, Sarath and Anil begin to lose hope of identifying Sailor; “they still [know] nothing about the world [he] had come from” (172). Their doubt poses the question, how can one reconstruct an entire worldview through one body alone— and a body that has been fundamentally deracinated, desexualized, and declassed? The universalist language that once fueled Anil to believe in his representativeness now inures her with doubt: “he [is] a victim among thousands,” and their findings seem unlikely to change anyone’s world, least of all his (172). The futility of their effort draws her back into another multidirectional memory. She recalls Clyde Snow, a teacher in Oklahoma, saying, “*One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims*” (172; original emphasis). In this instance, Clyde is voicing the liberal-humanist reading of human rights in Kurdistan, another locale divided by ancient sectarian conflicts, from within Oklahoma, a historic locus for Native American genocide in the U.S. Clyde thus has the privilege of speaking on unresolved contestations over national identities in the Middle East from a First World setting whose local history of violence has never been resolved. The irony of these confluences reveals the sentimental idealism internal to Clyde’s

words. Whether in the American, Kurdish, or Sri Lankan contexts, governments in power have continued to act with impunity, with “not one murder charge [having] been made during the troubles” (172).

Anil nevertheless holds out hope that identifying Sailor means materializing a victim whose reality cannot be contested or derealized (172). Her focus shifts from reconstructing his facial profile to rooting him in a socioeconomic reality, not through “a name but his markers of occupation” (202). The ghost of his unknown identity as a day laborer becomes “not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure,” emplotted in “that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (Gordon 8). On the contrary to causing the stir that Anil anticipates, the revelation of Sailor’s identity is anticlimactic, exposing how disturbingly ordinary disappearance is in his mining town. His real name was Ruwan Kumara, a toddy tapper. Like the wake-up call Sarath experienced while witnessing a blindfolded man being bicycled away in broad daylight, several people in the village had witnessed Sailor’s abduction by “the outsiders” at the entrance of the tunnel where Kumara and others were working (265). The nameless outsiders invaded the men’s work with a “*billa*” in tow, an anonymous informant wearing a gunnysack mask with slits for eyes, to “identify the rebel sympathizer” (265). In other words, Sailor *was*, as Anil had hoped, locally important—to the extent that someone from his own community would betray him. The *billa*, whose identity the townspeople do not seem to know, represents an inhuman horror thought to be fictional, “a monster, a ghost to scare children in games” (265).

Rather than taking a cue from the government’s inaction despite the open secret surrounding Sailor’s death, Anil begins aggressively pursuing channels that *should* exact justice. Her conviction in U.N. intervention overlooks how human rights organizations actually sabotage

any possibilities for justice “by imposing a narrative of justice that discounts indigenous interpretations of the conflict out of a dogmatic insistence on the need for punishment and retribution” (McGonegal 97). Legal retribution through existing ideologically and culturally exclusionary frameworks cannot and will not recognize force disappearance.³¹ Sailor, the body meant to be representative of the disappeared, is actually tangled up in Western epistemologies; he is an interpretive object for numerous institutionalized forensic, medical, legal, political, and religious discourses, all of which traffic in their own sets of regulatory norms and values. Sailor’s body ends up “los[ing] its singularity and integrity” so that “identitarian discourse, media representations, and ‘Western’ intervention become... complicit witnesses of the body” that interpret his suffering according to their own isolated “moral and legal frameworks” and not collective pursuit of redemption (Marinkova 120).

The deflating scene in which Anil publicly reveals her controversial findings to an auditorium full of Sri Lankan government officials proves that Sailor is like any other piece of evidence in a corrupt regime—easily manipulated and discredited. Ever the liberal-humanist, Anil has mistakenly presumed that a government should want to protect its citizens. She has ignored all of Sarath’s caveats about entanglements between people in positions of power and political crimes in Sri Lanka.³² To save her from her own naiveté, Sarath swaps out Sailor’s body

³¹ International human rights investigations sponsored by the U.N. often privilege Western understandings of crime and atrocity in a number of ways— by taking sides, lacking local cultural context, and imposing Western philosophies of justice (Derrickson 132). In operating under the pretenses that Western methods for prosecution are neutral and universal, human rights investigators like Anil actually “broadcast an arrogance that is culturally belittling” and unmindful to local prerogatives (132).

³² Slaughter agrees that “Anil’s personification of Sailor is doomed to fail because his rehistoricization is predicated upon a democratic, nation-statist framework; that is, the orientation of Anil’s recuperative project remains fundamentally nationalist;” thus, her success hinges on the stability of “an egalitarian national public sphere, a functional democratic nation-state, and a common national narrative” that are all absent from the Sri Lankan context (*HRI* 191).

for a decoy corpse and vociferously undermines every argument Anil makes in her public presentation. His unexpected sabotage spurs her to claim her Sri Lankan origins for the first time in the novel: “I think you murdered hundreds of us,” she openly states, and Sarath thinks to himself, “Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*” (Ondaatje 268; original emphasis). However, her identification with the national crisis *by* acknowledging its violence only furthers tension, not affinity, across gendered divides.

Suddenly epitomizing an exasperated chauvinist, Sarath presents their debate as a contest between two gendered authorities with polarized versions of the truth. As a female human rights investigator, her universalizing rationales sound idealistic and baseless in comparison to his authority as a local, male expert on Sri Lankan history. As Anil stubbornly forges ahead with her presentation despite lacking the correct body, Sarath points out the obvious incongruities between her observations and the evidentiary form on the table at every turn. When she becomes indignant at being made to look like an idiot and snaps that she can only “prove something” with the “confiscated” skeleton, Sarath chastises her for implying that “one [body is] less important than the confiscated one” (270). His dark joke that there are “too many bodies around” does not appall his tense audience (270). On the surface, his final public statement, which silences Anil’s protestations, seems not to contradict the conviction in harmony that has driven his actions throughout the novel: “I believe in a society that has peace, Miss Tissera. What you are proposing could result in chaos” (271).

Upon boarding her ship to Europe, Anil finds Sailor’s body safely inside; she realizes Sarath has, in fact, rescued her project and vouchsafed her own life. Cradled in the cavity of Sailor’s rib cage is a tape recorder. Indeed, the cassette tape is the last evidentiary form that Ondaatje inserts into his narrative on forced disappearance in Sri Lanka. When Anil presses the

button, “the voices [begin] filling the room around her”— hers and Sarath’s, proof of their investigation, closing on Sarath’s command to “*erase my words here*” (281; original emphasis). Suddenly it becomes clear that her seemingly percepticidal Sri Lankan counterpart *has* been working all along to ensure justice for Sailor. He even pretended to support the status quo while stealing Sailor’s corpse onto an outbound ship.

Sarath’s voice speaking from behind Sailor’s emptied rib cage enfolds one ghost of trauma into another, positioning Anil as the living receptacle for both. Just as Anil never bears witness to many traumatic realities in Sri Lanka, she also does not witness Sarath’s death. Only his brother, Gamini, a doctor, knows when his body is delivered in the morning’s cargo of corpses to his hospital. Anil never learns the trauma sustained to Sarath’s body— all his teeth removed, his “nose cut apart,” his “eyes humiliated with liquids,” his ears punctured but his face still recognizable (288). The mortification inflicted upon Sarath’s body implies political atrophy and failure of a very particular order. His identifiability renders him a different kind of representative— of treason, a detractor to the regime whose face must be known, not an anonymous victim. And yet, his broken hands align his with Sailor’s. Those hands and the agency they symbolize have been crushed, literally as well as metaphorically.

After Sarath dies, Anil’s ghost represents a haunting relationality, an affective space of vulnerability as well as intervention. Insofar as “apparitional” connotes “an appearance in history or before the world,” Anil’s ghost is a stubborn apparition of the ties that bind Sarath’s, Ananda’s, Anil’s, and others’ similarly violated but diverging relationships to Sri Lanka (*OED*). Her ghost is, symbolically, a revenant of longheld cultural and political contestations over power, accountability, and recognition, all of which have been fraught with ambivalence on the part of state actors. The apparition of Sarath sticks to Anil after his demise, whose truth only she knows.

And yet, her own uneventful disappearance from the national interior bears out a prescient statement about the normative plot of Western humanitarian interventionism, which Gamini voiced much earlier: “The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That’s it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds” (282). Anil turns out to inhabit that nomadic position of conventionally masculine privilege, able to play the hero and leave the war behind, having had “enough reality” for the time being (282).

The disappearance of Anil’s plot-to-truth pessimistically underscores how paradoxically impossible justice is in this novel: international pressures, if they exist, pose no threat to a nation-state comfortable with its own lawlessness. Yet, only within that nation do crimes gain recognition in the public sphere— albeit contrarily, as unverified truths that must be suppressed. The denouement of *Anil’s Ghost* exposes the untenability of a universalizing “Western need for an unambiguous, univocal reading of truth” (Derrickson 148). In this sense, the novel actually ends on a very cynically realistic note. Rather than tidying up the unresolved holes between all its archival fragments with ahistorical sentiments of empathy and vindication, the text insists that closure cannot be had. Freed has effectively summed up the only universally accessible truths that emerge as conditions for being in the context of civil war: “the novel reifies a powerful dimension of disappearance’s epistemic violence, displaces blame from those who commit crimes, and underscores the belief that society at large is powerless to prevent them” (40). Instead of offering a resolution that affirms the logic of any international law, the novel mourns the truth. In Anil’s absence, reasons to mourn increase as terror within Sri Lanka reaches new heights with the bombing of the President, an assassination fictionalized through allusions to a

few different suicide bomb assaults on the presidential seat orchestrated by the LTTE.³³ Representational power and political weakness inhere in this final composite image, which collapses all attacks on the government, the official organ of state violence, into one timeless event. Ondaatje poses the state's reputation for dehumanization as ongoing, historical, and yet also painfully unstoppable. The obliterated body of the President initiates the false notion that he and the illegitimate power his regime represents "ha[ve] been spirited away" (291). His body, like that of so many victims, ironically disappears as irrecoverable evidence of a crime for which no one will be prosecuted.

Conclusion: How to Reframe the Archives on Forced Disappearance

These novels explore a tension between local and universal challenges to the ways in which political, historical, and social realities of violence translate across national borders and resonate internationally. Reality and history emerge as always already predestined by the privilege of perspective. *Whose* reality is up for validation? Whose version of history needs to be told? The authority to speak on behalf of individuals who continue to carry out their will to dissent under siege of forced disappearance is not guaranteed. Forced disappearance traffics in both irremediable corporeal and ontological damage, ranging from trauma to erasure. The unfathomability of the violence that forced disappearance represents thus inherently resists conventional modes of representation.

³³ Historically, the first presidential assassination during Sri Lanka's civil war occurred in 1993, at least a few years after the novel's setting. A suicide bomb attack on President Ranasinghe Premadasa happened at a May Day Rally. In 1994, the LTTE murdered Gamini Dissanayake, presidential candidate and opposition leader; in 1999, during the time when the novel was written, a third attempted suicide bomb assassination left President Chandrika Kumaratunga unscathed but killed twenty-three civilians at a pre-election rally.

Through reconstructed archives, Peri Rossi's and Ondaatje's novels prove how forced disappearance poses exceptional problems to the universal subjectivity idealized in human rights discourse. These authors track differences in relationships to conformity, which enable or disable collectivity under the pall of ontological erasure. In Peri Rossi's novel, entrance into a community oriented around social justice becomes possible in the midst of state repression *only* once Equis learns how to alienate himself from his own privilege as a cisgender male vagabond. Exposure to diverse cultural forms that assert women's agency in international film, queer burlesque, unpublished manuscripts from mythological heroines' memoirs, letters, and the daily news inspires him to rethink images of femininity in states of subjection that he previously took for granted. Questioning his heteropatriarchal privilege and perceived entitlement to dignity draws into focus the more broadly sweeping erasure of political dissent in dictatorship-era Uruguay. In contrast, in Ondaatje's novel, social cohesion remains impossible when human rights watchdogs fail to acknowledge their own exceptionalism and therefore fail to aid the cause of dissent. Indeed, the difficulty Anil faces in reckoning with her own privilege demonstrates that gender is only one frontier for kindling political awareness in repressive contexts. The archival documents that Ondaatje fictionalizes from the types of human rights organizations that Anil represents ultimately do *not* help salvage Sailor from erasure. Their impotency reflects the limits on Anil's empathy as a naturalized Westerner. In short, both novels fictively reconstitute archives surrounding forced disappearance to emphasize the impossibility of redress so long as certain blind spots in changemakers' imaginations remain intact. Although these novels' strategies for representing forced disappearance risk collapsing local differences, their multidirectional reach across histories, cultures, and political standpoints reveals the ways in which familiar experiences of exclusion can, paradoxically, carve out new affinities for dissidence.

Chapter 2: Breaking Law and Language from Inside the System: Reforming Notes from the King’s Bench in M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*

In this chapter, I examine the capacity for conceptual poetry to rework insidious logics of dehumanization programmed into English law and language. In her experimental poem, *Zong!* (2008), the diasporic Caribbean poet M. NourbeSe Philip disentangles contradictions between rights, voice, and personhood embedded in a controversial 1783 court trial, which adjudicated over insurance claims for the deaths of 132 enslaved people— never mass murder. Philip contrives her entire lexicon for her 182-page poem from the scant 500 words in the official decision from the court of the King’s Bench to retry the case that brought the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade to international attention (*Gregson v. Gilbert*, 3 Doug 232).

To expose the harmful reasoning that ensured impunity for the eponymous massacre, *Zong!* interrogates the discursive mechanisms of ontological erasure inherent to the legal archive. Philip breaks her poem into six increasingly unintelligible, anti-narrative sub-sections, which she calls “movements.” She titles these movements in title with epigraphs from “great” male writers, like Shakespeare, Thomas More, and Wallace Stevens.¹ These epigraphs are notable for conceptualizing ontological erasure through her poem two reasons. First, the fourth section, *Ratio*, or “reason” in Latin, brings the Holocaust into the poem with a cryptic statement from the German-speaking Jewish writer Paul Celán, “No one bears witness for the witness” (qtd. in Philip, *Zong!* 100). Celán committed suicide decades after escaping from a forced labor camp

¹ Philip frames all but the aforementioned last of her seven sections with titles in Latin (*Os* [bone], *Dicta* [a saying], *Sal* [salt], *Ventus* [winds], *Ratio* [reason], *Ferrum* [iron]) and canonical axioms from the likes of Shakespeare and Augustine. The epigraphs from “great men” whose ideas helped shape English law, literature, and culture thus provide Philip with a series of ideological frameworks *within* which to dissent. Her paratextual framing counteracts canons and doctrines that survive through the systematic exclusion and devaluation of voices like hers as a Black Caribbean woman.

during the Holocaust. His quote underscores the unverifiability of the survivor's firsthand experience; no one can fathom knowledge that even the witness himself cannot make sense of. Celán's ability to testify only in the tongue of his persecutors heightens the stakes of the linguistic limits facing Philip and her use of English.

Second, the only influence Philip quotes twice is Saint Augustine in epigraphs for part three, *Sal*, or "salt," and part six, *Ferrum*, or "iron:" respectively, "*Non enim erat tunc. There was no then,*" and "*Praesens de praeritis. The past is ever present*" (qtd. in Philip, *Zong!* 58 and 126; original emphasis). Both these references come from theological content in Augustine's *Confessions*, where he is examining the "absolute nothingness" and "formlessness of matter" that must have paradoxically preceded creation (XII.iii.3-iv.4). Conceptually, Augustine's discussion of formlessness resonates with my theorization of ontological erasure. He describes formlessness as a necessary and yet "foul and horrible" state whose "extraordinary and bizarre shape" repulses its beholders (XII.vi.6). Eventually he begins drawing familiar, morally polarizing dichotomies that equate form with being, light, visibility, immutability, organization, and God, and formlessness, oppositely, with "'a nothing something' or 'a being which is non-being,'" "a 'dark abyss,'" invisibility, mutability, disorder, and chaos (XII.vi.6; XII.xvii.24). No great leap is needed to differentiate "species" according to these categories:

There is an inexpressible formlessness in the changes undergone by the lowest and most inferior creatures. Only a person whose empty heart makes his mind roll and reel with private fantasies would try to tell me that temporal successiveness can still be manifested after all form has been subtracted and annihilated, so that the only remaining element is formlessness, through the medium of which a thing is changed and transformed from one species to another. It is absolutely impossible for time to exist without changes and movements. And where there is no form, there can be no changes. (Augustine XII.14)

When extrapolated to Philip's context, Augustine's discussion on time, changelessness, and the "movements" into which she divides *Zong!* gains a new level of meaning: where there is no

attribution of human form—i.e., where ontological erasure is underway—there can be no transformation. His assertion calls to mind a provocative question from Achille Mbembe that appeared in my introduction: “But what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?” (137). Following Augustine’s logic—the suppositions Philip is railing against—doing violence to nothing means eradicating that which is already repulsive, uncanny, and undesirable.

Philip’s transgressions of English and intellectual inheritances from the Western canon also reframe the field of Language poetry in which Philip’s critics so often insist her work belongs.² A genre often critiqued for “its oblique rhetoric and ambiguous indirection,” conceptual poetry is Philip’s field for testing the moral implications of both the law’s and language’s preoccupations with exactitude and objectivity (T. Williams 786). A productive social tension emerges between law and poetry, which “both share an inexorable concern with language—the ‘right’ use of the ‘right’ words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation” (191). By locking herself into the “right” words that circulated between moral arbiters in the trial, like the judge, Lord Mansfield, and Granville Sharp, an ardent abolitionist whose papers Philip consulted at length while researching *Zong!*, Philip questions the logic underlying even anti-slavery sympathizers’ narratives. English herein appears to be one instrument of “symbolic imperialism, [which,] privileging the dominant group’s values and perspectives, inflicts damage and renders invisible the experiences of a colonized people” (Karpinski 183).

² According to Lee Jenkins, the underlying motivation of Language poetry has been to decenter universalizing discourses since its inception: “Language poetry, which emerged in the United States with the appearance of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1978, radically questions a poetics of the ‘naturalness’ of speech and referentiality, defamiliarizing poetic language to show the mechanisms of discourse and ‘insisting on the materiality of its mediums and its distance from whatever we tend to think of as natural’” (169). According to Philip, the West’s interpretation of Language poetry simply coopts methods of interruptive discourse— such as bricolage and code-switching— that have already been endemic to the Caribbean, which “was postmodern long before the term was invented” (“Father” 130).

I argue that Philip strikes what Édouard Glissant has called a “relationship of subversion” to English, the Western canon and the archive of the *Zong* massacre to expose the erasure at work in hegemonic discourses on race, gender, sexuality, and human rights.³ Philip strategically undermines colonial language and law’s normative conventions for bracketing public discourses on stigmas attached to minoritarian identities. To verify my claim, I undertook extensive archival research on the *Zong* massacre across five national, museum, and family archives in the United Kingdom.⁴ In retracing an author’s steps through primary sources in the archive, I learned how to read her poem redactively. In other words, I struck upon a method for comparative analysis that interprets the gaps and silences in her work as constitutive parts of her representational strategy. However, redactive reading draws the critic into interpretive complicity akin to that which Philip risks when she repurposes evidence of the *Zong* captives’ erasure in poetry; I cannot actually verify that any of my suppositions are “correct,” just as there is no evidence that Philip forcing the language of legalized, racially motivated mass murder can ever come close to “righting” the wrong at stake. My interpretive effort in this regard explores Brent Hayes Edwards’ claim that “one way to read an archive critically is to read it in concert with another archive, supplementing the blind spots and biases of one repository with the additional and differently classified documents in another,” even as “[s]till, the gaps remain” (961). Philip’s inherently archival poem

³ Glissant says a relationship of subversion to English exists “when an entire community encourages some new and frequently antiestablishment use of language” (105); although he is speaking of oral culture in the Caribbean, his term also applies to Philip’s logic as an individual writer, resisting the colonial establishment that English represents.

⁴ I conducted this research with the support of Columbia’s English Department and the Social Sciences Research Council. Specifically, I perused Granville Sharp’s papers at the Gloucestershire Family Archives in Gloucestershire, various documents on the *Zong* trial and transatlantic slavery at the National Archives in Kew, and slave tracts at Goldsmiths’ Library of Economic Literature, trial transcripts at Middle Temple Library, and Sharp’s diary at the National Maritime Museum in London. I designed a process for working through archives of collective trauma that I plan to apply to other works before I turn “Arts of the Impossible” into a book.

thus articulates the *Zong* massacre *within* the mildewed confines of her “word vault” to assert how little the atrocity’s legacy erodes with time and how impossible it is to dissociate reason from poetic intuition.⁵ Her project aims not only to rewrite the history surrounding the *Zong* massacre but also to reframe the very epistemological structures behind colonial archives and languages.

I also apply an intersectional feminist lens to Philip’s poem that surprisingly few critics have attributed to *Zong!*, despite its clear genealogy in her earlier work, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* (1989). This gap remains unexplored in spite of Philip’s hastily scrawled annotation in her *notanda* for *Zong!* that “women’s voices [are] surfacing in the text—which attempts to neutralize everything[;] suddenly [there are] references to menstruation and childbirth and rape—in contrast with the absence of women in the larger Caribbean text as it’s articulated at present” (201; original emphasis). This note responds directly to the trial transcript Sharp commissioned. I will argue that Philip’s retelling strategically manipulates and yet suppresses his voice from the archive to emphasize just how inadequate even abolitionist voices were for remembering this atrocity in the archive. Eliding even a beneficent voice like Sharp’s refuses to validate the blind spots inherent to his perspective as a zealous Christian who believed strongly in the evangelism that stoked Britain’s colonizing mission.

In making my argument, I trace the evolution of a particular feminine figuration in *Zong!*—“ruth,” whom Philip mostly refers to in the lowercase as a woman rent from the abstraction, “(t)ruth.” Ruth congeals into a person within the first twenty-five lines of *Sal*,

⁵ Philip actually uses the term “word bank” to describe the logic behind her vocabulary. Although the word choice “bank” metaphorically captures the impact of international finance on the *Zong* controversy, I prefer Patricia Williams’ term, “word vault,” for describing the court’s control over language: “it masterfully disguised the brutality of enforced arrangements in which these women’s autonomy, their flesh and their blood, was locked away in word vaults, without room to reconsider— ever” (226).

permitting the inference that “ruth” is the name of the first drowned female slave (62).⁶ Through perpetual return to “ruth,” a seeker of “(t)ruth from / visions and mortality / over and over over [sic] suppose truth,” Philip breaks down the ill logic behind the *Zong* massacre, which not only prioritized rights to property in the sale of human beings but also effectively sanctioned mass murder to preserve the lucre of the transatlantic slave trade (176). In *Zong!*, ruth is one of fourteen “women who wait” in the fictional ship’s manifest that concludes Philip’s poem (186). The formal appearance of a manifest in *Zong!* ironically intervenes in the missing contents of the existing archive. An inventory of goods and log of daily events in the captain’s hand, a ship’s manifest is meant to faithfully and transparently account for activities aboard a commercial vessel. In the case of the *Zong*, the manifest, along with diaries from the captain and first mate, was mysteriously lost after the ship landed in Jamaica; therefore, for all practical purposes, any narrative of the *Zong* massacre can only remain “necessarily provisional,” given the disappearance of the log and the insufficient legal evidence brought to trial (Jones 283). By inventing a manifest of her own— and including the aforementioned “women who wait” in its contents— Philip exposes glaring gaps surrounding gender in the *Zong* archive, which hardly dwell on the presence of women and children among the dead. Images of female embodiment, sexual violence, and childbearing surface in her retelling of the *Zong* because women’s sexuality was the battleground on which so many abolitionists, including Sharp, debated the immorality of the slave trade.

⁶ To respect the integrity of Philip’s stylistic choices, I refer to “ruth” in the lowercase, recognizing that an infelicitous ontological shift would occur if I were to capitalize her name and—therein—her identity; her forcible diminution is the point of Philip’s poem.

Critics have not yet remarked upon Ruth's presence in *Zong!* despite attending to Dido from Virgil's *Aeneid*, another notable mythological character in *Zong!*⁷ All of these women are not merely sailors' wives, waiting for the return of their men from sea but women waiting for justice. Through Ruth, Philip's poetics become legible as a politics of recognition for the *Zong!*'s unknown victims. Ruth becomes the cipher through which Philip interrogates multiple power structures—whiteness, coloniality, and Christianity. As the narrative surrounding the atrocity dissolves in Philip's poem on a literal level, Ruth emerges as a constantly shifting figuration for understanding how state violence acts upon differently racialized and gendered bodies. At various points in the poem, Ruth is a drowned captive, a raped but still living captive, a tempestuous rebel, and even a literate Englishwoman, daintily drinking tea. Her ontological transformations embody the multidimensional thresholds of powerlessness consigning slave life to white leadership's ruthless logic on the *Zong!*.

In following Ruth's path through the *Zong!*'s untellable tale, Philip reincarnates the biblical Ruth who enjoined her destiny to her mother-in-law Naomi's in declaring, "For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you" (Ruth 1:16-17). The biblical Ruth renounces one tribe for another—the Moabites for the Israelites. Her transgression reveals how ethnic impurity is foundational, not hostile, to civilization. The matrimonial tone of her vow also reorders kinship structures, binding bloods across different generations through women. Ruth's declaration recalls Judith Butler's claim that interdependency is central to the human condition:

⁷ In chapter seven of *Archives of the Black Atlantic*, Wendy W. Walters provides an especially cogent analysis of the relationship between Philip's Dido, Virgil's urtext, and another historical allusion, Dido Elizabeth Belle, the mixed-race, orphaned niece of the chief justice in the *Zong!* trials, Lord Mansfield.

“the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me... but they also haunt the way I am... periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded” (27-28). Ruth is thus bound to Naomi as Philip is bound to Ruth. The poet’s biblical muse also impels her into an interdependent bond to lodge where her deceased subjects, like Setaey Adamu Boateng, her purported, ancestral co-author, lodge—at the bottom of a manmade sea of legal and ontological obscurity.

I start by establishing the historical and legal backdrop of the *Zong* massacre. I examine how Philip distorts and deforms the court’s legal notes and Sharp’s papers to reform biases inherent in both. I scrutinize relevant material from Sharp’s archives at some length to prove reveal the blind spots that prompt Philip’s disavowal of his influence. In this segment, I explore a redactive reading practice that draws grounds for comparison from elisions, gaps, and fissures in the archival remnant. Then I turn to Philip’s poem, returning to Ruth and her story’s implications for “truth” amidst ontological erasure and state-sanctioned mass murder.

***Zong!* in Context: Historical Notes from the Eighteenth-Century Archive**

In September 1781, the *Zong*, a British slaver, departed São Tomé, an island outside of Gabon on the West Coast of Africa, with seventeen crewmen and approximately 470 (or 442 or 440) enslaved Africans on board (Austen 62).⁸ The British crew had recently captured the *Zong* from their Dutch rivals and bastardized its original name, *Zorg*, which means “care” in Dutch (Sharpe 467). The bitter irony of the ship’s christening would only intensify when negligence led

⁸ As Erin M. Fehskens reminds us, part of the difficulty in representing the *Zong* massacre is the factual imprecision regarding many important aspects of the controversy, including the number of people enslaved (generally thought to be 470, 442, or 440) and/or murdered (ranging much more widely from 150, 133, 132, or 123, with 132 having reached general consensus in scholarship on the *Zong*) (407). Aside from its metaphorical implications for Philip’s craft, I do not dwell on the question of exactitude here; the number of lives affected does not alter the grievousness of the crime.

to a dire water shortage within a few weeks of their journey. The ship was bound for Jamaica, a destination requiring six weeks. However, the voyage was also a first for its inexperienced captain, Luke Collingwood, a ship's surgeon by trade.⁹ By November, illness had broken out on board, claiming the lives of over 60 Africans and a dozen crewmen.

Equally mediocre as a navigator and a doctor, Collingwood mistook Jamaica for Hispaniola and sailed past their intended port. Shortly afterwards, he realized that freshwater was dangerously low; an unidentified crewman failed to notice holes in the casks. Scant water supply rendered the malady, which Collingwood had also contracted at this point, a much greater threat (409). According to Robert Stubbs, the vessel's only passenger, Collingwood was deranged with fever when he informed the crew that "if their Slaves died a natural death, it would be the loss of the Owners of their Ship; that if they were thrown alive into the Sea it would be the loss of the Underwriters" (qtd. in Sharp, n.d., Lords Admiralty 102). Collingwood was referring to the

⁹ As a ship's surgeon for transatlantic slavers, Collingwood was uniquely implicated in "a process of selecting people for murder" (Krikler 409). Judges of health, ship's surgeons were also speculators who predicted the commercial desirability of African bodies based on their stamina for withstanding the Middle Passage's abhorrent living conditions (402). A 1785 tract describes European surgeons "strip[ping] naked" and examining male and female slaves alike "without the least distinction or modesty; those which are approved as good, are marked with a red-hot iron with the ship's mark; after which they are put on board the vessel, the men being shackled with irons two and two together" (Benezet 24). Seemingly in reference to the *Zong* massacre, one anonymous author of another 1786 pro-slavery pamphlet, titled *An Apology for Negro Slavery*, defends ship's surgeons as "chosen not only for their skill in the way of their profession, but also for the excellence of their character as members of society, frequently succeed to the place of Masters of the ships;" their responsibility to commercial traders incentivized ship's surgeons "to treat the slaves, with common humanity, at least, if not with the greatest care and attention" traders (14-15). Sale under less than desirable economic conditions could set up infirm, disabled, elderly, or psychologically traumatized slaves for "commercial death," which, "in the slave trade... all too often spelled actual death" (Krikler 397). Collingwood, like many of his contemporaries, was a lower-class doctor whose job routinely involved trafficking in death instead of preserving life; in turn, his job regularly confined him to the same depraved environments as the Africans whose lives he conscripted to sale.

“jettison clause” in Lloyd’s standard marine insurance policy,¹⁰ which claims that fair causes for compensation include:

[T]he Seas, Men of War, Fire, Enemies, Pirates, Rovers, Thieves, Jettisons, Letters of Mart and Counter Mart, Suprisals [*sic*], Takings at Sea, Arrests, Restraints and Detainments of all Kings, Princes and People, of what Nation, Condition or Quality soever; Barretry [*sic*] of the Master and Mariners, and of all other Perils, Losses and Misfortunes that have or shall come to the Hurt, Detriment, or Damage of the said Goods and Merchandizes, or any Part thereof. (January 12, 1779)

Although captains were responsible for the “common” or “reasonable care” of goods in transit and could be held liable for undue negligence, the insurance underwriters were required to remunerate any losses caused by unpredictable dangers.¹¹

Insuring the lives of slaves routinely protected slavers against insurrection; slaves who died of natural causes or committed suicide on board were not covered (Walvin 112). Jettison clauses gave slavers and other freighters explicit license to throw overboard (implicitly inanimate) cargo “when the ship was in danger,” whether because of natural disaster or some other unforeseen “peril” that would require a ship “to lighten its load” (114). Using this logic, Collingwood convinced his crew to throw overboard 132 African captives between November 29 and December 2 or 3, even after a downpour partially replenished water supplies and eliminated reason for the massacre (Sharp, July 1783). Of those 132, it was estimated that 122 were cast alive into the sea with their wrists bound, and at least ten jumped into the water “in order to

¹⁰ Collingwood *played* God with a clause meant to vouchsafe commercial interests against *acts* of God. He instrumentalized a logic of diminishing loss without regard to the fact that *his* cargo entailed living humans, whose lives were only ever insured according to precarious legal “protections” in the eighteenth century. Jane Webster clarifies the meager protections afforded to slaves: “[W]hat was being insured was not the ‘life’ of a slave as such, but his or her status as cargo: that is to say, the status of the enslaved as goods in transit. Human cargoes (slaves) in transit on the sea occupied a problematic, liminal position in maritime law— a position somewhere between personhood and property” (296).

¹¹ A 1788 statute in the wake of the *Zong* case would bowdlerize the jettison clause from the books in order to circumvent any further disastrous contrivances (Oldham 302).

avoid the fettering, or binding, of their hands,” with one survivor having surreptitiously hoisted himself back to the deck from the sea (97). Upon arrival in Jamaica, thirty more Africans were found dead “for want of water,” and seven crewmen had also died from ague (*Gregson v. Gilbert*, MT 33). Delirious or not, Collingwood’s unconscionable actions placed him in a very narrow class of slavers; most would not willingly scuttle the lives of their cargo, whether out of deference to their potential commercial value or human life itself (Webster 298).

Within one year, the first of two trials commenced to decide which party bore responsibility for the loss—the captain and his crew, or the insurance company and their underwriters. Never in the history of the slave trade had a syndicate of Liverpool businessmen demanded compensation for over one hundred murders instigated by their own policies (Walvin 2). Luckily for Collingwood, he succumbed to the same illness for which he had authorized the murder of so many people just one week after landing in Jamaica (Fehskens 407). After his death, James Gregson, the owner of the *Zong* and the plaintiff in the first trial in 1782, resumed the line of reasoning that Collingwood had detected in the insurance loophole that might sanction mass murder. Alleging that a storm had rendered their vessel fatally “foul and leaky,” Gregson rationalized that the jettison clause protected the crew’s right to dispose of sick and physically compromised “cargo” without penalty to protect the lives of healthy captives and crewmen. Although legal historians remain split on the extent to which the murder of slaves at sea was historically exceptional or oppositely commonplace, the case of the *Zong* stands out as the first and only to test the jettison clause in court.¹² In doing so, the case exposed the diametrical

¹² Jane Webster staunchly maintains that jettisoning living slaves was explicitly what made the *Zong* massacre “a most unusual event,” regardless of whether other slavers resisted doing so out of interest for human life or commercial gain (292). James Walvin, however, asserts that insuring African lives on slave ships was “routine” and killing them, moreover, “was *not* uncommon,” given captains’ omnipresent fear of insurrection on their vessels (107).

opposition between rights to dignity and property. Validating the murder of slaves as a compensable loss of property meant invalidating mass murder as murder at all and diminishing the value of human life to its commercial viability at the point of sale.¹³

The macabre irony of *Gregson v. Gilbert* is that Gregson's obstinacy in seeing "a drowned slave as a still existent, guaranteed, and exchangeable form of currency" incidentally rescued the story of the *Zong* from the undercurrents of history (Baucom 92-93).¹⁴ During the trial, the British public learned for the first time that the 208 Africans who disembarked the *Zong* were not just captives but survivors of a mass killing (Walvin 102). "The value of certain slaves" and "the subject of property," never referred to as human in the official court proceedings, totaled almost one-third of the lives on board (*Gregson v. Gilbert*, 3 Doug 232, 629). The first jury trial favored Gregson, ordering the insurance company to remunerate his losses at the cost of £30 sterling per head (Sharp, n.d. Pitt, 119); thus, "the men who committed the killings, and the shipowners who employed them, not only got away with the killings, but even profited from them by successfully claiming against their insurers" (Walvin 104).

The underwriters, however, sensed that Gregson's defense, which rested solely on the unsubstantiated "foul and leaky" condition of the ship, merited a retrial (*Gregson v. Gilbert*, MT 32). Strange bedfellows—judges intent on protecting the "integrity" of the slave trade for English prosperity, insurers clamoring over the absence of any evidence that the ship was indeed

¹³ For an extremely thorough account of how the transatlantic slave trade exploited the West African economy, see Stephanie E. Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery*.

¹⁴ In his landmark study *Specters of the Atlantic*, Baucom advances a provocative definition for "insurance" and the "epistemological revolution" it entailed for slaves recognizable only within objectifying terms like these in the eighteenth century (95). Insurance was "a social practice which guaranteed that value was neither inherent in things nor void with their loss but was the secure product of the imagination and agreement," i.e., not 'real' in an objective sense, but socially approved, despite the horror suggested by thinking of human beings as 'things' (95). Thus, human bodies, specifically in the commodity form of the African slave, became imaginable (and derealizable) as currency.

“foul and leaky,” and outraged abolitionists— fueled the legal controversy with indignation (Walvin 118). *Gregson v. Gilbert* overturned the jury’s original verdict in favor of the underwriters in May 1783 because of the suspicion that, as an anonymous hand in the margin of one version of *Gregson v. Gilbert* states, “[t]his Loss if at all recoverable by the Underwriters cannot be recovered in a Decl. [sic]... Delay was occasioned by scarcity of Water to have happened By ye Perils of the Seas, because it really happened from a mistake of the Capt’n” (MT, 32). The second trial ultimately declared that murderers could not profit from their crimes. Perhaps it is no surprise that in a historical climate where the loss of innumerable African lives merely signaled damage to property, “the law respecting indictments for murder [did] not apply” (*Gregson v. Gilbert*, 3 Doug 232, 629). In other words, accusations of murder in this case fell outside of the sphere of discursive intelligibility since it was only against the law to kill people, not property. Thus, although the second trial refused the plaintiffs the right to profit from murder, it did not reverse the insidious racism at the heart of the trial that graced mass murderers with both social and legal impunity.

