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Candice Amich

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PERFORMING FUTURE MEMORY: A CRITICAL POETICS OF GLOBALIZATION

By

CANDICE AMICH

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

PERFORMING FUTURE MEMORY: A CRITICAL POETICS OF GLOBALIZATION

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Dissertation Directors:

Harriet Davidson and Elin Diamond

My dissertation contends that poets and performance artists of the Americas have been at the forefront of exploring the psychic and bodily effects of neoliberal globalization. More than just a set of market-driven policies aimed at privatization and deregulation, neoliberalism is a perceptual regime. Invoking globalization experts such as David Harvey, I argue that neoliberal globalization has produced profound changes in the way we experience time and space, and that these changes require new aesthetic forms. In countering the erasure of cultural memory, disruption of local environments, and omnipresent spectacle of commodity fetishism that characterize neoliberalism as a spatiotemporal regime, the poets and performance artists I study—Dionne Brand, Ricardo Dominguez, Coco Fusco, Ana Mendieta, Nancy Morejón, Adrienne Rich, Ed Roberson, Cecilia Vicuña, and Raúl Zurita—engage this transformation of the sensible.

Historically framed by two September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedies, my dissertation opens with the US-backed 1973 coup in Chile—that brutally implemented a neoliberal mode of governing—and closes with the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. The works that constitute my archive explore exile, displacement, alienation and cultural amnesia in order to reenact and revise earlier hemispheric moments of colonization and expropriation. While recalling legacies of slavery, indigenous genocide, and imperialism, the poems and performances I analyze also suggest different futures; at the heart of these formal experiments is a desire for new modes of social being that find their expression in textual and corporeal performances. While the novel remains the privileged genre of literary globalization studies, my project maps the complex ways in which poetry and performance, through multi-sensory techniques and tropes of touch, explore globalization as an embodied experience. As such, a major goal of my project is to traverse the gap between the abstractions of globalization discourse and the localized particulars of corporeal and textual performance. The unique temporal register this critical poetics achieves—in its accessing of repressed histories and geographies to pose new political futures—is what I refer to as ‘future memory.’

## **Dedication**

For Dominic

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## INTRODUCTION

### A Critical Poetics of Globalization

More than just a set of market-driven policies aimed at privatization and deregulation, neoliberalism is a perceptual regime that disciplines time and space. The processes of speed-up and spatial collapse that result from the accelerated integration of trade, finance and information networks across national borders are also (perhaps not so surprisingly) registered in our bodies, shaping how we move through time and space, and therefore live history and geography. This project contends that poets and performance artists from across the Americas have been at the forefront of exploring the psychic and bodily effects of this transformation of the sensible. In countering the erasure of cultural memory, disruption of local environments, and omnipresent spectacle of commodity fetishism that characterize neoliberalism as a spatiotemporal regime, the poets and performance artists I study collectively forge a critical poetics of globalization.

### From Cognitive Mapping to an Embodied Poetics

In *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson characterizes the postmodern as an era of a-historicity, flattening of affect, and spatiotemporal confusion. He describes it as a “new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capitalism

itself” (413). Despite a significant number of shifts and re-alignments in global politics in the two decades since Jameson is writing, his critique of postmodern cultural production remains an important touchstone for the theorization of a poetics of globalization. The way in which Jameson historicizes postmodernism as a set of cultural values formulated in response to radical socioeconomic changes in the postwar period, involving the transition from welfare states to neoliberal economies, is a crucial starting point for evaluating postmodern cultural production today. The notion that as individuals we are introduced into “radically discontinuous realities,” and the language of framing that Jameson uses to describe this condition, are both essential to theorizing the evolving relationship between politics and aesthetics in the neoliberal era.

In proposing “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping,” Jameson acknowledges that neoliberal globalization has produced profound changes in the way we experience time and space (51). (My study is especially interested in identifying how these spatiotemporal changes are differently distributed and experienced across diverse populations.) The acceleration in the transnational conquest of markets and dominance of finance capital exceed “the capacities of the human body to locate itself” (44). For Jameson, “the incapacity of our minds...to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” is a problem that permeates both politics and art at the level of efficacy (44). In cognitive mapping, Jameson seeks critical efficacy in an age when the possibility of critical distance “has very precisely been abolished” (48).

Situated at the juncture of the postcolonial and the postmodern, my project is also formulated as a means of historicizing the neoliberal present through the study of

aesthetics. The “new political art” that Jameson anticipates, is the same object of study in which I am centrally interested (54). Yet, while Jameson mistrusts the body and its lack of “perceptual equipment,” the poets and performers I study rely on their bodies as vital sources of knowledge about the dizzying world of multinational capital (38). Rather than try to gain a bird’s-eye view of the commodity maze, which is the problem of critical distance that Jameson articulates, these writers and artists map social relations *through* perceptual experience, refusing to think bodily and political knowledge apart. Rather than a “waning of affect,” what my model finds is an historical excess of affect—an excess that distorts time and space, form and media (10). Thus, instability of genre and blurring of boundaries between life and art are major features of a poetics of globalization, as questions of dislocation, spectacle and witness are not merely examined, but, more importantly, formally explored, in these works.

### **Literary Globalization Studies and Performance**

If the interdisciplinary field of literary globalization studies has flourished in the last decade, it is perhaps because the literary takes up where the social sciences discourse of globalization leaves off. In its study of subjectivities, literature explores what it feels like to live in a raced, classed, and gendered body—and this, in an era that aims to overwrite bodily difference in a free market fantasy of equal access for all. Nevertheless, the complex ways in which poetry and performance explore globalization as a psychic and embodied experience—that is, globalization as a force that collapses distance between *here* and *there*, so that rather than something *out there*, globalization is a relation we all inhabit—have largely gone unnoted. This study is thus partially formulated as a

response to the privileging of the realist novel as a generic form across literary globalization and postcolonial studies. The challenge of a critical poetics of globalization is to identify and elaborate how political work happens at the level of aesthetic form, whether through temporal deformations of language or spatial realignments of bodies and objects.

A major goal of the project is to traverse the gap between the abstractions of globalization discourse and the localized particulars of corporeal and textual performance. As David Harvey observes in *Spaces of Hope*, commentary in our neoliberal era careens between micro discourses of ‘the body’ and macro discourses of ‘globalization’; however, “no systemic attempt has been made to integrate ‘body talk’ with ‘globalization talk’” (12-18). This project aims to meet such a challenge (though perhaps not exactly in the way, or on the scale, Harvey, as a social scientist, would imagine), and, in doing so, uncovers an important trajectory of feminist aesthetic production in the Americas. More generally, my turn to performance as a critical tool is a response to the challenge of bridging the body-globalization gap. In an age of rampant simulation, digitization and speed, the field of performance studies insists on the role of live bodies in navigating a world in perpetual motion.

In contrast to Jameson, Édouard Glissant theorizes the totality of globalization as inseparable from the experience of bodies. For Glissant, globalization is not only unrepresentable, as Jameson concedes, but also unknowable—yet the impossible desire to know this *chaos-monde* is precisely what drives Glissant’s poetics of Relation. Glissant’s emphasis on diversity, history and the unknown—against the linear standardization and authoritarian logic of imperialism—is crucial for my work, as a critical poetics of

globalization seeks to span seemingly incommensurable scales; from the sensible world of concrete particulars that the poetic arises out of, to the abstractions of the world capitalist market, my model aims to show how these are interpenetrated. An attempt to think social relations on a previously unthinkable scale, Glissant's *chaos-monde* traces how the local engages the global and shapes history. Dynamic networks of cross-cultural contact compose the shifting present of the *chaos-monde*, opening up the relationship between universals and particulars. The emphasis on difference and movement within an unknowable totality derives from Glissant's sense of poetics as a mode of knowledge that "prefigures reality, without determining it a priori" (*Poetics of Relation*, 192). This notion of "prefiguring reality" suggests that radical acts of imagination can transform material histories, if in unpredictable ways.

### **(Re)Framing the Present**

Aesthetics and politics converge in acts of framing. In the following chapters, I develop models for reading poetic form and performance art in relation to processes of neoliberal globalization by examining how these creative works reframe reality. As Jacques Rancière relates, "There is no 'real world'. Instead, there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions. The real always is a matter of construction, a matter of 'fiction'" (*Dissensus* 148). Extending these observations, we can imagine not only how the neoliberal functions as a reality-shaping force, but also how oppositional forces might assert alternative visions through acts of reframing. Rancière continues, "Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying

frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective” (*Dissensus* 141). This play of “frames, scales and rhythms” is precisely the terrain of a critical poetics of globalization, and takes up from where second wave feminist acts of re-visioning history leave off.

Through the disruption of the sensible, the poet or performer is able to locate herself not only in relation to the operations of multinational capital, as Jameson’s aesthetic of cognitive mapping requires, but also, and perhaps, even more importantly, within oppositional configurations of time and space (history and geography) to which she summons her audience. In the chapters that follow, I study aesthetic experiments reframing time and space as historical performances; this methodology allows me to situate these works within their own shifting presents (rather than pin them down to static visions of the past). The first two chapters specifically trace how what have too often been dismissed as essentialist aesthetic practices are in fact the emerging acts of a critical poetics of globalization.

## **Two September 11ths**

Historically framed by two September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedies, my dissertation opens with the US-backed 1973 coup in Chile—that brutally implemented a neoliberal mode of governing defined by deregulation and privatization, against collective decision-making and ownership—and closes in the aftermath of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. The World Trade Center attacks have been widely analyzed as an extremist response to the pressures of globalization; thus, the three decades spanning these two September 11ths demarcate a period of intense contestations over the meanings of nation, citizenship

and exile in the Americas. The first two chapters track a critical poetics that engages the rise of the neoliberal state through to the hemispheric achievement of neoliberal hegemony following the defeat of several key Central American revolutions. The second half of the dissertation examines the post-Cold War landscape against which the global justice movement emerges and the ‘common’ world of globalization comes into view.

The works that constitute my archive explore exile, displacement, alienation and cultural amnesia in order to reenact and revise earlier hemispheric moments of colonization and expropriation. While recalling legacies of slavery, indigenous genocide, and imperialism, the poems and performances I analyze suggest different futures: at the heart of these formal experiments is a desire for more egalitarian and sensual modes of social being, which find their expression in textual and corporeal performances. As the field of hemispheric performance studies has aptly demonstrated, the Americas are as ideal a transnational space as any in which to theorize a poetics of globalization, and in which to contextualize our more recent history of neoliberal globalization within a 500-year history of forced migration, exile, and territorial conquest. Jill Lane, for instance, proposes “an approach that understands the hemispheric as a set of connected practices in deep time as a way to attenuate the cartographic impulse,” thus expanding the hemispheric to encompass not only, or even especially, geography, but overlapping histories of “conquest, native genocide, colonialism, slavery, independence wars, nation formation... migration and deterritorialization”; that is, histories that constitute the “heterogeneous character of time in the hemisphere” (“Hemispheric” 114-116). A commitment to revealing the neoliberal present as composed of these repressed pasts—through whatever generic means necessary—is what unites the poets and performers I

bring together as political artists.

The Chilean poet and visual artist Cecilia Vicuña is the central figure of my first chapter, “Performing Exile: Translation, Memory, Site.” I argue that Vicuña’s more recent textual citations and filmic reiterations of her earliest ephemeral works enact the precarious reconstruction of cultural memory. Establishing the political context in which Vicuña publishes her first book, *Sabor A Mí* (1973), I examine the formal production and distribution of this mimeographed artist’s book. A bilingual, multi-genre text published in exile, *Sabor A Mí* explores the historical buildup to General Augusto Pinochet’s US-backed coup. The book’s emphasis on touch and the precarious as a means of performing revolution, signals a sharp break from the collective aesthetics of resistance practiced by the muralist brigades of the Popular Unity socialist party in Chile or more widely throughout Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. I then analyze Vicuña’s exilic collaborations with the Chilean neo-avant-garde performance collective CADA (*Colectivo Acciones De Arte*), suggesting that the difference in scale between Vicuña’s subtle street performances and CADA’s monumental actions is indexical of the fragility of Vicuña’s art practice. Framing this discussion of Vicuña’s work is an exploration of the earth-body works of the Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta. I demonstrate how the bodily silhouettes Mendieta imprinted throughout the US, Mexico and Cuba during the late 1970s and early 1980s vividly materialize the spatial displacement and cultural erasure that define this hemispheric moment. I contextualize Vicuña’s and Mendieta’s common formal interests in disappearance, ritual, magic, earth and notions of deep history as a response to the cultural shocks of neoliberal state formation.



Building off the aesthetics of intimacy and touch established in the performance practices of Vicuña and Mendieta, I turn to three differently located feminist poets, who all experiment with language and politics at a time when collective struggles throughout the hemisphere are being undermined by new international forces of capital. In “Transnational Poetics: Body, Language, Nation,” I explore the turn to what U.S. poet Adrienne Rich calls a ‘poetics of location’ as a critical nexus of geography, history and politics. I read Rich’s poetry alongside that of Trinidadian-Canadian poet Dionne Brand and Cuban poet Nancy Morejón and show how these three differently located feminists respond to the growing disjuncture between nation and culture in the neoliberal era. While all three poets take advantage of new possibilities for a transnational readership, their differing national contexts produce quite different performances of internal exile and diasporic mobility. I show how Rich’s 1983 witnessing of the Sandinista Revolution urged her to abandon a more homogenous sense of female solidarity for a politics of location, and read Rich’s poem “Atlas of the Difficult World” (1991) as a performance of internal exile that imagines a transnational circuit of readers. In my discussion of Brand’s *No Language is Neutral* (1990), I open up the relationship between history and form in the poet’s creolized verse to specify the collective trauma that permeates the English language for the black Caribbean subject. Writing in Spanish, Morejón rewrites the history of the Cuban Revolution from within in her collections *Cuaderno de Granada* (1984) and *Where the Island Sleeps like a Wing* (1985), affirming, like Brand, Afro-Caribbean cultural forms. I claim, however, that in her refusal to abandon the promise of the revolutionary nation, Morejón departs from the positioning of internal exile that both Rich and Brand occupy.

The dramatic formal shift we see in the 1990s towards the incorporation of (dis)simulation and irony in performance is exemplified by the work of Cuban-American performance artist Coco Fusco. My third chapter, “Staging Politics: Time, History, Dissensus,” explores the turn away from the promise of revolutionary states to a new style of politics exemplified by the Zapatista uprising—a form of radical multiculturalism that insists on a space for difference within the frame of the neoliberal nation. In her clandestine performances of a wake, *El Ultimo Deseo (The Last Wish)* (1997), and burial, *El Evento Suspendido (The Postponed Event)* (2000), in Cuba, Fusco brings into visibility the island nation’s excluded and poses new possibilities for exilic mobility. I argue that the performance work of border-crossing artists such as Fusco and her collaborators flourishes with the global justice movement that began to coalesce transnationally and digitally around the Zapatistas in the mid-1990s. In my analysis of the multimedia performance *Dolores from 10 to 22* (2001), I show how Fusco and Mexican-American performance artist/media theorist Ricardo Dominguez appropriate surveillance technology as a means of inciting empathy in their dispersed audiences. Exploring the tension between embodiment and simulation in this collaboration, I present the rise of digital performance practices in the 1990s as a challenge to the World Wide Web’s promise of global connectivity.

In my fourth chapter, “Poetics of the Common: Landscape, Trauma, Love,” I return to the questions of spatial displacement, historical trauma, and the politics of location in my examination of recent works by African American poet Ed Roberson and Chilean poet Raúl Zurita. My final chapter tests Hardt and Negri’s theorization of the multitude as ‘singularities in common’ against the embodied visions of African American

poet Ed Roberson and Chilean poet Raúl Zurita. I circle back to the hemisphere's original 9/11 tragedy (which Zurita experienced firsthand as a victim of Pinochet's torturers), and then move out into an examination of the possibilities the 'common' world of globalization creates. Both Roberson and Zurita historicize their neoliberal presents through textual experiments in temporality. In *City Eclogue* (2006), Roberson inserts fractured images of the civil rights past into the gentrified landscapes of the present, challenging post-racial politics of personal responsibility that deny the historical basis for structural inequality; I demonstrate how his disjunctive poetics suggests alternative spatial-social configurations. Similarly defying visual conventions of representation, Zurita deploys a poetics of sensory blurring that invokes the touch of dead lovers to negate state terror in *INRI* (2003). I conclude with a meditation on the vulnerable bodies that compose the landscapes of these anti-pastorals, showing how Roberson's and Zurita's twenty-first century deformations of the pastoral genre echo the site-specific strategies of the feminist earth-body works of the 1970s.

In bringing together performance artists and poets who are typically studied in isolation from each other due to boundaries of nation, language and genre, my project articulates a hemispheric poetics that makes visible alternative circuits of aesthetic production. Identifying key sites of conjuncture and disjuncture, I put the particular aesthetic interventions I examine into conversation with emerging discussions in globalization studies and specify the limits of social sciences discourses in registering the bodily and psychic effects of neoliberalism. I read poems and performances that translate the embodied (that is, the raced, classed and gendered) experience of globalization and show how these works, through their negation of the universalizing flows of capital,

liberate time and space—if only in the present of performance.

### **Performing Future Memory**

The unique temporal register this critical poetics achieves—in its accessing of repressed histories and geographies to pose new political futures—is what I refer to as the performance of future memory. As a performance, ‘future memory’ is a fluid state that allows for critical embodiment, if not critical distance: what is modeled is not a critique from outside capitalist systems of oppression, but rather alternatives ways of moving through time and space. “When versions of reality are excluded or jettisoned to a domain of unreality, then specters are produced that haunt the ratified version of reality,” Judith Butler explains in *Frames of War* (2010). These excluded realities form a “rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resources for resistance” (xiii). The process by which discarded histories are recovered and made use of in Butler’s formulation, resonates with the acts of reframing that the poets and performance artists I survey perform.

As actual hauntings, these reframing performances require a level of bodily and psychic risk that distinguish them from modernist acts of critical distance. Rather than deny the breakdown of boundaries between interior and exterior worlds, or seek a critical foothold outside of or above the system, these poets and performers of globalization embody precarity and vulnerability as the very means of connecting with their audiences. In this way they model and question what it might mean to bear a common responsibility towards each other. As their audiences we are inserted in “the situation of being addressed” and confronted with a “demand that comes from elsewhere...by which our

obligations are articulated and pressed upon us,” but only if we take the hand they extend towards us (Butler *Precarious* 130). Intimacy and touch thus emerge as key strategies and figures for traversing vast disconnections of time, history and place in these works.

### **Another World is Possible**

When I began writing this dissertation in the late fall of 2008, the full exposure of neoliberalism as a bankrupt ideology seemed imminent, as the greatest promoters of deregulation, the private banks, were suddenly in the desperate position of requiring massive government bailouts. But as the months passed into seasons, something stranger happened: almost nothing. It took nearly three years for the U.S. to join the rest of the world in its growing refusal to accept austerity as a solution to irresponsible business practices.

‘Another world is possible,’ the slogan of the global justice movement that emerged at the end of twentieth century (announcing its full arrival on the U.S. scene in the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle), lives on in the anti-neoliberal Occupy movement of the twenty-first century. The emergence of a mode of social relations less abstracted from basic human needs (a possibility which seemed to grow ever more remote in the post-9/11 U.S.) has shimmered into visibility. The communal encampments set up by this movement—from New York to Barcelona to Lagos—with their free kitchens, nursing stations, and bedding departments, share an ethics of common care that negate the vicious individualism of neoliberalism. Beyond an ethos of mutual care, what this other world (in which “many worlds fit”) might look like, is hazier—as if composed in a field of hot breath, growing denser every day. It is the life-affirming breath of these

activists with which this project strives to connect in its articulation of a critical poetics of globalization.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Performing Exile: Translation, Memory, Site

The 1981 “Feminism and Ecology” issue of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* includes creative work by two Latin American exiles living in New York City, both of whom contribute documentation of their earthworks.<sup>1</sup> One of the eruptions the volcano on the issue’s cover signals—beyond its topical reference to the ecological disaster of Mount St. Helens—is the way in which “Third World Women” (the topic of a previous issue subtitled “the politics of being other”) are redefining the feminist art world at this time. Though Ana Mendieta and Cecilia Vicuña are born into families that claim white Spanish ancestry, both exiled artists self-identify as racially “other” in the U.S.: while Mendieta aligns herself with the Afro-Cuban and indigenous cultures of her native Cuba, Vicuña emphasizes the Andean origins of her Chilean background.

The period from the late 1970s through the early 1990s is an important moment for transnational feminism in the hemisphere, as women of color respond to both the oversights of the white feminist movement and confront the failures of national liberation projects to emancipate women. Concurrent with the rise and consolidation of neoliberal hegemony, the critique of race, nation, and gender that third world feminism introduces into oppositional thought at this moment—and of which Mendieta’s and Vicuña’s

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<sup>1</sup> Published by a feminist collective in New York City between 1977 and 1992, the mission statement of *Heresies* opens, “Heresies is an idea-oriented journal devoted to the examination of art and politics from a feminist perspective,” and continues, “Heresies is structured as a collective of feminists, some of whom are also socialists, marxists, lesbian feminists or anarchists; our fields include sculpture, writing, painting, anthropology, literature, performance, art history, architecture and film-making.” A recent documentary, *The Heretics* (2009), gives an account of the collective’s history. A full PDF of all issues is available on the film’s website.

earthworks participate—is central to the emergence of a critical poetics of globalization.<sup>2</sup> Overlapping with these seismic shifts in the world of visual arts is the move towards a poetics of location in the literary field, as will be explored in the following chapter.

Both Mendieta and Vicuña submit photographs of ephemeral installations accompanied by texts that are more performative than explanatory. Mendieta's "La Venus Negra" frames a photograph from her *Siluetas Series* with a Cuban legend that ends, "Today the Black Venus has become a legendary symbol against slavery. She represents the affirmation of a free and natural being who refused to be colonized" (22). Yet, the earth-body work reproduced above the legend, made of earth and gunpowder, was "executed in Amana, Iowa" shortly before Mendieta's first return trip to Cuba (Viso, 90; Roulet 234). Part of her so-called volcano series, "The Black Venus" silhouette was outlined in gunpowder and set ablaze; the photograph captures the ashen remains of the figural mound, echoing the eruption of the issue's cover.

Vicuña's contribution, "Glass of Milk Spilled under a Blue Sky," similarly invokes an anticolonial history of the Americas, documenting a transnational performance executed before a monument of Simón Bolívar (the independence fighter most recently reclaimed by the leftist government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela). Working in exile in Bogotá, Colombia, Vicuña responds to a local milk contamination crisis with her performance, linking her action to the political crisis of her native Chile. While a fuller reading of this performance and its documentation will be explored later in this chapter, more immediately, what I want to observe is the convergence in Mendieta's and Vicuña's similarly indirect approaches to performing exile—as their common formal

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<sup>2</sup> See Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* for a thorough history of U.S. third world feminism's links to global decolonization movements.



interests in disappearance, ritual, magic, earth and notions of deep history are revelatory of the dislocations of exile in the wake of neoliberal state formation.

What Vicuña's glass of spilled milk and Mendieta's hollowed-out form most powerfully communicate is their physical absence from the original source of their 'otherness.' As such, their *Heresies* contributions are concerned with keeping cultural memory and difference alive in an era of neoliberal erasure and assimilation. Studying fine arts in London the fall of 1973, Vicuña suddenly found herself exiled as a consequence of General Augusto Pinochet's U.S.-backed coup in Chile. Before moving to New York in 1981, she lived in Colombia for five years. Mendieta moved to New York in 1978, after spending the majority of the last seventeen years living in Iowa, where she studied at the University of Iowa, earning MFA degrees in painting and mixed media. Mendieta and her sister were sent to the United States by their parents in 1961 as part of an anti-communist U.S.-sponsored program, Operation Pedro Pan. While Vicuña is the central subject of my chapter, I bring in Mendieta to contextualize Vicuña's work within a broader field of transnational feminist aesthetic production, a field whose defining features include repetition and loss, history and time, earth and magic.

