

PLAYING GUNS: AVANT-GARDE AESTHETICS AND  
REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE

by

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A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland

March, 2014

## Abstract

*Playing Guns* theorizes the avant-gardes in relation to the following revolutionary movements from the extended Caribbean: the Mexican Revolution (Stridentism and Antonio Helú), the Cuban Revolution (Julio Cortázar), the Sandinista Revolution (Gioconda Belli), and post-NAFTA Mexico (Roberto Bolaño, Subcomandante Marcos and Paco Ignacio Taibo II). These examples, in turn, help elucidate the following theoretical-historical problems: the Caribbean and Latin America as privileged sites of revolt and revolution; human emancipation in relation to interpellation and agency; and practices of confrontation *vis-à-vis* practices of resistance. I argue that Latin American avant-garde artists, movements and institutions engage in a radical variant of what Rancière theorizes as aesthetic free play—an egalitarian rearranging of our common sensorium that overturns social hierarchies. By doing so, the avant-gardes “recognize,” in Althusserian terms, the actual interpenetration of life and art and thereby call into question certain caricatures of the avant-gardes as counterrevolutionary and politically vacuous. I then propose that free play propagates radical modes of being that *can* lead to forms of human emancipation as they confront—not *resist* as Foucault theorizes—interpellating hierarchies from peripheral positions proper to Latin America. William Egginton and Eduardo González served as advisors for this dissertation.

## Acknowledgments

It would be the highest act of ingratitude *not* to thank my spunky and capable partner Chelsea Shields Strayer for pushing me in everything. I would also like to thank my delightful daughter Eden Jean Shields Strayer for whom some slightly modified lines from José Martí seem particularly apropos: “Hija: / Espantado de todo, me refugio en ti. / Tengo fe en el mejoramiento humano, en la vida futura, / en la utilidad de la virtud, y en ti.” Likewise, I thank my advisor Eduardo González for shepherding this project in all the right directions. And to my advisor William Egginton: thank you for being so generous with your shrinking time and expansive mind. To my colleagues at Hopkins—Julia Baumgardt, Christopher Kozey, Marcos Pérez, Christopher Ray Alexander, Amy Sheeran and Amanda Smith—thank you for your mutual aid during coursework, comprehensive exams and the dissertation writing process. Funding from the Program in Latin American Studies and Associate Director Emma Cervone, and the Program for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality was essential to the research process. Likewise, Ángel González Abreu at the Hemeroteca of Casa de las Américas, and Lissette Ruiz Contreras, María Auxiliadora Estrada and María Ligia Garay at the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica shared their resources and expertise with great kindness. And finally, thank you to the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Brigham Young University for collegially hosting me as I finished this dissertation.

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“What is at stake is the affirmation of a life no longer exhausted by work, cowed by law and the police.”  
—Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*

### Introduction: Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Latin America

In *El reino de este mundo*, Alejo Carpentier brings to bear a theoretical question that continues to haunt Latin American cultural studies to this very moment. The problem revolves around the positing of the Caribbean—and by extension Latin America—as a privileged site of revolution in the face of colonial and neocolonial domination. In privileging Latin America, Carpentier theorizes the Marvelous Real as a way of being in the world that accounts for the extraordinary, at times even revolutionary, events chronicled from the European Conquest to the Age of Revolutions to modern times: “¿Pero qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real maravilloso?” (12). It is my claim that this ontology where marvel and magic permeate our historical reality, leading to unexpected states of emancipation says more, however, about the avant-gardes than it does about any sort of essentialist envisioning of Latin America. With Carpentier we have yet another avant-garde rearranging of the sensible world that leads to “un modo de ‘estado límite’” (8). This so-called “limit state” is embodied in the song, dance and revolt of the historical-fictional characters Mackandal and Boukman, and the Haitian Revolution (Carpentier 61). Avant-garde modes of emancipation—like Carpentier’s “limit state” and those of the surrealists who he rebukes *ad infinitum* in his manifesto-like prologue—are thus what animate the following pages, which chronicle certain particularities of modern Latin American history and culture.

More directly, this dissertation theorizes the avant-gardes through various case studies from the extended Caribbean. Each of the four chapters reads the avant-garde in relation to specific revolutionary movements: the Mexican Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, the Sandinista Revolution, and Zapatismo in post-NAFTA Mexico. These acute examples of radical art-politics, in turn, help elucidate the following theoretical problems: Latin America as privileged site of revolt and revolution; human emancipation in relation to interpellation and agency; and practices of confrontation *vis-à-vis* practices of resistance. I argue that Latin American avant-garde artists, movements and institutions engage in a radical variant of what Rancière theorizes as aesthetic free play—an egalitarian rearranging of our common sensorium that overturns social hierarchies. I then propose that free play propagates radical modes of being that *can* lead to forms of human emancipation as they confront—not *resist* as Foucault theorizes—interpellating hierarchies from a privileged peripheral position. This introductory chapter therefore begins by outlining the state of the field of *estudios vanguardistas* in Latin America, then transitions to framing the hypotheses that I have proposed in these introductory paragraphs, and finally concludes with a brief summary of each of the four chapters of my dissertation.

## VANGUARDIAS

Since the early 1970s scholars in Latin American literature and art have revisited *las vanguardias* with increasing frequency and rigor. This is perhaps due to the valuable anthological and historical work of many scholars like Merlin H.

Forster, Nelson Osorio and Luis Mario Schneider who once again made rare or forgotten documents from the 1920s and 30s available to the general, Spanish-speaking public (Manzoni 737). Like most *vanguardia* scholars I recognize that the avant-gardes in Latin America ought to be historically grounded in the Interbellum period (roughly 1918 – 1939).<sup>1</sup> However, since the pathway of periodization is well tread in *estudios vanguardistas* with all of the immanent scholars mentioned above and many more adding their academic footprints, I will therefore not propose any specific dates or periods. Nor do I consider it the objective of this particular study. In terms of an approximate chronology, however, I claim that the avant-gardes extend historically into the twenty-first century with notable forerunners like Rubén Darío (Nicaragua) and Isidore Lucien Ducasse (Uruguay-France) forming part of an avant-garde genealogy beginning in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These assertions are supported by George Yúdice’s observation that, even after the “decline” of surrealism in the early nineteen-forties, “the continual reelaboration of the projects of the avant-gardes” proliferated throughout Latin America during the latter half of the twentieth century in conjunction with an abundance of revolutionary conflicts throughout the region (“Rethinking” 72). With this Yúdice provides us with a justifiable reason for privileging Latin America that does not rely on essentialism or exceptionalism, which I will develop further in the paragraphs that follow.

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<sup>1</sup> This common heuristic designation is not without its exceptions with futurism and cubism gaining traction as early as 1909, and certain strains of surrealism extending all the way into the 1960s.

Extrapolating from Yúdice's argument, I claim that radical politics and the avant-gardes thrive symbiotically and can therefore *not* be totally separated out conceptually. By virtue of certain historical and geopolitical contingencies, Latin America is fertile ground for this symbiosis that can be readily observed, in particular, within certain aesthetic-political contexts associated with the Mexican, Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions of the twentieth century. These historical and geopolitical contingencies include the conquest and colonization of the western hemisphere and the resulting antagonisms that came to fruition under the political-economic forms of bullionism and mercantilism. They also include forms of neocolonial domination like the spread of capitalism during the nineteenth century. By virtue of being “discovered,” the Caribbean (and by extension Latin America) acquires a pride of place, a privileging, in that it marks the traumatic origin of the current world system. The antagonisms of the world system continue to be more evident at its point of origin where revolutionary, anti-capitalist struggle continues to be a very real possibility. This helps account for the fecundity of avant-garde movements, artists and institutions in the region throughout the twentieth century in that they often lit, stoked and warmed themselves by the fire of revolution. My thesis, following Yúdice, therefore differs in important ways from the work of many other important *vanguardista* scholars in that I seek to widen the temporal and theoretical scopes of the historical avant-garde in Latin America (without negating its primacy) by tracking it via specific aesthetic-political markers—which I will explain in detail in the



next section—across the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

In theoretical terms, for example, I take issue with a number of *vanguardista* critics working in Latin America in that I do not seek to confine the avant-gardes to the realm of aesthetic experience or that nebulous catchall term “culture.” For example, I contentiously do not heed one of Vicky Unruh’s most prominent admonishments:

I would caution against seeking too literal links between political confrontations and class struggles played out on Latin America’s streets in the late teens and 1920s and the contentious encounters with audiences, readers, and one another provoked by literary *vanguardistas*. (6)

With this cautionary note Unruh enacts what could be called a counter-offensive, in which the avant-gardes are forced to retreat to “the realm of culture and art” (7). I position myself in open antagonism to this type of overly reactionary stance, which conceptualizes the avant-gardes in terms of radical *praxis*, but then denies these movements any sort of political vitality. Similarly, other scholars like Fernando Rosenberg have situated the avant-gardes in terms of a cosmopolitanism that lacks any sort of political vitality due to the hegemonic Janus head of commoditization and global capitalism (166). Benjamin mounted a churlish, but welcome, response when he wrote apologetically of surrealism that these types of critics “are a little like a gathering of experts at a spring who, after lengthy deliberation, arrive at the conviction that this paltry stream will never drive

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<sup>2</sup> While Forster insists on periodizing the avant-garde he acknowledges, however, that the “lines of demarcation between modernism and vanguardism in the early 1920’s and between vanguardism and post-vanguardism in the mid-1940’s are problematic” (18).

turbines” (177). To deny the avant-gardes any sort of political vitality is to simply misrecognize their radical potentiality. In contrast, I maintain that the avant-gardes in Latin America confront capitalism and the classic liberal tradition, as Yúdice argues, from a peripheral position. One must clarify, however, that this peripheral position is absolutely central to colonial and neocolonial domination. It is therefore in the centrality of the periphery that the critic finds sufficient evidence for privileging Latin America within the global system. Of course, this confrontation from the periphery may or may not yield some sort of tangible social change, but it always marks new ways of being that continue to confront the current global liberal-capitalist hegemony.

Finally, while what Forster and Jackson call “a distinct setting” (i.e. Latin America) is certainly important to my study, I do not consider place alone a sufficient enough concept to effectively theorize the avant-gardes in Latin America (6). Even though critics like Osorio have successfully characterized the Latin American avant-gardes as more than a New World aping of Old World trends, one needs to recognize that this “distinct setting” still interacts with *other* “distinct settings” across national, regional and continental borders in ways that a lot of times have little or nothing to do with a uni-directional conception of aesthetic influence, imitation and/or adaptation (*Manifiestos XXVIII*).<sup>3</sup> Most studies or anthologies—like Reverte Bernal’s—on some level tack into this wind. Rosenberg, for example, has managed to avoid the dead-end problem of

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<sup>3</sup> Can we claim Lautréamont’s birth in Uruguay or Huidobro’s early collaborations with dada and surrealism or Asturias’ translation of the *Polpol Vuh* into French as examples of some sort of multi-directional flow of influences and adaptations that includes Latin America?

influence/adaptation while still incorporating other settings (both World Wars) into his analysis of the avant-gardes in Latin America: “The *loci* of enunciation that the vanguards made available were not about receptivity and the incorporation of a (foreign) modernity to be ingeniously adapted to (traditional) cultural milieu” (163). Extending the theatrical metaphor, the infinite plot reversals of history and the metaphysical contradictions of character also seem equally important when reckoning with the Latin American avant-gardes. With this in mind, I do *not* rely solely on an essentialized setting, focusing on what makes each case study of the avant-gardes in Latin America both iterable—by articulating a common theoretical framework—and singular—by accounting for certain extreme historical and cultural contingencies that address a critical privileging of the region. Now let us pass on to my proposal for a common theoretical framework for *estudios vanguardistas*, a critical gesture that within the field, as this brief review of literature suggests, has long been fragmentary and preoccupied with the anxiety of influence.

#### FRAMING THE AVANT-GARDES

Articulating a common theoretical framework could go many directions, but in terms of the interpenetration of art and politics, one starting-point stands out in particular: the critical tradition as it relates to the study of aesthetics and radical art-politics.<sup>4</sup> I will therefore propose that the critical tradition read against

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<sup>4</sup> By the critical tradition I mean schools or movements of thought influenced by Marx sometimes referred to as Marxist and other times as Marxian like the Frankfurt School. This designation

Rancière’s theorization of aesthetic free play can help us rethink the avant-gardes in provocative ways. We will therefore move from Rancière to Althusser to Žižek and then back to Rancière—in other words, from theories of the sensible to theories of interpellation and agency to theories of emancipation—in order to slice through the Gordian knot in which critics like Unruh and Rosenberg have bound the political vitality of the avant-gardes in Latin America. Starting with Rancière, then, we will first theorize how humans experience and make both art and politics under three interrelated aesthetic-political “regimes”: The Platonic, the representational and the aesthetic. Each regime of the sensible corresponds to how humans move and think within the common sensorium. The Platonic, for example, constitutes an ethical regime: “In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images’ mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities” (*The Politics* 20). This prioritization of *ethos*—in Rancière’s thought a type of coercive consensus—leads to certain hierarchies of power like the order of social occupations theorized in Plato’s vision of republican life.

Similarly, the representational regime of the sensible draws on Aristotelian *mimesis*, which also constitutes a hierarchy of the sensible due in part to the correspondence of aesthetic-political forms and ways of being, which “figure into an analogy with a fully hierarchical vision of the community” (*The Politics* 22). Under the representational regime mastery of certain honored forms translates into power within the community. These first two regimes of the sensible

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would include Rancière as he is variously grouped under the designations post-Althusserian or radical egalitarian.

therefore demonstrate two interrelated anxieties present in all of Rancière's thought: 1.) the intertwining of art and politics, and 2.) the problem of hierarchies. Effectively, as Steven Corcoran has observed, "Politics, for Rancière, effects a *break* with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific groups and individuals to rule" (*Dissensus* 7). This "break" with ruling hierarchies effectively constitutes emancipation, or "the abolition between a full humanity and a subhumanity"—a dividing of human life propagated by the colonial tradition and global capitalism (*Dissensus* 176). Hence its relevance to Latin American cultural studies. How might Rancière then propose to make this "break" with the Platonic and representational regimes and their corresponding hierarchies?

The answer can be found in Rancière's aesthetic regime of the sensible: a new art-politics emerging in Europe in the wake of Kant and Schiller.<sup>5</sup> Rancière argues that, contrary to most interpretations, Kantian aesthetic distance "does not consist in the ecstatic contemplation of the beautiful and thereby work mischievously to conceal the social underpinnings of art and dispense with concrete action in the 'outside' world" (*Dissensus* 137). The aesthetic does, however, and perhaps more radically so, separate itself out from hierarchies of domination traditionally associated with *ethos* and *mimesis*. For Rancière, "The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular

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<sup>5</sup> By using the designation "art-politics," I am graphically representing what is already an ontological given: that art and politics can never be fully separated out conceptually or correspond to any sort of philosophical hierarchy. They are equal and they interpenetrate to varying degrees. I therefore do not mean to say then that there exist "pure" categories of art and politics nor do I want to say that art and politics are one in the same, or identical.

and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres” (*The Politics* 23). One of the foundational concepts associated with the aesthetic regime and its barrier smashing propensities is what Rancière calls aesthetic free play: “a novel mode of experience that bears within it a new form of ‘sensible’ universality and equality” (*Aesthetics* 99). The universal egalitarian potential of free play therefore contrasts with the ethical and representational hierarchies of the Platonic and Aristotelian regimes as it relates to our common sensory experience.

Following Rancière, I argue that the *praxis* of free play complicates authoritarian, hierarchal ideologies and modes of production, and *can* thus be considered revolutionary in its approach to reimagining and reorganizing the world, because “it becomes the principle of a politics, or, more exactly, of a metapolitics, which, against the upheavals of state forms, proposes a revolution of the forms of the lived sensory world” (ibid). By metapolitics, Rancière means to say a “way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics rearrangements of its space, reconfiguring art as a political issue or asserting itself as true politics” (*Dissensus* 119). Under the aesthetic regime of making and doing lived sensory experience becomes revolutionary in a meta-political fashion in that it grounds politics in the operations of dividing and counting “parties and parts of the community in different ways”—ways that differ from the typical *modus operandi* of party politics and state bureaucracies in that it situates emancipation in relation to our immediate sensory experience within community spaces (*Dissensus* 35). The avant-gardes with their antagonistic rearrangements of space (both physical

and textual) would then seem to incarnate on some level the meta-politics of free play and its emancipatory promise, thereby rebuffing reactionary critics who deny its political vitality. Nevertheless, free play can, in addition to nodding towards the emancipatory potential of the avant-gardes, conjure the specters of Rancière's philosophical mentor Louis Althusser and certain Marxist theories of ideology.

It could be said, for instance, that free play deviates from certain currents of the critical tradition rooted in a "spirit of Marxism" by conveniently forgetting any structuring factors that might inhibit or control emancipation (Derrida 95). Here, we can think back to Rosenberg and his formulation of a cosmopolitanism subsumed by global capital. In other words, by returning to Kant, Schiller and free play, is not Rancière reverting to the old bourgeois conceptualization of the autonomous Subject? Is Rancière purposefully forgetting, in the words of Žižek, the "traumatic kernel" of Althusser's theory of interpellation (*The Sublime* xxiii)? In sum, in so far as a subject actually exists, can it ever truly be a "free" agent (i.e. a non-interpellated agent) capable of "free" play? Indeed, Althusser claims that the ideology of capitalist modes of production (i.e. ways of doing and making) is "so integrated into our everyday 'consciousness' that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the *point of view of reproduction*"—that is to say, to recognize how the socio-ideological order reproduces itself (85). *Almost impossible* says Althusser, but why? According to Althusser, the subject effectively internalizes the ideology materialized all around her in the form of various apparatuses, acting under the auspices of what has come to be known in Marxian terms as a "false consciousness" (115). Althusser's "structuring" model

of ideology is perhaps best expressed in the equation “ideology = misrecognition/ignorance” (124). This conception of the subject is therefore not unitary like the autonomous subject of the Enlightenment governed by Reason, nor is it fundamentally egalitarian like Rancière’s theorization of the subject as sensory animal, but rather effectively ignorant of and therefore structured by his or her subservience to ideology. It is *almost impossible*, says Althusser, to recognize one’s ignorance, but possible on some level. How then might one recognize one’s ignorance?

The answer is science where Marxism, for Althusser, is formulated as the science of history. This is because, in Althusser’s theory, “The place of ideology is the void, the absence of science” (*Althusser’s* 29). As a former pupil of Althusser, Rancière had recognized this problematic opposition of science and ideology where science (and therefore Marxism) is somehow exempt from all ideological distortion. Thus, if the very thing that is supposed to emancipate the subject from ideology (i.e. Marxist science) is in fact ideological, can the subject somehow still free him- or herself from the domination of these big Others? Or is it a question of merely picking one’s master à la Lacan’s now famous quip about the student movement of May ‘68? These questions constitute one of the most significant double binds that the critical tradition via Althusser has produced. If we take seriously the structuring specter of ideology, as I do, how then can we make our way back to Rancière, the avant-gardes and some sort of meaningful theorization of emancipation? Perhaps Althusser can lead us in that direction in spite of the deadlock constituted by his theory of ideology.



What about, for example, the “bad subjects” who, Althusser claims, “on occasion provoke the intervention” of repressive ideological state apparatuses (123)? How does interpellation affect them and do they experience a kind of emancipation through their deviant behavior? To answer these questions it becomes useful to think along with Žižek that maybe we can *all*, on some level, become “bad subjects.” For Žižek (via Lacan), “The subject is constituted through his own division, splitting, as to the object in him; this object, this traumatic kernel, is the dimension that we have already named as that of a ‘death drive’” (*The Sublime* 204). As the subject passes through interpellation, attempting to fill a lack in the big Other, he or she *can* also “break bad” so to speak, becoming as it were a “bad subject.” The “death drive” that Žižek posits is then “the opposite of the symbolic order: the possibility of the ‘second death,’ the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which so-called reality is constituted” (*The Sublime* 147). This “second death,” when experienced, in effect constitutes a social death. This is the death of the degenerate (from the Latin to become bad or fallen) subject who has “become bad,” effectuating a kind of separation or split from society. As such, “The process of interpellation-subjectivation”—Althusser’s infamous hail “Hey, you there!”—“is precisely an attempt to elude, to avoid this traumatic kernel through identification” (*The Sublime* 205). This identification with the ideological agent results in a form of enjoyment. This is why, for Žižek, “‘Ideological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness’” (*The Sublime* 16). Take away the support of “false consciousness” and what do we

have? The horror of the Thing itself—the object inside of us that we can never properly symbolize, articulate or govern which ultimately drives us toward (social) death. In other words, the subject will most likely find ways to stay deluded via anger and resistance even after false consciousness is revealed because she ultimately enjoys her symptom and is not merely lying to herself.

Thus, because of the nature of the split subject, at “a certain limit-point”—can we say “estado límite”?—“every interpellation necessarily fails” (*The Sublime* 135). In Žižek, the very possibility of a subject passing through interpellation into a “free” state hinges on subjects “redoubling themselves, only in so far as they ‘project,’ transpose, the pure form of their freedom into the very heart of the substance opposed to them” (*The Sublime* 261). This “pure freedom” paradoxically originates from the “death drive” and can best be described, in Rancière’s words, as “the abyssal liberty experienced in the encounter with the horror of the Thing” (*Dissensus* 215). The “bad subject” then takes on clinical dimensions as when Žižek theorizes the hysteric, the sociopath and the pathological subject. The sociopath, for instance, becomes “a social revolutionary effectively questioning the basic coordinates of society’s big Other” (*The Year* 124). The “bad subject” can therefore be an agent of emancipation once she accepts the necessity of her own (social) death: “true freedom overlaps with necessity, a truly free choice involves putting one’s very existence at stake—choosing because one simply ‘cannot do otherwise’” (*The Year* 121).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Here Žižek is playing with Marx’s claim from the third volume of *Capital* that “the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases.”

Emancipation is *almost impossible*, says Althusser, but Žižek's work opens up some very intriguing possibilities, including the theorization of the avant-gardist as "bad subject."

In spite of this theoretical opening and its possibilities, however, as critics we should not continue to feed into the ideation of "the superpower of truth," in which all understandings of agency or "freedoms" lead back to the structuring big Others of Capital and Unconscious (*Dissensus* 215). This ideation smacks of the "total system" that Marxist theorists like Jameson wish to confront and abolish: "the model of the 'total system' would seem to slowly and inexorably eliminate any possibility of the negative as such, and to reintegrate the place of an oppositional or even merely 'critical' practice and resistance back into the system" (91). In short, as critics, we need to emancipate the critical tradition from the shackles of interpellation, which paradoxically constricts the vitality of dialectical negation or negativity and consequently imprisons any meaningful concept of emancipation within the cell of ideology. But we must not forget those traumatic kernels that we strive to negate by confronting *how* they structure our enjoyment if we are to truly become emancipated. As it turns out we need both Althusser and Rancière *vis-à-vis* the avant-gardes and the peripheral center that is Latin America.

Similar tensions between interpellation and agency present in the critical tradition are also indicative of the vanguard tendency within the so-called political domain. While Lenin's foundational vanguard statement that socialists must separate "into an exclusive group" and chose "the path of struggle instead of the

path of conciliation,” might certainly ring true to those “bad subjects” engaged in class struggle, it also holds within it the possibility of paternalistic and hierarchical inter-subject relations. This is because, like in Althusser and Žižek, the vanguard tradition (i.e. Marxism-Leninism) assumes that the masses cannot emancipate themselves without the Reason and organization of the vanguard, of the Party. Critics ought not, however, summarily reject the revolutionary vanguards because of their seeming incompatibility with Rancière’s philosophical critique of hierarchies. This is because we must also grapple with the historical fact that apart from Marxism-Leninism no other radical socialist or egalitarian movement has put forth a widely adaptable and sustained challenge to global liberal-capitalist hierarchies. What is to be done then a hundred-plus years after Lenin? I hypothesize that the avant-gardes in Latin America can bring us to the limit point of Marxism-Leninism and the critical tradition. They can do so by demonstrating how radical emancipation *can* happen in relation to Rancière’s egalitarian rearrangement of our sensorium, opening up a “space for deviations” by engaging liberal-capitalist hegemony and dogmatic political configurations (*The Politics* 39). In the words of that long forgotten avant-garde manifesto written by Trotsky, Breton and Rivera, if the revolution must centralize the modes of production, “to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above!” Avant-garde modes of production *can* yield radical rearrangements of interpellating hierarchies. They can shape how we interrelate within our sense communities in egalitarian ways, because the avant-

gardes do not depend on preexisting social orders or mastery—because they necessarily “break bad.”

## TOWARDS A RADICAL AVANT-GARDE

Rancière’s positing of free play *vis-à-vis* the critical tradition and the revolutionary vanguard can thus be readily thought in conjunction with conceptualizations of the avant-gardes by theorists like Peter Bürger. In doing so, I put forward an open cluster of aesthetic-political markers specific to the avant-gardes through which to read their historical development in Latin America and further my thesis of their emancipatory potential. My hypothesis is that the avant-gardes are marked by the following interrelated concepts: experimental free play, open antagonism, anti-bourgeois sentiment, and the recognition of the interpenetration of aesthetic experience and ontological *praxis*. My purpose here is *not* to exhaustively define avant-garde art-politics or limit it to any given set of academic criteria, but rather to operationally delineate the phenomenon which I seek to discuss. To do so effectively, I will also provide some brief, preliminary examples in order to give the reader an idea of what kinds of evidence will be deployed in the chapters that follow.

Beginning with experimental free play, I mean to say a leveling of what humans experience and produce as art in that “Artworks henceforth relate to the ‘genius’ of peoples and present themselves, at least in principle, to the gaze of anyone at all” (*Aesthetics* 13). Aesthetic experience can never then, as Bürger claims, be “divorced from the totality of social activities,” but rather always

transforms our common sensorium as we play with art (42). In the case of the avant-gardes, this leveling of the classical philosophical category of “Art” is also characterized by radical experimentation with an emphasis on the qualifier “radical” from the Latin *radicalis*, meaning “by the roots, utterly,” or in modern parlance, “at the limits of control.” These experiments happen at the intersection of form and content, playing with certain normative parameters—not only in terms of genre, mode and figurative language, but also in terms of theories of human existence and behavior. This variant of free play therefore rearranges art in ways that are, in the words of Hugo Verani, “abiertamente experimental” (“La heterogeneidad” 118). A brief historical example can be found in the manifesto-like “Decálogo atalayista” by Graciany Miranda Archilla where the poet employs irony in a variety of registers—theological, political and comical to name a few—in order to play with certain normative parameters. Chief among Miranda Archilla’s free play is a total disregard for the generic norms of the Decalogue (i.e. the Ten Commandments) where Christ himself is mocked, no definitive commandments are issued and, ironically, the authority of the manifesto genre itself is even called into question (Videla 295). Avant-garde modes of production are thus centered in the “búsqueda de un reordenamiento del mundo” and thereby constitute “una nueva sensibilidad” that counters hierarchal notions of good taste or proper form (Ortega 196; “Las vanguardias” 9).

The avant-gardes are not then, as Clement Greenberg claims, “the imitation of imitating,” but rather a rearrangement of rearranging within the aesthetic regime (37). The avant-gardes separate themselves out as a particular

current of the aesthetic regime by way of their extremity, by being “at the limits of control.” I therefore agree with Octavio Paz’s assesment that “la vanguardia es una *intensificación* de la estética del cambio inaugurada por el romanticismo” (159, my italics). Additionally, Saúl Yurkiévich echoes Paz’s observation when he states that “La vanguardia funciona como toda literatura, pero *extremando* las tendencias” (355, my italics). Here I do not propose an empirical metric for determining some sort of threshold that could be adopted in order to determine the experimental quality of any given work of art, but rather a general criterion by which one might understand the avant-gardes in relation to other movements of modern art-politics. This “free” experimentation in the hands of the “bad subject” *directly confronts* interpellating hierarchies linked to hegemony and dogmatism, and is therefore “inseparably egalitarian, or anarchistic” in practice (*Dissensus* 218). The avant-gardes can thus be read as a radical movement of modern art-politics—an *extreme* manifestation of the aesthetic regime of the arts.

Under the sign of extremity, avant-garde antagonism, as theorized by Renato Poggioli, brings to bear the confrontational, activist-like, yet sometimes nihilistic and agonistic character of avant-garde art-politics. Following Poggioli, we can observe that under the general auspices of avant-garde antagonism there frequently exist confrontations between differing generations, classes, aesthetic-political movements, sexes and sexualities, races etc. Poggioli’s analysis thus unwittingly highlights our third theoretical problem from the introductory paragraph: practices of confrontation *vis-à-vis* practices of resistance. Antagonism delivers us from certain totalizing tendencies latent in Foucault’s “strategic

codification” of resistance from *The History of Sexuality* where he elides the covert and reactionary meanings of the term “resistance” and privileges it as a means to making “revolution possible” (96). Here we must remember the specter of the total system in which revolt and revolution are virtually impossible. The avant-gardes, in contrast to certain readings of Foucault, do not privilege resistance but confrontation—a face-to-face challenge to hegemony and dogmatism, an open antagonism. This distinction is important because, in the words of Rancière, “to resist is to adopt the posture of someone who stands opposed to the order of things, but simultaneously avoids the risk involved with trying to overturn that order” (*Dissensus* 169). Resistance ought to be one strategy, but it should not be the only game in town. Exemplary of this kind of antagonistic counter-stance is a statement from the prologue of Nicolás Guillén’s *Sóngoro cosongo*: “No ignoro, desde luego, que estos versos les repugnan a muchas personas, porque ellos tratan asuntos de los negros y del pueblo. No me importa. O mejor dicho: me alegra” (Schwartz 636). In this example the avant-garde poet unapologetically comes face-to-face with both racism and class struggle. Underlying these antagonistic confrontations then is what can probably best be described as the polemical orientation of the “bad subject,” which typically finds “solidarity within the community of rebels and libertarians” (Poggioli 31).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Here Poggioli is *not* referring to libertarians in the contemporary American understanding of the word (i.e. the radical, neoliberal capitalist and/or pro-capitalist), but rather its traditional referent: the social anarchist.



This tendency towards radical solidarity can also help explain “the sectarian spirit which afflicts avant-gardism, despite its anarchistic temperament” (Poggioli 30). Poggioli counter-poses group solidarity (the sect) with radical individualism (anarchism), but without considering the sectarian status of left anarchism within the broader socialist tradition. In this his logic is flawed and noticeably disdainful. Nonetheless, Poggioli inadvertently touches upon another aesthetic-political marker typical of the avant-garde when he states “that the avant-garde spirit is eminently aristocratic” in spite of its “anarchistic leanings” (39). It is not—and here again I depart from Poggioli—that the avant-garde is ultimately an aristocratic art-politics with contradictory anarchist underpinnings. Rather we must ask ourselves the following questions: What do these two disparate political identities or “sects” share in common? And what do they share with other political “sects” or regimes like communism and fascism? The answer happens to be *the one* unifying antagonism common to *all* avant-garde art-politics: its confrontation of the bourgeoisie, the *burgher*, or the dominant citizen-beneficiary of liberal democracy—in explicitly Marxist terms, the class of owners of the means of production proper to capitalist societies.

In keeping then with Bürger’s anti-art thesis, I see the avant-gardes as set in opposition to bourgeois institutions and modes of experience: “The avant-garde turns against both...the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society” (22). Here, in addition to museums and other cultural institutions, I include bourgeois notions of the modern republic, where everything from bohemianism to fascism unexpectedly coalesce,

positioning themselves against the technocratic regime of bourgeois liberalism-capitalism and all its attendant modes of experience. In an essay from 1927, José Carlos Mariátegui writes the following:

El sentido revolucionario de las escuelas o tendencias contemporáneas no está en la creación de una técnica nueva. No está tampoco en la destrucción de la técnica vieja. Está en el repudio, el desahucio, en la befa del absoluto burgués. (*Manifiestos* 195)

What unlikely bedfellows like futurism and surrealism have in common, as Mariátegui points out, is their utter contempt for bourgeois hegemony. The bourgeoisie then comes to represent, in the words of Mata, “el enemigo central al que la vanguardia dirigió sus ataques” (639). An explicit historical example of anti-bourgeois sentiment can be located in the manifesto “Prólogo solo” by the Nicaraguan poets Joaquín Pasos y Joaquín Zavala: “hay otra estupidez material, contra la cual hemos de luchar también. Es / LA BURGUESÍA” (Schwartz 216). Granted not all avant-garde movements, artists and institutions are as cavalier as these young poets, but anti-bourgeois sentiment can take less obvious forms associated with everything from aristocratic sensibilities to non-commercial and DIY modes of production. Anti-bourgeois sentiment plays out in the avant-gardes’ very attempts to break with what Bürger theorizes as the bourgeois—and in certain cases Marxist-Leninist—struggle to subject art-politics to capitalistic divisions of labor, ultimately resulting in “The citizen who, in everyday life has been reduced to a partial function (means-ends activity)” (48).

Thus in the case of the avant-gardes the interpenetration of the so-called solitary work of art—“isolated” as it were by bourgeois modes of counting and

dividing—and everyday *praxis* are “recognized,” in Althusserian terms, producing, at times, revolutionary modes of being. Art *qua* art, in the words of Arqueles Vela, must “estimular las funciones esenciales del ser, propulsar la vitalidad” (38). The avant-garde novelist thus recognizes that art can never be separated out entirely from different modes of life, including politics. It therefore follows that art in all its vitality must also fight against the structural isolation of the bourgeoisie. From this perspective, art and life interpenetrate, endowing one another with a certain sort of energy, an energy intentionally positioned against capitalist divisions of labor and play. This positioning does not, however, require some sort of movement from art to life in order to experience emancipation, because “There is no ‘real world’ that functions as the outside of art” (*Dissensus* 148). Following Jameson then, I also maintain that “the working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life” (20). The artificial division of art and life could then be seen as a sort of “misrecognition” (at times proper to the bourgeoisie and at times appropriated by sectarian leftists for various reasons) of how philosophical categories actually interrelate in the sensory world. The avant-gardes recognize this artificial dividing and propose counter-divisions that take the form of the various antagonisms outlined in the paragraphs above (i.e. generational, class, etc.). This recognition and re-dividing of the sensible along antagonistic lines occurs within the framework of experimental free play and *can*

lead, in the words of César Vallejo, to “nuevas relaciones y ritmos” (Schwartz 446).

The avant-gardes, nevertheless, are not without their contradictions. This is what gives any discussion its polemical vitality. Some authors like Jorge Luis Borges, for example, might have experimented with avant-garde phases (i.e. the Florida group), while others like César Vallejo might periodically play with non-avant-garde narrative modes (i.e. social realism) or totally discredit certain avant-garde movements (i.e. surrealism) in light of their declared political convictions.<sup>8</sup> This is precisely why case studies that examine singular examples are useful and necessary for evidentiary reasons. Let us then, in conclusion, pass on to the singular examples found in the chapters of this dissertation—examples that specifically address theoretical questions regarding the privileging of Latin America, interpellation and emancipation, and practices of confrontation *vis-à-vis* practices of resistance.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### Chapter 1: “CONTRA EL AGUACHIRLISMO”

Comparing and contrasting Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón’s writings with Max Nordau’s *fin-de-siècle* theory of degeneration, chapter one begins by proposing a revolutionary dialectic grounded in theories of degeneration and regeneration. Within the movement of this dialectic the radical

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<sup>8</sup> Speaking of avant-garde manifestoes apropos of Breton and Rivera, for example, Borges mocks those “papeles charlatanes (de los que poseí una colección que he donado a la quema)...”—a sort of counter-manifesto in its own right, aristocratic and anarchistic at the same time (202).

revolutionary confronted with social degeneration is compelled to regenerate society writ large even as he is perceived by bourgeois society as degenerate—form the Latin *degenero*, or “to become unlike one’s kind, to fall off, become bad, degenerate.” The radical, in short, becomes a “bad subject” because of his revolutionary *unlikeness*, because of a failed interpellation.