Although now a Canadian citizen, Philip’s birthplace, Tobago, flickers in the periphery of the *Zong*’s history (“Genealogy” 9); according to *Gregson v. Gilbert*, “she [the ship] passed [Tobago]... without touching, though she might have made that and other islands” (3 Doug 232, 629). In the minds of the justices presiding over the subsequent court trial, choosing not to dock at Tobago initiated the “gross negligence” that liquidated the crew’s water supply (MT, 34). Tobago could have provided the *Zong* with water or even safe landing; in the court’s eyes, Collingwood’s failure to stop in Philip’s homeland, seemingly for fear of “having a bad market for their slaves” compared to Jamaica, rendered him liable for the damage done to his ‘cargo’ (3 Doug 232, 629). In Sharp’s transcript of the trial, Tobago recurs as a critical point of no return;

in Davenport's view, assuming the captain and crew at least satisfactorily competent in discerning latitudes, turning towards Tobago "excepting Hurricanes always blowing... would've carried them in 30 Hours as I stated before and before any Soul on board could Perish for want" (qtd. in Sharp, May 1783, 13). From Philip's perspective, the phenomenon of Collingwood "passing without touching" her homeland felicitously connotes the intimate proximity with which her own heritage as a diasporic Caribbean woman hovers problematically around the circumstances on the *Zong*. The gendering of ships underscores the reality of the *Zong* as a space under white Englishmen's dominion. Moreover, landing in an alternative destination like Tobago, the land of Philip's ancestors, might have averted the massacre. A former barrister herself, Philip steps in to afford the slaves the "representation" formerly refused to them in more ways than one (Jenkins 173). She endeavors not to make victors of the vanquished but to upend the ontological status of hierarchical thinking more broadly.¹⁵

Using Glissant's terminology, Philip self-consciously manipulates the "filiation" she shares with the *Zong* to threaten both the dominant narrative surrounding it and the English language used to record it in history. *Zong!* is thus in a position to undo the "legitimacy" associated with the "resultant imperative succession of the law and order of reason, linked to the order derived from possession and conquest" (Glissant 61). This dictum empowers colonial authority to determine the logic of the law and discriminately legitimize some ways of being in the world at the expense (and for the profit) of others.

Which Archive to Reform? The Deferral of Abolitionist Voices in *Zong!*

¹⁵ Like Philip's earlier poetry on the power of the law and history to determine race-based justice, *Looking for Livingstone* and *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Philip's ethical motivation is ultimately "a *displacement* of hierarchy, not a *replacement* of one with another" (Naylor 199; original emphasis).

On March 19, 1783, Gustavus Vassa, also known as the freed Black abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, was the first to notify the abolitionist Granville Sharp of the *Zong* massacre. Strategizing how to charge the *Zong*'s crew with mass murder becomes a daily routine in Sharp's diary for three months leading up to the first trial in May, which he declares the "Day the Negro Cause came on." In a transcript Sharp commissioned for these trial proceedings, Lord Mansfield, perhaps the most morally conflicted judge in *Gregson v. Gilbert*,¹⁶ summarizes an important issue surrounding "necessity":

[A]ccording to his Judgment the Capt. did what was right, he was under that Careless Necessity they all apprehended they should died from want of Water if they had not thrown the Slaves overboard to preserve the rest, in short there was an absolute Necessity for throwing over the Negroes... The Matter left to the Jury was, whether it was from necessity for they had no doubt (though it shocks one very much) the Case of Slaves was the same as if Horses had been thrown overboard it is a very shocking Case. +The Question was, whether there was not an Absolute Necessity for throwing them overboard to save the rest. (qtd. in Sharp, May 23, 1783, 2-3)

Mansfield seems to resent the law's insistence on likening Black and animal life ("as if Horses had been thrown overboard"), but he gives voice to the analogy anyway. Moreover, he recognizes the potential for the captain's logic to have been sound according to the insurance policy, thus giving his argument authority. Sharp intervenes with a footnote, signified by the cross above, to talk back to their official deliberations: "+Shocking indeed!" he says, "But more shocking that a Judge and Jury should be so indiscriminate" (3).

As justices and lawyers debate the question of "necessity," Sharp's faint sepia footnotes constantly undercut their bickering with the real facts as they stand. When the Solicitor General

¹⁶ According to the historian James Walvin, Mansfield demonstrated reluctance to affirm black freedom through the law in the interests of protecting British commercial prosperity throughout his career (118). Yet, as aforementioned, he was the great-uncle to Dido Elizabeth Belle, the mixed-race daughter of an enslaved mother in the West Indies and Mansfield's nephew, a British admiral; Mansfield and his wife raised and educated their freed black niece as their own.

insists that moral questions are fundamentally moot because “it is the case of throwing over goods... they are goods and property and whether Right or Wrong we have nothing to do with it,” Sharp’s footnote retorts that even an ontological status “as goods... does not alter their existence and actual Rights as living men.” When these men begin to theorize alternative motives for drowning 132 people, such as the threat of an insurrection, Sharp’s footnote reminds the archive that “if the Blacks were in a Capacity or able to make an Insurrection they needed not the incitement of the want of Water” (53). In other words, if insurrection had been filed as reason for the insurance claim, there would be no question about whether the underwriters would be responsible (they would).

Unlike the judges and lawyers, Sharp unwaveringly defines the necessity of murder only for self-defense: “And therefore whenever a Man willfully takes the Life of an innocent Man on pretenses of Necessity to save his own, in any case, where the Plea of ‘Se defendendo’ will not hold [which requires Proofs of an actual attack by the deceased (who therefore is not an innocent Man) such an attack as must be inevitable, by any other means than the death wound]” (Account of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, 1783, 101). His zeal reaches new heights as he indicts the plaintiffs’ lawyers and the Solicitor General for their complicity in extrapolating “necessity” to justify any other motive for murder:

[W]hereby he endeavored to suppress the Idea of there being, at the same time, Human Persons and the necessary consideration in favor of the Life of Man, which our Law requires, it certainly liable to the Imputation, not only of Cruelty and Impropriety (though he has asserted the contrary) but must also be imputed to the grossest indiscrimination; which is unpardonable in his Profession as a Lawyer! Especially when the most obvious natural Right of Human Nature is at stake, viz.: the Right to even Life itself!!! (Sharp, n.d. 108)

The moral outrage in Sharp’s handwritten manifesto spills beyond the confines of his letters with exclamation points, airless run-ons, and multiple underlines, as though exasperated with its

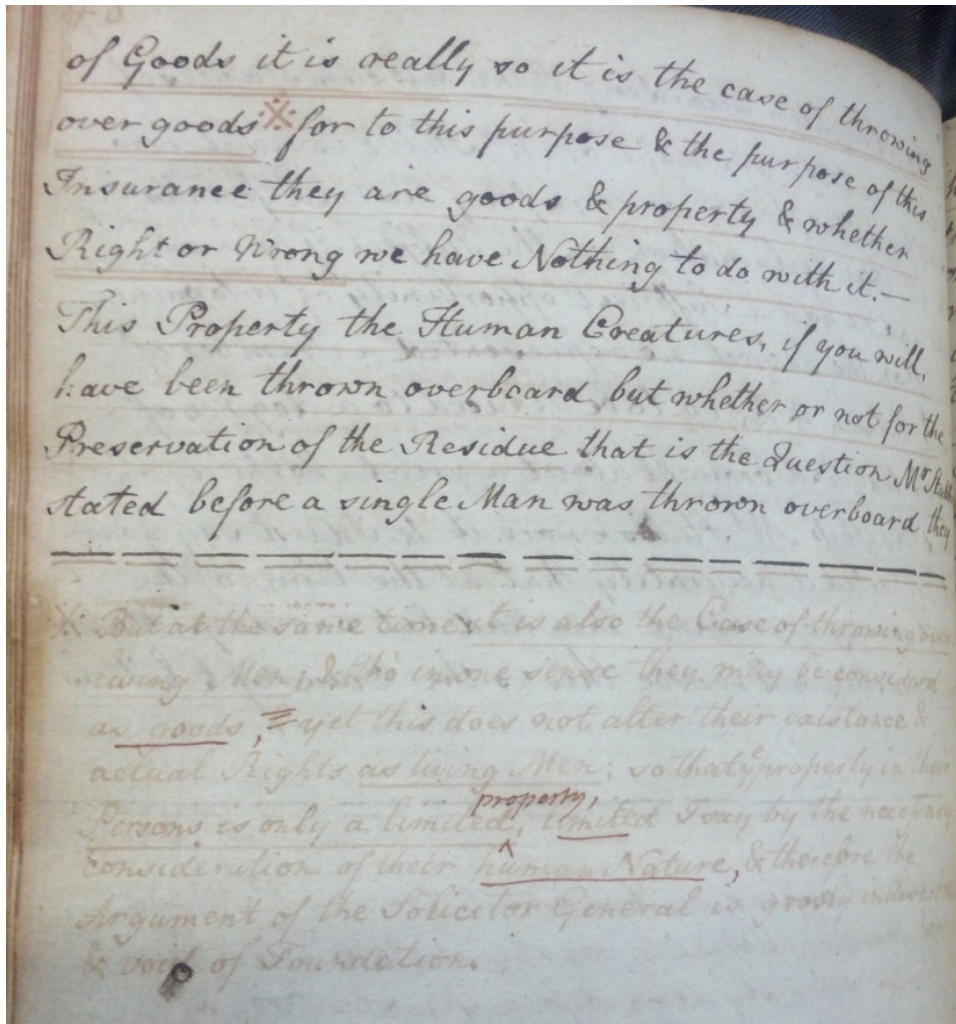


Figure 2.1. Example of Granville Sharp’s handwritten footnotes on page 48 of the transcript he commissioned for the *Zong* trials, dated May 21, 1783

powerlessness to convince his readers of the truth (Figure 2.1). Indeed, this outrage refuels his call for murder charges before the retrial, which he mentions in a letter to a friend, William Lloyd Baker, around the same time:

Owners and Insurers of the Ship is a more mercenary business about the pecuniary value of the Negroes; but I hope to obtain from it sufficient evidence to commence a criminal prosecution or Indictment before the Grand Jury of the next Admiralty Sessions for Murder so that every of the Murderers themselves should escape justice by flying the Kingdom (being all Mariners). (Sharp, May 23, 1783; original emphasis)¹⁷

He goes on to indict the “cruel pretense of necessity” as the crew’s self-avowed rationale for murder. His vehement underlining underscores his dismay for the trial’s emphasis on “the

The Context between the

¹⁷ When quoting Sharp’s handwritten documents, I have preserved his underlining to communicate his original intentions to express vehemence on a formal and visual level.

pecuniary value” of slaves instead of the ontological value of Black life or African life. In her notanda at the end of *Zong!*, Philip sketches her archival research and commends Sharp for insights like these, describing herself as being “so interested in how someone can be so contrary to his age” (201). Indeed, for both thinkers, the personal and the political are inextricable, as are moral character and justice work. So, given their strong ideological alignments, why *does* Philip suppress Sharp’s influence on her poetic work, which is so heavily invested in finding the voice of “truth” in history?

On the one hand, Sharp’s diligent notes account for many of the lost historical referents that inform Philip’s text. For example, it is his undated letter to William Pitt and John Skynner that most clearly assesses the implications of the ship’s log having gone missing. In this incensed document, Sharp enumerates all the likely absent legal evidence due to the loss of the logbook. In uncharacteristically addled, unemphatic prose, he exhorts his “Lords Admiralty” to indict the plaintiffs for obstruction of justice:

[B]y the Log Book of the Ship *Zong* wherein all the Transactions of the Voyage are entered which is now in the Custody or power of the same Defendants some are one of them and by sundry Journals Books Letters and Papers now or lately in there or some of their Custody or power is the same respectively have or hath not been by there were some of their Orders altered obliterated defaced torn burnt or otherwise destroyed and which your Honors have repeatedly by themselves or their Attorney desired the Defendants or some of them to produce But which the Defendants have always refused to do and have always concealed and still do conceal the same Log Book Journals Books Letters and Papers from your Honors sometimes pretending that the Same Log Book and the same Journals Books Letters and Papers or some of them were or was lost in the hands of the Agent of the same Ship *Zong* at Jamaica when they now remain and other times pretending that the same Log Book in the same Journals Books Letters and Papers or some of them were or was in the hands or possession of the same Luke Collingwood at the time of his Death and that he died in the Island of Jamaica and that they were afterwards lost Whereas your Honors charge that the Log Book is a Book belonging to a Ship which is open to all the Crew for them to make and enter therein whatever transactions and Memorandums relative to the Ship or the Voyage they please And that the same Book is always kept in the Ship and is never carried out of the Ship either by them Capt. Or any of the Crew unless with some unfair and fraudulent design. (Sharp, Pitt, n.d. 124-125)

The dizzying circularity of Philip's verse resembles Sharp's agitated tone in this missive, as if near incoherency is the natural effect of suppressed moral outrage forgoing all pretenses of patience and respectability. His letter observes that the manifest may have held, on the most basic level, Collingwood's "reasons" for murder. Indeed, he describes the crew's suspected erasure of evidence as a figurative murder in itself: "some of their Orders altered obliterated defaced torn burnt or otherwise destroyed." The breathless stream of action words catalogs the multiple violations the evidence endured before its final annihilation. Sharp also explicitly accuses Collingwood of racism—an "attempt to preserve the lives of the White People" (121). The manifest might even have imbued Collingwood with moral depth by explaining why he did not throw overboard all the "Women and Children and Infants which would have been of no great Value" (131). Indeed, Philip herself refers to this same letter as reason why "women's voices [are] surfacing in the text— which attempts to neutralize everything... in contrast with the absence of women in the larger Caribbean text as it's articulated at present" (*Zong!* 201). According to Philip, Sharp's reference to women, children and infants "slowed" her down while she was reading: "something so raw about that letter— he is so much closer in time to it and it's not neutral— he is taking a side" (201).

To take his stance, Sharp veers into a very uncharacteristic rhetorical detour that imagines all the details of horror that the court—and history—could have cataloged if the manifest had not disappeared. He wants to know how many of those thrown overboard "did not understand so much of the English or some other Language understood by the Crew or some of them as to express their such respective Slaves meaning and wants in some degree" (131). Did captives try to communicate their horror in words the crew could understand? Was the crew asked to explain their violence to their victims? And how many able-bodied captives, Sharp wonders,

contemplated “resistance” (131)? Was their active refusal to comply the “reason” they were “handcuffed in irons when they were so thrown overboard,” thus rendered powerless to survive (131)? This is part of the letter that renders Philip “unable to go on,” she says; she “cannot read on,” she repeats “— too much for me” (201). In a long digression, Sharp turns to the one slave whom he heard had survived drowning only to be murdered a second time:

[He] [l]ay there during the Night he being afraid least if you should be discovered the Crew of the *Zong* some or one of them would throw him again into the Sea and drown him And whatever the same Man Slave did not continue and lay close in such place or part until he was accidentally discovered by some or one of the Crew who took him on Board and after making Inquiry and being informed how he had saved himself they did not with the degree of Humanity preserve his life by what other means was the Life of the same Man Slave preserved. (Sharp, n.d., Pitt 132)

In the absence of the manifest, the court cannot know whether the life of this sole survivor was actually “preserved” as one of the 207 delivered to Jamaica or whether his insolence redoubled their inhumanity.¹⁸ Without the manifest, there is no way to know if the defendants ever felt the gravity of their obedience to a murderous logic— “whether they do not in their respective Consciences deem the throwing the same Slaves alive in the Sea twisted and unnecessary and inhuman Act and unparalleled in Cruelty in the person or persons committed the same and if not why not” (137). The significance of the *Zong*’s manifest lay in its failure to appear. Consequent to its absence, justices in forthcoming insurance trials had no objective material evidence by which to judge motives for taking life.

On the other hand, Sharp never doubts his moral authority, much less the blinders his privileged positionality puts on his ability to comprehend the ontologically compromising

¹⁸ A rich contemporary literary tradition from the Global South surrounds the *Zong* massacre; the mystery of the rebellious slave on board the *Zong* inspired British-Guyanese writer Fred D’Aguiar’s novel, *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997). In his adaptation, the twice-murdered captive is a young woman named Minta, who creates a plan for insurrection after befriendng a mentally disabled crewman.

conditions in which enslaved peoples exist. White, middle-class, educated, European, male, and Christian, he embodies the quintessential universal human subject for his time. In particular, his incontrovertible faith in scriptural law severely limits his capacity for empathy based on nationality, race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁹ In Sharp's view, the Bible is the Word of the Lord—not a tool for colonial reeducation that pulverized indigenous religious expression across the Global South. In fact, Sharp concedes in a letter to another friend ten years before the *Zong* massacre that he “has no particular Esteem for Negroes” (Oct. 19, 1772). For Sharp, respect for human life is simply a Christian virtue. On the question of slavery, the *nation's* soul is at risk. Thus, unlike Philip's fervor, Sharp's stems from a religious obligation to preserve God's esteem for his Christian people—not any rational conviction in the *intrinsic* value of Black life and personhood.

One anecdote from his personal archives exemplifies the paradox in his thinking that I believe intrigued and yet also repulsed Philip to redact his influence from her work. On one hand, Sharp frequently articulates social issues intersectionally, across barriers of gender, race, and sexuality. Yet, in the very same tract, he uncritically reproduces problematic discourses that

¹⁹ To give one example from an undated speech given to “the Maroons in the New English Settlement at Sierra Leona,” Sharp chastises his colonized listeners for their “prejudice respecting Marriage.” He informs them, as “truly [their] Friend,” that polygamy “is not only utterly inconsistent with ‘the Natural Rights of Women,’ but also equally contrary to the Christian Religion, which will not permit even one single criminal Indulgence or Injustice of any kind contrary to God's Laws, howsoever strictly you may profess all the other Commandments.” Sharp's invocation of women's rights works according to the same rhetorical logic linking human rights to Christian values throughout his antislavery tracts: women's rights to marital respect are only “natural” because God has ordained them so; therefore, women's rights only have intrinsic value to the extent that a Christian God validates their worth. Sharp goes on to liken “adultery” to “murder” and appeals to his listeners' desires for social dignity as reason to reverse their sinful practices: “And I am fully convinced that the African Nations and People of Color, in general, have all the amiable natural Affections of Gratitude, Love, and Benevolence in as great purity and forced to prompt them in the observance of these two great Duties of Christian Love to God and Man, as any other Nations under Heaven.” In other words, he implies that personhood and dignity are universally available to Africans and people of color—but only to the degree that they live according to the Christian values that make personhood and dignity possible.

participate in ontological erasure, simply because Scripture validates them as God's Word. In this instance, Sharp reeducates an African reader, whom he calls Omai, on the equivalency between men's and women's desires: "For the Women have the same Passions of Feelings and Love towards the Men, that we have towards the Women; and we ought therefore, to regulate our behavior towards them by our own feelings of what we should like and expect of faithful Love and Duty towards ourselves from them." Upholding the rights of women as he would the rights of slaves, he invokes Scripture to clarify that wives and husbands are "the Property" of each other: "let every Woman have her own Husband' (1 Cor. 7.2 to 5) and he cannot be 'her own Husband' if any other Woman gains a share of his Affections." Thus, even though he encourages men's treatment of women as equals, he does not trouble logics of property or submission in and of themselves so long as God decrees them. A large asterisk marking a footnote clarifies that wives are also more subject to husbands insofar "as an Obedience in all things that are lawful or reasonable, or even indifferent; but in things of a contrary nature they must always remember that they have a superior Lord above their Husbands." In other words, Scripture has consecrated any special restraints on wives' behavior, and unlike human reason, Scripture is infallible. Scripture especially exhorts women to police their bodies and "restrain even their very looks" to maintain chastity, even though "the natural Rights of Women' [are] both equally sacred and unalterable" elements of the essential "maxim of our English Common Law, that 'the Reason of the Law is the Life of the Law.'" In short, if women's sexuality receives closer scrutiny than men's, it is because God's biblical law, the basis of English common law, has decided it *ought* to be so.

Reacting to Sharp and the Law: Anti-Narrative Interventions on Voice, Being, and Personhood

By responding to Sharp's indignation with her own anti-narrative, Philip brings her poetics and his polemics into tonal alignment. Yet, she also remains ever-cognizant of the incompatibilities between their motivations for drawing to light the *Zong* massacre and the blind spots that occlude even a well-intended abolitionist's view on the situation. Philip's reincarnation of ruth as "(t)ruth" breaks down imperialist hegemony through both the prejudice of the law and the colonizing mission of Christianity, which zealots like Sharp never problematize. One example appears in her manifest, where she lists nineteen crewmen whose names are all in the diminutive (Alf, Sam, Ted, Ben, etc.) except for Jesus and Peter, the first apostle to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah *and* betray him before his crucifixion (185). In a redactive reading, the absence of Christ and the apostle's exceptionalism antagonizes Sharp's dogmatism. By relegating the New Testament's savior and his most conflicted emissary to the crew's ranks, Philip demotes the ontological status of Christian ideology. In addition, by emasculating the rest of the crew with playful nicknames, Philip juxtaposes insidious male violence with their own helplessness as implicated subjects in the slave trade. In one case, Ben expects to strike it rich in the trade but succumbs to pestilence instead: "a slave ship was the lad s desire / just shy of seven teen there were for / tunes to lure a man from sane / to mad there were perils pus / and bile he died the lad / ben of ague" (116). In instances like this, Philip balances her own perspective through the counterweights that hegemonic voices offer. As a descendant of enslaved peoples and a poet, she keeps her "right" to represent the massacre in question and, in doing so, elides the risk of her own representation becoming another form of domination.

Philip's *Zong!* thus steps in to revive and rewrite both the tortured indecision in the court's deliberations and Sharp's silenced resistance amidst the *Zong* controversy. In asserting

her own uncompromising reprisal, she reveals the moral contingencies in these men’s myopic logics, which valorize either national commercial interest or, in Sharp’s case, Christian salvation. “Necessity,” the keyword from the trial debate, is conspicuously absent from the first ten pages of Philip’s poem until its first appearance in the fragment “*Zong! #5:*”

one...

three butts good

of voyage

(a month’s)

Thandiwe Lukman Sabah Liu Sikumbuzo

(Philip, *Zong!* 11)

of necessity

sufficient

and

last

the more

of

exist

(Philip, *Zong!* 12)

Her sparing verse communicates the bare necessity of survival still being “sufficient” with “three butts good” for “(a month’s)” voyage. To “exist” could remain a state of being in the world for more passengers, not just white crewmen. Meanwhile the unpunctuated inventory of African names in the footer of these lines, fashioned from the letters in *Gregson v. Gilbert*—“Thandiwe

Lukman Sabah Liu Sikumbuzo”— figuratively *overpower* the insurance *underwriters*.²⁰ The names literally assert the material loss of Black personhood from below. Indeed, Philip transgresses her own laws, which forswear meaning-making, by superimposing these legible names on the unintelligible debate over necessity. Her transgression exposes the degree to which “the traditions of the English language,” down to its alphabet, are “inadequate for the representation of the humanity of these African men, women, and children” (Austen 74).

In these footers, Philip disintegrates the king’s English on the level of individual letters, disaggregating vowels and consonants into names that their original transcribers would never have been able to recognize or even pronounce themselves. Performatively, the names evoke the memory of lives lost, like the names of fallen soldiers at a war memorial; the act of naming partially restores personhood to and repeals anonymity for slaves.²¹ But ultimately, the roll call is not illuminating. Conferring names on the dead does not supplant real lives lost with “narrative flesh” that ethically substitutes for the ontological erasure sanctioned by legal mass murder (Fehskens 415). Thus Philip’s representational strategy reveals its own double bind: she cannot represent the untellable story of the *Zong* without giving voice to its silence, an impetus that cannot help but be at least partially appropriative.

These introductory excerpts also show how negative space visually outweighs text in most of *Zong!* The disorienting whiteness of the page threatens to blur, displace, and subsume black font. Engulfing blank space in *Zong!* makes visual the symbolic invisibility of racial

²⁰ Other critics have already commented astutely on the ways in which Philip’s effective reproduction of 228 Yoruban, Akan, Shona, Arabic, and Kikuyu names in the footer of each poem and her mimicry of the catalogue form imbalance power on a visual scale. See Veronica Austen’s “*Zong!’s* ‘Should We?,” Sarah Dowling’s “Persons and Voices,” and Erin M. Fehskens’s “Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold.”

²¹ For a more thorough analysis of the names, see Sarah Dowling’s “Persons and Voices.”

privilege conferred by whiteness. Myriam Moïse has said that white space in *Zong!* connotes “absence of being” and “the oppressive presence of the blank on the page” to draw into stark relief “the historical voicelessness of African Caribbean women” (28). The whiteness behind text like “the more / of / exist” also materializes what Patricia J. Williams, a legal scholar whose influence Philip cites in *Zong!*’s paratext, has called the “invisibility of white criminality” (61). In Williams’ words, “the individual unifying cultural memory of Black people is the helplessness of living under slavery or in its shadow” (154). White negative space figures the ever-looming threat of oblivion, the capacity for state narratives to subsume cultural memory and thus render existence after death impossible. Through juxtaposition, black text indicts white space, both figuratively— as the space of colonialism and imperialism— and literally— as a slip of paper to which captives like Thandiwe and Lukman could not have known how to sign their own names, much less transcribe their stories. In this spirit, Philip’s visual poetics actually make blank space readable, polarizing black text and white pages as counterpoints for knowledge and power; according to Linda A. Kinnahan, “the readability of race and gender enforced by visual practices and systems of specularities relates to the production of social identity and the social body” (xxii). The specularized space of the page reworks the conventional lyric subject to create an “I” whose identity is not isolatable.

Black text buoys amidst swimming white space with a contrast that also recalls Sharp’s allegation that the court trials weighed the value of white against Black life. As the lawyers debate necessity in Sharp’s transcript, whether “the whole of the Crew+ could not be valued” and whether “it [was] not better that a small part should perish to preserve the rest,” Sharp’s faint footnote, marked with a red cross, reminds the record that saving “the crew” implicitly meant prioritizing the lives of “all the whites” (56). The next day, May 22, 1783, *Chambre*, a defense

lawyer who represents the *Zong's* crew, purposely manipulates a discourse on human rights to insist that “perils at sea” were responsible for the tragedy. According to Chambre, there was no “murder” at all because nature incited violence. The sea cannot murder; it has no intentions. Only human beings can kill or be killed. At first, Chambre’s statement seems to affirm everything Sharp and Philip believe: “you have no right to make a distinction between black and white People they are all of the Human Species with respect to the Rights of Existence they are all upon the same footing they make no distinction between one and another and while there was any Water on Board every Person on Board has a Right to an equal distribution of it+” (73). But Sharp’s hand intervenes to demystify Chambre’s equivocation with the conclusion, “+no Doctrine of necessity can be admitted against it” (73). Chambre thus possesses an ulterior motive for feigning moral awareness of the equal value of white and Black life: he implies that perils at sea necessitated an exception to conscience, a supposition that Sharp will not allow to stand unimpeded in the archival record.

However, unlike Sharp, who cannot accept the powerlessness of his voice to sway the court, Philip literalizes racial divisions on the visual page with a dark irony that capitalizes on her presumed lack as a constitutive part of her voice. In her essay “A Genealogy of Resistance,” Philip claims that “silence” occupies a paradoxical “negative space” around which Black diasporic Caribbean women like herself have “shaped ourselves” (14). Relating to a hegemonic language and culture and striving to articulate oneself within its confines means confronting the lack with which English and the West has historically “deter/mined” her people (14). Her deconstructive splitting of the verb “determine” marks ambivalence as the root of the filiation that makes her knowable and recognizable. English and those who valorize it have both “deterred” her people from mastering it while “mining” and stripping raw her ancestors’ culture.

According to Susan Howe, another experimental poet interested in archival practices, “the gaps and silences are where you find yourself” (qtd. in Jenkins 171). If she is right, then Philip’s polemic against narrative paradoxically converts the gaps and silences in the *Zong* archive *into* narrative, giving form not only to a story that cannot be said but that has never been tried—a story that, in other words, has been neither attempted *nor* put on trial. In doing so, Philip aligns herself and her work with the resistant representational strategy that Saidiya V. Hartman describes for apprehending the lived reality of the Black Venus, whose intelligibility only emerges in snatches in archives, and only ever through hands that are not her own:

Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man... The intent of this practice is not to *give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death— social and corporeal death— and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since the dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive. (Hartman, “Venus” 12)

Insofar as Philip adopts an anti-narrative strategy *not* to give voice, she also mobilizes herself against a long trajectory of feminist idealism that has aimed to restore voice to the slave. Philip suggests that the impulse to relieve, or even reverse, the obscurity of an unmarked grave restores peace to the living more than the dead. It is an art of the impossible to recover intelligibility for a voice that bore the daily humiliation of never registering as human. The artistic production that occurs in the Caribbean, where Old and New Worlds creolized through the transatlantic slave trade into “a site of massive interruptions,” cannot be detached from the “rupture and break and hiatus and held breath. And death. And rebirth” that punctuate the history of the region (Philip, “Interview” 200). Philip’s poetry occupies “the wasteland between the terror of language and the

horror of silence,” where one’s tongue is the colonizer’s, bristling with barbs and bile, but one’s silence is complicity, not telling the story (198). In this sense, her decolonial bent on feminism *and* Language poetry politicizes aesthetics through the lens of trauma. A syllable that mimics a held breath is a reprieve from ontological drowning, not merely a performative gesture. An enjambment carries with it a legacy of forced displacements. A poem about rebirth reinvents the form itself— not just to assert voice and creativity, but also to undermine the discursive strictures that systematically suppress the voice and creativity of Black women poets past and present.

Philip’s redactive tactics for entering the archive find the heinous brutality that is not present on the surface of the court’s mannerly legalese. She imbues her anti-narrative with what she calls the “murderous rationality” that passed off the massacre as a matter of “necessity:”

I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling. (Philip 193-194)

Her textual sadism rattles the power structures that undergird the letter of the law in gendered, sexual, and racial terms. She endeavors to “castrate verbs” since white European men historically monopolize any capacity for action. She “jettisons adverbs” that try to justify the crew’s actions as anything other than mass murder. In doing so, she also invokes the jettison clause that furnished motives for the massacre. The crew’s failure to furnish the “care” for which the ship was ironically named spurs her to commit “spirit murder” against the trial proceedings. Her disregard for the sanctity of the archival fragment repudiates the crew’s equal disregard for the lives of captives dependent on their care. I disagree with one critic who discredits this manifesto as coming from an “anachronistic voice of moral outrage” (T. Williams 787). Instead I argue that

Philip's relationship to English presents her with a tautological double bind. The partiality of the archive enjoins her to "read the untold story that tells itself by not telling" (Philip, *Zong!* 194). This taboo story reveals its unspeakability by withholding any voice that portends to verify or authenticate such a horrific act. Her conceptual strategy also illuminates the ethical problem of terming any act of violence "unspeakable;" shirking from narrating atrocity only reinforces the pretense of obscurity that hazards its recurrence.

In murdering an archival urtext that pretends not to sanction murder itself, Philip works *within* the confines of an extant legal-linguistic system of exploitation. Eighteenth-century English law was already "designed to confuse, with its own specialist vernacular, and references back and forth to precedent, common law and legislation, [through] the use of Latin terms to describe issues and events more comprehensible in English" (Walvin 124-125).²² In contrast to the inherently obtuse and complicated language of eighteenth-century law, the "rhetorical truths" with which law more generally seeks to displace and mollify complex social relations are oppositely simplistic. Questioning laws "as rhetorical gestures is... necessary for any conception of justice," insofar as critical scrutiny of the law *as* language, *as* discourse, tests the potential for law's "utility" as well as the occasional "necessity" for its breakdown (P. Williams 10-11). In consciously playing on several of these contradictions within antiquated English law, Philip corrupts both the grammar and vocabulary of the court's English. She disorders not only its

²² In the forthcoming statement, Justice Buller, another judge in the trial, is using murder less as an ironic metaphor for proving just cause for necessity in Sharp's trial transcript. However, his statement illustrates the disorienting circular logic of their legal system: "the declaration most clearly does not in any part of it specify the accidents that occasioned the loss as to... an Indictment for Murder you must state the cause of the Death and prove the death of that Nature described if you state that Death to be caused by some Instrument you must prove the stabbing and the cause of the Death is to be proved but in this Case it would be attended with serious consequences if we were to overrule the objection to this declaration" (90). Put more simply, you cannot prove murder as a cause of death in the absence of *both* a murder weapon and a body, just as you cannot begin to prove 'the accidents that occasioned the loss' without any evidence of the purported 'accident' (in this case, the foul and leaky ship).

perverse legality but also the demoralizing supposition that any “official” historical record could survive untainted by racist and sexist logic. Patricia Saunders describes Philip’s strategy as “dis-forming [*sic*] the discourses which have instituted [master] narratives” rather than merely “remixing” their content anew (138). Aware of the narrative constraints facing Black women, Philip forges the story of the *Zong* massacre within “the economy of statements that subjects [her own narrative] to critique” while simultaneously disinterring “those existences relegated to the nonhistorical or deemed waste” (Hartman, “Venus” 13). Black lives lost on the *Zong* “exercise a claim on the present and demand us to imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended” (13). Ultimately *Zong!* challenges the legal terms of engagement that de/legitimize the fantasy that even modern law promises racialized and gendered subjects, like Philip herself, equal rights to inviolability.

A cacophony of multiply positioned voices interrupts Philip’s narrative of the massacre with “the sounding of impossible bodies” entering into an “impossible communion” (Dowling, par. 3).²³ As disembodied, murky voices channel the ancestors, they also reenact the illusion of *being a captive without* language on board the *Zong!* More likely than not, none of the victims would have understood Collingwood’s commands. Losing one’s authority over English while reading Philip’s poem projects the disorientation and terror that the *Zong*’s captives would have felt without knowing English. At some junctures, these voices converge and pivot against one another in unsettling ways. For example, in *Ratio*, the speaker’s stream-of-consciousness argues

²³ Sarah Dowling uses the metaphor of “impossible bodies” in “impossible communion” to underscore the historiographic paradox at the heart of Philip’s project: because slaves were considered “non-persons,” normative conventions for representing personhood fell short of vindicating their always already derealized ontological status; yet, representing the interiority that was refused to them in life is vital to “enfleshing” voices like theirs, which have been subsumed in the dominant narrative that *Gregson v. Gilbert* reinforces.

The captain's voice out-sings the rest to shame Collingwood, implicitly, as the ship's surgeon who "had an eye a very good / eye for negroes." The feminine object of Collingwood's gaze abruptly conflates a captive "raw" with "weal s on her skin" to an educated "ruth" who "can write no more salve or raw skin *salve / salve* slave she / reads" (109). "Salve" here means not only balm in English but also hello and goodbye in Latin— another blinkered entrance and exit of women from Philip's text.

The presence of an authorial voice, whether spoken by the narrator or through the subjection of "women who wait," remains intransigently ambiguous and provisional throughout *Zong!* Philip's partial presence symbolically enforces her surrender of authorial control throughout the *Zong* narrative. "A multiplicity of voices... undoes the individual lyric voice" and destabilizes the capacity of the captain's, crew's, or underwriters' universalizing point-of-view— as white, male, and European— to take over Philip's retelling (Kinnahan 86). The impermanence of point of view as a figure of speech also "posit[s] a multiply located 'I' as a product of social discourse and potential conductor of its change" (xiii). By dispersing the subject-position of the "I"— the author, the speaker with the power of voice, the god-eye— Philip mobilizes even the captain and crew's casually violent language to promote social change.

"Ruth" as Counter to Historical "Truth" about Slavery in English Law and Language

Framed through her redactive tactics, Philip's cacophony ironically galvanizes a conversation about silence, an inescapable condition of the *Zong*'s untellable story. Ruth's identity relies on her relationship to the visual material's semiotic implications, which transmute representation into comprehensible, albeit coded, meaning. Ruth's only certainty is the iterability of her loss, the inevitability that her story "will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry" (Hartman, "Venus" 6). Just as the profuse negative space on each page

reminds readers of the ever-looming threat that whiteness will engulf ruth's story, silence in *Zong!* has a metonymic capacity. Commenting on Philip's earlier mixed prose poem, *Looking for Livingstone*, Eva C. Karpinski has claimed that silence in Philip's work exemplifies "not so much absence as a different form of presence juxtaposed to the colonizers' phallic Word" (187). In the diasporic Caribbean context, silence weighs heavily with African myths, histories, and languages that colonialism's heteropatriarchal doctrine has overpowered. According to Philip herself, silence encapsulates an all-consuming "single memory... [of] [l]oss, loss, and more loss" ("Interview" 203); thus the "material" with which she writes is always already ontologically compromised. To write from a place of loss is to write from the nowhere of a banished past.

Trying to give shape to the materiality of silence thus enables Philip to write within—rather than against—the bounds of the unknowable, as part of an "interpretive discourse that explores the limits of meaning, [that] give[s] meaning by knowing its bounds" (P. Williams 109). Her strategy interrogates the law through poetry to flesh out an aggravating tautology that Williams learned firsthand in her own law career: "the best way to give voice to those whose voice had been suppressed was to argue that they had no voice" (156). A paradoxical means of expression, silence thus brings to light the injustice of one's voicelessness by reaffirming one's silence in the act of its subversion. Furthermore, by "respect[ing] silence" rather than "giving voice" to victims in a conventional sense, Philip remains aware of her own "power of voice" as a published poet, never problematically appropriating the unknowable terror of the *Zong* massacre for her own political agenda (Austen 64).

Thus from the moment she appears in *Zong!*, ruth, Philip's figural embodiment of violence and loss, is trapped in the official history of her murder preserved by Sharp's archives and the King's bench. A multivalent signifier, she is always an object of a male speaker's gaze.

As the nameless slave falls overboard in Philip's poem, her body conveys its own contradictions: "fortunes over board rub / and rob her" (61). Her body, the very same body that promises wealth and "fortunes" for the men who have abducted her, succumbs to disposability. Ultimately, the very same men who initially ransacked her existence to turn a profit in the near future adulterate her when a dearth of freshwater makes her value disputable. Witnessing her death, the implicitly male, unnamed speaker frets "now i [*sic*] lose count i am lord / of loss" (61). His mind works more like an accountant's, evaluating grim prospects, than an undertaker's, respecting the dead. Interruptions from this white male European voice promise brief flickers of narrative clarity. At the same time, these pauses always implicitly demand that readers question *whose* lucidity is at stake. For example, regardless of his lack of class privilege, Collingwood's identity as white, European and male has afforded him the inalienable right to speak and be heard. He is spared the risk and inconvenience of unintelligibility. The seemingly natural invisibility of hegemonic masculinity elevates the social category from the precariousness of an identity to the permanence of an ontological standard for being human.