### **The Precarious Reconstruction of Cultural Memory**

Vicuña constructs her first earthwork—a composition of stones, sticks and feathers—at the sandy junction where the Aconcagua River enters the Pacific Ocean. She listens, with her hands, for patterns to unearth. Assembled from the refuse of the landscape—its natural debris and human discards (a length of frayed rope)—*Con-cón* (1966) de-constructs at high tide. The incoming waters topple the erected sticks and

erase the spirals engraved in sand. Yet, what the weather destroys a few photographs preserve.

First reproduced in her second collection of poetry, *Precario/Precarious* (1983), the photos of Cecilia Vicuña's *Con-cón* are accompanied by a spare poetry. Marketed to a North American audience, the book seeks to translate this condition of exile, and thus fittingly opens with the author's definition of the precarious: "*Precarious* is what is obtained by prayer. Uncertain, exposed to hazards, insecure. From the Latin "precarious," from "précis"; prayer." Etymology is important for Vicuña, as traversing languages reveals hidden truths: inside the uncertainty of the precarious she discovers the root for prayer. Referring to her assemblages of natural and found materials as *precarios*, Vicuña assigns a ritual function to her works, blurring the boundary between art and offering. Rather than negate the vulnerability of exile, she draws on the spiritual and artistic resources of Andean culture to play on this historical fate.

Unlike the monumental earthworks of an artist like Robert Smithson,<sup>3</sup> Vicuña's installations in nature assert something more fragile in their performance of receptivity. As feminist art historian Lucy Lippard observes, Vicuña enacts Andean principles of reciprocity in her artistic practice (15). Curator and author M. Catherine de Zegher similarly argues that Vicuña's visual works embody "a different way of marking, one that addresses nature and (agri)culture in a dialogic way" (20). Requiring acts of translation (across media and languages) from her readers and audiences, Vicuña solicits the connections which her earthworks model. Though the author's precarious constructions (whose structures remain vulnerable to the elements) predate her exile, the perpetual

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<sup>3</sup> Best known for his *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a massive construction of natural materials in Great Salt Lake, Utah, Smithson is the U.S. artist most often credited with first theorizing and executing earthworks. Juliet Lynd refers to Vicuña's early installations in nature as "earthworks *avant la lettre*" ("Precarious" 1588).

reproduction (in new contexts) of these earliest works is a function of the author's dislocation. In this chapter, I argue that Vicuña's work counters the neoliberal market ethic that seeks to override indigenous ways of life and to disallow democratic control of resources; at the heart of Vicuña's work is a respect for the transitory and fluid nature of her environments, which resonates sharply against the short-term and extractive logic of neoliberal accumulation.

Following the thread that connects Cecilia Vicuña's earliest precarious work, *Con-cón*, in its first transitory manifestation in 1966 through its multiple reproductions in poetry collections to its most recent reappearance in the film *Kon Kon* (2009), is a process of approaching (and becoming more intimate with) "the place that is not" of performance. From her earliest days as a poet in Chile, Vicuña has resisted confinement to the page: "The poem is not speech, nor in the earth, nor on paper, but in the crossing and union of the three in *the place that is not*" (Vicuña qtd. in Sherwood 73, *emphasis mine*). Related to the erasure of cultural memory, "the place that is not" is the site where cultural memory is (re)constructed; the "crossing" to which Vicuña refers is the space of translation that performance (the un-locatable "poem") occupies. Vicuña's site-specific and textual performances invoke this matrix of oral, written and environmental elements not only to testify to disappearance, but also to demonstrate the un-locatable as a strategy of resistance, as that which survives despite repression and cannot be pinned down or trapped. In this way Vicuña's performances resonate with the legendary black Venus Mendieta emulates with her blazing forms.

Basing her avant-garde practice in what she terms "an Andean aesthetics of dissonance," Vicuña's work performs cultural memory as an uncertain process of

(re)construction (*Oxford* xxix). The term most closely associated with this performance of cultural memory—as a continuous process under threat in the moment of reception—is the “precarious,” the name which Vicuña gave her first earthworks and the title of her second collection of poetry. Much of the text of *Precario/ Precarious* is devoted to re-contextualizing Vicuña’s *precarios* through their photographic documentation and the poetry that frames them, and as such functions as what Mike Pearson describes as a ‘second-order performance,’ that is, a performance about “the retrieval and reconstitution of ephemeral events” (9). In these poetic acts, or ‘second-order performances,’ Vicuña renews her commitment to the construction of cultural memories that are “uncertain, exposed to hazards, insecure,” enacting that very fragility by her compulsive acts of repetition, as if ceasing to reproduce these works would mean their total disappearance.

In the 2009 film *Kon Kon*, the Chilean artist returns to the original *Con-cón* site to reconstruct the work for the roving camera eye. Neither history, nor the beach has stood still. An oil refinery has been built over an ancient cemetery, and industrial fishing has destroyed the livelihoods of the indigenous “chino” fisherman.<sup>4</sup> Vicuña works to recover the disappearing culture of the dunes where she grew up, documenting the “clam dance” of the chinos and exploring the “torn sound” of their dissonant music. She constructs a contemporary quipu of photographs of “the disappeared” (attached to each other and her body by thread);<sup>5</sup> clearly invoking the Latin American terminology for political dissidents ‘disappeared’ by the state, Vicuña stretches the term to include entire ways of life, pointing to photographs of the dunes themselves, women artists, and her own

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<sup>4</sup> “Chino” is a Quechua word derived from “chinear” which means “to be in service,” the filmmaker tells us.

<sup>5</sup> A quipu is an ancient Incan form of record-keeping that consists of a series of knotted cords. This form of ‘writing’ was suppressed by the Spanish colonizers who destroyed the quipus they encountered as part of a program of forced conversion.

ephemeral works.

According to Vicuña, the film “tells the story of how I started to work in one of the most sacred places in Chile...a place where people have been doing art for ten thousand years. When I did my first work [*Con-cón* ] there, I didn’t know any of this because ancient culture is invisible in today’s Chile” (Flores 9). Conceived as a ritual offering, the film is a performance in making cultural memory come alive: “In this film, I connect to the sensibility, to the perceptions, to the way of feeling for the land that is a memory of place. The film is an offering to Concón, so that Chileans may see that, however erased, this memory still lives” (Flores 9). While always site-specific in her outlook, Vicuña’s visual works during her years of exile will often function simultaneously as ‘non-site’ works, in that they signal (first and foremost) absence from her native Chile.<sup>6</sup>

Performance, for Vicuña, poses an aesthetic solution to violent erasure and displacement, destabilizing generic categories to bring invisible or discarded realities into visibility. In her introduction to *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry* (2009), Vicuña refers to generic and semantic instability as survival strategies of indigenous cultures: “flexibility of meaning is important for an oral culture where memory is not fixed, but is an ongoing creative phenomenon, renewed and transformed at each reading” (xxiv). The open-endedness of Vicuña’s visual works (whose structures remain vulnerable to the elements), and her experimental use of the space of the page in her poetry (often combining image and text in unconventional ways), suggest an impulse to

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘non-site’ also derives from the work of Robert Smithson. Most commonly used to refer to a work of land art removed from its outdoor context and framed in a new setting (such as an art gallery), the term is more broadly useful for describing art that manifests at a distance from its site of origin.

connect with environment and audience in the ongoing and transformative manner she ascribes to indigenous formations.

In this chapter, I focus on Vicuña's production from the mid-1960s through to the early-1980s, that is, from her earliest days as an artist in Chile through to her exilic productions in London, Bogotá and New York City, establishing at each point the transnational contexts in which she worked.<sup>7</sup> I do so, however, from the vantage of the present and embed my analysis of Vicuña's more recent retrospective gestures within this earlier timeframe. My aim is to locate Vicuña's poetic and performance practice as an embodied response to the rupture of the Chilean coup of 1973 and to demonstrate how Vicuña employs performance as a dynamic means of countering dislocation. I begin with Vicuña's immediate response to the coup, *Sabor A Mí* (1973), an artist's book that mourns the present and looks back on the immediate

past longingly as it strives to imagine a future. In this section, I survey Vicuña's early artistic formation as a founding member of the performance and poetry collective Tribu NO and interrogate her commitment to the indigenous as an alternative to neoliberalism. Next, I turn to Vicuña's exilic collaborations with the Chilean art action group CADA in Bogotá, Colombia (1979) and New York City (1981) and examine the re-staging of these actions in New York City in 2008. Tracking Vicuña's career requires acknowledging the ways in which she re-stages and re-mediatizes her own work; in conclusion, I assess the possibilities for the reconstruction of cultural memory in two versions of Vicuña's recent film *Kon Kon (Pi)* (2009/2010), returning to Mendieta once more.

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<sup>7</sup> In terms of my larger project, this timeframe corresponds to aesthetic production in the early neoliberal era. While neoliberalism overwhelms the Southern Cone in the 1970s, the early 1980's mark, with the Reagan presidency, the bold introduction of neoliberal governing in the U.S.

### News of the Coup, 1967-1979

Exiled in London, Vicuña responded to the immediate news of the Pinochet coup with 250 copies of a handmade artist's book, *Sabor A Mí*.<sup>8</sup> The book documents the fragile sculptures Vicuña made from found garbage in the months and weeks leading up to the coup. In an exhibition catalog,<sup>9</sup> Vicuña asserts the art objects' renewed threefold purpose following the coup: "Politically, they stand for socialism, magically they help the liberation struggle, and esthetically they are as beautiful as they can be to recomfort the soul and give strength" (qtd. in Lippard 9). Her re-contextualization of the London *precarios* in light of the new political situation in Chile is typical of her open-ended and improvisational artistic approach, in which the aesthetic absorbs the weight of history.

On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet's forces seized the Chilean presidential palace, causing the death of the democratically-elected socialist president Salvador Allende, and rounded up Allende's people, torturing and killing prominent activists. As thousands of leftist activists and artists were 'disappeared' by the state in the weeks and months following the establishment of the military junta, returning to Chile after the coup would have been suicidal for Vicuña, an open supporter of Allende's Popular Unity government (1970-1973).<sup>10</sup> In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein vividly narrates the horror with which Pinochet's military dictatorship inaugurated its seventeen-year rule:

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<sup>8</sup> The title of the book recalls a popular love song written by Mexican composer Álvaro Carrillo. The title of the song, "Sabor a mí," is most often translated as "Be true to me." A more literal (and erotically charged) translation—that Vicuña is surely playing off—is "Taste of me."

<sup>9</sup> In 1974, Vicuña organized the international *Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile* at the Royal College of Art in London and exhibited 400 precarious objects from *A Diary of Objects (for the Resistance)*.

<sup>10</sup> See Patricio Guzmán's film *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997) for an especially moving portrayal of the disappeared from the perspective of surviving friends and family.

In the days that followed, roughly 13,500 civilians were arrested, loaded onto trucks and imprisoned, according to a declassified CIA report. Thousands ended up in the two main football stadiums in Santiago...Inside the National Stadium, death replaced football as the public spectacle. Soldiers prowled the bleachers with hooded collaborators who pointed out ‘subversives’; the ones who were selected were hauled off to locker rooms and skyboxes transformed into makeshift torture chambers. Hundreds were executed. Lifeless bodies started showing up on the side of major highways or floating in murky urban canals. (93)

The international outcry that followed these high-profile executions led the Pinochet government to pursue a less visible strategy of ‘disappearances’: “Rather than openly killing or even arresting their prey, soldiers would snatch them, take them to clandestine camps, torture and often kill them, then deny any knowledge” (Klein 109-110). In order to restructure the Chilean economy in the interest of domestic and foreign business partners and open up natural resources to private interests, Pinochet viciously repressed the Left. Klein’s argument is that without such terrific violence what David Harvey refers to as “the first experiment with neoliberal state formation” would not have been possible (*A Brief History* 7). (In this way, the Chilean coup d’état prefigures the U.S. ‘Shock and Awe’ campaign that accompanied the imposition of free-market doctrine on occupied Iraq in 2003, according to Klein.)

Vicuña retreated to the headquarters of Beau Geste Press, an independent publishing house that operated out of the Mexican poet Felipe Ehrenberg’s farm home in the Devon countryside. Cranked out on a mimeograph machine, *Sabor A Mí* was assembled by Vicuña and Ehrenberg between September and November of 1973. Roughly translated into English, no two copies of this bilingual, visual and tactile text are exactly the same—each, for example, with its own leaf from Ehrenberg’s garden glued in on a piece of tissue. A different envelope sent to the author from friends and family in Chile was inserted in each book’s midsection. Inside each unique envelope, the same



mimeographed letter was to be found, suggesting a relationship to reproduction that is unwilling to leave behind the artisanal and idiosyncratic.

Coming together in what Ehrenberg referred to as an “untranslation from the spanish” in his introductory note, the bilingual text is tailored to address both Spanish and English readers, and their perhaps differing levels of familiarity with the politics of the coup and the anti-imperialist resistance. In a prefatory note, Vicuña explains how the purpose of her *precarios* changed after the coup. The English translation reads: “In the beginning I wanted to prevent the coup, now the objects intend to support the armed struggle against the reactionary government.” This is a clearly condensed version of the original Spanish on the facing page, a literal translation of which would read: “Although the coup was anticipated for months, at first it [the work] was about preventing the coup. Since the coup took place the objects are [intended] so that the resistance gets organized, so that the revolutionary army develops, takes power and socialism can flourish in Chile, like we elected.”<sup>11</sup> The author’s loose translation relays both a sense of urgency (as if she did not have sufficient time to complete the translation) and an awareness of multiple audiences and contexts for the book. It is the latter feature which I am particularly interested in, though it is, of course, inseparable from the first; that is, not taking the time to translate one’s ideas fully for an English audience is ultimately a decision based on one’s conception of one’s audience. In this instance, what gets left out of the English translation is the specificity of the revolutionary project the author advocates. While in the Spanish version, the objects organize a resistance which will lead to the development of a revolutionary army that will then take power and uphold the Chilean people’s

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<sup>11</sup> The Spanish reads: “Aunque hacía meses el golpe se veía venir, primero se trataba de evitarlo. Desde que sobrevino los objetos son para que se organice la resistencia, para que se desarrolle el ejército revolucionario, se tome el poder y el socialismo puede florecer en Chile, como habíamos elegido.”

election of a socialist government—it is as if this resistance has already taken shape in the English translation, though the contours of the “armed struggle” are not specified. Both a desire to materialize this armed struggle and an unwillingness to explain are registered in the compressed English translation.

In this way, *Sabor A Mí* powerfully inaugurates Vicuña’s career of exilic production, throughout which she refuses to compromise her gift for magical thinking, even when the politics of this aesthetic sensibility gets lost in translation. In the case of the London *precarios*, Vicuña ritualizes political solidarity as if to insist the present struggle for liberation in Chile is linked to a long history of indigenous resistance to imperial conquest. As contemporary art objects, her amulets aim to mobilize this deep history of the Americas as they circulate. Magical thinking is what allows Vicuña to recuperate and perform lost alternatives to the present—despite her transatlantic distance—as she calls on ancestral forms of knowledge rooted in the Americas.

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Vicuña came of age as an artist, poet and thinker during a dynamic and hopeful period in Chile’s history in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In a piece she wrote on the *Tribu NO* for 2010 (a Chilean magazine), she describes this exuberant era:

Joy and poetry were contagious. Everyone painted, read or wrote, performed theater or photography. We came together to dance and talk...We danced night and day, with and without wine, with or without clothes. We danced because that way we ceased being individuals and transformed into a collective being. (“No-guarida de lo imperfecto,”)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

During the Allende years, Vicuña and her friends participated in the cultural blossoming that accompanied the Popular Unity government's rise to power. Vicuña, for example, wrote for a government-sponsored television program which solicited children to write-in their ideas for how to end injustice and then translated those ideas into plays; the plays were broadcast nationally and credited the children ("No-guarida de lo imperfecto"). As the founder of the Tribu NO (1967-1972), Vicuña was more focused on how socialism blurred the boundaries between art and life, than in advocating for more concrete policies, such as the expropriation of foreign businesses or consolidation of workers' power (not that she necessarily opposed such policies). As Chilean scholar Soledad Bianchi writes, "For the *Tribu NO*, art and life were inseparable, and needed to change, if what one aspired to was a transformation of society" ("Pasaron desde aquel ayer" 230). As Coca Roccatagliata, another member of the Tribu NO, relates, "...We naturally had sympathy for socialism, for Allende's government, but, at the same time, we did not totally identify so as to join a party..." (qtd. in Bianchi "Tribu NO" 170). The members of Tribu NO wanted "to extend the view of socialism of the Popular Unity government" through their radical art practice (Flores 6).

Vicuña's first solo exhibit, the 1971 installation *Otoño*, which was set up in the Sala Forestal (or the forest room) of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago, involved filling the exhibit space with bags of leaves that covered the floor. Few photos of the event exist, but the work was recently reconstructed (in 2007) as part of a curatorial program at the same museum. In the catalog for the documentary reconstruction, *Otoño* is cited as one of the first "conceptual" works, or works of "performance art," in Chile (35). In a diary entry which hung on the back wall of the

gallery (and later was reprinted in *Sabor A Mí*), Vicuña wrote: “four hundred million years after the invention of leaves and a few years after the creation of plastic bags I decided to keep autumn in a bag, then in many bags” (*Otoño/Autumn* 37). For the young artist, a heightened awareness of life, brought about by the contemplation of death (which the scattered leaves are intended to induce), can fortify revolutionary sentiment: “A work dedicated to delight wants to make the urgency/of the present, which is the urgency of the revolution, palpable” (*QUIPOem* 30). Writing in 2007, Vicuña reflects, “Gathering leaves, as a way of loving them while feeling their death, was a gesture that unknowingly anticipated the mourning that soon would spread throughout Chile” (*Otoño/Autumn*). In this early work, the subtlety of Vicuña’s political art and its debt to performance are already apparent.

Typical of counter-cultural formations across the hemisphere in the 1960s, the Tribu NO echoed the practices of the international Dadaist movement of the early twentieth century in their confrontational approach to bourgeois norms as well as in their collective orientation. They declaimed erotic poetry at happenings, chalked the walls of their schools and neighborhoods with literary graffiti, wrote manifestoes in which they denounced the literary establishment, and generally refused to discriminate between life and art. Vicuña’s early poetry demonstrates diverse influences; she cites the pre-Colombian myths of the Guaraní and the poetry of lesser-known female surrealists as her major influences at this time (Bianchi “Tribu No” 173).<sup>13</sup> Largely focusing on unconventional erotic encounters (for the Chile of that time), the celebration of sexuality in these poems is a rejection of bourgeois ways of being which derive from the ideology

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<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Vicuña identifies the Greek poet Gisèle Prassinos and the Egyptian poet Joyce Mansour (both of whom she read in translation) (Bianchi “Tribu NO” 173).

of private ownership.

The Chilean critic Claudia Panozo describes the transgressive quality of the poem “Nuevos Diseños Eróticos Para Muebles” (“New Erotic Designs for Furniture”) in the following manner: “In this way, the poem observes the interference of the production of a biopower...that even invades the space...of that which appears most intimate” (156). Published in *Sabor A Mí*, and accompanied by a playfully sketched drawing of a naked woman draped atop a revolutionarily designed writing table, the 1971 poem humorously suggests alternatives to the “civilized world’s” version of the seated position. The use of the word “civilized” to indicate conventional morals and culture implicitly signals a valuation of the non-civilized or “wild” as a source of creativity. For a young female poet to write so brazenly about sexuality was considered taboo at the time in Chile, according to Vicuña.<sup>14</sup> This bold attitude to sexuality is evident in the book’s title, a literal translation of which would read: *my taste*, or *taste of me*.

Vicuña’s first published poems appeared in the bilingual avant-garde poetry journal *El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn* in 1967. The magazine’s editors warmly embraced the young Chilean poets who comprised the Tribu NO in its pages, publishing them as a group in issue #25 (January 1968). Co-founded by U.S. poet Margaret Randall and Mexican poet Sergio Mondragón in Mexico City in 1962, *El Corno* united radical poets around a discourse of transnational poetics, which was forged in opposition to the lingering repression of McCarthyism in the United States and as a response to state violence throughout Latin America.<sup>15</sup> Publishing beat poets from New York and San

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<sup>14</sup> Interview October 22, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> The following account of the journal *El Corno* is derived from a documentary film entitled *El Corno Emplumado: Una Historia de los Sesenta (The Plumed Horn: A Story from the Sixties)*, which was produced in 2005. Vicuña is one of twenty contributors to the journal interviewed in the film.

Francisco alongside Brazilian concrete poets and Cuban guerrilla poets, for example, the journal served as an intercultural forum geared towards projecting the arts, and poetry specifically, as a radically-embodied (rather than merely textually-bound) mode of social revolution. The transnational encounters that *El Corno*'s editors promoted and facilitated created a counter-public which openly clashed with the repressive force of the Mexican state in 1968. Due to a loss of funding and increasing harassment from the state, the editors were forced to dissolve the journal in 1969; however, many of its contributors found new forms and means of expressing the radical content rehearsed in the pages of *El Corno*.

Much like Vicuña's *Sabor A Mí*, each issue of the journal opened with an "untranslation": two editorial statements, one in English, one in Spanish, and each unique in tone and content. Issue #25 was largely a tribute to Che Guevara, who had recently been assassinated in the jungles of Bolivia. Randall, the writer of the English editorial, claims, "Fear is dead with Che's death." In the same page she announces, "Williams in Spanish, Cardenal in English, and Blackburn widely open."<sup>16</sup> In the contributors' page, Mondragón describes the young poets of the Tribu NO as "the freshest fruit of the great dada tree" and especially congratulates Vicuña for the militant force of her verse.

Vicuña has described *El Corno Emplumado* as "a bound miracle" and has compared entering its pages to entering a "radiant fabric" ("No-guarida de lo imperfecto"). She credits the journal for her career-long interest in transnational collaboration and has remained in touch with international readers/writers who contacted

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<sup>16</sup> The three poets referred to here are the U.S.-American poets William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Paul Blackburn (1926-1971) and the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal (1925-present).

her through its pages more than four decades ago.<sup>17</sup> Browsing one of Vicuña's personal copies of the journal, I note the different prices and currencies on the back of the journal. The listing of countries (Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Spain, Uruguay, United States and Venezuela) is impressive. As Margaret Randall explains in the documentary about the journal, the listed prices were not equivalent to each other in any straightforward manner, but rather represented what price a struggling poet could be expected to afford in each location (based on reports from poets in the field). This model of exchange, which accounts for an unevenness in the economies across the Americas, is a means of ensuring unity based on something other than privilege. Though only a limited number of magazines passed through each city, communities of readers and contributors were built as these copies circulated among poets and patrons.

The model of participation and exchange that *El Corno* manifested is one that Vicuña has pursued throughout her career. From her experience of the networks enabled by *El Corno*, Vicuña derived an internationalist approach to poetics that has not left her. Describing the Tribu NO's poetics, she explains, "...we felt a part of what happened with the Colombian nadaístas, with what happened at a total Latin American level or total planetary level, but we did not have that local idea of how to be like...a Chilean poetry group, not that" (qtd. in Bianchi "Tribu No" 162). The performance of unrestricted hemispheric identity that *El Corno* provided to its contributors and readers models a poetics of globalization—*from below*—that does not require an erasure of the local to connect with the global.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview October 22, 2009.