Flores Magón’s “breaking bad” can be rearranged in parallel with Stridentist manifestoes and poetry by connecting their shared emphases on aesthetic-political discord and anti-bourgeois antagonism. Experimenting with Magonian art-politics in Xalapa (aka “Estridentopolis”), the Stridentists created a sensory community that strived to eliminate, using Rancière’s terminology, “boundaries severing politics from economics, art, religion or everyday life” and came to include mystery writer-director Antonio Helú (*Dissensus* 81). In his classic detective novella *La obligación de asesinar* (1947), Helú adapts the thief-cum-detective tradition, which I read in relation to French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s *What Is Property?* (1840) and the degeneration-regeneration dialectic described above.

In the novella, Carlos Miranda—a *lumpenproletarian* house burglar—is enclosed in a locked-room mystery when he is caught in the act of robbing a mansion and accused of committing a murder he did not perpetrate. The relatively even playing field “proportioned”—in Proudhonian terms—by the locked-room mystery provides the means with which the thief-cum-anarchist can solve the crime, thereby proving his own “lumpen” genius and exposing the criminality of the degenerate bourgeoisies around him. These examples drawn from Stridentist

art-politics and Helú's work trace the curious convergence of anarchism-communism, the detective mode and an avant-garde "CONTRA EL AGUACHIRLISMO" of degenerate liberalism in early twentieth-century Mexico ("Manifiesto 4").<sup>9</sup> In its interplay with popular sensory forms this convergence therefore challenges characterizations of the avant-garde as elitist and evasive, positing an art-politics rooted in popular, non-hierarchical emancipation.

## Chapter 2: Blood Quota

While exiled in Paris during the early 1970s, Julio Cortázar took up Che Guevara's call to "Crear dos, tres... muchos Vietnam" in his collage-novel *Libro de Manuel* (1973) (*Obras* 584). By continuing the aesthetic-political games of *Rayuela* (1963) and *62 Modelo para armar* (1968) while for the first time topically addressing armed struggle in Latin America in a sustained fashion, *Libro de Manuel* confronts dogmatic conceptualizations of radical art-politics through its visual experiments in collage and montage. The anti-novel theorization of Morelli from *Rayuela*—"Provocar, asumir un texto desaliñado, desanudado, incongruente, minuciosamente antinovelístico (aunque no antinovelesco)"—demonstrates, however, how we might connect these very different "novel" experiments (517). The play on words here (i.e. "anti-" prefacing both "*novelístico*" and "*novelesco*"—or "anti-novelistic" yet "fantastic," or "novel") is a pertinent example of free play in that it critiques the bourgeois institutionalization of the novel both at the level of figurative language and

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<sup>9</sup> This neologism taken from the fourth Stridentist manifesto roughly translates to "watered downisms" or perhaps less literally as "ineffectualism."

narrative arc. Likewise, Cortázar's collage-novel not only plays formally with genre but topically with Tricontinental-era conceptions of socialist revolution while at the same time affirming the absolute necessity of revolutionary sacrifice and regeneration, of Guevara's "cuota de sangre" (*Obras* 592).

Chapter two therefore illustrates the particularities of Cortázar's avant-garde heresy by situating his collage-novel within a specific geopolitical triangulation of the Marxist milieu of 1968: Paris, Buenos Aires and Havana. The connecting line-segments of this triangulation consist of the embodied Marxism-Leninism of Guevara and the art-politics of the Cuban Revolution—particularly its poetry (i.e. Heberto Padilla and Vigilio Piñera) and revolutionary institutions (i.e. Casa de las Américas and Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba). Reading what the infant Manuel and his "instruction manual" mean for the revolutionary future, I then demonstrate how (the "protagonist") Andrés recognizes the actual interpenetration of experimental aesthetic free play and revolutionary *praxis* as expressive of new modes of being. This reading, however, contrasts with what aesthetes and militants during and after its publication characterized as a failed political novel. Andrés' actions, for example, abound in absurdity as he botches a political kidnapping because of his myopic intellectualism. In the end, however, Andrés' revolutionary art-politics, however ineffective, open up future radical possibilities. Entering into dialogue with the mythology of Guevara, Cortázar collapses guerrilla warfare and the avant-garde, rearranging—in the spirit of '68—revolutionary potentialities in an era typically marked by the dogmatism of

what cultural critic Ambrosio Fornet has called “El Quinquenio Gris” of the Cuban Revolution.

### Chapter 3: The Ludic Erotic Left

We then turn to Nicaraguan poet, novelist and revolutionary Gioconda Belli and three of her most vital literary works: *Línea de fuego* (1978), recipient of the Premio Casa de las Americas for poetry; her breakthrough novel *La mujer habitada* (1988); and the prize-winning novel *El país de las mujeres* (2011). In *Línea*, the ludic, the erotic and armed struggle all enter into play. Biological sex and sexuality are conceptualized, following Kate Millett, in terms of human emancipation, or an “arrangement of human life on agreeable and rational principles from whence the entire notion of power *over* others should be banished.” Belli’s poetic voice does not forswear political force, but takes power through her own sexual liberation. I therefore pose the following question: Does her celebration of eroticism and the feminine body—her lyrical conceptualization of “Woman”—not flirt with the mirror of subjectivity described by Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*? I then suggest that this question can best be understood in terms of Jean-Paul Sartre’s positing of a “necessary violence” in that Belli’s appropriation of the male gaze results in a sort of negation of the negation where emancipation *can* appear.

These violent rearrangements of patriarchy and capital also play a central role in my discussion of Belli’s re-imagining of feminism within the revolutionary context in her novel *La mujer habitada*. At the beginning of the novel, Belli plays



with certain tropes characteristic of pulpy Harlequin romances. The Harlequin romance is rearranged, however, when a lover shows up at Lavinia's home with a wounded comrade fleeing a government death squad. The result is an avant-garde rearrangement of the Harlequin romance, where the narrative voice halts her formative life as bourgeois architect (a kind of necessary violence) and "breaks bad," becoming a guerrilla fighter. Levina not only confronts bourgeois modes of doing and making, but continually challenges the macho revolutionary dogma of her fellow guerrilla fighters. Belli thus expounds an emancipatory version of avant-garde feminism that cuts close to her own biography as she flirts with both social and physical death.

The last section of chapter three then examines Belli's call to feminize politics by examining her latest novel *El país de las mujeres*. We can thus observe a transition from the Sartrean dialectics of negation based in a necessarily violent encounter with the masculine One to an art-politics that confronts machismo by exploding binary notions of biological sex and gender. By reading Belli's novels against Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), I articulate what Belli means by the feminization of politics and how she appropriates essentialist notions of gender. As a response to the stagnation of the post-revolution period, Belli posits an art-politics that synthesizes vanguard party modes of confrontation and feminine modes of nurturing. This results in a rearranging—or queering—of certain radical forms of feminism and socialism.

#### Chapter Four: Specters of Hayek

After the FSLN's loss in the 1990 elections and as NAFTA was being drafted, the guerrilla fighters of the EZLN stealthily prepared an anti-capitalist war in the jungles of Chiapas—that (southern) border state—marking one of the first violent confrontations with “end of history” or “total system” neoliberalism. This chapter focuses on two detective novels published in the wake of NAFTA during the early twenty-first century: *2666* by Roberto Bolaño and *Muertos incómodos* co-authored by Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Subcomandante Marcos. In “La parte de los crímenes” from *2666*, for example, an innumerable series of murdered corpses—in effect, specters of the the polemical Austrian economist F.A. Hayek and his rebranding of the impersonal and anonymous market of classical liberalism—uncannily appear in familiar settings around the US-Mexico border. This uncanny uncovering confounds a beset upon group of detectives in and around the border town of Santa Teresa, literary double of Ciudad Juarez where to this day over 3,500 women remain missing under nefarious circumstances.

Rearranged in relation to this particular literary-historical context, the following statement by Anzaldúa comes to embody more than just an identity politics: “The US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again” (25). Certain procedural tropes common to the detective mode are continually over-turned in *2666*, leaving the reader without resolution or hope as the border bleeds, hemorrhages, scabs-over and then bleeds again. I therefore argue that the

wage-slavery, torture and anonymous death suffered by the women of Santa Teresa-Ciudad Juarez become symptomatic of “free trade” neoliberal capitalism. At the same time I also argue that Santa Teresa becomes metonymic of the “post-ideological,” neoliberal order.

In *Muertos incómodos*, Zapatista crime commissioner Elías Contreras and private dick Héctor Belascoarán cross paths as they bear down on a ghostly, paramilitary thug. Tracking down this spectral avatar of Hayek results in a darkly playful meditation on the aftermath of ‘68 in Mexico and the resulting ravages of neoliberal capital. The two anti-heroes fight on against an overwhelming social degeneracy that most cannot see because we are—here conjuring a certain spirit of Althusser—unknowingly “mirando para otro lado” (Subcomandante 197). Even as the Zapatistas work towards radical community-based alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, the sublime spectacle of capital commands our attention because we, on some level, sadistically enjoy our misrecognition (i.e. our new TV sets and automobiles). This helps explain the subversive and confrontational rearranging of the popular commodity (i.e. the detective novel) into avant-garde art-politics. The comparative reading of these two extremely different novels illustrates their shared *mise-en-scène* on the borders of neoliberal capitalism, their shared experimentation with popular modes of expression, and their disparate hails—one dystopian, one semi-utopian—for egalitarian communities rooted in radical emancipation. These avant-garde authors thus enjoin us that in bonds of solidarity we must work collectively to detect the evils of neoliberal capitalism and administer justice.

## CONCLUSIONS

In Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes*, Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano steal a Chevy Impala and drive towards the US-Mexico border. The two poets are searching for the mysterious avant-garde poet Cesárea Tinajero. They are also revolting—searching for their own *estridentismo*. Tinajero thus embodies a bygone age when art was life and life was art and emancipation was possible. The poets, however, are children of the bloody birth of neoliberalism who experience a kind of postpartum horror as they break bad. Boredom: symptom of the new technocratic bourgeois order—an order that interpellates us through circuits of capital that run from the US-Mexico border to Bangladesh and back. Latin America constitutes the original peripheral center of these antagonisms—an ignominious privilege indeed. Returning to the novel, after the poet-detectives find Tinajero a gunfight ensues, resulting in her death: “Belano decía que la habíamos cagado, que habíamos encontrado a Cesárea sólo para traerle la muerte” (*Los detectives* 605). For the poets art is now more than just life—it is death too. Death comes to all, even the avant-gardes, but does it necessarily follow that we can *never* actually experience emancipation?

In my critical practice I hope to resurrect the avant-gardes from the grave of postmodern cynicism, crumbling the tombstone on which it has been memorialized by the critical tradition since Bürger. Like a necromancer I want to reanimate their vitality. I want to come face to face with the resurrected avant-gardes. Call it critical necromancy in the tradition of Carpentier's avant-garde

retelling of Mackandal, Boukman and the Hatian Revolution. Perhaps like Bolaño's poets, however, I will only succeed in killing the very thing I seek to make zoetic again. As Bolaño seems to suggest and as Rancière writes: "Against all nihilist wisdom, we will insist that is what makes it worth it" (*The Flesh* 6).

“Enigma, misterio. He aquí dos cosas que interesan al hombre desde que el mundo es mundo y que lo interesarán siempre.”

—Xavier Villaurrutia, prologue, *La obligación de asesinar*, 1947

“Let us, in passing, spit on Edgar Poe.”

—André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1930

## Chapter 1: “CONTRA EL AGUACHIRLISMO”

Before the Plan de San Luis Potosí was enacted in 1910, Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón penned the following call to arms: “empuñemos de nuevo la antorcha revolucionaria y hacemos vibrar el clarín de combate: *Regeneración*” (*El sueño* 127). The dawn of a new era seemed to be at hand in Mexico after forces ousted the corrupt regime of Porfirio Díaz. Before Flores Magón’s hardboiled death, however, 12 years later in a United States federal penitentiary he lamented: “¿No saben que el área que resulta inmensa al gusano, es prisión para el águila? ¿No saben que las alas necesitan el espacio sin límites?” (*El sueño* 247). Eagle-like uprisings condemned Flores Magón to life as a worm-like convict. Marshaling Flores Magón’s writings and contrasting them with the *fin-de-siècle* physician Max Nordau’s theory of degeneration, this chapter proposes a revolutionary dialectic based on historical conceptualizations of degeneration and regeneration. Within the movement of this dialectic the radical revolutionary confronted with social degeneration is compelled to regenerate society writ large even as he is perceived by bourgeois society as degenerate—following the Latin *degenero*, or “to become unlike one’s kind, to fall off, become bad, degenerate”—because of his revolutionary *unlikeness*.

Moving then to the realm of literary examples, chapter one analyzes the Stridentist avant-garde movement and Mexican mystery writer Antonio Helú. I do

this by conceptualizing Helú's adaptation of the thief-cum-detective in relation to French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *What Is Property?* (1840) and the degeneration-regeneration dialectic described above. By doing so, I hope to trace the curious convergence of anarchism, the detective mode and avant-garde art-politics throughout early twentieth-century Mexico. Furthering my argument advanced in the introductory chapter, I also confront conceptualizations of the avant-gardes as elitist, high-brow and politically vacuous by situating Stridentism and Helú in relation to popular modes of art and the emancipatory project of the Mexican Revolution. Chapter one is thus divided into six shorter sections that first move to theorize the degeneration-regeneration dialectic described above then articulate Helú's avant-gardism and finally finish with a close reading of his novella *La obligación de asesinar*. Let us then pass on to Nordau's theorization of degeneration in order to set the stage for the avant-gardes and Helú.

## DEGENERATION

Perhaps the most popular critique of modernity from the *fin-de-siècle* era was Hungarian born Max Nordau's *Entartung (Degeneration)* published in 1892 in German, widely read in its French translation from 1894, and translated into Spanish in 1902. Nordau's far reaching treatise primarily takes aim at aesthetic degenerates—among them Nietzsche and Verlaine—who afflict liberal bourgeois society with their calls for absolute individual freedom and unchecked egoism. In 1899, Nordau put it this way:

Art, poetry and fiction exalt the individual. Their ideal is 'sovereign personality,' which knows neither self-control nor duty

toward the neighbor. This ‘sovereign personality,’ which is praised as the most perfect blossom of human development, is the worst enemy of all moral advance. (“Philosophy” 797)

For Nordau, these sickly elements—characterized by what he calls “sovereign personality” and a total lack of self-control—must be dealt with by an otherwise progressively evolving liberal-capitalist society in order to avoid societal degeneration. Dealing with these social ailments included some sort of societal healing that rejected the pessimism of aesthetes. The most important thing for the moral advance of society is that the liberal body politic lives on nourished by a sense of societal duty and community.

Nordau ironically prefigures some of the more radical manifestations of Social Darwinism because of his steadfast belief in societal evolution, but must also be understood in terms of his strong faith in progressive values associated with reformist liberalism.<sup>10</sup> Like most liberals, Nordau believed that humans were self-centered and rational, but that these individualistic impulses could and ought to be harnessed through what he called “solidaritarian” ethics. In the words of historian P.M. Baldwin, “Man is by nature antisocial, yet his ultimate goal is a society of universal brotherhood. This, argued Nordau, is no paradox” (102). While Nordau agreed, for example, that socialists were absolutely necessary for the progress of liberal society, he did not sanction revolutionary methods, but rather evolutionary reforms: “The future belongs to evolution, not revolution,” he

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<sup>10</sup> Nordau’s liberalism must also be considered in relation to his Zionism. His liberalism does not propose that peoples of Jewish decent be incorporated into some sort of cultural melting pot: “Lost identity is no solution of the Jewish problem” (“Isreal” 669). Neither is the Final Solution a solution, but rather the founding of a Jewish republic: “They look for their salvation in a re-union in a land which shall be their own, where they will be the majority, and where they can develop in a temperature of sympathy along their own organic lines” (ibid).



wrote in 1904, “The Utopian socialism came to an end and the scientific socialism began, not with Marx’s ‘Capital,’ but with the German labor legislation” (“Socialism” 524). When statements like these are read in relation to *Degeneration*, it would appear that Nordau favored legislative reforms over radical direct actions. Argues Nordau, “it can scarcely be doubted that the writings and acts of revolutionists and anarchists are also attributable to degeneracy. The degenerate is incapable of adapting himself to existing circumstances” (*Degeneration* 22). For Nordau and many other liberals, revolution was not an evolutionarily favorable response to the crisis of liberal bourgeois values—characterized (by them) as a society engulfed in extreme egoism and pessimism—occurring throughout the westernized world and its satellites during the *fin-de-siècle*. The regenerative efforts of revolutionaries were in point of fact degenerative.

Indeed, it appears that Nordau’s work enjoyed some notoriety in the cosmopolitan centers of Latin America as well thanks to a handful of intellectuals living in Paris and Madrid at the turn of the century. In 1896, for example, Rubén Darío commented sardonically, “yo, que adoro al amable coro de las musas, y el azul de los sueños, preferiría antes que ponerme en manos de Max Nordau, ir a casa del médico de Clara Lenoir”—referring to the titular character from a novel by French Symbolist Auguste Villiers (207). Darío then goes on (predictably?) to describe his preferred treatment option in aestheticist terms: Lenoir “me enviaría al edificio de granito, en donde esperaría la hora de morir saludando a la primavera y al amor, cantando las rosas y las lirias, y besando en sus rojos labios a

Cloe, Galatea o Cidalisa” (ibid). Darío’s indulgent rejection of Nordau’s aesthetically regimented bourgeois world-view speaks to what Nordau might have called his sovereign personality. In an interview with Guatemalan-born writer Enrique Gómez Carrillo for the liberal Spanish publication *Mundo Latino*, Nordau himself paradoxically describes Spanish-language literature as in a state of “completa degeneración” where morally acceptable authors in Spain are “pocos, muy pocos; pero algunos excelentes, lo mismo que en América” (157; 162). Gómez Carrillo, for his part, comments on Nordau and his project affirmatively if not a touch ambiguously, employing what would appear to be a form of journalistic objectivity: “Lo único que para él no admite ni bromas ni tolerancias es la degeneración filosófica y moral” (157).

In 1906, *Mundo Latino* asked a selection of European liberal thinkers—in which Nordau was featured—to comment on the political situation in Latin America and endorse the editorial board’s call for a federation of Latin American states. In his piece, Nordau rejects the idea that aggressive North American imperialism will dominate the hemisphere, then posits his liberal evolutionary model: native institutions “se desarrollarían, naturalmente, convirtiéndose poco a poco, por crecimiento orgánico, en esa federación que usted bosqueja en su profética proposición” (81). Apart from these scattered commentaries, it would appear that Latin America did not figure prominently in Nordau’s writings even as a few eminent Latin American intellectuals popularized him as a cultural behemoth. Argentine cultural critic José Ingenieros in a chronicle written from Paris in 1906 described Nordau as the “monarca de la fama internacional” and

“hombre admirado por muchos, injuriado por tantos, discutido por los demás” (350; 351). Ingenieros concludes his otherwise sanguine essay, however, with the following barbed prose: “¿Ese médico odia, acaso, á su enfermo?” and “Habría sido más fácil demostrar que su libro era exagerado y lleno de injusticias” (354-355). That is to say, for many, Nordau’s diagnostic writings lacked good bedside manner.

Not all European *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals saw eye-to-eye with Nordau or his liberal conceptualization of human nature either. In direct response to Nordau’s rabid critique of degenerate aesthetes, for example, psychologist William James wrote in 1895 that “we should broaden our notion of health instead of narrowing it; that we should regard no single element of weakness as fatal—in short, that we should *not be afraid of life*” (405). Similarly, anarchist intellectuals like Peter Kropotkin—who also shared Nordau’s affinity for evolutionary theory and his pessimistic outlook towards the state of intellectual affairs of the *fin-de-siècle* era—differed greatly as to how to cure society’s ills. Commenting on the rampant individualism associated with *laissez-faire* liberalism, for example, Kropotkin states in his monumental tome *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* that

The result is that the theory which maintains that men can, and must, seek their own happiness in disregard of other people’s wants is now triumphant all round in law, in science, in religion. It is the religion of the day, and to doubt of its efficacy is to be a dangerous utopian. (184)

The utopian underpinnings of *laissez-faire* liberalism and its Social Darwinist interpretation worried the anarchist Kropotkin. At face value it looks like Nordau

would have no doubt agreed with Kropotkin's assessment, as well as his declaration that "Art, industry, and knowledge fell into decay" during the period (182). But the difference between the progressive liberal position of Nordau and the anarchist-communist position of Kropotkin centers, in part, on their respective views of human evolution. Whereas Nordau argues that humans ought to overcome selfish impulses through solidaritarian ethics, Kropotkin argues that "The sophisms of the brain cannot resist the mutual-aid feeling, because this feeling has been nurtured by thousands of years of human social life and hundreds of thousands of years of pre-human life in societies" (217). In other words, humans ought to be governed by natural, spontaneous mutual-aid feelings rather than statist policies and order. Thus anarchism's regenerative thrust, according to many of its theoreticians and adherents, has very little to do with reckless individualism or egoism—as many of its critics, including Nordau, would have it—and more to do with a radical return to community via socialist revolution.

## REGENERATION

In *fin-de-siècle* Mexico, liberal-capitalism under the Porfiriato had degenerated to the point of no return. Indeed, Nordau's mentor and rival—the influential Italian criminologist Césaire Lombroso—stated that extreme wealth mingled with militarism in Latin America is another manifestation of social degeneracy (79). The militarism of the "liberal" Mexican state also worried progressive thinkers in Mexico too. In the first issue of the radical Mexican newspaper *Regeneración* from 1900, the editorial board (including Ricardo Flores

Magón) boldly described liberal rule of law under the Porfiriato: “nuestro vigor juvenil y nuestro patriotismo, nos inducen á buscar *un remedio*, y al efecto, señalar, denunciar todos aquellos actos de los funcionarios judiciales que no se acomoden á los preceptos de la ley escrita” (“Regeneración” 1, my italics). Reformist in scope—as the healing analogy embedded in the quote above suggests—and liberal in philosophical orientation—the vociferous appeal to constitutional law and the negation of militancy<sup>11</sup>—, Flores Magón’s legalistic project *initially* sought a cure for the degenerate liberalism of the Porfirian courts. Yet as the decade unfolded, Flores Magón and his Partido Liberal Mexicano radicalized. As modernization continued to extend unevenly throughout urban Mexico and wealth increasingly concentrated in the upper echelons of society, the living conditions of the working and poorer classes continued to degenerate, and many political malcontents began to “fall forward” from a reformist to a revolutionist position.

*Laissez-faire* liberalism under the Porfiriato enabled a morally bankrupt and systematically corrupt capitalist oligarchy to govern Mexico: “El robo, la prostitución, el asesinato, el incendiarismo, la estafa, productos son del sistema que coloca al hombre y a la mujer en condiciones en que para no morir de hambre se ven obligados a tomar de donde hay o a prostituirse” (*El sueño* 126). This same system was caricatured in the September 10, 1910 issue of *Regeneración*, depicting “el monstruo” Porfirio Díaz squeezing the blood out of “las Garantías Individuales, la Justicia, la Constitución, la Prensa Libre, el Sufragio y la

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<sup>11</sup> “No constituimos una falange, repetimos...”—*falange* here meaning a paramilitary organization not a fascist political party as in the case of Spain (“Regeneración” 2).

Honradez Financiera” using a “prensa trituradora” (“La Caricatura” 1; Appendix, Figure 1). The system—consisting of a decadent liberal on the one hand and dog-eat-dog capitalism on the other—was increasingly condemned by Flores Magón and PLM in the period leading up to the Revolution. For the PLM leadership, mere reforms, or even another liberal revolution for that matter, were not enough when a comprehensive change of system was actually in order.

#### DETECTING DEGENERACY

In a curious coincidence, the tale of Flores Magón and the PLM in US discourse became the stuff of true crime. Because of his radical break with liberal institutions, Flores Magón began to be perceived by bourgeois society on both sides of the US-Mexico border as degenerate. This landed him in jail many times and eventually led to his noir-like death—“the bruises around his neck and his contorted facial features seemed to indicate that he had died in a struggle”—in the state penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas in 1922 (Cowen Verter 99). One such “true crime” narrative of Flores Magón can be read in the self-published detective memoir *Fifty Years a Detective* (1912) by Pinkerton, private detective and Porfiriato employee Thomas Furlong. Another narration of the arrest comes from the activist volume *Barbarous Mexico* (1910) by American socialist John Kenneth Turner. Both non-fiction pieces recount the arrest of Flores Magón and some of his PLM colleagues after their 1906 call for insurrection from Saint Louis, Missouri. For months during 1907, Flores Magón “was hunted by detectives from city to city. He went to California, but was still kept dodging and once

masqueraded as a woman in order to escape Diaz hounds” (Turner 284). Narrow escapes, hidden (gendered) identities, and secret plans framed this enigmatic cat-and-mouse detective game and played into the mystery surrounding the revolutionaries and their activities.

“The descent of the sleuths was finally made,” nevertheless, when—after pistol whipping Flores Magón unconscious—Furlong dragged him to a Los Angeles police station for “resisting arrest” (Turner 284-285). A PLM sympathizer, Turner takes great care to play up the bloody details and false premises of Furlong’s arrest. In Furlong’s detective memoir, however, after characterizing “President” Porfirio Díaz as “honest, high-minded, and, I believe, thoroughly loyal to the people of Mexico,” he states the following: “Ricardo Flores Magon was a man of brain, well mannered, inclined to be courteous, and educated and undoubtedly intended for a leader of men, but he was unscrupulous and irresponsible, and was *an anarchist* at heart” (145, my italics). The echoes of Nordau’s degenerate anarchist—a primitive, atavistic individual incapable of evolutionary adaptation—are palpable. Furlong’s accusatory description is indicative of the fact that “Porfirio Díaz called Flores Magón an anarchist in 1906, and authorities in both the United States and Mexico had been calling him an anarchist ever since” (Albro 123). In the eyes of the liberal state and its representatives, Flore Magón was a satanic figure, a fallen angel that sought to unseat the god-like state—the guarantor of private property and, consequently, liberal liberty. Furlong’s self-published memoir commodifies and popularizes this mystery wrapped in gritty violence and political intrigue, playing on the bourgeois

public's need to solve the enigma of the anarchist revolutionary and his relationship to the American state and its allies. Furlong's lack of narrative dexterity perhaps unravels the mystery too quickly for the average crime story *aficionado*, but his memories of the arrest play to an audience more captivated by scandal than aesthetic innovation. This aesthetic-historical knot constitutes just one popular example of how revolutionary anarchism and the detective mode were intertwined in early twentieth-century Mexico.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the enigmatic mystery surrounding Flores Magón's perceived anarchism propelled multiple narratives unfolding both in public and private. Following Furlong's shady arrest of Flores Magón, the socialist Turner countered accusations of anarchism when he questioned the legal persecution of PLM members involved in the publishing one of the party's newspapers:

“Revolucion” was not an anarchist paper. It did not advocate the assassination of presidents or the abolition of government. It merely stood for the principles which Americans in general since the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States came into being have considered as necessary to the well-being of any nation. (289)

Was Turner being naïve? As a socialist, did he regard Flores Magón's anarchist sympathies with a measure of solidarity?<sup>13</sup> Or was Turner just as duped as other

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps another example worth noting is Alfonso Reyes' 1919 translation of G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* where an undercover policeman infiltrates what appears to be a secret, pan-European society of anarchists. In the prologue, Reyes describes the cantankerous Chesterton's approach to the detective mode the following way: “si hay que defender la seguridad pública, no lo hace poniéndose al lado de la policía, sino en cierto modo, al lado del motín” (12). This observation, however apologetic it might be, will resonate with our study of Antonio Helú and his formulation of the thief-cum-detective.

<sup>13</sup> I am assuming by self-identifying specifically as a socialist that Turner considered himself a social democrat or democratic socialist. This might strike the reader as an insignificant degree of difference, but within the broad spectrum of leftist political philosophy mountains are frequently made of mole hills, causing discord and division even within the most similar of philosophies (i.e. the split after the First International) as we shall shortly see.



liberals and democratic socialists associated with the PLM? It is supremely difficult to tell where political strategy begins and ends. Letters as early as 1908 indicate that the leadership of the PLM actively pushed revolutionary anarchism under the guise of liberalism: “Sólo los anarquistas van a saber que somos anarquistas....Así seguiremos dando ‘el timo’ de liberalismo en beneficio de nuestros bellos ideales” (Letter). Flores Magón’s tactical decision, disingenuous as it may have been, was very astutely calculated and allowed the PLM to incite revolution without losing a lot of the base constituency it had built up over nearly a decade of reformist politicking. It looks as though Furlong the detective had successfully sniffed out Flores Magón’s “fraud” (*timo*) in the name of shell-game liberalism.

What would happen, however, when Flores Magón’s comrades—apart from his brother Enrique and a small group of co-conspirators—finally detected his nascent anarchism? Would they readily “evolve” and accept his anarchist position? Or would they utterly reject Flores Magón’s radical anarchist turn? After liberal Francisco I. Madero’s triumph in 1911, many PLM junta members “fell back” from their revolutionist position to a reformist position, but not Flores Magón, who remained fiercely in favor of a revolution and not merely a change of the guards. When former PLM junta members took jobs under the Madero administration and began publishing a newspaper titled *Regeneración* in 1911, Flores Magón mocked them by retitling the publication *Degeneración* and *Regeneración Burguesa*, and roundly stating that “Las oficinas de ‘Regeneración Burguesa’ se han convertido en un verdadero nido de víboras” (“Degeneración”

1). He also specifically called out former PLM stalwart-turned-reformist Antonio Villarreal by repeatedly referring to him as a *degenerado* (“Patadas” 2). It appears that both Flores Magón and some of his most intimate colleagues began to detect irreconcilable differences—anarchist-communists on one side, progressives and democratic socialists on the other. For his part, *also* adopting a language almost identical to Nordau’s, Villarreal denounced the intransigent Flores Magón as a “blackguard, swindler, coward and degenerate” (qtd in Albro 136). Detective narratives, word-games and political maneuvering detail the class struggle nascent in the plurality of revolutionary factions—including liberals, democratic socialists, and anarchist-communists—during the initial years of the Mexican Revolution and demonstrate just how unlike or fallen Flores Magón had become in relation to the liberal bourgeois order of the day. In early twentieth-century Mexico, degeneration-regeneration consequently became a dialectical tension of revolutionary proportions, infecting the political philosophy, discourse and lexicon of the day. During the tumultuous twenties it would even infect the advent of the avant-gardes in Mexico.

#### DISCORDANT RENOVATION

Even though “Porfirian high society had been destroyed by the revolutionary whirlwind,” Madero’s liberal revolution was not enough for many radicals (Aguilar Camín 72). It also proved to be a short lived victory as the Mexican Revolution continued to roil throughout the teens and twenties, resulting in the consolidation of power by various caudillos and the assassinations of

revolutionary heroes like Madero, Zapata, Villa and Flores Magón. Indeed, as Rashkin observes of the twenties, “True stability seemed far off, and Mexican society was in a constant state of agitation” (115). These were years that were not only marked by extreme violence (including the Cristero War), but also the “pacification and institutionalization of the forces that were unleashed by the violence of the previous decade” spearheaded by the caudillo class of Álvaro Obregón and the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles (Aguilar Camín 74-75). But the degeneration-regeneration dialectic continued to unfold even after Obregón’s ascent to power in 1920 and Flores Magón’s death in 1922, manifesting itself in various ways including as an aesthetic-political phenomenon particular to avant-garde Stridentism.

In many ways the development of Stridentism during the early twenties was also indicative of a larger trend in Mexican intellectual life: “In the wake of the Revolution, all but the most conservative artists and writers felt that art had an important role to play in the nation’s reconstruction” (Rashkin 113). Through his positions at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and his founding of the Secretaría de la Educación Pública in the early twenties, José Vasconcelos created a radical-friendly space for the cultural arts to flourish over the course of his four-year tenure. The socialist functionary unapologetically patronized radical artists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco and sought to profoundly change popular education in Mexico. Vasconcelos believed in the sudden and transformational power of education and art, and sought to make both as accessible to the Mexican public as possible via murals and free open-air-

classroom instruction—to name only two well-known examples. In 1924, for example, he outlined the radical potentiality of the philosophy undergirding many of his public policy decisions:

La evolución, en suma, reconoce mutaciones, pero no transformaciones radicales y súbitas. En cambio, hay casos en que la vida no sólo salta, vuela y se transforma en cambios bruscos, que no son explosión ni falla, sino verdaderas revoluciones o transformaciones de la energía. (4)

Vasconcelos advocated a revolutionary philosophy in which aesthetic experience—“que participa de lo infinito y nos conduce a una especie de emancipación”—is conceptualized as the highest plain of human liberation (13). This authentically liberating aesthetic experience could only be achieved dialectically through both evolutionary and revolutionary processes. Vasconcelos’ philosophy impregnated the production of the arts even when many artists, intellectuals, and members of the public did not fully participate in or identify with radical leftist politics. Thanks in part to Vasconcelos and his secretariat, politics became a concern for the vast majority of Mexican artists and intellectuals. His secretariat and philosophy thus simultaneously promoted and was nourished by the fledgling avant-gardes in Mexico. One such group, the Stridentists, advocated a radical, regenerative art-politics that differentiated them from other prominent groups and figures of the era, even democratic socialists like Vasconcelos who sought to mediate the transformative power of destruction and revolt.

Speaking to its difference, literary critic Jorge Ruffinelli describes the radicality of the Stridentist project in the following way: “Los propósitos del

Estridentismo estaban sellados en su propio nombre: escandalizar y remover la vida cultural, social y política del país” (177-178). As early as 1931, Carlton Beals commented that “They have to shout to be heard. They have shouted. Hence *Estridentismo*. Noisy-ism!” (264). Curiously, both critical assessments—although separated by a half-century in which very little literary criticism was strictly dedicated to Stridentism—also could easily describe most radical social movements. This broad characterization perhaps best speaks to what literary critic Samuel M. Gordon has characterized as “la frecuente confusión que propició el México posrevolucionario, entre vanguardismo estético y vanguardismo político” (163).<sup>14</sup> Let us therefore try to tease out why exactly this aesthetic-political “confusion”—which in reality is an example of misrecognized interpenetration—might be the case.

If we now think back once more to Flores Magón then we can frame the Stridentists and their *modus operandi* within the cultural, social and political milieu of 1920s Mexico. For Flores Magón, *all* creativity and progress are dependent on Discord: “La Discordia:”—with a capital “D”—“he ahí el grande agente creador que obra en la naturaleza....De ese caos, sale la belleza” (“Discordia” 2). Evoking the decadent spirit of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics, Flores Magón continues: “Esteta,”—Discord—“detiene en su trillado camino al Arte y lo hace tomar nuevos derroteros donde hay fuentes no aprovechadas aún por el

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<sup>14</sup> One could take issue with Gordon’s wording here because he falls into the all too common trap of equating the political vanguard with *all* revolutionary political philosophies and movements. In the case of Stridentism, it appears that its adherents viewed the vanguard strategy (i.e. the Marxist-Leninist vanguard party) with a measure of skepticism and ambivalence. In the more properly political realm, it is perhaps needless to say that democratic socialists and anarchist-communists—to name only two examples—were deeply skeptical of Marxist-Leninist vanguardism.

rebanco literario” (ibid). He then extends his reading to both painting and music: “nuevos colores, nuevas armonías, giros de dicción inesperados que no existen en ninguna paleta, que no han vibrado en ninguna cuerda, que no han brotado como chorros de luz de ninguna pluma” (ibid). The analogy linking Discord and the aesthete may strike some as strange because of aestheticism’s frequent and pejorative association with escapism. The strangeness is perhaps tempered, however, when one considers the PLM’s fondness for the literature of modernity. Consider the party’s listing of “libros casi regalados” from the same issue of *Regeneración*. Among tomes by Bakunin, Engels and Darwin, one finds a biography of Zola, a Spanish-language copy of *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860) by “Carlos” Baudelaire, and “algunas novelitas para los afectos á lecturas ligeras” (“Libros” 3). This brief text functions as what could be best described as page-filler, the list of books coming to an abrupt halt after the letter “g.”