In hijacking Collingwood's voice to narrate Ruth's demise, the poem questions the reader's trust in English as a grammar for social and political intelligibility. An idiosyncratic, detached, possibly authorial voice enters to extend Collingwood's logic while seeming to interrupt it. The interrupter sarcastically commands, "[S]ow / the seas / with she / negroes ma / n negroes murder my lord / my liege" (61). The ghastly image of sowing the seas with Black women's corpses emphasizes the unspeakability and absoluteness of the *Zong* massacre, whose history can only be understood in its inevitable withholding and its resistance to illumination.

Even though English is Philip's "mother tongue," the language of her birth, it unnaturally doubles as a "father tongue," adulterated with colonialism's heteropatriarchal prejudices

("Father" 129). In "Interview with an Empire," she explains that English and other colonial European languages— Spanish, French, Portuguese— were "never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. [English] spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. And irony of all ironies, it is the only language in which I cannot function" (196). By what means, then, can Philip underwrite the irony of her father tongue? Her willful deformation of the "anguish that is english [*sic*] in colonial societies" subverts her people's systematic dehumanization through English in account ledgers, ship's manifests, bills of sale, and runaway slave ads, not to mention verbal slurs, codified law, and educational curricula ("Absence" 42). In his sense, Ruth's biblical dimensions also hauntingly extend Philip's loss of both a motherland and mother tongue. Brazenly transgressing the grammatical rules that render English, Philip's forced inheritance, "universally" accessible coerces readers into another consciousness. Similarly, enslaved Africans "were compelled to enter another consciousness, that of their masters, while simultaneously being excluded from their own" through English (46). Inter-linguistic friction thus strains the narrative intelligibility of the already untellable story behind *Zong!* to create a unique opportunity for reinvention. The jagged, incoherent edges of unfinished demotic and frenetic English in the poem are almost equally compromised.

Philip thus forces English and the decision to retry *Gregson v. Gilbert* into an antiestablishment structure that accommodates her difference. She vies for the legal personhood forsworn to ancestors in suffering who the court case consigned to the status of damaged goods. She possesses an "ongoing debt to these dead nonpersons" whose transparency of existence has paradoxically provided her with a platform for visibility (Dowling, par. 30). Simply put, her deformation of English reforms its foundational discourses— on rights and the law as well as myths and religion. As Patricia Williams has explained, "For the historically disempowered, the

conferring of rights is symbolic of all the denied aspects of their humanity: rights imply a respect that places one in the referential range of self and others, that elevates one's status from human body to social being" (153). Inclusion in human rights thus does not mean assimilation, but recognition, legitimacy, and dignity of personhood too long withheld.

Conscripts of the *Zong* speak in the absence of authority, in spite of having no right to speak per se, and despite the reality that subsequent legal trials will protect the slave trade at the expense of their memory and history. Collingwood, the "lord of loss," suddenly shifts back from the sympathizer who first named ruth:

i say the lord of loss a rose
 for ruth a rose and for t
 ruth sup pose truth
 ing then find
 found a way a port
 evidence a rule ought
 ruth suppose then t
 over a rose
 over &
 with you
 she f alls falling

(Philip, *Zong!* 62)

The implicitly privileged speaker extends "a rose" of admiration "for ruth and for t / ruth," where truth is ironically divorced from ruth. Philip's assiduous deconstructive exercise aesthetically breaks down the logic guiding atrocity through rotten English and negative space; yet, it can only "sup pose truth" to a limited extent. Truth remains an ideal that can be manipulated, "posed," as easily as it can be consumed, or "sopped." Moreover, the speaker's fracturing of "sup / pose truth" visually signals the skepticism he poses towards both truth and women's bodies at a later

stage, where “sup” becomes a verb for violent, insatiable carnality. No matter whatever new evidence Philip gleans— however firm “a port” her poem, her re-presentation, might find in the harbor of today’s human imagination— expanding the terms for engaging with traumatic history will not rewind the trajectory of ruth’s fatal fall. “She f alls falling” suggests that life is falling apart into social death with her extinction; the verse represents a “*formal disruption*,” wherein Philip’s “manipulation of grammar and syntax convey[s] new meanings not intended or reified in the lexicon of English imposed upon the African in the New World” (McCallum 154; original emphasis).

The captain bestializing and sexualizing ruth on his ship summons an image of her as Black and African by association with what Philip has dubbed the archival *i-mage*, the subject of jettison.²⁴ “I pen this / to you / when I am her / able,” he starts; the slippage between writing “when I am able” and “when I am her” convolutes the distinction between Philip-as-speaker (“her”) and Collingwood-as-speaker (“I”) (65). He continues: “paps her / dugs her / teats / leak in necessity there / was sin a good supply of / ply the negroes with / toys lure them / visions of l ace for a queen” (65). The animalization of ruth’s reproductive body embodies the lie about the “leaky” ship that supposedly justified her death. She is the unwilling receiver of the crew’s lascivious gibes, a receptacle for rape and aggression, “rimed with sin / her sex / open all night rain / a seam of sin and / to market to market” (67). Her sex makes her vulnerable, a “seam” to

²⁴ In striving to recalibrate the scales of social valuation for the slaves killed on the *Zong*, Philip is resuming a long preoccupation in her work to “heal the word wounded by the dislocation and imbalance of the word/*i-mage* equation” (“Absence” 54). “*I-mage*” refers to the disunity of African women’s senses of identity and creativity in the wake of colonialism and slavery. Outfitted with only colonial languages as tools for creation, diasporic writers of African descent like Philip must come to terms with “destroying the language” if destruction reunites the self and the imagination (54). If Philip did not believe in reforming English through its deformation, then she would risk remaining in the arrested state of development wherein she first acquired English. Colonial language paradoxically taught her to “speak and to be dumb at the same time, to give voice to the experience and *i-mage*, yet remain silent” since her medium of communication was also the medium of her subjugation (48).

be torn and exploited.²⁵ At the same time, Philip interjects phrases like “all night rain” and “to market to market” to remind readers that the rain could have potentiated survival, not just sin, had the gamble of a bad market not loomed. An identical white male voice then addresses his subject as if starting a love letter. “Dear ruth,” he writes, “this is a tale told / cold a yarn / a story dear dear ruth” (64). The internal rhyme between “told” and “cold” emphasizes the heartlessness of reducing mass murder to an overactive imagination—a tale, a yarn, a story. He recollects their jaunts over dales and fens, “aster s / at tea time éclairs and you” (64). His imagination conjures an Englishwoman gazing at a picturesque countryside from her writing desk. This version of ruth is a lady of sensibility, composure, and leisure. But beset by their settings, both these iterations of ruth are trapped in their contexts. Regardless of racial difference, readers only gain access to the identities of women like ruth through men’s narrow vantage points, which reflects a power differential that Patricia Williams has called “the habit of his power in the absence of her choice” (19).²⁶

As Philip maneuvers formal and content-based disruptions in language, she teaches readers to detect oral resonances that overlap gender and sexuality in the poem’s atmospheric violence. Halfway through the section *Ventus*, or “wind,” ruth shifts from being the subject of direct address to the target of the speaker’s racist reprisal: “the she negro / ruth / drives me mad /

²⁵ In many cases, ruth’s representation as a slave draws to mind Saidiya V. Hartman’s description of the representational bind facing any Black Venus: “no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all. . . we only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her” (“Venus” 2). In other words, we can only know a ruth or a Black Venus many times removed from herself in the absence of records written in her hand and voice.

²⁶ Patricia Williams is discussing a modern but not unrelated paradox between agency, race and women’s rights, and the undying afterlife of slavery in the context of her own great-grandmother’s life; the only archive that might tell Williams about her family heritage is that of the white slave-owner who assaulted her grandmother and thus diverted the course of Williams’s own bloodline.

Italics insert the author’s sleight of hand in cursive, which is, like Latin, a powerful sign of cultural capital— a privileged education in English and composition. The cursive interrupts linear reading with fully formed interjections that implore ruth to help him answer why he desires butchery (“*why does the ... shin bone shine so ruth*”). Anagrammatically, he reveals the untruth inherent to his crime (“*there is ruse ... in insure*”). There being “a secret race under / writers” decenters “underwriters” as a race of their own; they are no longer simply defendants in the court case. Syntactically, “a secret race under / writers” also resurfaces the tension in Philip’s motives for writing. She seeks to represent the atrocity from the standpoint as an “other” while also recognizing the privilege she bears in owning the English that she is breaking down.

As *Ventus* transitions to *Ratio*, wind to reason, the speaker’s voice becomes more difficult to root in a white, male, universalizing subjectivity, and voices proliferate:

you see is she dead has she
gone we seek
to tame them ta me her
for me & for you
tame her we
meet we mate no need to wed
no meat no
pan no pain no no it can
t be a sin overboard with you fish
feed bit by bit turn meat
to bone sea fans def
end the dead *orí o*
rí gbo mi *mu* my queen she
was but a toy the story can not stand the
t
ruth only *el* *son el son* my
song long ago a tale was
told with no begin or end where
s the port and what
my part come men the gin
the rum read

this ruth and die hey
 a pint of beer long ago
 a tale was told
 an ass and a twit
 he was
 (Philip, *Zong!* 123)

The shift to the second-person plural point of view collectivizes the hegemonic speaker as part of the crew. They wish to “tame” the female slave, with whom they can “mate” and rape without marriage, since the enslaved woman is simply “meat.” Human flesh, “fish / feed,” is also their cannibalistic sustenance in place of bread—*pan* in Spanish, another colonial tongue. In contrast “def / end the dead” homophonically implies the truth of the dead being “deafened” in the crew’s rationale alongside the imperative to “defend” victims. Not coincidentally, this is the juncture where Yoruba retorts, “*orí o / rí gbo mi mu*,” which translates roughly to “hear me,” even as it also includes terms for the body and thirst. According to Philip’s own glossary, “*orí*” on its own means “head” and “*gbo mi mu*” means “drink water” (184). Thus, collapsed in this linguistic gesture are the slave’s banished intellect and her corporeal survival. While the crewmen get drunk, the author’s voice seems to emerge with the verse that realigns ruth with (t)ruth: “the story can no t stand the / t / ruth” (123).

“O / mens lie,” *Ferrum* goes on to suggest, calling out men for playing the part of gods in the *Zong* massacre (132). Even the voice of white privilege seems to begin to agree that it can “not b ear this t ale told b / are of all t ruth:”

n not b ear this t ale told b
 are of all t ruth ru th you a
 re my m ust m y can t
 ine to t his story i s not mi
 ell tell i t i m
 ust it was on ly trade after a
 il *act s* ix *sce* ne o
 ne we mat e them a b
 ill of s ale for a b
 ale of h ay a gu inea m
 an a ne gro *mi fri*
 end i p en this to y
 ou since y ou are my f riend an
 d will no t we fish for c
 arp in the ri ver ferns all r
 (Philip, *Zong!* 146-147)

Philip seems to be invoking “rut h” as carnal dalliance and obstacle, “rut,” as well as an unreliable impetus, “my m ust m y can” or “can t.” She sarcastically intimates that belated truth would only be a fair “trade” for the immoral trade in flesh that has already taken place. Her moral outrage abruptly wrenches her into the captain’s English: “we,” the slaves themselves, “mat / e them a b / ill of s ale for a b / ale of h / ay a gu / inea m / an a ne gro *my fri* / end.” Slaves ensure their commodification simply by reproducing, the biological necessity that ensures every other race a future. *Zong!* thus makes real the “psychic obliteration of the dead” and the memory of their defiled history evident in race relations today (P. Williams 61). The collective trauma that Philip represents, encapsulated in the metonym of the *Zong*, exists beyond the bounds of recovery; therefore the “survivor/witness,” the reader, must “accumulate the past instead of resolving and moving past it;” there is simply no narrative that can work through collective trauma on so massive a scale (Fehskens 419).

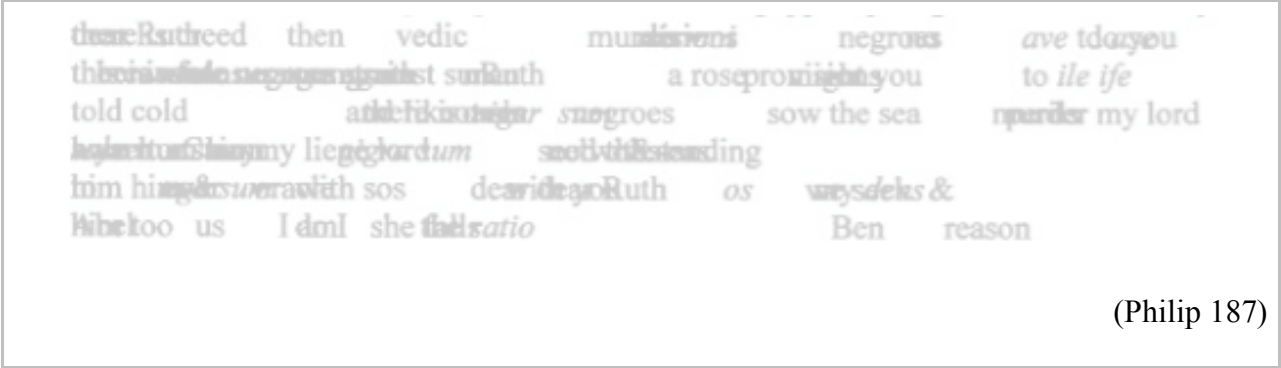
Conclusion: How to Deal with the *Ebora* of Slave Massacre in History

Heeding the limitations of any given perspective or discourse, even her own, is imperative to the ethical message at stake in Philip's *Zong!* I have argued that her task is not merely to expose the confines of any single paradigm (in this case, English law and language) but to question the content of the absences that exceed contemporary knowledge in the colonial archive through redactive reformation. Her counter-archival practice asks, how can we bring to light the loss at the heart of the *Zong* massacre without exploiting or appropriating the voices of victims who cannot—and could never be—heard? And how can we situate that sense of loss as part of a legacy of maliciously racist logic that has not disappeared from the West's cultural imaginary so much as it has transmuted into new and more insidious forms? And more broadly, how can literature, written from a perspective of alterity, reform dehumanizing discourses from the past—particularly those embedded in the law, the very discipline intended to preserve social order and justice?

From a feminist perspective, Philip's breakdown of English transforms every fragment of every syllable into a socially coded, prismatic signifier that destabilizes neo/colonialist and imperialist paradigms. For Philip, "the tradition of the solitary voice of the poet—a white male who embodies the wisdom of the society" reserves universal subjectivity as a privilege awarded only to men of European descent ("Interview" 201). To be heard, she must speak "for, on behalf of and to *his* society and culture"—in other words, she must make herself relevant through her relation to him (201). These poetics of relation constitute an ultimatum, not a choice: "[e]ither you speak a language that is 'universal,' or on its way to being so, and participate in the life of the world; or else you retreat into your particular idiom—quite unfit for sharing—in which case you cut yourself off from the world to wallow alone and sterile in your so-called identity" (Glissant 103).

In her epilogue, Philip does not mention *Ebora*, her only chapter with an African title, as an official “movement” of *Zong!* (2006). Philip translates “ebora” as “underwater spirits,” but it is also the word for making an offering to the gods in the West African language of Yoruba. Her suppression of the African title in her own text frames recognition of the slaves’ underwater spirits as an art of the impossible. Her rhetorical inversion also metacritically restates the court’s tacit decision not to recognize these captives’ deaths. She attributes *Ebora* to a ghost in the machine of her laser printer that literally could not process the first few pages from each of the last four movements in *Zong!* Black text against the white page and positive versus negative space take on figural significance in the semiotic regimes that calibrate race and social value. By the time the font has faded to gray in *Ebora*, the binary system of domination and subjugation that has heretofore separated white from black, absence from presence, blurs to suggest complicity between these competing constructs. Visually, *Ebora* carries a unique, palimpsestic quality; the printer has layered her words on top of each other so indiscriminately that some diction is completely illegible. But metaphorically, the overlay of one word piled on top of another—often cancelling out its predecessor—exposes the futility of Philip’s obsession with getting the words “right.” With its gray drafting font, refulgent mistakes, and inextricable type-overs, the manuscript quality of *Ebora* gives a reader the sense that the affective “truth” of both the *Zong* and Ruth remain unfinished.

The conclusion to Ruth’s story is especially impossible to read by the time *Zong!*’s English has finally disintegrated into its own jettison:



Slavery has alienated Ruth from the possibility of any collective self or culture. Ruth’s ghostly voice, now capitalized, resurfaces as the most legible signifier amidst the page’s typographic morass. The contradiction Ruth poses to the few other readable words in this passage from *Ebora*— “creed,” “payment,” “necessity,” “negligence,” among others— suggest that her story is still irreconcilable with legal and religious lexicons. Amidst this linguistic detritus, Ruth risks erasure. Without a struggle against this narrative’s unorthodoxy—the overlapping, inarticulable words, the irrationality of word associations, and the absence of syntax— Ruth disappears. When she disappears, she suddenly carries no more and no less importance than the “negroes” [slide] who are overrun by text at the center of this excerpt. She is no longer an individual. Her personhood drowns with the rest of their stories. It is in *Ebora* that we can most clearly see Ruth’s ontological erasure in action; she has become indiscernible from the tangle of words that obscure her untellable tale.

I cannot help but draw a figurative connection between the hopelessness of getting the answer right in *Ebora* and the many vexed, abandoned manuscripts that occupy Sharp’s personal papers. The aesthetic resemblance between Philip’s garbled *Ebora* and Sharp’s chaotic rough drafts underscore how the reality of “truth” remains fraught and unfinished business (Figure 2.2).

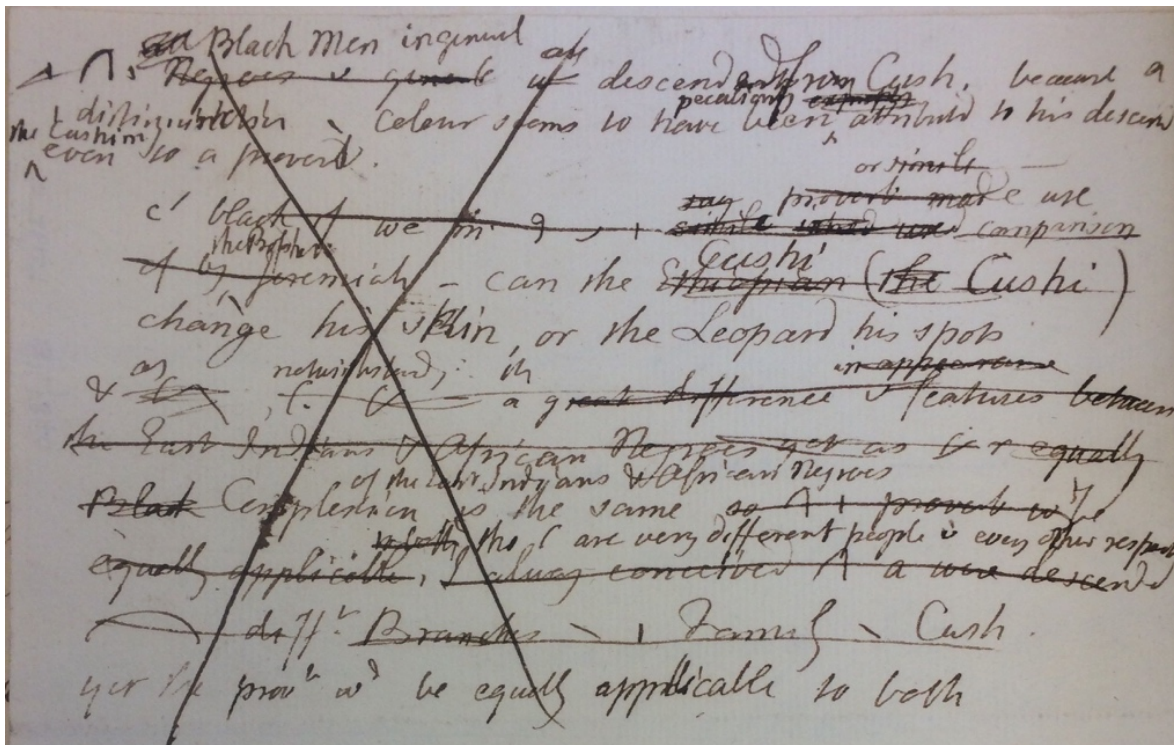


Figure 2.5. Example of Manuscript Revisions from a Draft of a Letter to Jacob Bryant, dated October 19, 1772

With tortured diligence, each of these writers overworks their creations for *exact* precision and clarity on a subject that is impossible to rationalize. In contrast to Philip’s wrenched words, floating signifiers, and cursive endearments, Sharp expresses his outrage with syntactical density, hasty misspellings, zealous underlining, and anxious quotes in Latin:

For the exemplary prevention of such inhuman practices for the future; because our Common Law ought to be deemed competent to find a remedy in all cases of violence and injustice whatsoever. ‘Lex semper dabit Remedium’— Lex Hominem rebus ejus presert — vitaon et libertatem’ (not the Slaveholders property) ‘et justitiam omnibus’ ‘Lex libertati Vitae Pudicitice et Doti favet. Recto autem in omnibus et ante omnia.’ Life and Liberty, therefore, are Rights, which demand favor and preference in Law, so that a Right to live ought by no means to have been suppressed in favor of a mere pecuniary claim in the most doubtful Species of property, the Service of Slaves, the very reverse of what the Law is required to favor, and which it cannot countenance without tincture of iniquity, nor without violence to its own excellent principles! (Sharp, *Account* 109)

Sharp’s limited authority to speak to issues of race and righteousness depends on his power to deploy authoritative texts—here, Latin legalese, Scripture—to undermine the ignorance

embedded in pro-slavery tracts and ambivalent juridical decisions like *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Yet his garbled Latin more so gives the *appearance* of authority as he positions the law as a panacea for political freedom; his polemic is actually rife with fake words (i.e., “presert”) and unconscious lapses in Greek (“vitaon” seems to denote “life”). In contrast, Philip’s interpellation of numerous colonial languages—French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English—alongside African and indigenous languages both ironizes his anxiety and reasserts primacy for “lesser” languages. When juxtaposed with his frantic cross-outs and corrections, the incoherency of *Ebora* also conveys resilience amidst linguistic and rhetorical implosion. Thus Philip metaphorically responds to tactics for gaining recognition like Sharp’s and yet nevertheless continues working against the grain of his invisible privilege.

The formally shuttered, incomplete, and anonymous perspectives in the Philip’s archive vaunt their own limitedness. In “giving voice” only through partial means, Philip highlights “the necessary limits to one’s knowledge as the means through which past victims of trauma can be honored yet their alterity respected” (Austen 67). By representing history in unintelligible terms, she ironically seals shut the weaknesses in logic, order, and rationality that hampered even radicals like Sharp. Indeed, the irony of Philip’s text is that readers must violate her disorder by wrenching her verse *back* into the constraints of narrative logic and reasoning—thus figuratively reenacting the originary “murder” yet again—to gain any meaning at all. Where Philip’s rules *affirm* incoherency, irrationality, and circularity, the reader’s instincts search for coherency, rationality, and linearity. Thus it is *impossible*—an art of the impossible—to comprehend this poem *without* violently forcing it into the conventions of language.

Yet, it is worth asking: why does Philip refuse Ruth— or any other “woman who waits,” for that matter— the privilege of responding to her aggressors? Redacting women’s voices from

Zong! aligns with Philip's objective not to put trauma to rest but to replicate the event affectively and phenomenologically. Even imagining her co-author, Setaey Adamu Boateng, as male further reiterates men's status as the only speaking subjects for this massacre. Philip's representational strategy does not unwittingly reaffirm men's authority over the untellable tale by giving perpetrators yet another platform from which to be heard. Rather, by withholding the voices of women who wait for justice, Philip faithfully captures the afterlife of slavery that remains an unresolved, extant structure of trauma for Black diasporic women like herself today, who are *still* waiting for a future in which controlling Black women's bodies does not dominate politics. According to Philip, when "we think of the Caribbean we have to think of cut— as in wound— and cunt into which Columbus, emissary of the old world, penetrated on behalf of his masters" ("Interview" 200-201). Owning and taming women's bodies through violence was as central to the colonial project as the anxiety to conquer land. Ultimately Philip's project is one of cut and cunt, of intimate distance: to commune with "rut / h my m / use" through the voices of perpetrators who "lo ng for y / ou to hu g me" (144). Such intimate distance allows her reader to remember the massacre as a deeply embodied act of intersectional injustice, where race, class, and gender interplay to bitter and all too familiar ends. Her intent to "par / se the t / ruth in m / urder in s / in" implies that the present can only begin to reconcile the social death sanctioned in the *Zong* massacre in pursuit of a dignified afterlife, not a utopian future or even a painfully forgone past (165-166).

Her aesthetics ironically and intimately align her with the purveyors of dominant narratives she is critiquing— not only lawmakers, but also abolitionists. Her figurative complicity in reframing discourses built on law, English, and religion exposes the blind spots in their versions of the untellable story, where "social death" displaces social life with "commodity

value” (Krikler 396). Inclusion in the cargo hold spelled exclusion from African society, stripping slaves of any connections and significance beyond their value for a European world-economic system.²⁷ As Orlando Patterson explains in *Slavery and Social Death*, in actuality, “property refers to a set of relationships between persons,” and so, “[t]he definition of the slave as an outsider, as the enemy within who is socially dead, allows for solidarity between master and non-slave as members of their community vis-a-vis the dishonored slave” (31; 34). A chain of solidarity thus forms between Collingwood and his crew, their shipowners, lawyers, and justices. Within this milieu, Sharp is a rare outlier defending the humanity of the “desocialized and depersonalized slave” condemned, by his displacement, to “remain forever an unborn being” (Patterson 38). To this end, Philip is wary of reproducing “the powerful narratives of domination/subjection that have come to monolithically define the subject we are now refusing to represent or claiming to represent better” (Pinto 177). Her task is not to represent the *Zong* massacre *better* but to capture the absences and wefts in the master narrative that currently robs the event of its singularity.

For Philip, ontological erasure is the state of being jettisoned outside the law. Her ancestors have been brought into being arbitrarily, to respond to someone else’s fiat or “necessity,” to resurface the *Zong* trial’s favorite keyword. Yet the word, the Word, and the law collude not to preserve humanity but only the property value of persons who do not register as equally human:

The descendants of that experience appear creatures of the word, apparently brought into ontological being by fiat and by law. The law it was that said we were. Or were not. The fundamental resistance to this, whether or not it was being manifested in the many, many

²⁷ Philip herself refers to the slave ship as a microcosm of a world-economic system: “the slave ship was a globalized world, a multilingual globalized prison on the sea that was a part of the first globalization—the globalization grounded on black skin and bills of exchange the fuels and initiated speculative financing” (qtd. in Moïse 26).

instances of insurrection, was the belief and knowledge that we—the creatures of fiat and law—always knew we existed outside of the law—that law—and that our be-ing [*sic*] was prior in time to fiat, law, and word. Which converted us to property: “*pig port field wood bull negroe.*” (Philip, *Zong!* 206-207)

From a feminist perspective, Philip’s breakdown of English thus transforms every syllable—*pig port field wood bull negroe*— into a socially coded signifier that destabilizes colonialist paradigms. Philip thus deforms both the law and language by which one lives in today’s English-speaking West; her counter-intuitive strategy violates the system by reproducing its violence against itself. Her language and law are, in themselves, forced inheritances, seared with horizons as well as paralyzing blind spots that reform the terms of Western history, even if her results are fated to be partial.

Chapter 3: Genocide, Gender, and Testimony for the Future in Boubacar Boris Diop's

Murambi : le livre des ossements* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones

Shortly after the beginning of his novel *Murambi : le livre des ossements* (*Murambi: The Book of Bones*, 1999), Boubacar Boris Diop's heroine provokes her male childhood friend, who has recently returned from exile after the Rwandan genocide, with a question: "Ever since 1959, every young Rwandan, at one moment or another in his life, has to answer the same question: Should we just sit back and wait for the killers, or try to do something so that our country can go back to being normal?" (loc. 364). For Jessica Kamanzi, an undercover agent in the guerrilla front that stalled the genocide in 1994, "normal" does not name the conditions of an oppressive status quo; "normal" signifies an aspiration, a restoration in the present of a past peace that was never quite here. Her question desires a return to at least the ordinariness of ordinary violence, if not actual peace. Decimation on the scale of the Rwandan genocide may have been extraordinary, but as Jessica suggests, mass killing generally has not been unthinkable; internecine violence had been erupting on small and deadly scales in her country since 1959. Moreover, in Rwanda, systemic inequality on multiple fronts— political, economic, gendered, sexual— has conditioned social life; what is "normal" has never necessarily been desirable or even tolerable in her lifetime. Women in particular— even middle-class women like Jessica— arguably had very little access to a "normal" life. As the Nigerian author Chris Abani reminds us, even "before the genocide in Rwanda, the word for 'rape' and the word for 'marriage' was the same one" (00:06:48-00:07:04). Within this grim order of things, what could be the "normal" for which Jessica fights?

Jessica goes on to describe a “giant machete” dividing her people “[b]etween our futures and ourselves” (Diop, loc. 364). In the original French, *notre avenir*, “our future,” is singular: one future collecting all or else unifying none (45). The machete has many symbolic implications as the most common weapon in both the Rwandan genocide and the Parsley Massacre, the historical events that occupy the two novels I compare in this chapter, Diop’s *Murambi* and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*. *The Farming of Bones* tracks the life of Amabelle Désir, an orphaned Haitian maid who has worked in a military household since childhood, during the time of the 1937 Parsley Massacre in the Dominican Republic. Sebastien Onius, a sugarcane cutter recently engaged to Amabelle, disappears during a violent roundup early in the massacre. Instead of marrying Sebastien, Amabelle, whose name is literally defined by her “beautiful, loving desire” in French, spends the rest of her life arrested in the trauma of her fiancé’s loss. *Murambi : le livre des ossements* pivots between the return of Cornelius Uvimana, Jessica’s exilic friend, to Rwanda and brief vignettes from perpetrators, bystanders, and victims during the genocide. Most of the novel and its secondary literature centers on Cornelius’s traumatic return to his homeland. Through his uncle, Siméon Habineza, and Jessica, who both remained in Rwanda throughout the genocide, Cornelius learns his father, a Hutu married to a Tutsi woman, Joseph Karekezi, was a key perpetrator in the massacre at Murambi Technical School, the book’s eponymous landmark. At Murambi, 50,000 people took shelter without sustenance for two weeks before being killed by the Interahamwe militia.¹ Today, the site is a memorial museum exhibiting exhumed remains from mass graves. In my view, Joseph’s unnatural betrayal of his own kin darkly predetermines Jessica’s resistance to reproducing family norms in the future.

¹ See Nicki Hitchcott’s article, “Writing on Bones: Commemorating Genocide in Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi*,” especially pages 48-50 and 59.

Although Jessica is a minor character in the book overall, her influence on Cornelius's journey is pivotal; she is not only the sole heroine in Diop's representation, but also Cornelius's guide through genocide memorials, his connection to estranged relatives like Siméon, and his most trusted confidante as he comes to terms with his father's past. The plot of *Murambi* focuses on Cornelius researching his family history with the absurd aim of writing a postmodern genocide play in which men's "only way of talking will be to scrape their machetes against each other" (Diop, loc. 631). In Cornelius's Rwanda, the machete, a figurative artifact of material history, supplants human language as the dominant register for communication. In Sebastien's Dominican Republic, where slavish conditions characterize day labor, the machete not only obliterates the flesh and effaces an individual body beyond recognition but also subdues fields of cane and coffee to secure a meager livelihood. When Jessica asserts that a machete has pitted individual selves against a collective future in Rwanda, she is suggesting that a household tool for survival has learned its capacity to kill—a potential the evidentiary object has always held, depending on the angle, force, and object against which it is wielded. The machete, now a doubly freighted symbol for socioeconomic oppression and tribalist butchery, is destined to strike death and foreclose the future. The metaphor of the domestic ware repurposed as a tool of death recalls the line from "Puerto Rico, Puerto Pobre," the poem by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda that inspired Danticat's title: "And there is no power that can silence me / except the sad magnitude of time / and of its ally: death with its plow / for the farming of bones" (ln. 5-8). Death's labor is to harvest bones, yet farming usually reaps the benefits of the land so as to sustain more life. Specifically in the Dominican Republic, cane workers like Sebastien, locally known as *braceros*, would "farm bones" by hacking cane stalks that loomed in the dark like bones; again, the bones

and the tools used to unearth them tie genocide to deeply entrenched histories of slavery and economic oppression.

Diop and Danticat are thus dealing with a similar dilemma in their fictional representations of genocide: what interventions are possible in a morally warped here and now? What hope can be tilled when various germs of death— corporeal, social, ontological, political— are the only seeds that thrive? By resisting normativity in the aftermath of genocide, Amabelle and Jessica insist that a politically revitalized future cannot emerge from mass death. In emphasizing women’s points of view in their memorials of collective trauma, Diop and Danticat ask readers not only to acknowledge the egregious absence of women’s voices from the archives but also to re-conceive of the norms and mores that fomented inter-group violence in the first place. Neither heroine assumes the normative path for heterosexual women in traditional cultures that venerate motherhood and stigmatize childlessness; in fact, both women consciously refuse to participate in conventional kinship structures after genocide.² As a Rwandese Patriotic Front informant, Jessica devotes her life to political revolt; instead of marrying post-genocide, she cares for rape survivors and orphans who also cannot reintegrate into “normal” society. Irredeemable loss of life likewise motivates Danticat’s protagonist, Amabelle, although not towards Jessica’s political ends; for Amabelle, the loss of her fiancé, whose body is never found, immures her to a lifetime without intimate attachments.

In both these novels, bones metaphorically preserve a long process of decay; although the last evidence of a body and the person who occupied it, bones can communicate very little, if

² Amabelle’s and Jessica’s decisions to abstain from reproduction should not be taken lightly; in fact, their choices are atypical and even alienating in their cultural contexts. In Rwanda, for example, “the social identity of motherhood [is] intimately bound up with the social harmony of the nation,” and motherhood is the symbolic rite of passage through which girls become women (Zrally, Rubin and Mukamana 412).

anything, about an individual. Neither novel dwells on bones at great length, but as a literary gesture, their eponymous metaphor abstracts genocide. The bones' capacity to communicate the gravity of violence is paradoxically reductive *and* illuminating: the relationship between reader and text defers to the power of the sympathetic imagination. Yet, rendering atrocity relatable through association with more familiar tropes and images inherently (if partially) erases the unrepresentability of the event. Diop only mentions bones once, in the context of Cornelius's first visit to a Rwandan parish that has been renovated into a macabre memory site like Murambi: "On two long tables, inside a rectangular straw hut, human remains were exhibited: skulls on the right, and an assortment of other bones on the left" (loc. 754-764). The bones are carefully ordered, as if mass death could be made sensible. For Danticat, bones convey Sebastien's grueling work in the cane fields alongside the figment of his body, unrecoverable in the sea or river. After learning of Sebastien's rumored demise from his mother, Amabelle wishes for "the dust of his bones" to be always in her atmosphere, and she ruefully observes, "Men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air" (282). Forensic science may help readers of the bones discern details like gender and cause of death. But in Amabelle's and Jessica's contexts, where bones have been planted in the bed of the Massacre River along the Haitian-Dominican border, or skulls have been curated into neat rows, bones mostly quantify the scale of violence without giving clues to lost and unknown personalities. The bones are remnants of the "nameless and faceless" for whom morning promises evanescence, not a new day's hope. Without geographical and historical context, the bones remain deracinated; if removed from their context, they could belong to no one and no people in particular. An impaled pelvis, snapped femur, or crushed skull may evince

certain acts of violence but betray very little aside from the loss of knowing who once gave birth to a son, danced at a wedding, or rested her head against a lover's collarbone.

In this chapter, I argue that these two heroines' repudiations of reproductive futurity in the aftermath of genocide speak to the precariousness of a future unfleshed by machetes and a national landscape laid fallow after the farming of bones. I draw the term "reproductive futurity" directly from the field of queer theory to describe the teleological, normative relationship presumed to exist between individual, biological reproduction and the collective futures of nations and cultures.³ However, the exceptional context of genocide exposes a major blind spot characteristic to the field at large, which assumes that deciding whether to participate in logics of reproductive futurism involves some *freedom* of choice. No Western theories of queer temporality consider the ineluctable difference posed by the Black African female body as the bearer of the next generation, much less rape as a tool of terror during genocides in Rwanda and the Dominican Republic, or the ways nation-states the world over have controlled Black women's bodies specifically to undercut reproductive agency. These theories also do not assess temporality in relation to traumatic events more broadly, even though, as Elizabeth Jelin has argued in *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, trauma's "break" in experience inherently skews normative time, involving "a suspension of temporality, expressed in the repetitions,

³ Over the last ten years, the relationship between reproductive futurity and queerness's potential for countercultural agency has occupied queer theory in the West. However, even the most prevalent debates in this realm are far removed from the cultural contexts that concern me. I take the term "reproductive futurity" from Lee Edelman's polemical discussion of "reproductive futurism," in which he goes so far as to suggest that "the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form" (loc. 85). In other words, the queer figures a lifestyle that cannot be assimilated to normative politics without being destroyed; thus, Edelman argues, the queer survives within a sphere of social death. He (explicitly, he) is ethically obliged to dismantle the exceptional symbolic value attached to "the Child" and the social order his image preserves. In the context of genocide, the liberatory potential Edelman sees for "the queer" (arguably a figure more universalistic, hegemonic and privileged than radical) is not particularly relevant.

reappearances, and recurrent specters that follow” (72). To some extent, Amabelle and Jessica are striving towards the new horizon of anticipation for rights not yet realized that José Esteban Muñoz anticipates as “a relational and collective modality of endurance and support” for people of color living “queer” or nonnormative lives conditioned by unfreedom (91). However, Jessica’s and Amabelle’s agency is not, in effect, liberatory; solidarity on bases of race, class, gender, and/or nationality do not advance of their rights as single Black women. Jessica becomes a “productive” member of Rwandan society with her orphanage and rape crisis work, but Amabelle ultimately fits the definition of the “political apostate” that Calvin Warren envisions: the Black female subject’s “self-excommunication” from “the Political” as it currently exists raises consciousness about how easily hope disables progress when hope obscures the need to revolutionize the belief systems at the base of an unethical society (“Nihilism” 233). Trauma thus automatically disrupts the linear trajectory of (hetero)normative time, what Jack Halberstam calls repro-time, so that an already precarious future hinges on a time apart from progress— time reserved “for subjective reconstruction and for distancing past and present” (Jelin 72).