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The multi-generic excess of *Sabor A Mí* betrays its historical condition of production. With the blow of the coup, several projects fused into one: an erotic poetry collection that would never make it to press in Chile;<sup>18</sup> reproductions of art objects constructed from discarded materials in London in anticipation of the coup; and retrospective documentation of installations and paintings produced in Chile. The book is roughly divided into three sections: the opening *Diary of Objects (for the Resistance)*; a middle section (introduced by a sheet of tissue with a glued leaf) which re-presents a series of installations and paintings Vicuña created in Chile in the late 1960s and early 1970s with accompanying texts; and a final section of erotic poetry, which is prefaced by a series of un-translated/untranslatable riddles in Spanish. The reproduction of a notebook and an explanatory text entitled “Texto Del Cuaderno Café” (“Text of the Brown Notebook”) intercedes between the London *precarios* created in anticipation of the coup and the retrospective presentation of the book’s second section.

In “Texto Del Cuaderno Café,” the author describes the notebook as a celebration of Allende’s Chile: “...it is my way of reading chile and it was done in june 1973...it is hand made with cardboard and velvet. everything should be the result of a caress. a touched object is a charged object.” It is in this section that Vicuña’s regret for leaving Chile is most tangible in the magical thinking that predominates. Written in June, at a time when Allende’s opposition was threatening civil war, there is already a tone of

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<sup>18</sup> Before leaving for London, Vicuña was granted a contract for a 100-page manuscript of poetry; when it became evident that this book would not be published under the coup regime, Vicuña selected a handful of these erotic poems for publication in the transformed *Sabor A Mí* (as relayed to this author by Vicuña on October 22, 2009).



nostalgia apparent in the text, which perhaps indexes a discomfort or sadness at not being in Chile at this crucial historical moment. The notion of the notebook as a “charged object” is the author’s attempt to close that psychic distance. The return to work produced in Chile in the larger manuscript conveys the author’s anxiety about disappearance. As the imagined circulation of the work itself depends on the undoing of an abruptly foreclosed historical experiment in socialism, Vicuña’s output is henceforth irrevocably linked to the fate of the Chilean revolution.

Vicuña considers each of her publications and visual works as fragments of a diary, which is a “type of total account” of her creative process (qtd. in Bianchi “Tribu No” 176). The absence of works from this fragmented source, which is itself constantly under threat of erasure, drives Vicuña to write and rewrite herself into history through the unceasing reproduction of her original works in new forms and contexts. For instance, Vicuña introduces her retrospective collection *QUIPOem* (1997) as an “autobiography in debris.” The meaning of autobiography here needs to be traced back to the blurring of the categories of life and art that defines much performance art. In its insistence on intimacy, Vicuña’s practice embodies the feminist claim that the personal is political. The form of the artist’s book (with its diary-like structure in the case of *Sabor A Mí*) performs a personal response to historical matter—as if what the author wants is to transcend her mimeographed content and enter her readers’ life, so she can transmit this unbearable historical pain.

Vicuña’s precarious process of memory building speaks to the exiled artist’s need to construct her own memory framework. In his study of memory in Pinochet’s Chile, Steve Stern explores how what he terms the individual’s “loose memory” may or may not

attach to a kind of “emblematic memory,” which offers a framework in which to understand and project the social importance of the individual’s memory. Without access to emblematic memory, the individual experiences a “clandestinity of deep experience” that involves self-censorship and fragmentation (116). This denied access is ultimately a barring from history, which prevents personal psychic pain from joining to a larger collective meaning. Stern identifies four emblematic memories that have developed in response to the 1973 coup and circulate among the Chilean public, some of which were in accord with the official dictatorship culture, and some of which were dissident. While emblematic memories of rupture (1), persecution and awakening (2), and forgetting (3) are all available to the exile, there remain loose strands of experience that cannot be contained within these frameworks, and which artists like Vicuña seek to endow with social significance. While neoliberal Chilean society at large most closely resembles the emblematic model of forgetting in its response to the dictatorial era (amnesia and indifference more readily available in the face of incontrovertible evidence of widespread human rights abuses than the salvation narrative (4) of Pinochet’s supporters), Vicuña’s work embodies the rupture that Stern associates with the kin of the disappeared.

Handling Vicuña’s personal copy of *Sabor A Mí* thirty-six years after its publication, I am struck by the fragility of the book—its tender spine, creased pages, loose insides. Nestled in a soft, worn leather cover, the delicate book poignantly testifies to the passing of its historical moment. It leaves me with a disconnected feeling (unmoored from my own present, inexplicably drawn to that past) that cannot be regained by my digital search of the original manuscript available on the Chilean national library website. Nor does working from the 2007 facsimile reproduction of the text (released by

a Chilean press) satisfy this desire to connect with that enormous, floating historical loss.<sup>19</sup> I close my eyes and try to re-imagine the book falling apart in my hands...

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From its fragile pages, to its impossible desire to undo history by harnessing the optimism of an earlier moment, a melancholy sensibility permeates the construction of *Sabor A Mí*. Already by the fall of 1973, the author is looking back at the Chilean experiment in socialism with acute longing. As Juliet Lynd argues, “the precariously constructed texts...written as allegories of hope during Allende’s tenure but published as one of the earliest cries of protest in the immediate aftermath of the coup, are rendered allegories of defeat by the changed historical circumstances” (“Precarious” 1592). Lynd rightly concludes that the book “...mourn[s] the loss not so much of the work of art as of its conditions of possibility” (“Precarious” 1594). That is, the revamped *Sabor A Mí* seeks less to duplicate the collection of erotic poetry under contract when Vicuña left Chile than to perform historical longing. In general, the archival documentation of ephemeral phenomena in Vicuña’s oeuvre functions as an additional spur to the enactment, recovery and imagination of such historical conditions of possibility, and as such achieves its “charged” quality through a complex juxtaposition of temporalities, which are ceaselessly re-negotiated.

Rather than a trajectory of uninterrupted historical progress, Vicuña represents socialism as a wheel blossoming with life in *Sabor A Mí*. In one of her precarious

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<sup>19</sup> In 2011 a “recreation” of *SABORAMI* was issued by ChainLinks press, making Vicuña’s book more widely available to a U.S. audience.

creations, the national flags of Cuba and Chile are “fetishes” that propel the circle of unbound life in which they are contained. In this ritualistic and aestheticized vision of transnational socialism, there is space for the inexplicable: the accompanying bilingual text attests that the unidentifiable forms and lines bursting forth within the circle are also part of the revolutionary process. For Vicuña, socialism at this moment enables an improvisatory and inclusive aesthetic. The delicate mimeographed circle, with its floating crab (“the only animal who can walk in any direction (like revolution)”) and talismanic depiction of a clothespin (“to fasten revolution”) appropriates a political slogan (“chile y cuba jamás serán vencidos”), which is impressed in bold text towards its center, to unleash a vision of creative and joyful communion: “The spoon, the fish, the lemon are C. & C. feeding each other.” The baroque bouquets of flowers framing the slogan, crab and red star emanating from the bottom of the disc create an uncanny sense of repetition. The text declares, “The red star makes the wheel move: Communism in the beginning of time, Communism in the end of times.” That these sentiments are expressed on what appears to be a recycled doily defamiliarizes a discarded, domestic object so that all of life is brought into the revolutionary process. The circle is dated the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1973.

### **Indigenous Interlude**

The “Texto Del Cuaderno Café” predicts the sharp indigenous turn Vicuña will make as a consequence of her exile, that is, as the Popular Unity vision of socialism and its accompanying cultural giddiness are foreclosed upon in the face of extreme state violence. Inspired by indigenous cultures from her earliest days as a poet and artist in

Chile (as evinced by her founding of the Tribu NO), it is only after the possibility of revolution in Chile is foreclosed upon that Vicuña dramatically re-orientes her practice towards indigenous sources. The notebook portrays Chile as a place of visions rooted in indigenous ways of being. Allende's revolution and Chile's indigenous landscapes are simultaneously posed as escapes from "the claws of U.S. imperialism."<sup>20</sup> Describing the national disavowal of indigenous ways, Vicuña counters, "Some indians leave their place in the high plains, their donkeys and deserts, but I will become an indian and will take the houses, the donkeys and will take myself to the desert." The English translation does not quite capture the sense conveyed by the Spanish of an abandoned identity which the author seeks to recover.<sup>21</sup> Though the way in which the author poses as the inheritor of discarded indigenous ways is problematic in its territorial claiming ("I will take the houses..."), Vicuña will continue to explore the living legacy of Chile's indigenous pasts and presents in productive ways throughout her exilic career, often making connections between Chilean and other indigenous formations throughout Latin America, but also as far away as Australia or Tibet.

Evoking a suppressed history of the Americas, Vicuña henceforth openly references indigenous forms (such as the Incan quipu) in her visual work, and works to embody what she terms "the counter reality of the indigenous societies" in her performance art (Vicuña & Magi 163). Vicuña remained in London until 1975, when she moved to Bogotá; based in Bogotá for the next five years, she traveled and worked throughout Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil during this period of exile, before moving to

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<sup>20</sup> According to Vicuña, "Allende is historically the only government in Chile that gave rights to the indigenous people" (Flores 6).

<sup>21</sup> "Los indios dejan de ser indios y abandonan los poblados del antiplano, los burros y el desierto. pero yo me voy a volver india y voy a tomar las casas y los burros y me voy a ir al desierto."

New York City in 1980. During her time in South America (where she has regularly returned to work, while maintaining a studio in New York), Vicuña extensively studied and participated in a number of activities with indigenous groups. For example, she led a formal workshop in Cauca, Colombia, working with Guambiano adults in Spanish, and ran an informal workshop with Tacuno children in the border town of Leticia, Colombia, communicating through play with stones, sticks and leaves and non-discursive sound games. She is currently involved in a number of aesthetic projects with the Mapuche in (central) Chile and recently co-edited the *Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry* (2009), which presents a counter canon that foregrounds indigenous innovations.<sup>22</sup> Committed to the promotion of Chile's indigenous cultures, Vicuña has also edited an anthology of Mapuche poetry, and is the co-creator of OYSI, a new online resource facilitating the transmission of indigenous forms of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

In a news story published in the Chilean press in 1987, Vicuña reveals that her time in London following the coup was one of personal and political confusion: "After the coup for several years I was lost, dedicated to the study of scientific socialism" (Donoso 45). She describes how the strict study of scientific socialism eventually sickened her with its rationality and exclusion of the more poetic aspects of life. In *Encountering Development* (1995), Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar similarly critiques the way in which the universalizing claims of Marxism render abstract the concrete realities of people's lives, thereby occluding self-representation. For Escobar, the essential problem with Marxism is the way in which it participates in development discourse, naturalizing the field of political economy; like Vicuña, he locates a post-

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<sup>22</sup> See my review of the Oxford anthology. < <https://jacket2.org/reviews/multilingual-latin-american-poetries>>

<sup>23</sup> < <http://www.oysi.org/>>

development alternative in peasant-based models of local culture and economics.

In her move to Bogotá, Colombia, which allowed her to re-connect with the indigenous world of the Americas, Vicuña was able to once again tap into the source of her creative energy. In a 1994 interview she narrates, “When I was in Europe for three years, I found that I was searching for a connection to the earth. I could not find it but when I returned to South America, to Bogotá, I threw myself face down on the earth and kissed it. The earth has an energy, a vitality, in the Americas that I don’t feel elsewhere” (Isbell & Harrison 51). This connection to the earth is performed again and again in Mendieta’s oeuvre, as she repeatedly imprints her body into the earth, leaving traces that recall ancient energy flows. While this compulsive locating of her body in the earth of Iowa and Oaxaca, Mexico has most often been taken as a sign of Mendieta’s sense of un-belonging as exile, this pressing of the body into the landscape is at least as much a sign of connection as disconnection. That is, in Vicuña’s and Mendieta’s body of exilic works, the outlines of a hemispheric identity, that can counter the grief and exclusions of national exile, begin to surface.

Today Vicuña associates her home in New York City with this energy as well, describing the city as “an indigenous territory covered with skyscrapers,” and thus proposing a hemispheric identity comprised on the contested grounds of modernity and indigenusness (Flores 7). In order to detach the notion of experimentation from Eurocentric narratives, Vicuña’s career has been committed to dismantling the binary opposition between modernity and indigenusness. In *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Argentine-born anthropologist Néstor García Canclini “conceive[s] of postmodernity not as a stage or tendency that replaces the modern world,

but rather as a way of problematizing the equivocal links that the latter has formed with the traditions it tried to exclude or overcome in constituting itself” (9). García Canclini’s definition of the postmodern is helpful here because it translates the postmodern breakdown of distinctions between high and low culture to a Latin American context in which the exclusions of modernity are negated through a reconsideration and recuperation of popular art forms. It is my contention that Vicuña’s body of work explores the way in which modernity is simultaneously indebted to, and based on the suppression of, indigenous innovation. Through her complex subaltern positioning, Vicuña seeks to subvert neo-colonial discourses and forms, recovering marginalized histories and subjectivities from within the cauldron of modernity.

There is a critique of Vicuña’s embodying of indigenous practices which circulates among Latin American scholars—whispers of which can be discerned at the mere mention of her name—though it is difficult to find instances of this in print. The basis of this critique, or at least one strand of it, is that Vicuña profits from the fetishistic/exotic interest North American academics take in her portrayals of indigenous culture, and that she furthermore *mis*represents these practices. Underlying these criticisms is an expectation of authenticity which is aroused by the claim of a link to indigenous ontology, whether biological or epistemic; the invocation of indigenous ways of being invalidates the postmodern license to perform less-than-authentic/inauthentic identities, multiple selves. In this critique, then, we discern an anxiety about Western/postmodernist approaches defiling indigenous identity. However, rather than view experimentation as “fundamentally and ideologically tied to a Eurocentric cultural sensibility,” it is also possible to posit, as James Harding and John Rouse do in their



introduction to *Not the Other Avant-Garde* that, “existing histories of the avant-garde have privileged a Eurocentric framing of practices that were always already present in a variety of unacknowledged forms across the spectrum of world cultures” (3).

Insofar as it urges a rethinking of critical distinctions between modernity and indigenesness, Vicuña’s tight-rope performance of the subaltern is productive. Rather than a union of two pure strands, the process of hybridization, for García Canclini, is a “matter of positioning [art and culture] in the unstable, conflictive field of tradition and ‘treason’” (xliv). The criticism that Vicuña misrepresents indigenous (for example, Mapuche) culture is charged with this threat of ‘treason.’ Yet Vicuña is quite straightforward about her ethnic background as the Chilean daughter of parents who identify their ancestry as European, and who, like much of the Chilean population, deny their mixed, indigenous ‘blood’.<sup>24</sup> Her performance of this mestiza identity is less a claim to authenticity than a bodily demonstration of how the indigenous continues to be suppressed in a neoliberal era that celebrates invented indigenous pasts in order to occlude indigenous presents. In *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo points to the history of mestizaje as a racial ideology appropriated by the postcolonial Mexican state as a means of galvanizing nationalist sentiment—despite its continued pursuit of anti-peasant, anti-indigenous policies (191-257). By emphasizing the indigenous roots of her mestiza identity, Vicuña works against the subaltern erasure upon which the neoliberal state, from Mexico to Chile, depends.

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<sup>24</sup> At a 2009 film screening at Rutgers, Vicuña cited the DNA test which she underwent to uncover this family secret.

In her deconstruction of the opposition between modernity and indigenusness, Vicuña refuses romantic, static images of ‘primitive’ or ‘pure’ indigenous subjects. Rather, she presents the indigenous world of the Americas as a dynamic and available, if elusive, alternative to the neoliberal landscape of corporate globalization. And in her turn to the spatial poetics of performance, Vicuña creates a methodology for reading the suppressed social text of the Americas—without claiming to transparently vocalize the subaltern. Yet this is precisely what her critics contest in her work—an inauthentic claim to representation. As in Gayatri Spivak’s observation of a tendency to conflate the political and aesthetic meanings of *representation*,<sup>25</sup> Vicuña’s critics problematically equate aesthetic appropriation, which is intended to gesture towards disappearance, with a claim to political representation. If performance theory enables us to conceive of politics as staging, then performance art can suggest new forms of politics through its acts of re-staging; this re-staging is a space in which the issues of authenticity and clarity that haunt questions of political representation, for example, can be interrogated. Through her precarious performances of cultural memory, Vicuña is less concerned with performing ‘authentic’ modes of indigenusness than in staging the disappeared, so as to suggest alternative models of being. Neither prescriptive, nor claiming an authoritative reading of indigenous culture, these alternative demonstrations aim to inspire the desire to explore what Spivak terms the “counterpossibility” indexed by subaltern struggle (“Can the Subaltern” 287).

Absolutely opposed to depicting indigenous or subaltern cultures in static ways, Vicuña’s work awakens in her audience an awareness of our moment-by-moment

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<sup>25</sup> See Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” for a discussion of the distinct political and aesthetic meanings of *representation*.

participation in a living social text that is infused with indigenous innovations, thus making visible what cannot be vocalized. Describing her own practice, Vicuña states, “In performance, I improvise and combine wild sounds created in the moment with phrases on the page, which are structured as precise poetic compositions” (Flores 10). This improvisatory technique is related to Vicuña’s notion of a deep history that can only be accessed through a flexibility of approach: “...[W]e, as human beings, are moving towards a memory of the future that involves a reconnection with the past” (Flores interview 8). According to Vicuña, our reconnection with this past is increasingly threatened by corporate globalization: “Lands are being taken for mining, for forest destruction, for all kinds of polluting industries that disregard completely any kind of human right, or civil right, or cultural right” (Flores 6). Her position as exile enables Vicuña to construct an indigenous vision of the Americas—not in the service of national identity—that urges transnational solidarity against corporate greed.

### **The Limits of Exilic Participation, 1979-2008**

As part of Vicuña’s Fall 2009 *Water Writing: Anthological Exhibit 1966-2009* at Rutgers University, a loop of five films runs in the intimate gallery space of the Mabel Smith Douglass Library. Two of these revisit Vicuña’s exilic participation in the ‘art actions’ of the Chilean performance group CADA (*Colectivo acciones de arte* or Collective of Art Actions). The first, *Vaso de Leche* (*Glass of Milk*), literally re-constructs a 1979 action that Vicuña performed in the streets of Bogotá.<sup>26</sup> The brief film opens with a shot of a red thread tied around a glass of bright white milk which stands against a blue-gray urban background; the sounds of passerby are indistinct but audible;

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<sup>26</sup> This is the action documented in the *Heresies* issue at the beginning of the chapter.

this is footage shot in NYC in 2008. The film cuts to the silent presentation of archival materials. Vicuña's hands are visible, but not the rest of her body. (The image of the artist's hands delicately touching, almost caressing her materials creates a longing in the viewer to access an irretrievable past.) The film alternates between the direct presentation of documentary footage, sweeping across still photos in close-up, which create an illusion of movement, and the framing of archival materials, such as personal letters and newspaper clippings, displayed in the artist's hands.

The second CADA film, *Parti Si Pasión*, re-creates in the New York of 2008, a 1981 art action that Vicuña performed on the West Side Highway. In the re-enactment, we are privy to the artist's process as she unlooses colored powders from canisters, rhythmically and precisely knocking them loose with a blunt tool, as she writes on pavement. Again, the image of a floodlight announces to the viewer the transition from 21<sup>st</sup>-century re-creation back to historic footage and documentation of the action. At the end of the film, we are presented with a lingering still of a poem in Spanish entitled "Participar" ("To Participate"), which opens, "from afar, what is it? / an illusion or a consolation? / one never knows for sure / what really happened." Distance in time and space unsettles knowing so that the artist is left only with her "good will and intention" since the time of exile when she was "deprived/ of the right and taste/ of participation." Offset from the previous stanza, a single line which reads "PARTE (que dice) SI (ala) PASION" closes the poem. The line literally translates, "PART (which says) YES (to) PASSION," thus breaking down the Spanish word for *participation* (*participación*) to uncover an affirmation. Since *parte* can indicate *part*, *place*, or *party* in Spanish, the line can be interpreted in multiple ways: for example, as the part of, or place within, the exile

that affirms a solitary passion, or as the individual or party who answers the call to social solidarity.

Robert Neustadt documents the history and impact of CADA, from their formation in 1979 to their disbanding in 1985, arguing that through radical performance techniques these artists wedged open a space for counter-hegemonic discourse in Pinochet's Chile. While Lotty Rosenfeld (visual artist), Diamela Eltit (writer), Raúl Zurita (writer), Fernando Balcells (sociologist) and Juan Castillo (visual artist) composed the group's core, their early actions often involved the participation of the Chilean exile community of which Vicuña was a part. The group's rejection of totalizing politics was reflected in its open-ended aesthetics, in which the audience was called upon to complete the artwork. Theorizing their work as "social sculpture," the group writes, "By social sculpture we mean a work and art action that intends to organize, through its intervention, the time and space in which we live, as a means of, first, making them more visible, then later, more livable..." (Neustadt *CADA Día* 39). Working within the repressive framework of the Chilean dictatorial state, CADA resorted to ingenious means of mounting their work, slyly convincing museum guards, business owners, and even former members of the military to collaborate with them. Though the physical traces of many of these ephemeral works have disappeared, their performative legacy is still palpable in the contemporary Chilean art world, according to Neustadt. The important Chilean art critic Nelly Richard positions CADA as "the first historic example of a Chilean vanguard art—as paradigm of an uncompromising commitment between aesthetic experimentalism and political radicalism" (qtd. in Neustadt *CADA Día* 15-16). While I argue a similar case for Vicuña (whom Richard does not include in her discussions of the Chilean avant-garde)

throughout this chapter, her exilic participation in these early actions of CADA has largely been omitted from the group's history.

In *CADA Día*, Neustadt includes a brief statement from Vicuña, in which she discusses her own transnational participation in two of the group's actions. Vicuña opens the statement relating her pleasure and surprise to have been acknowledged as a pioneering predecessor (for her 1971 installation *Otoño*) when first contacted by the group; however, the testimony ends unsure of whether her actual participation in CADA's work was valued. There is a painful sense of irony at play here, since the specific work under discussion (as proposed by CADA) invited a large number of exiles to create a work about (the lack of) participation in Chilean culture from a distance. This was Vicuña's second and final collaboration with CADA, her street action *Parti Si Pasión* (1981). Vicuña ends her statement saying she sent photographs of her work to Chile, but does not know if they were included in the evening of reunited and projected works in Chile. What begins hopefully is threatened with disappearance, suggesting a traumatic pattern of rupture. The mystery surrounding Vicuña's implicit statements of exclusion suggests a past too painful to interrogate further. The dissipation of the ephemeral work (run over by a bicyclist who made "the powder of [the] writing break out in all directions," but not before its photographic documentation) registers the precarious state of this participation (Vicuña statement qtd. in Neustadt 182). In this particular statement, Vicuña breaks down the title of the work to emphasize the sharing of pain which is contained within the Latin *patire*, which means *to suffer*: "Decir sí a la pasión es compartir el dolor" (Neustadt 182). Elsewhere Vicuña translates: "And to parti si pate/ is/ to partake of/ s u f f e r i n g" (*QUIPOem* 57). The idiosyncratic spacing within

words emphasizes the paradoxical distance, and therefore risk, to be found within participation. Participation is neither one thing nor another, but rather encompasses both sharing and suffering. Sensuality is what bridges these polarities, evoking through silence and gesture both the hazards and joys of participation. To risk participation, then, is to risk both visibility and erasure.