No additional lists follow in issues from the same era presumably because the Revolution commenced shortly thereafter and all space would have had to have been dedicated to the narration of revolutionary events. One can only guess what came after “g”—certainly Kropotkin and perhaps even Mallarmé. But what exactly separates Flores Magón’s philosophical musings on Discord from a typical account of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics? In other words, what differentiates it from current academic conceptualizations of aestheticism? Perhaps what comes next:

Revolucionaria siempre, la Discordia, hace que el disgusto fermente en los pechos proletarios hasta que, amargadas las almas *hasta el límite*, irritados los nervios hasta alcanzar el máximo de tensión, la desesperación hace que las manos busquen la piedra, la

bomba, el puñal, el revólver, el rifle y se lancen los hombres contra la injusticia dispuesto cada uno á ser un héroe. (“Discordia” 2, my italics)

As an aesthetic experience, Discord does stop at formal innovation or creation. It bleeds into social *praxis*, inciting disgust and contempt for the bourgeois order. This is very different, for example, from what Denisoff describes in his typical theorization of aestheticism: “an aesthetic doctrine that suggests that one’s private utopia is at hand, if one would only learn to ignore the domineering bourgeoisie” (32). While aestheticism for the most part can be associated with a withdrawal or subtraction from bourgeois society, Magonian Discord encourages revolt in open confrontation.

To put these statements into historical perspective, Flores Magón wrote this short essay a year after Marinetti penned the first known avant-garde manifesto in 1909, which posits “Non v’è più bellezza, se non nella lotta” (1). In the Strident manifestoes written between 1921 and 1925, for example, the solidarity between the two camps could not be more obvious. Consider the discordant challenge laid down by Stridentist founder Manuel Maples Arce in 1921 when he writes in bolded all-caps “MUERA EL CURA HIDALGO” (“Actual”). The indirect command ironically calls for the death of the martyred priest Miguel Hidalgo—who, by the way, is already physically dead—who impassionedly initiated the war for Mexican independence more than an hundred years earlier. Keep in mind that the wars of independence eventually led to establishment of a liberal republic in Mexico. Next, another series of bolded all-caps: “T ESQUINA— / O SE PROHIBE FIJAR ANUNCIOS” with the

solitary “T” and “O” coming from the vertical spelling of the word “EXITO” (ibid; Figure 3). At the time of its printing, the manifesto was most likely plastered on all manner of private property, some of which most likely explicitly prohibited the posting of handbills, flyers and other announcements. The metapolitics could not be clearer: this manifesto constitutes a direct challenge to private property regimes. Even though “Actual No 1” and the other Stridentist manifestoes are typically known for absurdist, dada-like slogans and neologisms like “literaturípedos” (my personal favorite), these texts articulate and draw from forms of political philosophy and *praxis*. When Maples Arce describes aesthetic truth, for example, he most certainly has Engel’s conceptualization of historical materialism in mind: “Las cosas no tienen valor intrínseco posible, y su equivalencia poética, florece en sus relaciones y coordinaciones, las que sólo se manifiestan en un sector interno más emocionante y más definitivo” (“Actual”). Here, Maples Arce’s antagonistically playful art-politics is clearly at odds with the regimes of art that fall under Rancière’s Platonic (ethical) and hierarchical categories. By emphasizing play and destroying the misrecognized division of Art and World, they are, in a word, revolutionary.

Discord is also operative in the second Stridentist manifesto. For example, the collectively authored statement resolutely states the following:

Primero:—Un profundo desdén hacia la ranciolatria ideológica de algunos valores funcionales encendidos pugnazmente en un odio caníbal para todas las inquietudes y todos los deseos renovadores que conmueven la hora insurreccional de nuestra vida mecánica. (“Manifiesto estridentista”)



Employing their trademark neologisms, the Stridentists condemn reactionary forces who seek to destroy revolutionary renewal. Later, as in the case of Hidalgo, they return to the ghosts-of-liberalism-past when they proclaim: “CAGUEMONOS: Primero:—En la estatua del Gen. Zaragoza” (ibid). In the statue we have another explicit example of the material interpenetration of the aesthetic and the political. The most likely historical-material referent is *Monumento a Ignacio Zaragoza* (1892) by Jesús Fructuoso Contreras, a statue erected in Puebla where the second Stridentist manifesto was penned 30 years later (Figure 2). One could postulate that given the neoclassical composition of the statue (50 years too late?) that the Stridentists’ excremental statement has everything to do with a simple rejection of tradition. But in the name of specifics, let us not forget the statue’s ties to the Porfiriato and for that very reason a degenerated manifestation of liberal-capitalism, nor the pride of place that the Stridentists give to shitting on a liberal icon. Let us also remember that the constitution of 1917, in spite of all of its revolutionary socialist potential, still upheld liberal principles like private property regimes. The art-politics of the Stridentists were radical in that they sought to create, in the words of the third Stridentist manifesto, “elementos autóctonos, fecundados en su propio ambiente” discordant with the nationalism of the bourgeoisie that stressed private property ownership (159). This parallels how social historian Colin Ward conceptualizes anarchism as an anti-utopian political philosophy based on “mutual control,” “radical nonconformity,” “social spontaneity,” and “friendly societies” (2, 3, 27). Again, the manifestoes show clear affinities with radical principles espoused by

anarchist-communists like Flores Magón that were intended to, in the words of Alfonso Reyes, “asustar al burgués y al académico,” positioning themselves “CONTRA EL AGUACHIRLISMO” (qtd in Quirarte 188; “Manifiesto 4”).

Furthermore, in 1925, the prominent Stridentist Germán List Arzubide dedicated his book of poetry *Plebe (poemas de rebeldía)* to “la memoria de / RICARDO FLORES MAGON / anarquista / asesinado por el capitalismo. / — / y a todos los már- / tires de la lucha social” (5). This is yet another example that revolutionary anarchism-communism and Flores Magón informed the aesthetic-political project of Stridentism. Historically, as Rashkin points out, “List Arzubide himself belonged to anarchist groups as a youth; although he served in the Revolution under Venustiano Carranza, his own politics were considerably more radical than those of his leader” (126). These close readings and historical proofs help ground Quirartes characterization of Stridentism as “Anarquista y demoledor” (187). In addition, a year after *Plebe* was published, List Arzubide assisted in authoring the fourth Stridentist manifesto, which insisted that

La juventud, que por definición es inquietud renovadora, jamás se ha detenido ante el círculo estrecho y angustioso de las ideas avaras y unidimensionales, proclamando gloriosamente la verdad de todos los ideales que conducen hacia la renovación absoluta.  
(53)

No liberal reforms here, just youthful evolution via revolution. In other words, for the Stridentists, the fruits of Discord were “Renovación social, política, estética... RENOVACIÓN CONSTRUCTIVA” (“Manifiesto 4” 54).<sup>15</sup> To renovate, to

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<sup>15</sup> Curiously, this particular Stridentist statement parallels a Peruvian avant-garde publishing house’s appraisal of Vasconcelos’ work from 1924: “Sus ideas, todo el mundo sabe, son radicales;

renew—in a word: to regenerate—an ever more corrupt and bourgeois Mexican Revolution; *this* was the cardinal principle common to both Stridentist and anarchist-communist ideologies. In 1920s Mexico, Nordau’s reformist diagnosis had effectively been co-opted by the revolutionists, anarchists, and “*dandies de izquierda*” that he saw as regressive, maladapted humans (Ruffinelli 182). Here we can now see the origin of the linkage between societal degeneration, revolutionary regeneration and avant-garde aesthetics in modern Mexico. Returning to Flores Magón’s frequent entanglement with bourgeois agents of the law and the detective mode, this now brings us to Antonio Helú: fourth Stridentist manifesto signatory, “Delegado Fraternal” of Stridentism, and the avant-gardist popularly known as the man who created “the first great Mexican man hunter, Máximo Roldán” (“Manifiesto 4” 56; Queen 105).

#### THE OBLIGATION TO REGENERATE

The “delgado, inteligente, nervioso y... explosivo” Antonio Helú Atta was a newspaper and magazine editor, filmmaker, dramatist, and crime writer aficionado known for his unabashed championing of the detective genre in Mexico (Villaurrutia 17). Helú’s collection of detective narratives titled *La obligación de asesinar* (1947) is by far his most celebrated creative achievement.<sup>16</sup> Of the literary works within the collection his eponymous novella

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pero aún dentro de su radicalismo revolucionario, es un espíritu {sic} eminentemente constructor” (1).

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that these detective narratives were most likely published in magazines and newspapers before they were published in abridged or compilation form. Unfortunately, neither of the two extant editions of Helú’s work give much information regarding original dates and places of publication, but one can safely assume that the gap between “Manifiesto 4”—the last

is frequently cited as the most important of Helú's literary output. Nevertheless, most literary critics who are familiar with Helú's novella only consider it important in relation to the broader genealogy of Mexican detective fiction. This has led one critic to lament that, for the majority of literary critics familiar with Helú's work, "la importancia del libro es más documental que estética" (Negrín 40). That is to say that Helú's work is only valuable in so far as it occupies what Stavans has called "The cornerstone of detective letters in Mexico" (75). Consequently, critics typically only employ Helú's literary biography in order to contextualize the "literary explosion of this 'subgenre'" during the nineteen seventies and eighties in Latin America (Stavans 74). In terms of aesthetic-political impact, Helú—at least for the few critics who write about this sort of thing—hardly ever figures prominently in the discourse. This is perhaps due in part to Mexican detective fiction's perceived and real debt to foreign fonts of creative output, resulting in its perception as, what Yates calls, "a type of *imported* literature" eventually practiced by "native authors" of detective fiction (xi & xii). Notwithstanding the ivory tower anthropology of Yates' assessment, the empirical outcome is not surprisingly a shallow pool of Helú scholarship.

Indeed, philologist Edith Negrín's book chapter "El azar y la necesidad: Las narraciones policiales de Antonio Helú" is the only piece of literary criticism listed in the MLA Bibliography that exclusively treats Helú as a subject. In addition, apparently no literary criticism primarily devoted to Helú or his corpus has been authored in any languages other than Spanish. Over the past 60 odd

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Stridentist manifesto, which he signed in 1927—and the bulk of Helú's literary output is not 20 years wide.

years a handful of academic books have treated either Helú or *La obligación de asesinar* in passing. The most recent academic book to reference Helú—*Artful Assassins*, authored by Fernando Fabio Sánchez in 2010—continues in the mold of previous literary historians like Stavans, situating Helú as the noble precursor to bigger and better things yet to come (61). Couple this with the infamous *Queen's Quorum* reference to *La obligación de asesinar* from 1948 where Helú is credited with “founding a south-of-the-border school of detection” and two or three websites, and there lies the extent of criticism devoted to Helú (125). Clearly, in the case of Helú, the literary canons have more than served their heuristic function. This is especially the case when one considers the influence Helú has exercised on generations of writers like, for example, Carlos Monsiváis—who authored the prologue to the latest compilation of Helú's stories and novellas published by Porrúa in 1997. Monsiváis, in fact, praised Helú as “un autor que creyó radicalmente en la literatura policiaca y a ella consagró lo mejor de su activa, generosa vida profesional” (19). Fifty years earlier, in another prologue to Helú's work, the avant-garde poet Xavier Villaurrutia enthusiastically commented “para la sed de los lectores de novelas policíacas, existe ya el pequeño oasis de los cuentos policíacas de Antonio Helú” (16).<sup>17</sup> In other words, two of the most prominent Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century have put their

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<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to know the exact relationship between Villaurrutia and Helú. Clearly, Helú maintains ties with other avant-gardists as late as 1947. Villaurrutia, of course, is famously known as one of the founders of the avant-garde group that published the magazine *Contemporáneos* in the late twenties. Perhaps Helú's move from the Stridentist camp has everything to do with “part-time” Mexican novelist Roberto Bolaño's assessment that “En México los estridentistas se van, los ‘contemporáneos’ se quedan, la paz vuelve a casa” (59). Or perhaps it has more to do with his designation as “Delegado Fraternal” from the fourth Stridentist manifesto, suggesting that he was an avant-gardist affiliated with both schools.

stamp of approval on Helú's work, and yet no serious academic scholarship has paid him any sort of due attention.

Much critical ink, however, has been spilled on Latin American detective narratives that play with hard-boiled detective fiction, which “appears to be a much more meaningful and adaptable form of detective fiction, principally because of its critical view of society” (Simpson 22). In Latin America in general and Mexico specifically, hard-boiled has deeply impacted literary criticism and cultural studies thanks in part to authors like Mexico's Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Brazil's Rubem Fonseca. In addition, over the course of the twentieth century some critical attention has also been paid to the indebtedness of Latin American detective fiction—especially in the case of its many early practitioners—to the classic detective mode as exemplified in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. But these two bookends, the classic and the hard-boiled, are much harder to trace in Helú who was without a doubt quite familiar with the classic pattern, but who also played with it incessantly in a way that seems less hard-boiled inspired than idiomatic—less imitative and more singular. In his way, “Helú respects the conventions of the genre to a point, but also introduces certain modifications that have important ideological implications” (Simpson 83). This claim, which I agree with, can be fleshed out by pointing to Helú's avant-garde appropriation of a popular literary mode.

*La obligación de asesinar* opens in the midst of a double crime where the thief Carlos Miranda stands in front of a locked safe ensconced in an affluent neighborhood in Mexico City, contemplating how to break it open. As he

monkeys with the safe, Miranda hears a loud gunshot, which precipitates the first murder of the novella. Miranda's attempted burglary is interrupted definitively when he is apprehended by a gendarme, dragged into the grand hall from which the gunshot emanated, and accused of murder. Like a lot of detective narratives, the novella is driven primarily by events and actions like these depicted in the opening sequence. In the 1947 edition of *La obligación de asesinar*, for example, the publishers categorize the novella under the following rubric: "Obra en la que predomina el hecho de asesinato o de un delito rodeado de misterio, y en la que los personajes pasan a ser accidentes de la acción, que es la fuerza motriz de la novela" (7). This mystery sub-genre category—marked as it were by the tiny, pulpy icon of a revolver—perfectly describes the general flow of action throughout the plot of the novella, but does not, however, preview Helú's radical art-politics for consumers. As the novella continues, a police officer arrives on the scene and attempts to handcuff Miranda, assuming his guilt. The authorities seal the doors and the locked-room mystery ensues. It is in this textual moment when the thief Miranda assumes the role of unlikely detective: "No soy el asesino. / — Eso nos dirá usted en la Inspección. / —No, señor. Eso lo voy a demostrar aquí mismo" (Helú 32).<sup>18</sup>

On one level Miranda must out-deduce the police officer who now has him in custody while on another level he must outwit the unknown murderer so as not to be killed. In addition, the author Helú must keep ahead of the reader, who is most likely well-versed in the play of the detective mode (Callois 3). In true

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<sup>18</sup> All citations of *La obligación de asesinar* emanate from the 1997 compilation unless otherwise noted.

experimental fashion, the novella manipulates the variables of the classic detective mode in interesting, and even avant-garde ways. But why avant-garde? Why not leave *La obligación de asesinar* safely within the confines of the genealogy of the Mexican detective narrative? The answer perhaps lies in an extended parenthetical analysis of the conceptual tension between the popular and the avant-garde. In the prologue to the 1947 edition of the novella, Villaurrutia offers his reasons for why detective narratives are so popular—from the Latin *popularis*, which can mean “belonging to the people” or “well-liked, admired by the people”—when he writes “Y lo que busca el lector de novelas, de aventuras y, más concretamente, de novelas policíacas—que ahora nos preocupan—es, ante todo, diversión e interés” (14). For Villaurrutia, intrigue and fun are what make the detective mode so *well-liked*. Essentially, the popularity of detective narratives boils down to Callois’ conceptualization of the detective mode as game. Under this particular conceptualization, the detective mode is consumed by the public because it puzzles. Writes Villaurrutia:

Enigma, misterio. He aquí dos cosas que interesan al hombre desde que el mundo es mundo y que lo interesarán siempre. El enigma devora al hombre en tanto que éste no alcanza la solución, del mismo modo que el lector devora la novela enigmática hasta llegar a ese momento en que el autor le da la solución del misterio, del que enigma que ha puesto en pie delante del lector y que ha vestido de sombras para hacerlo más compacto, pero que habrá de desnudar sabiamente en el momento victorioso de la solución. (14-15)

The detective mode taps into humankind’s innate or evolved love of games, of puzzles. The reader of detective narratives is driven to find a solution or solutions. In the solution she finds pleasure. According to this conceptualization, the



detective mode is *not* “essentially a luxury, a type of prose fiction aimed at entertaining a relatively sophisticated reader” as Yates postulates, but a phenomenon linked to patterns of modern capitalist mass-consumption that tap into inherent or evolved psychological drives (xii).

So far we have one affinity between the detective mode and the avant-garde, which happens to revolve around the question of the popular. This affinity is play. Thinking back to the introductory chapter and following Rancière, let us now remember experimental aesthetic free play, which consists of the hierarchal leveling of what humans perceive and produce as art characterized by a radically ludic will to form. What separates classic or even hardboiled expressions of the detective mode from its avant-garde expression is the *degree* of play and its attitude toward bourgeois institutions. Silverman, for example, pits the experimental nature of the avant-garde against the popular: “The artistic experimentalism and anti-bourgeois attitude of the vanguard successfully turns the raw directness of popular genres into searing political irony and satire” (11). Silverman, however, misfires when she divides the avant-garde and the popular into two types or kinds of art: “the popular threatens to overtake the vanguard, which is alternately undermined and reinvigorated by the popular’s rebellion against its subordination to ‘high art’” (12). This facile division of art into “high” and “low” misses one of the broader goals of the avant-garde: to destroy the solitary work of art, or in other words, to destroy art’s highbrow status as a metaphysical construct removed from the lowness of everyday existence. Similarly, commenting on the popular, Fiske states, “Relevance is central to

popular culture, for it minimizes the difference between text and life, between the aesthetic and the everyday that is so central to a process” (5). Both the popular and the avant-garde exhibit this aesthetic-political goal: the collapse of art and life. In addition, following Gramsci, Silverman does, however, point to the anti-hegemonic orientation shared by the popular and the avant-garde. García Canclini describes the popular in a similar way: “las culturas populares son resultado de una *apropiación desigual* del capital cultural, una *elaboración propia* de sus condiciones de vida y una *interacción conflictiva* con los sectores hegemónicos” (*Las culturas* 63). Popular cultures, or the popular, can be operationally defined by unequal possession of capital resources, creative employment of whatever resources are in fact available, and class antagonism born of the hegemony of modern, consumerist capitalism. Both the popular and the avant-garde can therefore be conceptualized in relation to the modern hegemony of liberal-capitalist society.

Continuing in dialogue with this Gramscian line of thought, Fiske writes “Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of the resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant” (2). This contradiction highlights the ambiguous status of the popular as sometimes progressive, but nevertheless allows space for subordinate members of society to practice some sort of subversive agency. It also privileges subordinate agency as both resistant and evasive, but *not* confrontational or discordant, allowing us to differentiate once more between the popular and the avant-garde. While the popular is “concerned with improving the lot of the subordinate rather

than with changing the system that subordinates them,” the avant-garde advocates total aesthetic-political regeneration (Fiske 8). Both employ each other’s aesthetic strategies to varying degrees, but politically they differ—one being more reformist, the other more revolutionary. Bringing it back to Villaurrutia, the detective mode as popular sub-genre plays with the reader, opening up various anti-hegemonic modes of thinking: “Cuando un autor logra imantar, magnetizar al lector, bien puede darse el gusto de filtrar en su obra y, en consecuencia, en la mente de la víctima, que es el lector mismo, las ideas que quiera difundir o, simplemente, expresar sobre las más variadas cosas” (15). In the case of Helú and *La obligación de asesinar*, the reader enters into a world riddled with class struggle that plays—perhaps excessively—with the police method, eventually inverting its hegemonic control over subordinate peoples.

Meanwhile, as the novella continues to unfold, Miranda’s most eminent task—that of proving his own innocence—commences with an *ad hoc* criminological experiment. The experiment consists of Miranda asking two witnesses to reenact exactly how they reacted to hearing the gunshot. The witnesses then return to their respective rooms, heading down a hallway that also leads to the very room where Miranda was found earlier by the gendarme. They then await the given sign: the sound of a light bulb smashing on the ground. After Miranda spikes the light bulb, the police officer runs toward the room at the end of the hall: “El choque resultó cómico. Pero nadie rió. Carlos Miranda exhaló un suspiro de satisfacción” (Helú 35). By sprinting down the hall and subsequently colliding with the two witnesses on his way to the room where Miranda was

discovered, the police officer is comically shamed. Miranda empirically proves he could not have been the killer, because in running down the hallway from the great hall where the murder occurred he would have collided with the other witnesses leaving their rooms. The police officer's pride is wounded enough that he still decides to handcuff Miranda "por burlarse de la policía" (Helú 36).

Another example of Miranda's superior powers of deduction transpires towards the middle of the novella after a third murder is committed. Three different witnesses are implicated in various ways in these three murders. The police officer, observing the three distinct threads of guilt, arrests all three witnesses—one for each corresponding murder. Miranda, still in handcuffs and still vying for his innocence, coolly offers the following caution: "Cuidado, Jefe, que se está usted haciendo un lío," to which the police officer wrathfully responds "¡No, señor! ¡Estoy haciendo deducciones!" (Helú 62). Both characters use "deductive reasoning," but only one character in the end turns out to be correct. When the facts are tallied up, Miranda wins out once again, but the police officer still refuses to release him from custody. Although he is still under arrest, Miranda has somehow managed to stay ahead of the killer enough to stay alive, and in the process keep his true reason for being at the residence a secret. Meanwhile, on the extratextual level, the reader is most likely still nowhere near deducing who the real killers are.

Must readers rely on a common thief to assist them in solving the murders? Yes, because the privileging of the thief is a consistent theme in all of Helú's detective fiction. In Helú's narratives there are no "official" or

“authoritative” detectives as in the classic detective mode, just thieves acting in the capacity of detectives. Miranda usually plays second fiddle to Máximo Roldán, another thief-cum-detective that populates a lot of Helú’s work. In fact, Roldán’s surname is an anagram for the word “ladrón.” Why thieves? Why not homicide detectives? Why not private investigators? The underlying question being—here following Breton in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*—“Is it not a shame to present in an intellectually attractive light a type of policeman, *always a policeman*, to bestow upon the world a police *method*?” (127). These questions are deliciously ripe with possibilities. I will suggest one out of many such possibilities that bonds Helú’s privileging of the thief to the consistent subtext of class struggle that other critics like cineaste Alfredo Garmendia have pointed to in his work.

Negrín, for example, misses an opportunity when she misreads Máximo Roldán’s reference to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the short story “Debut profesional” as characteristic of the thief’s unlikely status as “un hombre no carente de cultura” (44).<sup>19</sup> Making reference to a historical actor who is revered as the world’s *first* self-declared anarchist and who is also widely known for declaring that private property is theft hardly puts Roldán in some sort of culturally elite circle. In fact, before Roldán becomes a thief he is described as a common, low-level office worker. The streetwise thief *not* the cultured bourgeoisie is privileged because the thief-cum-detective always wins—a *criminal* always out-deduces authority figures like police officers and government

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<sup>19</sup> This story is titled “Un clavo saca otro clavo” in the 1947 compilation titled *La obligación de asesinar*.

officials. In addition, the reference to Proudhon happens during a key moment where Roldán unintentionally uncovers an administrator's embezzlement scheme while on the job. As he watches management count rent in front of an open safe, Roldán blurts out “¡Caray don Pancho cómo roba usted!” after silently contemplating to himself Proudhon's maxim: “¿No decía Proudhon que la propiedad constituía un robo?” (Helú 171). Roldán is then thrown into criminality when the administrator points a gun at him. He must now decide to kill or be killed. He of course kills the administrator and keeps the money. The intertext—Roldán's glossing of Proudhon's infamous maxim—signifies the opening of a world, an anarchic world counter to the degenerate, bourgeois trappings of post-revolutionary Mexico. After his circumstantial baptism in blood, Roldán is now obliged to engage in a lifelong attack on the sacred cow of the bourgeoisie: private property. This does not reflect an explicit call to armed struggle against the “desigualdad de fortunas que nace del principio de la propiedad privada” à la Flores Magón, but rather an anarchic approach to survival in the concrete jungle of post-revolution Mexico and an emphatic questioning of the concept of private property (*El sueño* 121).

In *La obligación de asesinar*, Carlos Miranda is also thrown into a situation that quickly turns anarchic as he competes with authority figures that buoy up the bourgeois order in order to solve the murder and thereby prove his innocence. By undercutting the police officer's authority at every turn, and by eventually solving the murder through reasoned deductions, Miranda administers justice. This is Proudhon's central concern in *What Is Property?*—“the last result

of the analysis, what *justice* is”—and his ultimate justification for the abolition of private property (88). Here, the Mexican state is not the true arbiter of justice. It is the proletariat in the act of seizing bourgeois property that empirically determines innocence and guilt. List Arzubide describes the configuration of the anarchist-thief in the following way: “Ladrón: en la noche abrumada, / recojes el tribute / de tu sangre regada / por tus antecesores / en la tarea que les dió hambres y dolores” (50). The thief justly reclaims what surplus was extracted from his ancestors’ labor by the bourgeois capitalist. Similarly, Maples Arce denounces what he considers the real thieves of modern capitalist society, and points to the consequences of their thievery in his Stridentist masterpiece *Urbe: súper-poema bolchevique en 5 cantos* (1924): “Y ahora, los burgueses ladrones, se echarán a temblar / por los caudales / que robaron al pueblo, / pero alguien ocultó bajo sus sueños / el pentagrama espiritual del explosivo” (Canto I). The forceful redistribution of capital is *justified* because of the original exploitation of social relations by the capitalist class and its partisans. Thinking on Marx and Engels, because of the necessarily antagonistic relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat under capitalism, there will always be an explosion of class struggle.

In addition to *La obligación de asesinar*, examples of Helú’s consistent preoccupation with justice in relation to class struggle can be found in some of his early literary ventures from the Stridentist period. In the novella *El centro de la gravedad* (1925), after weeks of not being paid by the capitalist Celerino, a group of workers take justice into their own hands by destroying his factory: “La idea de ‘injusticia que se cometía contra ellos,’ brotó al fin, adquiriendo la proporción

formidable del tanto de cada uno, multiplicado por el tanto de quinientos. / Y estalló” (Helú 116). Celerino’s utopian plan to develop a provincial cluster of five villages into a haven of modern capitalist industry in the vein of Henry Ford backfires and life goes back to normal in the sleepy villages precisely because of his abuses of the working class. Regenerative efforts grounded in capitalism and the liberal state fail. Additionally, the short story “El fistol” (1928) tells the tale of a young woman named Isabel who is duped by a capitalist millionaire into thinking that she is his daughter. Unbeknownst to Isabel, the capitalist millionaire had killed his wife (i.e. her mother) when he discovered that Isabel was, in fact, not his daughter, but the offspring of his wife’s lover. Isabel slowly comes to recognize that the capitalist millionaire is not her father and kills him because of his cruel, exploitative and violent behavior. The thief-cum-detective Máximo Roldán, after reading a number of journalistic accounts of the murders, solves the crime, but enables Isabel to escape before the police can put all of the clues together. In the end, justice is meted out as Isabel enacts vengeance and the thief-cum-detective Roldán makes off with a sizable amount of loot from the crime scene on “Calle de los Millones” (Helú 155). These are just a couple of examples of how justice and class struggle play out in some of Helú’s other work. In *La obligación de asesinar*, it is the thief-cum-detective-cum-anarchist who seeking justice levels all authority via what Proudhon would call “proportionality” (138). That is to say, given equality of conditions, human intelligence “may be observed without violating justice or social equality” (Proudhon 138). The laborer can thereby justly and proportionally be rewarded according to his or her



intelligence. The locked-key mystery through its reliance on an enclosed space secures this aesthetic-political equality of conditions while Miranda's intelligence is at liberty to administer justice. In a perverse twist of irony, the degenerate murderer must be a member of bourgeois society—society that, for Helú and his thief-cum-detectives, criminally institutionalizes private property and therefore injustice and inequality.

“HAIL THE DAWN OF UNIVERSAL REGENERATION!”

Miranda is duly rewarded when, in a spontaneous aside, the narrative voice expounds upon his Olympian detective prowess: “Sabido es que, en las Olimpiadas, no figuran todavía las Competencias Detectivescas. Resultaría interesante que se incluyera este número en el programa” (Helú 69). According to the narrator, Miranda could hold his own against the likes of “Sherlock Holmes, Nick Carter, Pepe Rouletabille, el Padre Brown, Hercule Poirot, Philo Vance, Ellery Queen, Perry Mason, Nero Wolfe, y todos los detectives que en el mundo han sido” (ibid). The narrator then ends this aside by concluding that “posiblemente tendríamos un campeón mundial” (ibid). Helú canonizes his own character and then dares anybody to stop him—a truly anarchic gesture indeed! Helú's anarchic thought experiment creates a space where equality and justice provide a path for our degenerate thief to regenerate as Olympian. The bourgeois moral order is turned upside down and the thief who is obligated to steal because of inequality and injustice is finally set free—he is liberated. The degenerate thief-cum-detective-cum-anarchist has regenerated justice because of both his

radical unlikeness and equality of conditions. Helú's locked-key mystery therefore constitutes a world where everybody is suspect regardless of class, empirical reason reigns, and property is indeed theft! Keeping Miranda in mind and thinking back to Flores Magón's revolutionary call for societal regeneration, Proudhon's closing petition from *What Is Property?* seems particularly apt:

Young man, exasperated by the corruption of the age, and absorbed in your zeal for justice!—if your country is dear to you, and if you have the interests of humanity at heart, have the courage to espouse the cause of liberty!... There your regenerate soul will acquire new life and vigour. (138)

The anarchist concludes: “sure of your faith, and thoughtfully enthusiastic, you will hail the dawn of universal regeneration” (ibid). Let it be said that *La obligación de asesinar* still hails its readers today!

“Es la hora de los hornos y no se ha de ver más que la luz”  
—José Martí, Carta a José Dolores Poyo

“Una oficina oscura donde la única luz es la de estos versos míos”  
—Ernesto Che Guevara, “Contra viento y marea”

“Perfecto es el instante en esta sombra verde / y todo, en lo más hondo, huele a muerte”  
—Julio Cortázar, “Poema 1968”

## Chapter 2: Blood Quota

Exiled in Paris during the early 1970s, Julio Cortázar took up Che Guevara’s call for Third World revolution in his capacity as a public intellectual and writer: “En alguna parte he dicho que todavía nos faltan los Che Guevara de la literatura. Sí, hay que crear cuatro, cinco, diez Vietnam en la ciudadela de la inteligencia” (*Viaje* 34). By continuing the avant-garde games of *Rayuela* and *62 Modelo para armar* while for the first time topically addressing armed struggle in relation to Latin America in a sustained fashion, Cortázar’s collage-novel *Libro de Manuel* challenges sectarian conceptualizations of radical art-politics through its experiments in collage and montage. Cortázar’s collage-novel thus not only plays with generic conventions and figurative language, but also with conceptions of socialist revolution. His avant-garde game—while consistently ludic and at times even frivolous—affirms the absolute necessity of revolutionary sacrifice and regeneration, of Guevara’s “cuota de sangre” (*Obras* 592). For Cortázar, play must animate revolution.

This chapter therefore illustrates the particularities of Cortázar’s avant-garde heresy by situating his collage-novel in relation to a certain geopolitical triangulation of the socialist milieu circa 1968: Paris, Buenos Aires and Havana. The connecting line-segments of this triangulation consist of the embodied

Marxism-Leninism of Guevara and the art-politics of the Cuban Revolution. Reading what the infant Manuel and his “instruction manual” mean for the revolutionary future, I demonstrate how (the “protagonist”) Andrés Fava recognizes the actual interpenetration of free play and revolutionary *praxis* as expressive of new modes of being. This reading manifestly contrasts with what aesthetes and militants after its publication characterized as a failed political novel. While it is true that Andrés’ actions and musings abound in absurdity as he botches a political kidnapping partly because of his myopic intellectualism, in the end, Andrés’ art-politics open up future possibilities for revolt and revolution. Entering into dialogue with the mythology of Guevara, Cortázar collapses guerrilla warfare and the avant-garde, rearranging—in the spirit of ‘68—revolutionary potentialities in an era marked by the dogmatism of what cultural critic Ambrosio Fornet has called the “Quinquenio Gris” of the Cuban Revolution (267). Let us however first turn our attention to the critical debate surrounding *Libro de Manuel* in order to set the stage for my critical interpretation of the collage-novel.

Most critics who study *Libro de Manuel* make a point of commenting on the collage-novel’s aesthetic inferiority or what they consider as the author’s compromised literary taste. According to these critics, Cortázar’s last major novel “no es de las mejores” (Maturó 137). This is because, for them, its “literary level is patently lower” than that of his previous novels (Boldy 161). I tend to disagree with these kinds of assessments. Since all literary value is “radically contingent”—as Barbara Herrnstein-Smith has pointed out—an analysis grounded

in the literary “success” or “value” of *Libro de Manuel* always seems to fall short of any kind of meaningful analysis (11). Additionally, setting aside questions of Bloomian aesthetic value and hierarchy can lead us down fruitful paths of investigation. For instance, critics have also frequently pointed to the (obvious) tension between aesthetic experimentation and political commitment present in *Libro de Manuel*. Steven Boldy describes it thusly: “Cortázar in this novel faces up to the tension between a politically committed message, and serious literary experimentation which often tends towards a relativization of the any message” (161). Likewise, Kathleen Vernon describes this tension as “the author’s ambivalence over the compatibility between aesthetic freedom and ideological message” (269). Again, referencing *Libro de Manuel*, Susana Gómez states that “En este punto conocemos a un Cortázar que ejerce su práctica política al mismo tiempo que redefine sus prácticas estéticas” (72). Similarly, Miguel Herraéz interprets Cortázar’s atypical inclusion of political *topoi* in *Libro de Manuel* as “su conversión a motivo pragmático y preciso”—meaning to a socialist political-economic program (285). Let us reiterate that this tension between aesthetic experimentation and political commitment on some level is present in Cortázar’s intellectual production from the era and that it also responds to certain demands.

I claim, however, that what we observe here is actually more characteristic of an illustrative tension rooted in the negation of a philosophical duality than an aesthetic-political conflict of interest. Serious literary experimentation does not preclude or somehow exist outside of ideological programs and/or messages. Similarly, ideology is not something that can be separated out completely from

any work of art, but is instead part of how we experience all art. Ideology moves within all human relations, including art, but is not necessarily totally determinant of human experience as certain (vulgar) Althusserians might have us believe. Cortázar's conversion to utopian socialism beginning in the early 1960s then seems less an awkward vulcanization of bohemian aesthete and political militant than a fusion of trends latent in his work since at least *Rayuela*. As Eduardo González has noted, "La importancia del punto de fusión," in the work of Cortázar, "consiste en estar situado en los límites de la representación"—a kind of "estado límite" à la Carpentier (234). This "limit state," of course, rubs up against certain interpellating agents and institutions, marking the tension between art and politics that critics have come to recognize. Following my critical distinction articulated above, this chapter is therefore divided into three interrelated sections—"Yo tuve un hermano," Cortázar and the Tricontinental Hail and Free Play in *Libro de Manuel*—that move from a theorization of radical socialist epistemology to a re-envisioning of Cortázar's personal politics to an emancipatory interpretation of *Libro de Manuel*.