By inventing testimonial forms through which women *can* speak autonomously, these novels dramatize the central double-bind at stake in “survivor writings” that “live with the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory, and a concomitant need to tell what seems untellable” (Culbertson 169-170).⁴ Can we address the being who has survived

⁴ Only in fiction is there the possibility of speaking autonomously— as an agent of one’s own story. Giorgio Agamben has laid out the irony that affronts all survivor writings: that of *not* having died despite having survived the closest a person can come to death in life (33). As a result, “the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority;” therefore, any witnessing is already only ever a negotiation with the impossibility of representation (34). In this chapter, I am not interested in the extent to which these writers successfully obfuscate that intrinsic paradox of bearing witness to genocide; instead, I focus on *how* they create the fiction of female agency in order to expose how *any* future *without* radical systemic change inherently *cannot* be just or equal.

the experience of being forced not *to be* at all? Or, as Warren asks, “Can we address the being fallen off the map of conceivability?” (“Onticide” 8). What interests me in this chapter is precisely the inevitability of the limits on voice that hamper self-expression. In revealing the resilience of voices buried *and* gendered by genocidal violence in history, whether through the unity of one witness or the plurality of many, Danticat and Diop undercut tendencies to immure genocidal pasts as “unspeakable.”⁵ Their reliance on individual voices to challenge history also insists that most popular conceptions of history are hegemonic and, therefore, exclusionary; whereas a truly collectivist history would mobilize an assemblage of unique voices for telling a story, hegemonic history flattens out a singular interpretation of events that envelopes everyone as one and the same.

In my view, Danticat and Diop ironize the very conceit of “unspeakable” violence by putting events that supposedly defy ethical representation into testimonial forms. By speaking in terms of “testimonial forms,” I mean to recognize these women’s accounts can only ever be figural semblances of actual eyewitness accounts that have been compromised, lost, suppressed, or silenced. These fictions of recovered voices demand us to confront the myriad ways in which a singular female voice like Amabelle’s or Jessica’s *cannot* gain recognition and therefore must pursue lives *radically opposed* to the pre-genocide norms of the nation-state. Trauma studies’ emphasis on the unspeakability of genocide privileges the voice— the capacity for language to transmit history— over the physical presence of the body that has endured the actual event; thus,

⁵ According to Naomi Mandel, designating certain events of mass violence “unspeakable” dangerously conscripts their intelligibility to a realm outside discourse. Normative understandings of “unspeakable” violence are inherently equivocal, simultaneously “gestur[ing] toward and away from the complex ethical negotiations that representing atrocity entails” (5). Invoking unspeakability as “a discursive production that is re-created and reinforced whenever the limits of language, comprehension, and of thought are evoked” sends the contradictory message that atrocity must be rationalized within an ethics of representation even as other people’s traumas remain infinitely unrepresentable and incomprehensible (5).

“the limits of our language [become] the limits of our world” (Mandel 13). The immateriality attributed to language undermines the material (racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, etc.) violence withstood by the survivor. In Naomi Mandel’s view, being “haunted by a speaking corpse,” with Amabelle being a living vestige of onticide after Sebastien’s death, for example, reminds readers of the material effects of violence through “our own corporeality, our own vulnerability to suffering, our own inevitable complicity in victimization” (29).⁶ Indeed, Sebastien’s manifestation as a speaking corpse takes the metaphor of Sarath speaking as Anil’s ghost through his tape-recorder in chapter one to a new level: for Amabelle, the ghost is not merely an uncanny presence of a dead loved one, but a palpable, physical, unrecoverable being whose loss she lives with every day.

These women’s resistance to the heteronormative institutions that structure society—marriage, family, domesticity, kinship— recognize that gendered, socioeconomic, sexual, and sometimes even racial violence insidiously persists *within* those greater matrices of domination. Indeed, family ties are sources of love and recognition but also power—lineage, birthright, dynasty, inheritance. Jessica and Amabelle resist a social logic of reproductive futurity that closely resembles nationalist fixations with blood purity and stratified gender roles, which stake collective strength in men’s virility and women’s fertility. These ideologies do not merely instigate genocidal violence but objectify women’s bodies as exceptionally susceptible targets for terror through genocide-rape, genital mutilation, forcible impregnation, and forcible infection

⁶ For Mandel, the speaking corpse has an exceptional power to awaken us to our own vulnerability. While I agree that the speaking corpse has the capacity to attune us to the threat of our own erasure, I would not say the appeal to reader’s ego is not the speaking corpse’s salient purpose; rather, I think that the speaking corpse, in staking a voice despite the defiance of all logic, reclaims a degree of ontological agency for herself, less interested in activating compassion amongst the living than in stubbornly testifying to the ineluctability of her own loss.

with HIV/AIDS.⁷ By refusing to bear children, Jessica and Amabelle effectuate the ends of their own bloodlines and thereby nullify the fractious loyalties to child, family, tribe, and nation that would otherwise persist in their survival. Their refusal to participate in the social makeup of the nation as it previously existed recalibrates the politics of recognition so that women like Amabelle and Jessica must be recognized as members of society on grounds *other than* their attachment to men and their capacity to reproduce the race. Indeed, for single women living in the absence of men and the recognition that a family would afford, returning to “normal” would mean continuing to tolerate the conditions that augured ontological erasure long before physical death became reality.

By analyzing Jessica’s and Amabelle’s non-reproductivity as a metaphor aiming to demolish national identity in its pre-genocide form, I approach questions of trauma and representation from a decolonial feminist standpoint. If, as Myriam J. A. Chancy has noted of the postcolonial context, “male nationalism is a response to the feminization of the nation-state through colonization,” then female non-reproductivity can be read as an affront to the virulent nationalism that shores up men’s power and reproduces femininity as a negative capacity— frail, capricious, and analogous to colonial emasculation (“Facing” 4). Danticat, for example, never allies her novel with nationalist perceptions of history in either Haiti or the Dominican Republic; her refusal thereby elides local racial and/or ethnic binary oppositions between victims and perpetrators for the global design entailed in fetishes for blood purity.⁸ Through Amabelle, the

⁷ For more on the gendered dimensions of violence in the Rwandan genocide from a social scientist’s perspective, see Adam Jones’s “Gender, Genocide, and Gendercide.”

⁸ A few words on Haitian history might be helpful for situating the country’s historically fractious relationship with the Dominican Republic on Hispaniola. Independence from France in 1804 marked Haiti a bastion of Black nationalism. Dominican elites felt particularly threatened; Europe feared Haiti, and Haiti was prepared to dominate the DR by force (Subramanian, “Blood” 150). After abolishing slavery in Haiti, Toussaint L’Ouverture attempted to reunite Hispaniola’s two ventricles by initiating

ordinary housemaid orphaned in life as well as from history, Danticat critiques systemic abuses typically ignored in the oversimplified narrative of ethnic cleansing predominating memory of the Parsley Massacre. A survivor of not only institutionalized racism but also systemic poverty, women's oppression, and the "neocolonial will to power" that fueled Trujillo's anxious *antihaitianismo*, Amabelle embodies "the indivisibility of rights violations" shouldered by a subject like herself (Goldberg, "Intimations" 113).

In what follows, I provide a framework for understanding the relationship between ontological erasure and genocide before looking at each woman's relationship to kin, belonging, and futurity in greater depth. I argue that escaping a cycle of violence is impossible without radically overhauling constrictive norms previously in existence. I frame each novel's critique of power, violence, and genocidal ideology through testimonies aimed at three main institutions: the family, evinced in the power of heteropatriarchy and lineage; the church, as a colonial powerhouse; and the state, manifest in a number of infrastructural sites that refuse to witness Amabelle's or Jessica's suffering. Indeed, the absence of an exit is most apparent in women's silencing of *each other's* testimonies amidst genocide. Their lapses into complicity affirm that shoring up the state without revising status quos repeats and does not reckon with senseless violence. These novels bare the bones of genocidal thinking in structures safeguarding family,

extreme land reforms, which replaced unregulated agricultural exploitation with plantation labor (Chancy, "Facing" 13-14). *L'Ouverture* assumed that mixed-race Dominicans would become laborers in this new scheme, which affronted Dominicans' sense of racial superiority. Moreover, whereas Henri Christophe's Constitution in Haiti consolidated "Haitian" as a unique and independent national, racial, and anticolonial identity for the first time, a series of tyrannical regimes on the Haitian side systematically undermined the neighboring DR's economy and individual citizens' autonomy with equal force (Goldberg, "Intimations" 108). Indeed, the fatal irony of Haiti's despotism towards the DR in its first century of independence was its inversion in the Parsley Massacre under Trujillo. After the massacre, Haitians in the DR were conscripted more strictly than ever to the lowest rank of society; they bore more excessive and indiscriminate indignities from both the state and sugar companies, even though the atrocity garnered only reprobation from the international public sphere (Turits, qtd. in Goldberg, "Intimations" 115).

parentage, and futurity through two women who find alternative means of contributing to the next generation.

Genocide and Ontological Erasure: A Theoretical Framework

When Raphael Lemkin coined the term “genocide” by merging the Greek *genos* (race or tribe) with the Latin suffix *-cide* (killing) in his 1944 study, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, he intended to cover the destruction of not only human bodies but also ways of life, belief systems, languages, and cultures— in other words, the very institutions targeted for ontological erasure and through which we *become* socially recognizable *as* human. Lemkin’s definition includes “the political and social institutions of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, healthy, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups” as sources of “national” affinity and identity (79). Rather than respecting his insistence that genocide especially threatens the survival of a “national *group*,” not just a quantity of individuals, the U.N. codified his basic definition of genocide as “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” in 1948 (79; emphasis added). Whereas Lemkin’s interpretation simultaneously broadened the scope of “the national” and emphasized not just physical bodies but group *identities* under siege, the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide prioritized large-scale *bodily* destruction, motivated by the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical [*sic*], racial or religious group,” as its metric for determining whether a genocide has occurred (280). As a result, in cases like the Parsley Massacre, where concrete evidence of likely vast bodily destruction pales compared to the long-term epistemological violence left in the wake, international authorities refrain from recognizing

the event as genocide. In this chapter, I read the Parsley Massacre as a genocide using Lemkin's definition: a premeditated event, Trujillo's massacre sought to eradicate a minority already stigmatized racially and socioeconomically.

"Dominicanizing" the impoverished border did not mean acculturating Haitians to a particular brand of Dominican nationalism but eradicating them entirely, inciting enmity across a region where Haitians and Dominicans had formerly coexisted, traded, and married.⁹ Because of frequent intermarriage between Dominicans and Haitians, especially along the border of Massacre River where Danticat's novel takes place, Trujillo's regime became "afraid that within three generations, the Dominican Republic would become much more like Haiti than its own self" (Wachtel 107).¹⁰ Given threats of intermarriage and miscegenation, not only racial but also gendered and sexual purity were at stake in "the de-Haitianization process:" "Women's bodies, in particular, became abject entities associated with the marketplace and prostitution in exchanges of goods between the two countries" (Chancy, "Facing" 11). By racializing Haitians as a subspecies, Trujillo's regime exerted special control over women's bodies as the bearers of the next generation; gender and sexuality are thus not incidental but synchronous with race and ethnicity in determining his biopolitical ideology.

Trujillo, not unlike the Interahamwe militia in the Rwandan genocide, wanted to rout out a way of inhabiting the nation that he perceived to be parasitic. Haitians were no longer conceivable as human for Trujillo just as Tutsis were vilified as *inyenzi*, "cockroaches" in

⁹ See Myriam J. A. Chancy's "Violence, Nation and Memory: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*."

¹⁰ According to Danticat, the river was named for a massacre of French colonists in the 19th century; see her interview with Eleanor Wachtel.

Kinyarwanda, by the Interahamwe.¹¹ These perpetrators pursued an outcome even more destructive than genocide in the physical definition that the U.N. upholds. Their violence vied for what Calvin Warren has termed “onticide,” a “murderous ontology” in which a “double exclusion occurs,” when an “irresolvable conflict” between being and recognition-as-humanity, like Blackness, Haitianness, or Tutsiness, interfaces with “an experience of ‘unfreedom’” (“Onticide,” 12). For Warren, the political “experience of unfreedom” at stake is queerness, but in Diop’s and Danticat’s novels, Jessica’s and Amabelle’s resistances to compulsory femininity and heterosexuality work similarly: to be culturally and socially bound to the family as a societal institution is, to some extent, a “crisis of unfreedom” that threatens to force these women into past norms that perpetuate societal breakdown in the present (15). Because “[s]uffering belongs to the human,” characters like Jessica and Amabelle, who have survived the trauma of being mistaken for *not* being at all, cannot suffer on a socially intelligible level (10).

For Warren, onicide precedes genocide as a “murderous logic” specifically for people of African descent, for whom “Being [*sic*] lost its integrity” in the transatlantic slave trade (Warren, “Nihilism” 237). The slave trade signaled a historical turning point in which it “finally became

¹¹ In Kinyarwanda, *inyenzi* means “cockroaches;” it was a disparaging epithet ascribed to Tutsis. This aspersion conflated ethnic otherness with vileness. Being oppressed by a Tutsi thus suggested the exceptional humiliation of being oppressed from below. Ethnic tribes’ unassailable differences— “as foreigners, as others, with different blood and evil natures, even as evil satanic [*sic*] beings”— was constantly repeated across the country’s mass media (Harrow 38). As a result, in Kenneth Harrow’s words, “In place of an undefined historical set of relations, a fixed narrative with definite borders emerged, justifying the narrative on the grounds of the objectification of the others” (38). Widespread poverty, a precipitous economic recession, strident political partisanship and opportunism localized to the Tutsi minority, and residual colonialism combined to cause systemic blight. These conditions mobilized solidarity amongst a disempowered majority around conviction that Tutsis deserved to be the object of ignominy. Alexandre Dauge-Roth agrees that “Hutu extremist ideologues translated a historical fact into an immutable trait of character and ideological permanency [ethnicity] that rhetorically superimposed the past on the present in order to obliterate historical and social change and eliminate the possibility of a negotiated solution” since Tutsis, in this extremist rhetoric, were as primitive as cockroaches— constitutionally resistant to evolution or change (17).

possible for an aggressive metaphysics to exercise obscene power—the ability to turn a ‘human’ into a ‘thing’” and thereby consign Black bodies to what Orlando Patterson termed social death (237).¹² Victims of social death in genocide experience death on the level of ontology itself, shorn of face, name, and place. Moreover, historical events premised on “overkill,” like the grisly torture, rape, and mutilation common to so much brutality in the Rwandan genocide and Parsley Massacre, further transform a “thing” that was once human to an ontological, corporeal, discursive, and material “nothing” (Stanley 114). In Danticat’s and Diop’s novels, Black bodies that do not appeal to Eurocentric sensibilities for ethnic purity inhabit “the place of *the nothing*,” in which “those made to live the death of a near life”— a life never fully realized *as* life through the logic of onticidal violence— experience “a break whose structure is produced by, and not remedied through, legal intervention or state mobilizations” (114-115).¹³ In the case of Rwanda, although all involved parties—Hutus, Tutsis, and Twas—were Black, there is evidence that German and Belgian colonizers showed preferential treatment for Tutsis because they perceived Tutsis’ facial features to be more angular, more delicate, and therefore “more European;” thus, some critics have argued that colonial prejudices in the Tutsis’ favor further solidified imagined boundaries between bloods, in spite of mutual experiences of racism under colonialism, within Rwanda.¹⁴ Indeed, as Saidiya Hartman has stated in her interview with Frank B. Wilderson III,

¹² See Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death*.

¹³ In his article “Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture,” Eric Stanley claims that Black queers of color (in his study, primarily men) who have been murdered through hate crimes in the U.S. inhabit “the place of *the nothing*” that I see Amabelle and Jessica experiencing (14; original emphasis). Excommunicated from society, these women are bereft of both recognition and redress so long as doing violence to them means doing violence to nothing.

¹⁴ Harrow claims that “the Tutsis were described as past oppressors, collaborators with the Germans and then, worse, the Belgians;” being confused for Hutu meant demotion to a “lower status” because Tutsis were associated with both socioeconomic and biological privilege (35). According to Dauge-Roth,

“[t]he state machine is a racializing machine” that depends on the preservation of racial difference specifically in order to maintain what Wilderson goes on to call “the libidinal economy of white institutionality,” which, in both the Dominican Republic and Rwanda, is a lasting vestige of European colonialism (196; 198).

The graphic violence that immures Jessica’s and Amabelle’s failures to gain state recognition for their suffering ironically inverts both the discursive and material effects of “overkill:” the aesthetic reproduces excessive violence in both affective and corporeal term, exposing the impossibility of redress without structural change. Danticat’s and Diop’s ironic invocation of overkill also fits into the genre of “traumatic realism,” a mode of cognition and aesthetics laying at “the intersection of the everyday and the extreme,” the realistic and the unknowable,¹⁵ in a manner that “marks the necessity of considering how the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide intersect and coexist” (Rothberg, *TR* 9). Traumatic realism eschews factuality for “a metaphor that signifies a referential relation (or truth claim) that is more or less direct or indirect (generically probably more indirect in fiction than in historiography)” (La Capra 14). The indirection of fictional forms like the decolonial novel thus performs narratological work— reclaiming the subjectivity-constructing work of “worlding” or

Belgians “favored a small elite of the Tutsi minority in their indirect ruling of the colony” until the end of their colonial stint in 1962 (16).

¹⁵ In *Traumatic Realism*, Michael Rothberg distinguishes two allegations that tend to be evaluated when assessing the ethics of representing the Holocaust. First, the presumed necessity of realism risks implying that it is somehow possible to make sense of the Holocaust and translate “this knowledge... into a familiar mimetic universe” (3). Second and to the contrary lies the assumed desirability of an “antirealist” representation, which suggests that the Holocaust “would be knowable only under radically new regimes of knowledge and that it cannot be captured in traditional representation schema,” thus ignoring the frightening ordinariness of the mechanisms of mass killing at work in the event (3-4).

“soul making,” to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s paradigms— typically barred from popular history.¹⁶

According to Spivak, reproduction, or “childbearing,” accompanies “soul making” as a foundational social construct. Whereas childbearing determines a woman’s subjectivity in the domestic realm, soul making constitutes “the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission;” “soul making” thus invests women with values and norms that reconstruct Western civilization in the colonial realm (244). The historical novels I discuss in this chapter reclaim the authority to fashion souls or world the imagination of the past; in doing so, they expand the novel form as a site for imaginatively deconstructing the onticidal logic behind neo/colonial perceptions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Speaking of Danticat’s work, Cherie Meacham claims that visceral violence in “frank and unmitigated detail... explicitly demands a place in personal and national consciousness” (122-123). In the context of these atrocities, literature as a tool for consciousness-raising bridges alterity to voice “a loud and cacophonous mass of communities in negotiation with their own erasure” (Subramanian, *WWW* 71).

By filtering my readings of onticide and genocide through the specific lens of reproductive futurity and its stakes for these female protagonists, I seek to engage in what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have termed “gendered translation:” an “endeavor to...

¹⁶ When Spivak coins the terms “soulmaking” and “worlding,” she is thinking about the imperialist epistemology through which nineteenth-century British literature constructs the world and subject-positions of colonized others. According to Spivak, “the Third World” is an invented construct through which the colonized supposedly become knowable; thus, worlding, an imaginative process activated by Victorian literature, imposes a Eurocentric framework on the knowability of colonized others (243). Worlding gives way to “soul making” that specifically interpellates women in fiction as viable subjects of both domesticity and civil society. When Diop and Danticat resume these epistemological efforts in their own decolonial, historical fiction, they reclaim the right for postcolonial subjects to world their own realities and refashion subaltern women’s subjectivities.

excavate the feminine buried within the layered structure” of first-person testimonies in Diop’s and Danticat’s novels (“GT” 6). My gendered translation reveals that genocide has disrupted the normative order of things on a deep, intrinsic level, so that femininity, rather than affirming the inevitability of rebirth, is aberrantly associated with “destruction without a parallel generativity” (11). In a postcolonial, post-genocide context, women’s rejection of reproductive futurity as part of traditional culture carries heightened biopolitical implications.¹⁷ As Alys Eve Weinbaum has shown, “reproduction as a biological, sexual, and racialized process” emerged as an organizing logic across modern nation-states both within and outside of the West, central to systems of social control and imperial domination in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade (2). Genocides like that in Rwanda, the Parsley Massacre, and the Holocaust mark “a crisis precipitated by the failure of the social order, particularly the modern racial nation, to continually reproduce itself without a glitch,” which is nothing less than “a crisis in the dominant racial and gender order that becomes visible in the failure of reproduction to achieve a stabilized meaning” (14). In the midst of such a crisis, the fantasy of protecting a “pure” bloodline prevails, and blood manifests as “*a reality with a symbolic function*” (Foucault, *HOS* 147; original emphasis).

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler theorizes that victims of state violence are othered and their human rights violated on the level of ontology itself; effectively “derealized” as less than human in the public imagination and objects of inexhaustible violence, they are “neither alive

¹⁷ My understanding of “the political” here lifts largely from Calvin Warren’s definition of “the logic of the Political— linear temporality, biopolitical futurity, perfection, betterment, and redress— [as] sustain[ing] black suffering” (“Nihilism” 218). Warren’s polemic against political hope specifically pertains to widespread, often unpunished violence against Black lives in the contemporary U.S. However, I think his conclusions about the risks of hope in an era of oppression also speak to Jessica’s and Amabelle’s motivations. Like Warren, Jessica and Amabelle both abstain from “reproduc[ing] the conditions that render existence unbearable for blacks” by refusing to participate in “the logic of the Political” as it currently exists— built as it is on fantasies of reproductive futurity (243).

nor dead, but interminably spectral” (33). I define ontological agency as the freedom to be and be read as human, and to act according to who one is, and with the security that one’s being will be read as real. In my view, having ontological agency is a primary condition for social and political recognition. To exercise the civil and human rights ascribed to political agency, or to acquire the mobility associated with social agency, one must first be read as a person— not as a speaking corpse or a ghostly victim of onticide and the social death it implies, but as a being with ontological substance, with an individual identity *and* a fleshly body whose vulnerability stings a collective conscience. The speaking corpse of genocide—whether the bones of the deceased or a ghostly revenant like Sebastien’s— cannot *do* anything except refuse her invisibility through the persistence of her voice. At the center of these authors’ convictions in collective responsibility remains an urgency to assert the voices of historically silenced victims *as* individuals whose figural descendants are still routinely shorn of ontological agency.

Decomposing Institutions: Heteropatriarchy, the Church, and the State in a Decolonial Feminist Framework of Refusal

While collecting oral histories on either side of the border, Danticat came across the story of the nameless woman who inspired Amabelle. As a boy, Danticat’s interviewee had worked with a maid in a military household. On the eve of the Parsley Massacre, their employer stabbed the maid to death at the dinner table. Danticat imagines that this woman must have seen herself as a citizen of multiple “social borders,” knowing “both sides and [feeling] like, somehow, she belonged to both sides but really didn’t” (qtd. in Wachtel 108). Sudden conflicts within intimate relations populate Danticat’s novel: a colonel stabs his maid after thirty years of service, field guards bludgeon *braceros* to death, and “groups of Haitians [are] being killed in the night because they could not manage to trill their ‘r’ and utter a throaty ‘j’ to ask for parsley, to say

perejil” (113). These acts of violence allude to the Parsley Massacre, which took up to 20,000 Haitian lives over nary a week’s time in October 1937,¹⁸ just two years after Danticat’s mother was born in neighboring Haiti.¹⁹ Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, who governed the Dominican Republic from his military coup in 1930 to his assassination in 1961, ordered the racially motivated killing along the Dominican-Haitian border.²⁰ In the radio broadcast that launched the genocide, Trujillo intimated genocide as an extreme “remedy” for Dominicans’ perceived socioeconomic disenfranchisement by even poorer Haitians:²¹ “To the Dominicans who were complaining of the depredations by Haitians living among them, thefts of cattle, provisions, fruits, etc., and were thus prevented from enjoying in peace the products of their labor, I have responded, ‘I will fix this’” (qtd. in Goldberg, “Intimations” 114). Trujillo’s “fix” instructed ordinary Dominicans to test darker-skinned neighbors’ ethnic origins with a shibboleth, a verbal test of authenticity with biblical origins in genocide.²² Being able to pronounce the word *perejil*,

¹⁸ Also known as the “cane field massacres” or El Corte, “the stabbing” in Spanish, machetes and clubs dominated the Parsley Massacre to sustain the false impression that outraged *campesinos*, not official military troops (who would have used bullets), were responsible for the bloodshed. Even after attempts to mobilize shame against the Dominican government persisted from a betrayed Haitian government and a slow-to-respond international press after the event, Trujillo only faced monetary sanctions negotiated by the U.S.— an indemnity to survivors and the families of victims to the tune of \$525,000. See Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s *Literature of the Caribbean*.

¹⁹ See Danticat’s interview with Zöe Angelesey, “The Voice of the Storytellers” in *Multicultural Review*.

²⁰ See Paravisini-Gebert’s *Literature of the Caribbean*.

²¹ Trujillo had been touring the border at the behest of Dominican citizens. Dominicans were complaining that Haitians were dominating cheap labor formerly valued by American plantation owners, who had abandoned the DR’s sugar cane industry by 1934. In actuality, Haitians working the cane fields were being exploited for brute toil that most Dominicans disdained. Even so, racial animus and economic instability provided Trujillo the excuse he had long sought for “Dominicanizing” the border region. See the 1996 human rights report conducted by Patrick Gavigan on behalf of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, *Beyond the Bateyes: Haitian Immigrants in the Dominican Republic*, which Danticat cites as part of her research in the acknowledgments for *The Farming of Bones*.

²² Jenny Davidson offers a brief intellectual genealogy for “shibboleths” as a measure of ethnic purity, using Danticat’s representation of the Parsley Massacre as a key example, in her book *Breeding: A Partial History of the Eighteenth Century*. According to the Bible, an army from Gilead subdued the

or parsley, displaced the burden of proving citizenship from formal identification papers (which have not existed for the majority of Haitians in the DR for generations).²³ Indeed, I believe Danticat privileges testimonial forms in *The Farming of Bones* to expose the ambivalent authenticity of voice, which can validate murder in one breath and nothing at all in another.

The amnesia surrounding the Parsley Massacre permeates not only the DR's national history but also the event's legacy in international human rights discourse, where "the structural connection between the acute violence of genocide and the sustained violence of poverty, oppression, and the colonial legacy" is "often obscured, if not disavowed" (Goldberg, "Intimations" 104). Unlike the Rwandan genocide, in which the murder of an estimated 800,000 to one million Rwandans, primarily Tutsis, Twas, and Hutu moderates, spanned just 100 days between early April and mid July 1994, the Parsley Massacre barely survives in Hispaniola's popular memory in addition to lacking recognition as a genocide. The absence of commemorative plaques or public apologies in both the DR and Haiti shocked Danticat during her fieldwork. In a National Public Radio interview, Danticat attributes the amnesia surrounding the Parsley Massacre from public squares to history textbooks to national shame and the routine immurement of the poor in the DR.²⁴ Latin American historian Ernesto Sagás's research into the massacre confirms that Trujillo's regime scrupulously avoided documenting the event even as his ideologues disseminated the "myth of peace and national security" to gross proportions: "No

Ephraimites and then subjected stragglers crossing their border via the River Jordan to pronouncing the word *shibboleth* to prove their belonging; failure to pronounce the word correctly resulted in execution, and supposedly, up to 42,000 Ephraimites were slain (Paravisini-Gebert 89).

²³ See Ricardo Ortiz's essay, "Edwidge Danticat's *Latinidad: The Farming of Bones* and the Cultivation (of Fields) of Knowledge."

²⁴ See Danticat's October 1, 2012 NPR interview with the Dominican-American writer Julia Álvarez, "Dominicans, Haitians Remember the Parsley Massacre."

documentation with direct references to the massacre— before, during, or after it— has been found in Dominican archives. It was as if it never happened. And for many Dominicans, misinformed by Trujillo's propaganda machine, it never did” (47). Like the Holocaust, the Parsley Massacre fits psychoanalyst Dori Laub’s paradigm of an “event without a witness”— a historical event wherein mass extermination was not only central to the strategy of the crime, “but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims” (80). Contriving testimonial narratives thus ironizes not only the absence but also the impossibility of witnesses.

Within two years of Danticat’s publication, Diop generated his retelling of the Rwandan genocide in a two-month-long African artists’ mission called *Rwanda : écrire par devoir de mémoire*, or “Rwanda: Writing as a Duty to Memory.”²⁵ Together, ten writers from eight African countries sought to memorialize the genocide. As a co-founder of *Sud*, Senegal’s first independent newspaper²⁶ and a journalist dedicated to challenging the organized repression of creative expression in Africa more broadly,²⁷ Diop took an activist interest in the genocide. However, he also found his artistic proclivities at odds with Rwandan survivors who wanted their stories heard. “We were faced with the almost moral dilemma of whether we had the right to fictionalize such bloody events,” he confessed in an interview with Véronique Tadjó, an

²⁵ Convened in the Rwandan capital of Kigali by the Rwandan government and the Fondation de France, a French NGO, in 1998, this collective was the brainchild of the Chadian writer Noke Jedanoon. See Nicki Hitchcott’s “Writing on Bones: Commemorating Genocide in Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi*” in *Research in African Literatures*, and also Karin Samuel’s “Bearing Witness to Trauma” in *African Identities*.

²⁶ See Fiona McLaughlin’s “Writing the Rwandan Genocide” in the anthology *Palavers of African Literature*; McLaughlin also provided the introduction for Diop’s *Murambi*.

²⁷ While Diop and his colleagues were attending Writing as a Duty to Memory, the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and his compatriots were being hung for political crimes in Nigeria.

Ivorian colleague on the retreat (qtd. in Tadjó 426). In Diop's novel, Hutu perpetrators and members of the Interahamwe militia have a voice alongside women in the Rwandese Patriotic Front who secured the end of the bloodshed, like Jessica Kamanzi. At the risk of alienating the subjects of his study, Diop wrote *Murambi* in a colonial language. Similarly, Danticat wrote *The Farming of Bones* in English rather than French or Kreyòl (languages in which she is also fluent). Their linguistic choices underscore their desire for an international reach that allows them to write back to bystanders from complicit, neoliberal world powers like France and the U.S. Sharing a unique insider/outsider status, Danticat and Diop are thus linked to their subjects through far-reaching legacies of political and historical violence but certainly not of the same time, place, or background as their characters.²⁸ Their aim is not to patronizingly “give voice” to silenced victims of genocide but instead to expose the complicated matrices of domination that comprise genocide's internal framework.

Although the novelistic imagination cannot supplant the material effects of trauma, it can problematize the logics of erasure that instigated violence in the first place. Genocidal ideologies are premised on culturally and politically ingrained fictions. In the Parsley Massacre, a tongue stumbling too lugubriously in its roll of an “R” spelled murder for a Black man who might have been born on Dominican soil. The Rwandan genocide started by singling out citizens based on ethnic affiliations assigned to identity cards— blood-based categorizations that were practically arbitrary in a country where intermarriage has been common for generations. Amabelle and

²⁸ Danticat was born in Haiti but raised in Brooklyn, New York since age twelve. Diop, originally from Senegal, did not spend time in Rwanda beyond the length of the writing retreat. However, I agree with Naomi Mandel that fictionalizations of genocide like Danticat's and Diop's are not always automatically taboo simply because their imaginations are historically and geographically distant from the event. Danticat and Diop are pushing back against the dominance of a historical record that vies for the erasure of communities in which they themselves do not explicitly belong.

Jessica's abstention from re-integration into heteropatriarchal state institutions suggests that moral decay has rotted the superstructure from the inside. These women's apostasy may seem to follow the logic of genocide—to extinguish the race— by not reproducing. However, on a deeper level, their refusal to participate in the state's protocols for citizen-making radically break with the past. Women's bodies bear a special relationship to state institutions that seek to control a population through the biopolitical regulation of individual bodies and desires.²⁹ According to Weinbaum, in nations that would prefer to think of themselves as “racially homogeneous,” women's reproduction can establish a “genealogical connection” that “secure[s] notions of belonging” and permits “racism and nationalism [to] articulate through each other” (8).

Gendered humiliation carries heavy symbolism: rape and/or sexual torture defame the collective whom a woman's body represents, just as the mass murder of battle-aged men emasculates the virility men are meant to represent. Diop and Danticat depict women as counterpoints to male violence— and enemies of structural violence— to throttle into ontological recognition not nameless victims but, rather, the capacity for shared vulnerability amidst “genocidal masculinity” (Jones 580).³⁰ In this sense, Diop shares a propensity that Myriam J.A. Chancy has noted of Danticat to “point to women's absences in... national histories... [even as] the (his)story itself does not shift in character” (“Facing,” 5); thus, Diop's and Danticat's

²⁹ See Michel Foucault's discussion of biopolitical institutions and state power in *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1; I have extrapolated his broader points on page 141 to deal specifically with the question of gender.

³⁰ In his work on “gendercide,” a neologism coined by philosopher Mary Anne Warren, the political scientist Adam Jones has extensively studied vulnerability on the bases of sexual and gendered difference in the Rwandan genocide. He defines “non-combatant men of ‘battle age,’ roughly 15 to 55 years old,” as the most threatening social group to the repressive state apparatus (569). He goes on to discuss types of violence that specifically affected women, such as genocidal rape, concubinage, and rape-murder. In Jones's analysis, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda's (ICTR's) ruling against Jean-Paul Akayesu, a Rwandan mayor who was successfully convicted of facilitating the mass rape of Tutsi women in his commune, rendered “sexual assaults... not merely adjuncts to genocide, or indicative of genocidal intent, but... *genocidal in themselves*” (573; original emphasis).

representational strategies contest intransigent hegemonic narratives by exposing women's absences without actually rewriting the institutionalized, masculinist scripts that "make history." The end-result is a "neutered history," a repressed narrative not merely neutralized but emasculated, defanged of its assumed right to represent the truth and castrated of its long-unquestioned, institutionalized power (6).

Diop and Danticat challenge power structures through critiques of heteropatriarchal masculinity that permeate their heroines' relationships to both genocide-era perpetrators and post-genocide institutions, namely the family, church and government.³¹ In both novels, perpetrators are primarily male, and each poses his violence as a patrilineal obligation—a duty to restore the purity of his father's bloodline and ideology for the future. While Danticat permits only Trujillo to speak at key turning points in Valencia and Pico's family drama, Diop juxtaposes Cornelius's and Jessica's testimonies with many accounts from perpetrators and otherwise unknown survivors. Whereas female survivors' testimonies across these two novels are very aware of their irreducible differences and conflicts with their communities, perpetrators use the testimonial form primarily to vindicate their own myopia. As early as *Murambi*'s second chapter, Faustin Gasana, an indignant young Hutu, promises to rectify the "same mistakes" their truculent fathers have been making since the first unsuccessful wave of violence in 1959 (loc. 241). His derangement signals that 1994 Rwanda is beyond international reproach; in a heart-to-heart with

³¹ Foucault lists these institutions among many others in the making of racism as a modern invention: "Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, 'biologizing,' statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concerned with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race" (*HOS* 149); he goes on to name Nazism, e.g. genocide, as the most deleterious state-sponsored institution operating on a "fantasy of blood" in his consciousness up to date (i.e., pre-Rwandan genocide).

his infirm father, the two men take inspiration from Hitler, who they initially misidentify as “the Frenchman who wanted to kill all the white Inyenzi during their big war” (247). Diop’s critique of colonialism as laying the groundwork for genocide is hidden in this inaccuracy: the men misperceive France, Rwanda’s colonial fatherland, as Hitler’s birthplace. Meanwhile, the only person whose judgment Faustin fears is his silent mother’s.

Before Cornelius heads to Murambi, Jessica informs him that his father not only masterminded “the carnage” but also murdered Cornelius’s mother, younger siblings, and all his in-laws (loc. 813). Jessica explains that “being married to a Tutsi” became most repellant to Karekezi in the midst of his own failed activism as a Hutu moderate; unlike Jessica, Cornelius’s father could not isolate himself, and his shame turned him towards violence (822). Cornelius’s epiphany that he is “the son of a monster” renders him “the perfect Rwandan: both guilty and a victim”— complicit in the very horror that violates him (822-831). As Jessica cautions, many of the *genocidaires* were fathers who left sons like Cornelius to inherit the burden of learning from or denying involvement. In another instance, Michel Serumundo, whose Tutsi family cohabitates with a Hutu neighbor, impotently quells his wife’s worries while remembering the specters of other genocides he has already viewed on television: “Guys in slips and masks pulling bodies out of a mass grave. Newborns they toss, laughing, into bread ovens. Young women who coat their throats with oil before going to bed. ‘That way,’ they say, ‘when the throat-slitters come, the blades of their knives won’t hurt as much’” (176).³² In his memory, images of genocide far afield, ambiguously resonant of atrocities from the Holocaust to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia,

³² A note on translation: in the vast majority of cases, the published English translation lines up identically with the original French. I quote the original French when there are important word choices to verify or slight slippages to note; in a few instances, I point out a more glaring discrepancy. If I am quoting Diop without noting the French at all, it means I have allowed the English translation to stand alone.

gravitate around the exceptional vulnerability of women and children— women who groom themselves for the throat-slitters, infants (and the futures they embody) incinerated.