While Neustadt does highlight Vicuña's participation in a brief section on international collaborations in his prologue, it seems that the difference in scale between Vicuña's work and that of the Santiago-based collective's, as well as the lack of direct state repression endured from her exilic location, have perhaps contributed to Vicuña's exclusion from most critical dialogues about the group. According to Neustadt, "CADA's actions were massive events—a parade of milk trucks, a squadron of small aircraft from which 400,000 flyers were thrown, graffiti written on walls throughout Santiago..." ("Diamela Eltit" 121). The fragmented nature of Vicuña's exilic participation in the group's first action, *Para No Morir de Hambre en el Arte (So Not to Die of Hunger in Art)*, captures this disjuncture. Based in Bogotá at the time, Vicuña received an invitation to collectively realize a work with CADA. The hasty manner in which she was contacted testifies to the insecure and urgent conditions under which the Santiago-based group organized—conditions which did not facilitate an extended transnational back-and-forth, as the group had to be crafty in seizing whatever opportunities arose to intervene in a severely monitored public sphere. For example, CADA took advantage of knowledge of a museum director's temporary absence to block the entrance to the Palacio de Bellas Artes with an enormous white sheet—incredibly convincing guards that their mounting of the sheet was previously officially approved—

as a part of the milk actions that were united under the *Para No Morir de Hambre en el Arte* concept. It seems that the unexpected and subtle nature of the group's interventions went a long way in gaining them the necessary time, space and (often unsuspecting) collaboration to launch their spectacular actions.

As Neustadt recounts it, the group's first action, *Para No Morir de Hambre en el Arte*, was realized in several phases and locations during the month of October 1979. Milk was the vehicle through which opposition to Pinochet's regime was registered, arousing the memory of a more hopeful period in the action's participants in Santiago. Referencing Allende's "1/2 liter of milk" per child per day program in their labeling of the bags, the group distributed 100 bags of milk to a poor Santiago community, which returned the empty bags upon drinking the milk. The consumption of the milk permitted temporary entry into a suppressed collective past, the absence of which was marked by the drained bags. The depleted bags were then passed on to artists to prepare for a multi-media exhibition, which included video of the action, a taped reading and samples of a poetic "advertisement" taken out by the group in *Hoy*, a popular magazine.

Working from Bogotá, Vicuña adapted the milk concept to her location. In the public sphere in which she intervened, milk functioned as an index of official corruption. Vicuña cites that nearly 2000 children died in Colombia annually from contaminated milk. Perhaps even worse than withholding milk from its citizens, the Colombian government neglected to take action on the poisoning of its most vulnerable constituents. The profit motive at the base of this toxicity implicitly links Vicuña's piece to the suppressed history of Allende's milk program through a counter-example born of greed rather than social solidarity; Bogotá and Santiago are linked through their dual negation



of the optimism of the Allende era.

Working in an appropriative mode similar to her Santiago-based collaborators, Vicuña imitated the look of posters announcing bull fights to publicize her milk action. These posters were scattered throughout Bogotá, as is evident in her 1980 film “What is Poetry?” in which the camera pans over a wall of tattered announcements, in which the remnants of a series of CADA posters is still visible. The posters announced “The spilling of milk under a blue sky” at the site of a monument dedicated to Simón Bolívar.

At first glance, the delicacy of Vicuña’s gesture is in marked contrast to the Santiago-based collective’s spectacular parade of ten milk trucks to the entrance of the Palacio de Bella Arte. Vicuña tied a cord around a glass of milk at the appointed hour and yanked it. In chalk, she wrote the following poem: “The cow/is the continent/whose milk/ (blood)/is spilt.//What are we doing/with life?” The reference to the continent recalls Bolívar’s unfulfilled vision of a united Latin America, free of imperialist intervention, thus linking her act of spilling to the Santiago residents’ act of drinking (both of which index this deferral). While there were only a dozen or so audience members for the action, later that evening a more sizeable crowd of about 100 attended a poetry event at which Vicuña projected images from the performance and informed the audience of simultaneous milk actions in Bogotá, Santiago and Toronto. Though an ephemeral action with a small audience, the photographic documentation of *Vaso de Leche* continues to circulate in Vicuña’s books and exhibitions, toppling the glass of milk again and again, so the minimalistic event gains in significance through citation. Though the specific milk scandal to which Vicuña immediately responded has passed, the cry of spilled milk, which stretched across the continent that fall afternoon in 1979, continues to

resound in this pared down poetry of precarious life.

Yet, there is a discrepancy of dates which disturbs my somewhat neat reading of these transnational actions. In the photographic documentation of Vicuña's action (a series of color prints on posters pinned into the library's gallery walls), the poem written on the sidewalk is dated 26 September 1979. But studying the source documents in Neustadt's *CADA* book, I come across a chronology of milk actions out of sync with this dating. The Santiago-based collective's actions span from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1979. Having received a hurried letter inviting her to join in on a simultaneous, though physically disparate, action, Vicuña claims she immediately accepted, as the theme was particularly relevant in the case of Bogotá where hundreds of children were dying of milk poisoning (qtd. in Neustadt *CADA Día* 181). After the initial invitation, Vicuña must have worked in relative isolation; why else would she not launch her action in coordination with the others? The temporal gap between actions reflects a larger exilic isolation that prevented artists like Vicuña from having a direct impact in Chile. The transnational solidarity of which this work dreams is a past of international collaboration which wants to materialize as a future but is caught in a neoliberal morass.

Vicuña's interminable reproduction of her art actions formally insists the way forward depends on a return to a repressed past. As Juliet Lynd suggests, "the re-presentation of her precarious texts—sculptures, poems, and performances whose transitory nature is designed to reflect the fragility of life and its historical circumstances—remembers and rearticulates the utopian impetus of her earlier works" ("Precarious" 1590). Vicuña's refusal to forget is a form of "anti-imperialist nostalgia," which Jennifer Wenzel defines as "a desire not for a past moment in and for itself but

rather for the past's promise of an alternative present: the past's future" (17). In order to re-imagine the present, we need to recall how a more hopeful past imagined the future—or so Vicuña's oeuvre compels us.

In re-staging the lost CADA actions on film, Vicuña takes her recreation of the past a step further, bringing it into a productive tension with the present. Shooting her re-enactments in downtown New York City in 2008, Vicuña's fragile assertion of her lost tie to the optimism of Allende's Chile haunts the towering 2001 tragedy with the memory of the Chilean September 11th. The scale of loss is vertiginous: the film of spilled milk recalls the forgotten 1979 action, and the 1979 action brought into awareness recalls the 1973 coup. This uncanny reminder of the hemisphere's original September 11<sup>th</sup>, amidst the muffled sounds of passersby, is jarring: as if the milk represents the vague dribble of regret with which the enormous human tragedy of the coup is recalled—if at all—by those of us living in the nation that made that original disaster possible.<sup>27</sup>

The anti-imperialist nostalgia that Vicuña's work models involves expanding what Judith Butler refers to as "the sensuous parameters of reality itself—including what can be seen and what can be heard" (*Frames* xi). In her most recent work, Butler advocates for a coalitional politics that recognizes precarity, or vulnerability to state violence, as a shared, yet differently distributed condition, for solidarity across national borders (*Frames* 28). Writing in the context of the so-called war on terror, Butler objects to the status quo framing of war, which renders some lives grievable and others disposable. The task of an anti-imperialist aesthetics is to disturb this disciplining of the sensible, by expanding what can be seen and heard. Vicuña's practice, in its battle

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<sup>27</sup> The culpability to which I refer here involves both open and covert forms of interference by the U.S. government in its support of counter-revolutionary activities in Allende's Chile.

against forgetting, works its magic at the margins of perception in precisely this way, as the 2008 milk action demonstrates: she haunts our shared reality with forgotten histories and suppressed social forces.

### **Museums and Caves**

Vicuña's performances of cultural memory invoke a notion of site as sacred space. Interestingly, Vicuña links her generation's embrace of performance art to indigenous commitments to specific geographical sites: "...many Latin American artists moved toward performance and began to produce works that interact specifically with place in a way that echoes the indigenous practices" (*Oxford* xxvii). Rather than a 'primitive' or 'nativist' return (of the kind commoditized and perpetuated by the neoliberal market), these avant-garde performance practices signal a cutting-edge, place-based response to neoliberal spatial collapse. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey cites "capital flight, deindustrialization of some regions, and the industrialization of others, [and] the destruction of traditional working-class communities as power bases in class struggles" as "leitmotifs of spatial transformation under more flexible conditions of accumulation" (294). By contrast, site-specific performance art insists on the link between community and place in a manner that (for Vicuña) recalls indigenous epistemologies. While Harvey worries that focusing on the local to the exclusion of the global results in a fragmentary politics that cannot possibly challenge neoliberalism, site-specific performance art, as conceived by Vicuña, Mendieta and others, can channel alternative ways of being, and, in this way, disrupt the neoliberal disciplining of time and space.

The emphasis on the local that indigenous ideology models, and which inspires Latin American site-specific performance art in the late twentieth century, poses an alternative to the neoliberal in its insistence on present ties to a deep (pre-Columbian) history. In *The Postcolonial Aura*, Arif Dirlik argues that the local is “where indigenous ideals of social relationships and relationships to nature may have the most to offer; especially in their challenge to the voracious developmentalism of capitalism” (18). For Dirlik, it is the way in which indigenous ideology harnesses “claims to a different historicity” that makes it efficacious in the face of neoliberal assaults on indigenous ways of life (228). He clarifies that the potential of an indigenous alternative relies on “indigenous ideals as they have been reworked by a contemporary consciousness, where indigenism appears not merely as a reproduction of the past, but as a project to be realized” (18). The way in which Vicuña turns to and makes use of the indigenous in the wake of hemispheric neoliberal erasure certainly suggests such a project.

Yet the subtlety of Vicuña’s political art—which is what, ultimately, makes it so compelling, and allows us to brush up against different ways of observing, participating and knowing—is at odds with mainstream modes of perception. In *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson laments “the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (21). Jameson links this loss of historicity to a spatial experience of time as “a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” devoid of past and future (18). In contrast to the apolitical features that define Jameson’s postmodern, Vicuña’s postmodern art aims to recover the historicity that late capitalism abolishes, by summoning modes of perception antithetical to the distracted consumption of rapid-fire

images and sounds.

An encounter with Vicuña's work at the Museum of Modern Art in the winter of 2011 clarified for me the importance of context for the reception of her work (which is another way of saying the importance of the viewer herself performing cultural memory, so to connect with the artwork more meaningfully). Vicuña's film, *Kon Kon Pi* (2010), was part of a major exhibit entitled *On Line* curated by Catherine de Zegher. Running about thirteen-and-a-half minutes, the film looped without sound on a large suspended screen in a room of Fluxus and minimalist works. After viewing an entire loop, I decided to stay in the room and observe how other museumgoers experienced the film. As might be guessed, most visitors casually glanced at the screen before moving on. Those who were more interested stayed on watching for a few minutes. During the short run of my impromptu experiment (about 3 or 4 loops), no one else watched the film in its entirety.

The experience contrasted markedly to my previous experience with an extended version of the film that Vicuña presented as *Kon Kon* at Rutgers in the fall of 2009. In its extended format, the film is accompanied with dissonant song and flute playing and powerfully presents the loss of place and culture. Vicuña's use of technology to reinvent ritual in the film exemplifies the way in which she disturbs cultural expectations. For García Canclini, hybridization has "made possible a departure from the biological and essentialist discourses of cultural identity, authenticity and purity" and "emerges from individual and collective creativity" as "one seeks to convert a heritage or resource...in order to integrate it to new conditions of production and distribution" (xxvii). In her film *Kon Kon*, Vicuña cites an ancient Andean ritual in which seashells are laid atop Aconcagua, the tallest mountain in the Americas, to celebrate the cycles of water. Earlier

in the film she presented documentary footage shot in 1963 at the base of Aconcagua of the “chino” fisherman’s dance and dissonant flute song. Later, when an isolated laptop computer is filmed atop a mountain ledge playing the footage of the disappeared dance, a new form of postmodern ritual is born in which the past is technologically integrated into the present. Indigenous struggle for survival, as presented in Vicuña’s film, is not outside the instantaneous circuits of capital, but rather, poses a different historicity—from within the inescapable space of the world market.

Similarly, in an earlier scene in which Vicuña produces beautiful sounds out of a plastic water bottle as she lays flowers on an ancient gravesite, she retools the technology of the present to make visible the past. When later in the film we learn that a refinery has been built on the site of an ancient cemetery at Con-cón, we are haunted by the image of the plastic bottle (this un-discarded instrument derived from the oil that blackens the sea) and the mournful phrase “black plastic” which we had jotted down upon hearing, not yet knowing to what toxicity it specifically referred. We did not know the extent to which the poet countered pollution with her song, her lips pressed to the contaminated bottle.

As presented in the MOMA environment though, what most viewers most likely walked away with was an abstract (and short-lived) memory of a gorgeous choreography of materials in nature. The unspun lines of wool, in shades of pink, red and orange, that dance in the wind and are ultimately released into the sea will most likely not be connected to the brief flash of text at the beginning of the video that “the sea is dying/ the dunes are being destroyed.” The spatial metaphor of the unspun wool as the umbilical cord of the sea will not translate. For those who happen to see the footage of cranes, tires and boots in the last couple minutes of the abbreviated film, perhaps a sense of industry

defiling nature will register. The specifics of oil refineries displacing fisherman and the denial of indigenous culture in official Chilean society will go unnoted. Only beauty, and perhaps its desecration, will be marked.

Given the exhibit's formal concern with 'the line' it is not surprising that Vicuña's film, in this abstracted form, loses its political bite. What this example perhaps most clearly illustrates is the trend towards the de-politicization of works from the global South when circulated in the international art market—as if the demand for context is somehow an admission of lesser aesthetic value, rather than a sign of the vast ignorance of a consumer-oriented culture. Even works critical of the exploitative practices of globalization (such as Vicuña's film) are subject to a streamlining process that dispossesses the work of its local and critical content.

Vicuña relies on a poetic vocabulary to describe her material constructions so as to involve her audience in the process of meaning-making; it is our job to decipher her spatial codes. The photographs of Vicuña's first ephemeral, site-specific installation have been re-presented in numerous retrospective poetry collections and exhibitions in the intervening decades. This shifting archive, which refuses to stay still, invokes the language of poetics and ritual to negate the function of the commoditized art object and/or reified text. In order to do so though, something more than a casual glance is required of us. That is we must accept the invitation to participate in the precarious performance of reconstructing cultural memory. In the frailest of Vicuña's constructions, entirely new ways of being call out to us—but they require we slow down, and expand our sensuous relationship to reality.



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Mendieta's naked body, over the course of a decade, slowly disappears from the scenes of her outdoor performances: she creates her first earth-body work in 1973, but by the end of the 1970s, it is exclusively the silhouette or trace of her body, rather than the flesh itself, which appears for documentation. The lush color photographs of her naked body interred in mud, pressed up against the bark of trees, or buried under flowers, give way to images of bodily forms evacuated of her flesh, if not her presence. Most of these earth-body works are staged in Iowa and Oaxaca (where Mendieta went on four extended trips with the University of Iowa Summer Multi-Media program between 1973 and 1978) (Blocker 92). Yet, it is Mendieta's sculptural works in the natural limestone caves of Jaruco Park outside Havana that most forcefully capture the heightened exilic structure of feeling that the neoliberal era ushers in.

Mendieta executed the Rupestrian Sculpture series in 1981, during her second trip to Cuba, on a Guggenheim fellowship. During this excursion she met up with an important group of young Cuban artists involved in the "Volumen Uno" show, which announced the emergence of a new experimental art movement on the island. Adapting to the sediment formations already present in the rock walls, Mendieta carved these life-size goddess figures in a deliberately 'primitive' style. Their location is linked to the anti-colonial history Mendieta references in her Black Venus submission to *Heresies*: the Jaruco caves and stairs on which Mendieta executes her carvings historically served as shelter for independence fighters and fugitive slaves (Blocker 102). Yet, these carvings aim to reach even further back, to the island's indigenous cultures, the Taíno and

Ciboney.

Though similar in size to the *Siluetas Series*, the Rupestrian sculptures do not trace Mendieta's actual body. Rather than imprint herself on the landscape, the artist seems to uncover these female figures from the rock formations themselves, gently chiseling their forms for definition. She names her sculptures after pre-Columbian goddesses of Cuban myth. Given her intensive study of pre-Hispanic cultures while in Cuba, it is likely that Mendieta modeled her figures after indigenous pictographs. Mendieta even hoped that visitors to the park might mistake the sculptures for authentic pre-Columbian artifacts (Viso 86).

This desire for dissimulation indexes a radical act of self-erasure that revises the narrative of Mendieta's lifelong search for a site of disappeared origins in important ways. Rather than an exclusive feature of the Cuban-American exile community, Mendieta's assertion of entirely lost cultures and ways of being in the carvings reveals the truly hemispheric nature of her project. What distinguishes Mendieta's recovery of goddess culture from other similar gestures of second wave feminism is the way in which her goddesses are signs of hemispheric genocide—her goddesses stand-in for a way of life destroyed by European imperialism. Her carvings summon these deep histories in a manner that situates Cuba as a possible exemption from the logic of neoliberal development. However, despite Mendieta's many returns to the island over the course of the next several years, there is nothing in her work to suggest that Cuba is exempt; ironically enough, a number of the sculptures were later “destroyed when the porous rock was quarried for use as a construction material” (Viso 89). Her earthworks henceforth might be taken as representative of the radical deterritorialization that neoliberalism

reveals to be the hemisphere's lost origin. This is a loss that finally her beautiful body, steeped in mud, submerged in icy water, or drenched in blood, cannot reverse.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Transnational Poetics: Location, Body, Nation

In the fall of 1983 U.S. poet Adrienne Rich spoke at a forum on “Women in Struggle” in New York City.<sup>28</sup> She had recently returned from Nicaragua (where the CIA was funding counterrevolutionary raids on the Sandinista government), and had been invited to speak about her experience there. In this talk Rich cites the women she had been meeting in the U.S. “from Argentina, Puerto Rico, [and] Chile who were feminists and political dissenters” and describes the trip to Nicaragua as only the latest stage in her “hemispheric education” (*BBP* 161). An anthology of Cuban women’s poetry (edited by Margaret Randall) prepares her for the journey: “It was partly because of that book [*Breaking the Silences*] that I went to Nicaragua” (*BBP* 184). In another talk given that year Rich testifies, “I...wanted to get a sense of what art might mean in a society committed to values other than profit and consumerism” (*BBP* 185). Though only lasting for a brief period in the summer of 1983, it is now clear that Rich’s firsthand witnessing of the unfolding Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua was central to her theorization and development of a politics and poetics of location.

At a time when collective struggles throughout the hemisphere were being undermined by new international forces of capital, Rich turned her attention to Latin America. Throughout the 1980s the U.S. played a leading role in funding rightwing mercenaries and death squads that promised to eliminate the threat of leftist guerillas taking power in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Rich’s politics of

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<sup>28</sup> Reprinted as “North American Tunnel Vision” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* [henceforth *BBP*] (1986).

location directly responds to this situation in its “struggle for accountability” (*BBP* 211). Rather than assert patriarchy as the overarching form of domination in society, Rich carefully teases out the omissions of such a stance, incorporating third world feminism’s analysis of interlocking oppressions into her critique of the nation.

In this chapter, I move out from Rich’s poetics of location to the analysis of works by two other major hemispheric poets writing at the juncture of feminist and postcolonial critiques of the nation.<sup>29</sup> As poets of Afro-Caribbean descent, both Trinidadian-Canadian poet Dionne Brand and Cuban poet Nancy Morejón map the Americas as a transnational space of diaspora. In my readings of the poetry I argue that Rich, Brand and Morejón take advantage of the way in which contemporary globalization strains the relationship between the nation-state and national culture in order to write an anti-imperialist poetics that problematizes the links between land, language and race. Migration, anti-colonial struggle, and the global economy are filtered through local lenses that do not neatly align with nation. These poets embrace historical and cultural particularity as the means of reaching audiences beyond their respective national borders, and thus assert the local as a dynamic (rather than static) site of globalization.

Rejecting the masculinist rhetoric of the national body figured as female—whether to be conquered in the imperial vision, or defended in the anti-colonial—Rich, Brand and Morejón re-map the Americas through their representations of bodies and histories in motion. In her antiwar poem, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” (1991), Rich responds to the first U.S. intervention in Iraq by recovering a radical history of U.S. social movements that enables her to articulate a transnational audience of intimates.

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<sup>29</sup> Dionne Brand currently serves as the Poet Laureate of Toronto and Nancy Morejón has recently been referred to as the “most prominent poet in Cuba today” (P. González 954).

Brand similarly draws on tropes of intimacy to translate a historical longing for revolution in her poems dedicated to the female revolutionaries of Grenada in *No Language is Neutral* (1990). Bypassing a direct critique of the nation, Morejón rewrites the history of the Cuban Revolution from the perspective of an African diaspora in *Where the Island Sleeps like a Wing* (1985), the first bilingual anthology of her poetry. Through their emphasis on the lived experience of revolution and political struggle, these feminist poets bring the body into globalization discourse, challenging the universalizing abstractions of neoliberalism.

Poetry serves as an alternative model of transnational exchange in the work of these poets. In their co-edited collection *Minor Transnationalism*, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih distinguish between the transnational as “a space of exchange and participation...where it is still possible for cultures to be produced without necessary mediation by the center” and globalization as a hegemonic logic that “assumes a universal core or norm” (5). Lionnet and Shih assert that while transnationalism “is part and parcel of globalization,” it also “can be less scripted and more scattered” (5). The transnational connections that Rich, Brand and Morejón pursue in their poetry lead them to invoke repressed hemispheric histories so as to reconfigure their own locations through language. In this way, they imagine transnational networks that defy the universalizing logic of globalization.

### **The Poetics of Location**

The need to account for a postmodern landscape that collapses borders for capital while deepening fissures of race, class and sex between people and nations, urges a

rethinking of privilege in the poetry and prose of Adrienne Rich in the early 1980s. In her now seminal essay, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” (1984), Rich counters the deterritorialization of capital by locating geopolitical histories of domination in the body: “I need to recognize how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create” (*BBP* 212). Taking responsibility for one’s location is the precursor to forming alliances across difference; identity is limiting only insofar as it is denied. The dual emphasis on “created and trying to create” accounts for both the undeniable aspects of identity and the desire to form bonds across difference. As has previously been noted, Rich addresses the problematic erasure of racial and class differences within the white feminist movement, echoing and elaborating upon crucial interventions of feminists of color in the U.S.<sup>30</sup> What has not been as closely examined is how Rich’s encounters with national difference shaped her politics of location.

Rich describes her trip to Nicaragua as revelatory; no longer is it sufficient to see herself as nationless feminist (part of a global sisterhood) critical of her government’s excesses:

I traveled then to Nicaragua, where, in a tiny impoverished country, in a four-year-old society dedicated to eradicating poverty, under the hills of the Nicaragua-Honduras border, I could physically feel the weight of the United States of North America, its military forces, its vast appropriations of money, its mass media, at my back; I could feel what it means, dissident or not, to be part of that raised boot of power, the cold shadow we cast everywhere to the south. (*BBP* 220)

In Nicaragua, Rich is made viscerally aware of her location—whether “dissident or not” she is “part of that raised boot of power.” Suddenly, transnational solidarity, in the case of a U.S. citizen, involves more than a critique of one’s own government; it necessitates

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<sup>30</sup> Rich specifically cites the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherríe Moraga, among others.

recognition of one's site of resistance. In this way, Rich's politics of location anticipates Latin American scholar Walter Mignolo's theory of a "locus of enunciation." Emerging as a concept in the early 1990s—a time during which the relevance of postcolonial theory to Latin American studies was being debated within the US academy—the locus of enunciation has been defined as "the disciplinary, geocultural and ideological space from which discourses of power and resistance are elaborated" (Moraña et al 3). In elaborating the opposition of Latin American scholars to postcolonial theory, "the locus of enunciation" of metropolitan postcolonial scholars is cited to challenge the way in which knowledge production in the North occludes scholarship produced in the global South (Moraña et al 313). Rich's emphasis on location thus looks forward to the call of U.S.-based Latin American scholars to be attentive to alternative sites and sources of knowledge production.