#### "YO TUVE UN HERMANO"

Sometime before he left for Bolivia in 1966, Che Guevara arranged for "an undated call to arms" to be published in the print organ of the Tricontinental Congress (Anderson 684). In it he trumpeted the following: "ya han dado los mártires que figurarán en la historia americana como entregando su cuota de sangre necesaria en esta última etapa de la lucha por la libertad plena del hombre"

(*Obras* 592). In Guevara's mind, his revolutionary sacrifice was absolutely necessary in order to enact global emancipation. On April 30, 1967 Guevara—then clandestinely ensconced in the Bolivian outback—commented in his diary: “el clamoreo sigue, pero ahora por ambas partes y luego de la publicación en La Habana de mi artículo, no debe haber duda de mi presencia aquí” (*Diario* 172). The article foreshadowed Guevara's own demise in Bolivia less than a year later, satisfying in death what he might well have called his “blood quota.” The Tricontinental and Guevara's martyrdom became revolutionary touchstones for an entire generation, cementing in blood many of the theoretical underpinnings characteristic of what Robert Young has called Tricontinental epistemology (“Preface”). This framework of knowledge was theorized and propagated by Guevara and other prominent anti-colonialists of the era like Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. Tricontinental ways of knowing and being led a global effort to overthrow colonial nation states and combat neocolonial political-economic policies through socialist revolution in the Third World. It is in this context where Cortázar and Guevara meet up—even though they never met—under Guevara's “estrella eligida,” or his vision of liberatory communism (*Cartas 1964-1968*).

In 1965, Guevara postulated that art ought to be a weapon when he wrote, “La angustia sin sentido o el pasatiempo vulgar constituyen válvulas cómodas a la inquietud humana; se combate la idea de hacer del arte un arma de denuncia” (*Obras* 378). For Guevara, art *qua* art should not be escapist, but rather escape “la jaula invisible” of capitalism (*ibid*). Guevara advocated artistic production that was both experimental and communistic, an art committed both formally and

ideologically to the overthrow of capitalism embodied, for Guevara, in US imperialism. The ultimate function of art, for Guevara, was pedagogical, marking a gap between Che and many avant-garde artists. Likewise, interpreted a certain way, Guevara's ad hoc theorization reinforces various philosophical dualities (i.e. form/content) confronted by avant-garde art-politics. This is evidenced by certain partisans who (still) insist on the preeminence of message or episteme, which leads to the privileging of particular forms like social realism. Hence the noticeable preoccupation over "revolutionary" art throughout the era. This particular interpretation of Guevara's writings and Fidel Castro's infamous "Palabras a los intelectuales"—both enunciated from the locus of the Cuban Revolution—are perhaps where the political misunderstandings regarding Cortázar's work originate. These misunderstandings later come to a head at Casa de las Américas with the Padilla case and also in Paris after May 1968. But before we delve further into these scandals it might be worth asking the following questions: what constituted revolutionary "content" during the Tricontinental era? What were some of the radical *topoi* that intellectuals and revolutionaries valued? And how did avant-garde artists play with these *topoi*? Answering these questions help tease out different sectarian ideologies circa 1968 and then lead us away from the misrecognized interpretation that *Libro de Manuel* somehow constitutes a rejection of political radicalism.

Perhaps one of the most evident pillars of Tricontinental epistemology is its ideological confrontation of colonial racism. Writes Young, "The new humanism of Fanon, Guevara and Castro, and the anti-humanism of Althusser,



were essentially founded on the same colonial problematic: that racism of colonialism was degrading colonial (or semi-colonized) subjects to the category of the subhuman” (xvii).<sup>20</sup> For the major actors of the Tricontinental milieu, colonial and neocolonial systems dehumanized their political subjects, subjects who for the most part had been defined by colonial racial categories. Sartre elaborated this when, in a book review published in *Les Temps Modernes* from 1957, he wrote: “Colonization denies *human rights* to people it has subjugated by violence, and whom it keeps in poverty and ignorance by force, therefore, as Marx would say, in a state of ‘subhumanity’” (“Albert” 58). For Sartre and other intellectuals, coercive force employed by the colonial power structure bred systematic racism and economic exploitation that separated out different classes of humans. Here, as is also plainly evident in the works of Fanon, Sartre collapses race and economic class, forcefully demonstrating the subhuman state or condition of the colonized.

This collapse of economic class and race, in turn, leads to the coupling of colonial power structures with twentieth century capitalism. In the preface to *Discours de Lumumba* from 1963, Sartre writes, “Imperialism needs a governing class which is sufficiently aware of its precarious situation to link its class interests with those of the large Western companies” (“The Political” 215). Class conflict—again, a colonial collapse of racial and economic conflict—is

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<sup>20</sup> Althusser would most certainly have rejected Young’s synthesis of what he saw as two conflicting philosophical orientations: humanism and Marxism. That said, I think Young’s analysis correctly recognizes the interpenetrating ends of both philosophical sects and (paradoxically?) gives critics both a more nuanced and unified path towards interpreting the revolutionary ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

necessitated by foreign economic interests that control local government. These types of conflicts were not strictly an African phenomenon, but rather characteristic of colonial and neocolonial contexts throughout the Third World. Sartre continues, “The aim is to reserve the same fate for the black continent as that of Latin America: weakness of central government, alliance of the bourgeoisie (or remaining feudal landowners) with the Army, a super-government of multi-national corporations” (“The Political” 216). Following Sartre, Tricontinental epistemology confronted the convergence of moneyed foreign entities and colonial government, formulating a conspiratorial model of First World dominance in which multi-national corporations pull the socioeconomic strings.

If the oppressive colonial triad of systematic racism, economic exploitation and corrupt governance undergirded the grievances of Tricontinental epistemology, what then was the objective? The answer is quite simple: socialist revolution. In the preface of Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* from 1961, Sartre wrote, “In order to triumph, the national revolution must be socialist; if its career is cut short, if the native bourgeoisie takes over power, the new state, in spite of its formal sovereignty, remains in the hands of the imperialists” (“Preface” 11). For Sartre, in order for a total revolution to occur in any given colonial nation, said revolution must ultimately institute socialist political-economic policies. The model for Sartre and many other radicals immersed in the Tricontinental milieu was, of course, Cuba *independiente*. In fact, Sartre and de Beauvoir had visited the newly liberated ex-colony in early 1960—during roughly the same time

period that he authored the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*—and had come away ecstatic from their experience in Revolutionary Cuba. In a speech given in Brazil just a few years later, Sartre declared the following: “If we want the Cuban revolution to have some meaning it is important that all Latin American countries follow its example in their march toward independence” (qtd in Cohen-Solal 402).

The Cuban Revolution—a movement that was originally described as “an antidictatorial, multiclass political revolution”—quickly developed into *the* model and base for other anti-colonial, socialist operations (Farber 6). This way of seeing the Third World in relation to the rest of the world was not just specific to Sartre and other radical intellectuals, but also necessarily informed the *praxis* and propaganda of revolutionaries like Fanon and Guevara. In an enigmatic epistle written to Castro on October 3, 1965, for instance, Guevara wrote of “la sensación de cumplir con el más sagrado de los deberes: luchar contra el imperialismo donde quiera que esté” (*Obras* 698). This epistle temporally marked Guevara’s resignation from all of his posts in the Cuban government and his quixotic journey to the ruins of Lumumba’s Congo. One gets the sense that while Sartre informed the “theoretical foundation” of revolutionaries—what Guevara referred to in other speeches as “consciencia”—the *praxis* of radical social movements like the Cuban Revolution and the Algerian National Liberation Movement also informed radical intellectual thought throughout the period (*Obras* 372). This incessant back-and-forth constituted a dialectical, *not* a causal relationship between theory and *praxis*.

This is all to underscore that the fundamental object of Tricontinental epistemology was to enact socialist revolution throughout the Third World, which would then catalyze what Guevara in 1966 called “la liberación real de los pueblos” (*Obras* 594). These *topoi*—colonial racism, economic exploitation, corrupt governance, socialist revolution and real liberation—not only informed, but was also shaped by avant-garde cultural production. Likewise, for many intellectuals and revolutionaries, aesthetic concerns were in some respects just as vital as armed struggle itself. In the heat of this revolutionary epoch, Sartre, for example, maintained that “If literature is not everything, it is worth nothing.... This is what I mean by ‘commitment.’ It wilts if it is reduced to innocence, or to songs” (qtd in Cohen-Solal 389). The ethical stakes of literature had been raised. Literature as frivolity, as entertainment, as commodity had been disavowed as it took pride of place among the anti-colonialists. Likewise, according to Guevara’s childhood friend, “everything began with literature” for the Argentinean revolutionary (Anderson 38).<sup>21</sup> Major figures in the Tricontinental milieu like Guevara and Sartre thus consistently maintained that aesthetic experience should not be an escape from, but a confrontation of the Real—the real exploitation of colonial and neocolonial regimes. One can

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<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most curious instance of this dialectic is Guevara’s reading of Vallejo’s “Los heraldos negros,” which he recorded for his family shortly before leaving for the Congo in 1965. Why recite an avant-garde poem by an intellectual who died hold-up in decadent Paris during the heat of the Spanish Civil War? Why read this particular poem for one’s family right before leaving on a life-threatening mission to overthrow a violent neocolonial regime? Did Guevara, on some level, think of the work of art in terms of the revolutionary event? Ironically, Guevara’s literary proclivities might not have withstood the rigor of some of his most vehement partisans. Indeed, Guevara’s guerrilla library in Bolivia, in addition to works of philosophy and political economy, included novels and poetry. Was Cortázar or, heaven forbid, Borges somewhere in that mobile library?

therefore readily observe the inter-bleeding of aesthetics and epistemology as these *topoi* converge and enter into play as I will illustrate in my case study of Cortázar's *Libro de Manuel*. This interpenetration, however, also opens up possibilities for misrecognition like when critics and artists attempt to separate-out form and content, marginalizing the emancipatory potential of avant-garde free play. Cortázar's work during the late 1960s and early 1970s as an intellectual committed to Tricontinental modes of knowing and being is illustrative of this political-philosophical misrecognition.

#### CORTÁZAR AND THE TRICONTINENTAL HAIL

In the inaugural issue of *Casa las Américas* from 1960, Cuban author Virgilio Piñera wrote a brief chronicle detailing the first May Day parade in Havana after the Revolution. The account is notable because it was produced by a perennially misunderstood—or “misrecognized”—author of the Revolution and represents one of the first recorded instances of the tension between political commitment and artistic autonomy after January 1, 1959 in Cuba. Piñera begins his testimony by framing himself, fellow artists and assorted journalists in terms of labor: “Nuestra milicia está integrada por los obreros y empleados del taller *Revolución* y por los escritores que se agrupan junto a *Lunes*,” referring to two prominent cultural magazines from the early Revolution (32). These intellectuals are above all else, in the words of Piñera, militant workers. Self-management and creative autonomy in the workplace is central to Piñera's description of the parade. These workers—including such disparate authors as Guillermo Cabrera

Infante and Antón Arrufat—joined the parade, according to Piñera, because “por fin tenemos algo que conservar y defender,” adding, “Es por eso que los escritores (no todos, por desgracia) dijimos Presente en el desfile del día Primero de Mayo” (ibid). Piñera writes this in order to confront those who perpetually misrecognize artistic liberty or absolute creativity as the much maligned “irresponsabilidad del escritor” associated with art as frivolity and/or pastime (ibid). Militancy here revolves around the intellectual’s status as worker. It is manifested in parades and speeches, but does not necessarily entail some sort of espousal of social realism or any other regimented “revolutionary” art. Given Piñera’s future ostracism during the Quinquenio Gris because of his homosexuality, his militant adhesion to Fidelismo in this all but forgotten chronicle is particularly interesting. It is worth noting that the chronicle predates Castro’s “Palabras a los intelectuales” from 1961 and oozes with hope in the revolutionary future—a radical future where, one might speculate, homosexuality is, at the very least, not actively persecuted as counterrevolutionary or decadent bourgeois phenomenon.

Briefly focusing on this “raro” of the Revolution, as *Casa de las Américas* characterized Piñera 100 years after his birth, puts in relief the strange—perhaps *queer* is a better qualifier—position of the avant-garde artist in relation to the Revolution (“Páginas” 109). If the Cuban Revolution is an authentic worker’s revolution, why must the intellectual be ready to “sacrificar hasta su propia vocación artística por la Revolución” (Castro)? Why must the revolutionary artist put the Revolution “encima de las demás cuestiones....aun de su propio espíritu creador” (Castro)? In sum, why must an avant-garde artist like Virgilio Piñera

cede his vocation—indeed, his very liberation from alienation in the workplace—to a new master: the Revolution? When the question is phrased like this a certain reactionary position latent in the Revolution becomes evident. On the one hand this reactionary conservatism produced revolutionary martyrs like Piñera and Reinaldo Arenas who embodied radical sexualities that confronted traditional and bourgeois moralities. The statist crackdown on “dissident” homosexuals, Afro-Cubans and other marginal bodies during the first decades of the Revolution is by now well documented and even eventually contributed to some transformative reforms in Cuba. On the other hand it wrestled control of the modes of production from the very people it meant to emancipate. These much needed reforms have thus functioned to elide another question: that of the authentic emancipation of human beings from alienated work—the principle concern of Guevara. From 1961 until the late 1970s this reactionary, double contradiction within the Revolution became more obvious and vicious. This is the cultural context into which Cortázar leapt after he visited Cuba for the first time in 1963. Shortly after his visit he was enlisted as a member of the editorial board of *Casa*. The author of *Rayuela*—perhaps the most freewheeling (anti-) novel of the early nineteen sixties—was now editing for the Revolution.

Cortázar’s position as a foreigner simultaneously inside and out- of the Revolution is important because it allowed him certain privileges not available to Cuban avant-garde artists like Piñera, Cabrera Infante and Heberto Padilla. It did not, however, vaccinate him from the fever of political commitment and its attendant questions of loyalty, class position and hierarchy that spread throughout

Latin American intellectual communities after the Revolution. Indeed, during the late 1960s certain agents of the Cuban Revolution demanded that Cortázar quite literally answer their interpellating hails. In one famous example from 1967, Cortázar responded to the hail of Roberto Fernández Retamar and Casa de las Américas with a letter outlining his commitment to socialist revolution in Latin America. In his letter, even as he affirms the eschatological necessity of utopian socialism, Cortázar still “breaks bad,” stating unequivocally that “Incapaz de acción política, no renuncio a mi solitaria vocación de cultura, a mi empeñada búsqueda ontológica, a los juegos de la imaginación en sus planos más vertiginosos” (“Carta” 113-114).<sup>22</sup> This particular refusal indicates that, for Cortázar, cultural work had revolutionary importance outside of any vulgar conception of political commitment that might sideline him as an armchair revolutionary or petit bourgeoisie.

Like Piñera before him, Cortázar propagated a militant, worker-based vision of intellectual life. In 1970, for example, nearly a decade after Castro’s “Palabras” speech, Cortázar defended worker autonomy when he wrote, “Pretendo solamente que nadie se ponga a dictar desde afuera las líneas de conducta que sólo pueden ser decididas por el escritor o el artista a base de su propia sensibilidad y su propia conciencia” (*Viaje* 61). Notice how Cortázar’s emphasis is not on the category of the bourgeois “individual” and his or her attendant rights, but rather the category of worker and his or her vocation. One also ought to remember that this statement was made in the wake of the Padilla

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<sup>22</sup> When talking of his political “incapacity” or “uselessness” during this era, Cortázar is usually referring to his age: 50 when he publishes *Rayuela* in 1963.



affair although it was not written as a direct response to the scandal that imprisoned one of Cuba's most promising poets for the "counterrevolutionary" exercising of his vocation (i.e. his vocal critique of intellectual censure). Likewise, in a letter to Haydée Santamaría from 1972, Cortázar argued against any sort of determinate ethic prescribed by the revolutionary big Other: "Haydée, si ser revolucionario es, como tú dices a renglón seguido, ser un hombre decidido que no escoge el camino más fácil, entonces soy un revolucionario aunque nunca me he dado a mí mismo tan alto título." For Cortázar, the act of speaking out against the detainment of Padilla was a revolutionary act that he sought to reconcile with Cuban institutions like Casa—certainly not an easy task considering the draconian censorship sponsored by the Cuban state during the era.

But why do this? Why not just alienate oneself from the Revolution like Mario Vargas Llosa or Jorge Edwards? I believe, like Breton before him, Cortázar engaged in a double rebellion against both the bourgeoisie and the vanguard party. In response to Retamar in 1967, Cortázar justifies his avant-garde revolt like this: "Estoy convencido de que sólo la obra de aquellos intelectuales que respondan a esa pulsión y a esa rebeldía se encarnará en las conciencias de los pueblos y justificará con su acción presente y futura este oficio de escribir" ("Carta" 114). The bad subject justifies his breaking or splitting by grounding his revolt in worker autonomy and mass consciousness—one avant-garde way of breaking with vanguard party paternalism. In the case of Cortázar, he does so with extreme care and at times even deference to the Cuban Revolution and its agents. The revolutionary/liberal duality schematized by Fornet and other Latin American

intellectuals is thus exploded by a third possibility: libertarian (235).<sup>23</sup> In Cortázar's particular avant-garde position, the specter of Marx is haunted by the ghost of Mikhail Bakunin rather than that of John Locke.

This is not to say, however, that Cortázar was without his fist-pounding revolutionary moments. In a recently unearthed poem titled "Las buenas conciencias," for example, the poetic voice critiques an unnamed bourgeois character that contents herself with reading the news and complaining about the injustices that she reads about: "Da gusto ver / cómo vos y tu gente participan / de la historia. / Vas a dormir mal, verdad, mejor quedarse oyendo música / hasta que venga el sueño de los justos" (*Papeles* 483). Earlier in the poem the acquaintance is reproached for what the poetic voice describes as "Casi una militancia o poco menos" (*ibid*). The poem confronts the non-militant bourgeoisie, shaming her, goading her to choose between indignant apathy and radical action. And yet the indignant bourgeoisie simply waits for the dream of the just to materialize. The poetic voice, in contrast, sees rampant injustice as fertile ground for militancy, valuing revolutionary *praxis* over bourgeois complacency. The poem is critical and confrontational, while Tricontinental *topoi* like political commitment and socialist revolution (i.e. the dream of the just) are also propagated. Tricontinental *topoi* are not therefore alien to Cortázar's work before *Libro de Manuel*, but rather marginal in relation to more privileged forms like the novel. While this obscure

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<sup>23</sup> Here again, we are not referring to the contemporary American usage of the term (i.e. neoliberal, right wing party politics) but rather its historical usage in relation to social anarchism during the XIX century. The famous quote by Bakunin expresses a similar sentiment: "We are convinced that liberty without socialism is privilege, injustice; and that socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality."

poem is only just one example of Cortázar's creation and dissemination of Tricontinental knowledge, a clearer biographical example can be located in the decades-long epistolary exchange between Cortázar and childhood friend and artist Eduardo Jonquières.

In a note sent with a copy of his *Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales* to Jonquières on February 9, 1975, Cortázar confessed the following: "Aquí te va el *Fantomas*, que como verás *no es literatura sino el deseo de llevar una cierta información a niveles de público que carecen de ella por razones bien conocidas*" (*Cartas a los Jonquières* 529-30). Cortázar then addressed what he certainly saw as his friend's stubbornly bourgeois apathy, "Vos me repetiste en el hospital que no creés en el poder de este tipo de cosas, pero yo sigo empeñado en creerlo y además en hacerlo" (*Cartas a los Jonquières* 530). Cortázar considered some of his writing like *Fantomas* to be epistemological in function even as these texts fight against notions of *doxa*. Like for many Tricontinental intellectuals, in spite of his (friendly) confrontations with Cuban institutions, Cuba also became *the* model of anti-colonial *praxis* for Cortázar. In Cortázar's mind, radical epistemology and avant-garde art-politics converged in Cuba, opening up for the artist the possibility to act in ways related to her vocation as artist. In another letter addressed to Jonquières from 1971, Cortázar frankly lamented that Jonquières chose not to show his artwork in Cuba, an implicit rejection, for Cortázar, of the Tricontinental socialist project. Writes Cortázar, "Hace años que te quejás de ese no hacer nada en pro de causas que teóricamente defendemos. Ahí, en muchos sentidos, hubieras podido por

primera vez, incorporarte a una lucha concreta y por algo que—con todos sus errores—vale la pena” (*Cartas a los Jonquières* 513). Cortázar paints Jonquières as a grumbling petit bourgeoisie reluctant to join the fight—an imperfect fight, but a fight nonetheless, against US imperialism.

But Cortázar’s Tricontinental interactions were not strictly limited to the Cuban Revolution or the cafés of Buenos Aires. In another related moment from Paris 1969, a group of Maoist “interpelantes” confronted Cortázar at a public roundtable of Latin American intellectuals, accusing him of proving the Althusserian axiom that “la literatura es un producto de la clase dominante” (*Viaje* 39). In a written response the following year, Cortázar confronted in kind what he considered jargon-laden, sectarian posturing: “la repetición de andanadas supuestamente dialécticas pero que en realidad mostraban un dogmatismo, por no decir un sectarismo deprimente” (*ibid*). Nevertheless, this kind of intellectual backlash does not mean, as we have noted above, that Cortázar ought to be characterized as some sort of anti-revolutionary reactionary because he confronted these Althusserian interpellators. This particular intellectual contention has roots in Althusser’s Maoist turn during the late 1960s and his rejection of (European) man as the protagonist of history. This is also happens to be one instance in which Young’s ideological synthesis of the Tricontinental milieu tends to unravel because of the antagonism between the Althusserian vanguard and the direct actions of the actual masses during May 1968. On one side we have Sartre—and I would argue Cortázar—advocating for a decentralized, popular revolution in a dialectical relationship with intellectuals and artists. On the other

side we have Althusser arguing for a revolution under the explicit direction of the intellectual vanguard and its institution: the French Communist Party. Thus the Althusserian position, from an avant-garde point-of-view like that of Cortázar, becomes a sort of false Maoism in that it wrestles power from the actual masses in an attempt to propagate “true” or “pure” Marxist science and stifle worker creativity or free play, because it is misrecognized as a “bourgeois” concept intimately intertwined with humanism.

Thinking back to the questions raised in my literature review at the beginning of the chapter, in the work of Cortázar it is not a question of commitment to art versus commitment to politics, but rather it is a question of what commitment is at its core. I therefore argue that this tension between free play and political commitment constitutes more an epiphenomenon rather than the actual kernel of Cortázar’s art-politics. In the face of poor aesthetic taste and political rhetoric, readers of *Libro de Manuel* often suffer from a bout of critical amnesia. Have we as critics forgotten just how axiomatic the collapse of the Fantastic and the Real is to the work of Cortázar? I contend that this is indeed the case. Let us then remember the following comment from García Canclini’s foundational study on Cortázar from 1968: “El autor sabe que la confusión de lo real y lo fantástico trastornará nuestra indiferencia a lo excepcional, no hará desconfiar de la realidad aparente y averiguar su mecánica más profunda” (*Cortázar* 31). In *Libro de Manuel*, “recognition” of the artificial distinction between reality and fantasy bleeds into other dualities such as action/inactivity, culture/politics and form/content. The collage-novel therefore confronts aesthetic-

political closures by interpellating agents and institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. At the same time it also antagonizes moderate gestures by critics that suggest that Cortázar “proceeds to elicit the support of non-extremist, more open, middle ground of readers” (Vernon 265). Likewise, it undermines Castro-Klaren’s claim that “Cortázar undertakes the search for an open rationalism or surrationalism” (225). Make no mistake, Cortázar is not proposing a middle ground convivial to bourgeois rationalism, but rather enacting a radical avant-garde experiment that opens up non-dogmatic revolutionary possibilities. What we have then is the “good revolutionary” Cortázar who unflinchingly supports the Cuban Revolution on the one hand, and on the other hand Cortázar the “bad subject” who refuses certain Tricontinental interpellating hails. It is precisely here where a critical analysis of *Libro de Manuel* is needed in order to emancipate Cortázar’s art-politics as both revolutionary and non-dogmatic in relation to the Tricontinental milieu.

#### FREE PLAY IN *LIBRO DE MANUEL*

In 1973, Cortázar penned this enigmatic phrase in Jonquières’ personal copy of *Libro de Manuel*: “Para Eduardo, este amargo juego en torno a un bueno. Julio” (*Cartas a los Jonquières* 553). One could translate this dedication as “This bitter game about a good one”—wordplay that instantly involves the reader in the games that will follow in the collage-novel. From the beginning, game/play (i.e. “juego”) therefore frames the collage-novel, because, for Cortázar, “play is not only a means of discovery and entertainment, but an inseparable part of that

reality which is revealed” (Yovanovich 15). Perhaps more importantly, in the preface Cortázar writes,

Más que nunca creo que la lucha en pro de socialismo latinoamericano debe enfrentar el horror cotidiano con la única actitud que un día le dará la victoria: cuidando preciosamente, celosamente, la capacidad de vivir tal como la queremos para ese futuro, con todo lo que supone de amor, de juego y de alegría.  
(*Libro 8*)

Here Cortázar dematerializes, in part, the fight for socialist revolution by insisting, much like Guevara, that certain immaterial categories like love, play and happiness inform the materiality of political-economic revolutionary *praxis*. In other words, a strictly materialist vision of revolution, according to Cortázar, is insufficient.

This puts Cortázar at odds with dogmatic approaches to Maoism or Althusserian anti-humanism. In *Libro de Manuel*, the category of play, above all, is posited against these types of sectarian socialist dogmas. Play as social renovation can be read as part of a broader attempt at socialist regeneration after the Tricontinental Congress in 1966 and the martyrdom of Guevara in 1967. Sartre, for example, spoke of the continual need for cultural renovation when he addressed the student occupiers of the Sorbonne on May 20, 1968, saying, “You must reinvent your tradition....a tradition worthy of this cultural revolution” (qtd in Cohen-Solal 463). The creativity of the students and their ability to play with existing social hierarchies is exalted and not submitted to the authority of the French Communist Party. A similar sentiment is also expressed by Marcos—the Che-like figure from *Libro de Manuel*—when he whispers to his lover Ludmilla, “Todo hay que volver a inventarlo, polaquita....la gente cree que no hay nada

nuevo bajo el neón, calzamos en las rutinas....pero mientras pueda inventaré por mi cuenta” (*Libro* 294). The fundamental operating principle in this passage, indeed, in most of the novel, is innovation. Play—play of the creator, play of the inventor, play of the revolutionary. In *Libro de Manuel*, the renovating properties of play test and affirm the possibilities of Tricontinental epistemology and the certain normative constraints of the novel, moving towards a recognition and subsequent rejection of various conceptual dualities like form/content, play/work and activity/inactivity.

Keeping play in mind, a preoccupation with the dueling dance of doubles latent in the binding possibilities of binary thought, can also be readily observed in Cortázar’s writings in relation to the Tricontinental call for reinvention. In a newly discovered poem from 1968 titled “Doble invención,” Cortázar writes, “Creo que soy porque te invento / desde la arena y la penumbra, / desde una inmensidad sin viento, / y tú en esa vigilia alientas / como la sombra que me alumbró / y el murmurar con que me inventas” (*Cartas a los Jonquières* 486). Sand and shadow *are* because sea and light *are*. Likewise, the subject of the poem and the poetic voice simultaneously invent one another. Lonstein, an intellectual revolutionary in *Libro de Manuel*, addresses a similar binary predicament regarding socialist revolution. Paraphrasing the Russian revolutionary Nikolai Bukharin, Lonstein states, “las revoluciones binarias....se condenan antes de triunfar porque aceptan la ley del juego, creyendo quebrarlo todo se deforman” (*Libro* 228). *El juego* (i.e. game/play) is determined by the rules of capitalism, not socialism, leading, therefore, to its ultimate failure. But what if the rules of the



game where changed? This is the objective of la Joda—the group of radical fuck-ups at the center of *Libro de Manuel*. Lonstein continues by adding, “Ahí está, es un problema de reflejos condicionados, negarse a aceptar las estructuras esperables y lógicas. Las hormigas esperan un toro y Marcos les larga un pingüino, por decirlo de alguna manera” (*Libro 228*). By not playing into the game of *las hormigas*—certain counterrevolutionaries living in Paris headed by el VIP who conducts a dirty war amongst the exile community—la Joda seeks to subvert their logic, and, subsequently, their system. In this schema, play ought to be employed subversively. Problems arise, however, when the constraints of certain strains of revolutionary dogma deny the renovating power of play. Later in the novel, after dissertating on the revolutionary potential of onanism for hours, Lonstein adds the following: “después quieren hacer la revolución y echar abajo los ídolos del imperialismo o como carajo los llamen, incapaces de mirarse de veras en un espejo” (*Libro 256*). For Lonstein, piety sets in amongst revolutionaries in which liberation in certain domains like sexuality are repressed. This leads to the perpetuation of certain moral categories or institutions that block real emancipation. The principles of emancipatory socialism are rigidly flattened, playing into the capitalist game. Innovative ways of addressing colonial racism, economic exploitation, socialist revolution, real liberation and especially corrupt governance are marginalized and repressed because of their connection to radical modes of work, sexuality and gender, for example.

For Cortázar, this is precisely the point where play is needed most. And it is precisely here where collage and montage in *Libro de Manuel* interplays with

Tricontinental *topoi* in innovative ways. By collage, for the purposes of this chapter, I mean an aesthetic organizing principle in which “the physical identity of the different motifs is preserved in the overall diversity” of cultural production (Hoesterey 11). The first instance of collage in *Libro de Manuel* occurs near the beginning of the novel where a facsimile of an article from a French newspaper literally splits the page with novelistic text. Members of la Joda translate and comment on the article. This example is typical of the collage sequences in *Libro de Manuel*, which usually consist of a facsimile text (usually newsprint) and a novelistic text where characters from the novel wrestle with the information printed in the facsimile text. In general, the physical identity of both of the texts is preserved. Within the narrative frame the collage of texts is intended to act as a “manual” for Manuel—baby of Susana and Patricio who la Joda hope to raise in antagonism to neocolonial capitalism. In a recently unearthed chapter originally removed from *Libro de Manuel*, the audience learns of one of the functions of collage in the novel: “la Joda quería desarticular y recomponer la historia cotidiana” (*Papeles* 123). In collage, the deconstructive act of cutting and pasting constructs new possibilities for revolutionary interpretation/action.

One of the most interesting examples of this dialectical relationship between text and reader can be observed toward the end of the novel as Susana translates a published letter to the editor of a French newspaper written by one Dilma Borges Vieira. As members of la Joda gather one night to finish Manuel’s manual, a series of collages are presented to the reader where the merits of including seemingly random newspaper clippings about novel sleeping bags and

the so-called “crimes of homosexuals” are debated. In response to Susana’s exasperated inquiry as to why these odd clippings ought to be included, *el que te dije* flatly states, “Susana tiene que darse cuenta de que los rescates y las liberaciones son insuficientes si no van acompañados de recortes paralelos y complementarios” (*Libro 358*). Within the frame of the novel, the clippings are intended to put accounts of revolutionary actions and actors in relief, simultaneously calling attention to the absurdity of the era from which they are cut and the necessity of revolution. This absurdist collage is complimented by the addition of a pair of facsimile texts that, in the words of Heredia—another member of la Joda—, “ha caído más bien como una pedrada” (*Libro 360*). These “heavy” facsimile texts consist of two clippings: a newspaper article outlining the plight of a woman whose husband has been kidnapped by the Tupamaros in Uruguay and the aforementioned letter to the editor written by Dilma Borges Vieira.

In the letter, Vieira, directly addressing the wife of the kidnapped ambassador, writes, “Señora, no es usted la única que llora. Pero nadie habla de mi sufrimiento y de mi angustia. Yo lloro sola” (*Libro 361*). Vieira then reveals the following: “Su marido está vivo y bien tratado. Volverá a su lado. El mío murió en la tortura, asesinado por el Primer Ejército” (*Libro 362*). The logic of the counterrevolution is turned on its head as the revolutionaries play with the norms of combative reprisal. As Susana translates Vieira’s detailed description of the torture and death of her husband, one of the French members of la Joda interrupts, “Ya entendemos—dijo Roland—, ça va comme ça,” to which an infuriated

Susana responds, “Ah no, ahora voy a terminar” (ibid). Roland’s interjection and Susana’s quick reproach call into question the inter-human capacity to understand. Susana then continues to translate: “Ya sé, señora, que no está usted en condiciones de comprender mi sufrimiento, pues dolor de cada uno es siempre mayor que el de los demás” (ibid). Individual pain is relative and somewhat incomprehensible, but, following Vieira, the socio-cultural reasons for pain can easily be ascertained:

Pero comprenda, espero, que las condiciones que llevaron al secuestro de su marido y a la tortura mortal del mío son siempre las mismas: que es importante darse cuenta de que la violencia-hambre, la violencia-miseria, la violencia-opresión, la violencia-subdesarrollo, la violencia-tortura, conducen a la violencia-secuestro, a la violencia-terrorismo, a la violencia-guerrilla; y que es muy importante comprender quién pone en práctica la violencia: si son los que provocan la miseria o los que luchan contra ella. (*Libro 362-363*)

Neocolonial economic exploitation and government corruption cause revolutionary violence. Revolutionary violence is, therefore, a response to the original violence of colonial and neocolonial regimes.

Vieira ends her letter by addressing the interconnectedness of the aggrieved woman’s family life: “Su desesperación y su sufrimiento demuestran que su marido era un buen jefe de familia que usted deplora su ausencia y que su vida es muy importante. También Mario Alves fue un buen jefe de familia, también él me falta” (*Libro 363*). The violence buried by the quotidian is laid bare; the ambassador must pay for his participation in the clandestine kidnapping and killing of fathers and sons, of mothers and daughters. The collage of facsimile, translation, and novelistic texts unearths this hypocritical dichotomy.

And yet, ultimately, we return to the quotidian. The chapter ends with the normally jovial Heredia disgustedly leaving the room, physically altered by the experience as he goes to fetch coffee: “Tenía una voz rara, no era la voz de Heredia ni su manera de caminar” (ibid). The aesthetic experience provoked by the collage is one of an aesthetic-political confrontation that is on some level reorganizes one’s perception of the microcosm of the quotidian and the macrocosm of the socio-political—a reality, for Cortázar, formed in large part by Tricontinental *topoi* like economic exploitation and corrupt governance. Form and content interpenetrate, resulting in an avant-garde assault on the senses that confronts paternalistic modes of representation that insist on the primacy of facile pedagogical content in cultural production. At the same time—and the fact that collage resists any kind of total closure, including an “avant-garde” closure, is key—this episode also preemptively addresses any potential interpellating hails that might insist on revolutionary content. It does this while at the same time by teasing human suffering out of an otherwise flattening, instrumentalist interpretation of the events chronicled in the newspaper article like the kind initially forwarded by the French Maoist Roland. The collage therefore also insists on radically humanizing anti-colonial class struggle. So the heterogeneity of the collage can spawn a non-paternalistic yet pedagogical narration in a way that humanizes Tricontinental modes of struggle in Latin America. And it does this by exploding conceptual dualities like form/content where the collage is simultaneously form and content.

Montage also functions in similar ways in *Libro de Manuel*. While montage is normally associated with cinematic production, it can also be readily linked to novelistic production. “Literary montage”—or as Walter Benjamin called it in *Passagen-Werk*, “the accumulation of reflections and exterior text fragments”—presents itself as a possible interpretive tool given Cortázar’s propensity for including facsimile texts throughout *Libro de Manuel* (Hoesterey 13). I operationally define montage as an intertwining of distinct *moving* images or textual fragments that *confuses* any notion of integrity. The two key distinctions in my analysis of montage are therefore motion and confusion as they relate to textual fragments. Short stories like “Las babas del diablo” demonstrate Cortázar’s preoccupation with this kind of intersection of film and literature as his photographer-narrator *moves* through the narrative continually focusing and re-focusing on *confused* interpretations of the narrative arch with his gaze and the gaze of the camera. Likewise, approximately half way through the collage-novel the narrative voice of *Libro de Manuel* observes that “La manera de percibir imita cada vez más los montajes del buen cine” (*Libro* 267). This is all to say that the connection, on some level, is there to be made. I will thus attempt to demonstrate the convergence of textual fragments and what Hoesterey has called “a ‘montaged’ character,” or, in other words, a character “who is a composite of two or more authentic and fictional characters” (13).