Jessica's complicated family history has directed her political life. Unlike Faustin's or Cornelius's fathers, Jessica's father participated in the earliest socialist movements in Africa, including Che Guevara's organized resistance in the Congo. Her father has jokingly "promise[d] to leave [her] all his goods to the one of us who could reproduce the same scars on his own body" (350); in the original French, *à reproduire les mêmes blessures* can also translate to "the same wounds"— an injury that never quite heals, marking the Black, African female body as different in the name of politics (45). Thus scars are Jessica's only meaningful inheritance from laboring for political change. Even so, she attributes her valor to her mentally ill mother in a letter to Cornelius before his homecoming; she confesses, "My mother played a much bigger role in my choices than even I had ever imagined when she was alive. Her image follows me everywhere. She remains, even in her tomb, the secret witness to my life" (660). Rather than tainting her childhood, her mother's illness and subsequent disrespect for gender norms inspired Jessica's nonconformity. Her mother's spectral presence, which alternated between paranoid silence and "talk[ing] to herself in the streets," encourages Jessica to control her own voice and *not* let irrational violence drive her insane (660).

In contrast, the strict gender dynamics at work in Cornelius's father's household show how heteropatriarchy corrodes collective conscience. Cornelius's "self-effacing" mother, who bowed to her traitorous husband's machinations, barely keeps her face in his memory; he can recognize her and his younger sister and brother only as part of a collective loss, not as individuals (1293). The time of the genocide in Cornelius's memory, captured from the distance of a childhood in exile, takes on the demeanor of a derelict father, reversing the natural laws of

progress: “It was an epoch when time staggered backwards, drunk with hatred. Death came before life. And later, Murambi. His mother, Nathalie. He hardly knew her either” (1293). He realizes no one ever gathered her testimony. Nathalie became “silent, always” in response to Cornelius’s father’s fatal decision “to become a powerful man,” even though power guaranteed “blood on his hands” (1477-1490) As Siméon Habineza, his father’s surviving brother, repeats to Cornelius, “Joseph [Cornelius’s father] was her god. He had completely effaced her [*il l’avait anéantie*, devastated her] and she saw the world only through her husband’s eyes” (loc. 1488; 198). In other words, his parents’ marital dynamic represents, in small, the engulfing tendencies of his father’s political imaginary: his mother has compromised her whole sense of self to attain her husband’s recognition.

By and large, *The Farming of Bones*, in contrast, spotlights fatherheads embodied in the church and state who determine collective futures. The novel portrays Trujillo as the Parsley Massacre’s most insidious perpetrator, cloaked in the very fabric of everyday life and yet barely present. In Señor Pico and Señora Valencia Duarte’s home, the family refers to Trujillo with the deferential shorthand, “the Generalissimo” (Danticat 42). Since her parents drowned in Massacre River when she was a child, she has lived with Valencia’s family. Metonymically, her story as a woman who belongs nowhere and to no one stands in for the tens of thousands of Haitians in the Parsley Massacre for whom survival did not promise vindication from social, economic, and political oppression. The metonym “Generalissimo” indicates the ubiquity of state power in the household, where Trujillo’s presence literally looms in a painting created by Valencia for her husband. The Generalissimo’s “coy gentle smile” and “bedroom eyes” in the portrait allegorize the complicated erotics of power coursing between Valencia and Pico, whose complicity as Trujillo’s ardent protégé brings the genocide into their home (42). Initially, their union thrives

with the birth of twins.³³ Valencia names Rosalinda after her mother, and Pico names Rafi, a nickname for Rafael, after Trujillo. At first, the twins' advent seems to reinforce the virtue of reproductive futurity. While Rafi emerges fair-skinned and hale, Rosalinda is dusky and frail, with a cowl ominously shrouding her face and an umbilical cord constricting her neck. Beholding the girl's cowl and cord, their obstetrician immediately poses Rafi, Trujillo's symbolic descendant, as a predator when he comments to Amabelle, "[it]'s as if the other one tried to strangle her" (18). The tableau of their birth thus places Rafi, Trujillo's namesake and his mother's "Spanish prince," in a dominant position over his comparatively slight sister (29). Her palette as an "Indian princess" also betrays the arbitrariness of genealogical lines drawn between language and lineage in the DR's rhetoric of *antihaitianismo* (29).³⁴ Valencia's first dialogue with Amabelle about her daughter concerns her dark skin; she frets, "My poor love, what if she's mistaken for one of your people?" (12). Valencia's callous question exposes the contingency of race and the interracial intermingling already latent in her supposedly undisputed bloodline. The twins thus are not scions of future hope but of precarity. They become undeniable harbingers for future division when Rafi suddenly dies. The heir's death unnaturally ruptures the heteropatriarchal line since Rosalinda, the "Moor," a fragile girl with skin "a deep bronze,

³³ Chancy relates all literal and figural twins in *The Farming of Bones*—Rosalinda and Rafi, Sebastien and Yves, Amabelle and Valencia—to "the trope of the *marassa*, or the *vodou* cult of twinship, by which women's solidarity is envisioned as a crucial component of ideological revolution" in *Framing Silence* (15) as well as in her article "Violence, Nation, and Memory."

³⁴ Although *antihaitianismo* preexisted the Parsley Massacre, it had never been consolidated into a statist ideology; Trujillo's government institutionalized *antihaitianismo* as "a complex, yet historically flawed, dominant ideology" by integrating elite intellectuals' Hispanophile leanings with the broader Dominican population's anti-Haitian prejudices (Sagás 46). This ideology operated in conventionally racist terms. It replicated unjustifiable, phobic stereotypes associated with Black bodies and delineated a false binary grounded in Eurocentric notions of racial purity: "Haitians were an inferior people, the pure descendants of black African slaves who were illiterate, malnourished, disease ridden, and believed in voodoo [*sic*]; Dominicans, on the other hand, were betrayed as the proud descendants of the Catholic Spanish conquistadores and the brave Taíno Indians" (47).

between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify” who has “[t]he profile of Anacaona, a true Indian queen,” survives instead (10; 118; 29). Not Trujillo’s miniature but Rosalinda, embodying Africanness and indigeneity in defiance of *antihaitanismo*, will live to tell this tale.

His masculinity wounded by the death of his heir, Pico’s fervor for the cause anxiously mounts with a desire to reassert his masculinity as he listens to Trujillo “shriek” racism on the radio.³⁵ Trujillo’s vitriol fuels Pico, his army, and an equally disenfranchised Dominican peasantry with purpose, all the while provoking terror and disbelief in Amabelle (96). The Generalissimo, the only historical actor who speaks for himself in Danticat’s novel, seems to testify directly to Pico on the radio: “You are independent, and yours is the responsibility for carrying out justice... Tradition shows as a fatal fact... that under the protection of rivers, the enemies of peace, who are also the enemies of work and prosperity, found an ambush in which they might do their work, keeping the nation in fear and menacing stability” (96). Haitians, the “enemies of peace,” are herein posed as vampires draining the spirit of the nation, “work and

³⁵ His mechanical hatred recalls the image of the unthinking parrot from Rita Dove’s 1983 poem commemorating the massacre, “Parsley,” which Danticat cites as an inspiration for her novel. While Trujillo paces his chamber “wonder[ing] / Who can I kill today,” his parrot “is, coy as a widow, practicing / spring,” echoing his false presumption that rebirth could spring from mass death (lines 39-40; 45-46). The simile likens Trujillo’s parrot, a metaphor for the mindless ventriloquism he desires from his citizenry, to a demure widow, prematurely severed from serving the nation as a mother and wife. The association emphasizes Trujillo’s urgency to emasculate insubordinates like Father Romain, who must seduce the former’s fragile ego to evade violence. But according to the speaker in Dove’s poem, a primary lack for his mother motivates Trujillo’s aggression— “*My mother, my love in death*” (line 81; original emphasis). He hallucinates hearing “a voice / so like his mother’s,” which prickles his eyes with tears (line 79). In a decision that would have stirred Pico’s heart, Trujillo chooses parsley as his weapon because, in the village where his mother raised him, men wore the herb “to honor the birth of a son” (line 84). Thus by warping a badge of respect for the next generation’s heirs into a tool of genocide, Trujillo contravenes cultural mores attached to both childbearing and motherhood. As Amabelle’s elders already know and have warned her, the only “inheritance” that her people’s children can claim are the “[p]roverbs, teeth suckings, obscenities, even grunts and moans once inserted in special places during conversations” (Danticat, *FOB* 265). Unlike Trujillo’s carefully orchestrated dogma, these non-verbal gestures of cultural belonging and recognition can persist without ideological backing. The revelation that “[t]he slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on” wakens Amabelle to the reality that “the river of blood” courses through “all of our houses” and therefore threatens every future (265).

prosperity,” while endangering the very solidarity on which the nation supposedly stands. The death of the couple’s light-skinned, visibly robust heir allegorically foreshadows not only the failure of the ethnic “cleansing” to come—the survival of Haitians as a people even within the DR’s borders— but also the survival of Amabelle and everything she represents, in spite of her physical frailty and racial vulnerability. The cleaving is evident in Valencia’s and Pico’s relationship. In the aftermath of Rafi’s death, Pico silently holding his shuddering wife seems to Amabelle “a sign of failure for this marriage, the abrupt union of two strangers, who even with time and two children— one in this world and one in the other— had still not grown much closer” (98). Here the absence of individual speech corroborates the hopelessness of their union, forged out of desires to preserve sameness through class status, race, ethnicity, and religion, rather than establish longer-lasting affinities *in* and *through* difference.

In these genocidal contexts, having a voice also meant having the power to perpetuate bloodshed since ideology has drowned out reason and resistance. Moreover, the institution of the family has shrunk into the smallest and most intimate scale for genocidal politics to play out. As Danticat chooses to preserve Trujillo’s original speech, so does Diop preserve the callous comment from France’s then-President François Mitterrand, “In those countries a genocide doesn’t mean much” (loc. 1704). By permitting Mitterrand and Trujillo— each of whom are, to borrow Cornelius’s words, the metonymic “old man [*Vieillard*]” of governmentality and state repression— to speak, Danticat and Diop preserve the violent link between state authoritarianism and genocidal masculinity as-is (1704). Similarly, when Amabelle encounters state institutions outside of the family only to sustain further invisibility and denial, her frustration affirms the urgent need for systemic change. The impossibility of garnering recognition for her suffering from the church or the Haitian government protracts trauma and living death as her state of

being. Operating on both literal and metaphorical levels, the suppression of her voice underscores the ubiquitous choicelessness in all possible outcomes for her destiny. This is not to undermine the bravery in her individual *attempt* to speak, but it is to emphasize the grave extent to which the state's very infrastructure is inimical to her survival.

In contrast to many triumphalist readings,³⁶ like Meacham's, who optimistically sees Amabelle as "confront[ing] death with love, transcend[ing] violence through community, and heal[ing] suffering with a profound belief in the power and continuity of the spirit," I argue that *The Farming of Bones* compels us to recognize that the absolute injustice facing Amabelle is the relentless *impossibility* of love, community, or the spirit transcending a kind of death that is not only deeply, personally intimate but also intrinsically social (137).³⁷ Time after time, Amabelle's imperturbable hope affirms Warren's point that hope is a cruel opiate for Black women whose rights do not matter to the state. At many junctures, she believes Sebastien has survived, that the law *will* protect her once she finally crosses the border into Haiti, that her childhood home "[is] still [her] birthright," and it is her responsibility to "try and find the future" herself (183). But in each instance, Amabelle comes to consciousness of the undeniable horror around her and the impossibility of any future she previously envisioned for herself and Sebastien. A woman's mutilated corpse tumbles out of a truck bed overflowing with bodies. Bloated bodies, including two boys, "dangl[e] at the end of bullwhip ropes" from trees (186). The insurmountability of her

³⁶ For other examples, see Chancy's "Facing the Mountains: Dominican Suppression and the Haitian Imagination" and Nadia Ragbar's "Imagining Post-Colonialism as a Revolutionary Reality: Edwidge Danticat's *Opus* as a Testimony of Haitian Women's Survival through Narration" in the *Journal of Haitian Studies*.

³⁷ Although I agree with Meacham that the prospect of testifying gives Amabelle "an ethical purpose in surviving, to leave a record so that the dead will find their place in the communal memory," I think it is necessary to acknowledge the more pessimistic reality that every established outlet for testimony actually disables her from satiating this desire (133).

suffering— her inability to overcome collective trauma of such unimaginable proportions, especially in the absence of a narrative outlet— is exactly why the mechanisms of oppression that incited genocide must be overhauled.

The first rejection of Amabelle’s testimony at a state institution occurs at the courthouse, where officials record testimonies and furnish meager monetary reparations on behalf of then-Haitian President Stenio Vincent. Her friend Yves’ characterization of the government writing down testimony as an attempt “to erase bad feelings”— an affective erasure that supposedly nullifies personal trauma— ironically foreshadows both Dominican and Haitian governments’ complicity in repressing the crimes from cultural memory (230). When Amabelle first waits her turn at the courthouse, she notices that three classes of survivors can skip the queue: the “most mangled victims,” so visibly defaced that their wounds become a privilege for witnessing, “pregnant women,” and people who bribe the soldiers (231). The “vague order” that therefore creates a hierarchy of worthy witnesses brings the most brutalized bodies parallel with those bearing the next generation, even though none leave the courthouse satisfactorily compensated for their suffering (231). The report given by the last woman whose testimony is heard affirms that all classes of victim are nevertheless doomed to the same bureaucratic black hole. Recognition, she says, depends on “papers to show that all these people died” (233). Aside from vacant gestures of sympathy, the state only plans to remunerate deaths that register— those that are part of the archive, with “papers to show,” which is to say, certainly not deaths like Sebastien’s. The courthouse’s complicity is evident in the uniforms worn by Haitians patrolling it; guards wear the same uniform as “the Dominican soldiers— a common inheritance from their training during the Yanki [*sic*] invasion of the whole island” (233).³⁸ Several institutionalized

³⁸ Just before the Parsley Massacre, the U.S. occupied the whole of Hispaniola. U.S. collusion with the landowning elite and corrupt government fleeced Haiti’s economic and political sovereignty through

and competing regimes are at stake here: those of Dominican dominance, Haitian subservience, and American imperialism behind the power struggles.

Thus turned away from the courthouse, Amabelle searches out the priest who helped plan her foiled escape from the DR with Sebastien. Rather than submitting to a state institution's attempts to direct her voice, Amabelle begins to re-script her existence out of ontological erasure. She finds Father Romain outside the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. But surviving torture has mentally decimated him to a drooling mouthpiece for Trujillo's *antihaitianismo*. "Our problem is one of dominion," he parrots, "Tell me, does anyone like to have their house flooded with visitors, to the point that the visitors replace their own children? How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders?" (260). Completely alienated from his activism, Father Romain's only script is Trujillo's diatribe about the dangers miscegenation poses to the republic's future. In place of redress, Amabelle yet again discovers more extensive damage. The genocide has ruptured not only the bonds of family, but also the sanctity afforded to religion and

"systemic poverty and the criminalization of the Haitian revolutionary psyche" (Ragbar 111). Danticat's novel makes numerous gestures towards this "Yanki" occupation of the island. Americans erected the cane mills where socioeconomic tensions fueled Trujillo's fatal decree. On the other side of the border, Americans also trained Haitian troops to suppress uprisings amongst common people. Soldiers across Hispaniola patrolled their territory in U.S. khakis and shared English as their *lingua franca*, a reason Danticat cites for writing the novel in English rather than Kreyól. U.S. plantation owners and military personnel thus shifted from being the island's most vocal intermediaries to its most deafeningly silent bystanders. Previously, an American presence tacitly maintained peace, albeit because of the power of international finance and not human rights. Danticat situates the U.S.'s egregious absence prominently in the background of her fiction to expose American complicity as a constitutive force in the historical event. Indeed, as Elizabeth Swanson-Goldberg points out (by way of historian Richard Lee Turits), only one concentrated attack on sugar plantation workers occurred in the Dominican Republic during the Parsley Massacre; most of the 20,000 dead were not targeted for being *braceros*. In other words, hardly any plantation workers were targeted likely because the U.S. managed most of the sugar plantation economy. Thus, by presenting such a rare circumstance as if it were the norm, Danticat strategically misrepresents history— not only to highlight the special degradation that cane workers faced, but also to indict transnational networks of neocolonial, neoliberal power that contributed to their immolation. Her novel challenges popular memory affirming the U.S.'s role as principally a negotiator for Haitian rights after the massacre. (For two years following the event, the U.S. parlayed with Trujillo and then President of Haiti, Sténio Vincent, to demarcate the first legal, permanent border between Haiti and the DR.)

the trust owed to the state. Her testimony is supposed to be legitimate as speech to God or the law, but structural damage in both contexts keeps her evidence from entering the record.

Disillusioned by her failures to gain recognition from family, the state and the church, the only country that Amabelle wishes to visit is “the country of death,” where Sebastien now lives, if the gossipers outside his mother’s house are correct (237). If a survivor of an atrocity does not have access to a testimonial outlet and, consequently, the narrative agency to reestablish oneself in the world of social life, then “the destruction of the self is a social act, most fundamentally pushing the self back into its cellular, nonsocial, surviving self, and at the same time fusing the self with that of a demanding and destroying other” (Culbertson 179). Thus Amabelle retreats into her aloneness, bereft of reentry into the hospitable society she needs. It is finally at this juncture when Amabelle visits Sebastien’s mother and learns that Sebastien was likely executed “between two government edifices” in Santiago (Danticat, *FOB* 240). The setting of his massacre between two state buildings stages the hopelessness of her political situation and reminds Amabelle of her voicelessness. Indeed, the difference between Rosalinda and Amabelle is that Rosalinda’s class privilege will cloak whatever racial or ethnic differences shimmer on her skin. Amabelle belongs to an invisible class, what Sebastien’s ghost calls the “*vwayajè*, wayfarers” in Kreyòl— wayfarers whose only kinship is their shared belonging nowhere (56).

A Refusal to Return: Women’s Anti-Reproductivity and the Question of a Future

The Farming of Bones opens with a testimonial form, a confession, that politicizes Amabelle’s interdependency with Sebastien, severed through genocide: “I am afraid I cease to exist when he’s not there” (Danticat, *FOB* 2). Indeed, the opening lines of *The Farming of Bones*, “His name is Sebastien Onius,” situate all preceding historical events in the framework of Amabelle’s loss as the reality determining her personal testimony (1). Naming Sebastien is an

act of resistance against his ontological erasure. Amabelle introduces him as a specter of her own history who “comes most nights to put an end to [her] nightmare” (1). In these liminal dream-states, he is not a willowy ghost but a palpable reemodiment of his missing self, whose sweat, lips, fingernails, and tongue she can still recognize. His body is already scarred, and his “palms have lost their lifelines to the machetes that cut the cane” (1). Poverty and racism put his life under erasure long before Trujillo launched his edict. In the absence of Sebastien, whom Amabelle likens to her “shadow,” with shadows having been her only “real or present” friends since childhood, all her ties are now imagined and past (1). Amabelle inhabits what Achille Mbembe has termed “a place where life and death are so entangled that it is no longer possible to distinguish them, or to say what is on the side of the shadow or its obverse” (197; original emphasis). In Sebastien’s absence, any fantasy of a right to her even own body dissipates; his absence constantly reminds her that their love has been subjected to an inimical state’s control. And the state, as Jared Sexton claims in his work on Afro-pessimism, is essential to “the modern world system” whose social codes circumscribe black life so that “a living death is as much a death as it is a living” (69). As a Black Haitian maid, her class, race, birthplace, and gender are always already at odds with being a rights-bearing citizen in the DR’s corner of that larger world system.

Through her devotion to Sebastien, Amabelle experiences the freedom to be shorn of identification—to be whatever she feels, when she feels it, to be “you... only you, just the flesh,” and not “this uniform they make for you,” as Sebastien describes her in the dreamy reverie that opens the novel (2). Her imagination becomes the only platform where his testimony can still be heard. Through Sebastien, Amabelle experiences ontological agency, the capacity to define herself outside of society’s strictures, such as sexism and gender roles. Beyond asking

permission to be engaged to her, Sebastien never once pressures Amabelle to conform any archetype of a would-be wife or someday mother. Thus in his absence, Amabelle loses the fantasy of more than one kind of freedom (because indeed, in the context of Trujillo's tyranny, any kind of freedom was a fantasy for every Haitian): the freedom to be the *woman* she chooses, *as she chooses*, perhaps even the freedom *to be* at all. The loss leaves her "grieving for who I was, and even more for what I've become"—by the novel's end, an elder dishonored by childlessness, divorced of ties to tribe and kin in honor of his disappearance (2).

Amabelle's failure to escape home with Sebastien also allegorizes problems with race-, class-, and nationality-based kinship structures in the DR. Valencia's belated hemorrhage from her labor, just after the death of the family's newborn heir, waylays Amabelle en route to meeting Sebastien. Her efforts to protect adopted family from opposing standpoints come to naught: Valencia might still exsanguinate, and Sebastien has already left. When Amabelle finally does sneak out of the house, she witnesses Sebastien's fellow cane workers defaming motherhood in a standoff against Pico and his troops. The *braceros* vituperate Pico specifically on the basis of matrilineage: "The men called Señor Pico's mother the worst whore who was ever born to a family of whores; his grandmother and godmother were both cursed as disgraceful harlots" (154). Their slurs conflate Madonna and whore, misogynistically pinning the women behind Pico's bloodline as the root of the political problem. The erasure of gender equality and exploitation of women's sexuality motivate genocidal violence; women, who have no voice, are empty signifiers for waste in these *braceros*' words. Thus the aftermath of Valencia's fraught labor, followed by this scene of chauvinistic aggression from Dominican and Haitian men alike, poses sisterhood, reproduction, and contestations over bloodlines as equally responsible for the derailment of Amabelle's meeting with Sebastien and, consequently, the future she desires.

Valencia's failure to recognize her years later strikes the final blow to Amabelle's desires for family in the future. Instead of embracing Amabelle when she returns an exhausted old maid, Valencia regards her warily. Her skepticism not only offends Amabelle but also loosens the latter's hold on reality: "That she did not recognize me made me feel that I had come back to Alegria and found it had never existed at all. But at the same time, without knowing it, she was giving me hope that perhaps all the people who had said that Mimi and Sebastien were dead, they too might have been mistaken" (294). Valencia's vacuous gaze draws into question not only Amabelle's ontological substance but also the history of her world and all the violence it has survived. Rather than submitting dejectedly to Valencia's disbelief, Amabelle incredulously asks herself, "How could she not know my voice, which, like hers, might have slowed and become more abrupt with age but was still my own?" (294). Even at this late stage, Amabelle will not accept her invisibility as inevitable. At this crucial turning point, she wins a "battle" to force Valencia into recognition by divulging an irrefutable fact from their childhood: "Your father, he asked one of the children to the riverside to question me in Kreyòl, asking who I belonged to, and I answered that I belonged to myself" (295; 294). It is darkly ironic that an affirmation of her wholesale divorce from family, her status as one of Sebastien's *vwayajè*, authenticates her identity for her former friend and employer. Belonging to anyone else puts Amabelle at risk for a death-in-life that is not only social but also spiritual, rendering her voiceless and invisible. Yet, laying claim to her voice and becoming manifest, retreating from disappearance, requires relationality—someone to hear her testimony and behold her flesh and vulnerability. Thus trapped in a double bind between recognition and erasure, Amabelle's only recourse is to continue existing as a lone woman "looking for the dawn," as the last words of the novel

suggest— waiting for a future unscripted by dictates of blood and purity, even if history itself cannot be undone (310).

For both Diop and Danticat, fiction cannot relieve the effects of ontological erasure when institutional indifference persists post-genocide. The absence of any viable future only becomes more palpable amidst Sebastien's disappearance, the degeneration of each heroines' bloodlines, and the devaluation of their testimonies. To be fair, both Amabelle's and Jessica's yearnings for even unrequited attachment imply that they have not lost hope for change and their desire to belong; at the same time, "belonging" is not actually possible as long as their femaleness undercuts their capacity to be fully human. Rather than finding hope in survival or closure upon learning of her lover's murder, Amabelle weds her future to Sebastien's persistent ghost. Danticat privileges the emotionally destroyed, individual, unreproductive woman as a specter for her people's survival as well as their grief, suggesting an allegory for femininity that is not consonant with nationalist logic. Women will no longer bear out the stereotype of incubating future nationalists in their wombs; instead, they will bear witness to the taboos and prejudices that continue truncate their own being and jeopardize their hypothetical children's futures. By turning against the symbolic matrix of the past, Jessica and Amabelle become revelatory narrators who both "acknowledge and contradict the power embedded in previous understandings" of history to divert its course towards more just and honest ends (56). Jessica's and Amabelle's anti-reproductivity comments on their impossible futures in light of their political situations: if children extend the life of the nation, and the nation is rent with turmoil, then the absence of children spells the absence of a future, not only for an individual bloodline but also for the nation writ large.

In *Murambi*, Jessica is the only survivor who contributes formal testimony about having witnessed unnatural horrors that invert human relations, like “mothers [being forced] to crush their own babies before being executed themselves;” nevertheless, she has refrained from actively joining in violence (even if she, like Cornelius, has been implicated in it) (Diop, loc. 1091). Having witnessed genocide’s impact on the most intimate spheres of normal life— family, marriages, parenthood— she has maintained a stable point of view explicitly by avoiding institutions. For the “the abnormal order of things” to be corrected, Jessica believes every individual, institution, and nation that facilitated genocide must recognize itself as an “enormous bloodstain” in the unmaking of the world’s, not just Rwanda’s, history (1091; 1209). Not coincidentally, through Jessica, Diop reasserts the primacy of certain facts in the archive— dated notifications of arms transports, death tolls for Belgian U.N. soldiers, and, notably, the brutal assassinations of two prominent historical female figures, Rwanda’s first prime minister, Agathe Uwilingiyamana, and a Hutu activist-nun, Félicité Niyitegeka. In Diop’s portrayal of Niyitegeka’s case, the Interahamwe force her to watch them butcher the forty-three refugees in her shelter before executing her. For Uwilingiyamana, Jessica describes the act done to the prime minister as “beyond me,” to imagine “a woman’s body profaned” (337). The unspeakability of the female head of state’s mortification is reproduced in the novel’s silence on the subject— a silence replicated in histories of the genocide, which do not detail the “profanation” of Uwilingiyamana’s body. The novel’s elisions include facts such as: Uwilingiyamana was a Hutu moderate who became Head of State after Habyarimana’s assassination; ten Belgian U.N. troops defended her house and family against the Presidential Guard; and although Belgian troops considered standing down, all were ultimately “castrated and died choking on their genitalia,” according to the war journalist Scott Peterson’s account in *Me Against My Brother* (292). The

attack on Uwilingiyimana thus aimed not only to subjugate the only female prime minister in Rwandan history but also to emasculate international forces through terrorizing the feminine body.

Post-genocide, men's perceptions of Jessica confirm their problematic perceptions of women have not changed. During her reunion with Cornelius, he sees her as a wasted woman, "very thin and... in bad health under her determined forehead and her deep and slightly sad eyes" (Diop, loc. 395). Instead of seeing her as a weathered survivor, he paternalistically pities her frailty and her modest apartment, rented from a Kyovu-of-the-Poor house (539). His panic at her home's unsettling quiescence is almost laughable: "Only a tiny window let in any air, and for the first few minutes Cornelius had trouble breathing normally. The house seemed dead" (650). Her single woman's flat, resounding with silence rather than children or comfort, smothers him like a crypt. His eye creeps back to her emaciation: "Jessica's badly buttoned shirt revealed her bony chest. Her body was dry and graceless. He thought that she must have been very ill" (660). His memory of her raving mother, who died of madness at an early age, and her father, who "had belonged to some guerrilla group or another" incites more pity (660). He never thinks to compare their provenance: that, whereas Jessica is the child of anticolonial, anti-statist revolution, he is heir to genocidal mania, a violent inversion of the preexisting status quo. To the contrary, Jessica openly admits that she does not regret her austere way of life, which is both literally and figuratively barren: "No, when all's said and done, it doesn't really matter what happens to some or to others, or even to the country. We fought to make Rwanda normal. That's all. A good fight" (680). "Normal" in Jessica's view is thus expressly *not* political— not about the country or its stability, or even the home it represents, but about a return to baseline humanity that evades even "natural" bonds like family.

Unlike Cornelius, Jessica can exist outside the genocide. Despite not being “beautiful,” according to Cornelius’s judgment, she can take pleasure in sex without any intentions to marry, confessing her enjoyment of “feeling a man move inside [her] body” (749; 738). Cornelius recognizes to himself that she is “a woman with character, the kind that scares men” because she remains so sure of herself in their absence (738). Even so, he assumes her carnal desires must be tangled in the genocide when she confesses having a lost love; he presumes this ex-lover is “blood extracted from her by the genocide” like Amabelle’s Sebastien, a part of herself wrenched from her own innermost being (738). “Not at all!” Jessica exclaims: “What’s got into you, Cornelius, that you think that no one in this country is still alive?” (749). Her question rues his cynical attitude towards Rwanda’s present and emphasizes her own comfort with being a childless single woman. Despite her culture’s stigma against barrenness, which is stronger than any taboo surrounding pregnancy out of wedlock in Rwanda, Jessica feels at home with herself because she has found an interstice between institutions in which to survive.

Silencing or Speaking for the Other: The Trouble with Testimonial Forms

Although genocidal masculinity may have ignited preexisting ethnic and racial tensions, neither Amabelle nor Jessica escapes some level of complicity; indeed, their implicated subjectivities emphasize the full scale of the violence, which has polluted the bloodlines, psyches, and solidarities of even women whose intentions were only good. Invisibility is Amabelle’s *de facto* state as a maid who long ago learned the virtue of being present only when summoned. Yet, as the final scenes of her reunion with Valencia show, she does not consciously think of herself as lacking a voice or recognition— or as being seen as an absence without ontological substance. Rather, her onticide begins at the scene of mob violence during her initial flight to the border in search of Sebastien. Even though she has had so much practice

pronouncing *perejil* at markets and, “with all [her] senses calm, [she] could have said it,” (193) the mob never gives her the chance to try because they do not see her as a sentient, speaking human. They thrust parsley into her mouth while pummeling her body. After being saved by a friend she made during her flight, Odette, Amabelle accounts for her injuries: “My chipped and cracked teeth kept snapping against the mush of open flesh inside my mouth” (197). Her facial injuries symbolize the always already violated nature of her testimony, the futility of speaking when there is no one to recognize her account. Injured, her “words ran together, blurred and incomprehensible,” leaving her “unable to speak [her] desires;” even her comrades cease registering her hopeless attempts at communication as having any meaning (199; 205).

Her silencing through violence assumes an even grimmer irony during their crossing of Massacre River; one of Trujillo’s men shoots Odette’s husband, and Amabelle claps her hand over her friend’s mouth while they are swimming. In her effort to keep Odette’s wails from jeopardizing all their lives, Amabelle accidentally drowns the woman who saved her. Thus the infelicitously named river where Amabelle’s own parents died becomes the end of Odette and Wilner’s future and, for the first time, Amabelle, not forces outside of her control, is partially responsible. The impulse to silence a fellow woman to survive haunts Amabelle, and her regret reveals the sheer finitude of her agency during and after genocide. As she later confesses to Sebastien’s ghost in a dream, “living death” for lack of courage becomes her only option for survival (283).³⁹ In dreams with her mother, Amabelle repeats a statement Valencia first made about her own mother: “I will never be a whole woman... for the absence of your face” (208).

³⁹ Despite how often Amabelle describes herself living in a state of death, I stop short of allegorizing her existence to that of a zombie, the proverbial “living dead.” Kaiama Glover, however, has offered a provocative analysis of the zombie figure and social death in Spiralist fiction from Haiti in her article “New Narratives of Haiti: Or, How to Empathize with a Zombie.”

Amabelle becomes a foil for Valencia and vice versa, just as Odette becomes a foil for Amabelle's mother; these metaphorical links create a new genealogy that simultaneously ruptures and recreates chains of filiation. When Amabelle's mother apostrophizes her daughter as "my eternity" in the dream, time moves beyond teleological repro-time to encapsulate time without end (208). Her apostrophe affirms Sexton's point that "a living death is as much a death as it is a living;" the eternal life of memory cannot be disentangled from social death as a living state in Amabelle's genocidal context (69).

Whereas Amabelle implicates herself in the genocide by accident, Jessica consciously compromises others as an informant for the Rwandese Patriotic Front. Affiliated with the government party that defeated the genocide, she must feign allegiance to the Interahamwe militia, even when it means concealing her identity at the expense of others' lives. Whereas Amabelle is bereft of all attachments, Jessica is perhaps beyond them. She has chosen her unspeakable "double life," which she "can't talk about to anyone," in the name of politics (Diop, loc. 307). Becoming an asset to the resistance movement that aims to take down the state at all costs gives her a way out of feminine choicelessness. When undercover, Jessica is *only* complicit in women's deaths— whether strangers, like a beggar with "the right part of her jaw and chest covered in blood," whom Jessica consigns to the "throat slitters," or friends, like Theresa Mukandori, whose corpse Cornelius and Jessica view on display four years later in Nyamata church (391). In this scene, bones take on the energy of talismans against social death in the future. Raped and murdered, with a stake "lodged in her vagina" and "her head pushed back and the scream extracted from her by the pain [that] had been frozen on her still grimacing face," Theresa's pain resounds in the present (770). In the original French, her scream is an animalistic

“howl” (*le hurlement*), a pose of primal degradation that conveys the complexity of her victimization: abjection married to rage, a scream masking voicelessness (96).

Jessica “hear[s] Theresa’s voice again” instead of speaking to Cornelius; she recalls that “dreadful dialogue with her friend [that] was still going on, four years down the road,” where time and distance collapse into each other (loc. 780). After they conversed about their friend Lucienne’s impending wedding, Jessica allowed Theresa to take shelter in the church, even though she knew Tutsis were being herded there only to expedite the slaughter. As Jessica silently hugged her best friend goodbye, Theresa insisted, “[T]hey’ll never be able to do anything, knowing that God can see them” (327). She did not know, as Jessica does and did, that visibility is not enough to mobilize shame against genocidal violence. For Jessica, the power of her friend’s voice— and the innocence it betrayed— outlasts any tenuous logic for her immolation and nags her conscience. The subject of their final conversation, Lucienne also faced violence at the hands of her paranoid Hutu fiancé. In Jessica’s words to Cornelius, just before viewing Theresa’s corpse:

“At first, he protected her, but one day he rushed at her with a machete, shouting, ‘No love today!’ Lucienne was obsessed by that scene, she couldn’t believe it, she talked about it all the time, laughing and crying at the same time. She ended up killing herself three months ago.” (Diop, *Book loc.* 738)

—Au début, il l’a protégée, mais un jour il s’est précipité sur elle avec sa machette en criant : «Il n’y a pas d’amour aujourd’hui!» Lucienne était obsédée par cette scène, elle n’y croyait pas, elle en parlait tout le temps en riant et en pleurant à la fois. Elle a fini par se suicider il y a trois mois. (Diop, *Livre* 91)

In Lucienne’s story, her husband’s proclamation that there will be “no love today” announces how hastily genocide halts affective temporality, arresting her in an insufferable present that finally tempts her to suicide even years after the event. Thus, in the presence of the genocide, no form of kinship survives— neither marriage, nor friendship, nor sisterhood.

In another instance, a nameless “stranger” of ethereal beauty enjoins Jessica to bear witness to the shameful acts that have secured her survival up to this point. The stranger knows Jessica’s true identity as a double agent but has no interest in exposing her. She testifies to tolerating a corrupt priest’s repeated rape so as to avoid the Interahamwe’s “special treatment,” a fate of enormous horror that Jessica has witnessed firsthand (916). The stranger describes “good family men [who] aren’t into violence” either standing by or taking turns defiling a woman as one of twenty or thirty pleasure-seekers (917). Sarcastically maligning these gang rapists as “good family men” emphasizes the total dissolution of familial norms. She describes fear of contracting AIDS, which the good family men strategically spread; the victim’s body thus risks being marked with the colonial stigma and collective fear associated with AIDS. The gratuitous destruction to her sex organs violently sunders her bloodline from any reproductive future. In the context of genocide, wherein gender-motivated violence “is ‘committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group by inflicting bodily and mental harm, causing death or group destruction, or preventing future births,’” rape also has political aims to dehumanize the individual and traduce the collectivity that she represents (Zrally, Rubin and Mukamana 411). During the genocide, rape was used to devalue Tutsi and Twa women on the basis of their cultures’ shared esteem for motherhood; pregnant Tutsi women were disemboweled, pregnant Hutu wives of Tutsi men were killed, and non-pregnant girls and women were subject to forcible impregnation (412-413). Overall, only 50,000 of the 350,000 women and girls raped during the genocide survived, and approximately 5,000 children were born to genocide-rape survivors (411; 413). The raped woman thus metonymizes her people’s degradation, and the onticide she faces certainly does not enable the *jouissance* that Lee Edelman fetishizes or the forward-thinking that José Esteban Muñoz idealizes for queer futurity.

In place of her name, which she refuses to give, and the recognition it would confer as an archivable remain, the stranger demands that Jessica understand the impossible scale of her choicelessness. She can be raped by one man and possibly survive in body if not in spirit, or she can submit to the end of recognition augured in her butchered body, taken “away in trucks to [be] cut... into pieces” (937). The English translation skips an important detail about the duration of sexual violence in the original French: the “coming apart” that the victim experiences is forever, never again [*à jamais*] to be the same (loc. 917; 120). The Interahamwe’s tactic is designed to decimate an individual woman’s spirit by desecrating her body and all the possibility that it could represent. By keeping her identity unknown, the stranger expands in Jessica’s memory as a metonym for all the “special treatments” and modes of social death reserved for women. This is even the case for those like the nun Félicité Niyitegeka, implicated in institutions like the church, for which Jessica repeats she has no words: “All that is absolutely unbelievable. Even words aren’t enough. Even words don’t know any more what to say” (loc. 948); in French, “*même les mots n’en peuvent plus*” literally translates to “words are overwhelmed,” suggesting that words alone simply *cannot* convey these memories (124). Speech is powerless to protest such unnatural violence.

Conclusion: Is There Hope for a Future?