Once in Nicaragua, Rich realized that for her own feminist politics to develop it was more important for her to listen to the "women and men dedicated to creating a new Nicaraguan society" than to push her own U.S.-based feminist agenda (*BBP* 157). Learning to listen for the feminist priorities emerging from the revolutionary process in Nicaragua, rather than trying to force discussion of issues pressing to feminists in the U.S. (such as abortion), was a crucial steppingstone to Rich's politics of location. Teaching herself to think feminism from a different location, Rich describes the pain of political growth: "While there, I went through moments of feeling contradictions—both within feminism and within the Sandinista revolution—like a physical pain: not just the sensation of being torn apart, but also of long-severed pieces wrenching back together" (*BBP* 156). The way in which Rich locates politics in the body suggests a revolutionary



mode of registering affect based in a feminist politics, but which also echoes the visceral language of Frantz Fanon's brilliant writings on the process of decolonization. (It is precisely the use of this kind of affectively-charged language to explore their own shifting politics which compels me to think about the poetry of Rich, Brand and Morejón in unison.) Torn between her desire to support the political priorities of the feminist movement she helped build in the U.S., while learning different priorities from the women and men struggling for a more egalitarian society in Nicaragua, Rich recognizes that a theory of location is necessary to counter the national chauvinism of U.S. feminism.

In her focus on location, Rich also discovers a way out of the limited "Can poetry matter?" debate within the U.S.<sup>31</sup> Deeply impressed by the significant role poetry plays within the struggling societies of Nicaragua and Cuba at this time, Rich rejects the North American bias against "mixing politics with art" (which, of course, she'd already denied for decades in her feminist poetics) and begins to imagine how poetry can play a similar galvanizing role across gender, class and race divides in the U.S. (178). She envisions poetry as a "precious resource" that is nevertheless marginalized in the U.S. because it is "separated from the social fabric" (185). John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman's account of the role of poetry in the revolutions in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador confirms Rich's sense that poetry played a crucial role not only as "a means of politics but also a model for it" (Beverley & Zimmerman xiii). Poetry in these revolutionary societies was at the forefront of "defining new paradigms of the relationship between the intelligentsia and popular classes," according to Beverley and Zimmerman (xiii). Rich's poetics of

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<sup>31</sup> See Piotr Gwiazda's "'Nothing Else Left to Read': Poetry and Audience in Adrienne Rich's 'An Atlas of the Difficult World'" (2005) for a detailed account of this debate.

location similarly labors to re-conceptualize the relationship between poet and audience in the context of the U.S.

### **Where is Rich's Audience?**

In "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," Rich declares a strategy of writing "against lofty and privileged abstraction....against the idolatry of pure ideas, the belief that ideas have a life of their own and float above the heads of ordinary people" (213). Rich's description of the dangers of abstraction resonates with David Harvey's analysis of how neoliberalism achieved hegemony "as a mode of discourse" (*A Brief History* 3). Neoliberal governing was able to win broad consensus in the 1980s precisely by veiling its operations of "accumulation by dispossession" in the rhetoric of 'individual freedom,' according to Harvey (*A Brief History* 159).<sup>32</sup> As Harvey demonstrates, the counterpart to the market ethic of short-term contracts is "the disposable worker" (169). By bringing our attention back to the material existence of this figure, poets like Rich trace the redistribution of wealth from poor to rich (at both the intra-national and inter-national levels) that the language of 'individual freedom' mystifies, and in doing so, counter the increasing commodification of all social relations.

Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World" (1991) opens with an image of "A dark woman, head bent, listening for something" as she picks strawberries (142, line 1). Rather than the human voice for which she listens, the woman is greeted by the "voice of the freeway, night after night, metal streaming downcast/ past eucalyptus, cypress, agribusiness empires/ THE SALAD BOWL OF THE WORLD, gurr of small planes/

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<sup>32</sup> The four main features of "accumulation by dispossession" in the neoliberal era, according to Harvey, are: privatization and commodification of public assets, financialization, management and manipulation of crises, and state redistributions (160-163).

dusting the strawberries” (142, lines 3-6). The migrant laborer described in these opening lines is part of the audience for which Rich imagines writing against the deafening traffic of the neoliberal landscape. The straining gesture of the woman testifies to the poet’s uncertainty of whether her words will ever reach her intended audience (the audience which she attempts to bring into being in the poem’s concluding dedications).

The violence of the exigencies of profit, the raining down of pesticides here, is juxtaposed to the intimacy between woman and landscape. The poem’s long opening sentence continues, “...each berry picked by a hand,/ in close communion, strawberry blood on the wrist,/ Malathion in the throat, communion,/ the hospital at the edge of the fields,/ prematures slipping from unsafe wombs,/ the labor and delivery nurse on her break watching/ planes dusting rows of pickers” (142, lines 6-12). In the twelve cascading lines of this opening sentence, Rich establishes the complex and shifting terrain upon which she will attempt to reach her audience. Structured in thirteen sections, many of which are internally divided, the poem is continually searching for the ground from which it can stand to project a voice capable of “communion,” of true exchange, in the face of dehumanizing abstraction. These opening lines seek to make material the perversity of laboring bodies (and bodies in labor) exposed to the toxicity of “agribusiness empires” through the poet’s use of a sacrificial, blood-tinged language. The naming of the poison entering the woman’s body (“Malathion”) grates against the beauty of the image of the woman’s strawberry-stained wrist, and gets caught in the sub-vocalizing reader’s throat, keeps us from getting lost in the strawberry fields.

The poem’s formal restlessness, the sense that each section is a new beginning, relays the poet’s difficulty in mapping the nation-in-flux. The poem’s second section

begins “Here is a map of our country:” and goes on to list toxic sites, Civil War battlefields, sites of labor struggle, as well as centers of capital (144, line 78). The section closes, “I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural/ then yes let it be these are small distinctions/ where do we see it from is the question” (144, lines 98-100). Distinctions between geography (the map) and art (the mural) are blurred, so that the poem’s continually shifting perspective is foregrounded as constitutive of its formal construction. The lines also call attention to how perspective is embodied, a product of the seer’s location, denying the false objectivity of cartography. The expressive or subjective content of the mural is no less reliable than that of the map (once its point of view is acknowledged). It is not the products, but the acts of mapping or tracing that they enable, which are valued here.

The construct of the nation comes under heaviest pressure in the poem’s eleventh section, in which the poet contemplates the meaning of citizenship in a time of war. References to the first Gulf War are scattered throughout the poem, marking a sense of occasion for the poet’s words: “Flags are blossoming now where little else is blossoming/ and I am bent on fathoming what it means to love my country” (155, lines 407-408). Resonant with the multiple references to the misuses of language in the poem, there is an attempt to reclaim the word *patriot* as compatible with dissent: “A patriot is not a weapon. A patriot is one who wrestles for the soul of her country, / as she wrestles for the soul of her own being, for the soul of his country” (156, lines 428-429). Often quoted in discussions of the poem, these lines, in conjunction with the final section of dedications, are taken as signaling the limits of the poet’s quest: Piotr Gwiazda argues that the poem “addresses the question of American identity primarily through its

envisioning of the poetry audience in the United States” (167); Margaret Dickie writes of “the country [Rich] would unite in addressing” (qtd. in Gwiazda 166); and Joshua Jacobs concludes that “Rich allows an unbounded readership access to the means of national self-definition”(748). While Jacob’s notion of an “unbounded readership” moves us in the right direction, even he misses the transnational scope of the poem, whose title alerts us to think on a global or inter-national, rather than purely national, level. Similarly, Lin Knutson does not go far enough: she aptly puts Rich’s poetry into conversation with postcolonial and globalization theory, but her recurrent recourse to the notion of an ‘America’ limited to the boundaries of the United States misses an essential component of the “Atlas” project. Knutson writes, “Rich remaps America to include the responsibility of its citizens to the dispossessed within its borders” (106). In addition to the problematic erasure of the rest of the Americas that comes with the use of ‘America’ to denote the United States, Knutson’s emphasis on responsibility within the borders of the nation-state unnecessarily confines the poet’s vision.

To treat this antiwar poem as limited in its search to an ‘American’ audience diminishes the force of Rich’s poetics of location. Yes, there is an American audience the poet addresses in her search for accountability, but she does not imagine her audience as contained within the artificial borders of the nation state. To unselfconsciously refer to an ‘American’ audience in the wake of Rich’s ‘hemispheric education’ (as most critics do) is to misread the poetry. The poet’s goal is not to cement (or even create an alternative) national identity in a time of crisis, but to thoroughly trouble the notion of national identity. As Gwiazda states, “The question [for Rich] is whether, under the homogenizing effects of late capitalism, poetry can fulfill the need for individual

expression and create the conditions for multicultural exchange” (179). This exchange, however, is not limited to containment within the nation state; it is precisely such nationalist thinking that Rich seeks to undermine in her country’s jingoistic moment. There is nothing to keep us from imagining the readers addressed in the final section of dedications as living in Baghdad, for example. In fact, it is a multilingual, transnational audience the poem craves, amidst its calls for ‘American’ accountability.

The “patriot” section ends on the figure of the “internal emigrant...the most homesick of all women and of all men” (156, line 436). If we see this “internal emigrant” as a stand-in for the poet (which I do), then it is possible to read “An Atlas of the Difficult World” as a performance of psychic exile that urges the poet to imagine a new community of readers bound together despite problems of literacy and translation. It is not that the poet seeks to erase difference through her performance of shared exile, but rather that she restlessly seeks those moments of solidarity which can materialize a different future. It is not the work of the poem to imagine this future, but rather to claim a constantly shifting ground on which the future can stand.

The poem’s final section of dedications opens “I know you are reading this poem”; this is the refrain that stitches together the audience the poem imagines (157, line 457). While the different dedications move across vast locales, there is nothing to suggest that the poem’s readers should be imagined as strictly abiding within the nation-state, as most critics of the poem assume. Though the addressed readers—even those tuning into broadcasts from the “*intifada*,” or those struggling because “this poem...is not in your language”—could all be located within the United States, the poet’s project, based as it is in gestures of solidarity, more likely imagines a transnational circuit of

readers (158, lines 475, 487). While the poem obsesses over the question of accountability at the national level, this is precisely because it seeks to make its connections across national bounds. As William Waddell observes, the poet “textually rescues figures, imagined and historical, often erased from the American story, giving them their place, and projecting a community beyond imperialism’s boundaries” (96).

By acknowledging the disparate locations of her readers, yet bringing them together through her repetitions of “I know you are reading this...,” the poet imagines a community united by the need for poetry, without erasing or universalizing its participants’ differences. As Harriet Davidson argues, the politics of location is what enables Rich’s poetic breakthrough: “Location, for Rich, becomes a way to think community and difference simultaneously” (168). Poetry itself serves as the basis for solidarity, or connection across differences, here; it speaks to our most fragile, yet life-affirming, values. The nakedness of the image of the “stripped” reader, on which the poem ends, alludes to the risk inherent in seeking connections with strangers, which is precisely what poetry, by its conception of a sympathetic audience, models (158, line 493). The final sentence reads: “I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else left to read/ there where you have landed, stripped as you are” (158, lines 492-3). Location, or where we have “landed” defines who we are, but does not limit our possibilities for connection to that physical or discursive space.<sup>33</sup> It is in the modeling of connection among strangers that the poet offers a political alternative to the neoliberal model of the pursuit of individualism.

As in Beverley and Zimmerman’s depiction of the poetry of the Central American

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<sup>33</sup> As Davidson explains, “Location, for Rich, involves more than a merely physical spot; a ground is also discursive...” (167).

Revolutions of the 1980s as not only “a means of politics but also a model for it,” Rich’s poetry also seeks to enable radical politics at the site of her locus of enunciation. But in the absence of a revolutionary situation, such as the one in Nicaragua in the 1980s, what role can poetry play? This is where we come up against the limits of Rich’s project, which imagines an audience it cannot yet directly reach. The poem circles back to where it began, its penultimate address calling us back to the image of the migrant worker through the repetition of “listening”: “I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn between bitterness and hope/ turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse” (158, lines 490-491). Yet, in this instance the poem opens out to all readers, who, in their anticipatory “listening,” are precariously bound to the woman picking strawberries. Here, the poet offers an alternative model of exchange, based on the most fragile of connections: beyond the demystification of consumption (which tracing the fruit back to its source enables), the poet uncovers a common need for the work of poetry.

The danger of such a vision is the evaporation of all difference into some sort of universal claim about the need for poetry in our lives; however, the specificity of the dedications themselves, forestalls the danger. The way in which the poet rejects the assumption that her language will be her readers’ native language, for example, anticipates a readership based in an incipient political desire for connection: “I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language/ guessing at some words while others keep you reading/ and I want to know which words they are” (158, lines 487-489). The poem itself is only the beginning of an exchange, a way of uncovering desire, or surfacing that which has been repressed. The dedications demonstrate the poet’s embrace



of the risk that her effort will be misunderstood, that the audience she seeks may not materialize; yet the repetition of the phrase “I know you are reading this poem” is like a mantra that wills this audience into being, establishes the intimacy which solidarity demands.

### **Brand’s ‘Internal Emigrant’**

Whether writing from her native Trinidad or her exilic Toronto, the speaker of Brand’s *No Language is Neutral* embodies and extends Rich’s figure of the ‘internal emigrant.’ In the title sequence of *No Language Is Neutral* (1990), Brand performs the historic vicissitudes of what Édouard Glissant terms coming into Relation. Describing her native Trinidad, the poet opens the sequence with a vision of place (and its naming) inseparable from race: “No language is neutral. I used to haunt the beach at/ Guaya, two rivers sentinel the country sand, not/ backra white but nigger brown sand” (22, lines 1-3). The introduction of the vernacular in the third line locates the speaker in and of the landscape. Slipping between Standard English and Trinidadian Creole English, the speaker switches between registers of speech to illustrate the principle that “no language is neutral.”<sup>34</sup> Metonymic of the island’s colonial history, not even the “country sand” escapes a classed racialization. The white sand associated with the slave-owning class, the speaker returns to the “nigger brown sand” as a figure of haunting. The haunting an action of the past (“I used to haunt”) the speaker physically distances herself from the beach, even as she psychically returns to the site of *marronage*. The absence of “backra white” sand marking a space outside the plantation system, she imaginatively transmutes

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<sup>34</sup> Brand borrows her title from Derek Walcott’s “Midsummer LII.” While Walcott’s poem describes the wide umbrella of the tree of English, Brand’s poem asserts, “No/ language is neutral seared in the spine’s unraveling” (*No* 23).

the beach into the site of a fugitive slave community.

The doubled haunting of the speaker—that is her psychic return, through poetry, to a site geographically charged with historical memory—suggests the complicated terrain of her exile. Even in memory she is belated; as an ‘internal emigrant’ she haunted a beach ghosted by escaped slaves. (The displacements are dizzying: the speaker’s slave ancestors are kidnapped from their African communities and sent to the West Indies; a number of the enslaved escape to form a site of refuge outside the plantation system but within the nation; the speaker haunts the beach searching for traces of this oppositional community; the speaker reflects on this historic process from her diasporic location in Toronto.) Writing from elsewhere, it is to this original desire for escape that the speaker returns. She cites “history which has taught my eyes to/ look for escape” (22, lines 13-14). In the following poem she will describe the ocean as a “way out and not anything of beauty, tipping turquoise/ and scandalous” (23, lines 13-14). The act of leaving home cannot be plotted linearly, but rather unfolds jaggedly. The role of water in this historical drama is crucial: the rivers “sentinel” the space of *marronage*, the ocean is sign of both enslavement and freedom. The ambivalence of these bodies of water is akin to the crossing flows of the poem’s linguistic waters: “It was as if a signal burning like a fer de lance’s/ sting turned my eyes against the water even as love/ for this nigger beach became resolute” (22, lines 20-22). The beauty of the landscape is irrevocably marred by the legacy of slavery, which both forms and distorts the language the speaker uses to describe her native land. To leave, the speaker will have to cross water, yet the trope she employs for leaving is turning her sight against the water, suggesting that water, the route of escape, is the substance that composes place. The imagery is circular because the

traveling is so; there is no escape from history, nor would the speaker will it so. What the beach figures is a mode of diaspora—a common desire for escape from exclusion and into community that unites, but does not cancel out, disparate elements. The “signal burning” recalls the clandestine signaling of runaway slaves that haunts the speaker even as she haunts the beach.

For the diasporic subject, uncertainty about leaving the homeland is tied up with the problem of community. According to Silvio Torres-Saillant: “Tension, hesitation, ambivalence, even the desire to escape, stem naturally from the archipelago’s traumatic history” (67). For Brand’s speaker, the emphasis on her “love for this nigger beach” defines the homeland as space of community;<sup>35</sup> her leaving, at the same time, suggests that the community is fractured (as does her haunting of the beach at Guaya). She wanders the beach alert to traces of independent communities of runaway slaves. On the other side of escape, in Toronto, the stirrings of community are drenched in ambivalence. As the Grenada poems illustrate, it will literally take a revolutionary leap to ground the speaker in community.

In an essay about her time in Grenada, the poet declares, “I could not live in the uneasiness of conquest and enslavement and it didn’t seem to me that paths with even the merest suggestion of acceptance of these could lead me out. I could not choose to do anything but fling myself at the hope that the world could be upturned” (*Bread out of Stone* 96). The desire for revolution is intimately tied up with an embodied sense of history for Brand. In the “no language is neutral” sequence, the speaker’s consciousness melds with that of her ancestors so that her love/hatred of the land and desire for escape

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<sup>35</sup> Jason Wiens convincingly argues that the appropriation of the word ‘nigger’ here establishes a “contestational dialogue between the speaker’s clearly affectionate usage and the echoes of its violent history” (88).

is enmeshed with the historic experience of her family, distant and near. She imagines, “To hate this, they must have been/ dragged through the Manzanilla spitting out the last/ spun syllables for cruelty, new sound forming,/ pushing toward lips made to bubble blood (23, lines 2-5). Brand presents the story of slavery in the West Indies as a narrative of forced poetics; the language developed by the African slaves brought to the New World is forged in violence. According to Glissant, a forced poetics occurs when “a need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression” (*Caribbean* 120). Brand asserts that the terror of the slave trade necessitated a new language: “a morphology of rolling chain and copper gang/ now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air/ rudiment this grammar” (23, lines 19-21). Language here is born of a “collective desire for expression that, when it manifests itself, is negated at the same time because of the deficiency that stifles it, not at the level of desire, but at the level of expression, which is never realized” (Glissant *Caribbean* 120). The deficiency inherent in the speech of the speaker’s slave ancestors arises from their need to accommodate to a common tongue that does not acknowledge their most basic humanity. Linguistic innovation is necessary to “cut across one language in order to attain a form of expression that is perhaps not part of the internal logic of this language” (Glissant *Caribbean* 121). Language ties the speaker to her ancestors; it is this common desire for escape which the vernacular registers in Brand’s poetry. The poem participates in, or rather seeks to commune with, the “idiom/ and hot core” which was the slaves’ hushed talk at night (23, lines 23-24).

The poet projects from “some damn memory half-eaten/ and half hungry” (23, lines 1-2). This notion of memory as both lack (“half-eaten”) and desire (“half hungry”) shapes the speaker’s relationship to language, so that sound becomes the vehicle by

which she is able to access the revolutionary memory of her ancestors. The prose-like form of the sequence recalls Glissant's description of spoken Creole as "the continuous rush of language that makes speech into one impenetrable block of sound" (*Caribbean* 124). The poem's rhythm is determined first and foremost by the speaker's breath, which is dense and hurried, as if to evade overhearing. Glissant traces the development of Creole languages to a "strategy of trickery," a means of clandestine speech among blacks in the presence of whites (*Caribbean* 21). In this way, the speaker's breathy form links her in a bodily manner to the history she struggles to recall. The effect is one of urgent telling; the reader is invited to listen carefully: "Take what I tell you" (23, line 21). Brand constructs an audience available to the subterranean pull of history.

Though the telling is urgent, it is not ephemeral; the poems are patient, waiting for us to find them. They are like the photograph of the ex-slave to which the poem preceding the sequence is dedicated: "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater" asserts that self-portraiture can be an act of defiance that awaits its proper audience. Just as Mammy Prater waited until she was 115 years old to strike the exact pose that would cut through to the poet, the poet assembles her materials deliberately, simultaneously exhibiting restraint and resistance. The fantasy that the photographed woman anticipated the poet—"she planned it down to the day,/...this moment of/ my turning the leaves of a book,/ noticing, her eyes"—is a dream the poet passes on to her readers, suggesting she has been waiting for us (19, lines 12-19). While Brand's immediate audience for these poems might be the Toronto Black Women's Collective (whom she credits for listening on the copyright page), the book seeks out a wider revolutionary audience.

Though time and geographical distance separate the speaker from the lives of the

women she writes, she moves through her breath to make this contact: “I in the/ middle of a plane ride now a good century from their/ living or imagination, around me is a people I will/ only understand as full of ugliness that make me/ weep full past my own tears and before hers” (24). The speaker connects her life in exile to the lives of her ancestors, hardly pausing to link their century to hers with a comma. Similarly, her weeping extends past her current moment to envelop a history both she and her female ancestors share. As readers, we wonder who these “people...full of ugliness” are, and, if we are seduced by the poetry, want to imagine ourselves nothing like them—we gravitate to the sensual intelligence of the speaker instead. Yet, in this liminal state, the speaker is neither of the past nor of the present—alienated from those in her present, she turns to a past she can only imagine, in order to live. The condition of exile *is* the problem of living: “it’s hard to remember waiting so long to live” (31, line 25). Living, for the exile, is an act of imagination, impossible in the absence of collectivity.

Suspended in air between states (both literal and metaphoric), the speaker focuses on the history of a character named Liney, presumably her great-grandmother on her mother’s side. For the remainder of the sequence, the poet labors to get back to Liney as a way of piecing together her family’s history: “Why I always have to go back to that old woman [Liney] who/ wasn’t even from here but from another barracoon, I/ never understand but deeply as if something that/ have no end” (24). The speaker is drawn to this history in a bottomless sense, suggesting her own suspended state. The use of “barracoon” (a term for slave barracks) to denote location signals Liney’s importance not only as a local figure but as emblematic of the passage from slavery into something else. For Glissant, “creolization” is a process that encompasses the “metamorphosis” of

victims of the slave trade “into something different, into a new set of possibilities” (*Caribbean* 14). His emphasis is on the dynamic nature of this process as opposed to an “ethnographic approach” that insists on “fixing the object of scrutiny in static time” (14). This “new set of possibilities” is what the speaker looks for in Liney.

The poet’s striving to recover Liney’s life accelerates her language so that (auto)-biography is only possible at a speed which threatens its very coherence. The poet is unsure of her own capabilities: “History will only hear you if you give birth to a/ woman who smoothes starched linen in the wardrobe/drawer, trembles when she walks and who gives birth/ to another woman who cries near a river and/ vanishes and gives birth to a woman who is a/ poet, and, even then” (26). The weeping woman is revealed to be the poet’s mother in the following stanza, assuring us the “poet” referred to in these lines is in fact the speaker. The way in which the speaker’s genealogy is linked to Liney’s is not transparent, though the suggestion here is that Liney is her great-grandmother. If this is case though, then why not refer to Liney as such, why distance her through the language of “that old woman who/ wasn’t even from this barracoon”? What registers is an uncertainty about genealogy that is inextricably linked to issues of language, naming and the legacy of slavery.