The first instance of a “montaged character” in *Libro de Manuel* occurs in the preface when Cortázar confesses that the protagonist of the novel “sueña algo que yo soñé tal cual en los días en que empezaba a escribir” (*Libro* 7). The

passage implies a convergence of authorial experience and narrative action. In addition, it is worth pointing out that the “preface” is not labeled as such, nor is it signed by the “authentic” author—Cortázar. That is not to say that *Libro de Manuel* is an autobiographical novel. It is to say, however, that the line between “authentic” and “fictional” characters is confused from the onset of the collage-novel. On the first page of the novel the composite of characters becomes even more complicated. The novelistic text, it would appear, consists of “una cantidad de fichas y papelitos” compiled and written by *el que te dije*—a mercurial author committed to socialist revolution—that are then added to and edited by Andrés—another Argentine writer of “petit bourgeois” tendencies (*Libro 11*). The narrative voice, therefore, is constituted by a triangulation of three characters, one “authentic” and two fictional: Cortázar, *el que te dije* and Andrés. As such, each author-character is a composite of the other two author-characters. In other words, returning to the poem “Doble invención,” each author-character invents the others. Thus, the author-characters simultaneously converge and diverge both inside and out- of the novelistic text. In short, like the cinematic montage they move and confuse in relation to one another.

This character montage therefore triangulates three distinct characters with their accompanying iterability and singularity. While Andrés is characterized as a restless, bohemian author from a previous generation, *el que te dije*, according to the narrative voice, “sólo piensa en libros y novelas como mera base metafórica para sus puntos de vista en materia de registro mnemónico” (*Libro 285*). Likewise, both characters’ particularities can be observed in the “authentic”

author: Cortázar, a bohemian militant from a previous generation. The three author-characters invent one another, but are also indicative of one of the most important intellectual problems of the novel—how to conceptualize revolution. Framing the problem allegorically, the narrative voice pits classical music against contemporary experimental music, finding their synthesis in the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Prozession*. While mulling over the unsettling quality of the Stockhausen's piece, Andrés-*el que te dije*-Cortázar comes to the following conclusion: "Tan sencillo en el fondo: el hombre viejo y el hombre nuevo en este mismo *hombre* sentado estratégicamente para cerrar el triangulo de la estereofonía" (*Libro 28*). It is here where the allegory of revolutionary human experience is laid bare in the montaged character. When the narrative voice describes this "new man" it is clearly alluding to Guevara's New Man that he theorized in "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba" in 1965. Writes Che, "Para construir el comunismo, simultáneamente con la base material hay que hacer al hombre nuevo" (*Obras 372*). Guevara's New Man is a man of sacrifice and revolutionary consciousness—he is the man of the twenty-first century, the man of the future. In the novel, the montaged character—Andrés-*el que te dije*-Cortázar—represents the plain where the New Man confronts the old man. Continuing the musical allegory, the narrative voice explains, "porque no se trata de coexistencia, el hombre viejo no puede sobrevivir tal cual en el nuevo aunque el hombre siga siendo su propia espiral, la nueva vuelta del interminable ballet" (*Libro 29*). No matter how much he struggles, the New Man is locked into an eternal dance with his old self who can likewise never be completely disavowed



or destroyed. The inextricable quality of the old in the new prompts the narrative voice to quip, “Hombre nuevo, sí: qué lejos estás” (ibid). This is not to say that the novel dissolutely dismisses Guevara’s call for revolutionary evolution. On the contrary, it is but a frank recognition of the proverbial road ahead. Remember also that this allegorical insight aligns more closely with Andrés (the character actually listening to Stockhausen) who by the end of novel has ventured further down the revolutionary spiral, finally giving himself up, as it were, to la Joda. In Derridean terms, the New Man functions less as an attainable evolutionary stage of human development than an enjoining specter from the future-past in this particular collage-novel. The New Man enjoins Andrés.

Towards the end of the novel, when one of his lovers, Ludmilla, leaves him for the Che-like Marcos, Andrés is forced to choose between his petit bourgeois life and new revolutionary possibilities. And yet Andrés is slow to realize just exactly what is going on around him: “estoy al borde de qué sé yo, pero al borde” (*Libro 378*). As the narrative arch moves forward members of la Joda kidnap el VIP: a top ranking counterrevolutionary from an unnamed Latin American country stationed in Paris. This takes la Joda’s absurdist, Situationist-like direct actions in supermarkets and restaurants from earlier in the collage-novel to an entirely new level. And this new level is more indicative of the lived reality in Latin American countries like Brazil and Argentina during the late 1960s and early 1970s than that of the streets of decadent Paris. Because of this, Lonstein—the guardian of the secret location where Ludmilla, Marcos and the rest of la Joda are all ensconced with el VIP—is reluctant to let a washed-up

bohemian like Andrés enter this volatile situation. When Andrés insists that Lonstein give him the location and password of the secret hideout, Lonstein replies, “El señor quiere cosas, pero no renuncia a nada,” to which Andrés responds, “No, mi hermano. Nada. Todo me lo llevo conmigo a donde sea” (*Libro* 384 & 385). This statement bears an uncanny resemblance to Cortázar’s response to Retamar’s interpellative hail from 1967 that we analyzed in the second section of the chapter. The old/new duality is negated by Andrés. But notwithstanding Andrés’ obstinacy, Lonstein discerns in him what could probably be best described as revolutionary promise: “vos con tu Xenakis y tu culturita de sofá y lámpara a la izquierda. En el fondo sos un poco como el que te dije y como yo, claro que los tres estamos jodidos apenas nos extrapolamos históricamente” (*Libro* 386). In spite of their historically precarious position as intellectuals in the throes of a global revolution, Lonstein and *el que te dije* have decided to dance with the New Man. Lonstein claims to see the same potential in Andrés. Later in the chapter Andrés frames it like this: “el pequeñoburgués contra los Gómez y los Lucien Verneuil”—Maoists who the narrative voice later describes as “los fascistas de la revolución” (*Libro* 393 & 394). In terms of French Maoism, Althusser’s assertion that “Marx’s whole intellectual history can and must be understood...as a long, difficult and painful rupture by which he moved from his petty-bourgeois class instinct to proletarian class positions” is rejected (66). This interpretation of Marx’s life trajectory is used by Althusser in order to sustain the privileged position of the proletariat in Marxist thought and often to discredit rival thinkers and institutions as Rancière has documented. But this is really just another

example of the old/new duality that André refuses, one might assume, because of its ontological impossibility.

The sons of Mao then occupy a space where ideological closure is pursued at all cost even as the humanity they strive to save is reduced to a mass of self-deceived bourgeoisie. In contrast to Gómez and Lucien, the rest of la Joda is characterized as “los hijos del Che” (*Libro* 395). Here visions of Mao and visions of Che are positioned against one another. Che’s liberatory humanism is therefore valued over the Mao of the Cultural Revolution and his Althusserian avatars even though historically Che and Mao shared certain tactical affinities and a diplomatic relationship. Returning to the narrative of the collage-novel, in spite—or perhaps because—Andrés refuses to renounce the old, Lonstein eventually divulges the location of the secret hideout. When Andrés finally arrives at the secret location, counterrevolutionaries descend, killing many of the revolutionaries, including el que te dije and Marcos. With the shootout, Andrés begins his revolutionary spiral as a militant petit-bourgeoisie from Bánfield—“suburbio dormilón de Buenos Aires”—engaged, however clumsily, in Tricontinental ways of knowing and being (*Libro* 396).

## CONCLUSIONS

After the shootout, the narrative voice describes the surviving members of la Joda sitting in a dingy Parisian jail, contemplating the gravity of the previous night’s events. Lying on a cold cement floor, sharing a cigarette with his incarcerated colleagues, Gómez editorializes, “fue la gran Joda, viejo, y es lo que

cuenta, lo único que cuenta hasta la próxima,” to which Heredia contently replies, “Seguro. . . Marcos hubiera pensado lo mismo, no te parece” (*Libro* 410). The Promethean failure of la Joda is framed by its surviving members as a smashing success because it has fulfilled its purpose, because la Joda—roughly translated as “the party” or more literally as “the fuck”—had “fucked” with the capitalist, neocolonial system. Both the Maoist, Gómez, and the petit-bourgeoisie Heredia, exalt their defiant act as heroic, as revolutionary. It seems as though that in the heat of battle the sectarian differences do not matter all that much to the revolutionaries. The narrative voice—Andrés/*el que te dije*/Cortázar—then adds, “el juego se dio así, a ellos les pasaron cosas y a mí me pasaron otras que no tenían nada que ver, por ejemplo una mosca, pero mirá, al final hubo como una especie de convergencia” (*Libro* 413-414). This convergence led to something that will lead to something else that might just lead us to something like the New Man. Likewise, in a journal entry dated August 8, 1967, Guevara commented on the precarious nature of his revolutionary efforts in Bolivia: “Es uno de los momentos en que hay que tomar decisiones grandes; este tipo de lucha nos da la oportunidad de convertirnos en revolucionarios, el escalón más alto de la especie humana” (*Diario* 275). In both the diary of Guevara and the manual of Cortázar, revolution is the ultimate human act—even in the face of spectacular failure. Maybe the “failure” of *Libro de Manuel* is less a question of bad taste and more a question of Guevara haunting its pages and enjoining its protagonists.

Decontextualizing an entry from Guevara’s Bolivian journal and alluding to the famous prose of José Martí: “El horno no se pudo acabar por estar blando el

barro” (*Diario* 45). The hour of the furnaces may have passed as the 1970s unfolded, giving some credence to the Gospel adage “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (KJV Matt 26:41). We see the dead flesh of Che in CIA photos. We see it in the Argentine film *La hora de los hornos* (1968) as the camera glacially zooms in on the dead eyes of his Christ-like visage during the agonizing last five minutes of the film (appendix, figure 4). This is our Option: become revolutionary like Che, our brother. But although we see his dead flesh, we can only imagine, like Cortázar, his confrontation with death, “paralizado mirando en los ojos al infeliz robot que se le acercaba pistola en mano” (*Papeles* 122). The specters of Che live on, calling out in defiance like Che himself: “I know you’ve come to kill me. Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man” (qtd in Anderson 710). Che enjoins us in the prose of Cortázar to throw ourselves into the revolutionary spiral, a spiral that refuses its own teleological ends even as it pushes us toward something like the New Man.

“La mujer que se revela, se rebela”  
—José Coronel Urtecho, prologue, *Sobre la grama*

“Time no es money sino vida guerrillera”  
—Ricardo Morales Avilés, “Cárceles ‘La Aviación’”

### Chapter 3: The Ludic Erotic Left

In 1976, Julio Cortázar travelled to Costa Rica to meet with literary types, sign books and attend various cultural events. Sometime during the usual proceedings he met a group of Sandinista intellectuals living in exile that included Sergio Ramirez and the primary subject of this chapter: Gioconda Belli. As a young married professional Belli had deviated from certain social obligations proper to her class, cavorting with leftist intellectuals at parties and literary cafés, and quickly coming under their tutelage—or in her words, “condenada al destierro / y a dieciocho meses de cárcel / por haber amado / más de la cuenta” (*Línea* 18). This daughter of a bourgeois immigrant family began a “conversion” process in which radical politics and avant-garde art eclipsed opposition parties and debutante balls. Indeed, via the intelligentsia of Managua, Belli came to read and seemingly internalize the aesthetic world of Cortázar. One of Belli’s lovers from the era, for example, compared her *bios* to Cortázar’s *poiesis* citing *Rayuela*: “El poeta me apodó la Maga por lo mucho que me identifiqué con ese personaje” (*El país bajo* 187). Indeed, the parallels are striking between Cortázar’s Maga and the young Belli. Both are young mothers incorporated into a group of avant-garde intellectuals. Likewise, both play the role of female apprentices, functioning, in part, as objects of male desire. The young Belli’s radical conversion, however,

differentiates her from la Maga in that it signifies a divergent path of becoming woman not strictly confined to objectification and domestic life.

Alongside her radical conversion the Belli becomes a poet, publishing tomes of leftist poetry charged with eroticism. Class in her case—in contrast with Cortázar’s constant battle with ideological hails—became an asset for the germinal Sandinista movement in that it gave the Sandinistas access to information and potential allies amongst Nicaragua’s elite. In addition, her professional life in public relations and advertising were extensively used by the Sandinistas. Her sexuality and feminist politics, however, constitute her avant-garde heresy. In this chapter, I will examine how sexuality, gender and biological sex move in the work of Belli as it relates to the Sandinista Revolution. As such, I will consider the following questions in relation to Belli’s work. How do conceptualizations of the bourgeoisie and patriarchy intertwine and rip apart? How does gender enter into a continuum rather than a binary? And what are the systematic implications of these challenges to patriarchal hegemony?

In contemplating these questions I hypothesize that by playing with *género* (in its multiple connotations) Belli synthesizes revolutionary struggle in the macroeconomic and domestic domains, thereby rearranging the revolutionary vanguard. My analysis thus diverges from critics who attempt to separate out Belli’s work from the revolutionary vanguard in the name of postmodern plurality. I also move towards an understanding of *how* Belli and her work might be considered revolutionary in terms of *género*—question often preemptively elided by her participation in the Sandinista Revolution. Finally, instead of

confining Belli and her work exclusively to certain concepts of “woman” or feminism, I conceptualize *género* in relation to the avant-gardes. I therefore track Belli’s play with *género* through various works that span Belli’s literary career—beginning with her early poetry and concluding with her latest novel—by organizing my argument into three interrelated sections: The Break with the Bourgeoisie (early poetry and journalism); The Bad Subject and the Revolution (*La mujer habitada*); and The Program of the Erotic Left (*El país de las mujeres*).

### THE BREAK WITH THE BOURGEOISIE

In order to chart Belli’s early work, let us briefly return to Cortázar. This move is of utmost importance because Belli and her work are almost exclusively analyzed according to uncritical notions of postmodernism and magical realism but never in relation to the avant-gardes. As such, in order to understand Belli, Cortázar’s avant-gardism is paramount: “Siento que Cortázar fue muy importante para mí a nivel de corazón, de los dramas que se descubren a través de las pequeñas cosas” (Krakusin 138). Similar to her description of Cortázar’s work, Belli has been described as an author who details “los procesos de transformación social a partir de la experiencia cotidiana” (Estrella Vega 374). Both authors pay close attention to the quotidian in all its absurdity. Indeed, Belli and Cortázar often explode the drama of the quotidian by laying bear the interpenetration of day-to-day material experience and the fantastic, thereby playing with understandings of reality, history and narrative. By moving away from a distorted and popularized deployment of magical realism towards an avant-garde



understanding of the quotidian and the fantastic, I ground Belli and her work in an aesthetic genealogy that moves retroactively through Cortázar back to the historical avant-gardes. My rearranging of the current critical framework attempts to underscore the anti-bourgeois orientation of her work, connecting it to sexuality, biological sex and gender.

This avant-garde synthesis of anti-bourgeois sentiment and liberatory sexuality is embodied in two guerrilla fighters named Comandante Marcos—one from Belli’s writing, and one from Cortázar’s *Libro de Manuel*. Most likely neither of the authors intended Marcos to be the “same” character, but the parallels are striking to say the least and worth outlining. First of all, both authors write of a Comandante Marcos who participates in urban guerrilla warfare, ultimately dying as a little-known martyr. In addition, both guerrilla commanders incorporate various female lovers into their clandestine activities. These revolutionaries also participate in national and sexual liberation movements. While Cortázar seems to celebrate the Che-like Marcos, Belli articulates the guerrilla fighters’ contradictions in her memoirs:

Marcos, mi guerrillero heroico ¿nos amaría a todas? ¿O creería que nos amaba? ¿Implicaría la clandestinidad un desdoblamiento, el desarrollo de una real capacidad emotiva para llevar vidas paralelas? Yo misma me daba cuenta de que cuando se empezaba a romper con las normas de la sociedad, las nociones aprendidas del bien y del mal se tornaban difusas. (*El país bajo* 215)

Marcos constitutes the sexually liberated subject who breaks with societal norms of monogamy and marriage. He is a split subject who leads a double life populated with fantastic adventures and heroic feats. But his liberation is only

made possible by a multitude of women bound by the quotidian demands of domestic life.

Drawing more parallels, the phrase *guerrillero heroico* in Belli's memoir alludes to the iconic photograph of Che Guevara taken by Cuban photographer Alberto Korda—common point of reference for the revolutionary left of the 1970s (appendix, figure 5). In her memoir Belli remembers her last embrace with Marcos in which the guerrilla fighter cites Guevara, whispering to her Che's iconic send-off "Hasta la victoria siempre" on an anonymous street corner shortly before his death "offstage" at the hands of a government death squad (*El país bajo* 140). Belli's Comandante Marcos therefore constitutes a literary shadow of Guevara who evokes a certain Romantic image of the guerrilla fighter even as she deconstructs it by including quotidian concerns of "non-revolutionary" import. Likewise, as demonstrated in chapter two, Cortázar's Comandante Marcos moves through quotidian spaces even as he enacts revolution, often embroiled in absurd situations and sexual exploits. In both instances it would seem as though Comandante Marcos' quotidian day-to-day experiences and sexual deviations are just as important in terms of emancipation as is his armed struggle. Belli, however, explicitly challenges readers to consider the gender conditions upon which the emancipation of guerrilla fighter and *patria* are constituted. Thus, "Belli challenges us to think about sexuality as a necessary part of the revolutionary process for both men and women" (Stephens 28). This rearrangement of revolution breaks with certain strains of Marxism-Leninism that

are primarily concerned with macroeconomic relationships grounded in class struggle rather than sexual identity and patriarchy.

For Belli and Cortázar, sex and sexuality are just as imbricated in the revolutionary experience as class. Particularly, in Belli's work, *eros* is conceptualized broadly—following the Greek—as life: “el poder erótico—del eros como la vida” (De Mello). Guerrilla warfare is therefore a reclaiming of life in its multiple instantiations and is not necessarily limited to the battlefield, but also manifests itself in the bedroom and other domestic spaces. In her work, eroticism confronts certain ideological rigidities, “generating a fusion between erotic and political vitality” (Arias 189). In *Línea de fuego* (1978), for example, the erotic and armed struggles enter into play in avant-garde ways, impregnating sentimental and erotic lyric with revolutionary *eros*. Comandante Marcos' death at the hands of government death squads, for example, is related via a quotidian memory taken from a bedside encounter:

No puedo creer tu muerte,  
tan sin despedida,  
—sólo ese lejano presentimiento de aquella noche,  
¿te acordás?—  
en que lloré rabiosamente viéndote dormido,  
sabiéndote pájaro migratorio  
en rápida fuga de la vida. (*Línea* 71)

In the poem, the abandoned lover incredulously mourns the loss of Comandante Marcos even as his *vida guerrillera* is grounded in the inevitability of death.<sup>24</sup>

The poetic voice's sentiment of disbelief ushers in feelings that cannot rationally understand the assassination of Marcos: “Pero allí estaba la noticia en el periódico

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<sup>24</sup> Here let us recall the epigraph of this chapter taken from a poem by the Nicaraguan revolutionary Ricardo Morales Avilés: “Time no es money sino vida guerrillero.”

/ y tu foto mirándome sin verme / y esa definitiva sensación de tu ausencia / corriéndome por dentro sin consuelo” (*Línea 72*). Sentimentality frames guerrilla imagery as the poetic voice feels life and death in relation to the gaze of the guerrilla’s dead eyes—reminiscent of the iconic close-up of Che Guevara on his deathbed taken by Bolivian security forces. This example therefore speaks to Belli’s deployment of the Erotic as broadly understood in terms of life and illustrates her avant-garde play with *género* as she vulcanizes sentimental and political poetry, playing to certain essentialist notions of female affect.

In the poem “Recorriéndote,” nevertheless, eroticism takes on its popular sexual connotation as the poetic voice kisses the male object of the poem from head to toe, contemplating the “dureza de macho enardecido” of his phallus and travelling downward “a [sus] piernas / firmes como [sus] convicciones guerrilleras” (*Línea 59-60*). Firmness, both physical and ideological, is praised by the poetic voice, resulting in the rearrangement of gazes. Man is now Object and Woman is now Subject. “Coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum,” as Kate Millett famously stated, but rather *can* be expressive of a certain type of human emancipation. This “arrangement”—could we say rearrangement?—would consist of the reordering “of human life on agreeable and rational principles from whence the entire notion of power *over* others should be banished.” In this poem, Belli has rearranged the existentialist subject-object dialectic of gender. Her rearrangement, however, is still informed by a sense of power over others, breaking with (for the time being at least) Millett’s conceptualization of human emancipation.

This is perhaps where Belli and her work become interesting in terms of radical feminism. Does her early celebration of eroticism and the feminine body—her lyrical conceptualization of “Woman”—not flirt with the dialectical mirror of subjectivity described by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*? (“The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view.”) Maybe this question can best be understood in terms of Sartre’s positing of a “necessary violence” from his essay “Black Orpheus” in that Belli’s appropriation or negation of the male gaze results in a sort of negation of the negation where emancipation *can* appear. This kind of necessary violence explodes in the prose poem “Vestidos de dinamita” where the Nicaraguan people cannot be emancipated from patriarchal, consumer capitalism until “nos vistamos”—we being women—“de dinamita y nos vayamos a invadir palacios de gobierno, ministerios, cuarteles... con un fósforo en la mano” (*Línea* 28). A woman dressed in dynamite walking the halls of the degenerate republic (in this case, that of the Somoza regime) evokes terror in the bourgeois-patriarchal order at the same time that it still flirts with an eroticism of the female body.

In this image, radical feminism can be read as “perfectly consistent with an expanded Marxian framework, for which the transformation of our own dominant mode of production must be accompanied and completed by an equally radical restructuring”—again, can we say rearrangement?—“of all the more archaic modes of production with which it structurally coexists” (Jameson 100). How this rearrangement plays out will be the subject of the second and third

sections of this chapter. For now, let us remember that this early poetry points to a longitudinal development in Belli's work that moves from a dialectical understanding of gender informed by Beauvoir and Sartre towards a conceptualization more consonant with developments in poststructural thought synthesized in the theoretical work of Judith Butler. This is not to say that Belli completely breaks with the Marxist humanism posited by Sartrean existentialism, but rather reorganizes the historical linkage connecting human emancipation and vanguard party *vis-à-vis* eroticism and radical feminism.

Examples of eroticism taken from Belli's early poetry find a counterpoint, however, in her official work as author and editor of numerous Sandinista publications during the 1970s. These publications suggest that the scandal provoked by her poetry in both bourgeois and working-class circles was not necessarily indicative of her more orthodox Marxist-Leninist principles.<sup>25</sup> In *Nicaragua en el camino hacia su liberación* (1978), for example, readers are introduced to Belli the militant poet. Any talk of poetry—let alone of erotic poetry—or feminism, however, is noticeably absent. This is after all an official document of the FSLN published sometime after the September offensive of 1978 and the triumph of the revolution in July 1979. Belli's focus in this particular interview is on the imminent overthrow of the Somoza regime and she makes this clear: “dada la situación de crisis y eferescencia popular que existía, las masas se iban a lanzar al combate y nuestra obligación como vanguardia independientemente de otras consideraciones, era estar a su lado” (*Nicaragua* 34).

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<sup>25</sup> In an interview from 2007 Belli recounts, “Las clases más altas se escandalizaron. Sintieron que yo estaba quebrando tabúes, estaba transgrediendo” (Krakusin 139).

Belli, as a spokesperson of the revolution propagated a message concerned less with the particular emancipatory claims of feminism, but rather mass liberation: “En plano político, este es un momento de ofensiva, de transformar cualitativamente el entusiasmo y el heroísmo muchas veces espontáneo de las masas y convertirlo en organización popular” (*Nicaragua* 35). This is a typical example of Marxist-Leninist organizational theory where in the vanguard party educates and mobilizes the masses against the ruling class, resulting at first in mass insurrection and eventually culminating in revolution. There is an emphasis on unity and cohesion of objective. In other words, first thing is first, we must remove the dictator. Once the revolution triumphs—much like in the cases of class exploitation and intellectual freedom before the revolution—sexism is promised to become an institutional priority.

With this in mind let us also remember that, in terms of Marxism-Leninism in Latin America, communist Cuba was *the* vanguard and had already moved toward incorporating women into its revolutionary program with uneven results. The Sandinistas were well aware of this and had taken pains to include the liberation of women in their post-revolution program. An example of this phenomenon that Belli in her function as a director of various state-owned communication enterprises most likely edited comes from the first issue of a Sandinista magazine titled *Patria Libre*. The magazine’s cover features a close-up photo of the face of a young, brown woman wearing a black beret and holding a rifle. The young woman is smiling tensely and looking directly at the camera. She takes up nearly two-thirds of the page. She is most likely a teenager. The caption

under the photo reads: “La mujer nicaragüense desempeña un papel histórico en victoria revolucionaria.” The magazine dates from the December, 1979—six months after the revolution. The cover seems to suggest that this is the face of the Sandinista Revolution.

In the same issue, readers are introduced to “Carta de una madre sandinista” by Idiana Fernández “asesinada en León el 16 de abril de este año” (8). This woman’s last letter to her children before dying for national liberation links the domestic with guerrilla warfare. Writes Fernández to her children: “Mis mejores deseos son que un día no muy lejano vos podás vivir en una sociedad libre donde podás realizarte como verdadero ser humano, donde los hombres sean hermanos y no enemigo” (ibid). National liberation trumps any domestic concerns, because the domestic life of the average Nicaraguan is plagued by systematic exploitation. This is further emphasized by the incorporation of a photo showing a woman with baby in tow surrounded by two other naked *mocosos* who also look longingly at the camera. This is the destitution of the dictatorship—a destitution with which liberalism-capitalism is complicit. The magazine article recognizes the sacrifices of women during the revolution and argues for a continuation of the project that these women valiantly fought for when they sacrificed their personal and family lives for the life of the nation. As one critic affirms, “Fueron estas mujeres quienes tuvieron en este proceso revolucionario una participación política mayor ya que tuvieron que empatar la liberación de la sociedad con su liberación interior, enfrentando las contradicciones del sistema capitalista y androcéntrico” (Estrella Vega 375).



Thus, the emancipation of women was not only accounted for in the Sandinista project, but routinely used as a tool to mobilize the masses.

Yes women are accounted for, but only at arms-length, thus establishing an important tension in Belli's autobiographical work after the revolution. In her memoir from 2002, the reader is privy to certain intimate details of Belli's personal conversion to feminism. Looking back at her childhood, Belli accounts for her radicalization by reinterpreting her personal history. As she moves within the masculine worlds of art and revolution she begins to see her otherness—a radicalness that exceeds the immediate objective of overthrowing the dictatorship. Her biological sex becomes just as important to emancipation as class struggle: “Quizá porque desde niña consideraba mi sexo una ventaja, me concebía libre, soberana de mí misma. No se me ocurría que un hombre tuviera el derecho de impedirme ser quien era” (*El país bajo* 47). While this candid observation seems to be relatively true, before the revolution one gets the sense that Belli still operates within the limits of the FSLN and its appropriation of Marxism-Leninism. One example of this occurs after the birth of her second daughter. As Belli becomes a Sandinista initiate, she leverages her class position in order to reach out to future sympathizers and collaborators among the bourgeoisie. She does this even though she is relegated to the roll of house wife by her husband: “Rodeada del olor a pañales y el llanto de los cólicos de Melisa, apaciguando los celos de Maryam quien ya iba a la escuela, armé mi primera pequeña red de colaboradores” (*El país bajo* 91). Her desires for domestic liberation, again, are put on hold even as her domestic role is exploited for the purposes of the

revolution and its fight against macroeconomic exploitation. After the revolution we see a different Belli—a Belli remiss to sideline her nascent feminism for the revolution, but nevertheless committed to certain forms of socialist utopia. After the revolution how then does Belli rearrange this particular manifestation of Marxism-Leninism in which subject formation is subjected to the masculine One? After breaking bad with the bourgeois order of her class, how does she deploy *género* in order to break bad with certain macho tendencies latent within the Sandinista Revolution?

#### THE BAD SUBJECT AND THE REVOLUTION

In order to track Belli's avant-garde break with the FSLN let us return to *Patria Libre*. The first version of a Sandinista publication titled *Patria Libre* was *not*, in fact, published six months after the revolution. The first *Patria Libre* was published in Costa Rica and rushed across the border on July 19, 1979. The document itself is anonymous in terms of authorship—no names other than those of the subjects of the newspaper articles (mostly revolutionaries, FSLN sympathizers and agents of the dictatorship) and the directors of the provisional government. Belli's name does not appear anywhere. According to her memoirs, however, she and Sergio Ramirez authored and edited the obscure publication.

The question then arises: Can we see her marks on the document? The cover page consists of a reproduced black and white photo of Sandino taking up nearly one third of the page, trademark hat and riding boots, rifle hanging over right hip, standing on the side of some unnamed, wooded road. Inside the cover

we come across the following text of interest: “Editorial: Sandino Vive.” In it the editors write that “Sandino vive entre nosotros. Su ideal libertario....emerge hoy victorioso entre las ruinas de la dictadura somocista” (3). It might be easy to read into the editors’ use of “libertario,” for example, but how much of the editorial is Belli’s germinal blend of social democracy, feminism and anarchistic avant-gardism, and how much of it consists of already agreed-upon political terms and positions in circulation among the FSLN? Regardless of the intent of the editors the term is in play, signifying a shift away from certain historical incarnations of Marxism-Leninism towards something freer, more liberating. Likewise, after the revolution, Belli’s play with *género* no longer takes a backseat to other revolutionary concerns, but rather “comes out” in liberatory ways that break bad with vanguard party politics.

Returning to the historical chronology, immediately after the revolution, Belli directed and became involved in a number of state-media enterprises in her capacity as a card carrying Sandinista. Belli took joy in donning her crisp military uniform at public events and duly basked in this ebullient moment in Nicaraguan history. In her memoir she writes, “En esos días por donde quiera que iba me llamaban ‘Comandante Belli,’ lo cual me parecía muy divertido” (*El país bajo* 328). Indeed, Comandante Belli was highly involved in media and cultural production, public relations and state communication for approximately the first four years of the revolution, attempting to bring radical feminism to bear within her different spheres of influence. At this point in time she is operating firmly within the bounds of the Sandinista revolution. Poetry and other forms of creative

writing also fell by the weigh side during this period as her revolutionary duties continued to take priority. But this “quinquenio,” or lustrum, of intense revolutionary activity seems to have eventually taken a toll on Belli. In 1984 Belli retired from her government post as the director of a conglomerate of government-owned communication businesses. After renouncing her post to Bayardo Arce—Coordinator of the Comisión Política de la Dirección Nacional del FSLN—Belli recounts that “Siempre le agradezco que me comprendiera, que no me dijera que dedicarse a escribir en un país que la guerra contrarrevolucionaria desgastaba lentamente era una desviación pequeñoburguesa” (*El país bajo* 298) As Belli breaks with certain cultural expectations associated with the revolution she is keenly aware of her deviation and the repercussions it might have in terms of national security and her standing in society. The bad subject—the avant-garde subject—breaks with the interpellative hail of the revolution because, as she narrates in her memoir, “llegó el momento de comprender la cita de Rilke, de que, para seguir viviendo necesitaba escribir” (ibid).

Belli’s break, however, parallels certain ideological possibilities latent in Sandinismo. By appropriating certain Marxist-Leninist vanguard strategies the FSLN is able to ultimately take power in 1979. By allowing for a certain kind of flexibility, however, they also open the doors of their fledgling republic to critique, dissent and opposition.<sup>26</sup> In many official documents both before and

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<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that the FSLN did not engage in *any* forms of suppression or censorship. It did. But when considered relative to two of the more famous branches of the Marxist-Leninist

after the revolution, the FSLN eschewed a strict Marxist-Leninist program in favor of a more “liberatory” form of socialism singular to the national context of Nicaragua. This program included allowances for a mixed economy, a multi-party republic and privately-owned media. An organizational tight-rope walk indeed, especially when one considers that a US-sponsored civil war and trade embargo raged for the first ten years of the Sandinista government, necessitating stronger foreign relations with Marxist-Leninist powerhouses like the USSR and Cuba. Belli in her role as a militant public relations agent of the FSLN contributed on some level to the shaping of this strategy. In her memoir she authors a passage that remarkably resembles many Sandinista tracts from the late 1970s and early 1980s: “Y la verdad era que por mucho marxismo-leninismo que hubiéramos estudiado, por mucho amor o respeto que le tuviéramos a Cuba, a Fidel y hasta a la Unión Soviética, nuestro sueño era hacer algo diferente. Un socialismo original, nicaragüense, libertario” (*El país bajo* 362). It is this “liberatory” part of the program that Belli begins to emphasize from *La mujer habitada* onward, a possibility opened up by the revolution from which she breaks. Thus, after the revolution, “sus novelas articulan una visión de mundo alterna” (Pérez Marín 127). The path towards this alternative world is laid out in *La mujer habitada* as Belli’s protagonist Lavinia experiences a revolutionary transformation: “From the woman largely preoccupied with her own sensuality and satisfaction in her guerrilla lover’s arms”—think back on early poetry like “A Comandante Marcos”—“she becomes the guerrilla herself” (Craft 166).

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family tree—the USSR and Cuba—their propagation of multiple parties and a free press seems quite flexible.

Violent rearrangements of patriarchy and capital play a central role in Belli's reimagining of emancipation in *La mujer habitada*. We might say that this play revolves around the confluence of a plurality of *géneros*. In much of the criticism of the novel, for example, a plethora of literary genres are invoked, so many so that one is tempted to characterize the body of criticism as a play on *género en disputa*.<sup>27</sup> Genres mentioned in the critical oeuvre include *Bildungsroman* (Barbas-Rhoden 51); testimonial novel, *telenovela*, Third World resistance literature (Craft 158); and heartthrob romance (Arias 183). Right off the bat let us remove testimonial novel from the horizon of possibilities because the novel is not written in the first person and contains little testimony of actual events. Third World resistance literature seems too generic (pardon the pun) given the fact that—following our thesis in the introductory chapter—Foucauldian conceptualizations of resistance do not adequately describe the confrontational orientation of avant-garde literatures. Likewise, *Bildungsroman* does not quite fit since Lavinia breaks with bourgeois society and never resignedly reintegrates herself into its structure. While the novel certainly contains fragments or traces of these different literary genres, heartthrob romance and *telenovela* make more sense (for reasons that I will articulate below) and could be reformulated in more precise terms as the Harlequin genre.

At the beginning of the novel, Belli plays with certain tropes characteristic of pulpy Harlequin romances. These tropes include the independent yet reasonably beautiful woman (Lavinia); the strong, mysterious man (Felipe); and

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<sup>27</sup> This, of course, is the Spanish-language title of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

the perennial “will-they-won’t-they get together?” plot tease. The following passage, for example, is characteristic of Belli’s appropriation of figurative language typical of this *género*: “Se sentía atrapada en un campo magnético de imanes y polvo de acero. Felipe aparentaba coquetear con la atracción, al tiempo que rehuía el vértigo de abandonarse a ella” (*La mujer* 31). Not only does the plot-tease place the reader firmly within rules of the game of the Harlequin romance, but the language also plays on popular gendered notions of attraction and desire. The first third of *La mujer habitada* is profoundly marked by examples of these kinds of tropes and plays on popular language, parodying and rearranging essentialist conceptualizations of *género* in both its literary and biological manifestations.

Returning to the narrative, as the sexual tension between Felipe and Lavinia mounts, the two coincidentally find each other at a disco. Felipe, of course, is alone, adding to his mysterious allure, while Lavinia accompanies a milk-toast lover named Antonio. Felipe then boldly asks Lavinia to dance, embarking on a flirtation on the dance floor: “Felipe la abrazó más fuerte. Ella no entendía el cambio tan brusco. Parecía haber dejado repentinamente toda pretensión de indiferencia, lanzándose abiertamente a la seducción casi animal” (*La mujer* 35). The flirtation is physically consummated later that night in Lavinia’s bed as Felipe confesses his long-hidden desire for his office mate and the two engage in highly eroticized coitus—another trope typical of the Harlequin romance. The novel is clearly situated within these exaggerated and essentialized conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity. As much as Lavinia strives to

break the glass ceiling in her professional life and justify her independence from patriarchy she does not negate her “feminine” affective experience. This would appear to validate the dominant, essentialist conflation of biological sex and gender propagated by numerous dominant cultures all over the globe.