Both Amabelle and Jessica ultimately evade social death by refusing to participate in inevitably circumscribed narratives for social life. Moreover, both remember atrocity by absenting themselves from society as they know (or knew) it. Genocide has put family and motherhood at odds with bare conditions of survival and recognition. Amabelle’s and Jessica’s decisions not to resume responsibilities for reproductive futurity are thus particularly paradoxical because motherhood would secure at least the *semblance* of a socially and politically validating

reentry into their communities. Before the genocide, Rwanda's fertility rate, for example, ranked as one of the highest in the world. After the genocide, motherhood as an ideal of national reconstruction remained despite trauma in the aftermath of genocide-rape, just as it did in the Holocaust; as early as 2000, the fertility rate was as high as 5.8 children per single woman in Rwanda, rising to 6.1 just ten years after the genocide in 2005.⁴⁰ In the aftermath, and in contrast to their stigmatized lives as single women, their nation-states thus stubbornly continued charting progress according to reproductive futurity. This status quo risks reproducing divisive logics of blood and legacy that promoted genocidal ideologies in the first place. Refusing to participate in the reversion to the past's gender norms both intimately and politically responds to what Warren has called "extreme unfreedom" ("Onticide" 15). In such cases, Black women like Jessica and Amabelle are "liminal subjects" bereft of "symbolic placement, differentiating flesh, and a grammar of suffering," thereby trapped within "the existential crisis of unfreedom" (15). Because they have already been subjected to onticide on a psychic level while surviving genocide on a physical level, they have been "placed outside of life and its customary lexis;" therefore, they exist in a space of without, their suffering denied symbolic gravity, corporeal empathy, and social intelligibility (21).

But instead of "giving voice" to these unknown women, Danticat and Diop track testimonies that reveal their unfreedom as an enduring injustice for human rights. Words may have the power to incite participation in genocide, but they do not have the power to correct the irreversible death that takes lives and erases worldviews therein. As Siméon Habineza, a widely respected community leader and Cornelius's uncle in *Murambi*, states, there simply "are no

⁴⁰ See Pierre Claver Rutayisire, Pieter Hooimeijer, and Annelet Broekhuis's article "Changes in Fertility Decline in Rwanda: A Decomposition Analysis" in the *International Journal of Population Research*.

words to speak to the dead” (loc. 1607). What *was* perhaps just a way of speaking— of off-handedly commenting, as Joseph Karekezi, Siméon’s diabolical brother and Cornelius’s father, once did about being “between two bloods,” himself Hutu and his wife Tutsi— has become a way of being or not being, of believing or disbelieving (1488). According to Siméon, words have, at least in part, made possible and believable an ideological structure for mass death that contravenes even the most basic “laws” of human nature, like protecting family:

“Four years ago people said: ‘Times are difficult, maybe if we kill one part of the population everything will get better.’ Wasn’t that an incredible way of thinking? Young girls killed their fathers. Mothers killed their sons. Husbands killed their wives. And they all did it joyfully. They got together in churches to make raucous fun of dying human beings.” (Diop, *Book loc.* 1613)

—Il y a quatre ans, des gens ont dit : les temps sont difficiles, peut-être que si nous tuons une partie de la population, tout ira mieux. N’était-ce pas une façon étonnante de penser? La jeune fille a tué son père. La mère a tué son fils. Le mari a tué sa femme. Et tous l’ont fait dans la joie. On se réunissait dans les églises pour se moquer bruyamment des êtres humains en train de mourir. (Diop, *Livre* 212)

In French, Siméon’s rhetoric is more metonymic than totalizing: “*the* young girl!” kills her own father; “*the* mother,” her sons; “*the* husband,” his wife. A single social function embodies a monolithic archetype for girlhood, motherhood, and marriage as well as the unnatural inversions genocidal thinking posed to each status quo. Thus Siméon is striving to comprehend an incomprehensible shift in his country’s cultural imaginary, the self-annihilating social dynamics through which mothers learned how to kill their heirs and, in the process, their own legacy.

A moral scion for Cornelius’s generation, Siméon singles out Jessica as “the kind of person Rwanda needed in order to come to terms with itself” (loc. 1654). Indeed, Siméon tells Cornelius, “Jonas Sibomana’s daughter [Jessica] makes me forget all the children I’ve lost;” thus, Jessica, in embodying a surrogate child for Siméon, manifests a unique possibility for social change that could counteract his children’s disappearance by waylaying violence in the

future (1654). Figurations like Jessica and Amabelle are thus performing the epistemological work of rescripting women's lives in the face of social death and ontological erasure and navigating futures with uncertain horizons. Insofar as their physical survival behooves them to continue interacting with state institutions— church, government, and family— they chart ways to exist despite continued attempts at their effacement as Black women. Jessica even participates Rwanda's reconstruction by spearheading women's causes that assist orphans of genocide and rape victims. And like Jessica, Siméon is finding unlikely ways to recalibrate the status quo on behalf of "what is yet to be born rather than what is already dead" (1352).

Their collaboration in establishing an orphanage in Murambi especially undermines fetishes with blood and legacy at the center of their status quo. Instead of demolishing his brother's compound as the townspeople desire, Siméon turns Cornelius's childhood home into a shelter "for all the orphans who hang about on the streets of Murambi" and otherwise face the perils of a parentless life (1576). As an institutional landmark, the orphanage refurbishes a space of unnatural death, the transgressed family home, as an asylum. In this household where the future will be reconstructed, the only unspeakable utterances that Siméon promises to punish are identifications of anyone as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa; thus, the family home, once an institution securing the state's power through punitive ideologies, becomes a site wherein the future can be reconstructed and preexisting discourses radically transgressed. In contemplating Siméon and Jessica's mission to re-home Rwanda's rootless children, Cornelius returns to a memory of Siméon schooling him on "the birth of Rwanda" before he went into exile; a flute-playing child whom he remembers seeing on the shore of Lake Mohazi resurfaces as "[t]he image of a world that nothing could destroy" (481; 1352). The memory of the child carries a symbolic invincibility that outlasts the child himself, who may or may not have survived genocide. Siméon's and

Jessica's purpose is thus not to give birth to a new body politic, literally or figuratively, and therein risk reproducing the ideologies of blood, birthright and belonging that fomented the genocide. Instead, they refrain from drawing new blood for the future in order to salvage the remnants of the now and forever mottled eternity that belongs to the *children* of genocide. In this frame, the only future possible must recognize its self-destructive logic instead of pretending that hope alone can heal extant inequalities.

Like Cornelius, Danticat and Diop are “confident of the future, of its long memory and infinite patience” as it confronts ongoing strife in the present (1704). The “amnesia” that envelopes the Parsley Massacre in popular memory has “produced an obscuration of the widespread repression of Haitians by Rafael Trujillo” seeping into Dominican-Haitian relations today (Chancy, “Facing” 8). As of December 2015, the Dominican Republic threatened to deport as many as 20,000 Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent, with nearly 3,000 of 10,000 officially expelled having been forcibly displaced to refugee camps in Haiti.⁴¹ Rwanda has more aggressively memorialized the atrocity with museum-memorials like Murambi and the removal of ethnic designations from identification cards.⁴² Yet, an official moratorium on voicing ethnic

⁴¹ See Danticat's June 2015 op-ed for *The New Yorker*, “Fear of Deportation in the Dominican Republic” and Azam Ahmed's December 2015 news update in the *New York Times*, “Forced to Flee Dominican Republic for Haiti, Migrants Land in Limbo.” Danticat's column draws attention to the Dominican government's plans to act on a 2013 court ruling that reserves Dominican citizenship for people who can prove one full-Dominican parent if they were born after 1929— anyone who was a child under the age of eight in the time of the Parsley Massacre, in other words. In the Dominican Constitution, rights to the soil, or *jus soli*, determine citizenship; thus, Haitians who have lived in the Dominican Republic for several generations but lack *jus soli* by nature of their birth have been categorized as a people “in transit,” vulnerable to deportation without recourse at any point in time.

⁴² Banning ethnic categories from identity cards is part of President Paul Kagame's “Rwanda Vision 2020” campaign, which aims to mandate national reconciliation through political and economic reform. Before Vision 2020, community-based, small-scale truth and reconciliation commissions known as the *gacaca* courts were Rwanda's primary legal means for remediating genocide crimes; however, these courts have received criticism for many reasons, including the allegation that the courts' tendency to

difference achieves a similar effect to the systematic silence maintained in the DR's history books. These political stratagems are, on some level, tantamount to "endorsing silence" to restore an already broken and abnormal status quo, thereby "legitimiz[ing] a social silence that not only leaves unexamined the conditions of possibility of genocidal massacres, but also inhibits survivors' ability to forge the recognition of their survival and reclaim their do with in our cultural 'scene'" (Dauge-Roth 22). These measures do not destabilize the interlocking matrices of domination that heightened previous ethnic tensions, such as mass poverty, internalized racism, xenophobia and state paranoia, colonialism, and rape.

I have argued that Jessica and Amabelle refuse to return to normal when they refuse motherhood as a sacred principal in their societies. A precarious peace was normal before the genocide, as was women's voicelessness and invisibility. Thus, their decisions to lead anti-reproductive lives are expressions of that explore the limits of their choicelessness— to restore order to national history and the erasure it already promised to women, or to break from the script and at least partially exclude themselves from recognition in cultures that seek to own but not validate them. Neither Amabelle nor Jessica is rendered infertile in the aftermath of genocide, as if by will of the gods as punishment for human error; in fact, they do not passively submit to spinsterly futures but choose to maintain their independence at the cost of belonging to a family. Both women certainly feel the absence of kinship as an irreparable yearning, but their solitude implicitly acknowledges that belonging carries a price. Genocide depends on a racist fallacy that preserves the fictional purity of a bloodline; in this frame, reproduction transmits blood, legacy, and memory. Bloodlines cannot survive in the absence of children, just as

encourage conformity to a narrative of national forgiveness suppressed victims' voices and antisocially promoted their silencing in new ways.

generations cannot perpetuate exclusionary values, ideologies and norms antedating the genocide if women abstain from procreating. In short, without bloodlines to fetishize, the risk of repeating genocide lessens because legacies themselves dissipate; indeed, with exactly this knowledge in mind, Jessica helps found the orphanage to recover children severed from their legacies through genocidal violence. Her partnership with Siméon to do so is highly symbolic. The childless elder joins forces with the intentionally barren woman; together, they create a new vision of the future, where platonic alliances built on justice, not blood, are paramount for undermining the traditional thinking that instigated violence again and again in the past.

Chapter 4: The Banality of Evil: Forensic Reports and Hate Speech in Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*

In a photo I remember vividly but can locate nowhere, a skull yawns out of Mexico's scrubby borderland; its teeth bite down on a fist-sized rock. In the slightly out of focus background, men's legs are wearing boots. The boots probably belong to cops and forensic investigators, maybe a reporter. The black boots face each other, boxed into conversations kept away from the disembodied remnant. Synecdochally, the shoes' sharpness and grimy luster bring state power into the picture; they symbolize dominance, neoliberal law and order, grim, uniform-issued identity juxtaposed with personal de-individuation.¹ But here, on the detail of the boots, my memory risks romanticizing their power; the truth is, I remember the skull in the foreground best. I remain struck by the incomprehensible fact that the first time I saw the remains of her face, I did not even see what I was seeing. I looked twice, thought I saw a car part or some other trash, and instead couldn't *not* see her teeth, resting on a rock.

In this chapter, I present one Latin American author's strategy for mapping impunity in a real-life case—the 500+ unsolved *feminicidios*, or women's and girls' murders,² that have

¹ In its most basic usage, I take “neoliberalism” to signify a dangerous conflation of international wealth and government, which Alice Laurel Driver describes in “*Más o menos muerto: Bare Life in Roberto Bolaño's 2666*”: “a level of complicity between wealthy business owners and politicians that demonstrates the way in which sovereign power has become something shared by the parallel structures of government and big business, two powers that often define bare life, because, in excluding certain elements of the population, their own power grows” (53).

² The official femicide numbers vary; this moderate estimate comes from one of the more recent scholarly publications at my disposal, Alicia Gaspar del Alba and Georgina Guzmán's introduction to *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. Writing about *2666* for the *Nation* in 2008, Marcela Valdes cites “more than 430 women and girls” (13). Amnesty International tallies a lower number, around 370 since 1993, but emphasizes sexual torture on at least 137 bodies; a local nonprofit, Casa Amiga, much more steeply counts 254 *feminicidios* in the border metropolis in 2002 alone (Gaspar del Alba and Guzmán 9).

accumulated along the U.S.-Mexico border since 1993.³ Most victims are low-income women of color from *maquiladoras*, essentially mass production plants for U.S.-based businesses that operate like sweatshops.⁴ The United Nations defines “femicide” as the “gender-motivated killing of a woman”—in other words, a crime motivated by a politics of misogyny, not passion, circumstance, or even apolitical indifference (4).⁵ The Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio (National Citizen Femicide Observatory), a Mexico-based NGO, puts the number of *feminicidios* in Mexico at 3,892 for 2012 and 2013 alone, with only a 1.6 percent conviction rate (Matloff, par. 7). Colloquially, the victims bear a number of nicknames: *las muertas*, the dead women; sometimes *las inditas del sur*, “the little Indian girls from the south of Mexico... who have arrived alone and disenfranchised in Ciudad Juárez to work at a twin-plant *maquiladora* and earn dollars to send back home;” and also *maqui-locas*, low-paid laborers by day living *la*

³ For more comprehensive background on *feminicidio* in Latin America, see Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano’s introduction to *Terrorizing Women*.

⁴ In *The International Novel*, Annabel Patterson cites the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), coincidentally signed the same year as the start of the murders in 1993, as the impetus for *maquiladoras*, which facilitate easy exports from Mexico to the U.S. Laura Barberán Reñares, in *Sex Trafficking in Postcolonial Literature*, adds that 80 percent of *maquiladoras* are American-owned. Furthermore, working in them is so financially undesirable that women who are also jeopardized in multiple ways as “migrants from pauperized Mexican states or impoverished Central American countries” fill the assembly lines (122). Valdes points out that the improved infrastructure in Juárez that accompanied NAFTA—“good roads, proximity to a large consumer market, an abundance of unorganized labor”—literally paved the way for increased human and drug trafficking (14).

⁵ The United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, dated May 16, 2012, sketches a useful genealogy for the emergence of the neologism “femicide” and its relationship to *femicidio* and *feminicidio*, which are slightly different. “Femicide” as a gender-specific alternative to plain homicide was first proposed in the context of 1970s Second Wave feminism in the West; in 1990, scholars Jane Caputi and Diana Russell more formally defined it as “the killing of women by men motivated by hate, contempt, pleasure or the assumption of ownership of women” (qtd. in 4). The term gained exceptional traction in Latin America; whereas *femicidio* is the Spanish translation of the English neologism, *feminicidio* is a Latinate translation of that translation, which seeks to “add the element of impunity and institutional violence owing to the lack of accountability and adequate response of the State to such killings” (qtd. in 4). To maintain this institutional critique, I use *feminicidio* when referring to the term in Mexico, and the English word “femicide” to refer to gender-motivated killing more broadly.

vida loca as sex workers and drug users at night (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 1, 3). Thus dismissed as “public women,” the public perceives victims to be lacking enough self-respect to keep themselves safe in the private space of their homes after dark.⁶

Unlike the forty-three male student-activists who were disappeared to international attention in September 2014 in Iguala,⁷ these women have not been recognized as victims of state-sponsored forced disappearance.⁸ I ask, why not?⁹ Indeed, Roberto Bolaño, the Chilean

⁶ According to anthropologist Melissa W. Wright, “In Mexico, the term ‘public woman’ suggests the negative interpretation of a prostitute (*la puta*) who represents the ‘fallen woman’ whose uncontrolled sexuality represents a contagion and a threat to society” (272). See Melissa W. Wright’s “Witnessing, Femicide, and a Politics of the Familiar,” in *The Global and the Intimate* and also *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*.

⁷ To be clear, the Mexican government at the *federal* level has not acknowledged complicity in either the cases of the “Ayotzinapa 43” or the *feminicidios*. Rather, the sudden mass disappearance of these rural Mexican student-teachers while traveling to a protest sparked enough international controversy in the mass media to oblige the federal government to respond. Governmental tactics of disavowal included criminalizing the local police force as well as the mayor of Iguala and his wife. The federal government claims to be complying with human rights NGOs that are still searching for the missing bodies, but most international interventionists remain skeptical, given that the “mass grave” discovered by the government included only one victim’s ashes amongst incinerated pig remains. For more on the Iguala situation, see Camilo Pérez-Bustillo’s article, “Mexican Government on Trial for Crimes against Humanity.” For more on the preponderance of forced disappearance in Mexico more broadly, see the Human Rights Watch’s 2013 report, *Mexico Disappeared: The Enduring Cost of a Crisis Ignored*.

⁸ As discussed in chapter one, forced disappearance targets vulnerable populations who already exist within a state of exception that places them beyond the law. The strategy literally erases evidence of not only victims’ corpses but also official records like identification cards, timecards, and police reports that made their lives legible and “real” in the sphere of national life. By curtailing victims’ access to human rights on an ontological level, repressive regimes violently wrench their very identities as political dissidents outside of the bounds of recognition.

⁹ At some length, I quote Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Patricia Ravelo Blancas pursuing virtually the same question regarding the Juárez *feminicidios* beyond the realm of fiction: “If we define *disappearance* as kidnapping, being cut off from communication, torture, sexual abuse, and murder committed by unidentified agents who enjoy the protection and tolerance of the state, we must conclude that (1) there exists an agent that acts beyond the will of the state, which is the will of organized crime, for whose logic of power this type of death serves a purpose; (2) there is a stubborn concealment of the identity of the aggressor, which goes beyond merely denying that the disappearances have happened; (3) if one cannot believe in the capacity (or the innocence) of the state institutions, then all recommendations with respect to the disappearances and deaths of women have to take the uselessness of the state as a starting point” (195).

exile whose novels on Juárez occupy this chapter, seems to be asking the same question. For many scholars of human rights, the reason is obvious: as I detailed in chapter one, forced disappearance, a crime against humanity recognized by the United Nations occurs explicitly when the *state* or an *authorized agent* of the state illegally abducts, detains, interrogates, tortures, and/or executes a citizen for political reasons, removing their dignity beyond the bounds of the law. Such disappearances usually occur as part of a widespread phenomenon of state repression, individually or en masse, and, by definition, demand legal recognition and criminal redress from international human rights organizations. But as I will argue in this chapter, the *lack* of formal recognition accorded to the *feminicidios* does not originate from any inherent incompatibility between the definition of forced disappearance and the murders along the border; illegal abductions typify all the murders, and victims' bodies often show very definitive marks of torture, primarily sexual in nature (one-third show evidence of rape) (Valdes 13). Rather, the problem rests with vicissitudes in the law and its application—the subconscious biases written into forensic reports, for example, the high burden of evidence placed on sexually motivated crimes, and the modern criminal justice system's inability to reprehend structural violence.

In this chapter, I argue that Bolaño's Juárez novels—most famously, *2666* (2004), a thousand-page behemoth on *feminicidio* in Mexico, and its recently published companion novel, *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (*Woes of the True Policeman*, 2011)—expose the insurmountable limitations of common evidentiary forms for criminal justice through social realism. Bolaño's fictions of extreme violence create a shadow-universe in which make-believe bleeds into reality. When filtered through the bleed, the forensic report becomes a constructed object for political critique, not an objective recitation of facts from the crime scene. Bolaño devotes 284 pages—a fourth chapter appropriately titled “The Part about the Crimes” occupying

almost one-third of his *pièce-de-résistance*— to hyperrealistic depictions of *feminicidios*. He adapts his forensic reports from those of real crime scenes, which he procured illegally from a Mexican journalist, Sergio González Rodríguez.¹⁰ In all, this middle section of the five-part novel depicts 112 murders between 1993 and 1997, the early years of “the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history” (Gaspar del Alba and Guzmán 1).

However, *feminicidio* is a darkly ironic centerpiece for a 1000-page novel that starts and ends with vastly different subject matter: three bored academics’ search for the fictive and famously elusive writer, Benno von Archimboldi. Indeed, the search for Archimboldi, whose life story the fifth part of the novel traces back to pre-World War II Germany, is a red herring for the heart of Bolaño’s detective narrative. “The Part about Archimboldi” backtracks decades to Archimboldi’s destitute beginnings as Hans Reiter, the uneducated child of a physically disabled mother and racist patriarch in rural Germany. In contrast to the individual writer, whose mystery is resolvable and whose whereabouts are ultimately found, the *feminicidios* in part three never see justice. Arguably, the women’s “killers” are not individuals per se so much as metonyms for imprecise forces of evil, spawned from murky collusions between cartels, a neoliberal federal government, and the local criminal justice system. Bolaño’s reconstructions reveal how deeply ingrained and perhaps even unconscious biases against women across these forces predetermine the (in)efficacy of evidence. As I argue, he juxtaposes these reports with the immaterial evidence of hate speech from even queer and feminist protagonists and examples of forced disappearance from the Holocaust to expose the limitations of the modern state’s capacity to imagine justice.

Resistance to recognizing *las muertas* as victims of forced disappearance overlooks at least three increasingly frightening realities in the age of neoliberal globalization that makes

¹⁰ For more on this subject, see Rodríguez’s book on *feminicidio*, *Huesos en el desierto* (2002).

maquiladoras possible. First, gender-based violence—hardly ever regarded as organized state violence anyway—has been normalized as an unremarkable feature of everyday life, gauged on a slippery scale from “legitimate rape” to “locker room talk.”¹¹ In fact, attacking women *because* they are (fragile, disposable, promiscuous, defenseless) women *is* a political question of power. The refusal to acknowledge institutionalized misogyny as a motive for state murder obfuscates the inextricability of political repression from toxic masculinity on a broader cultural level. Second, *feminicidios* exceed conventional narratives of forced disappearance while still achieving similar or identical ends—the complete and eternal eradication of citizens whose collective existence poses a threat to a *machista* society’s norms. The relationship between *feminicidio* and ontological erasure should only underscore, not impede, the urgency of these crimes. Although women along the border may not be blindfolded in broad daylight and sequestered in an interrogation room by military police, their deaths have a different kind of value for those in power. As I argued in chapter three, the state instrumentalizes women’s bodies to advocate ideologies in which chastity and licentiousness, motherhood and degeneracy, are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, Ciudad Juárez, the epicenter of the *feminicidios*, is uniquely precarious; drug cartels and human trafficking, operating largely thanks to suspected collusion between *narcos* and government at various levels (certainly local police, but possibly municipal and even federal branches), fuel the economy.¹² Women primarily fill low-paying posts on

¹¹ Here I somewhat ruefully allude to euphemisms for sexual violence popularized in U.S. politics in recent years, the very sort of language Bolaño, if alive, would have reviled as yet more signs of the rise of a neofascist, Alt-Right across world powers: Donald Trump’s 2016 dismissal of his own advice to “grab [women] by the pussy” as “locker room talk” in an *Access Hollywood* interview, and congressman Todd Akin’s claim in 2012 that, because women’s bodies can guard themselves against “legitimate rape,” rape is not a legitimate reason to abort ensuing pregnancies.

¹² According to Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Blancas, Ciudad Juárez’s infrastructure is uniquely corrupt. Financially, the government depends “on the criminal forces that control the border”—i.e., both U.S. border patrol *and* drug cartels (182). At the same time, city officials are preoccupied with rehabilitating Juárez’s public image as the “murder capital of the world” (which generally means downplaying

assembly lines even as cultural traditions that chain femininity to the home simultaneously vilify and ostracize those who must work to survive.¹³ In such a fraught ideological conflict zone, women's bodies are symbolic collateral, disposable and produced to be damaged.

Last, these unique confluences have catastrophic consequences for protecting human rights. In a setting dominated by decentralized power and political chaos, police and politicians can easily claim ignorance while *narcos* and serial murderers act with impunity.¹⁴ Indeed, at stake in the story of *las muertas* are our very definitions of politics and agency as we know them. What would (or could) we do if state violence no longer looked extraordinary but, rather, like any one of the “ordinary” murders we read in the news every day? What if there were no “agents” of state repression to expose at all because the only *certain* agents were amorphous structures of power—neoliberalism, global capitalism, international complacency, white nationalism, neoconservative fascism, and institutionalized misogyny, to give a few examples? The Mexican government has conveniently refrained from recognizing the murders as interconnected crimes, as misogynistic violence, or even as events happening at all. Indeed, to elevate legal recognition of the *feminicidios* to the status of forced disappearance would be to

feminicidio) (182). Interventions from supposedly well-meaning international NGOs complicate and increase competing claims to justice even further.

¹³ For a comprehensive study on the Juárez gender conflict in context, see Deborah M. Weissman's “Global Economics and Their Progenies: Theorizing Femicide in Context” in *Terrorizing Women*.

¹⁴ For a legal analyst's perspective on impunity around the Juárez *feminicidios*, see James C. Harrington's “*Alto a la impunidad!*: Is There Legal Relief for the Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez?” in *Gender Violence at the U.S. Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*. (His answer to his own question is basically no, there is not legal relief for victims of *feminicidio*—not for as long as economic and political structures continue operating codependently. The most viable means for legal retribution would be through lawsuits specifically against U.S.-based *maquiladoras*, in cases where negligence on the part of *maquiladora* management could have increased a woman's vulnerability to violence—for example, dropping off a worker later than scheduled, from a bus a long distance from home. As of now, no such cases have been tried and vindicated in court.)

admit the repressive state's complicity in the murders. To preserve their own inculpability, the state has long rationalized the murders as, at best, alarmingly frequent but one-off examples of *capos*, or drug lords, murdering victims when their families could not pay ransom, or, at worst, unassailable evidence of cartels' dominance over Mexico's rule of law.¹⁵

2666 attempts to fix a narrative to these disturbing elisions and ambivalences in justice. Born in Chile in 1953, Bolaño escaped the risk of forced disappearance at the age of twenty on the eve of Pinochet's rise to power; his would-be interrogator was a classmate from junior high school (Gwyn 6). Pinochet's military coup against Salvador Allende's democratic government in 1973 actually brought "neoliberalism" into focus on a world scale. Known for enacting economic reforms that widened Chile's access to international trade while distending socioeconomic inequality at home, Pinochet's regime instantiated free market mobility by any means necessary as a precursor for social capital.¹⁶ Cultural theorist Nelly Richard describes Chile's 1989 transition into democracy in a tone that hauntingly recalls driving themes in *2666* and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*. Of the dictatorship's aftermath, Richard states: "Absence, loss, suppression, and disappearance evoke the body of the detained-disappeared in the most brutally sacrificial dimension of violence, but they also connote the symbolic death of a mobilizing force of a social historicity no longer recoverable in its utopian dimension" (19). In Bolaño's violated national imaginary, the heuristics of mourning, like absence and loss, paradoxically *manifest* the body of the disappeared victim— but only symbolically. The *feminicidio* victim's "real"

¹⁵ See Kathleen A. Staudt's *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*, as well as Sarah Stillman's 2015 report, "Kidnapped at the Border: Where are the Children?" on traffickers' expanding exploitation of undocumented migration in *The New Yorker*.

¹⁶ See Greg Grandin's *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*.

recovery is forever outside of the bounds of possibility, a dire consequence of the erasure to which she has been historically subjected.

By the time Pinochet's dictatorship fell in 1989, almost 3,000 Chilean citizens had been executed, 30,000 tortured, and 1,300 exiled, including Bolaño himself. He fled to Spain and split the remainder of his life primarily in Barcelona with intermittent sojourns in Mexico. His novels, particularly *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998), which achieved him worldwide acclaim, have often dealt with organized crime in Mexico. Divided into five parts, *2666* weaves the story of the *feminicidios* into a farther sweeping narrative about an elusive Italian writer, Benno von Archimboldi, whose biography is tied up in Fascist violence. Literary critic Nicholas Birns has aptly described Bolaño's literary project as "fired by a passionate discernment of the threat posed by the contemporary Right, the devastating and corrosive reverberation it has had on imaginative expression, and the limited, yet calculable, role of literature in quelling these reverberations" (132). Grant Farred adds that Bolaño intersects violence across marginalized groups to indict a "neoliberal state that incarnates death" in its normalization of exploitation (695). The novel starts with four Western academics fecklessly searching for Archimboldi before turning to Mexico, first through the eyes of an African American journalist named Oscar Fate, who connects the crimes to transatlantic slavery, and then through those of a psychologically unstable philosopher, Óscar Amalfitano.¹⁷

¹⁷ I do not examine the novel's multidirectional connection to transatlantic slavery in great depth because that portion of the text does not contribute to my argument about how common hate speech refracts onto bias in the forensic reports. Moreover, Bolaño develops the multidirectional connection to transatlantic slavery much less deeply than others. But for those who are interested, the relevant passages occur in "The Part about Fate." Oscar Fate, the African American journalist who brings Amalfitano's daughter, Rosa, safely to America, is assigned to report on Barry Seaman, a fictional ex-Black Panther likely based on Bobby Seale (given the identical initials and the reminiscent marine metaphors in their surnames). Amidst his research, he encounters an academic text (also fictive), titled *The Slave Trade* by Hugh Thomas. Bolaño quotes this fictional piece of evidence at length between pages 261-263 of the English translation to draw the coercive displacement of Africans in the transatlantic slave trade into line with

On the one hand, Bolaño’s voyeuristic gaze on fictionalized women’s corpses risks reproducing the even more gruesome, problematically aestheticized images I find in my futile attempt to relocate the missing photograph that started my inquiry—soiled rags masking dismembered body parts (Figure 4.1), women’s limbs shucked to mere bones (Figure 4.2), a woman’s back turned to the camera inside a clear plastic trash bag (Figure 4.3). Indeed, the barely veiled “true crime” plot at the heart of Bolaño’s novel inherently risks sensationalizing the very injustice he aims to indict. But as I will argue in a close reading of *2666* and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, the risk in exploiting realism allows him to metacritically shadow the extratextual reality of visceral, unmitigated violence against women along the border.



Figure 4.1. Photo of Discarded Clothes Near a Mass Grave by Brett Gundlock, dated November 2014

forced disappearances elsewhere. For a related study assessing Amalfitano’s embattled relationship with Fate, see Brett Levinson, “Case Closed: Madness and Dissociation in *2666*”.



Figure 4.2. Photo of a Skull, Bones and a Girl's Dress Near the City of Iguala by Brett Gundlock, dated November 2014



Figure 4.6. Photo of unknown femicide victim in early 1990s Ciudad Juárez, México; no date, and no author, posted to Borderland Beat website

Indeed, the irony of state violence in this context is that it already exists in the uncanny realm of mere semblance, where police only *appear* to function as defenders of the law. His novel is thus not only, in part, a very astute visionary's compelling exegesis of real forensic reports. On a more phenomenological level, the novel also *performs* verisimilitude so as to expose the double futility of two common humanistic reactions to seeking justice. First, rendering hypervisible the vulnerability of invisible lives will not make their suffering any less "unreal," to use Judith Butler's term, or any more grievable in the public sphere. Second, representing such atrocious violence does not raise consciousness of its political effects so long as any capacity to reckon with the atrocity tirelessly exceeds the imagination anyway. In assent, Andrew McCann describes the irony riddling "The Part about the Crimes:" Bolaño's desert of death is a "potentially Sadean [*sic*] space overwhelmed by the mutilated bodies that bear silent testimony to a violence that otherwise can't be processed in terms of recognizable narrative forms" (137-138). The verisimilitude Bolaño achieves therein yields an uncanny effect: his representation is so visceral and hyperreal that the truth itself is hard to apprehend. The reader enters an alternate reality that is so *familiar* to what she knows—and yet so *alien* to what could be imaginable, morally thinkable, in her ordinary frame of reference—that the story empathetically unsettles her, ratcheting her perspective into recognition of the "true" (and terrifying) reality at stake.¹⁸

Indeed, I refer to this meta-universe of "semblance" deliberately, perhaps as shorthand for the "infrarealist" movement Bolaño himself started, which sought a kind of "visceral realism"

¹⁸ Intentionally, I invoke Dominick LaCapra's definition of "empathetic unsettlement" in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*: "empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or benefit" (40-41). Empathetic unsettlement thus withholds the kind of gratification that accompanies the resolution of an injustice by productively disrupting the bystander's sense of reality, never resolving the other's narrative into a positive account of resilience and recovery.

that looked for the *truly* real embedded within *superficial* appearances of the real.¹⁹

“Semblance,” or *la apariencia*, is the word Bolaño himself chooses to describe the uncanny alter-reality constructed by Nazi ideology. Grant Farred argues that the writer Archimboldi’s backstory, which includes the novel’s only direct allusion to “semblance,” is “symptomatic of a larger globalized system of capital and genocide... that has been integral to the project of modernity” (692). When young Hans Reiter (the writer Archimboldi’s birth name) is a conscripted Nazi soldier, he likens his current reality to semblance through analogy to his favorite writer, the Jewish-Russian Boris Abramovich Ansky, who died in the Holocaust:

Semblance was an occupying force of reality, he [Reiter, via Ansky] said to himself, even the most extreme, borderline reality. It lived in people’s souls and their actions, in willpower and in pain, in the way memories and priorities were ordered. Semblance proliferated in the salons of the industrialists and in the underworld. It set the rules, it rebelled against its own rules (in uprisings that could be bloody, but didn’t therefore cease to be semblance), it set new rules.

National Socialism was the ultimate realm of semblance. (Bolaño, 2666 741)

La apariencia era una fuerza de ocupación de la realidad, se dijo, incluso de la realidad más extrema y limítrofe. Vivía en las almas de la gente y también en sus gestos, en la voluntad y en el dolor, en la forma en que uno ordena los recuerdos y en la forma en que uno ordena las prioridades. La apariencia proliferaba en los salones de los industriales y en el hampa. Dictaba normas, se revolvía contra sus propias normas (en revueltas que podían ser sangrientas, pero que no por eso dejaban de ser aparentes), dictaba nuevas normas.

El nacionalsocialismo era el reino absoluto de la apariencia. (Bolaño, 2666 loc. 14324-38)

Reiter’s exegesis of another multiply marginalized, ontologically erased, and socially damned writer’s philosophy shows that “semblance” is the normative representational mode for capitalist economics (“the industrialists”), hell (“the underworld”), and fascist government (“National Socialism”). Its rules are made to be broken since semblance is a shadow-universe waiting to be

¹⁹ For more on Bolaño’s infrarealism, see Alberto Medina’s “Arts of Homelessness: Roberto Bolaño or the Commodification of Exile” in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*.

found out as fiction. Semblance reigns most supreme in National Socialism, the near oxymoron bridging neo-imperialist, fascist interests with “socialism” only as an ever unrealized collective ideal.

According to Freud, the uncanny depends on the cumulative effacement of divisions between reality and the imagination, “as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes” (244). Mass death, the previously unimaginable reality, thus becomes visible in a heavily freighted symbol, like a woman’s red shoes standing empty on a sidewalk in Juárez (**Error! Reference source not found..4**). Although Juárez becomes the fictive city of Santa Teresa in Bolaño’s telling, he does not bother fictionalizing other details; for example, Sergio González Rodríguez, the Mexican journalist, appears by his real name. In contrast, most women in *2666* do not even have names; they are simply “the whore” who gave a man with a savior complex, like Sergio, a bright idea:



Figure 4.4. Photo of Elina Chauvet’s installation, “Zapatos Rojos,” at Castle Square, Turin, Italy, by Franco Baldan; each pair of shoes represents a victim of femicide in Mexico whose murderer has not been brought to justice

[... As Sergio] was talking the whore yawned, not because she wasn’t interested in what he was saying but because she was tired, which irritated Sergio and made him say, in exasperation, that in Santa Teresa they were killing whores, so why not show a little professional solidarity, to which the whore replied that he was wrong, in the story as he had told it the women dying were factory workers, not whores. Workers, workers, she

said. And then Sergio apologized, and, as if a lightbulb [*sic*] had gone on over his head, he glimpsed an aspect of the situation that until now he'd overlooked. (Bolaño, 2666 466)

[M]ientras él hablaba la puta bostezaba, no porque no le interesara lo que él decía, sino porque tenía sueño, de modo que concitó el enojo de Sergio, quien exasperado le dijo que en Santa Teresa estaban matando putas, que por lo menos demostrara un poco de solidaridad gremial, a lo que la puta le contestó que no, que tal como él le había contado la historia las que estaban muriendo eran obreras, no putas. Obreras, obreras, dijo. Y entonces Sergio le pidió perdón y como tocado por un rayo vio un aspecto de la situación que hasta ese momento había pasado por alto. (Bolaño, 2666 loc. 9020)

The journalist's obsession with other women's suffering exhausts "the whore." When he snaps at her to "show a little professional solidarity" and respect these murdered women, she haughtily points out that they are "not whores" but "factory workers." At this, not just a "lightbulb" (as the translation says) but "*un rayo vio*," a "lightning bolt" hurled as if from the gods, cleaves his brain with a hitherto unnoticed epiphany (loc. 9020, my trans.).²⁰ Men like himself—supposedly progressive men on the prowl for their predatory stepbrothers— do not even know how to humanize and recognize the female victims for whom they are fighting. An even closer look at his eureka moment reveals that the whore explicitly *does not* yawn from boredom, as Sergio's third-person limited point of view implies: she is "tired" ostensibly because her work requires her to pretend not only sexual but also intellectual interest in male clients like Sergio. Her work as "the whore" metonymically stands in for her personality and whatever recognition she can earn in her social position. In this light, Sergio's accusation that she needs to show "a little trade-union solidarity [*un poco de solidaridad gremial*]"— as if all laboring women are an organized party— is situationally ironic (loc. 9020, my trans.). When the whore reprimands Sergio, she shows not only that she *does* care about *feminicidio* but also that she and these women, in her mind, occupy two distinct ontological categories: "factory workers" versus "whores." In making

²⁰ Whenever referencing Bolaño's novel in English, I defer to Natasha Wimmer's published translation of 2666, only utilizing my own translation to note discrepancies with the original when relevant.

this distinction, she reveals how entrenched and stratified roles for women are in her neoliberal society. Sergio meanwhile must admit to himself that he has conflated these two classes. For us, both the whore's clarification and Sergio's conflation are both familiar and problematic: whereas the whore's distinction disallows women's solidarity, Sergio's conflation oppositely unifies the two classes into the same camp of de-individualizing disposability.