According to Glissant, “delirious speech can be a survival technique,” which is why the speaker maps her wounds with words rather than tears (*Caribbean* 129). The speaker inhabits the “concrete eternity” of her new location deliriously, as if home were irretrievable and inescapable at once. She imagines herself as dripping her native landscape: “Five hundred dollars/ and a passport full of sand and winking water, is how/ I reach here” (28). “Here” is defined as the place of exile, the site from which the

speaker's language unreels, linking her back to her homeland. She maintains her link to her homeland through fits of synesthesia. When sight fails her, smell reminds her of home: "...the concrete/ building just overpower me, block my eyesight and/ send the sky back, back where it more redolent" (28). The aroma of home haunts the poem's diasporic speaker. Yet, she questions even this cultural longing for home, the "chicken and ham and sweet bread effort to taste like/ home," concluding "even/ our nostalgia was a lie, skittish as the truth these/ bundle of years" (30). The poet cannot allow herself to indulge in a false nostalgia—that substitutes rootedness for politics—when it is the desire for escape (from oppression) that defines the community she seeks.

The threat of a loss of control over language in her new location mediates the speaker's condition of exile. Upon arrival in Toronto, there is an attempt to dislocate the speaker from her name: "I steady trembling I trembling when they ask me my/ name and say I too black for it" (29). She inhabits the precarious role of the migrant laborer whose very selfhood is under threat. Because of the history of black Caribbean migration to Toronto, the speaker is marked as such: "...saying I/ coming just to holiday to the immigration officer when/ me and the son-of-a-bitch know I have labourer mark/ all over my face" (29). She leaves a trail leading from the cane fields of Trinidad to the commercial buildings of Toronto, suggesting it is the labor necessary to fuel these commercial enterprises which deterritorializes the immigrant who comes looking for work. The speaker describes herself as "the thin/mixture of just come and don't exist" so that with entry comes erasure (29). She responds to this exclusion by emotionally distancing herself from her new location: "Not a single/ word drops from my lips for twenty years about living/ here" (31). Racial discrimination ("jim crow flats") and



cultural policing (“You can’t smile here, is a sin, you/ can’t play music, it too loud”) prevent the speaker from fully inhabiting her moment (31). The passing of time is thus severed from the sense of living: “...it’s hard to remember waiting so long to live” (31). The split self is defined through language: “...I became more secretive, language/ seemed to split in two, one branch fell silent, the other/ argued hotly for going home” (31). The silent branch of exile (not weighed down by return) can only be articulated through a radically different mode of politics, one that builds escape into its very structure.

Like exile, the return home is also defined through absence: “This place so full of your absence, this place/ you come to swim like habit, to taste like habit, this/ place where you are a woman...” (33). While the speaker’s repetition of the phrase “this place” only demonstrates her lack of grip on a stable sense of location, her repetition of “habit” betrays an ambivalence towards the very stability she mourns. The relation between place and gender ultimately constrictive, language and location are unmoored for the speaker. It is as if by loosening her grip on language, and allowing it to register her experience in multiple valences and vernaculars, she embraces the free-floating character of exile itself. Return ‘home’ comes at the cost of self-denial; as a woman who loves women, Brand’s speaker cannot afford nostalgia.

The way in which gender complicates the racial mapping of Brand’s exilic poetics once again puts the emphasis on escape, recalling Brand’s statement that “I could not live in the uneasiness of conquest and enslavement....I could not choose to do anything but fling myself at the hope that the world could be upturned.” Participation in revolutionary politics exceeds the bounds of national belonging in the Grenada poems, taking the form of bodily engagement with “the world”—there is no “place” for the speaker to rest

otherwise. Thus the desire for escape manifests as an anti-imperialist relationship to territory, literally as the negation of “conquest and enslavement.” Just as Rich offers poetry as an alternative model of transnational exchange, Brand interpellates her reader into a geopolitics of revolutionary desire.

### **The Desperate Man**

The intimacy with which Brand’s speaker addresses her comrades and readers recalls Rich’s dedications. Brand’s quieting of the reader, as an invitation to listen, echoes the secretive speech of the organizing slaves: “hush...Look I/ hated something, policeman, bankers, slavetraders, / shhh...still do and even more these days” (31). The imposed silence of exile, which fuels revolutionary desire, is recovered as inciting subterranean forms of subterfuge—and passed on to the reader.

In her excavation of repressed histories in “Atlas,” Rich uncovers another hemispheric arc of revolutionary desire. One of the poem’s most important interlocutors is black militant George Jackson. Rich extensively quotes from Jackson’s collection of prison letters, *Soledad Brother*. A member of the Black Panther party, Jackson spent the last 12 years of his life in prison, devoting the majority of his time (much of it in solitary confinement) to pursuing radical political self-education. He was killed in a prison riot, in which he freed prisoners on his floor, in 1971. He was 29 years old. Though Rich quotes from a number of writers throughout the poem, the italicized excerpts from Jackson’s letters, comprising 25 lines in total, visually stand out in a way that the much shorter italicized fragments she borrows from other writers do not. So one must ask: What work is the language of George Jackson doing, located as it is, in the heart of

Rich's poem? The three dispersed excerpts from Jackson's letters describe: the biopolitical effects of the prison system on the prisoner (154, lines 362-368); the gap between official rhetoric and reality for the disenfranchised (154, lines 371-377); and the subterranean affect that solidarity taps into (155, lines 386-397).

In an earlier section of the poem, the poet explores the "waste" that dominates "this segregate republic," articulating the squandering of human potential, of which George Jackson's writing is an especially stunning example (148, lines 189, 192). In those "locked away out of sight and hearing, out of mind, shunted aside," she apprehends the wasted potential of "those needed to teach, advise, persuade, weigh arguments/ those urgently needed for the work of perception/work of the poet, the astronomer, the historian, the architect of new streets/ work of the speaker who also listens/ meticulous delicate work of reaching the heart of the desperate woman, the desperate man" (148, lines 194-198). The "desperate man" is the subject of the third excerpt from Jackson's letters (cited in full here), which closes the poem's tenth section:

*But the significant feature of the desperate man reveals itself  
when he meets other desperate men, directly or vicariously;  
and he experiences his first kindness, someone to strain with him,  
to strain to see him as he strains to see himself,  
someone to understand, someone to accept the regard,  
the love, that desperation forces into hiding.  
Those feelings that find no expression in desperate times  
store themselves up in great abundance, ripen, strengthen,  
and strain the walls of their repository to the utmost;  
where the kindred spirit touches this wall it crumbles—  
no one responds to kindness, no one is more sensitive to it  
than the desperate man.  
(155, lines 386-397)*

The manner in which Jackson's words describe the bonding that occurs between "desperate men" with a common cause is reminiscent of the way in which Rich describes

(in the talk she gave in New York City upon her return from Nicaragua) the connections that poetry seeks. In that talk, she described poetry “as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (*BBP* 181). Like the acts of solidarity Jackson unearths, the work of poetry, according to Rich, is to surface the connections that “desperation forces into hiding.”

By offering a poetic model of solidarity, Rich surfaces a hemispheric mode of affect that went underground with the consolidation of neoliberal modes of government. In her alternative history of neoliberalism, *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein argues that the torture that accompanied the free-market experiments in the Southern Cone in the 1970s was fundamentally aimed at eradicating the principle of solidarity (139). In order to decimate the opposition to the brutal imposition of neoliberalism in Chile and Argentina in those years, these military dictatorships sanctioned torture as a way to “shock that impulse of social interconnectedness out of their prisoners” (139). Even more than information, what the torturers sought, in the subsequent accounts of the tortured, was “to do irreparable damage to that part of themselves that believed in helping others above all else, that part of themselves that made them activists, replacing it with shame and humiliation” (Klein 139). Transforming these communally-oriented political prisoners into individualists was the ultimate goal:

The ultimate acts of rebellion in this context were small gestures of kindness between prisoners, such as tending to each other’s wounds or sharing scarce food. When such loving acts were discovered, they were met with harsh punishment. Prisoners were goaded into being as individualistic as possible, constantly offered Faustian bargains, like choosing between more unbearable torture for themselves or more torture for a fellow prisoner. (Klein 139-140)

The United States’ funding of the Nicaraguan Contras the following decade would similarly be aimed at making the cost of solidarity deadly. Having experienced the

Sandinista Revolution firsthand, Rich writes against the erasure of such an ethos. The radical black movement, of which Jackson was a part was itself transnational, drawing on the lessons of global independence struggles.

### **The Desperate Woman**

Brand's statement that she "could not choose to do anything but fling [herself] at the hope that the world could be upturned" is realized in her Grenada poems. The same year Rich traveled to Nicaragua, 1983, Brand spent in Grenada, participating in the revolution underway there. Brand describes it "as the best year of my life because it made the world finally seem right" (*Bread out of Stone* 96). A committed Marxist, Brand's vision of feminism, and her politics more broadly, were already, of necessity, transnational—due to the radical black Toronto milieu in which she was based. Brand's language performs exclusion in order to examine her ongoing and shifting relationship to history and place—that which Rich terms "location." Though the revolution in Grenada ultimately stumbles and fails, Brand's desire for a reconfiguration of location, through language, remains steadfast throughout her career. Continually reworking language through the lens of location, Brand, like Rich, insists on the primacy of poetry in any transformative or revolutionary process. "Revolutions," she writes, "are not as simple as the words given to them after they fail or triumph. Those words do not account for the sense in the body of clarity or the sharpness in the brain, and they cannot interpret the utter vindication for people like me needing revolutions to reconcile being in a place" (*Bread* 96). In order to understand the ways in which Brand's feminist poetics interrogate location, we need to pay attention to how her speaker expresses her desire for

revolution through an affective bodily language charged with the history of place.

In her poems dedicated to female militants in Grenada, Brand employs an intimate, particular language that suggests a radical alternative to the universal white male revolutionary subject of nationalist discourse.<sup>36</sup> Rather than idealized heroes, these women are depicted as based in their communities, and are described as patient, if fierce, teachers. We see them (through the eyes of the speaker) generously offering rides, tirelessly discussing and debating wherever they are, playing with their children at the beach, and laughing late into the night—as well as risking their lives for the change they believe in. Embedded between parts I and II of a poem entitled “return,” the poems “Phyllis” and “Jackie” also appear in the volume *No Language Is Neutral*. Both poems are followed by notes that identify the women, Phyllis Coard and Jacqueline Creft, as members of Grenada’s revolutionary government. Both poems are elegiac in mode, though we know from the dedicatory notes that only Creft is dead, while Coard is in prison. A bit of research into the situation of the revolutionary government in Grenada reveals that Creft and Coard were members of rival factions of the revolutionary government and that Coard was in prison for her role in a coup that resulted in the death of Creft among others. However, the intimate form of address of both poems bypasses this political split to establish connection with both women. So what precisely does this strange pairing tell us about Brand’s politics and poetics?

We know from Brand’s 1994 prose collection *Bread out of Stone*, that writing about the revolution in Grenada and subsequent U.S. invasion (for which she was present), raised difficult questions about appropriation for the poet. She struggles with

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<sup>36</sup> See Saldaña-Portillo’s *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (2003).

balancing her own need to heal from this traumatic experience and the danger of minimizing the historical (and very real) pain of others who were not as lucky as her to escape:

Here, look, it has always seemed impossible to talk or write about this because so many people lived it and many were injured more, more painfully because colonial war is physical and mental harm, so many that I hesitate to write because writing is claiming all pain and I cannot claim all the pain... So each time I speak I must say mine was not the only terror and not the most important but a small thing in my small self compared to the hundred thousand crouching in the other houses, their fate slipping. (139)

Brand's ethical concern with claiming an experience not hers to claim is related to Rich's desire not to impose the demands of a foreign feminist agenda on the Nicaraguan activists she encountered, in that both poets are aware of the need to account for their location. It is within this frame of location then that Brand's decision to memorialize both Creft and Coard, rather than 'pick a side' in the factional battle, begins to make sense. Brand's participation in the unfolding revolutionary process for the year preceding the coup suggests that she could not possibly have been innocent in her decision to put these elegies side-by-side. Rather, there seems to be a salvaging gesture at stake here. While acknowledging the sexism and homophobia operating within the black revolutionary movements in which she participated in the 70s and 80s, Brand sees her participation not so much as capitulation, as an effort at radicalizing these movements from within. In this way, by honoring the memory of these female militants, despite the status of Grenada's revolution as another "anti-colonial liberation struggle gone sour," Brand clears room for the imagination of another, more fiercely egalitarian kind of politics (*Bread* 125). Again, as in Rich, she directly addresses her reader's attention: "Here, look..." The intimacy of this gesture—both its casual diction and pointing to something indescribable—reorients

the private connotations of intimacy towards a more public mode of connection.

Both poems open with the speaker invoking her addressee by her first name, establishing an immediate intimacy. The poems are structured around a repetition of the women's names as if the speaker is worried she will lose her listener's ear, or not make herself heard through the static. Both women are addressed as comrades in struggle, which binds the speaker to them in powerful ways, despite the relative brevity of their encounters; we can gather from the poems that the extent of the speaker's interaction with these women may have been no more than a few conversations, which most likely took place in group settings. So what might be the payoff, for Brand, of turning to this form of lyric intimacy in order to assess the aftermath of a revolutionary situation?

Elegiac in mode both poems mourn the passing of a revolutionary moment in the hemisphere while celebrating the unique contribution of two women in positions of revolutionary leadership. In "Phyllis," the imprisoned woman who served as Minister of Women's Affairs in the People's Revolutionary Government of Grenada, is described as conveying a message to the speaker from behind prison walls through a stranger who deciphers "a letter running/ like a karali vine around Richmond Hill [Prison]" (11). The speaker's geographic distance from the prison (as she writes from Toronto) and inability to communicate directly with her addressee are registered through her repetition of the phrase "Phyllis, I know they treat you bad/ like a woman" and her citation of unnamed messengers relaying the prisoner's condition (11-13). The speaker returns to her memory of Phyllis's laugh as an emblem of defiance, even in her imprisoned condition; the warmth of the laugh "like a bronze bauble/ hanging in that revolutionary evening" transforms into a silencing force in the nation's post-invasion moment: "your laugh



clanging against the stone walls/ your look silencing soldiers” (13). The transition from laughter to looking which ends the poem prepares us for the opening of the following poem dedicated to “Jackie,” the Minister of Education who was killed in the coup of October 19, 1983 (of which Coard was allegedly a part). Recalling the vine imagery of Phyllis’s prison “letter,” Jackie is described as looking upon the speaker for the first time with “eyes vined like a/ school teacher’s folding me in” (14). Embodying the grateful pupil, the speaker defers to Jackie’s vision of “an extraordinary life” and cites her patience in pedagogy, echoing an earlier description of Phyllis: “Phyllis, when you sit down and explain/ the revolution, it did sound sweet and it/ did sound possible” (14, 11). Clearly, the speaker is refusing to pick a side in the factional fight by focusing on the positive example of both these women instead. She counters the geographic distance that separates her from this history, by directly addressing the women with the news that has reached her in exile; in this way, she establishes a female camaraderie that defies distance and politics, even death. Of course, this denial of political difference is a form of politics itself, one that weds revolutionary commitment to friendship and trust and acknowledges that historical positioning can be contradictory. This refusal of judgment begins in the body and as such can be translated into poetic language that extends the bounds of politics, allows images of laughter and a burning mouth to transcend party divides—when located within a framework of liberation.

Lodged between parts I and II of the poem “return,” “Phyllis” and “Jackie” are framed by the poet’s return to Trinidad. Both “return” poems seek out (or cannot avoid) the sensory remnants of the past in the present, a history of slavery and colonization that stretches across the Caribbean, from Trinidad to Grenada to Cuba. The final image of the

“return” poem that precedes “Phyllis” ends on the image of women whose laboring bodies emit history: “bare-footed hot, women worried, still the faces,/ masked in sweat and sweetness, still the eyes/ watery, ancient, still the hard, distinct, brittle smell of/ slavery” (10). The second “return” poem describes the landscape itself as haunted by history: “That is not footsteps, girl, is duenne! / is not shell, is shackle!” (15).

The poet’s placement of the poems about the female militants she met in Grenada between these homecoming poems signals that for the diasporic subject the definition of “home” is as dependent on history and politics as it is place. “Home, in the diasporic framework,” Rinaldo Walcott, in his book on black Canadian writing, reminds us, “is an ethical place, not a narrative of containment” (23). As Paul Gilroy’s formulation illuminates, diaspora “disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location and consciousness” (qtd. in R. Walcott 23). In Brand’s verse we sense how a diasporic consciousness challenges the very meaning of location, dislodging it from place, to make it come alive with history and politics through poetry.

The exploration of exile that fuels much black diasporic writing is, according to Rinaldo Walcott, often “performed as incitement to dialogue”; by tracking the dislocations of exile, the diasporic subject prepares “the grounds for a possibility of the new” (74-75). As in Rich’s performance of shared exile, Brand’s poetics of location struggles to articulate the grounds upon which a more radical (and inclusive) politics can flower. Against the loneliness and alienation of exile, racism, sexism and homophobia, Brand performs the revolutionary desire to be alive in historical time. To get there she cannot simply ‘go home’ or find some other idyllic land, but must “fling [herself] at the

world,” become her own land.

### **Morejón’s *Grenada Notebook***

Writing from Cuba, Morejón’s tribute to the female militants of Grenada, *Cuaderno de Granada* (1984), also exhibits a diasporic consciousness that politicizes geography. Published in Havana by Casa de las Américas in 1984, and then in a bilingual edition translated into English by Lisa Davis later that same year, *Grenada Notebook* (*Cuaderno de Granada*) is composed of nine poems mourning the defeat of the Grenadian revolution. Like Brand, Morejón celebrates the memory of those who died, while registering outrage at the U.S. marine invasion. In “A Los Caidos en Granada” (“To the Fallen in Grenada”), the poet positions Grenada as the “patria de las Antillas” or “Antillean homeland,” signifying that the struggle in Grenada puts it at the center of Caribbean geography; thus, history and politics determine positioning in the poem, so that national borders become secondary to regional ones. The regional homeland is figured as a welcoming mother: Grenada’s “hijos múltiples/ (hijos de Louverture/ como hijos de Maceo) / ponen sus altas sienes/ sobre tu pecho” [“many children/ (the children of Louverture/ and the children of Maceo) / rest their heads/ on your breast” (Davis)]. Grenada’s children are the descendents of Haiti’s and Cuba’s independence fighters, suggesting that the struggle for independence from slavery and colonialism unites the region’s black descendants as kin, a form of family that overrides national belonging. As we’ve seen in Brand’s poetry, the U.S. invasion of Grenada was considered an attempt to forestall black autonomy in the region. By positioning Grenada at the center of this vexed Caribbean history, both time and space are subordinated to politics—the kinship

that unites the protagonists of the Haitian Revolution of the late eighteenth century, the Cuban independence fighters of the late nineteenth century and the Grenadians of the late twentieth century telescopes two hundred years of regional political struggle into this image of the embracing mother.

While liberation from colonial oppression requires regional unity in Morejón's poetry, the solidarity her verse explores is rooted in diversity, not universal forms of transcendence. The distinction Glissant establishes between the Western hallucination of totality and the Antillean desire for integration in *Poetics of Relation* is helpful here. As Betsy Wing, Glissant's translator explains, "To become other than dust, aggregating their scattered and lost histories into a concrete presence in the world...the Antilles must assert their dense, opaque, rock-hard existence..." (xiii-xiv). Glissant theorizes opacity as "that which protects the Diverse" against the flattening impulse of the imperial view that deems the Antilles nothing more than 'dust-specks on the sea' in DeGaulle's notorious formulation (*Poetics of Relation* 62). In a 2004 essay on the "Mundialidad de Édouard Glissant," Morejón contrasts the universalizing tendencies of economic globalization to the cross-cultural encounter and creolization at the heart of Glissant's notions of globality (*Pluma al Viento* 188-191). Throughout Morejón's body of poetry there persists a tension between clarity and opacity. Rather than a tension between the political and the lyrical, which is most often the critical shorthand for describing these alternate tendencies,<sup>37</sup> I want to examine how Morejón pursues lyrical opacity as a political and poetic strategy simultaneously. For Glissant, opacity is "the irreducible density of the other" (*Caribbean Discourse* 133). It is precisely this "irreducible density" that is so

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, De-Costa's claim that "it is possible to trace two sometimes different but often overlapping trajectories in her work: a line of committed work, forged in revolutionary ideals...and a lyrical thread" ("Introduction," 1-2).

difficult to translate across Spanish to English, from a location within the Cuban Revolution to an audience in the United States.

We can begin to approach the opacity of Morejón's verse though through a brief examination of her cultural references and use of parenthetical structure in "A Los Caidos." Morejón's translators do not always capture the more occult textures of her poetry. The "high foreheads" ("altas seines") of Grenada's children, for example, are translated simply as "heads" and the gesture of bowing to the earth is lost in an image of resting heads, in the available translation, which fails to bring across the denser and more culturally specific imagery of the original. In the Spanish, Morejón's use of parenthesis registers as a historical whisper, an insistent, if subdued, voice: "Y el polvo de sus huesos/ (desde el océano)/ se desliza en la tierra/ (a la sombra de las banderas)/ y alimenta sus jugos/ (con el aliento de las nubes)/ y un árbol nuevo crece" [("And the dust of their bones/ (coming off the sea)/ slips into the earth/ (in the shadow of the flags)/ and feeds its substance/ (with the breathe of the clouds)/ and a new tree grows" (Davis)]. That the dust of the revolutionary children's bones comes from the ocean, and not the ground, affirms once again that the dead children come from other islands, and invokes the original history of transplantation against which these (descendants of) slaves revolt. The sea-drenched imagery of the opening lines, in which it is unclear if it is Grenada or her children who navigate among mosses ("navegando entre musgos"), also prepares us to read the images of the dust of ocean-born bones as unloosed from a deep history.

Though Morejón's figuration of the homeland as mother echoes a masculinist narrative of revolution (that problematically identifies the nation with a compromised femininity), the poet's oeuvre manifests a feminist re-visioning of revolutionary

discourse. More precisely, in adopting Alice Walker's vision of 'womanism,' Morejón suggests that Walker's (re)vision of feminism accounts for gender as a raced phenomenon in a way that speaks more directly to the experience of Afro-Cuban women (Howe 153-154). Howe surmises that "Morejón perhaps uses Walker's womanist position to hint at the Black female intellectual's lack of power in Cuban cultural affairs" (158). While Morejón's verse is clearly pro-revolutionary, the manner in which she develops her metaphors subtly grinds away at the rigid edges of the official discourse in which she operates as a Cuban female writer. In an interview in which she discusses her epic poem "Mujer Negra" (which traces, "from a woman's perspective," a hemispheric history from slavery to emancipation), Morejón asserts that in "Afro-America" (which for her includes the United States, the Caribbean and South America) "the woman had always appeared like an external reality to the work of the poet, more like something which had only an erotic connotation" (Abudu 39). Unlike Walcott's Helen in *Omeros* (recall Walcott's crass description of "the split breadfruit of her African ass," for example (Walcott 312)), the mythic beauty of Morejón's women derives from their historic energies: "Granadina, con tu lanza, / va conociendo tu cuerpo/ el himno de la gracia" ["Woman of Grenada, with your lance, / your body goes along discovering/ the hymn to beauty" (Davis)]. Female agency is embodied—but not circumscribed by sexual appeal. By adopting an Afro-Cuban womanist perspective of revolution in her verse, Morejón extends beyond the totalitarian rootedness of the Cuban state to make contact with mythical systems of belief that defy the rationality of political discourse. In doing so, she goes beyond a model of resistance to assert alternative identities, which Glissant describes as the "real work" of decolonization (*Poetics* 17).