The Harlequin romance is rearranged, however, when Felipe shows up unannounced at Lavinia’s bachelorette pad with a wounded comrade named Sebastián who is fleeing a government goon squad. As it turns out the tall, dark stranger is not only an accomplished professional architect, but a revolutionary—a double life that Lavinia had never anticipated. The result is an avant-garde rearrangement of the Harlequin romance *vis-à-vis* the conversion mode. Lavinia is forced to confront her formative life as a bourgeois architect, breaking bad by converting to the Movement. But this conversion is less indicative of a Pauline rupture than a series of personal confrontations with class and gender privileges. This results, as one critic has pointed out, “En una elaboración autorial más sofisticada que lo acostumbrado, la conversión política, resorte de la identidad, no es fácil ni rápida” (Mora 82). Although Lavinia is already somewhat alienated from her parents because of her decision to work as a professional and not seek marriage, she still feels the pull of class as she slowly breaks away from old friends and acquaintances. This breaking necessitates further radicalization, as many of her class-based relationships center on opposition party politics.

At a debutante ball, for example, Lavinia dances with an old schoolmate named Pablito who is now employed by the Gran General as an economic consultant for the Central Bank. Pablito lays claim to impartial objectivity as he



tries to explain how an opposition party sympathizer might come to work for the dictatorship: “somos un grupo independiente. Nada de política. Nosotros somos técnicos” (*La mujer* 194). Pablito is characterized in this moment as a liberal technocrat blind to his complicity with the military regime. (Later it is revealed that Pablito is actually a member of the Movement moving clandestinely within bourgeois society.) Lavinia, in the process of her radical conversion to the Movement, sniffs out Pablito’s apparent hypocrisy: “Ser apolítico era una cómoda manera de ser cómplice....Critiquémoslo pero no lo cambiemos era la consigna” (*ibid*). As Lavinia accepts the risks associated with being a bad subject she breaks further and further away from her former life grounded in opposition politics and bourgeois sociality. In short, she actively pursues a synthesis of critique and change—a mode of being compatible with Marx’s famous critique of history.

This is not to say, however, that Lavinia limits her critique-change synthesis to the bourgeoisie. Lavinia not only confronts bourgeois modes of doing, making and feeling, but confronts the macho *praxis* of the Movement. Additionally, her critique-change synthesis responds to a particular affective experience—that of feeling trapped. As a new initiate in the Movement, Lavinia often feels isolated and uninformed even as she desires to take a more involved, collaborative role. Her assignments are limited and her opportunities to collaborate are directed from above. This is all done, she is told, for the sake of security. The military hierarchy imposed by the vanguard (i.e. the Movement) would seem totally logical given the violent context in which the guerrillas militate if it were not for Lavinia’s critique-change synthesis of its masked

machismo. For example, during one moment in which Lavinia awaits further contact from her lover-cum-handler Felipe, “se reconocía atrapada en la tradición de milenios: la mujer en la cueva esperando el regreso de su hombre de la caza y la batalla” (*La mujer* 94). Locating the Movement’s hierarchy within a tradition of male dominance inherited from the prehistoric era calls into question the “reasons” that mask its incipient machismo. This is complicated by her relationship with Felipe who serves as her direct connection to the Movement and thus as her immediate superior in the chain of command. Hierarchies of love and revolution enmesh Lavinia, confining her to the role of lover within the Movement: “Y el problema de ella, moderna Penélope a su pesar, era sentirse encerrada en la casilla limitada de la amante” (*La mujer* 95). Lavinia is trapped by her sexual relationships because of evolved historical forms of domination and exploitation—because of Felipe’s benevolent desire to “protect” her from the dangers of guerrilla warfare.

Lavinia continues to unmask the Movement’s paternalistic *praxis* as the novel progresses. Sexism, however benevolent one’s intentions, is still sexism, and the Movement is certainly not exempt by virtue of its revolutionary goals. This line of reasoning is evident in following thought attributed to Lavinia by the narrative voice:

Sería aceptable, racional, que existieran en el mundo personas capaces de inventarlo de nuevo con tanta determinación; desglosando la tristeza en menudos párrafos, delineando la esperanza punto por punto, como en el programa del Movimiento, donde se hablaba con tanta seguridad de todas las cosas inalcanzables que se debían alcanzar: alfabetización, salud gratis y digna para todos, viviendas, reforma agraria (real, no como el programa de televisión del Gran General), emancipación de la

mujer (¿y Felipe?, pensó, ¿y los hombres como él, revolucionarios pero machistas?); fin de corrupción, fin de la dictadura... (*La mujer* 107)

Note how most points of the Movement's platform are free of parenthetical statements. The use of parenthetical statements in this particular context seems to suggest that Lavinia doubts the legitimacy of such claims given the Movement's current *praxis*. Leaving aside the issue of land reform for the time being and thinking of the phrase "revolucionarios pero machistas," we can connect the benevolent, protective gestures of Felipe and the paternalistic tendencies of the revolutionary vanguard.<sup>28</sup> Both are employed to keep women safe, to liberate them from insecurity in its multiple connotations. But both also happen to be grounded in chauvinist conceptualizations of evolutionary biology. How then can the revolutionary vanguard pretend to emancipate women when its ranks flow in accordance with certain hierarchies that either systematically exclude or appropriate women? As we will see in *La mujer habitada* the vanguard strategy does not necessarily lead to the emancipation of women.

Apart from employing "security issues" as a way of isolating his lover from revolutionary violence, Felipe also argues for the naturalness of certain domestic roles among the guerrillas. During one episode where Lavinia and Felipe discuss the problem of machismo within the Movement, Felipe exasperatedly states, "Todos nosotros somos machistas, Lavinia. Hasta ustedes las mujeres" (*La mujer* 166). To which Lavinia acidly replies, "y todavía nos quieren

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<sup>28</sup> In terms of land reform, Belli is perhaps alluding to the practice of mixed economy as outlined by the FSLN in which certain private land-holdings are not entirely expropriated by the revolutionary state. This could be read as a stop-gap measure that does not entirely address the problem of land distribution.

echar la culpa” (ibid). Felipe does not necessarily do wrong to point out that macho *praxis* is not something only proper to males. The problem is that he tries to hide his own machismo behind such a statement. Indeed, a page later we read how Felipe transitions from inculcating his *comadres* to justifying the situation in terms of his chauvinistic interpretation of evolutionary biology. Observes Felipe: “No bien juntás hombres y mujeres en una casa de seguridad, las mujeres asumen el trabajo doméstico sin que nadie se los ordene, como si fuera natural” (*La mujer* 167). The hierarchy of duties is naturalized when revolutionaries assume traditional gender roles without being commanded to do so. Let us remember that within the revolutionary pantheon of heroes, cooks and housekeepers rarely merit monuments. Lavinia, of course, sees the chauvinism embedded in this argument. But that does not stop Felipe and the Movement from maintaining their hierarchal chain of command.

When Lavinia tries to contribute ideas or participate democratically in the revolutionary vanguard she meets resistance and disdain. In one particular instance, Sebastián—one of the Movement’s guerrilla leaders—chauvinistically rejects Lavinia’s input when he says, “debés aprender que en este asunto, no te corresponde hacer los planes, sólo los planos—sonrió apenas—, Tus ideas son bienvenidas pero tienen que ser aprobadas por los mandos” (*La mujer* 225). Referring to her role as architect when he uses the word “plano,” Sebastián gently mocks Lavinia’s attempt to assist in planning a guerrilla action against one of the military dictatorship’s top brass: General Vela. Although Lavinia’s professional work is somewhat valued, her ability to collaborate on any other level is not. She

is only valued in so much as she obeys the macho chain of command. This does not, however, lead her to abandon the revolutionary project because, as she asks near the close of the novel, “¿Cómo creer tan fervientemente en la posibilidad de cambiar la sociedad y negarse a creer en el cambio de los hombres?” (*La mujer* 244). Total revolution requires emancipation including the abolition of patriarchy and sexism and the rearranging of essentialist gender roles.

What then would these “new” women and men look like? How might the revolutionary vanguard be “out in front” leading the attack against the rampant sexism that has been cultivated over hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution? For Belli, misogynist conceptualizations of sex and sexuality must come face-to-face with a radical re-envisioning of the spectrum of gender in order for women and men to experience emancipation. At the end of the first chapter of her memoir, for example, Belli gives us an idea of how this radical re-envisioning of gender might be constituted. Writes Belli,

He sido dos mujeres y he vivido dos vidas. Una de mis mujeres quería hacerlo todo según los anales clásicos de la feminidad: casarse, tener hijos, ser complaciente, dócil y nutricia. La otra quería los privilegios masculinos: independencia, valerse por sí misma, tener vida pública, movilidad, amantes. (*El país bajo* 12)

Essentialized conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity are employed and subverted in order to demonstrate that gender exists on a spectrum in tension with biological sex, but not necessarily determined by it. In the words of Judith Butler, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and

woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler 9). Butler of course maintains that biological sex and gender cannot be entirely separated-out from one another nor can they be developed autonomously as in the existential dialectic theorized by Beauvoir. But this does not mean that both biological sex and gender cannot present themselves in an array of different combinations. This is in fact part of a broader queer feminist strategy in which “the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power” is deployed in order “to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through mobilization, subversive confusion” (Butler 46). This gender trouble is exemplified by Belli’s seemingly paradoxical claim that ends the first chapter of her memoir: “Sin renunciar a ser mujer, creo que he logrado también ser hombre” (*El país bajo* 12). Masculinity and femininity are coeval to varying degrees in every subject, or in other words, it is possible to be both man and woman in terms of gender even if one’s biological sex is constructed as either male or female.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, in *La mujer habitada*, Itzá—a female indigenous warrior from colonial times who “inhabits” Lavinia over the course of the novel—experiences gender in a similar way. As Itzá recounts her own culture’s traditional gender dynamics she is forced to contemplate her desire to fight, to be a warrior: “*O quizá, me decía, mi madre sufriría un hechizo cuando me llevaba en su vientre. Quizás yo era un hombre con cuerpo de mujer. Quizás era mitad hombre, mitad mujer*” (*La mujer* 125). Itzá cannot explain her gender experience within the logic

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<sup>29</sup> Of course biological sex is also socially constructed and exists along a spectrum.

of her culture, but nevertheless her desires to mother and fight remain coeval. Regardless of the causes (mystical or otherwise), gender is problematized, confronting macho hierarchies and chauvinist conceptualizations of human nature and pushing men, in particular, to value non-male instantiations of masculinity. In the case of Itzá she becomes a valuable warrior in her own culture and an ancestral spirit who guides Lavinia throughout the revolution towards her future emancipation. In both cases it appears that the chauvinism of the warrior class actually slows down the emancipatory process because of its adherence to binary, essentialist conceptualizations of gender.

Given the sexism of the revolutionary vanguard, what then is to be done? One perspective is offered up by Flor—Lavinia’s guerrilla-fighter mentor—who cites the example of Che Guevara. When Lavinia points out certain double standards in the *praxis* of the Movement, Flor waxes apologetic: “Flor decía que el Che había escrito que las mujeres eran ideales para cocineras y correos de la guerrilla; aunque después anduvo en Bolivia con una guerrillera llamada Tania. Cambió, decía Flor” (*La mujer* 126). For Flor, Tania’s presence during the Bolivian guerrilla operations absolves Guevara from any sort of misogyny. This particular conversational thread between Flor and Lavinia continues throughout the novel. Later we learn how Flor understands female guerrilla fighters like herself and Tania. To be a guerrilla fighter, to participate fully in the Movement, “lo que cabe es suprimir lo femenino, tratar de competir en su terreno, con sus armas” (*La mujer* 209). Butler, however, warns us of this sort of tactic:

The feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation.

This becomes politically problematic if that system can be shown to produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination or to produce subjects who are presumed to be masculine. In such cases, an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of “women” will be clearly self-defeating. (3).

Becoming exclusively masculine and attempting to purge all femininity enmeshes the female subject further in patriarchy. As an emancipatory project, suppressing the feminine ultimately results in a perversely political version of Stockholm syndrome.

Returning to the narrative, in spite of the limited inclusion of women in the Movement, the macho hierarchy never changes, because women must effectively become masculine. We can remember here the violent appropriation of the male gaze à la Beauvoir in some of Belli’s early poetry. Lavinia, however, responds to Flor *not* by championing a necessary violence or by refuting essentialized conceptualizations of sex and gender, but rather by reclaiming gender’s fluidity. Lavinia thinks aloud:

El otro día estaba pensando precisamente que hombres y mujeres nos hemos especializado en diferentes capacidades. Nosotras, por ejemplo, tenemos más capacidades afectivas. Ellos en eso son más limitados. Necesitarían aprender de nosotras, como nosotras aprender de ellos esa práctica más fluida de la autoridad, de la responsabilidad. Se necesitaría un intercambio. (*La mujer* 208)

For Lavinia, an authentic exchange is necessary. Women ought to embrace how they experience masculinity and men ought to embrace how they experience femininity. Lavinia then takes this formulation to its radical conclusions: “Pero uno debería ser capaz de feminizar el ambiente, sobre todo si estamos hablando de ambientes duros como la lucha” (*La mujer* 209). In Lavinia’s mind, even in the throes of war femininity ought to be valued—a truly radical proposition. Here I



agree with Arias in that “The macho ideology of patriarchal society is broken down” even as I disagree with his causal attribution: “not from the standpoint of an antithetical feminist ideology, but from an anti-rationalistic affirmation of feminine subjectivity” (194). Ideologically, Belli’s attack on machismo certainly is consistent with Butler’s queering of gender and thus constitutive of a certain kind of feminism. As such, it affirms both non-rational sensuality (essentialized as feminine) and rational discourse (essentialized as masculine), refusing to perpetuate the gender binaries grounding Arias’ “feminine subjectivity.”

Taking these examples into account as well as those of the Harlequin romance expounded at the beginning of this section we can see just how femininity and masculinity interpenetrate even under extreme conditions like those found in guerrilla warfare. At the end of the novel we learn that Lavinia’s involvement in the design and construction of General Vela’s home will be used by the Movement in one of their guerrilla actions when a dying Felipe bursts into Lavinia’s home and asks her to take his place on the secret mission. Later—after Lavinia employs much persuasion in order to be included in the mission—the guerrillas take the house and begin hostage negotiations. The narrative voice then contemplates how masculinity flows through Lavinia’s experience even as femininity frames that masculinity: “Ella era Felipe. Felipe era ella...Felipe viviría en sus manos, en su dedo apretando el gatillo, en su presencia de ánimo, en la sangre caliente y la cabeza fría, en el ‘endurecerse sin perder la ternura’ del Che” (*La mujer* 325). Toward the end of the novel Lavinia experiences a kind of gender trouble, evoking Butler, in which emancipation is finally possible. To even

get to this point, however, her macho lover Felipe must die. This leads the narrative voice to editorialize towards the end of the novel: “Había tenido que morir Felipe para cederle su lugar. Las mujeres entrarían a la historia por necesidad” (*La mujer* 328). Thinking back then to the photo caption from the second version of *Patria Libre*—“La mujer nicaragüense desempeña un papel histórico en victoria revolucionaria”—we can see the historical presence of revolutionary women without losing sight of the difference between an egalitarian interchange and a chauvinist chain of command. This directly contradicts Barbas-Rhoden’s ideological claim that Lavinia “does not represent a particular program or ideology but rather is an individual in search of her identity and historical subjectivity” (61). The ideologies at work are clear: Lavinia embodies the gender trouble articulated by Butler *vis-à-vis* revolutionary Marxism-Leninism. The problem revolves around macho hierarchies.

Lavinia not only takes advantage of the situation afforded to her by Felipe’s death, but also contributes to the success of the kidnapping. The novel closes during the kidnapping mission when Lavinia figures out that General Vela is hold-up in a secret room, waiting to ambush the guerrillas in a spray of gunfire. Without obeying the chain of command Lavinia sees an opportunity to penetrate the room and kill Vela before he can attack the guerrillas. When Lavinia kills Vela she brings her (masculine) knowledge and (feminine) intuition to bear on the overall operation of the mission. This is not indicative of an “identity crisis” resolved when Lavinia allows “history to give her the stable identity of revolutionary martyr” (Barbas-Rhoden 68). The revolution does not squash her

individuality, but grows because of it. Hence the paternalistic impulses of the revolutionary vanguard are upended—not reinforced as Barbas-Rhoden would have it—as Lavinia works toward emancipation.

Female subjects must intervene in history in order to experience emancipation. They must wrestle power from male-dominated hierarchies by seizing power during strategic moments. They cannot wait for men and their chauvinist allies to cede power to them. Here I reject the following reading by Craft: “It seems to me that this type of feminism...avoids an adversarial ‘winner-take-all’ model and advocates negotiation, compromise, and common space to accommodate interests” (171). No, this type of feminism advocates subversion, confrontation and negation as we have demonstrated—negation by exploding binaries. Patriarchy must be smashed. In addition, we cannot excise Belli and her work from the vanguard project as Craft attempts to do. Belli is not concerned with creating “a project of shared space,” but rather revolution rooted in Marxist-Leninist organizational *praxis* (Craft 173). She critiques guerrilla machismo so as to achieve emancipation not in order to enact some sort of postmodern, pluralist utopia. This militant movement of women in history is further accentuated in Belli’s latest novel *El país de las mujeres* where a vanguard constituted solely of women takes state power and radically alters the history of Faguas—imaginary country in which both novels are set.

## THE PROGRAM OF THE EROTIC LEFT

Unlike other avant-gardists who butt-up against revolutionary regimes Belli does not solely level critiques nor does she abandon the revolutionary project altogether. In her memoir she writes, for example, “Añoro la energía desatada, los sueños grandes, locos, imposibles, que me permitían trascender los límites y salir de mí misma hacia la experiencia común” (*El país bajo* 408). Given her tendency to embrace her revolutionary past, it seems rather strange that critics still employ under-theorized notions of magical realism and political disillusionment to talk about Belli. Arias, for example, lumps Belli in with what he conceptualizes as a guiding tendency that runs throughout all post-1970s literature in Central America: “Now, they are attempting to reencounter the magic of illusion and fantasy; to close the chapter on the shattering of their lives as a result of their own political militancy as well as because of the revolutionary struggles in the region” (181). Her memories of the revolutionary past, however, are not laced with melancholy or remorse, but rather a sense of longing for radical community—the community to come. Instead of withdrawing from the emancipatory struggle like some other authors of the Boom and her generation, Belli continues to develop a progressive political philosophy in her novels and journalistic work up until our present moment. As one literary-prize panel remarked, ““En el panorama de la novela política latinoamericana ampliamente dominado por figuras masculinas,”” *El país de las mujeres* ““es una divertida e inesperada provocación”” (Chamorro). Thinking back on the previous section of this chapter, if *La mujer habitada* deconstructs macho revolutionary hierarchies

via *género* then it is with her latest novel *El país de las mujeres* that Belli offers up an alternative world grounded in leftist thought that “logra llegar al corazón de la problemática histórica de género de Nicaragua” (De Mello).

In the examples of the FSLN and the Movement we observe two organizations rooted in post-1968 appropriations of Marxism-Leninism in response to Soviet state capitalism and Cuban *fidélismo*. As we have outlined previously, the key to this variant of radical socialism—what separates itself out from previous strains of Marxism-Leninism—is the operative use of the word “liberatory.” In the case of both the FSLN and the Movement, liberation from the dictatorship is paramount. Likewise, in both cases we have seen that by prioritizing the macroeconomic domain, liberation inclusive of a plurality of domains of human experience tends to suffer. *El país de las mujeres* presumably takes place after the revolution in Faguas. The dictatorship is abolished and the country languishes under the rule of two parties that maintain the macho hierarchy originally imposed by the dictatorship and systematically ignored by the Movement. The ruling party in Faguas is ostensibly socialist, but women continue to be exploited. There is very little to speak of in terms of liberation. What Viviana Sansón, the protagonist of the novel, wants is precisely this: a liberatory movement that fights for women’s emancipation and in the process “cleans up” an otherwise corrupt and degenerate republic enmeshed in machismo. This kind of righteous indignation resonates with a recent interview of Belli: “Muchas veces la mujer para entrar en la política ha tenido que dejar de ser mujer. Renuncia de alguna manera a una agenda propia y debe agarrar la agenda masculina. Al final,

las mujeres acabamos hartas de eso” (Krakusin 143). Women are tired of and disgusted with the macho state of politics. What then would a post-revolution, liberatory socialism that rejects machismo look like? And just how exactly would it propose to enact its political philosophy?

These questions are fairly easy to track in the novel because of the proliferation of manifestoes and reflections on the *praxis* of Viviana and her vanguard party: PIE. In playful, avant-garde fashion, for example, the novel “está construida a partir de distintos registros como el blog, el artículo periodístico, la entrevista, los discursos oficiales” (De Mello). Furthermore, a preliminary analysis reveals that the creative impulses behind PIE could be also be considered playful and whimsical. PIE, which stands for Partido de la Izquierda Erótica, comes about as Viviana and her friends discuss the post-revolution stagnation of Faguas. What starts off as more or less a joke ends up with a fairly sophisticated conceptual justification. These women are of the Left because they support egalitarian principles while they are erotic because they propagate life, or *eros*. This is not to say that these women are pro-lifers as it were—far from it. One only need think on the deep interpenetration of *eros* and sexuality. The playfulness of the name is thus kept as a radical subversion of public relations and advertising tactics. In practice these women militate for the abolition of hierarchal, systematic constrictions on living one’s life. This would include certain macroeconomic constraints proper to capitalism as well as domestic and societal constraints proper to patriarchy. Likewise, the leadership of the vanguard party is constituted solely of progressive women. The platform of PIE could then be distilled into four

major points: 1.) the redistribution of capital on the levels of shelter, food and medicine; 2.) the propagation of radical individual freedom; 3.) the limitation of state intervention in the lives of the citizenry; and finally, and perhaps of most interest, 4.) the feminization of society. The first three points of the platform could be readily conceptualized as a synthesis of progressive and social democratic macroeconomic policies and civil libertarian ideologies, while the fourth point relates to the radical gender trouble theorized in *La mujer habitada*. Although Belli envisions what she calls “felicismo” as something other than capitalism and socialism, I claim that *felicismo* makes up another branch of the socialist family tree. With this in mind, let us consider Belli’s deployment of interventions and further tease out what exactly she means by feminization.

After winning elections thanks to a strange combination of circumstances, Viviana and PIE begin a series of radical interventions in the Althusserian sense of the word. Even as PIE intervenes using the strong arm of the state they are keenly aware of a potential contradiction in their platform: their desire as vanguard party members to radically change societal norms and *praxis* even as they militate for the radical liberty of the citizenry. In good faith, PIE establishes state apparatuses as guarantors of individual and collective liberty. Near the beginning of Viviana’s administration a day dedicated to celebrating liberty is established: “Era el segundo año de su mandato y el primero en que se celebraba, por todo lo alto, el Día de la Igualdad En Todo Sentido que el gobierno del PIE mandó incorporar a las efemérides más ilustres del país” (*El país de 13*). As much as it harkens to certain liberal North American conceptions of liberty,

the phrase “En Todo Sentido”—which implies an antagonistic tension with free enterprise and capitalist exploitation—is key. So what we have here is less a liberal, bourgeois conceptualization of market freedom and more a comprehensive ideology grounded in freedom from exploitation—even economic exploitation under forms of capitalism. The tension remains unresolved in part because there is a move away from the revolutionary vanguard strategy in that, for the most part, the rules of the multi-party republic are respected and Faguas remains a mixed economy under PIE.<sup>30</sup> At times one gets the sense that Belli even flirts with a kind of North American libertarianism in which self-interested, rational citizens police themselves. Viviana, for example, “No habría querido policías,” exhibiting a marked reluctance to enforce state power via violence even after an attempt on her life that propels the plot of the novel (*El país de 14*).

But the state, again, never ceases to act as the guarantor of liberty. In Belli’s Faguas, the PIE attempts to institutionalize a citizen-state relationship in which the state only intervenes in cases of private and/or collective exploitation. This ideology of liberty, for example, is duly institutionalized in the “Ministerio de las Libertades Irrestringidas, una institución dedicada a promover leyes, comportamientos, programas educativos y todo cuanto fuera necesario para inculcar el respeto a la inviolable libertad de mujeres y hombres dentro de la sociedad” (*El país de 42*). The military thrust of the vanguard party is ameliorated through state apparatuses that exercise what could be called “soft” power through laws, education and cooperation. Let us not forget, however, that in spite of what

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<sup>30</sup> Clearly the fictional Faguas mirrors the historical Sandinista state.



at times reads like anti-statist rhetoric in Belli's prose, this Ministry of Unrestricted Liberties constitutes an intervention by the state into society. It still in certain moments also obeys a paternalistic, vanguard-type logic. In a line of reasoning reminiscent of Che Guevara, Viviana explains to her fellow PIE members why this soft intervention is necessary: "La gente en Faguas se cree libre porque no reconoce la jaula que tiene en la cabeza....Aquí para muchos ser libre solo significa no estar en la cárcel, y cuando digo cárcel me refiero a la que tiene rejas y guardias en la puerta" (ibid). In Faguas, if the New Woman of the twenty-first century is to overcome the stagnation of the post-revolutionary period and realize emancipation she must be educated. Again, the tension is not resolved between intervention and liberty just softened or lessened. Are PIE's interventions just another form of liberalism or are they something more radically egalitarian? How does PIE attempt to mediate this tension in order to *not* fall into certain political traps associated with liberal republics in denial of the exploitation occurring inside and out- of their borders?

This is where the notion of feminizing politics can intervene and push the republican form to its radical conclusions via the vanguard party. At this stage in the narrative it becomes apparent that the idea of a non-interventionalist state is impossible. Once this is realized the state again becomes a site of contention, a site of struggle. This is an argument that is no doubt compatible with certain forms of Marxism-Leninism. With the triumphs and defeats of the radical left—including Nicaragua and the fictional Faguas for the purposes of our discussion—in the rearview mirror, how can we re-tool the revolutionary vanguard? PIE

stumbles upon an answer almost by accident. On the one hand, a lot of the citizenry of Faguas is tired of the male-dominated hierarchy of the ruling party. On the other hand, a freak accident of nature—the eruption of Mount Mitre, “el volcán erecto”—drastically lowers the levels of testosterone—in the popular terms of the citizenry, “*tensiónterrona, tetasterona, tedasterona, tesonterona, terraterrona*”—of the male population of Faguas (*El país de 40*). As one of the members of PIE remarks, “Y es que, entre la dulcificación de los hombres y las estupideces del gobierno, el Partido de la Izquierda Erótica se colocó a la cabeza en las encuestas” (*El país de 39*). This fantastic set of circumstances facilitates PIE’s popular ascendancy among the electorate. In a word, echoing another vanguard strategy, the material conditions were right.

But the presence of a woman in the Presidential Palace is not the end all be all of PIE, but rather PIE wants to radically transform the republic. In an important exchange between Viviana and Eva—a particularly strident member of PIE—the reader, much like in the case of *La mujer habitada*, witnesses a confrontation between feminizing and masculinizing feminist *praxis*. During the exchange Viviana posits the following:

Ya hay mujeres presidentas. Eso no es novedad. Lo que no hay es un poder femenino. ¿Cuál sería la diferencia? Yo imagino un partido que proponga darle al país lo que una madre al hijo, cuidarlo como una mujer cuida su casa; un partido ‘maternal’ que blanda las cualidades femeninas con que nos descalifican, como talentos necesarios para hacerse cargo de un país maltratado como este. En vez de tratar de demostrar que somos tan “hombres” como cualquier macho y por eso aptas para gobernar, hacer énfasis en lo femenino, eso que normalmente ocultan, como si fuera una falla, las mujeres que aspiran al poder: la sensibilidad, la emotividad. (*El país de 101*)

Viviana's feminist vision embraces essentialist conceptualizations of femininity like maternity, nurturing and domesticity even as she rejects machismo. Her politics are quite a bit different from most of the more well-known ideological propositions of first wave and second wave feminism, hence Eva's reaction: "Las feministas nos acabarían diciendo que vamos a eternizar todo lo que se piensa de las mujeres" (ibid). Linking biological sex to gender would and has led to exactly what Eva says—woman as transcendently feminine. Note how Viviana, however, problematizes the two: "Lo que tenemos que hacer es demostrar cómo esa manera de ser y actuar femenina puede cambiar no solo este país, sino el mundo entero" (ibid). The key here is the performance of gender, or in other words to "act feminine," which, presumably, would include all human beings along the spectrum of biological sex.

In keeping with this radical re-envisioning of the republic, the first order of PIE is to feminize the government workplace by sending all male employees home on paid leave (for six months). Women, in turn, occupy their positions. The men are then enjoined to participate in domestic duties—to act feminine. Note that private employers are not obligated to participate. The government of Faguas is occupied by women with variety of gender orientations and experiences. PIE then mandates that workplaces give generous pregnancy leave, provide in-house childcare and provide spaces for breastfeeding. The military and police forces are scaled back and, due to the forced leave, entirely constituted by women. To support better education and healthcare PIE nationalizes the floral industry and increases production, effectively competing in regional and world markets. This

effectively moves to remedy Belli's observation that "lo que ha faltado—que es lo que apunta este libro—es que el mundo del trabajo se reorganice para adaptarse al ingreso de las mujeres al mundo del trabajo, al mundo político, al mundo público" (Chamorro). The domestic and the political interpenetrate just as the feminine and the masculine interpenetrate as new social relationships are formed by PIE's interventions.

But perhaps the most controversial intervention by PIE has to do with the clean-up of rape culture. The vanguard party pushes through a measure that would tattoo people convicted of rape: "Las diputadas aprobaron la moción por mayoría. Se acordó que se les tatuaría una pequeña V en la frente en lugar de la palabra completa en el estomago, pues los violadores, usualmente, ni siquiera se quitaban los pantalones" (*El país de 87*). With a touch of humor Belli explores the dark side of punitive justice. Other proposed measures include castration, public floggings and caging convicted rapists in public plazas where citizen-vigilantes can administer justice. Nurturing this class of criminals is apparently off the table, demonstrating that PIE also exists within the gender spectrum thanks to some of its "tough love" initiatives. When taken in conglomerate these radical reforms effectively constitute a revolution that systematically overturns macho hierarchies and constitutes a democratic socialism more akin to a Nurture State than the Nanny State that many so many conservative liberals fear.

But no revolution is without its counterrevolution and Faguas is no exception. This is where the utopian, political *género* is rearranged. As the biological effects of the volcanic eruption begin to wane, certain men and their

allies begin to take issue with the state of their nation. Demonstrations occur in Plaza of the Revolution. Some are non-violent while others involve clashes with the police even as Viviana attempts to mitigate the explosive situation in non-violent ways. Viviana even insists on limiting police escorts and military protection much to the disapproval of Eva and other members of the PIE cabinet. This is perhaps Viviana's (near) fatal flaw because it opens the door for an assassination attempt. The total utopian transformation of the state never takes full effect within the frame of the narrative. This otherwise utopian political novel populated with platforms, policies and politicking is disrupted by a mysterious assassination attempt and surreal scenes tapping into "dreams" experienced by an unconscious Viviana. What we are presented with then is another instance of *género* where gender and genre intertwine, playing with reader expectations and radical political philosophy—an avant-garde rearranging of our world that resists totalization even as it signals progressive possibilities for the future grounded in gender trouble.

## CONCLUSIONS

The assassination attempt also allows us to reenter the terrain of biography. For Belli, *El país de las mujeres* "es en parte una revancha, una crítica a lo que se dejó de lado dentro del mismo Frente en el tramado de la revolución" (De Mello). According to Belli, "la literatura puede ser también un ajuste de cuentas con la propia historia, un territorio donde aún es posible seguir dando pelea" (ibid). As such, if the novel's ruling socialist party is a fictional double of

the FSLN and Viviana Sansón, as a former public relations guru, is an avatar of Belli then the web of conspirers behind the assassination attempt becomes instantly more interesting. As it would turn out, this political whodunit does have a mastermind with a historical double: Emiliano Montero, “el presidente del partido que, él no dudaba, habría Ganado las elecciones de no aparecer el PIE en el panorama y de no haber el Mitre disminuido la virilidad de sus partidarios” (*El país de* 49). Anybody familiar with Nicaragua’s recent history will readily recognize Emiliano Montero as the fictional stand-in for President Daniel Ortega. In her memoir, for example, Belli readily criticizes Ortega for his erroneous faith in winning the elections of 1990 and his blatant machismo. In addition, as it would happen, Montero also has a conniving wife who espouses a certain kind of feminism, but submits herself regularly to the will of her husband: Leticia Montero, or Ortega’s current wife Rosario Murillo. Belli’s break from the Sandinistas and public criticism of Ortega and Murillo is by now no secret. What might surprise the critic, however, is that the Sandinistas are once again reflective of (resurgent) leftist trends in Latin America after flying off the radical Left’s radar for more than a decade.

The Sandinistas’ return then begs the question, if Belli is so progressive then why the antimony? The row between the return of the FSLN under Ortega and Gioconda Belli revolves around one issue in particular: abortion. During the 2006 elections the Catholic Church of Nicaragua pushed hard to commit both presidential frontrunners—Daniel Ortega and Eduardo Montealegre—to make abortions totally illegal in Nicaragua, resulting in the National Assembly

outlawing abortions shortly after the election of Ortega (Amnesty 12). In a piece written in *El Nuevo Diario* from 2009, Belli expresses her deep-seated concern, “El instinto de supervivencia no da lugar a la auto-inmolación que, en nombre de Dios y de principios que los hombres violan constantemente, se les exige a las mujeres” (“Me duele”). All of this in spite of the fact that the Sandinistas have submitted to quotas which mandate that 50 percent of all government posts be filled by women, and the placement of Murillo in various high-profile, non-elected positions of power within the government (“Power”). What Belli rightly identifies is a notably retrograde tendency within the new FSLN that attempts to maintain power at any cost. The macroeconomic domain is unevenly prioritized even as the human emancipatory project is compromised in terms of sex, sexuality and gender.

How then should we read Belli’s Faguas? Considering her incessant play with history, is Faguas an alternative Nicaragua? Or considering her use of fictional names and places, does Faguas constitute an alternative for Latin America? For the Global South? For the international radical Left? Comments Belli, “de alguna manera es una metáfora para Nicaragua, pero sin ceñirme a la realidad nicaragüense como tal, porque yo quería jugar con esa realidad, que no me constriñera la imaginación” (Chamorro). The answer is all of the above. As Belli would have it the prioritization of radical feminism would affect a sort of trickle-down effect, leading to total emancipation. Given certain historical developments of the twentieth century and the consequent widespread prioritization of the macroeconomic domain—to the obvious detriment of other

domains of social experience—she might be right. But given the fact that in Faguas the ascent of a feminized politics was facilitated by a series of fantastic contingencies, how can a radically subversive feminism grounded in gender performance occupy state power? In short, when is the revolutionary vanguard going to finally make gender trouble?



“Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot.”  
—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*

“The graver the specter of the other becomes, the heavier its imposition.”  
—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

“Let us endeavor to draw from the ill itself the remedy that should cure it.”  
—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Geneva Manuscript*

## Chapter: Specters of Hayek

After the FSLN’s loss during the 1990 elections in Nicaragua and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulting in Cuba’s eventual descent into what we now know as the Special Period, all hope for a revolutionary socialist future in Latin America seemed illusory. Were there then, as Francis Fukuyama posited in 1989, “any fundamental ‘contradictions’ in human life that cannot be resolved in the context of modern liberalism that would be resolvable by an alternative political-economic structure?” (9). Had liberal democracy and capitalism finally triumphed over socialism? Was working “eight to twelve hours a day to wire in backup lights of US autos or solder minuscule wires in TV sets” in the borderlands of capital—as Anzaldúa perspicaciously stated in that very same year—now the triumphal horizon of possibility for the majority of the world’s population (32)? Before most radicals could effectively address these substantial questions, consensus about “the impersonal and anonymous mechanism of the market” and other “new” liberal policies calcified into laws like those articulated in the North American Free Trade Agreement (Hayek 73). As NAFTA was being drafted, nevertheless, the guerrilla fighters of the EZLN stealthily prepared an anti-capitalist war in the jungles of Chiapas—that other (southern) border state—

marking one of the first violent confrontations with “end of history” or “total system” neoliberalism. The border as concept can then be interpreted as both symptom and cure of neoliberal capital. This is particularly the case in certain avant-garde detective narratives touching on the borderlands of post-NAFTA Mexico.