In attending to appositions between character and subplots ranging from Sergio's phobic misapprehensions to the actual unmitigated crimes, I reveal how Bolaño connects diverse histories, identities, and contexts to make sense of the networked logic behind modern human rights crimes.²¹ According to political scientists studying *feminicidio* like Pascha Bueno-Hansen, perceiving disturbing confluences between experiences of structural violence is the first step to remediation: "Social change requires a politics of seeing, of making connections across different manifestations of misogyny that are tacitly supported through heteropatriarchal legal and social systems," and thus is essential for redefining "women as rights bearers [with] subjectivity and agency" whose dignity must be preserved and violation, prosecuted (290-291). As Bolaño connects *feminicidio* to Nazi fascism, only two universalisms stay true. First, biopolitical control in heteropatriarchal societies can only be sustained through the systematic dehumanization of disposable people.²² Second, the lust for accumulating power is a universal human trait that most

²¹ My chapter does not engage deeply with the aesthetics and ethics of Bolaño's comparative scale because several critics have already interrogated the issue quite forcefully; see, for example, David Kurnick's "Comparison, Allegory, and the Address of 'Global' Realism (The Part about Bolaño)" and Stefano Ercolino's *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*. Instead of charting the "maximalist" or "global" reach of Bolaño's tour-de-force in general as these critics do, I specifically address the enormity of scales of state *violence* in *2666* to tie modern-day *feminicidio* in the Global South to events like WWII-era genocide in Nazi Germany and eighteenth-century transatlantic slavery in the U.S.

²² Historian R.I. Moore claims that the persecution of lepers, whores, Jews, and Muslims forms the historical basis for social order in virtually all Western societies to date in *The Formation of a*

imperils those living on the margins of humanity. It is not a gender- or race-specific trait, as the disproportionate desirability for heteropatriarchal whiteness would have it seem.

To the first point, only one suspect—Abdul Latif Sharif Sharif, an Egyptian chemist convicted of rape in the 1980s—has ever been imprisoned for Juárez’s serial femicides; even though he died while incarcerated in 2006, the murders continue.²³ In Bolaño’s fictional account, the Juárez murders emit only one serious suspect, Klaus Haas, a German expat who recently acquired U.S. citizenship; subtext suggests that Mexican police are framing Klaus to cover up their own complicity with the cartels. Transforming Abdul into Klaus, Bolaño resists the ethnic and religious profiling thought to have propelled Sharif’s conviction. (Although already a convicted rapist, it was convenient for the Mexican municipality that a foreigner should be responsible for such an intimate, local crime.) In contrast to Sharif, the foreigner Klaus’s white male privilege not only makes him a scapegoat but also stands in for Nazis’ murderous racism in the Holocaust. Klaus’s newly minted American citizenship also brings the more insidious virulence of U.S.-backed neoliberalism and militarism into the Global South. U.S. companies also employed Sharif as a highly paid research chemist. Thus the murder suspect for at least 100 missing women in a Third World outpost resembles the murderer of a heartless Nazi in a First World nightmare. And regardless of either’s guilt, the novel’s and reality’s open secrets exist in similitude: the killers of the women, as with the Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and myriad stigmatized others in the Holocaust, are the same as those in the real *feminicidios* and probably Iguala’s forced disappearances. Ubiquitous agents of a politically repressive status quo—police

Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250. I would add LGBTQI-identified people to his list.

²³ For more on Sharif, see Valdes’ “Alone Among the Ghosts” and Patterson’s *The International Novel*.

and the federal government, colluding with cartels and other exploitative financial interests—masquerade as defenders of law and social order to defend their ever-anxious authoritarianism.

In the epic scope of Bolaño's narrative, modern-day impunity surrounding *feminicidio* and historical genocides reverberate in smaller-scale personality conflicts between quasi-marginalized characters. In this chapter, I focus on Azucena Esquivel Plata and Óscar Amalfitano, two bystanders whose relationships to *feminicidio* reveal Bolaño's intersectional approach to political repression. Although these characters may not be *as* pivotal as Benno von Archimboldi, whose presence is murmured or patent in each of the five books that comprise *2666*; however, in their respective sections—"The Part about the Crimes" and "The Part of Amalfitano"—they recur as main characters whose unique relationships to the murders in Juárez reframe the consequences of the unsolved crimes. According to Margaret Boe Birns, Bolaño exposes how normalized unmitigated violence against women is in Mexico as part of a noxious, neoliberal world-system founded on the strategic oppression of universally stigmatized ontologies. I assent to Birns' suggestion that Bolaño's blunt words ironically make manifest "a kind of silence [that] amounts to a policy of indifference that shapes itself into an official position that protects the wrongdoers or the conditions that makes the crimes possible" (71). However, I do not agree that the resulting tone maintains a veneer of "moral neutrality," expressing neither rage nor tolerance (71). Instead, Bolaño's stridency summons the prejudices hidden even within oppressed perspectives. In this regard, I align with Sol Peláez's argument that Bolaño so aggressively reproduces vernaculars of hate to show "how the enjoyment of language and the reification that language entails pervade the telling and reading of violence, questioning the position of a morally alert criticism" (30). Two bystanders in the investigation do not even seem to *realize* the degree to which they attribute hate speech and phobic prejudices to

experiences of otherness not unlike their own; in so doing, their behavior demands readers perceive the depth to which hate and violence are socially coded into even the worldviews of those who risk persecution themselves.

In the first case, Azucena Esquivel Plata—a congresswoman and one of only two women trying to solve the crimes in 2666—regularly critiques masculinity by counter-intuitively adopting the vernacular of homophobia. “As you’re well aware,” she says to Sergio, “this is a macho country full of faggots. The history of Mexico wouldn’t make sense otherwise” (609). As with any oxymoron, the paradoxical effect in “a macho country full of faggots” is simultaneously true and yet doubly negating. By definition, a “macho” nation can’t be full of effeminate men. So, for this paradox to hold water, effeminacy—the condition of being shamed as a “faggot”—must transform, to be *less* vulnerable, less womanly, and therefore, ironically, *less like Azucena herself*, who cannot get out of having been born female. Azucena castigates her country for parodying heteropatriarchal power at best. In her discourse, the “macho” man and the “faggot” typify hegemonic masculinity at its most abject and toxic extremes. I would not say her words stereotype men (gay or straight alike). Rather, her vituperations polarize standards for masculinity and femininity that occupy the rotten history of repressive states like Mexico. Azucena thus attains political power by dehumanizing others, and her contradictory politics expose confluences in social differences and relationships to systemic violence.

In the second case, Óscar Amalfitano, an effete, Chilean professor of philosophy, is exiled to Santa Teresa for sexual misconduct in Barcelona. Likely to repress his homosexuality, which is incommensurable with the *machista* state, he poses homophobic language similar to Azucena’s against himself. Having compromised his coveted spot in the Western academy as a pseudo-European intellectual, Amalfitano embodies neoliberalism’s failed promises; his fellow

European scholars encounter him at the vanishing point between social capital and cultural recognition.²⁴ Both Amalfitano's and Azucena's subject-positions clash with a certain sort of neoliberal normativity built on a logic of increasing visibility for hegemonic masculinity. In this frame, upwardly mobile, educated, European and American men are idealized at the expense of a modern lumpenproletariat—recognized as working, poor, female, queer or promiscuous—and rendered statistically invisible. By granting the most vulnerable people who speak in *2666* the power to malign the dignity of other marginalized ways of knowing and being in the world, Bolaño demands we perceive the impunity in Juárez as a systemic problem. The problem is not isolated to the borders of one collapsing state or one morally defunct human. Rather, the collapse is structural—a foundational disintegration of the norms and mores for regarding women, violence, and politics not only across the Global South, but also around the world.

Signs of trauma, moral decay, and institutionalized hate in his novels closely align with and yet transgress what we *think* we know of the world. Bolaño's verisimilitude is inassimilable to— and yet somehow hauntingly resonant with— what we know (and fear) to be true. In literature as in psychic life, the uncanny is, paradoxically, “on the one hand, what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud 224-225). The metaphor quintessentially captures the paradoxical open secret surrounding the crimes in Juárez, both in reality and in Bolaño's Santa Teresa. The entire criminal justice system as it exists, *along with* the government, cannot possibly *not* know the inner machinations of these crimes, just as Bolaño's characters cannot *not* sense their internalized self-aberration, just as I cannot *not*

²⁴ When I cite Azucena (and Sergio) by their first names, and Amalfitano and Archimboldi by their last, I am keeping with the conventions established by *2666*; I suspect that Bolaño's reasons for preferring Amalfitano's surname are practical (there are two Oscars in the novel), whereas Archimboldi is meant to stand in as a literary great, recognizable by his last name alone—a Dostoevsky (or, one could say, a Bolaño) of sorts.

recognize the contours of a skull in a photograph I can't find. Indeed, the recognizability—the indubitable familiarity—of the uncanny is exactly what makes it so frightening: in this case, the uncanny effect of Bolaño's affective hyperrealism reveals a spectral reality that contemporary readers cannot *not* recognize. His novel revivifies what we already know to be true, what we have repressed in our collective consciousness (and conscience). It is not “hysterical realism” as James Wood defines it—realism exhausted, overwrought and enervated—but rather, realism as an affective simulation of actual human suffering in all its horrible, unbelievable ordinariness.²⁵

The Futility of the Forensic Report as Evidence for *Feminicidio*

Bolaño's more ruthless depictions from forensic reports are ruefully, painfully ironic. An internal contradiction in Mexico, whereby crimes proliferate in open secrecy, motivates Bolaño to represent women as hypervisible, yet voiceless. Women appear on every page of “The Part about the Crimes” in *2666*. Kneeling in tall grass, distressed matrons cover their heads and weep over the bodies of missing children. Policemen pass sex workers on the streets at night and, in Juárez, disparagingly refer to them as “public women”—as if women out in public are asking for dismemberment. Third-person omniscient condemnations of victims for their choices and clothes compel readers to reassess the ease with which we reduce women to singular ontologies and flat stereotypes—as whores, mothers, moguls, psychics, daughters, *maquiladora* workers, cashiers, and in one rare instance, an American tourist. Bolaño's women are, in other words, intentionally generic. Some have names and others do not, but all, generally, serve a function in their

²⁵ Citing Bolaño as an example, James Wood contends that the fault of “hysterical realism” lies not in a tendency to warp reality, like magical realism, “but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself” (179). In contrast, I argue that hysteria *should* be the affective mode for the reality in which Bolaño's Santa Teresa operates; thus, the seeming *absence* of hysteria in his measured, lucid depictions of femicide does the opposite of evading reality. Indeed, the apparent repression of any discernibly hysterical undertones in Bolaño's realist narrative form perfectly mimics the unsettling psychological composure at stake in reality.

neoliberal society that replaces their personhood. Typologizing women is a patronizing feature of contemporary reality. By reproducing it, Bolaño insists readers see the scant, ontologically limiting conditions by which women and other biopolitically marginalized people survive.

In short, impunity paradoxically precedes criminality in Bolaño's representation. To parody Mexico's ruthless and intransigent criminal justice system, his crime scenes quickly assume a monotonous effect, cataloging setting, age, clothing, wounds, and identification (or lack thereof). Desecrated female bodies turn up in vacant lots, alleyways, restaurant dumpsters, illegal dumps, highway ditches, deserts and the overgrown grass around shacks, sometimes pregnant, sometimes prepubescent, and often unidentifiable. At the time of their deaths, these women and girls appear to have been sewing in sweatshops, walking home from school, arguing with boyfriends, and tending to mentally ill sons, among other activities. They are basically women like women everywhere: by default, nameless and vulnerable by nature of their sex. The repetition of sameness without interruption or alteration—"the constant recurrence of the same thing," be they "character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations"—is an essential feature of Freud's psychological uncanny (234). Sameness promotes familiarity, but in the morbid context of the Juárez *feminicidios*, familiarity has the desensitizing effect of moral inoculation—what human rights scholars have pejoratively called "compassion fatigue."²⁶ Ironically, the multiplication of the crimes' haunting sameness, *in absentia* of any evidence of recrimination whatsoever, actually preserves impunity—not justice—against erasure. By seeming to *affirm* the prevalence of

²⁶ Human rights scholar Thomas Keenan describes "compassion fatigue" as "the dark side of revelation," in which "overexposure" to obscene images actually *immobilizes* shame, thus rendering "the absence or failure of shaming... not only traceable to the success of perpetrators at remaining clothed or hidden in the dark" but also to the over-saturation of violence in the public sphere (438).

impunity while tautologically critiquing the very same phenomenon, Bolaño thus invites the critical eye to judge an international public's tolerance of such gross violence.

In the fifth report of a crime scene, an esoteric inventory of material odds and ends—lipstick, Kleenex, condoms and cigarettes— seems to represent the victim's personal ties to capitalism:

Midway through February, in an alley in the center of the city, some garbagemen [*sic*] found another dead woman. She was about thirty and dressed in a black skirt and low-cut white blouse. She had been stabbed to death, although contusions from multiple blows were visible about her face and abdomen. In her purse was a ticket for the nine a.m. bus to Tucson, a bus she would never catch. Also found were a lipstick, powder, eyeliner, Kleenex, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, and a package of condoms. There was no passport or appointment book or anything that might identify her. Nor was she carrying a lighter or matches. (Bolaño, 2666 355)

A mediados de febrero, en un callejón del centro de Santa Teresa, unos basureros encontraron a otra mujer muerta. Tenía alrededor de treinta años y vestía una falda negra y una blusa blanca, escotada. Había sido asesinada a cuchilladas, aunque en el rostro y el abdomen se apreciaron las contusiones de numerosos golpes. En el bolso se halló un billete de autobús para Tucson, que salía esa mañana a las nueve y que la mujer ya no iba a tomar. También se encontró un pintalabios, polvos, rimmel, unos pañuelos de papel, una cajetilla de cigarrillos a medias y un paquete de condones. No tenía pasaporte ni agenda ni nada que pudiera identificarla. Tampoco llevaba fuego. (Bolaño, 2666 *loc.* 6901)

The list interpellates and exploits the reader's latent prejudices. Is a woman who wears a "low-cut white blouse" asking for trouble? Won't she need to ask strange men to bum a light? If she is traveling with makeup but no identification, she must be vain *and* irresponsible. And why does she have a bus ticket? What is she running away from? (What has she done wrong?) If she is going to make it past border control *without* a passport, what kind of wrong is she planning to do? In prompting these questions, Bolaño pushes the reader to blame the victim. This impulse pushes readers to rethink the thoughtless instinct with which we attribute blame to victims, no matter how progressive we may think ourselves to be. By playing on the nefarious stereotypes ingrained in readers' social intelligence, Bolaño inverts the discursive "fixity" assigned to certain

occupational types—the whore, the police, the *maquila* worker—in the neoliberal world order. Not unlike the colonial power relation Homi Bhabha ascribes to the stereotype, this world-system “connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition;” in this realm, the stereotype functions as “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (94-95).

Another episode in “The Part about the Crimes” perfectly encapsulates Bolaño’s stereotype-play, which he uses to highlight the ordinariness of gender-based systemic violence. Cops delightedly trade sexist jokes while eating donuts in a diner. Bolaño’s use of a familiar American stereotype—indolent, crass, blue-collar policemen indulging in donuts instead of fighting crime—brings the specter of U.S. neoliberalism back into the picture. The cops swap hammy, downright stupid jokes. “What’s the definition of a woman?” one jeers, receiving silence until he unintelligently jibes, “a vagina surrounded by more or less a bunch of cells” (2666 552). Women are thus reduced not just to abusable flesh, but to biological sex: “a vagina” cloistered with nondescript “cells.” Indeed, when the conversation turns to vulnerability and human rights abuses, the policemen’s dialogue epitomizes the irony of women’s hypervisibility in 2666 and the international public sphere at large. The jokes quickly veer to domestic abuse: “How many parts is a woman’s brain divided into?... Depends how hard you hit her,” and “a woman’s path lies from the kitchen to the bedroom, with a beating along the way” (552). Husbands and brothers divide women against themselves, their brains, through abuse, by “hitting hard” and “beating” housewives into one “path” from pleasure to provision for life. Thereafter the jokes broaden out to a more universalizing scale, suggesting that women’s inferiority rests not *just* in the home. Some notable examples include, “How do you pick the three dumbest

women in the world? *Pues* at random... It makes no difference!” and “What’s a man doing when he throws a woman out the window? *Pues* polluting the environment” (552-553). Women are indistinguishable—universally, the “dumbest,” in which “dumb,” not coincidentally, also connotes the least able to speak. She is a danger to her environment—a body of “pollution.”

But moreover, her environment is not hers; one joke asks, “Why do kitchens have windows? *Pues* so that women can see the world” (552-553). “The world” is a foreign place she views from inside her stereotypes, which is “why... kitchens have windows”—so women can view, from afar, a world of which they are not a part. One of the final, most disturbing, and, not coincidentally, aesthetically most successful “jokes” of all, states, “Women are like laws, they were made to be broken” (553). Like laws the world over, and the very laws of semblance, women’s existence begs for destruction—they are “made to be broken,” liable to be exploited from inception. Using such profoundly homophobic, racist, and misogynistic discourse, Bolaño’s code-switches paradoxically critique the hegemonic masculinity behind neoliberal power to detect how a universally internalized hate language operates at varying extremes. Bolaño thus ironically interpellates his critique of toxic machismo through its seeming reaffirmation. In doing so, he calls upon readers to confront both insidious violence and its *de facto* normalization at all levels of society in politically repressive contexts.

In what follows, I focus on the congresswoman Azucena Esquivel Plata and professor Óscar Amalfitano as figures of vulnerability who comfortably reproduce the very ideologies that endanger their own ontological capacities to be in the world. I aim not only to elucidate how and why Bolaño so closely mimics reality to terrorize his readers’ public conscience on a formal level. I also throw into relief the widespread vicissitudes in power that destabilize commitments to human rights across a spectrum of purported social change agents—reporters, politicians,

police, academics, and others. Hermann Herlinghaus claims that 2666 is “about a planetary state of affairs, pointing to the heart of everyday existence as a figure in which the uneven development generated by global capitalism translates into particular pathological scenarios” (104). I extrapolate the impact of violence’s normalization on individual consciousness, explored through Azucena and Amalfitano, to the broader scale of world history, expressed in Archimboldi’s connections to the Holocaust and his genealogical link to Santa Teresa’s only murder suspect.

Hate Speech as Vernacular: Women’s Difficulty with Speaking Truth to Power

To restore their humanity, to gloss the complicity of homophobia and misogyny as operative paradigms for all walks of power, or to heroize anybody, even a woman like Azucena, an agent in a noxious system, would be to misrepresent the galling monotony behind the *feminicidios* that enables their recurrence. Feisty and proud of her quote-unquote “legendary” sex life and unapologetic manipulation of “hopelessly stupid” and “arrogant” men, Azucena would be read as a raging feminist if it were not for homophobic comments like Mexico “is a macho country full of faggots” (609). Her tolerance for neofascism also conflicts with her interests. Her former colleagues in journalism write her off as a sell-out when she becomes a politician for the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI, or the Institutional Revolutionary Party in English). Started as a socialist-democratic party, the PRI in Mexico is now the party of the state. Thus it is primarily invested in maintaining the status quo even at the expense of human rights. Mexico’s current President, Enrique Peña Nieto, is a member of the PRI; his corrupt administration has been implicated in a number of forced disappearances, like that which Azucena fears for her missing friend, Kelly Rivera Parker. Little does Azucena know that Kelly has likely become a kingpin in an elite sex circle catering to rich men; Annabel Patterson identifies Heidi Slaquet

Armengol, one of the *feminicidio* victims, “who used to set up parties for the drug lords with young women she had procured for them,” as Kelly’s “real-life” analog (6). Azucena thus embodies the paradoxical contradictions circumscribing agency for women in the contemporary Latin American state. On one hand, she is a self-made woman who has, in a rare achievement, overcome systemic gender discrimination and risen to leadership. She entered politics because she wanted “free rein to change some things in this country,” like public health and education. She naively believed that “inside... [she’d] have more freedom to act” (Bolaño, 2666 609). Yet, she has also internalized the normalization of violence against sexual minorities, like women and gay men. Even more importantly, her motivation for suddenly attending to ubiquitous violence against women is personal, not political. Someone she loves is in danger; there is no indication that Azucena would have spoken up without the threat to her friend’s existence.

Azucena frequently reviles gender-based violence through the vernacular of homophobia, underscoring the lack of intersectionality in her feminist consciousness. She never considers that institutionalized homophobia and machismo, the criminalization of the poor, and widespread violence against women could all be part of the same stifling matrix of domination. The paradoxical tension of a self-identified feminist using homophobic slurs to denounce rape and *feminicidio* politically charges Azucena’s role in Bolaño’s indictment of the crimes. By juxtaposing demands for justice with bigotry, Bolaño exposes the fatal blind spots at the heart of each advocate’s motives. In fact, the recurrence of their blind spots points to a much more massive lacuna in their imaginary: the injurability of disposable people is a primary condition for the maintenance of the neoliberal state’s status quo. Thus, neither the workers toiling in the *maquiladoras*, who comprise most *feminicidio* victims, nor fairly privileged, upper-middle class

entrepreneurs like Kelly, are safe in a climate where violence against vulnerable populations ensures the neoliberal state's precarious stability.

Although “The Part about the Crimes” has occupied most criticism of *2666*, no one has focused on Azucena's appearance in the middle of the criminal investigation. This gap persists even though her narrative literally has the second-to-last word on *feminicidio* before Bolaño moves on to the final chapter about Archimboldi. Two divergent narrative fragments interrupt the eighty pages containing Azucena's interview with Sergio González Rodríguez. The first concerns a renowned criminologist, Albert Kessler—barely an alias for the real Robert Ressler, who investigated the crimes in Juárez and is often credited with inventing the concept of the “serial killer.” Each time Kessler runs into a dead end, the text toggles to the other setting predating Azucena's interview with Sergio, Klaus Haas in the interrogation chamber. While jumping between these essential storylines, Azucena's story at the epicenter becomes a pivotal turning point in which violence has finally exceeded normative boundaries of class and privilege.

Azucena enters the novel at a critical juncture: Kessler will arrive in Santa Teresa for fieldwork the next day, and Sergio has already been conducting independent research without much luck. Azucena phones Sergio, and he crawls into the backseat of her Mercedes ten minutes later. He notices that the dark sunglasses hiding her eyes are “like the kind Stevie Wonder wore occasionally and that some blind people used so the inquisitive couldn't see their vacant eyeballs” (Bolaño, *2666* 584). Sergio's simile performs two figurative functions. First, it draws Azucena into a parallel with racial otherness and disability, two modes of oppression previously not represented in the novel's structural tension between sexism and homophobia. Second, assimilating Azucena's sunglasses to race and blindness foreshadows the debilitating blind spots that careerist feminism augurs for her political perspective. Then a snapshot from Klaus's

interrogation chamber and a forensic report abruptly punctuates Azucena's narrative to affirm how the police embrace the same blind spots. The forensic report reads:

On October 10, the same day Leticia Borrego García's body was found near the Pemex soccer fields, the body of Lucía Domínguez Roa was found in Colonia Hidalgo, on the sidewalk along Calle Perséfone. The first police report stated that Lucía worked as a prostitute and was a drug addict and that the cause of death had probably been an overdose. The next morning, however, a distinctly different statement was issued. It said that Lucía Domínguez Roa had worked as a waitress at a bar in Colonia México and that the cause of death was a gunshot wound to the abdomen... There were no witnesses to the killing and the possibility that the killer might have shot from inside a moving vehicle hadn't been ruled out. Nor had the possibility that the bullet was intended for someone else. Lucía Domínguez Roa was thirty-three and separated, and she lived alone in a room in Colonia México. No one knew what she was doing in Colonia Hidalgo, although it was most likely, according to the police, that she'd been taking a walk and had come upon death purely by chance. (Bolaño, 2666 586)

El diez de octubre, el mismo día en que se encontró el cuerop de Leticia Borrego García cerca de los campos de fútbol de Pemex, fue hallado el cadáver de Lucía Domínguez Roa, en la colonia Hidalgo, en una acera de la calle Perséfone. En el primer informe policial se dijo que Lucía ejercía la prostitución y era drogadicta y que la causa de la muerte probablemente había sido una sobredosis. A la mañana siguiente, sin embargo, la declaración de la policía varió ostensiblemente. Se dijo entonces que Lucía Domínguez Roa trabajaba como mesera en un bar de la colonia México y que su muerte fue ocasionada por un disparo en el abdomen... No Había testigos del asesinato y no se descartaba que el asesino hubiera disparado desde el interior de un coche en marcha. Tampoco se descartaba que la bala apuntara a otra persona. Lucía Domínguez Roa tenía treintatrés años, estaba separada y vivía sola en una habitación de la colonia México. Nadie supo decir qué hacía en la colonia Hidalgo, aunque era probable, según la policía, que hubiera estado dando un paseo y que so topara con la muerte por pura casualidad. (Bolaño, 2666 loc. 11314)

The gaps in Azucena's political consciousness are actually foundational to her state's warped status quo. The police initially demonize a *feminicidio* victim, Lucía Domínguez Roa, as a prostitute and a drug addict, another "public woman."

But the landscape of her victimization is coded with references to the power of women's dehumanization in myth and culture. The fact that she was found in "Colonia Hidalgo"—with "hidalgo" being an archaism roughly translated as "gentleman"—is a dark joke. The discovery of her body on "Calle Perséfone" while "taking a walk" and stumbling upon "death by chance"

alludes to the Greek myth of Persephone's disappearance: Hades abducted and raped Persephone, his niece, when she was a young, naïve girl, picking flowers alone in her mother's fields.²⁷ Thus the forensic report classifies her death as arbitrary—a meandering bullet, a missed target, bad luck—when, in fact, her fate was written into the land she walked upon. Indeed, the age of her death—thirty-three—poses her as a Christ-like martyr. The report cannot detect, much less evaluate, these fatal nuances because there is hardly any room for figurative thinking in the law. The misperceived arbitrariness of the attack, apposed with the confusion over her identity—and consequently over whether her murder was excusable or not—urges readers to perceive Kelly's parallel predicament as disturbingly mundane.

When Sergio and Azucena finally sit down to talk, Azucena does not remove her dark glasses; symbolically, her blindness will not alter in the course of their conversation. She all but scolds Sergio for not recognizing her friend's name, Kelly Rivera Parker. Kelly, whose name was Luz María before she Americanized it, was a fashion designer and art dealer, the only child of a very wealthy Mexican architect and a white mother. Azucena callously comments that her “*gringa*” mother's womb “maybe... couldn't stand any more Mexican children and the babies were aborted naturally” (588). The violence in her racist language inherently disdains the mother's *gringa* difference. When Azucena goes on to lament the dilapidation of Kelly's father's buildings, she asks Sergio the completely uncalled-for question, “Isn't reality an insatiable AIDS-riddled whore?” (588). This phobic, misogynistic image viciously positions the queer body of the “AIDS-riddled whore” as having an endless hunger to devour the successful, educated patriarch's dreams. In Bolaño's text, the body of the whore can often be read as queer in Jack Halberstam's terms, whereby “queer” indicates “the potentiality of a life unscripted by

²⁷ For the full story, see Helene Foley's translation of “The Homeric Hymn to Demeter.”

the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (14). Azucena’s image connotes limits of longevity and survival desired by supposedly “normal” people.

Unfazed, Sergio simply nods. The origins of Azucena’s friendship with Kelly are steeped in racist fantasies of ethnic purity, carried down through her family. “Real Mexicans,” she explains, “[are] few and far between... The rest [are] embittered Indians or resentful whites or violent people come from who knows here to destroy Mexico. Thieves, most of them. Upstarts. Fortune hunters. People without scruples” (Bolaño, 2666 592). Unilaterally dismissing indigenous people, whites, and immigrants as degenerate criminals, she reveals the irony in her political party’s name. The Institutional Revolutionary Party does not emphasize “revolution” so much as an anxiety to shore up static, normativizing “institutions,” like racism and homophobia. Azucena’s inadvertently ironic comment that Mexicans “think we’re clear-sighted when in fact we’re stubborn” pertains to herself, too (592). She literally cannot see the depth of her own complicity in the indisputable violence racking every crime scene.

To be fair, Azucena has objectively attained many firsts for a woman in her genealogy: she is the first in her family to go to college, and the first to “profane the holy sacrament of marriage” with divorce (601). She scoffs at her family thinking she “was overtaken by the demon of command or leadership,” and yet, her desire for power is undeniable (601). Instead of being careful not to replicate the oppressive power structures that have circumscribed her and Kelly’s mobility, she grabs power indiscriminately. Instead of carving out a new language to resist misogyny, she emasculates men with their favorite means of humiliating each other. She will not “stand for any more limp wrists in [her] family” (601). She never considers that contempt for the “limp wrists,” often homophobically ascribed to effeminate men, intrinsically started as a jibe at weak women who were too frail to defend themselves or strike gavels.

From Azucena's standpoint, the Americanizing shift in Kelly's identity signified "the first step into invisibility, into a nightmare" (605). The neoliberal nightmare to which Azucena refers is the ontological erasure that made Kelly more "other," a target for disappearance. Three months after their last rendezvous, Kelly's business partner hysterically calls Azucena about how she is missing from a business trip. Azucena resentfully describes the partner as "an ugly young woman who adored [Kelly];" the girl's excessive adoration, coupled with Azucena's excessive jealousy over their attachment, carries homoerotic (and homophobic) undertones (606).

According to Azucena's private eye, Kelly was last seen at a private party with Salazar Crespo, a corrupt banker mixed up with Sonora's depraved drug cartel. In this context, Azucena learns that international financial institutions and even the Mexican government are nefariously entangled with organized crime. In one example, when Azucena demands justice for her missing friend, the mayor of Santa Teresa makes all the correct gestures of taking her seriously while doing nothing. He puts her in touch with Ortiz Rebolledo, Santa Teresa's chief of police. Azucena summarizes Santa Teresa's ineffectuality in the following terms: "Ortiz Rebolledo struck me as a fudge packer. The mayor seemed to play for the other team. The assistant attorney general looked limp in the wrist" (621). She equates the stunning incompetence of every government official she meets to their heterosexual deficiency—a problem rooted in their decrepit masculinity rather than their decrepit humanity.

After her failed collaboration with the mayor, Azucena abandons police intervention, and her private eye discovers that Kelly was not necessarily a model feminist herself: "most of Kelly's jobs could simply be considered veiled prostitution" (623). Kelly's elite parties were essentially expensive orgies where prostitutes masqueraded as fashion models for high-profile men. The parties mostly attracted venal bankers like Crespo, *narcos*, and businessmen with

interests in various enterprises built to butcher the human spirit— *maquiladoras*, slaughterhouses, and transport companies facilitating human trafficking, e.g., ventures whose only purpose is to exploit the poor and furnish more disposable women. Thus Azucena learns that her beloved friend, like her, is feeding the cannibalistic system of exploitation that enables exceptional violence even against herself. However, Azucena does not necessarily judge Kelly's complicity any more harshly than her own. Instead, to draw attention to Kelly's disappearance, Azucena cultivates a new public image for herself as "a woman sensitive to violence" (626). In the process, she becomes aware of the sheer extent of the crime against humanity in which Kelly has been implicated, and "her rage" explodes into a "collective" vengeance. Even so, her blind spots do not evanesce in the end; instead Azucena suspects that she is going crazy as she becomes haunted by the disembodied "voices" of victimized women in the desert" (626).

Characters like Azucena embody the contradictory politics by which contemporary women can attain power most efficiently by dehumanizing other oppressed populations across the Global South and elsewhere. Like Amalfitano, whose closeted homosexuality becomes an analog for the ontological erasure facing victims of *femicidio*, Azucena reveals the extent to which sexual shame coordinates mobility and recognition in a neoliberal world order. In a Foucauldian sense, women comprise a "'shameful' class [that] exists only to disappear" (*DP* 182). The phallogocentric discourses that structure and engender power through the policing of sex compulsorily discipline the "docile bodies" of working-class women of color, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and even women like Kelly who have achieved a certain level of social standing in Santa Teresa (183). And as Azucena herself observes, "The really unbelievable part of the story (the sad story of Mexico or Latin America, it makes no difference)... Making a mistake, butting your head against the wall, becomes a political virtue, a political tactic, gives you

political presence, gets you media attention” (Bolaño, 2666 609). For as long as Azucena remains a cog in the dysfunction that peddles incompetence as virtue, and wasted life as the key to social order, Azucena will have no influence over the logic of terror that has swept her friend into its wake.

The Internalization of State Repression: Amalfitano’s Uncanny Homophobia in 2666 and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*

Whereas Azucena preserves the fantasy of an irreducible difference between her femininity and other forms of sexual and racial otherness, Amalfitano’s identity crisis oppositely *conflates* his experiences with these overlapping structures of oppression. Indeed, it could be said that Amalfitano performs a more inherently intermediary function in the true crime plot than Azucena, who is a woman herself; his positionality refuses him a place as the novel’s tragic hero(ine). Consequently, the pain he speaks to and refracts as a bystander to *feminicidio* cannot be “annihilated through incorporation and catharsis” on the part of the reader, thus allowing “literature... only [to] bring order to the disorder of reality by pointing out its senselessness” (Omlor 664). His internal psychological degeneration as a Europeanized, middle-class, educated, repressed gay man provides an uncanny analog for the erasure facing Mexican female factory workers. Through Amalfitano, neoliberal normativity blurs divisions based on race, class, sexuality and gender to misrecognize the social inequality entrenched therein. The scale of the murders, which could be mistaken for “disaster pornography,” reveals commonality through difference, actually dissolving assumed margins between differences.²⁸ The hateful language he directs against himself presences homophobia as a vernacular for interpreting toxic masculinity more broadly. Indeed, *only* by reading his homophobia as an analog for the type of misogyny

²⁸ See Keenan’s “Mobilizing Shame.”

that appears throughout the *feminicidio* forensic reports is his hate speech redeemable; without this essential context, these interludes read as if Bolaño himself believes the professor deserves his inner turmoil.

Intertextually, *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* clarifies the circumstances that relegated Amalfitano to a state of ineluctable exile in 2666. Whereas *2666* gives no clear rationale for Amalfitano's begrudging relocation from Spain to the provincial University of Santa Teresa on the Mexican border, *Sinsabores* explains that he was fired for sexual misconduct involving a male student at the University of Barcelona. *Sinsabores* also introduces Amalfitano's young male lover, Joan Padilla, who plays perhaps the only indisputably heroic role across both novels. A sexually liberated poet, Padilla embodies the radical political fervor that Amalfitano valorized in his own youth—and that Bolaño himself regretted was no longer viable in his own nation under Pinochet's rule. He is likely an allusion to Pedro Lemebel, a gay Chilean poet whom Bolaño intensely revered for being an unapologetic “[t]ransvestite, militant, Third Worldist, anarchist, Mapuche Indian by choice” revolutionary (“Corridor” 167). Speaking of decolonial impulses in Bolaño's corpus, Ignacio López-Vicuña positions the author's anti-nationalism as the foundation for his anti-tribalism in all other regards, so that “regulative fictions for relating to others and organizing the national community—such as *mestizaje* and multiculturalism—become suspended” (90). Indeed, as a social construct, normativity is intrinsically violent; normativity depends on exclusion, calibrating regimes of power and response that secure some individuals a place in the human hierarchy while altogether eschewing less “desirable” others. Supposedly degenerate sexualities, races, and classes must conform or else vanish from the public sphere. The phallogocentric, public discourses that structure and engender power through the policing of

sex compulsorily discipline the bodies of working-class women of color and gay men in Santa Teresa.

State violence is ubiquitous in the “age of suspicion” that beclouds gender, class, and sexuality in relation to power in *2666* and *Sinsabores*.²⁹ When Bolaño announced to artist Carla Rippey in a 1995 letter that he was working on *Sinsabores*, a pet project and “demented tangle that surely no one would understand,” the aura of suspicion surrounding the Juárez *feminicidios* had temporarily suspended with Sharif’s arrest (Valdes 14). When Sharif’s incarceration did not halt the crimes, the police alleged that he was controlling a pack of eight teenage boys, dubbed “The Rebels,” from within prison (17). This narrative thread (and grave mistake on the police’s part— or purposeful misdirection, as some journalists, activists, and scholars have claimed) reappears almost identically in Bolaño’s work. While incorporating and revising characters from *2666*, *Sinsabores* assembles unverifiable coincidences, aimless evidence trails, and sometimes even inexorable narratological contradictions. These gaps and fissures, as I will argue, are not negligible but actually foundational to a comparative reading of how Bolaño defamiliarizes verisimilitude across his Juárez novels.

Policing recurs as a metaphor for instigating shame and suppressing witness. When Amalfitano’s and Padilla’s supposedly aberrant sexualities become visible, various powers-that-be immediately ensure their disappearance, whether through Amalfitano’s occupationally mandated exile or Padilla’s rapidly developing AIDS. The neoliberal state disappears gay men like Padilla and Amalfitano alongside women workers like *las muertas* to suppress these bodies as the literal evidence of its failures to control the population. In the midst of revealing

²⁹ I have taken this term from Dário Borim, Jr. and Roberto Reis’s Foucauldian reading of Latin American literature, which they posit has entered an “age of suspicion:” in post-dictatorship nation-states, where regulatory mechanisms for power are newly vulnerable, sexuality provokes paranoia (xvii).

Amalfitano's true sexual identity, *Sinsabores* also addresses the more talked-about mystery in *2666*— the femicidal serial killers' identities. The reader, as Bolaño's titular "true policeman," knows the enduring presence of Amalfitano's homosexuality and can also guess the complicity of Santa Teresa's police in the killings.