Santería cosmology provides Morejón with a dynamic system of gender roles to access in her poetry. In her fascinating study *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender Implications* (2005), Mary Ann Clark argues that within the Yoruba-derived religion, gender is a performative construct only obliquely related to gender roles outside the ritual space, and, furthermore, that Santería is a “female-based religion” (143). Tracing Santería’s origins back to its earliest female practitioners in Cuba, Clark asserts that centrality of trance possession to Santería is “female-normative” because of the community values upon which it is based, as opposed to the more male-normative rites of other Afro-Cuban religions like Palo Monte (67, 86-101). Clark’s acknowledgment that initiation into Santería “both valorizes and overturns essentialist views of gender,” reminds us of Morejón’s own ambiguous representation of the revolutionary nation as embracing mother (84). Approaching the density of Morejón’s imagery requires a hemispheric reading of gender that does not impose, as Rich would warn, a U.S.-based liberal feminist agenda on the Afro-Cuban politics of communalism as explored within the poetry’s revolutionary framework.

### **The Weeping Mother**

In contrast to Morejón’s figuration of Grenada as open-armed mother, Brand’s weeping mother is oppressed by the landscape of her native Trinidad. Brand’s refusal of the sacrificial imagery that Morejón embraces signals a disjuncture of location—and perhaps the limits of Morejón’s tightrope act of rewriting the official discourse of the Cuban Revolution from within. Foregrounding the contribution of women and blacks to the Cuban revolutionary process, Morejón—despite her attempts to shift the center of the

official revolutionary discourse by drawing on diasporic forms of knowledge and tropes—nevertheless writes from within a national framework. Unlike Brand’s internal exile, who rejects the exclusions of her native land and seeks diasporic connections beyond her country’s borders, Morejón’s speakers pursue transnational solidarity through the vehicle of the nation (rather than in spite of it). Historically this distinction plays out in the poets’ lives: while Brand goes to Grenada as an individual revolutionary, the Cuban state itself is militarily involved in fighting off the U.S. invasion.

While the female and black revolutionaries of Morejón’s poems are the leading protagonists of her country’s revolutionary drama, the exclusions of “this/ place where you are a woman” drives Brand’s speaker into the arms of exile. Recalling the image of the weeping poet in transit, the weeping mother in Brand does not stand in for the nation, but rather is the victim of its masculinist logic: “A woman who/ thought she was human but got the message, female/ and black and somehow those who gave it to her/ were like family, mother and brother, spitting woman/ at her, somehow they were the only place to return to/ and this gushing river had already swallowed most of/ her” (27). The river referred to here is the Pilate, a river in southeast Trinidad blocking access to the Atlantic, but also the “gushing river” of language itself, with its power to both harm and heal. The family’s internalization of misogyny, captured in their “spitting woman/ at her,” makes these individuals no source of respite for the abject woman, which is why they are only “like family,” instead of the real thing. The word “spitting” calls us back to the earlier depiction of the ancestors “dragged through the Manzanilla spitting out the last/ spun syllables for cruelty, new sound forming, / pushing toward lips made to bubble blood.” The poem’s gushing river of speech echoes this predicament, suggests that the speaker



seeks to rid herself of the “blood-stained blind of race and sex” (27). Through language she finds the source of escape that her mother with “that constant veil over her eyes, the/ blood-stained blind of race and sex” could not (27).

Exile, for Brand, is not only composed of national exclusion, but of sexual alienation as well. The “hard against the soul” poems of *No Language is Neutral* narrate history through a lesbian love affair. Only through her eroticization of the landscape can Brand’s speaker achieve some kind of peace with the brutal histories of her location and actually ‘live’: “You ripped the/ world raw. It was as if another life exploded in my/ face...so easily I saw my own body, that/ is, my eyes followed me to myself, / touched myself/ as a place, another life, terra” (51, lines 7-12). Only when the body finds expression can location be claimed for Brand’s speaker. The exiled body without location must transform itself into terra: “They say this place/ does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here/ before” (51, lines 12-14). As in Morejón, myth lies outside the rational discourse of the nation, and thus functions as a site of transformation; however, while for Brand the mythic is an embodied condition that makes living possible, in Morejón myth transforms bodily damage into historical progress.

### **On Opacity**

While Rich and Brand construct their audiences through forms of direct address, Morejón shapes and acknowledges her audience through her allusions to Santería ritual. In a 1996 lecture entitled “Cuba and Its Deep Africanity,” Morejón calls attention to the fact that “Cuba—unlike the rest of the Antilles under French or British domination—did not create a third language—a Creole” (942). However, within the language acts of

Santería ritual, Morejón locates a hidden creole: “these languages form part of a closed code and...only come alive at the very moment of performing the ritual” (943). Morejón emphasizes that this hidden creole does not circulate in daily life outside of the ritual context. Yet the poet finds ways to perform this occult knowledge in her poetry, so as to mediate between official politics and marginalized identities. The function is similar to Brand’s use of the vernacular in gesturing towards an available audience, but also more “hushed” like the secretive talk of slaves.

The furtive nature of Morejón’s approach comes into focus when we consider the history of her career as a writer in Cuba in conjunction with the evolving relationship between race, class and gender in post-1959 Cuba. Born in Havana in 1944, Morejón emerged as a poet in the early years of the Cuban Revolution. She published her first volume of poetry, *Mutismos* (*Silences*), in 1962, and by 1967 had already published her third volume of verse, though only in her early twenties. She was for the subsequent twelve years, however, unable to find a publisher for her poetry; this publishing dry spell of Morejón’s coincided with a notorious period of artistic censorship by the revolutionary government, epitomized by the Herberto Padilla case.<sup>38</sup> Key scholars of contemporary Cuban poetry speculate that Morejón’s association with black intellectual circles in the 1960s may have contributed to the official dismissal of her verse as “hermetic” during this period (DeCosta-Willis “Introduction” 7-8; Howe 158-162; Luis 53-54). The publishing house of the El Puente group, which printed Morejón’s first two books of

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<sup>38</sup> Though Morejón could not find a publisher for her books during this period, she continued to write (and publish in journals) some of her most important and well-known poems, such as “Mujer Negra” (“Black Woman”) (DeCosta-Willis “Introduction” 8). The Padilla Affair, which ultimately lost the Cuban Revolution the support of many international intellectuals, involved the house arrest (’71-’80) of the Cuban poet Herberto Padilla for publishing a poetry anthology with writing allegedly “subversive” against the Castro government.

poetry, for example, was shut down by the government in the mid-60s (F. González 990). While Fidel Castro's government depended on the support of the island's black population, and thus embraced black participation, it would not tolerate competition from organizations suspected of separatist politics of any sort (Gott 172-175).

The relationship between race and nation in the history of the Cuban Revolution is a complex one which I do not have space to fully elaborate here; however, a fair summary may maintain that while the Cuban Revolution guaranteed significant advancement in the health care, education and working conditions of the island's black population, such progress came at the cost of subordinating issues of race, gender and sexuality to allegiance to the revolutionary nation. Patricia González explains, "Castro declared Cuba a mulatto island, and black pride surged, but at the same time, the government eradicated all separatist organizations, including black societies and clubs, and repressed all religious manifestations, including African-derived religions" such as Santería (954).

During the period in which Morejón could not find a publisher for her poetry, she turned to critical prose as a way of pursuing literary work that did not conflict with official politics. Though Morejón never joined the Communist Party, her friendship with important Cuban poets like Nicolás Guillén (who was appointed National Poet by the Communist Party in 1961), ensured her a position in UNEAC (the National Union of Cuban Artists and Writers, of which Guillén served as president) and other key national literary sites, such as the Casa de las Américas, where she served as director of the Center for Caribbean Studies for seven years (DeCosta-Willis "Introduction" 8-12). When Morejón re-emerged on the poetry scene in the late 1970s, it was with a fiercely

revolutionary poetry—the most impressive innovation of which was the means by which she was able to foreground the contribution of women and blacks to the Cuban revolutionary process.

### **Morejón's Winged Island**

In 1985, San Francisco-based Black Scholar Press published *Where the Island Sleeps like a Wing*, the first bilingual anthology of Morejón's poetry. The figuration of the island sleeping like a wing suggests the island as only one part of a larger body of flight. Poised for sudden flight, it is a precarious sleep that birds are known for; vulnerable to predators, they often sleep in groups with lookouts, or even sleep in flight. All of this clearly signals the island nation's vulnerability to its enemies and the need for constant vigilance. It is, however, the privileging of mobility that the simile suggests which interests me most here. Throughout her oeuvre, Morejón positions the fate of her island nation in relation to the global liberation struggles of the African diaspora. By forging links with the female revolutionaries of Grenada, for example, Morejón articulates black diasporic communities in revolt against the global capitalist order.

In the title sequence "Donde Duerme La Isla Como Un Ala," the poet revisits major moments in Cuban history through the vehicle of the landscape and seasons. In the poem "Abril," for example, the month of April carries with it memories of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Mariel exodus.<sup>39</sup> The poem opens with an image of flying leaves: "Esas hojas que vuelan bajo el cielo" (28) ["Those leaves flying beneath the sky" (Weaver 29)]. The ominous imagery of the following lines in which birds sense a

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<sup>39</sup> In the April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, CIA-trained Cuban exiles attempted to overthrow the Castro government. During the Mariel exodus, which began in April 1980 and lasted approximately six months, an estimated 125,000 Cubans voluntarily left the island and were admitted entry into the U.S.

coming storm, alerts us to the dual meaning of the word “hojas,” which is translated as “leaves” by Weaver. “Hojas” are both papers and leaves in Spanish, and the reference to language in the following line suggests that Morejón is blurring the natural storm imagery with that of a leaflet drop: “Esas hojas que vuelan bajo el cielo, /quieren decir la lengua de la patria” (28) [Those leaves flying beneath the sky/ are the language of our nation” (Weaver 29)]. (In addition to pirated radio shows, leaflet drops were one of the main ways in which the anti-Castro, CIA-funded exile community prepared for its counter-revolutionary invasion.)

The island itself is figured as built on the bones of those who have fought for its independence. The sandy image of its shore is haunted by the clamor of resurrected bones: “Y si caemos otra vez/ se alzarán los huesos en la arena” (28) [“And if we fall, once again/ our bones will rise up on the sand” (Weaver 29)]. The spirits of the fallen animate the present: “Aquí están nuestras almas/ en el mes imprevisto, en abril, / donde duerme la isla como un ala” (28) [“Our spirits dwell here/ in the unforeseeable month, April, / where the island sleeps like a wing” (Weaver 29)]. Tuned into generational cycles of revolutionary struggle, the speaker does not offer a straightforward narrative of progress, but rather one that resurrects (or reincarnates) as it builds, positing a temporality that is neither pure repetition nor a disavowal of the past. As Patricia E. González explains in her essay on Yoruba traces in Morejón’s poetry, “Many of Morejón’s poems honor friends, family, and national heroes who have passed away. They are all ‘the living dead,’ the *eggún*” (955). That April is the month in which the island is most threatened signals the potential for transmuting “aggressions” into a “magnificent garden” (29). Belief that the violent energies of spring will transform into a

flowering future, once the cycle is fully realized, transcends the speaker's own mortality, thus the sobering possibility that "we fall, once again."

The Afro-Cuban cosmology of the sequence is structured in a cyclical vision of temporality that overlaps with, but is not synonymous to, the sacrificial logic of revolutionary nationalism, which is wedded to more linear notions of progress. While the linear model of progress the Cuban state upholds maintains a rational, Western approach to time, the poetry's circular constructions of time assert a peripheral or marginal form of knowledge at the center of the Cuban Revolution. It follows that the ways in which Morejón's poems dislodge binaries between linear and circular time, also map onto and deconstruct other binaries, such as center and periphery, official and unofficial histories, as well as transparency and opacity, at the level of form. The multiple allusions that Morejón's coded imagery carries, that is, its relative opacity, is in tension with the misleadingly "transparent" qualities of her verse in translation.

In "Renacimiento" ("Rebirth") the speaker refers to herself as the "daughter of ocean waters" ("hija de las aguas marinas") alluding to the Middle Passage through her invocation of the Yoruba deity of the ocean, Yemayá (30-31). By re-mapping the 1959 revolution through Santería logic, the poem's speaker is the initiate whose rebirth disturbs the ancient "dust" of history. In this way, she transcends her position of internal exile. Here is the short poem in full:

Hija de las aguas marinas,  
dormida en sus entrañas,  
renazco de la pólvora  
que un rifle guerrillero  
esparció en la montaña  
para que el mundo renaciera a su vez,  
que renaciera todo el mar,  
todo el polvo,

todo el polvo de Cuba.  
(30)

[Daughter of ocean waters,  
asleep in that womb,  
I am reborn  
out of the gun-powder  
sown over the mountain  
by a guerilla rifle  
so the world in its turn  
might be reborn,  
and the vast sea  
and all the dust,  
all the dust of Cuba.  
(Weaver 31)]

The Spanish word “entrañas,” which Weaver translates as “womb” here, is literally “entrails” in English. While “womb” connotes the symbolic rebirth the goddess enables, it omits the connotation of a harsh reality from which the speaker is reborn (making the guerilla rifle necessary). Morejón’s language is closer to Glissant’s description of the slave ship as the “womb abyss” (*Poetics of Relation* 6). The reanimated dust suggests the return of the ancestors, so that the revolutionary violence of the guerilla unleashes a new cyclical time. In the poetry of Morejón, it is a repressed black history that makes its return onto the world stage. The meaning of exile is expanded to encompass African diasporic communities struggling sleeplessly throughout the hemisphere to overcome their historic erasure. As in the poetry of Brand, there is the sense that each sentence “takes a side” as it transforms inescapable exile into the possibility of a world built on solidarity rather than exclusion.

In “La Noche del Moncada” (“Moncada’s Night”), the final poem of the “Where the Island Sleeps like a Wing” sequence, the completion of a thirty-year cycle aligns temporalities of revolution and religion through a uniquely Afro-Cuban logic. The poem

opens with the simple sentence, “Pasaron treinta años” [“Thirty years have passed” (Weaver)], marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Moncada Barracks Attack (42-43). On July 26, 1953 a group of rebels led by Fidel Castro attacked the Batista government’s barracks in Santiago de Cuba. The insurrection failed yet nevertheless gave rise to the 26<sup>th</sup> of July movement, and is largely recognized by those on the island as the official start of the Cuban Revolution. The magic of that night is palpable in the moonlit scene: “Hasta hoy llega el perfume/ de la noche silvestre, duradera, / entre las hierbas de la granjita Siboney/ y el brillo de los fusiles navegando en el pozo del patio” (42) [“That rural night’s perfume/ has drifted until today, / permanent among the grasses/ of the Siboney farm, and the sheen/ of rifles floating in the patio well” (Weaver 43)]. The repetition of the number thirty and lunar references scattered throughout the poem alert us to occult layers of signification within the poem. According to the lunar calendar that practitioners of the Yoruba faith abide, the seasons realign roughly every thirty years. It is as if by incantation the speaker wishes to revive the magic of that special night “donde unos jóvenes comieron, cocinaron, cantaron/ y nos hicieron una noche más dulce” (42) [“when a few young people ate, cooked, sang/ and prepared a sweeter night for us” (Weaver 43)]. By the end of the poem the present and past are indistinguishable: “mientras respiro ésta, aquella noche” (42) [“while I breathe in this...that night” (Weaver 43)]. The English translation does not fully capture the way in which “this” night is a repetition of “that” night: “Pasaron treinta años, treinta noches del trópico/ y pensar que esta noche yo vivo el privilegio/ de contemplar otra noche tan linda,/ sin más ni menos luna, sin más ni menos ansias” (42) [“Thirty years, thirty tropical nights/ and to think tonight I am privileged/ to contemplate that other night, so beautiful, /when the moon and



our desires were hardly different” (43)]. What is lost in translation is the way in which the original (“sin más ni menos luna, sin más ni menos ansias”) conflates the moonlight and longing of “this” night and “that” night. It is not simply that the elements and community’s desires were in sync “that” special night, but that this magical pattern is also being relived “this” night. That the moon, in Santería, is associated with Yemayá (the goddess Morejón associates with the rebirth of international black struggle in the previously discussed “Renacimiento”) thickens the relationship already established between history and ritual practice in the sequence.

What is at stake in all this repetition of numbers, insistence on re-alignments? The poem is introduced by an epigraph by Haydée Santamaría: “*La noche era más linda, era como algo que merecía verse toda la vida, y a lo mejor que no veríamos más*” (42) [“*That night was beautiful, like something that deserved to be contemplated for a lifetime, but probably we would never experience it again*” (Weaver 43)]. Morejón echoes this language throughout her poem, but insists on the possibility of re-experiencing exactly that which Santamaría mourns—an irretrievable feeling of boundless hope. By countering this nostalgic aspect of Santamaría’s sentiment, while elaborating on the worthiness of that night, Morejón keeps history alive. This is exactly what the island regime’s enemies want to bury as they propagate a narrative of an idealistic dream gone wrong. By insisting on the presence of that historic night in the present of composition, Morejón refutes Cuba’s critics; that she does so through a magical logic of Yoruba return, grounds the spirit of the revolution in a uniquely Afro-Cuban register. What is at stake here is not honoring the revolutionary government as such, but the anti-colonial struggle its triumph represents.

### Conclusion: Tuning into the Transnational

The model of transnational exchange that Rich, Brand, and Morejón offer here is not immune from its own disjunctures of time and place. Morejón is writing in the immediate aftermath of Grenada, while Brand is reflecting nearly seven years later. Rich is struggling to reclaim the word ‘patriot,’ while Morejón is writing as a revolutionary patriot, and Brand, in her next collection, will simply confess “I don’t want no fucking country” (*Land* 48). What unites these three poets is the way in which they exercise their feminism to imagine networks of affect beyond the nation.

A poetics of location recognizes that “Each sentence realized or/ dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a/ side,” as Brand’s speaker concludes (34). Thinking poetics through location does not mean sacrificing a reading of the poet’s unique relationship to form for a reading of history, but rather learning to read poetic form *through* history. The distinction is important, as the field of contemporary poetics is divided between those who value cultural studies as an approach to poetry, and those who claim interdisciplinarity only weakens our literary work.<sup>40</sup> Edward Said offers a nuanced approach to literary criticism that embraces the way in which history shapes form, without reducing literature to a mere reflection of cultural values:

To value literature at all is fundamentally to value it as the individual work of an individual writer tangled up in circumstances taken for granted by everyone, such things as residence, nationality, a familiar locale, language, friends, and so on. The problem for the interpreter, therefore, is how to align these circumstances with the work, how to separate as well as incorporate them, how to read the work and its worldly situation. (xv)

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<sup>40</sup> See Brent Hayes Edwards’ excellent *PMLA* piece “The Specter of Interdisciplinarity” (January 2008), in which he argues against Marjorie Perloff’s call to return to the “‘merely’ literary,” demonstrating how such an attitude utterly fails to account for the inventiveness of postcolonial poetics.

Critics who would have us deny the ‘worldly situation’ in which the writer creates miss a crucial opportunity to approach the mystery of form, and are left relying instead on outmoded ideas of individual genius and/or formalism in a vacuum.

Ultimately, location accounts for the multiple ways in which the uniformity of neoliberal time is processed and/or rejected in the poets’ different hemispheric spaces and poetics. For Rich, neoliberal time is synonymous with the forces of amnesia that wipe out radical memory and extol commercial values above all else. Neoliberal time is exilic time in the poetry of Brand, a means of cutting its subjects off from the making of revolution, or new forms of time. In Morejón, neoliberal time is the current that her island flies against, spreading its trans-Atlantic wings. Within a hemispheric framework, it is the study of the poets’ particular relations to language and form that reveals their discrepant and overlapping relationships to time. As their readers, we are more likely to succeed in tuning into their transnational wavelengths (and in doing so, save ourselves from drowning in the universal static of ‘American poetics’) if we learn to listen to them simultaneously.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Staging Politics: History, Time, Dissensus

But this history, which is everywhere simultaneously the same, is still only the refusal within history of history itself.

-Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

Contrasting the logic of globalization with that of modernity, philosopher Eduardo Mendieta suggests that globalization replaces the myth of progress with the post-historical fiction that "the future is already here" (298).<sup>41</sup> The problem with this foreclosure of the future, as Mendieta explains, is that it preempts a critique of the present. As a counter to the post-historical malaise propagated by globalization's victors, Mendieta offers a "strategy that seeks to think [...] the mapping of world-historical time and the temporalizing of geolocalities" (305).

Such a subaltern strategy was surely at play in the Zapatistas' dashing entry onto the world-historical stage on New Year's Day 1994. Timed precisely to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the rebels' declaration of war on the Mexican state was a consummate performance of anti-neoliberalism. The Zapatista National Liberation Army's (EZLN's) imposition of the indigenous time-space of Chiapas on the nation's cosmopolitan capital irreversibly ruptured the neoliberal discourse of post-history.

This unforeseen disturbance spurred the growth of a global justice movement at a

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<sup>41</sup> Francis Fukuyama's pronouncement, following the end of the Cold War, that "the end of history" had been arrived at with "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government," exemplifies this logic (3).

moment when the hegemony of neoliberalism in the Americas seemed a foregone conclusion. As has been widely recognized, the media-savvy agenda of indigenous rights that the Zapatistas boldly put forth ingeniously turned to their advantage the spatial collapse that accompanies the instantaneous transmission of information in the multinational era, famously earning the rebellion's primary spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos the title of "the region's first postmodern guerilla hero" (Golden). The Zapatista uprising thus brilliantly made use of the dissonant temporalities created by the uneven global division of labor to perform a defiant alternative to the neoliberal myth that NAFTA would transform Mexico into a First World (ha, ha, ha) nation.<sup>42</sup>

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord anticipates the hegemony of neoliberal time. For Debord, the refusal of history is a consequence of capitalism functioning as a world system: "universal irreversible time is the time of the world market" (Debord #145). In order for global production and consumption to flourish, everyone must obey the same time scheme since, as Marx demonstrates in *Capital*, time is at the center of how value is determined under capitalist modes of production. Everyday experience around the globe, regardless of national or cultural differences, is increasingly structured in segments most conducive to capital movement. Though the workings of the world economy are no longer so neatly tied to questions of production in the era of finance capital, the relationship between time and profiteering is only more hectic and congealed today. Jameson writes of "new and unrepresentable symptoms in late-capitalist everyday life" born of "the intensification of communications technology to the point at which

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<sup>42</sup> "First World, HA HA HA!"—a popular chant at marches in Mexico City in 1994—expressed solidarity with the rebels' rejection of the neoliberal project of NAFTA.

capital transfers today abolish space and time, virtually instantaneously effectuated across national spaces” (“Culture and Finance Capital” 252). David Harvey similarly argues that as a result of the radical socio-economic shifts of the last three decades, neoliberalism has fundamentally altered our experience of time and space. While there are those who may produce outside this time schema—such as independent artists or small farmers who may work by seasonal or nocturnal measure, for example—they are still bound to the rhythms of neoliberal time as soon as they decide to sell their products on the market. The pursuit of the free market logic of privatization, deregulation and liberalization, which has defined the formation and consolidation of a global neo-colonial order, also functions as a “hegemonic [...] mode of discourse” that limits our ability to imagine alternative modes of being, according to Harvey (*A Brief History* 3).<sup>43</sup> In order for the world market to keep pace with the desires of the architects of neoliberal policy, “the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade” must displace historical thinking in the general populace (*A Brief History* 7). The increase in volatility which the turn to finance capital has introduced into the global market is mimicked in the short-term solutions offered by governments to avert major social upheavals within their national spaces, which in turn is refracted in an accelerated pace of everyday living that seeks to dissolve the links between history, temporality, and exchange in favor of a universal ethos of individual freedom.