Since the rise of transnational global capital and anti-capitalist movements like EZLN, literature has played, as Beverley predicted in 1993, a “role in the definition of new forms of human liberation and possibility” (xiv). Following that broad trend, some contemporary avant-garde literature has compellingly theorized and critiqued neoliberal modes of production and the neoliberal endgame—an ideological space where “neither an exit from, nor an alternative to, capitalism is imaginable”—from a frame of reference that draws on radical conceptions of gender, sexuality and work (During 158). This chapter thus demonstrates how avant-garde modes of being continue in the neoliberal age, and how these modes of being theorize neoliberalism in relation to new forms of human emancipation. Following detective narratives by Roberto Bolaño, Subcomandante Marcos and Paco Ignacio Taibo II, I return to conceptualizations of the sick modern society discussed in chapter one. I then theorize neoliberalism in relation to contemporary avant-garde formulations of modern sickness, anchoring it geographically on post-NAFTA Mexican borders. I do this in order to demonstrate that avant-garde art-politics continues to confront bourgeois ideology and propose alternative modes of being that threaten the hegemony of global capital as it relates to patriarchy and heteronormative sexuality.

Part one of this chapter will be organized into four shorter sections: The Sickness of Modern Man (degeneration theory), Uncanny Frontiers (*unheimlich* and Sodom), Blood of the Beast (Bolaño's *2666*) and Neoliberal Hemorrhaging (border theory). (Part two will be outlined midway through the chapter.) The shorter sections of part one move from theorizations of human experience under neoliberalism to uncanny typologies of the detective mode to avant-garde free play to ethical enjoinders proper to the dystopian novel. The narrative arc of this chapter thus attempts to historically and theoretically situate the current avant-garde appropriation of the detective mode in relation to contemporary radical struggles.

## **PART I: BOLAÑO AND 2666**

### **THE SICKNESS OF MODERN MAN**

In *Los detectives salvajes*, Roberto Bolaño chronicles a group of avant-garde poets playing the part of amateur sleuths. Poet-detectives Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, near the conclusion of the novel, steal a Chevy Impala and embark on a road trip towards the barren lands of the US-Mexico border. The two poet-detectives “inician una búsqueda internacional en pos de una mítica escritora de la vanguardia de los años 20”: Cesárea Tinajero (“Dictamen” 206). In Tinajero these young poets see their own poetry and defiance, their own *estridentismo*. Tinajero embodies a bygone age where art was life—an age populated with people who “somehow lead *poetic lives*, who literally *become-poets*....who internalize powerful feelings and poetic values, spontaneous values with no holds barred”

(Merrifield 11). During their madcap journey throughout the borderlands, the poet-detectives embark on an avant-garde quest to combat bourgeois boredom—an insidious and sickly modern phenomenon that threatens the vitality of poetry. This vapidness, for Bolaño, threatens *all* of modern humanity (Wimmer 1). After the poet-detectives track down Tinajero a gunfight ensues resulting in her death: “Belano decía que la habíamos cagado, que habíamos encontrado a Cesárea sólo para traerle la muerte” (*Los detectives* 605). Tragically, the poets have killed the very person they have come to search for and emulate. Art is now more than life—it is death too.

Returning to Fukuyama and the so-called end of history we observe that these fictionalized detective-poets transposed from the 1970s struggle in the grips of what later came to be known as neoliberalism. Fukuyama’s neoliberal utopia at once causes and suffers from this sickly specter of modern boredom: “the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands” (23). These avant-garde detective-poets therefore seek to confront the vacuous abyss of neoliberal technocracy and consumer capitalist culture. They attempt to be actors within history. Indeed, Fukuyama’s articulation of neoliberal boredom marginalizes any sort of leftist, revolutionary opening or event even as contemporary avant-garde movements continue to fight against this type of closure. This was articulated by Derrida when he stated in *Specters of Marx*

(1993) that “A thinking of the event is no doubt what is most lacking from such a discourse” (78). The revolutionary event under neoliberalism becomes a hopeless joke, devolving into a nihilistic spiral of self-indulgence and anti-social behavior.

Bolaño’s poet-detectives read in light of Fukuyama’s bored, neoliberal utopia constitute an instantiation of what Bolaño theorized in “Literatura + Enfermedad = Literatura” as “un juego constante con la muerte y que, en una escala jerárquica, es el primer peldaño de cierto aprendizaje poético” (146). By risking (social) death the poet takes her first step towards “*lo nuevo*,” or what Bolaño describes in various moments as “la pobre bandera del arte que se opone al horror que se suma al horror,” and “aquello que sólo se puede encontrar en lo ignoto,” and finally as “lo que siempre ha estado allí” (“Literatura” 154, 156, 158). The new, the oppositional, the unknown, what has always been—four philosophical-literary categories grounded in searching and confrontation. The modern subject’s options are thus limited to either resignation or the Sisyphean task of searching (in vain?) for a cure to “la enfermedad del hombre moderno” (“Literatura” 151). Likewise, in an acceptance speech given for the Rómulo Gallegos Prize, Bolaño asks “¿Entonces qué es una escritura de calidad? Pues lo que siempre ha sido: saber meter la cabeza en lo oscuro, saber saltar al vacío, saber que la literatura básicamente es un oficio peligroso” (“Discurso” 211). Good writing, according to Bolaño, consists of the danger and darkness that one experiences when fiercely confronting the ills of modern humankind—what we have theorized here as neoliberal exploitation and boredom. This consumptive

sickness, as these personal writings and speeches suggest, is laid bare in Bolaño's posthumously published mega-novel *2666*.

The enigmatic epigraph of *2666* taken from the poem "Le Voyage" (1857) by Charles Baudelaire frames the novel in terms of the horror and boredom that we have been discussing: "Un oasis de horror en medio de / un desierto de aburrimiento." In this poem that Bolaño describes as "un poema sin salida, pero acaso el poema más lúcido de todo el siglo XIX," Baudelaire sketches the sense of horror experienced in perceiving the reflection of oneself in foreign, novel lands ("Literatura" 146-147). If the poet is to ever find "el antídoto o la medicina para curarnos" she must confront and be subsumed by the horror of the modern condition ("Literatura" 152). Returning to Baudelaire's poem, Bolaño remarks "Para salir del aburrimiento, para escapar del punto muerto, lo único que tenemos a mano, y no tan a mano, también en esto hay que esforzarse, es el horror, es decir mal" ("Literature" 151). To escape boredom the modern subject must inescapably bind herself to horror and evil. Bolaño's reading of Baudelaire's poem thus evokes an avant-garde rearrangement of Max Nordau's theory of degeneration that we discussed in chapter one.

Let us not forget, however, that Bolaño also leaves us an opening through which to escape this nihilistic abandon: "hay que seguir transitando por el sexo, los libros y los viajes, aun a sabiendas de que nos llevan al abismo, que es, casualmente, el único sitio donde uno puede encontrar el antídoto" ("Literatura" 156). Clinging to sex, books and travel provides the modern subject with "una suerte de liberación" ("Literatura" 136). Thinking back to the introduction of this

dissertation we might say that sex, books and travel provide the subject with ways in which she might “break bad” or split with the big Other of neoliberal capital. The protagonists of *2666* travel through a “tiny and monotonous world” that pulls them towards Santa Teresa—a fictional frontier town on the US-Mexico border that teeters on the abyss of twenty-first century capitalism (Baudelaire). Their lived, poetic journeys unfold even as Bolaño freely plays with certain literary modes, figurative language and theories of human behavior and existence enveloped in sexual exploration and gendered violence.

In keeping with this contemporary re-envisioning of a sickly modern existence, Roberto Cabrera comments that “Santa Teresa se presenta como el eje físico de la enfermedad, donde convergen las líneas de la narración” (198). Attempting to understand the degenerate *gravitas* of Santa Teresa, this first part of the chapter therefore analyzes examples from the fourth part of *2666* titled “La parte de los crímenes” in which thousands of innocent young women are disappeared and killed without any rational explanation. In Bolaño’s narrative, “Es esa ‘isla de horror’ o ‘parte de los crímenes’ la que identifica al aburrimiento, la complicidad y falta de imaginación como detonadores de prácticas genocidas.” (Muniz 41) This linkage between bored capitalist consumerism and Third World femicide sketches the wage-slavery, torture and anonymous death suffered by these women, becoming symptomatic of “free trade” neoliberal capitalism. At the same time Santa Teresa becomes metonymic of the very same “post-ideological” neoliberal order. I have therefore chosen this particular part of the novel not only because I agree with Raúl Zurita who has characterized it as “la gran justificación

del libro,” but because the violence emanating from Santa Teresa can help critics conceptualize the interpenetration of patriarchy, sexuality and neoliberal capitalism that we as humans currently experience as part of our day-to-day existence.

## UNCANNY FRONTIERS

Now that Bolaño’s avant-garde rearrangement of societal sickness has been provisionally described as a contemporary phenomenon, let us now reevaluate the symptoms. Much like the first chapter of this dissertation, Bolaño’s avant-gardism deploys popular modes of understanding, being and representation. In particular, “La parte de los crímenes” at its core plays with the detective mode in its many variations. Bolaño toys with classic, procedural and hardboiled generic parameters for instance. The result is an avant-garde rumination on crime and neoliberalism that plays with Judeo-Christian typologies of the frontier city and the Freudian *unheimlich*. Although these two theoretical propositions seem like unlikely bedfellows, they *do* happen to share a cluster of aesthetic-political affinities that provocatively conceptualize the boredom and violence characteristic of the current neoliberal global hegemony.

Beginning then with the Judeo-Christian tradition, a variety of studies attempt to penetrate the size and density of *2666* through the novel’s varied and uneven biblical allusions. Some have pointed to the structural configuration of both the novel and the Jewish Pentateuch into five books, connecting the wanderings of Israel to the journeys of *2666*’s plurality of protagonists. Following



this logic—in a rather suggestive literary parallel perhaps more coincidental than not—the fourth part of the novel (“La parte de los crimines”) would be analogous to the fourth book of the Pentateuch: פְּדִישָׁה בְּמִדְבָּר or “Bemeedbar”—literally “in the desert,” evoking the border region surrounding Santa Teresa (*Webster’s* 617; 543). “Bemeedbar” is usually translated, of course, as “Números” in Spanish or Numbers in English, speaking to the horrific quantity of murders piling up around Santa Teresa. With this in mind, no critic, however, connects the novel’s frontier geography with its multiplicity of biblical allusions. One of the foundational collisions of desert, frontier and city in the western canon is the story of Sodom from the Book of Genesis. I will therefore employ the story of Sodom in order to configure a typology of the frontier city.

After wondering through various lands, Abram, Lot, and their families settle on the plain of Jordan: “Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever” (KJV, Gen 13:14-15). The plain of Jordan is a frontier; it is a land apart from Abram’s father’s house, a land given to him by an all-powerful God. It is here where we get a closer look at Sodom, the archetypal frontier town of the Judeo-Christian tradition: “But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly” (Gen 13:13). The Sodom of Genesis is a proverbial den of vice where sin and wickedness abound. Later in the narrative, after Lot is kidnapped and Abram saves him, Abram is propositioned by the King of Sodom to which he responds: “I will not take any thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have

made Abram rich” (Gen 14: 21-23). The frontier town is a fictional space marked by corruption and money. Abram refuses to be beholden to the type of transaction that the King of Sodom proposes here; it runs contrary to his moral understanding and personal ethic. For Abram, the stranger, Sodom is a queer place—a strange land (Gen 17:8). Sodom is also a place particularly fraught with violence. For example, when Lot entertains two holy men “the men of Sodom, [compass] the house round, both old and young,” and cry out “bring them out unto us, that we may know them” (Gen 19:4-5). The men of the city lay siege to Lot’s house, attempting to rape his visitors. This sexual violence is met with violence from above: “Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire” (19:24). The violent men of Sodom are punished by the retributive violence of Abram’s god. Violence, vengeance, corruption, greed and death form some of the sadistic cornerstones of Biblical Sodom.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of the Sodom-like *topoi* described above, many critics have commented on the serialization of death in *2666*, but none have explicitly conceptualized it in terms of the frontier town or the Freudian *unheimlich*. Ángeles Donoso Macaya, for example, describes the femicide thusly: “Bolaño le presenta al lector la desgarradora historia sobre los crímenes de Santa Teresa a partir de una repetición sistemática de lo *heterogéneo*” (128). Notwithstanding the onslaught of bodies, Donoso Macaya finds particularity in each murder. Like Donoso Macaya, Muniz also incorporates the repetition of violent murders into her analysis: “La repeticiones, pues, a pesar del lenguaje burocrático, pueden

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<sup>31</sup> Here I am purposely evoking another one of Bolaño’s favorite authors—the Marquis de Sade—and his *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinism*.

verse como una letanía que conmemora a estas víctimas” (43). But Donoso Macaya’s claim to heterogeneity read side-by-side with Muniz’s observation of bureaucratic ubiquity presents an obvious paradox: “How can death be remarkable if it is so endemic?” (Farred 693). In Bolaño’s *2666*, the Sodom-like *topoi* of the frontier town possess an affective valence that could be described as uncanny. Indeed, Bolaño’s “descriptions of the murder investigations” have been called in passing by one critic “equally precise and uncanny,” and by another critic as exemplary of “lo siniestro que convive con nosotros o en nosotros,” clearly invoking the specter of Freud (Valdés; Muniz 39). Neither of these observations, however, has been sufficiently fleshed out in detail.

In Freud’s essay “The Uncanny,” he begins by looking at the etymology of the German word *unheimlich*. According to Freud, in Greek, the word translates to “*ἕβος*—strange, foreign”; in Spanish Freud translates it as “Sospechoso, de mal agüero, lúgubre, siniestro”; while in Arabic and Hebrew “‘uncanny’ means the same as ‘daemonic’, ‘gruesome’” (125). This multiplicity of etymologies, however, does not satisfy Freud in the end. Going back to the opposite of *unheimlich*, the word *heimlich* Freud writes, “on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight” (129). Freud then summarizes Schelling’s theorization of the phenomenon when he writes, “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (130). Still, Schelling’s definition seems incomplete for the Psychoanalyst. After introducing the psychoanalytic concept of repression into the mix, Freud defines the uncanny in

the following way: “It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it” (153). The uncanny, for Freud, consists of a psychic phenomenon kept hidden by repression that suddenly becomes unconcealed.

In terms of the aesthetic-political dimensions of the frontier city, all of these ingredients are in the mix. There is the strangeness of the familiar-unfamiliar. There is the conceptual linkage between the concealed nature of vice and that which “is concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud 129). There is also the sinister—as in the Spanish *lo siniestro*—in which motives and intent are always in question. In sum, and in the words of Derrida, *unheimlich* “is the word of irreducible haunting or obsession. The most familiar become the most disquieting. . . .the nearby, the familiar, the domestic, or even the national (*heimlich*) frightens itself” (181). I therefore propose a reading where the affective qualities of Freud’s uncanny and the Sodom-like typology of the frontier city converge in *2666*. Bolaño channels this reading as he plays with certain generic *topoi* common to the detective mode such as corruption, murder, rape and violence, begetting what I call *frontera negra*. Let us then pass on to our reading of Bolaño’s avant-garde mega-novel and conclude by positioning it in relation to the current neoliberal hegemony.

#### THE BLOOD OF THE BEAST

The first dead body in “La parte de los crímenes” appears synchronically with the opening lines of the novella. Writes Bolaño, “Unos niños que jugaban en

el descampado la encontraron y dieron aviso a sus padres” (2666 443). The flatness and matter-of-factness with which the postmortem discovery is narrated heightens the strangeness of the scene—a scene, one would suspect, intricately linked to trauma and therefore heightened affect. Critics have noted that “La parte de los crímenes” exhibits “the neutral tone of a report” and is narrated “in an almost forensic fashion” (Kerr; Deresiewicz). In fact, in researching 2666, Bolaño ““wanted to know the language of forensic investigation”” (González Rodríguez qtd in Valdés), nodding to the observation that “el trabajo de los equipos forenses pasó a formar parte del imaginario popular y esto condujo a cierta apropiación y familiarización de ese lenguaje legal para describir cadáveres” (Muniz 36). Ironically, the lack of affective representation can affect how readers experience the novella by heightening a sense of detached strangeness. Continuing the narrative, after a mother calls the police, two mystified police officers arrive on the crime scene where mourners have already started to congregate. One of the police officers asks the women standing over the body “si la conocían. No, señor, dijo una de las mujeres. Nunca la habíamos visto. Esta criatura no es de aquí” (ibid). Thus, some of the Sodom-like *topoi* of *frontera negra* make their first uncanny appearance: transitoriness, violence and death. Santa Teresa, the quintessential Mexican frontier town, will experience a series of murders like never witnessed before. Almost all of the victims will be women, strangers unto that land. The bodies will reveal themselves anywhere at any time—“ni el que siembra sabe en dónde, en qué lugar se encuentra”—evoking the strangeness of the familiar-unfamiliar (2666 444). Bodies will be found in vacant lots, garbage

dumps, on roadsides, in nightclubs, and even homes. The concealed, the forgotten and the violently repressed will be laid bare. There may have been others before her, but Esperanza Gómez Saldaña—the dead woman found by the children playing in the vacant lot—is quite literally the first one on the books.

The deaths that engulf Santa Teresa are above all troubling and terrifying, but not necessarily mysterious. Protagonists from various sectors of society play detective in “La parte de los crimines,” but none of them solve the proverbial mystery. This augments the uncanniness of the narrative and nods to the inescapable darkness proper to most noir and/or hardboiled narratives (Woolfolk 109). One of the first detective figures that the reader is introduced to, police officer Epifanio Galindo, successfully solves the second homicide of “La parte de los crimines”—that of Luisa Celina Vásquez—but fails to connect her murder to first victim’s death. In the end it appears to be too difficult to also hang her murder on the murderer of Vásquez, spurned lover Ezequiel Romero: “Romero era mucho más duro de lo que aparentaba y no se autoimplicó en el primer crimen” (2666 445). The criminal is either too savvy to fall for the old tricks of his investigators or is actually innocent of the first crime. All of the detective figures of the novella run into the same difficulty: dead ends. One death might be solved, but any sort of pattern to the mounting bodies never emerges.

The dead keep appearing, circumstances keep reoccurring, but the larger picture remains unsolved. Bodies are left unidentified, murders are forgotten and nobody ever knows when or where the next victim will appear. Indeed, many of the victims one night “se desvanece[n] en el aire” as is the case with Deputy

Azucena Esquivel Plata's friend Luz María 'Kelly' Rivera Parker (2666 786).

That is not to say that these detective figures do not try to solve *the* mystery. But it *feels* like the spectacular ubiquity of the crimes overwhelms all would be protagonists. In the end, the reader and the characters of the novella are left with an uncanny experience where all feels unsettling, immense and unsolvable, echoing noir-hardboiled generic conventions like insurmountable violence and rampant corruption. But this uncanny feeling goes further than genre fiction into the field of avant-garde art-politics, because "La rigurosa descripción forense, pormenorizada en todos sus detalles....le otorgan a este relato una fuerza y contundencia que lo colocan en el límite de las posibilidades del género narrativo en la economía actual" (Zurita).

Let us take the case of Olegario Cura Expósito for example. His storyline starts when the chief of police, Pedro Negrete, and the detective Epifanio Galindo are looking for "un hombre de confianza" for Negrete's drug lord buddy Pedro Rengifo (2666 481). Negrete finds his "man"—the adolescent Olegario Cura Expósito—in Villaviciosa. Later, after talking a little with the young man, Negrete asks Olegario Cura Expósito the following:

¿Y tus amigos cómo te llaman? Lalo, dijo el muchacho. ¿Lalo? Sí señor....¿Lalo Cura?...Es una vacilada, ¿verdad? No, señor, así me dicen mis amigos, dijo el muchacho. ¿Lo has oído, Epifanio? dijo el jefe de policía. Pues sí, lo he oído, dijo Epifanio. Se llama Lalo Cura, ¿lo captas? Pues sí, está claro, dijo Epifanio, y también se rió. Al poco rato los tres se pusieron a reír. (2666 483)

Either Lalo and Epifanio do not get the joke or the joke has merely lost its punch. The possible registers are multivalent to say the least. One could, however, make the following claim. *La locura*, madness or insanity, is the *modus operandi* of the

frontier in and around Santa Teresa. *La locura* is so instantiated as a *modus operandi* that the play on words becomes a dead metaphor. Paul Ricoeur, for example, says that “Only genuine metaphors are at the same time ‘event’ and ‘meaning’” (100). That is to say that once the context of the metaphor or play on words is lost, forgotten, or taken for granted, the metaphor loses its meaning and becomes metaphorically dead. Only when the characters in the novella *really* think about Olegario’s nickname is it *really* funny. This in turn mirrors the flatness with which many of the characters in the novella regard the Sodom-like particulars of Santa Teresa. From an outsider’s perspective, it truly is madness that so many women are being disappeared and murdered. It is madness that an adolescent from a tiny town who has never fired a gun in his life is being recruited as a security agent for a *narco*. But *la locura* is so instantiated in the world of the novella that nobody in the frontier town, Santa Teresa, realizes just how crazy these events are. That is why, later in the narrative, the joke falls flat once more when an Irish security guard working for Rengifo asks Lalo his name: “Lalo Cura, dijo Lalo. El irlandés ni se rió ni lo miró raro ni creyó que se estaba burlando de él, sino que anotó el nombre en una libretita negra” (2666 486). The play on words taken for granted, that is to say the dead metaphor, reflects the collective *modus operandi* of the region. *La locura* is a collective state of mind in Santa Teresa. In it, violence, corruption, and coercion are concealed in the repetition of the everyday, that is to say, in the quotidian ubiquity of madness. It is a literary space corrupt to the core much like the typical noir-hardboiled city—a place where violence, vice and vengeance reign. It is, in short, a *frontera negra*.



The uncanniness of *frontera negra* continues to envelope the narrative thread following Lalo Cura. In the closing pages of the novella, Esther Perea Peña is killed at a night club in Santa Teresa by an unknown male assailant. The case is supposedly solved by Officer Ortiz Rebolledo who informs the press that he has found the body of Francisco López Ríos—a car thief who resembles the shooter—dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head from the same type of gun that killed Perea Peña. The crime is linked to the car thief López Ríos and the case is subsequently closed. Commenting on the strangeness of the investigation, the rookie police officer, Lalo Cura, says the following:

Que raro que no hubiera habido una rueda de reconocimiento del cadáver. Y que también era raro que no hubieran aparecido los acompañantes del homicida. Y que también era raro que la Smith & Wesson, una vez guardada en los almacenes de la policía, hubiera desaparecido. Y que lo más raro de todo era que un ladrón de coches se suicidara. (2666 782)

Clearly, Lalo Cura knows something else is going on here—he *feels* the strangeness of the situation. The investigation is an obvious cover up and Ortiz Rebolledo is without a doubt implicated in it somehow. In response, his partner Epifanio Galindo, lets the following quip fly: “Todo es raro” (ibid). The scene closes with Galindo’s apathetic response. The two detectives then fail to appear in the interwoven narrative for the remainder of the novella. The reader is therefore led to believe that nothing will ever be done to correct this injustice even though Lalo Cura “seems to be the only figure with the patience and cunning to someday solve crimes” (Deresiewicz). Such is the state of Santa Teresa, a city littered with bodies and riddled with corruption—a *noirâtre* frontier town too overwhelmed, too taxed to register the moral degradation of an obvious homicide cover up.

In a sense, Lalo Cura is lucky because, as far as the reader is concerned, he is not disappeared or killed like many of the other characters in the “La parte de los crímenes.” One detective figure who does not have such luck is the Chicano sheriff of Huntsville, Arizona, Harry Magaña. Magaña enters the narrative when Lucy Anne Sander, also from Huntsville, is reported missing in Santa Teresa by her friend Erica Delmore. Sander is never found. When leads peter out and authorities on both sides of the border shelve the case, Magaña makes it his personal (i.e. vigilante) mission to solve Sander’s disappearance. In typical private dick fashion, Magaña gains his information by any means necessary: “Una noche se hizo amigo de uno de los barman de la discoteca y cuando éste salió de trabajar Harry Magaña lo estaba esperando afuera....Al día siguiente el barman no pudo ir a trabajar, dizque porque había tenido un accidente” (2666 519). As a hard-boiled detective is wont to do, Magaña frequents bars and brothels (partaking of the goods one might add), mixes with all kinds of unsavory thugs and rogue cops, and frequently employs swift and exacting sadistic violence when the situation calls for it. And his methods at times seem to bear fruit. After interrogating a prostitute named Elsa Fuentes with the help of his belt as to where he might find a suspect named Miguel Montes, Magaña locates Montes’ former abode.

But after waiting around in Montes’ house for two nights, Magaña’s lead does not pan out: “creía que su última pista se había esfumado” (2666 527). The generic parameters of the classic detective mode are subverted by the lack of narrative resolution. Multiple dead ends eventually lead to Magaña’s own dead

end—another noir-hardboiled trope—when he stumbles upon two unidentified men sacking a house that has a telephone number registered to Miguel Monte. Magaña is caught without his gun and is out of luck. Although Magaña’s end is not clear, he disappears from the narrative when “Se abalanzó sobre él mirando de reojo, desesperado, las dos sombras que ya había visto a bordo de la Rand Charger, que avanzaban por el pasillo” (2666 562). Santa Teresa proves too much even for a seasoned officer of the law like Harry Magaña. Whether beaten up, disappeared, or dead, Magaña pays the price for his incursions into Santa Teresa. The end of his vigilante adventure is marked by violence à la Sodom when certain men of Santa Teresa storm the home seeking vengeance. Thus, Magaña’s private dick narrative echoes the uncannily repetitive fate of the brutalized, the disappeared and the dead—a fate that will remain concealed for the duration of the novel. By sadistically intertwining and playing with narratives of death and boredom, Bolaño brings his readers face-to-face with the horror and infirmity of modern humankind. In the next section of this part of the chapter we will therefore consider the metapolitics of Bolaño’s avant-garde intervention into the political economy of patriarchy.

#### NEOLIBERAL HEMMORAGING

The biblical readings of *2666*, again, are multiple and varied. Let us not then forget the title *2666*, which invokes the number of the beast from the Book of Revelations. The digit “2” brings this beast both into the present—the new millennium—and projects it far into the future—a future marked by the sickness

of consumption and conformity. According to Florence Olivier, “en [el título] se cifra lo diabólico y se propone una fecha anticipada y mítica, proyectándose así hacia el actual milenio las perennes manifestaciones del mal mientras la ficción lucha con éstas” (31). Muniz concurs, “El título de la novela señala una fecha ulterior, indicando así que la Santa Teresa ficcional es un germen de ciudad violenta que será moneda corriente en el futuro de Latinoamérica” (38). Although Muniz appears *not* to have read Olivier’s work, both critics correctly identify the prophetic or speculative quality of the apocalyptic title. Likewise, Derrida conceptualizes the messianic-apocalyptic tradition the following way: “In the experience of the end, in its insistent, instant, *the extreme today*, there would thus be announced the future of what comes” (45, my italics). We must therefore read Santa Teresa as Ciudad Juárez, Mexico partly because, as Randolph D. Pope says, “it offers a recognizable view of our current condition” (162). But since Bolaño deliberately employs a fictional name, following Derrida, we must also read Santa Teresa metonymically. Here, “our current condition” is not a vague cosmopolitanism as Pope suggests in his article, but symptomatic of something more horrific, more global, more sickly and infinitely more imminent as Derrida suggests.

Many critics have laid bare the symptoms of this modern *locura*, but few have been very specific about the root causes of the sickness present in *2666*. It also seems as if no critic has read (or at least cited) the work of others on this subject. Muniz, for example, describes Santa Teresa “como ciudad de letargo, pobreza, crimen, burocracia, abandono y horror. La diferencia abismal entre el

primer mundo y el mundo del trasto se evidencia en esos cadáveres ultrajados en la frontera” (38). The desecrated bodies testify of the poverty, corruption and horror of the city and its geopolitical locus. Santa Teresa is therefore re-imagined, in the words of Olivier, as “el *horrens locus* poético del crimen impune y del goce sádico” (40). Cabrera also takes up the image of the desecrated corpses (how could you not?): “Mezclados mimetizados con los desechos productivos generados por las maquiladoras, los despojos femeninos van marcando especies de hito geográficos, rutas por donde la muerte” (200). In difference from Muniz and Olivier, Cabrera ties the bodies to one of the most prominent modes of production in and around Santa Teresa: the *maquiladoras*. These critical endeavors do not contain a word about capitalism per se, but certainly nod towards what Critchley has recently re-characterized as “purposeless productivity and life-denying work” (141). So far we have a large body of symptoms that seem to indicate that modes of production and consumption have something to with the horror envisioned in Bolaño’s novel, but we have no diagnosis thus far.

Yet some critics have attempted to diagnose the sickness. Lidia Santos, for example, classifies the sickness in Derridean terms as “la exclusión social y cultural concretada por la política occidental de la falsa hospitalidad” (162).

Similarly, Galdo takes one step closer with the help of Jameson when he states

Sin duda existe una especificidad que tiene como protagonistas y víctimas a los propios mexicanos pero en su significado más profundo dista mucho de ser un fenómeno puramente local o nacional para erigirse más bien en un perturbador símbolo de la modernidad, de cómo y a qué precio opera la sociedad en el capitalismo tardío. (27)

Santa Teresa extends metonymically beyond the borders of twenty-first-century Mexico, becoming symptomatic of global social-economic systems. But let us be *even more* specific about late capitalism and our current condition. Returning to the symptoms (primarily the gruesome body counting), Farred diagnoses this sickness the following way: “It is Bolaño's ability to make us deal directly, dialectically, with death in its intimate relation to neoliberalism, that lends his work its critical salience” (693). What Bolaño has managed to do with Santa Teresa is narrativize—death by death, body by body—the hidden costs of neoliberal production and consumption and project this lived reality into the future. “If death weighs on the living brain of the living, and still more on the brains of revolutionaries,” writes Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, “it must then have some spectral density. To weigh (*lasten*) is also to charge, tax, impose, indebt, accuse, assign, enjoin” (136). Bolaño’s uncanny exposure of the deaths covered over by neoliberalism enjoins—employing the terminology of Derrida—the reader to confront and summarily reject its modes of production and consumption.

What results is a dystopia that begs the question: where will the current, neoliberal hegemony and its utopian projections lead us? Bolaño—witness, like so many Chileans and internationals, to the bloody birth of neoliberalism, deeply felt the loss of popular, radical militancy during the aftermath of the dirty wars. In 1999 he wrote,

En gran medida todo lo que he escrito es una carta de amor o de despedida a mi propia generación, los que nacimos en la década del cincuenta y los que escogimos en un momento dado el ejercicio de la milicia, en este caso sería más correcto decir la militancia. (“Discurso” 212)

This bizarre exercise of an avant-garde militancy marks Bolaño's thought as dystopian. He therefore resists Critchley's either/or statement: "In the political circumstances that presently surround us in the West, to abandon the utopian impulse in political thinking is to resign ourselves to liberal democracy," which he later defines as "a political deism governed by the hidden and divine hand of the market" (151; 152). While Critchley, in general, is right when he identifies the dangers of complacency and apathy, Bolaño's cure strives to carve out a way that is neither complacent nor utopian—a skeptical, anarchistic Marxism rooted in avant-garde art-politics that is "faithful to a certain spirit of Marxism," in the words of Derrida, "to at least one of its spirits for, and this can never be repeated too often, there is *more than one* of them and they are heterogeneous" (95). This sadistic avatar of Marx points to the horror of a human sexuality grounded in patriarchy that continues to enslave women in the borderlands of capital. These dead wage-slaves, these specters of neoliberal economist Friedrich Hayek, continue to enjoin us from their graves in Bolaño's narrative.

In concluding this first part of the chapter, I would like to draw blood one more time by returning to Anzaldúa: "The US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (25). For Anzaldúa, the violence of *la frontera* stems from the grating of two seemingly different worlds. She is of course more famous for moving her analysis into the realm of identity, but we can also find the violence of neoliberalism embedded in Anzaldúa's text: "Barefoot and

uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone” (33). She goes on to describe in critical terms the *maquiladoras*, intimating that the blood from this *herida abierta* is in great part caused and exacerbated by neoliberal modes of production and consumption. This hemorrhaging metaphor seems apt when thinking of the uncanniness of the *frontera negra*. In “La parte de los criminales” from *2666*, Santa Teresa hemorrhages with the appearance of every *muerta*. Some are workers at the infamous *maquiladoras*, some are immigrants from the Mexican interior or other Central American countries, others are students and tourists. All are desperate for something.

Take the case of María Elena Torres, a thirty-two year old woman from Santa Teresa desperate for justice who, after participating in a student demonstration against the violence, is found dead in her home. Her death could very well be read as metonymic of what Anzaldúa describes as the incessant hemorrhaging of the frontier: “Dos días después la acuchillaron en su propia casa. Una de las heridas le atravesó el cuello, provocándole un hemorragia que a la postre le causó la muerte” (2666 758). Indeed, much like in the case of Anzaldúa’s bleeding borderland, a new imaginary space is born from the blood spilt throughout the pages of “La parte de los criminales.” This aesthetic-political conjuring consists of a Sodom-like frontier town intimately tied to an uncanny mixture of the familiar-unfamiliar, transitoriness, sadistic sex, money, corruption, violence and ultimately death. In the end, the vulgar *noirâtre* of this neoliberal space is inescapable. All who come in contact with the glittering prospects of the



frontier are sucked in and eventually spit out by its rotting underbelly—*frontera negra*. The reader is therefore enjoined, called to account for the covering-over of the neoliberal production-consumption relationship and its underlying gender dynamics: “Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her” (Anzaldúa 108).

## **PART II: MUERTOS INCÓMODOS**

In *Muertos incómodos*, Zapatista crime commissioner Elías Contreras and private dick Héctor Belascoarán cross paths as they bear down on a neoliberal, paramilitary thug named Morales responsible for shady privatization deals in Zapatista territory and the murder of José María Alvarado—a revolutionary killed because of his involvement in the protests of 1968. Tracking down this spectral avatar of Hayek results in a darkly playful meditation on the aftermath of ‘68 in Mexico and the ravages of neoliberal capital. The two anti-heroes fight on against an overwhelming social degeneracy that most of us cannot see because we are—here conjuring a certain spirit of Althusser—unknowingly “mirando para otro lado” (Subcomandante 197). Even as the Zapatistas work towards radical community-based alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, the sublime spectacle of capital commands our attention because we, on some level, sadistically enjoy our misrecognition i.e. our new TV sets and automobiles, resulting in this subversive and confrontational rearranging of the popular commodity (i.e. the detective novel) into avant-garde art-politics.

The comparative reading of *Muertos incómodos* and *2666* illustrates their shared *mise-en-scène* at the edges of neoliberal capitalism, experimentation with popular modes of expression and disparate hails—one dystopian, one semi-utopian—for egalitarian communities rooted in radical emancipation. This part of the chapter is therefore organized into three shorter sections: Taste Breaks Bad (literary value), Uncomfortable Ideologies (Marxist theory), and Certain Symptom / Indeterminate Cure (justice). By doing this I hope to show how *Muertos incómodos* confronts bourgeois notions of taste, propriety and solidarity, signaling one way forward towards further confrontations and victories against the evils of global, neoliberal capitalism. But first let us turn to the novel's reception by literary critics and cultural pundits.