In *2666*, Amalfitano embodies a figural switch-point for accessing Ciudad Juárez's true crime story. Forcibly removed from his prestigious position in Barcelona, Amalfitano has left behind the laurels of the West for the desert of the Global South. Within the first thirty pages of the novel, Bolaño introduces the open secret that also regulates Amalfitano's homosexuality through the eyes of his elitist European colleagues and fellow humanities academics, Pelletier and Espinoza, who have engaged him in their hunt for the German writer Archimboldi. Their "first impression" of Amalfitano is "mostly negative"—not because of his legible homosexuality but his unbearable likeness to the scrubby, provincial landscape of Santa Teresa:

[...] Amalfitano could only be considered a castaway, a carelessly dressed man, a nonexistent professor at a nonexistent university, the unknown soldier in a doomed battle against barbarism, or, less melodramatically, as what he ultimately was, a melancholy literature professor put out to pasture in his own field, on the back of a capricious and childish beast that would have swallowed Heidegger in a single gulp if Heidegger had had the bad luck to be born on the Mexican-U.S. border. (Bolaño, *2666* 114)

[...] Amalfitano solo podía ser visto como un náufrago, un tipo descuidadamente vestido, un profesor inexistente de una universidad inexistente, el soldado raso de una batalla perdida de antemano contra la barbarie, o, en terminus menos melodramáticos, como lo que finalmente era, un melancólico profesor de filosofía pasturando en su propio campo, el lomo de una bestia caprichosa e infantiloides que se habría tragado de un solo bocado a Heidegger en el supuesto de que Heidegger hubiera tenido la mala pata de nacer en la frontera mexicano-norteamericana. (Bolaño, *2666* loc. 2253-68)

His luckless occupational failure initially eclipses any suspicion of his sexuality. A European intellectual, Amalfitano has compromised his coveted spot in the Western academy. Exile has almost comically jettisoned him into obscurity, and the critics encounter him at the vanishing point between cultural recognition and psychic unintelligibility. For as long as Amalfitano

attempts to resist the neoliberal reality that “[i]n Mexico, and this might be true across Latin America, except in Argentina, intellectuals work for the state,” he is doomed to perpetual ideological and moral war with himself and his cohort (121).

“The Part about Amalfitano,” the second book in *2666*, disentangles one of the most glaring analogs for women’s disappearances and degeneration in his own life: the mystery of his wife Lola’s disappearance. The stereotype of a fallen mother, Lola is introduced as a sexual outlaw through a series of letters tracking her travels. Amalfitano learns that Lola has largely fantasized the depth of her dalliances with her alleged inamorato, a poet analogous to Amalfitano’s lover Padilla in *Sinsabores*. In *2666*, Lola’s hysteria while living abroad takes the form of sexual paranoia. In her first letter, she vociferously protests any suspicion of her heterosexuality in association with her new companion Imma’s lesbianism:

I’m not a lesbian, she said, I don’t know why I’m telling you this, I don’t know why I’m treating you like a child by saying it. Homosexuality is a lie, it’s an act of violence committed against us in our adolescence, she said... Imma is a lesbian, every day hundreds of thousands of cows are sacrificed, every day a herd of herbivores or several herds cross the valley, from north to south, so slowly but so fast it makes me sick, right now, now, now, do you understand, Óscar? (Bolaño, *2666* 167)

Yo no soy lesbiana, decía, no sé por qué te lo digo, no sé por qué te trato como a un niño diciéndote esto. La homosexualidad es un fraude, es un acto de violencia cometido contra nosotros en nuestra adolescencia, decía... Imma es lesbiana, cada día cientos de miles de vacas son sacrificadas, cada día una manada de herbívoros o varias manadas de herbívoros recorren el valle, de norte a sur, con una lentitud y al mismo tiempo con una velocidad que me produce náuseas, ahora mismo, ahora, ahora, ¿lo puedes tú entender, Óscar? (Bolaño, *2666 loc.* 3251)

Amalfitano certainly does not “understand” Lola’s ramblings. As Lola apologizes for infantilizing him, “treating him like a child” by reminding him she is *not* a “lesbian,” he rocks their daughter and grips the letter “like a life raft” (167), a tenuous tether to the heteronormative fantasy their union once catalyzed. Lola rants almost psychotically that “[h]omosexuality is a lie” and “an act of violence committed against us in our adolescence.” On one hand, her language

analogizes homosexuality to child molestation; but on the other, in her psychologically aberrant state, she could also be suggesting that what we *think* we know about homosexuality, coded into our worldviews since adolescence, is actually the “lie”—not same-sex identification, but the stigmas, horrors, and deficiencies culturally associated with it. When Lola likens Imma’s lesbianism to the ritual slaughter of cows—female animals sacrificed in the names of cultural and religious traditions—the excessive quantity she imagines, “every day a herd,” foreshadows the senseless, rampant slaughter of *maquila* women.

While institutionalized, Lola meets a lover who is suspected of being gay; perhaps in this alter-verse, the unnamed poet is Padilla himself, who ends up in the same Mondragón asylum in *Sinsabores*. In her letters, Lola anxiously validates his heterosexuality: “I knew the poet had lost his way, he was a lost child and I could save him, give him back a small part of all he’d given me” (169). Thus attempting to “rescue” the poet from his homosexuality, she charts a master plan for his escape from the asylum and their refuge in France. Not until she spies the poet masturbating a male inmate “as if his fingers were a flag in flames, the flag of the unvanquished”—the flag, arguably, of the nationless and dispossessed, the homosexuals, victimized women, and the poor—does she realize the futility of her mission (179). Almost a decade after fleeing her marital home, she returns to the dejected Amalfitano only once to inform him she has AIDS, with HIV implicitly contracted from the poet. In one of her final letters, she likens herself to the mythological Electra, “the killer mingling with the plebes, the masses, the killer whose mind no one understands, not even the FBI special agents or the charitable people who dropped coins in her hands” (183). Indeed, as McCann explains, Lola “emerges as a ghostly revenant of the processes that permeate the novel” (138). An exilic woman, she sweeps offices

for a living, rooms with other migrants, and frequents insane asylums before developing the proverbial “homosexual” disease that Azucena also marked for social damnation.

Lola’s madness seems to accelerate Amalfitano’s identity crisis, which has been rooted in homophobia since childhood. His father vituperated every man from Chilean boxers to Mexican citizens as “faggots, every one of them, happy to be cheated, happy to be bought, happy to pull down their pants the minute someone asks them to take off their watches” (Bolaño, 2666 197). The condition of being a “faggot” therefore is not an identification so much as an anathema attached to greed; “faggots” are, presumably, cultural figures (but also ordinary people) prone to financial corruption, whether through bribes or theft. So, when Amalfitano begins to hear voices that “beg” him “to be a man, not a queer” and taunt him for being a “ho-mo-sex-u-al,” a stretched truth, his paranoia is not calling his sexuality into question so much as the societal rules he enforces to regulate his sexual expression (207). In fact, the voice, which claims to be his grandfather’s, clarifies that it possesses “boundless admiration for certain poets who had professed such sexual leanings, not to mention certain painters and government clerks”—clearly ranking the cultural avant-garde alongside the lowest rung of government (208). The heteropatriarchal ancestor’s voice goes on to denounce the very possibility of friendship, love, and poetry that are able to withstand the incoherent utterances of “egoists,” “cheats,” “traitors,” “social climbers,” and “faggots” (209). These juxtapositions collapse intellectuals, elitists, and hypocrites into a single inventory of indecipherable drivel. Homosexuality, the voice reiterates, is merely a figure of speech, wherein “faggot” signifies a universally recognizable slur that violently connotes all kinds of phallogocentric cowardice.

In *Sinsabores*, Amalfitano’s wife’s narrative also follows an entirely different trajectory; in place of the deranged renegade Lola, Amalfitano marries Edith Lieberman, a Chilean citizen,

observant Jew, and French language teacher—in other words, an exemplary post-World War II cosmopolitan exile—who dies of cancer. Reading one novel through the other puts Amalfitano’s homophobic schizophrenia in *2666* into perspective as a defensive reaction to the shame he feels for having compromised his hitherto “perfect” marriage with Edith.³⁰ Not Edith but Padilla serves as the true foil to Lola in *2666*. As with her, AIDS also abbreviates Padilla’s life.

In *Sinsabores*, Amalfitano’s affair with Padilla tenderly ushers the older man into carnal experiments that make him feel like “[a]n adolescent in a foreign land” (*Woes* 46). At the end of a long soliloquy, Amalfitano laments his inability to secure comparable work in the aftermath of his firing from Barcelona. He declares himself:

[I] who discovered my homosexuality at the same time that the Russians discovered their passion for capitalism, I who was discovered by Joan Padilla the way a continent is discovered, I who was swept away and rediscovered pleasure and paid the price, I who am the source of mockery, disgrace of the halls of academe, labeled a filthy South American, faggot *sudaca*, corruptor of minors, queen of the Southern Cone... (Bolaño, *Woes* 23)

[Y]o que descubrí mi homosexualidad al mismo tiempo que los rusos descubrían su vocación capitalista, yo que fui descubierta por Joan Padilla como quien descubre un continente, yo que fui arrastrado al delirio y redescubrí el placer y pagué por ello, yo que soy motivo de escarnio, la vergüenza del claustro y por ello llamado el sudaca desvergonzado, el sudaca mariquita, el sudaca perversidor de menores, la reinona del Cono Sur... (Bolaño, *Sinsabores* loc. 410)

Amalfitano thus aligns his sexual epiphany with the last gasp of communism, Russia’s entrance into the neoliberal world market. He likens homosexual desire to a colonial conquest whose

³⁰ Both *Los sinsabores del verdadero policia* and *2666* were unfinished at the time of Bolaño’s death and published posthumously; therefore, there is no way to know whether the novels *should* be read in tandem, or if they are actually meant to be alternative versions of the same plot. Some critics might argue that Amalfitano’s wife’s identity shift from the crazed Lola (in *2666*) to the angelic Edith (in *Woes*) is obvious evidence that he was aiming to rewrite an entirely new story for Amalfitano’s past, not to confuse associations with his more epic novel. However, I maintain that it is far more productive to read foils across these novels—Amalfitano/Padilla, Amalfitano/Edith, Amalfitano/Lola, Padilla/Lola—as figurative holograms within the walls of a shared moral, semiotic universe. For this reason, I read Edith and Lola, as well as Padilla and Lola’s unnamed lover, as counterpoints whose stark similarities and differences expand horizons of interpretation.

“discovery” has come at the cost of irredeemable occupational disgrace, decline in social capital, and even criminal implications. When he vacates Barcelona for Santa Teresa as “the wandering queer,” his mottled reputation follows him (34). Amalfitano and his daughter, Rosa, arrive in Santa Teresa as “two gypsies without a tribe, reviled, used, exploited,” demonized by the scarlet letter that marks Amalfitano’s forfeited claim to neoliberal normativity (37).

Rather than stopping here, however, *Sinsabores* continues constructing a shadow-universe for Padilla’s life in Amalfitano’s absence— again, through letters. Padilla’s correspondence mirrors Amalfitano’s with Lola’s in *2666*. Amalfitano learns that his loyal ex-lover has dropped out of Barcelona and begun writing his first novel, *The God of Homosexuals*. Padilla describes this titular deity as “the god of beggars, the god who sleeps on the ground, in subway entrances, the god of insomniacs, the god of those who have always lost” (40). “The God of Homosexuals” thus metonymizes the straggled ranks of those sexually, economically, and psychologically dispossessed and AIDS, the foreign body that will decide Padilla’s fate. As Amalfitano reads Padilla’s letters in Santa Teresa, where the murders are burgeoning, he contemplates whether “a field of invisible whores, the glare of pimps and policeman” has overshadowed the whole of his exile (75). AIDS panoptically looms over Amalfitano’s and his lover’s lives arises as a hermeneutic of surveillance that “like a faceless gaze... transform[s] the whole social body into a field of perception” (Foucault, *DP* 214). This patrolling danger in mind, Amalfitano becomes obsessed with his own hypocrisy, as a radical who once “wanted to be a Jew, a Bolshevik, black, homosexual, a junkie, half-crazy, and—the crowning touch—a one-armed amputee” (Bolaño, *Woes* 86). While he could seek out any of these identities idling along the outer limits of social capital, he has instead shamelessly settled for the cushy job of literature

professor at a provincial university. This is, arguably, the Amalfitano we meet in *2666*—devastated, and ashamed.

Never outright naming the killers in either novel, Bolaño obliquely insinuates in *Sinsabores* that Pedro and Pablo Negrete, Mexican brothers serving as Santa Teresa's chief of police and university rector respectively, are involved in the cover-up. Thus, the police and the academy represent parallel, complicit forces of neoliberal regulation, violently controlling the movements of mostly poor women of color. Before his disgrace in *Sinsabores*, Amalfitano, the new, enigmatic Chilean hire, visits Pablo in an inebriated premonition, in which "Amalfitano was riding one of the horses of the Apocalypse through the streets of Santa Teresa" (192). The image evokes Pedro Lemebel's *Mares of the Apocalypse*, an avant-garde duo whom Bolaño has described as "two poverty-stricken homosexuals, which in a homophobic and hierarchical country (where being poor is shameful, and being a poor artist a crime) nearly amounted, in every sense of the term, to a date with the firing squad" ("Corridor" 166). In comparison, Amalfitano's sexual repression—*not* his criminalization—begets moral impoverishment. His latent homosexuality, though suppressed, nevertheless defies the normativity that the neoliberal state seeks to instantiate as status quo. The vision spooks Pablo and Pedro into ordering their key detective to undertake a background check of Amalfitano, who has begun to suspect their collusion.

In contrast, *2666*'s Amalfitano remains a wholly emasculated, paranoid bystander, obsessed with safekeeping his daughter Rosa. He repeatedly alludes to having figured out the secret of the police's involvement, but his conspicuous insanity impairs his credibility. Even though Amalfitano barely knows Oscar Fate, the African American journalist temporarily displaced in Santa Teresa (in a dark, metaphorical joke, to cover wrestling, not the murders),

Amalfitano places Rosa's safe passage to Barcelona in his hands, convinced that the police are caught up in the killings. His behavior contrasts his own sentiment that divulging secret fears, not keeping silent, has the power to tap into a collective empathy:

Anyway, these ideas or feelings or ramblings had their satisfactions. They turned the pain of others into memories of one's own. They turned pain, which is natural, enduring, and eternally triumphant, into personal memory, which is human, brief, and eternally elusive. They turned a brutal story of injustice and abuse, an incoherent howl with no beginning or end, into a neatly structured story in which suicide was always held out as a possibility. They turned flight into freedom, even if freedom meant no more than the perpetuation of flight. They turned chaos into order, even if it was at the cost of what is commonly known as sanity. (Bolaño, 2666 189)

Estas ideas o estas sensaciones o estos desvaríos, por otra parte, tenían su lado satisfactorio. Convertía el dolor de los *otros* en la memoria de *uno*. Convertía el dolor, que es largo y natural y que siempre vence, en memoria particular, que es humana y breve y que siempre se escabulle. Convertía un relato bárbaro de injusticias y abusos, un ulular incoherente sin principio ni fin, en una historia bien estructurada en donde siempre cabía la posibilidad de suicidarse. Convertía la fuga en libertad, incluso si la libertad solo servía para seguir huyendo. Convertía el caos en orden, aunque fuera al precio de lo que comúnmente se conoce como cordura. (Bolaño, 2666 *loc.* 3680)

The series of anaphora of communicative acts (“ideas,” “feelings,” “ramblings”) “turning,” transforming into more apocalyptic fodder, suggests a moral conversion. The murders, the extremist offshoots of Azucena's internalized sexism or Amalfitano's self-directed homophobia, are all part of an “incoherent howl with no beginning or end.” Pain and memory police these “brutal stories of injustice and abuse,” forcing them into “neatly structured stories” that conform to acceptable conventions, but only to a degree—a degree beyond which “suicide,” as total annihilation and unequivocal silence, remains the last “possibility” for release. “Freedom” and “flight” from regimes of neoliberal normativity, managed by the violence that causes pain and elongates memory, hold one another in dialectical tension. Neither freedom nor flight is celebratory; Bolaño's dystopian tone certainly resists “the restorative, the redemptive, [and] the testimonial” injunctions that have come to characterize many postcolonial narratives of violence

and resistance (Farred 702). Chaos may convert into order at some stage of one's internalization of shame and grief—but not without tremendous cost. To the extent that succeeding in survival means being irrevocably altered, Amalfitano, it could be said, transforms “the pain of others into memories of one's own” through the empathetic displacement, the terrorist resemblance, of the women's immolation in his own privileged experience (2666 189). A chain of violence yokes the Amalfitanos in *2666* and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*. Through the power of shame, Amalfitano's homosexual narrative transmutes into Padilla's, whose stigmatized lifestyle analogizes Lola's, whose ruination circles back to the anonymous deaths of hundreds of women in Santa Teresa, whose advent at the Mexican border was owed to various neoliberal circuits of free trade, from transnational drug trafficking, to cheap labor from Central America, to tourism trickling down from the North. Although these novels imply that there may be no end in sight to this signifying chain, they also suggest that merely solving the crimes would not resolve the crisis so long as victims and victimizers alike remain shuttered in the same dehumanizing obscurity.

Conclusion: Bolaño's Reinvented Patriarch and His Legacy against/of Fascism

By way of conclusion, I turn to “The Part about Archimboldi,” the final section of *2666* where Bolaño explodes the scope the Juárez crisis back to the Holocaust. This miniature *bildungsroman* follows Hans Reiter, a young boy in rural Germany, to his involuntary conscription in the Nazi S.S. army, his detainment in an American prisoner of war camp, and his illustrious writing career under the Italian pseudonym Archimboldi. Hans Reiter, a fairly common German name, is also, uncoincidentally, the name of a Nazi soldier awarded for bravery on the battlefield, as well as a Nazi doctor convicted of war crimes for conducting experiments on prisoners in concentration camps like Buchenwald. By naming the original Archimboldi

“Hans Reiter,” Bolaño charts a legacy that nominally links the hero to violent medical and militaristic discourses antagonistic to human rights, leaving readers reason to suspect that Hans carries evil in his footsteps. Amalfitano’s and other professors’ obsession with Archimboldi is a red herring that exposes the near-universal tendency to spotlight the individual loss of a Great Man at the expense of mass-murdered women.

Indeed, as with Amalfitano, racism in young Hans’s family life predetermines his worldview. His disabled father, anxious to defend his masculinity because of his lost leg, bestializes and emasculates Mexicans from Chihuahua, the state where Juárez is located, as “tiny dogs” (2666 642). His rant about many other countries being political pigpens takes a homophobic turn as he calls Greeks and Turks “bald, sodomitic swine” (643). Historically, Prussia, the source of Hans and his father’s origins, has disappeared. But instead of having sympathy for cultures under erasure, his father even more eagerly affirms the dead fatherland’s strength: “The only people who aren’t swine are the Prussians,” he declares (643). After being drafted into the war, Reiter falls in love with a German girl named Ingeborg. Although Nazi literature fills her parents’ bookshelves, she herself is obsessed with the Aztecs, another people wiped out by genocide. Reiter is too dense to sense the ominous connection. Ingeborg dies of tuberculosis. Reiter moves on. The first hint of the Holocaust in Reiter’s *bildung* surfaces while he is drinking coffee at a hostel in Kostekino, a fictional village where a number of inhabitants recently disappeared. Recuperating from an injury that has left him mute and thus unable to voice questions or dissent, he overhears a troubling story about how “the depopulation” occurred because *Einsatzgruppe C*, a Nazi brigade, “proceeded to physically eliminate all the Jews in the village” while passing through (706).

Having been isolated on the snowy Eastern Front before trying to desert his regiment, Reiter does not understand the statement at all; he knows nothing of Hitler's violence. Indeed, his passivity is his crime; he has absorbed and defended inherited ideologies while standing for nothing politically. He does not dwell on his ignorance, and he does not move to activate any moral consciousness until he encounters Leo Sammer, a war criminal, in the American POW camp. One night, Sammer purges his story as a Nazi functionary in a small town outside of Chelmno, a well-known death camp in Poland. He recounts the unexpected arrival of 500 Greek Jews on a transport:

“The smell that came from the cars when they were opened made even the woman who cleaned the station washrooms wrinkle her nose. Eight Jews had died on the trip. The official made the survivors fall into ranks. They didn't look well. I ordered them to be taken to an abandoned tannery. I told one of my employees to go to the bakery and buy all the bread available to distribute to the Jews. Have them charge it to me, I said, but be quick about it.” (Bolaño, 2666 753)

» El olor que exhalaban los vagones al ser abiertos hizo fruncir la nariz hasta a la mujer encargada de los lavabos de la estación. En el viaje murieron ocho judíos. El oficial hizo formar a los sobrevivientes. No tenían buen aspecto. Ordené que los llevaran a una curtiduría abandonada. Dije a uno de mis empleados que se dirigiera a la panadería y que comprara todo el pan disponible para repartirlo entre los judíos. Que lo pongan a mi cuenta, dije, pero hágalo rápido. (Bolaño, 2666 loc. 14574)

Caught between his desire not to be a killer and the pressure to satisfy men of higher rank, Sammer employs the detainees as a temporary cleaning crew for his derelict village. In the meantime, Sammer finds out that these people have been delivered to him by mistake; their transport was bound for Auschwitz. A bureaucrat on the phone tells him to “dispose” of them himself and, when Sammer requests verification, scoffs at him not to “be naïve... these orders are never issued in writing” (Bolaño, 2666 759). Issuing an order for mass death in writing would legitimize its reality, and Sammer's real job is to maintain only the semblance of justice.

The violence can never enter the archive as “real,” per se, but must remain a reality that can be manipulated and repressed, like the *feminicidios* in Juárez.

After the phone call, Sammer divides the sweepers into groups, enervates them with a ten-mile walk, and then executes them in a wooded hollow. But eventually, in another turn so maudlin as to be farcical, the hollow runs out of space. Sammer himself must go to the mass grave to clear space for the evidence:

“Each time someone found something I repeated the same thing. Leave it alone. Cover it up. Go dig somewhere else. Remember the idea isn’t to find things, it’s to *not* find them. But all my men, one after the other, kept finding something and in fact, as my secretary had said, it seemed there was no room left at the bottom of the hollow.” (Bolaño, 2666 764)

» Cada vez que uno encontraba algo le repetía lo mismo. Déjelo. Tápelo. Váyase a cavar a otro lugar. Recuerde que no se trata de encontrar sino detrás de otro, iban encontrando algo y efectivamente, tal como había dicho mi secretario, parecía que en el fondo de la hondonada ya no había sitio para nada más. (Bolaño, 2666 *loc.* 14826)

Despite his conviction that it must be possible to keep invisibilizing the evidence—to “*not* find” anything of consequence—even he concedes his task is impossible. His terse imperatives ultimately give way to his secretary’s revelation that there is nowhere to store the bodies except in the open air. Amidst Reiter and the other POWs, Sammer is a lesser-ranked Adolf Eichmann, a caricature of ordinary moral failure pleading for sympathy because he was simply following orders. Indeed, Hannah Arendt calls the “failure to think” for oneself the true “banality of evil” (*loc.* 185). But unlike Eichmann, an unnamed POW—who only the reader, the true policeman, knows to be Reiter—takes it upon himself to short-circuit the banality of Sammer’s evil by strangling him in his sleep.

To conceal his culpability in the Nazi’s murder, Hans renames himself after an Italian painter, Benno von Archimboldi. 2666 positions Archimboldi as a sympathetic figure, trapped in

webs of evil beyond his control. However, a comment on his sex life very close to the end of the novel implies that even he may possess instincts akin to the killers’:

Archiboldi’s sex life was limited to his dealings with whores in the different cities where he lived. Some whores didn’t charge him. They charged him at first, but later, when Archiboldi began to form part of the landscape, they stopped, or they didn’t always charge him, which often led to misunderstandings that were violently resolved. (Bolaño, *2666*, 861)

La vida sexual de Archiboldi se limitaba a su trato con las putas de las diversas ciudades donde vivía. Algunas putas no le cobraban. Le cobraban al principio, pero luego, cuando la figura de Archiboldi empezaba a formar parte del paisaje, dejaban de cobrarle, o no le cobraban siempre, lo que a menudo llevaba a equívocos que se resolvían de forma violenta. (Bolaño, *2666 loc.* 16834)

Resolving disputes over money for sex *through* violence appears here as business as usual—nothing remarkable, no matter the greatness of the man enacting the violence. More remarkable here is the indiscernibility of the *actors* in the violence—the ambiguity that the passive voice, “misunderstandings that were violently resolved,” allows. Did the whores stand up for themselves and demand payment for their labor, regardless of friendly niceties? Or did Archiboldi instigate violence when the whores or their pimps demanded payment retroactively? After all, just before the novel’s close, Archiboldi is the one who sneers to himself, “history, which is a simple whore, has no decisive moments but is a proliferation of instants, brief interludes that vie with one another in monstrousness” (794). As Bolaño meditates on the *impossibility* of recovery, his work does “speak to a felt need for a full confrontation with neoliberalism’s dehumanization of moral subjectivity, its division of the world into undeserving winners and undeserving losers, its desensitizing to death and suffering, its blurring of the line between dictatorship and democracy” (N. Birns 146). Indeed, there is no “world” in existence in which the killers *could* be found and brought to justice. Justice itself, like agency, like human rights and politics, is an ideal whose definition has degraded. The best the novel can do is remind

readers around the world that semblance itself is a privileged reality—and not necessarily one anyone can choose to avoid.

Coda: On Resistance to Erasure

In this dissertation, I have argued that contemporary writers from postcolonial and post-dictatorship contexts across the Global South are finding ways to expose modern state violence that recognize—and yet also refuse to surrender to—the futility of representing unrepresentable subjects in the wake of collective trauma. I have called these political interventions through literary form “arts of the impossible,” which negotiate competing desires for hope and justice through memory, reparation, and representation. Arts of the impossible are not existential performances of crisis and disorder that deploy graphic violence merely to dwell on the intransigency of dehumanization in our globalized world. Rather, these endeavors aspire to a deeper, metacognitive awareness of readers’ complicity in the systems of dehumanization that render such intransigency our collective reality in the first place.

Each text I have examined reveals the actual inefficacy of specific evidentiary forms that are, ironically, supposed to champion justice in vastly different contexts. For example, Cristina Peri Rossi and Michael Ondaatje reveal the inadequacy of existing national archives for commemorating the state’s involvement in forced disappearance, much less individual *desaparecidos*’ bodies and personalities. On both figurative and literal levels, national archives often reify heteropatriarchal discourses as normal and constrain collective imaginations. Both Peri Rossi and Ondaatje not only resurface suppressed counter-narratives—origin myths recentering women’s roles in society, for example, and reports on missing people by international NGOs—but also connect local crimes to global histories and multidirectional memories of atrocity. In doing so, Peri Rossi and Ondaatje imply that *de facto* conduits for justice are universally too intent on securing their own ideological hegemony to work in victims’ favors. In other words, the very foundation of the *premise* of a “national” archive—a cache of

records unobjectively assembled to *affirm* a (corrupt, authoritarian, repressive) nation's dominance—is built on wormwood in neocolonial nation-states like Uruguay and Sri Lanka.

Whereas Peri Rossi and Ondaatje censure both national and international publics for complacency in broad strokes, the works I discuss in chapters two through four are invested in individual evidentiary forms tied to tactics for what I have called “ontological erasure.” To reframe a slave massacre from 1781 as an act of state-sanctioned violence, M. NourbeSe Philip ironically indicts a short set of official notes from the King's bench on a trial that weighed insurance claims without ever indicting mass murder as the primary crime at hand. Philip's painstaking linguistic deconstruction of these notes exposes the impotency of the original trial for exacting any justice for Black life, which was reduced to the ontological status of animals and things. In chapter three, Edwidge Danticat and Boubacar Boris Diop both explore the limits of first-person testimony for remembering genocide. Unlike the other authors I discuss, who locate delays for justice in the blind spots inherent to evidentiary forms themselves, Danticat and Diop do not disavow the importance of survivors witnessing or giving voice to collective trauma through testimony. Rather, their novels focus on the role *reception* plays in legitimizing testimony; a speaking subject depends on a listening counterpart to validate suffering and enact reparations. Thus, heroines like Amabelle and Jessica find their voices jarring against impossible listeners who are yoked to broken institutions that include the family, church, and state. Finally, in chapter four, Roberto Bolaño brings my study up to date in the very near present by polemicizing forensic reports on *feminicidio* along the ever-fractious U.S.-Mexico border. Presumably, the original reports detect clues for potential serial killers (or at least hint at a male presence). However, Bolaño's representation suggests this presumption is not accurate. In his account, these reports dwell on dissecting potential traces of deviance, immorality, and fatal

naivety from dead women's bodies—clarifying very little about the *killers* at all. The report thus does not advance justice but instead subtly incriminates victims for their own slaughter.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of these inefficacious reports with hate speech flowing freely from two ardent opponents of *feminicidio* further underscores the all-encompassing absence of social consciousness that effaces victims. Altogether, the blind spots made visible through this juxtaposition suggest high possibilities for failure intrinsic to the “real” evidentiary form, which does not take into account the unconscious biases latent in the hand that is writing the report.

In critiquing various documents at our disposal for exacting justice against recurring atrocities, these authors do not limit their stakes to delegitimizing particular evidentiary forms; rather, each evidentiary form metonymizes broader modes of structural violence. To varying degrees, each text I discuss challenges the primacy of the following hostile, exclusionary structures in contemporary discourses surrounding rights and justice: heteropatriarchy and its corollary, heterosexism, which equally vaunt the superiority of men and the necessity of heteronormativity as a foundation for family life and, by extension, the nation's future; white supremacy and institutionalized racism, which bestialize non-white subjects the world over and create hierarchies of ontological value based on indefensible fictions of ethnic purity; capitalism and neoliberalism as collusive forces that constrain agency, amplify poverty, and instigate violence across the Global South amidst unhalting globalization; and neo-imperialism, neocolonialism, and authoritarianism as oppressive ideologies benefiting from the compulsory, collective normalization of all previous structures of exclusion in this list, and guiding many twenty-first-century leaders, bureaucracies, and procedures in governments ranging from dictatorships to putatively liberal democracies. Indeed, each author is explicitly intent on exposing interlocked *systems* of oppression, which is why I have applied an intersectional,

decolonial feminist lens to my close readings. In these authors' renditions, the fictionalization of an individual, impoverished, silenced, non-Western, Black woman—Amabelle Désir in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, for example—reenacts, on a microcosmic level, structural perversions that persist on a macrocosmic scale.

Ontological erasure is the term I have chosen to describe the strategy through which those perversions reproduce themselves against stigmatized, disenfranchised individuals within minorities— seemingly so subtly as *not* to alert collective humanity that the very right to be human, as Paul Gilroy has called it, is at stake. However, the paradigm itself is not necessarily new. As I mention in chapter one, Hitler's *Night and Fog Decree* first tied social dehumanization (the official denunciation of Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, the disabled, etc.) to political vanishment (the actual practice of disappearing individuals to concentration camps) as a legal action, thus authorizing dissident identities as viable grounds for abduction, torture, and death. Commenting on Guantánamo Bay, Judith Butler calls the same process of state-sanctioned immobilization and erasure “derealization” in *Precarious Life*; whereas “realizable” people garner recognition as human subjects worthy of dignity and rights, victims of “derealization” have been removed from the collective imagination, often bestialized and then alienated as inconceivable others. In the frame of Afro-pessimism, Calvin Warren carves out “onticide” as a paradigm effectuating genocide on the level of ontology, whereas Eric Stanley prefers “overkill” to describe the subaltern literally effaced from existence through egregious, visceral violence.¹ All these articulations fit into the rubric of what Patricia J. Williams has called “spirit murder,” i.e. “disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard,” thus producing and

¹ See Calvin Warren's *Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory and Ethics* and Eric Stanley's “Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture” in *Social Text*.

sustaining “a system of formalized distortions of thought... [a] social structure centered on fear and hate, a tumorous outlet for feelings elsewhere unexpressed” (73). In my view, ontological erasure is a term capacious enough to draw from all these prior meditations on state violence without superseding any.

What the future holds for each of the atrocities I have discussed—or even what can be done, in a practical sense, to resist or overcome state violence—remains beyond the bounds of this dissertation. Whereas former military officers in Latin America’s Southern Cone are increasingly facing indictments and receiving harsh sentences for forced disappearances in Peri Rossi’s era, the practice still occurs frequently in politically unstable parts of the Global South, notably Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Bangladesh.² Like many late twentieth-century dictators, Trujillo may be dead, but his genocidal ideology has left behind a legacy of anti-Haitian vitriol and naturalized racism that still fuels ethnic strife between Dominicans and Haitians from Hispaniola to New York City.³ Perhaps presciently, Philip’s *Zong!* preempted the Black Lives Matter movement by only five years. Indeed, the very metaphors embedded into the movement’s name cleverly play on language and absence in kindred spirit with Philip’s work. Black lives “matter” despite attempts at erasure, while the primacy of “black matter,” the unknown quantity that, ironically, comprises most of the universe, remains inarguable. Yet, even as activism in defense of Black lives has intensified, racially motivated police brutality and mass incarceration in the U.S. remain adamant hallmarks of transatlantic slavery’s afterlives, what Michelle

² I have been tracking the keyword “forced disappearance*” in the public sphere with a Google News Alert since December 2014, accumulating 485 relevant news items from around the world in just over three years; these are the countries with the highest number of hits from that data.

³ As an example, see Richard André’s article, “The Dominican Republic and Haiti: A Shared View from the Diaspora,” a conversation on Dominican-Haitian racial animus between Edwidge Danticat and the Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz, in *Americas Quarterly*.

Alexander has called “the New Jim Crow.” Progress on criminalizing *feminicidio* in Mexico is even more stagnant; even though the Mexican Senate approved a General Law on Enforced Disappearances in June 2017, and new tactics for activism abound, *feminicidio* remains a separate issue, with the latest numbers from the country’s National Institute of Women tallying 12,811 suspected gender-based homicides in the last five years alone (qtd. in Ceja, par. 7).⁴ In other words, each historical act of state violence that I have discussed remains in flux—perhaps on the road to reparations or, oppositely, to reproduction in new and insidious forms.

When contemporary writers and other cultural producers traffic in arts of the impossible to indict state violence, their obligation is not to invent a solution, as a policymaker or an activist might. Instead, their contributions expose overlapping experiences of injustice to sway hearts and minds towards majoritarian dissent and empowered resistance. Indeed, like Otto von Bismarck’s utterance about “arts of the possible,” the dark irony of which I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the need to affect “hearts and minds” is a platitude frequently attributed to times of war and conflict (perhaps most recently, the Iraq War). However, it was most famously pronounced in the Malayan Emergency, a colonial campaign that sought to subjugate the non-Western populace of contemporary Malaysia. Between 1948 and 1960, British imperial armies entered into a guerilla war with the Communist Party of Malaya, which demanded national independence; covering the counterinsurgency, the British journalist Vernon Bartlett wrote, “Malayan patriotism [for the British Commonwealth] cannot be imposed from without or from above; it must develop in the hearts and minds of the Malaysians themselves” (109). Put another way, immediately after World War II— the same year when the U.N. and broader notions of

⁴ For more on the passage of Mexico’s law against forced disappearance, see the January 2018 news item titled “U.N. Experts Welcome Enforced Disappearance Law in Mexico” by the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights.

universal human rights were being formulated in the West— a major ally of all these ventures, Britain, was angling to manipulate the collective imagination of a subjugated people to secure their submission for the foreseeable future. This episode exemplifies exactly the manipulation of words— and, by extension, the sentiments, prejudices, and beliefs they convey— that writers in my dissertation are striving to counteract. In contrast, political actors like Bartlett and Bismarck advocated warping narratives and cultural scripts to ensure the erasure of a subaltern minority’s identity and freedom.

I conclude with a close reading of an activist art installation stationed from within the U.S., one of several neo-imperial and neoliberal epicenters often indicted by works in this dissertation. In 2007, one year before Philip released *Zong!* and Natasha Wimmer’s English translation of Bolaño’s *2666* was published to international acclaim, the feminist mixed media artist Swoon installed a series of public artworks throughout San Francisco, California that commemorated the deaths of murdered women in Ciudad Juárez. Titled “Portrait of Sylvia



Figure 5.1.
"Portrait of Sylvia Elena" by Swoon, an art installation supported by the Yerba Buena Cultural Association in San Francisco

Elena,” this “memorial” for a suspected victim of *feminicidio* replaces the expected subject matter of a portrait—a human face, in any posture—with seemingly random detritus (Figure 5.1). A dusty mound of dirt stacks up against ramshackle plywood from another neglected structure. Empty water bottles, plastic caps, metal screws, soiled paper and cardboard, and a destroyed computer part—perhaps one side of an Ethernet hub, further underscoring the missing corpse’s dislocation from a virtually interconnected world—crowd the edges of this photo. If there is any focal point, it is a mass of soil, twigs, and stones near the center. On the one hand, the mass metaphorically figures a burial mound even as it is, on the other hand, too shallow to hide a body. The only certain sleight of human intervention in this installation are the delicate black paper butterflies precariously perched throughout the frame. Were it not for the more sinister connotations the butterflies carry—the spiderlike webs in their wings, their flimsiness and their shadowiness—their message of hope amidst the jettison would be all too saccharine. But, juxtaposed with trash, the butterflies help enact an art of the impossible. Urgently, they bear witness to a life that has likely been crushed like paper while also remaining wakeful to the impossibility of resuscitating that life’s body, person, or voice as the irreparable injustice hidden in plain sight. And yet, even as each individual’s death’s reality is intractable, the very creation of the memorial is an expression of hope. The texts I have discussed in this dissertation share a conviction in the possibility that evidentiary forms can be reformed, judgments can be rethought to fit ongoing human rights crimes, and more lives need not be lost— if only agents of justice and change were to work more consciously towards resisting structural violence for the reality it is.

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