#### TASTE BREAKS BAD

As many commentators have noted, when the idea of *Muertos incómodos* first entered into public knowledge “The news set off a flurry of speculation about the motives of the masked rebel leader, followed by critiques of his writing style” (Wyels 27). Political news operatives, Zapatista sympathizers and even *literatos* salivated at the possibility of the world's most famous living revolutionary writing a detective novel with Mexico's most famous crime writer. After the serialized novel was published in book format, thereby giving critics a chance to catch up with the general public's enthusiasm, this avant-garde wet dream quickly turned into a tasteless literary nightmare. In fact, many critics engage the text almost exclusively in terms of “juicio literario,” or more precisely Marcos's lack

of it (Vanden Berghe 389). Critics have posited, for example, that “la novela carece, desde el punto de vista literario, de una estructura y propósito claros, y también de equilibrio estético, siendo los capítulos de Taibo mucho mejores” (Guntsche iii). This echoes the preemptive quip by el Ruso, one of Marcos’ characters in the novel: “Si lo ve al Sup, dígame que ya se deje de mamadas de cuentos y novelas, que ya nos diga qué sigue” (Subcomandante 112). The spontaneous circumstances of the novel’s writing and the interplay between the two authors are often characterized as disjointed and forced. Better for Marcos and Taibo to just stick to what they do best: revolution and literature respectively. This type of criticism grounds its reading in terms of literary taste, of what is proper to the literary and what is proper to the political.

As we have discussed previously, what interests the avant-gardes is not what is proper or in good taste, but rather confronting and interrogating these very notions that happen to be proper to both consumerist and elitist notions of art. This is why a reading that frames *Muertos incómodos* in relation to the avant-gardes can move us past critiques of literary value—which, again, are radically contingent—into an analysis that enters into play with hierarchal deployments of taste that recognize the interpenetration of politics and aesthetics. As such, many critics have identified certain aspects of the novel that could easily be rearranged in terms of the avant-garde aesthetic-political markers posited in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. Castillo, for example, speaks to our conceptualizations of avant-garde free play and militancy when she writes the following about the novel: “This is a ludic, entertaining, strongly voiced novel, but also one with a

fierce political stance and a serious message” (47). Likewise, Close argues that the authors “stretch the conventions of the detective novel genre in an effort to restore and inflect public memory of episodes long repressed and denied by official discourse.” The novel plays with the conventions of the detective mode even as it antagonistically rearranges histories of the rise of the neoliberal state—a doubly avant-garde move.

From its unorthodox composition (alternating chapters by two different authors) to its various conceits (clues left on answering machines by dead revolutionaries among others) the novel does not overly worry itself with delivering a polished, properly literary product. As one might expect, Marcos comes off as particularly playful, because his “bizarre aesthetic....vacillates between the cartoonish, the sententious, the carnivalesque, the melodramatic and the revolutionary-heroic” (Close). Indeed, Marcos’ Elías Contreras, for example, is actually dead when he recounts his adventures leading a rag-tag (cartoonish and carnivalesque if you will) group of Zapatista commandos known as NADIE on a mission (certainly revolutionary-heroic) to capture and try the mysterious Morales for crimes of conspiracy and murder (sententious to say the least) under Zapatista jurisdiction. This detective novel is wide ranging, tangential and clumsy. But perhaps the most tasteless of all the aesthetic crimes of *Muertos incómodos*, for many critics, is the overt trespass of ideology into the terrain of the literary. Marcos again is singled out by many critics for including political rants, EZLN political talking points and taking an overall hard-line stance against neoliberalism and its political avatars.

## UNCOMFORTABLE IDEOLOGIES

Readers of the novel will no doubt be familiar with its stridently anti-neoliberal orientation. It would therefore seem, at least in Marcos' chapters, as though "el motivo principal del novelista Marcos fue usar la literatura como medio de promover su causa zapatista y, sobre todo, su propio ego. Pareciera imperdonable que un líder revolucionario se dedique a literatura de ficción" (Guntsche iii). Again, it is a question of what is and is not properly literary. It would seem then that for many critics ideology has no place in detective fiction. Vanden Berghe, for example, describes the novelty of an openly ideological Marcos: "Me parece que el hecho de que la ideología sea tan visible y esté tan poco escondida bajo una capa crítica es uno de los cambios más llamativos en el discurso literario del Subcomandante" (390). This causes her to misread ideology altogether when she states, "Los calificativos post-comunista y postmoderno que le han dado numerosos observadores e investigadores sugieren que era percibido como postideológico" (Vanden Berghe 392). Thus we have quickly moved from a desire—grounded in notions of taste—to excise all ideology from the detective mode to a highly selective memory of ideological content in Marcos' other writings. Ironically, this results in a kind of critical neo-liberalization of the Zapatistas. We will maintain at all costs that ideology is never absent, that it penetrates all social relations and that the conceptualization of a post-ideological world is, in fact, ideology hard at work. There is no non-ideological ground or positionality not even in the domain of literature. And this is true no matter how

uncomfortable it makes readers and critics alike. Once again, the interpenetration of politics and aesthetics is something that the avant-gardes recognize in Althusserian terms and which *Muertos incómodos* lays bare for its readership.

It is not to say that these critics are wrong when they point to the ideological aspects of the novel. The first chapter, for example, already makes reference to a cluster of radical leftist talking points. As Contreras begins investigating the disappearance of a woman in Zapatista territory, for example, he wishes to stay “a hablar con él”—the missing woman’s husband—“del neoliberalismo y de la globalización y esas cosas” (Subcomandante 16). In other moments Zapatista accomplishments like La Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres are trotted out unapologetically (Subcomandante 20). In addition, during the first chapter Contreras describes the basics of the Zapatista judicial and policing systems, differentiating them from the jurisprudence of the neoliberal Mexican state. Essentially, the novel is framed by competing ideologies that serve to set the stage for the crimes committed within its pages. To scandalized critics: ideology is unquestioningly a major component of the novel, but please do not pretend that this is *not* the case with all literature. Can we finally get comfortable with this frank acknowledgement?

Ideology also bleeds into the chapters by Taibo. In chapter two, Taibo’s Belascoarán comments in passing where he falls along the political spectrum. After he interviews a progressive civil servant about a crime, Belascoarán is asked about his ideological leanings, to which he responds

Mi hermano dice que soy de izquierda natural, pero pinchemente inconsciente—respondió Héctor sonriendo—O sea, como que de

izquierda pero sin haber leído a Marx a los 16, sin haber ido a las manifestaciones suficientes y sin tener en mi casa póster del Che Guevara. (Subcomandante 25)

Belascoarán has an intuitive knowledge of the radical Left and identifies to some degree with its heroes and projects even as he does not militate actively within its ranks. On the one hand then we have Contreras who's entire identity is predicated on the Zapatista movement in which he militates. On the other hand we have Belascoarán the classic hardboiled antihero, alienated and skeptical—a leftist in embryo who does not associate with any vanguard. The two protagonists thus embody more than one position on the political spectrum.

But this plurality also presents a number of conceptual problems. For critics like Close, the novel's plurality masks a kind of ideological homogenization. Close argues that this is primarily because of the rabid critique of neoliberal capitalism that runs throughout the novel even as Marcos and Taibo employ a variety of voices from numerous loci of enunciation to narrate their story. But Close's analysis, in turn, masks class struggle in the name of heterogeneity. This is precisely where a reading of the novel in relation to avant-garde aesthetics helps us rethink terms like plurality and heterogeneity. As an avant-garde novel, *Muertos incómodos* does not eschew ideology, but rather dogmatic approaches to ideology. Therefore plurality is still an operative term while heterogeneity ceases to warrant Close's postmodern fetishization. In short, Close confuses homogeneity with solidarity. What then are the constitutive parts of this ideological plurality? Are they exclusively leftist in orientation? And how do they relate to broader trends in post-NAFTA Mexico?

In order to further develop this idea of plurality within the bonds of solidarity, let us first consider the politics of both authors. Radical leftist thought when examined in detail reads as diverse, diffuse and even as dissentious. Such is the case with Marcos and Taibo, as Santana Peraza points out:

En materia política el Subcomandante Marcos y Paco Ignacio Taibo II no vienen de los mismos orígenes aunque ambos sean de izquierda; desde la publicación de *Muertos incómodos* el EZLN ha marcado una distancia irrestricta del PRD, partido en el que milita Taibo II si bien de manera errática y disonante.

Just because the Left is evoked does not necessarily mean that a politics of consensus will necessarily flow forth. The PRD (Partido de Revolución Democrático), for example, favors radical reforms while the autonomous Zapatista communities favor armed struggle. These positions carry further implications when we start to talk about issues such as private property, political representation and community autonomy. This does not mean, however, that constituents of both groups cannot or do not act in solidarity with each other. In another moment, for example, an Italian sympathizer articulates the sectarianism of two other Zapatista collaborators while self-deprecatingly articulating their common enemy: “Y clavado que el chino ese es trotskista y el ruso es maoísta”—Taibo’s characters—“Put a madre. Put a Wal-Mart. Put a nauyaca. Put a pirámides. Put a comida rápida. Y puto yo” (Subcomandante 54). The divergent points between Trotsky’s internationalist Permanent Revolution and Mao’s nationalist Cultural Revolution could take up entire tomes. The point being that plurality can therefore exist within the bonds of solidarity even among followers of such different revolutionaries as Trotsky and Mao. Valiente Núñez insinuates this



when he writes that “El movimiento estudiantil de México del 68 y el zapatismo son dos de estas alternativas dialécticas a favor de las víctimas reivindicadas por la novel y la defensa de los excluidos por parte de Belascoarán en su trabajo como detective puede considerarse otra” (376). In other words, the novel’s plurality of alternatives moves in solidarity against neoliberal political agents and state interventions throughout the novel.

Apart from questions of political affinity, radical plurality in the novel also engages questions of identity, moving towards an ideology that embraces critical race theory and radical conceptualizations of gender and sexuality in addition to class struggle. This is evident when Contreras interviews a group of Zapatista sympathizers—El Club del Calendario Roto—who camp in Zapatista territory. Marcos’ inclusion of a club of radical misfits echoes certain clubs from the avant-garde novels of Roberto Arlt and Julio Cortázar—we only need recall *la Joda* from chapter two for example—even as their presence seems tangential to the narrative arc. Juli@, a gay Filipino member of the club, relates why characters like these sympathizers are included in the novel:

porque ya ven que los zapatistas sostienen que el mundo no es sólo uno, sino muchos, y por eso le están aventando a la novela un mecánico homosexual y filipino, una alemana repartidora de pizzas en moto y lesbiana, una maestra francesa amante del jazz y un cocinero italiano que cree en extraterrestres. O sea que no nada más hay hombres y mujeres. Así que es posible que luego aparezcan más personajes ‘extraños.’ (Subcomandante 44)

Radical diversity is valued in the novel, hence the emphasis on local justice initiatives and community autonomy within the Zapatista. Diversity in the Zapatista context comes to include race, sexuality and gender. In most liberal

democracies the rights and privileges of the characters mentioned above would be severely limited. Through solidarity multiculturalism is taken to its radical conclusions.

This is to say that sympathizers and collaborators are not required to take a Zapatista catechism or adopt an orthodox party line. One would assume that they have made their commitments because of some sort of shared faith in anti-capitalism. This also resonates with Marcos' broader project. As Thornton writes, "Consistent with previous writings by Marcos, international solidarity, local forces, global powers and communication all converge in this novel" (507). Solidarity and diversity of tactics are not instantiations of homogeneity, but rather ways of synthesizing plurality and class struggle. This ideological fact might be uncomfortable for some progressive liberals, but verifiably accurate nonetheless. Thus, Marcos' emphasis on solidarity "podría implicar que el público internacional ha llegado a ser a los ojos de Marcos el más importante para los zapatistas o que se ha convertido en su interlocutor principal" (Vanden Berghe 407). As much as EZLN is a nationalist struggle, it also positions itself in relation to flows of global capital and labor. In the third section of this part of the chapter I will think of solidarity in terms of non-sectarian socialist strategies of confrontation, and—by returning to Bolaño— theorize a concept of evil that binds both avant-garde detective novels together in the quest for emancipation.

## CERTAIN SYMPTOM / INDETERMINATE CURE

The chapter of *Muertos incómodos* that provokes the most reaction from ideology-concerned critics, however, is chapter ten written by Subcomandante Marcos: “El Mal y el Malo,” which roughly translated into English could mean “Evil and the Villain.” It also happens to be the chapter that, when interpreted in a certain way, casts the most doubt upon our arguments regarding heterogeneity, plurality and solidarity. Indeed, chapter ten contemplates Good and Evil in ways that border on categorical and/or binary modes of epistemology. It is a different strategy than that of Bolaño and *2666*, one that would appear to tell rather than show. Not the way to become a critical darling or the rising star of one’s Master of Fine Arts program. In a previous chapter written by Marcos, Juli@ articulates how this binary might be rearranged into a plurality, albeit in a limited fashion: “He aprendido que sí, que los mensajes de los zapatistas muestran unas cosas y ocultan otras, las más grandes, las más terribles, las más maravillosas. Pero he aprendido que no, que no tratan de engañarnos, sino invitarnos” (Subcomandante 41). In an apologetic mode, Juli@ frankly acknowledges the heightened rhetoric of the Zapatista public relations machine. For Juli@, that is to say for the sympathizer or the apologetic, the high-contrast binary of Good and Evil is not about closing off possibilities, but rather prompting allies to realize the stakes of the game, enjoining them to get off the sidelines and play.

It is also a narrative strategy that *can* lead audiences to recognize that the game is rigged. This sentiment is expressed by a Zapatista ally when he states, “El Mal es el sistema y los Malos son quienes están al servicio del sistema....el Mal

es una relación, es una posición frente al otro” (Subcomandante 53). Again, we are talking about the theorization of a common enemy—a big Other from which to break bad—much like in the case of Bolaño’s uncovering of the costs of capitalist modes of production. When examined closely this narrative strategy does not necessarily lead to ideological closure, but rather hope in an emancipatory future in which oppressed peoples break bad with the liberal-capitalist system. Let us now enter into the details of how exactly this might be by closely reading “El Mal y el Malo.”

Chapter ten begins by narrating the encounter of Elías Contreras with a transsexual person named Magdalena in Mexico City. After witnessing firsthand the suffering of Magdalena, Contreras seizes an opportunity to evangelize for the Zapatista cause: “una causa así, que sea la causa zapatista, se merece el apoyo de lo mejor y que lo mejor está siempre abajo, en la gente jodida” (Subcomandante 145). Marcos’ use of “gente jodida”—or “fucked people”—to describe Magdalena—a sometimes sex worker—plays with notions of alienated labor. Contreras acknowledges Magdalena’s suffering and attempts to incorporate her/him into his crusade against el Mal y el Malo. Sensing Contreras’ spontaneous loyalty and good intentions, Magdalena expresses her desire to join the fight: “onde están el Mal y el Malo para ir a partirles su madre *orita* mismo, dijo” (ibid). The problem is that Contreras does not know exactly where to find el Mal y el Malo, suggesting that Marcos’ terminology is frustratingly vague for a reason. This does not, however, stop Magdalena from joining Contreras as he continues on his mission to capture el tal Morales.

The question of who or what exactly constitute el Mal y el Malo is then deliberated for the remainder of the chapter by fictional and historical characters who philosophize via dialogues, letters, manifestoes, poetry etc. The first character trotted out by Marcos is Federico García Lorca whose poem “Romance de la Guardia Civil española” is cited: “Pasan, si quieren pasar, / y ocultan en la cabeza / una vaga astronomía / de pistolas inconcretas” (Subcomandante 146). Although the concept of el Mal y el Malo is not systematically fleshed out, given the frame of the novel, the poem would indicate that police authority and state violence figure into Marcos’ conceptualizations of Evil and Villain. We then return to Magdalena and her/his plight as a transgendered person in the next section of the chapter. Framing her rumination of el Mal y el Malo, Magdalena states, “para ellos no somos normales, somos como fenómenos horribles, degenerados a los que hay que eliminar” (Subcomandante 147). Underlining her/his statement is the idea of the degenerate, or bad, subject under neoliberal democracy. Magdalena continues: “El Mal, papá Elías, es la incomprensión, la discriminación, la intolerancia. Está en todos lados. O en ninguno” (Subcomandante 148). Let us remember *who* Magdalena addresses: Contreras, an indigenous man from a rural backwater who probably has limited or no interaction with transgender people on a day-to-day basis. Throughout his interactions with Magdalena one gets the sense that Contreras is struggling to understand Magdalena and his/her gender. The key here is that he actually struggles to understand. Evil is everywhere, but by attempting to understand

difference and by building solidarity amongst “fucked” people, Zapatismo fights against the status quo.

In the next few sections of the chapter we read other articulations of el Mal. In one, Doña Socorrito, an elderly matron, attempts to explain how people become evil. Says Socorrito, “que el mundo cada realidad tiene dos puertas y que una es la puerta del Mal cierto y otra es la puerta del Bien incierto; que a veces uno puede elegir en qué habitación va a vivir; que a veces uno no puede escoger y que la vida y el Mal lo avientan a uno donde sea” (Subcomandante 149-150). First of all, it would appear that Evil is much more definite than Good. This is interesting in that it opens up the binary because Good becomes less certain. Also, as somebody who has cared for children her entire life, Socorrito acknowledges the formative qualities of family life, society and education. In other words, some of us might not necessarily choose to be evil or bad, we just do not know any better. Is Evil then a choice as other characters like the Italian have claimed? Socorrito’s voice seems to contradict this assertion. Next we have Pedro Miguel a writer for the progressive newspaper *La Jornada*. In an excerpt dedicated to deconstructing the War on Terror and the politics of US President George W Bush, Miguel writes, “Qué necesidad va a tener de formular una definición clara del Mal, si resulta evidente que el Mal es todo aquello que antagonice con el Señor” (Subcomandante 151). This passage undermines a monolithic understanding of el Mal because here it is understood as manipulatable by politicians. One must therefore be discerning when considering el Mal and who is using it as an ideological tool to mobilize the masses. This observation about

George W Bush is followed by a section narrated by La Chapis—a radical nun serving in Zapatista territory. States the nun, “si buscas al Mal y al Malo, los busques arriba ya la derecha. Seguro que ahí viven” (Subcomandante 153). Read in sequence, Bush’s right-wing appropriation of the concept of Evil masks his own evil. And so el Mal is not totally dependent on individual agency, but is related to class position and can therefore be manipulated by the ruling class.

In the capacity of devil’s advocate, el tal Morales—the man being hunted by Contreras and Belascoarán—gives the reader an alternate perspective on el Mal in the next section of chapter ten. El tal Morales begins his monologue contextualizing el Mal in terms of neoliberal pragmatics: “No es que uno sea cínico, sino realista. Y la verdad es que si no chingas, entonces te chingan a ti” (Subcomandante 154). The law of the jungle prevails and is ultimately naturalized—it is the reality on the ground. This position presupposes a reliance on liberal-capitalist ideologies of competition and evolution. This is also evident when el tal Morales states the following when justifying his former participation in radical leftist struggles during the 1960s: “¿Traicioné? Depende de cómo lo vea uno. Según yo, sólo cambié de paradigma, y eso lo hacen todos en el mundo, nomas que le dicen ‘madurar,’ ‘realismo,’ ‘sensatez’” (Subcomandante 154). The character mounts a defense of opportunism by framing political commitment as immature, idealistic senselessness. El Mal is no longer categorically operative because it is human nature. Exploitation is nothing but a byproduct of human evolution in progress. Clearly, Marcos paints el tal Morales as an opportunist who preys on his fellow humans whenever he gets the chance: “O sea que en esto la

maldad hay que tener buen ‘timing’” (Subcomandante 155). The moral justification of “if I didn’t do it somebody else would” comes off thin when it is embedded within a pastiche of fictional and historical radicals.

El tal Morales’ position is further weakened when a page later el Ruso—our Maoist—critiques humankind’s tendency to forget the past and opportunistically act within the present. About el Mal el Ruso states the following:

Traicionar la memoria de nuestros muertos. Renegar de lo que somos. Perder la memoria. Vender nuestra dignidad.  
Avergonzarnos de ser indígenas o negros o chicanos o musulmanes o amarillos o blancos o rojos o gays o lesbianas o transexuales o flacos o gordos o altos o chaparros. Olvidar nuestra historia. Olvidarnos de nosotros mismos. Aceptar lo que nos da de tragar el poderoso. Rendirnos. No luchar. (Subcomandante 156)

Give up, stop fighting, forget the dead and deny who we are—all things of which el tal Morales is guilty. As it would turn out Morales is not so moral. His opportunism plays into broader trends like globalization and neoliberalism. These trends are described by el Chino—our Trotskyite—in the section following el Ruso. El Chino theorizes a Permanent Revolution of the Right: “Eso es lo que es la globalización neoliberal, una reorganización internacional de la derecha” (Subcomandante 158). El Chino taps into certain conspiratorial anxieties as he develops a macroeconomic vision of el Mal. The right-wing rearranging of the global economy thus constitutes a hegemony grounded in the macroeconomics of privatization that again frames Evil in terms of class struggle.

This perspective is reinforced by the inclusion of a text by death row inmate and political activist Mumia Abu Jamal. Warns Abu Jamal: “Eso también



es lo que realmente significa la privatización: tomar la herencia común de la naturaliza y convertirla en una propiedad privada más” (Subcomandante 160). The global commons are looted in the name of personal and corporate wealth creation. Back in Chiapas, Comandante David, in the next section describes the prospects for neoliberal capital: “La zona de Chiapas en la que estuvo el Fox tiene maderas preciosas, petróleo, mucha riqueza de plantas y animales, uranio... y agua. Si en algún lugar están el Mal y el Malo, es aquí” (Subcomandante 163). Evil is everywhere because global capitalism is everywhere and is supported everywhere by neoliberal democracy. “Se reúne el acero” from *Canto general* by Pablo Neruda also supports this observation. In the section of the poem that Marcos’ cites the poetic voice makes the following discovery: “Encontré a la maldad sentada en los tribunales / en el Senado la encontré vestida / y peinada, torciendo los debates / y las ideas hacia los bolsillos. / El Mal y el Malo” (Subcomandante 164). El Mal y el Malo are inextricably tied to the liberal-capitalist linkage of politics and money. Here we read that capital accumulation is prioritized over all else. The trope of false appearances (“vestida / y peinada”) is thus recognizable when one considers the connection between capital accumulation and electoral democracy.

So far chapter ten has conceptualized el Mal y el Malo in terms that are broadly construed—Magdalena, Socorrito and Miguel—and class based—Contreras, el Ruso, el Chino, Abu Jamal and Neruda. This appears to be a contradiction of sorts. I believe that Marcos moves to resolve this contradiction by including the following quote by Spanish author Manuel Vázquez Montalbán:

“Pero es imposible contemplar el Mal y no reconocerlo. El Bien no existe, pero el Mal me parece o me temo que sí” (Subcomandante 166). First of all we have no binary because el Bien does not exist. This is something that is also reinforced by the Socorrito’s narrative. Second of all el Mal, as diffuse and plural as it is, is immediately recognizable as such. This is elaborated by the concluding section of the chapter that recounts the first meeting of Belascoarán and Contreras. After the two detectives meet up, they begin to share information in the hopes of finding el tal Morales. During the conversation Belascoarán uses the word “perspectiva” when describing his sleuthing methodology. After struggling to understand the word, Contreras finally defines it in the following way: “Que sea que yo entendi que ‘perspectiva’ es mirar las cosas en colectivo” (Subcomandante 168). The use of the word “colectivo” has a double valence in that it means to work as a group or community, but also nods to the idea of collecting a large body of information or facts. The irony being that by working in *colectivo*, the detectives see the collective picture with more clarity.

Thinking outloud, Belascoarán outlines the case against neoliberal capitalism: “Y entonces dijo que ahí había de todo, que sea represión, asesinatos, cárceles, perseguidos, desaparecidos, fraudes, robos, despojos de tierras, venta de la soberanía nacional, traición a la Patria, corrupción. –En resumen—dijo—, los de arriba chingando a los de abajo” (Subcomandante 172). Thinking back to the quote by Vázquez Montalbán, are not corruption, murder and fraud immediately recognizable as evil? When put in those terms, yes, they are. In response, Contreras then articulates the following insight: “El Mal es grande y deben ser

varios los malos” (Subcomandante 173). Evidence would suggest that Evil is systematic and many if not all of us are somehow involved in its propagation. Sometimes it is hard to detect el Mal as it were—hence the need for perspective, the need to work as a collective. In short, Contreras realizes this when he states, “O que cada quien jalara en su terreno, el Belascoarán en el monstruo y yo en el Chiapas, pero apoyándonos mutuamente ambos dos con las informaciones que juntáramos” (ibid). El Mal, as it turns out, is not so categorical, but rather multifaceted, and can be detected and confronted in its multiple instantiations by collective means. Plurality strengthened by the bonds of solidarity.

## CONCLUSIONS

Towards the end of *Muertos incómodos* Contreras articulates what could be interpreted as an Althusserian understanding of ideology. Describing the art of a musician friend named Alakazam, he touches on the idea of subjects internalizing the interpellating hail of, in this case neoliberal capitalism: “Y entonces la maldad no nada más está en que estamos distraídos, sino que también arresulta que sus preocupaciones de los ricos las agarramos como que son nuestras” (Subcomandante 192). Later he has a thought:

Y entonces yo pensé que es como si estuviéramos viendo la televisión mientras nos están robando la casa. Y entonces la gente dice que está muy bien informada pero es que sabe muchas cosas o casos, según, pero de otro lado, y no sabe bien de que nos están robando el corazón. (Subcomandante 198)

This observation parallels Žižek’s formulation of Althusserian Marxism in that—in a twist—the subject knows full well what is going on during the interpellation

process, but experiences a kind of perverse joy in responding positively to the interpellative hail. We as subjects like our distractions. We love buying cheap clothes and automobiles even as we are fully aware of the plight of low-wage workers and victims of drug violence in the borderlands of neoliberal capitalism. We enjoy our symptoms.

What the authors of *Muertos incómodos* recognize is that we subjects *also* enjoy our justice. At the end of the novel Taibo authors the details of how Belascoarán finally tracks down el tal Morales in a half-abandoned office located in la Torre Latinoamericana. El Malo is finally unveiled, revealing “un pobre culero....un pobre miserable, un canalla menor” (Subcomandante 231). It is a deflationary moment, one in which the expectations proper to the detective mode are mildly subverted. This is what Evil looks like. What to do with the man who murdered José María Alvarado—our ghost *revenu* on answering machines—in cold blood? What to do with this specter of Hayek, this gross deformation of the neoliberal capitalist system? “Usted, a chingar a su madre—dijo Belascoarán” right before he shoves Morales down the stairwell of the tower, watching him fall “Hasta el fin. Hasta el infierno” (Subcomandante 232). Through collective action crimes of the past have been solved and justice has been served. For the moment the ideological struggle has been won thanks to solidarity. Let us remember our dead. Let us strengthen pluralities through bonds of solidarity. Let us hope that in the year 2666 wage slavery is abolished, that women and men are emancipated from the bonds of free trade. And may we find those cures in the borderlands of neoliberal capitalism!

“Te amo. / Soy el asesino de tus retratos.”  
—José Coronel Urtecho, “Oda a Rubén Darío”

### Conclusions: The Avant-Garde Spiral

By concluding this dissertation I do not hope to conclude anything. I hope to spur on, in the words of César Vallejo, “nuevas relaciones y ritmos” (Schwartz 446). I hope to foment relationships forged in solidarity. I hope to play on rhythms that disrupt daily life. Nothing is certain within this realm. There are no guaranteed outcomes. This is one of the pedagogical problems that Rancière approaches in *The Flesh of Words*. Reading Althusser’s Marxist science *vis-à-vis* the Quixote’s madness, he makes a very relevant observation: “Don Quixote hangs his fate, the fate of his madness, on a letter that will not be read, on a letter addressed to an addressee who does not even know herself to be its addressee” (*The Flesh* 136). Recognizing the radical openness of any textual experience virtually makes concluding any text a moot point. “Thence, the solitude and madness of Don Quixote, the man who takes books literally, comes to signify literature itself, the adventure of writing alone, of the body-less letter, addressed to someone who does not know that she—or he—is the addressee” (*The Flesh* 137). Nevertheless, the author of texts—literary or otherwise—can experience a kind of emancipation in this because he, like the Quixote, “carries out his duty, which is to be mad, the end: his duty....toward the very book whose character, or rather hostage, he is” (ibid). Madness is freedom. And so it is that I present here for you, dear reader, my avant-garde madness one more time.

The avant-gardes, as I have demonstrated, are not dead. They are not encased in the coffin of historical periodization. They still walk amongst us, mutated by time but still recognizable by certain aesthetic-political markers: experimental free play, antagonism, anti-bourgeois sentiment, and the interpenetration of aesthetic experience and ontological *praxis*. These aesthetic-political markers are in no way definitive, but rather open to revision and elaboration. Theorizing these markers, however, helps connect disparate authors, movements and institutions moving throughout the past 100 years of contemporary history. It thus helps map uneven trends and historical contours. And it helps recognize the political in the aesthetic and the aesthetic in the political. My methodology is based on taking this structural framework for conceptualizing the avant-gardes to its radical conclusions by reading them against various revolutionary vanguards in Latin America. Under these extreme experimental conditions, my case studies have not only validated the hypotheses of my framework, but they have also opened up other questions and possibilities for avant-garde futures that move in relation to the revolutionary vanguards to come.

From the historical avant-gardes I have provided an example belonging to the Mexican Revolution in which the revolutionary vanguard was in fact anarchist-communist not Marxist-Leninist like in the case of most other prominent twentieth-century revolutions. What does it mean to re-ground our understandings of revolution in Mexico rather than Russia? What does that signify exactly in terms of avant-garde art-politics? In one way it speaks to

antagonisms rooted in creative discord rather than party hierarchies. With both the Stridentists and the Partido Liberal Mexicano we observe cohorts of revolutionary intellectuals who move within a tension pulled by collaboration and dissent. Discord, dissent and creative destruction all frame the degenerate, bad subject—the subject in open rebellion against law and police (in their various connotations) even as they form alternative movements, magazines and communities. The avant-gardist Antonio Helú, for example, populates his rearrangement of popular fiction with one of these bad subjects: Carlos Miranda, a *lumpenproletarian* thief-cum-detective. Miranda levels hierarchies and enculpates the bourgeoisie—rearranging perceptions of criminality and republican rule of law. He exposes the original sin of the bourgeoisie—private property—by demonstrating that it is neither by genius nor hard work that they maintain their class privileges, but rather through the exploitation of labor and the corruption of politics. The proletarian—his fellow thief Máximo Roldán—and the *lumpen*—Miranda—detect the contradictions of bourgeois society, enjoining all to regenerate degenerate institutional experiments like the Mexican Revolution in pursuit of a more liberatory society.

With the Cuban Revolution we encounter the problem of the revolutionary worker. Remembering Castro's "Palabras a los intelectuales," how can a revolution dedicated to the emancipation of the working class deny avant-garde artists their vocation? In Julio Cortázar we see how the bad subject not only breaks bad with bourgeois society, but at times breaks bad with the very revolution he marches with in solidarity. By not fully heeding the interpellating

hails of both agents of the Cuban Revolution and French Maoists, Cortázar anchors his discord in notions of radical worker autonomy. Here again hierarchies are leveled via free play as Cortázar's "protagonist" Andrés-*el que te dije* stumbles toward emancipation. Guevara's New Man is thus re-conceptualized in terms of a revolutionary spiral in which one's old self is never completely abolished nor overcome. This takes the dialectical materialism of Engels to its radical conclusions because history is no longer conceptualized in terms of a linear, teleological development, but rather an open-ended spiral. This avant-garde recognition, in turn, enjoins us to, like Che himself, throw ourselves into a revolutionary spiral that will lead to something like the New Man even as it eschews capitulating to authority in blind faith. This is then taken to the level of vocation, of the worker. Instead of framing revolutionary hails in terms of bourgeois conceptualizations of individual liberty, Cortázar anarchistically shapes the intellectual as a worker entitled to autonomy. As it turns out, discord, dissent and creative destruction are all part and parcel of this spiraling, avant-garde New Man not bourgeois liberalism.

But the New Man, in reality, ought to be the New Woman. In the work of Sandinista revolutionary and author Gioconda Belli free play with *género* busts binaries while at the same time maintaining creative antagonisms. Her synthesis of necessary vanguard violence and explosive spectrums of gender and biological sex destroy macho hierarchies inside and out- of her literary work. The deadlock of post-revolution stagnation and failure is thus confronted by women militating to occupy places of power. In her novelistic work Belli gives us provocative



alternatives grounded in avant-garde free play, which break from the existentialist dialectic of the masculine One and the feminine Other. In this Belli conceptualizes feminized alternatives that play with essentialized gender roles. Like a good mother, for example, the radical republic should nurture not nanny. Likewise, radicalized citizens should collaborate rather than compete. Radical reforms issued to us in her latest novel synthesize collectivist and feminist ideologies, and yet still depend upon the necessary violence of the revolutionary vanguard. In short, these radical reforms are predicated on confrontation rather than resistance. The question then becomes: When will Belli and her Partido de la Izquierda Erótica trouble gender enough to occupy power in Nicaragua?<sup>32</sup> And when will the international Left violently feminize sites of power?

Similarly, in the borderlands of neoliberal capitalism, Roberto Bolaño, Subcomandante Marcos and Paco Ignacio Taibo II embark on detective adventures that play with gender, race and class. Here the detective narrative once again constitutes a methodology for detecting the systematic failures of degenerate bourgeois society. In this regard, Roberto Bolaño's *2666* is particularly instructive in that "La parte de los criminales" symptomatically examines neoliberal capitalism by incessantly playing with the detective mode in most, if not all, of its popular manifestations: procedural, hardboiled and classic to name a few. The US-Mexico border is therefore symptomatic of the uncanniness of neoliberal capitalism—a system erected on hidden wage-slavery and femicide.

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<sup>32</sup> PIE was also the name of a group of women who militated within the Sandinista Revolution, bringing feminist politics to bear on government affairs within their respective spheres of influence. It still exists and in fact has a website where sympathizers and collaborators can obtain more information.

The sadistic contradictions of this system are even more exaggerated in the peripheral centers that are Latin America (in general) and Mexico (specifically). When laid bare these covered-over symptomatic contradictions enjoin rebellion, revolt and revolution.

Likewise, in his critical work, Bolaño offers up a provisional cure for society's neoliberal illness: sex, books and travel. This recommendation might appear to be nothing more than nihilistic escapism at its purist. But when read against *Muertos incómodos* we find certain structural parallels between Bolaño's cure and the work of Marcos and Taibo. In terms of sex we are exposed to a menagerie of characters whose identities circulate within a radical spectrum of sexualities and genders. These characters identify with the Zapatista movement and militate towards emancipation. In addition, flaunting his work in the face of good taste and propriety, Marcos' fetishization of the book and his *praxis* as author annihilate classic distinctions of Art and World in which revolution is separated out from literature. In the end, however, it is through Elías Contreras' voyage to the neoliberal center of the nation—Mexico City—that Marcos and Taibo posit the revolutionary possibility of solidarity in plurality. The avant-gardes and the revolutionary vanguard joined yet discordant.

But why go round and round *ad nauseam* about the avant-gardes and the revolutionary vanguard? I believe that by dissertating—to continue to discuss or debate—we can recognize how these two sometimes antagonistic constructions can be thought of as informing one another. Without a shared hatred of the bourgeoisie and an organizational model cribbed from the revolutionary

vanguards the avant-gardes whither. Similarly, without the discord, dissent and creative destruction of the avant-gardes the revolutionary vanguard withers. Both lose their political vitality. Both become lost to history. It is with this in mind that anyone that envisions a progressive future ought to tackle the problems of organization and creation. Let us not therefore forget the antagonisms that undergird our societies. And let us not be afraid to break bad like the avant-garde subject. Degenerates of All Countries Unite!







**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**

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## Curriculum Vitae

Mike Strayer was born in Sacramento, California on April 23, 1980. He graduated from Brigham Young University with a Bachelor's of Science in psychology and a second major in Spanish. He also holds a Master of Arts from Boston College in Hispanic studies. He currently lives in Orem, Utah with his wife and daughter where he is a visiting scholar at Brigham Young University while he completes his Doctor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University and prepares to enter the academic job market.