### **Coco Fusco’s Uncanny Pedagogy**

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<sup>43</sup> Harvey continues that neoliberalism “has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (3). He cites as examples the heralding of market freedoms as the dominant societal ethic and efforts to “bring all human action into the domain of the market” through information technologies (3).

In this chapter I am interested in exploring how the Cuban-American performance artist Coco Fusco, as a practitioner of radical multiculturalism,<sup>44</sup> illuminates, in her investigations of intercultural encounter, the link between geopolitical and representational violence. Through performance Fusco unearths the political questions buried beneath the official rhetoric of multiculturalism—which seeks to disguise and reify (as cultural differences) geo-political inequalities. Exposing what the discourse of “the end of history” wants to obscure, Fusco invokes the legacy of violence that globalization, as a five-hundred-year process rooted in the Old World’s subjugation of the New, entrenches in the social imaginary.

In *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* (1992), for example, Fusco collaborated with Mexican-American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña to reprise a history of ethnographic spectacle in the context of the international quincennial celebrations of Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World.<sup>45</sup> As Fusco documents, “We sought a strategically effective way to examine the limits of the ‘happy multiculturalism’ that currently reigns in cultural institutions...” (*English is Broken* 39). Diana Taylor observes, “Fusco and Gómez-Peña chose countries deeply implicated in the extermination or abuse of aboriginal peoples” for their international tour (65).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> In the new introduction to *Testimonio*, John Beverley distinguishes between the official multiculturalism of states that dissolves subaltern difference into current capitalist relations and a radical multiculturalism based on demands that “propose to redefine the identity of both the nation and the international order” (23). What proponents of a radical multiculturalism demand “of the state is not ‘recognition’ of their alterity, but rather that the state recognize itself as other; that is, as always-already multicultural” (23). For Beverley, a politics of radical multiculturalism enables a rethinking of the space of the nation “under conditions of globalization and in the face of neoliberal critique and privatization of state functions” (23).

<sup>45</sup> For more detailed accounts of the performance, in addition to Fusco’s “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” in *English is Broken Here* (37-63), see Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s “Colonial Dreams/Post-Colonial Nightmares” (96-98) in *The New World Border*, Diana Taylor’s “Scenarios of Discovery” and Caroline Vercoe’s “Agency and Ambivalence.”

<sup>46</sup> Taylor specifically cites the following sites: “the Plaza Colón in Madrid, the Australian Museum of Natural History in Sydney, the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History, London’s Covent Garden, and Buenos Aires, Argentina” (65).

Traveling in a gilded cage, Fusco and Gómez-Peña performed stereotypically ‘primitive’ behaviors for audiences who were informed that the outrageously clad duo were natives of a previously undiscovered island in the Gulf of Mexico.

In “The Other History of Intercultural Performance,” Fusco’s meditation on the tour’s reception, she explores the way in which the live encounter with audiences enabled an oblique approach to testing the multicultural waters at the so-called end of history: “...We intended to create a surprise or ‘uncanny’ encounter, one in which audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection as to what they were seeing...In such encounters with the unexpected...beliefs are more likely to rise to the surface” (*English is Broken* 40). The collaboration—in a strategy of what Fusco terms “reverse ethnography”—revealed the colonial structure of feeling that continues to circulate freely in postmodern society: “the human exhibitions dramatize the colonial unconscious of American society,” she concludes (38, 47). Fusco continues,

Our experiences in the cage have suggested that even though the idea that America is a colonial system is met with resistance—since it contradicts the dominant ideology’s presentation of our system as a democracy—the audience reactions indicate that colonialist roles have been internalized quite effectively. (*English is Broken* 48)

Writing at a boiling point in the PC era, Fusco’s larger claim is that “conscious methods may not transform unconscious structures of belief” when it comes to liberal efforts to “eradicate racism through didactic correctives” (*English is Broken* 54). As a whole, Fusco’s oeuvre powerfully testifies to the unacknowledged effects of the institutional tendency (whether in the general space of the nation or specific space of the art museum or university) towards radically simplifying, if not seeking to obliterate outright, the complex problems of historical inequities, past and present.



As a performance artist, Fusco seeks to break the spell of the spectacle and open it to history by playing with time. In doing so she exposes seductive images created for material and psychic consumption that mirror the reification of labor and deny history. Through their use of satire and irony in the Guatinaui tour, for example, Fusco and Gómez-Peña recover a history of racist ethnographic display that reverberates unseen through the corridors of their host institutions, so as to break down the false divide between a colonial past and *post*-colonial present. If for Guy Debord, “the spectacle is none other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation, its use of time,” then perhaps, since the time of “discovery” clearly lived on in the quincentennial celebration’s imperial moment, what Fusco and Gómez-Peña’s performance uncovered was the survival of its accompanying spectacle in the popular imaginary (Debord #11). What is uncanny—or both familiar and strange—in the contemporary spectacle we encounter (most every waking moment of every day) is the unseen laboring bodies that constitute it, even in its most ethereal or intangible projections. Since commodity culture obscures the realization of this truth, betraying the time of labor to the time of exchange, the spectacle is also “the false consciousness of time” in its a-historicity (Debord #158).

Presenting her body as spectacle, Fusco engages her audiences in complex viewing scenarios that counter the passivity which commodity fetishism inspires. If the consumer is a “guise” in which capitalism dresses us, as Debord suggests, then the body can perhaps shed what the commodity cannot—the mystification not only of human labor, but also of psychic life, under conditions of globalization (Debord #43). Fusco consistently negotiates an uncanny blurring of fantasy and reality to negate the boundary between politics and art in her work. The jarring effect of the spectator-participant’s

inability to distinguish the real from the false, registers as a historical shock, as in Walter Benjamin's formulation wherein "to articulate the past historically [...] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). In this way, Fusco's open-ended performances function as alternative and unexpected sites of pedagogy, in which the performer often reaches out to (or confronts) her audience through an uncanny logic that surfaces the repressed material of history, countering the temporal confines of an a-historical present. The inseparability of art (as the imaginary) and politics (as the real) in Fusco's performance work—that is, its uncanny logic—is what enables her critique of multinational capital, giving her a dynamic (because unexpected) entry point into our vertiginous cultural landscape.

The unflinching quality of Fusco's work—in which she coolly returns to an original site of colonial violence, or its contemporary equivalent (behind the closed doors of the maquiladora plant, for example)—distinguishes her brand of radical multiculturalism from the feel-good multicultural displays of the neoliberal order. Fusco emerged as an artist and writer in the 1980s era of identity politics. As Jean Fisher recounts, "Fusco was among a generation of cultural theorists and practitioners then emerging from an expanded field of postcolonial critique, bringing with them new paradigms of cultural politics developing in cross-border zones and post-national global networks" (223). Refusing to think theory outside of experience, Fusco (like the critics of black British cultural politics, such as Stuart Hall, who were a major intellectual influence on her) performs difference to contest static notions of nation, race, and gender under conditions of neoliberal globalization. In her own critical writing, Fusco cites the creation of counter-spectacles in the field of cultural representation as a "key site of

political struggle” and writes admiringly of activist groups like ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and the Guerilla Girls, the basis of whose work is “merging activism with spectacle” (*English is Broken* 31). Continually emphasizing the inextricable links between the political and the symbolic, Fusco claims that “[b]y giving abstract concepts and formal operations more overt social content, these conflicts localize, politicize, and historicize postmodern cultural debates that had at one time been excessively formalist and ethnocentric, even in the characterization of difference itself” (*English is Broken* 31).

In this chapter, I will be looking at three examples of Fusco’s radical multiculturalism in international performances (two staged in Cuba, one in Finland) which took place between 1997 and 2001, years in which the global justice movement was in the ascendant. I will explore the issues of time, space and visibility that Fusco’s experiments invoke in response to the condition of speed-up and spatial collapse that defines the neoliberal era. In these performances, Fusco marks a scene of dissensus, or extends the performance of a wrong, in order to stage a new kind of politics as an alternative to the neoliberal discourse of rights.<sup>47</sup> However, while Fusco performs for a local, culturally specific audience in her clandestine Cuban pieces, her Finnish collaboration with Ricardo Dominguez, a creator of the Electronic Disturbance Theater, is staged primarily for an international Internet audience. The question of how to break through to the real uniformly haunts Fusco’s simulations of a wake, burial, and scene of labor discipline, as discussed below.

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<sup>47</sup> As Jacques Rancière memorably puts it, the problem with the discourse of human rights is: “Ultimately, those rights appear actually empty. They seem to be of no use. And when they are of no use, you do the same as charitable persons do with their old clothes. You give them to the poor. Those rights that appear to be useless in their place are sent abroad, along with medicine and clothes... They become humanitarian rights, the rights of those who cannot enact them, the victims of the absolute denial of right” (“Who is the Subject” 307).

## Performance and Dissensus

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Jacques Rancière argues for a reversal in the way in which the intersection between art and politics is conceived: rather than political art appropriating its methods from Left politics, it is emancipatory politics that needs to borrow from “the modes of presentation” produced by radical art (65). Rancière locates the political efficacy of aesthetics in its ability to disrupt, or reframe, the cultural field of representation. Politics is reformulated as an intervention into “the distribution of the sensible,” defined as the “delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience” (13). Thus, the distribution of the sensible is experienced as a set of “aesthetic coordinates” (64). The shifting of these coordinates is linked to the shifting of political consciousness, suggesting that political acts, much like art, capture our imaginations through their sensory qualities. Radical politics, therefore, are possible only insofar as experiences that counter the sensory status quo are created. Fusco’s experiments investigating the relationship between embodiment, simulation and the real precisely invoke this instability of sensory knowledge, upon which the possibility for a radical politics to emerge, depends.

In our neoliberal era, then, we might think of the distribution of the sensible as the regime of time-space compression that David Harvey outlines in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990). In Rancière’s terminology, time-space compression is the aesthetic or sensory experience of the current “police order,” which excludes the “people” or “anonymous multitude” from its grand spectacles of greed only to conform

us to its consumer agenda—unless we disrupt that order through acts of “dissensus.” Rancière draws on the language of performance to theorize the process of becoming a political subject as “a capacity for staging scenes of dissensus” (“Who is the Subject” 303). He theorizes dissensus as “a division put in the ‘common sense’: a dispute about what is given, about the frame within which we see something as given” (“Who is the Subject” 303). Rather than imagine political bodies as static collectives, Rancière’s redefinition of politics as the act of disrupting the distribution of the sensible urges a new understanding of the processes of political emancipation. In “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” Rancière argues that tying rights to citizenship, or even a term as universal as ‘the human,’ is a dead-end, and defines rights instead as the performance of a wrong. In response to what he sees as the de-politicizing discourse of ethics in the age of humanitarian interventions, Rancière offers, “The channels for political subjectivization are not those of imaginary identification but those of ‘literary’ disincorporation” (*The Politics* 40). He invokes the example of literary experimentation to emphasize the anarchy-inflected aspect of breaking away from (rather than asserting of) power; just as an experimental text may deconstruct dead language, an act of dissensus may illuminate a dead right. And just as a literary text may make meaning multiple and indeterminate, the performative act of dissensus can be repeated indefinitely in a context of exclusion.

Rancière’s theory offers performance studies a conceptual vocabulary for examining the reframing gesture that is necessary to resist the neoliberal ‘common sense’ that Harvey identifies. It is through the (re-)distribution of the sensible that performance intervenes as politics here, since it is precisely the impulse to imagine alternative ways of being that performance, as an embodied practice, can deliver on, enabling artists to

disrupt the neoliberal consensus by reshaping the ways in which we experience time and space. Thereby, it can counter the affect-flattening and amnesia-inducing effects of speed-up and spatial collapse associated with our epoch of time-space compression.

### **Cuban Time and the Poetics of Exile**

The notion of return haunts the Cuban exile community in uncanny ways. Yet neither the desire to erase the last half-century of revolutionary change, nor uncritical support of the revolutionary regime—the two poles of Cuban exile politics as shaped by the nationalist forces of both the right and left—can account for the radical instability of the Cuban project in our neoliberal era. Neither hallucinations of the innocence of the pre-Castro days, nor feverish endorsements of *la lucha*, can account for Cuba's transformation into a tourist-based economy within the neoliberal world order—certain features of which bear a conspicuous resemblance to the notorious excesses of the Batista years. For sectors of the Cuban-American community, the US embargo has encouraged the easy vilification of the Castro government, while obscuring the island's material reality within the global economy. Though positioning itself in opposition to the neoliberal order, Cuba, like the advanced capitalist countries, has undergone a dramatic change in the experience of time and space; this has occurred as a result of the pressures exerted upon it by a rapidly changing world economy. Cuba has inhabited a unique position in the global economy since it entered its "Special Period" upon loss of Soviet financial backing at the end of the Cold War (Gott 286-298). While the US embargo (which dates back to 1960) thrust the island into an antagonistic relationship with the hegemon to the north, the policing of human movement across borders remains a two-

sided affair (Gott 185).

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord distinguishes between “diffuse” and “concentrated” spectacles, relating the diffuse spectacle of commodity overload to the operations of free market capitalist societies, while linking the “concentrated” spectacle to bureaucratic capitalist societies (#64-65). Cuba, as a struggling state capitalist nation, has been defined by the rationing of commodities rather than their abundance; however, the concentrated spectacle, according to Debord, is the cynical idealization of non-consumption through revolutionary imagery which ensures the authoritarian power of the police state under conditions of scarcity.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Cuba’s embattled stance vis-à-vis the United States simultaneously positions it as a vocal disruptor (and silent follower) of the neoliberal consensus on the world stage. In “Hustling for Dollars: *Jineteras* in Cuba,” Fusco likens the Cuban government’s courting of sex tourists to the maquiladora model: “‘Pussy Paradise,’ as Cuba is now called over the internet, is a place where these [foreign] men can act out their fantasies without any threat of police intervention—not unlike the multinationals looking for cheap unregulated labor across the border” (*The Bodies* 142). In today’s world economy, the Cuban national continues to live under conditions of surveillance typical of the concentrated spectacle, while the sex tourist enjoys the diffuse spectacle of eager-to-work, native bodies.

As a performance artist, Fusco reframes Cuban exile politics in her stagings of dissensus in two clandestine performances executed in Havana in 1997 and 2000 (during the official biennials, but in unofficial venues). Following in the wake of her

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<sup>48</sup> Debord states, “The imposed image of the good envelops in its spectacle the totality of what officially exists, and is usually concentrated in one man, who is the guarantee of totalitarian cohesion... This celebrity is master of non-consumption, and the heroic image which gives an acceptable meaning to the absolute exploitation that primitive accumulation accelerated by terror really is” (#64).

collaborations with Gómez-Peña, Fusco's unofficial Havana performances spotlight the policing of human movement across borders in an era defined by the free movement of capital. "Physical and cultural dislocation characterizes the daily lives of many, if not most, of the people of the world...migrant workers, immigrants, exiles, refugees, and homeless people," Fusco writes at this time (*English is Broken* 26). She stages the exclusions of exile—a "paradigmatic experience of identity for millions"—so as to counter immobility with politics in these underground performances (*English is Broken* 26). Through her negation of the policing of movement within and across the island nation's borders, Fusco examines the exile's impossible desire for repatriation and offers new possibilities for imagining Cuban identity and exilic mobility in the neoliberal era.

Fusco's rejection of the nationalist politics that have traditionally limited the discourse of the Cuban exile community enables her to explore previously disarticulated dimensions of the exile experience. She enters the contested space of the island nation to challenge what Jose Muñoz has termed "the inside/outside Cuba binary that has become so central since the revolution" (402). Fusco's participation in underground events during the 1997 and 2000 Havana Biennials was made possible by the Cuban artists who opened their homes and performance spaces to her. As Fusco explained in a radio piece following her first Cuban performance, "By exhibiting work by Cubans in the US, [these independent gallery spaces] are breaking with what was, until very recently, an official policy of denying access to visual arts venues to exiles and their children" ("The Havana Bienal"). By engaging with the exile community, Fusco's Cuban collaborators set the stage for the kind of disjuncture in which Rancière locates the possibility for politics.



Rancière suggests that dissensus requires “putting two worlds in one and the same world” (“Who is the Subject” 304). With their decision to perform in joint spaces, Fusco and her fellow artists defy the Cuban state’s policing of borders, intended to separate the *gusanos* (literally *worms*; the name given to exiles) from the revolutionaries, and capitalize on the clashing notions of time and space that these collaborations invite.

Fusco “force[s] open the matrix of reality to introduce unsuspected possibilities” (as Gómez-Peña suggests is “the work of the artist”) by accessing multiple temporalities and geographies in these performances (6). In doing so, she counteracts the refusal of history in an effort to awaken her audiences from the numbing effects of the spectacle (in both its diffuse and concentrated forms), exploring the more elusive contours of the Real.<sup>49</sup> In both *El Ultimo Deseo* (*The Last Wish*) (1997) and *El Evento Suspendido* (*The Postponed Event*) (2000), Fusco contests the denial of mobility to Cuban citizens and exiles alike; in this way, she refuses to privilege the status of either group and challenges the state policies that seek to discipline their movements within and outside of the island nation. According to Fusco, the immobility that many Cubans suffer induces an indeterminate feeling of suffocation: “I have often heard Cubans in the throes of despair speak of their existence as being buried alive. There are many there and here who have been forced at one time or another to inhabit a liminal state between existing and living” (“El Evento” 166). Exploring this space of liminality in her performances, Fusco, with her Cuban collaborators, co-creates models of time and space unbounded by the frames of either the revolutionary or neoliberal state. The political work of dissensus (in contrast to the de-politicizing work of consensus) entails disrupting the distribution of the sensible

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<sup>49</sup>In the Cuban context, the allure of the diffuse spectacle is the bait of the anti-Castro exile community, while the concentrated spectacle, such as Che’s ubiquitous image, is the lure of the state.

to introduce what has previously been excluded—in Fusco’s case, the exile within the revolutionary nation.

### **Playing Dead in Cuba**

In *El Ultimo Deseo*, Fusco realigns time and space outside the limiting frame of Cuba-US relations, performing “a wake in the name of those who could not die in their country” (*The Bodies* 163). She posts a sign titled “The Last Wish” at the threshold to the room in which she explores her dead grandmother’s unfulfilled wish to be buried in Cuba. Fusco’s immobile body invokes a generation of exiles, many of who fled Cuba in the early 1960s and were unable to return to their native country to die. She describes the performance space in the following manner:

I held the wake in a home in Old Havana, and laid myself out as the cadaver, wrapped in a white sheet on the floor of one of the parlors. Radio Reloj, the Cuban radio station that marks the passage of time with continuous reports of all the historic events that have occurred on any given day, was playing in the background. At the entrance to the room was a sign... (*The Bodies* 163)

Elsewhere she refers to “the style of a traditional Catholic wake...lit only by rows of tiny candles and a single black light” (“The Havana Bienal”). Fusco’s overlapping of past and present, life and death in her citation of a Catholic ritual that seems to be occurring both in and out of a bygone and future Cuba all at once, is vertiginous in its temporal displacements.

By imaginatively inhabiting her grandmother’s deterritorialized body, Fusco enacts the “wrong” which Rancière identifies as the universal gesture of politics. Unable to return to Cuba to die, Fusco’s posted sign reports, her grandmother “boarded a plane, flew to Barcelona to meet distant cousins, checked into a hotel, lay down, and died in the

night. When I arrived at the hotel three days later, I discovered she had left not a suitcase behind, only her glasses and a small purse” (*The Bodies* 163). The unsettling manner in which Fusco suggests her grandmother was able to hold onto life just long enough to check herself into a hotel room to die (since she packed no suitcase), disturbs the Cold War narrative of the Cuban exile eternally grateful to the United States for granting her the political refugee status denied to so many other immigrant groups.<sup>50</sup> Through performance, Fusco transforms the strange details of her grandmother’s death into an opportunity for dissensus—breaking the frame that assumes the crassness of exile politics is excluded from the realm of natural death. As in Rancière’s formulation, the articulation of the wrong (the denial of the body’s repatriation) blurs “the border separating bare life and political life” (“Who is the Subject” 304). By resurrecting her grandmother’s last act—instead of letting it rest as an eccentric gesture of senility—Fusco politicizes her grandmother’s detour.

In the black-and-white performance photo that Fusco reproduces in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*, our vision is drawn first to the white sheet loosely draped on the woman, whose bare arms and head blend into her surroundings so that the black light makes it impossible to tell if she is lying on the floor or suspended in space. She is surrounded by a perimeter of white roses, which are themselves framed by tea lights, whose effusive glow is bisected by the blurred and darkened legs of an onlooker in movement. The darkened abyss, above which the woman’s body seems impossibly to float in the photo, creates an uncanny effect.

Freud’s description of the uncanny as “something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” resonates with the

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<sup>50</sup> In her *Latino USA* radio piece, Fusco explicitly addresses her grandmother’s desire not to die in the U.S.

alienating condition of exile (148). Severed from her national community, the exile is made a stranger to her place of origin, and thus estranged from an essential part of herself. The re-enactment of Fusco's grandmother's wake—but now in Old Havana—evokes the return of this repressed content for both the exile and citizen. By blurring the line between life and death, Fusco precisely stages an encounter that incites both fear and attraction. Fusco's testimony of a little boy's response to her performance suggests the creation of a scene intended to induce this response: "As I lay there, one little boy from the neighborhood genuflects before asking someone if I might actually be dead" ("The Havana Biental"). According to Freud, an "uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary..." (150). Performing her dead grandmother's wish for repatriation, Fusco brings into visibility the nation's excluded by materializing the psychic reality of exile.

By playing dead, Fusco defies the time-space constraints of Cuban exile politics. She disrupts the static quality of official revolutionary time in order to signal the coexistence of multiple temporalities and geographies within the performance space. Faintly coming into contact with the performance space, *Radio Reloj* (literally *Radio Clock*) plays in the background. Accompanied by a faint ticking, which marks the seconds as they pass, *Radio Reloj* interrupts its constant news flow to announce the time every *minute* on the minute, structuring the march of time as the material of inevitable revolutionary progress.<sup>51</sup> The background static of *Radio Reloj* suggests both the official

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<sup>51</sup> Consider, for example, this statement from *Radio Reloj*'s director, Omayda Alonso: "Our staff is never satisfied. We have to continue to improve the quality of our broadcasts and to continue being the pen that reflects the work of the Cuban Revolution, which is our *raison d'être*." See "Cuba's Radio Reloj Radio

noise that aims to drown out alternative voices, and a warped conception of time. In this piece, Fusco opposes the undisciplined structure of historical memory to the ceaseless onslaught of official time and news. The radio station's endless broadcasts juxtaposed against the performer's immobile body, the pathos of the exile's situation is unexpectedly registered from the margins of the performance space. As part of an "underground counter-bienal," Fusco's clandestine work resists the disciplining of time that is a key element of the policing of borders in the Cuban context (*The Bodies* 163). By taking on the static of history, Fusco's performance makes a reality (if a fleeting one) of the exile's wish to be buried in her homeland. This act of transgression urges a different future by making the seemingly impossible happen—and this, in spite of the radio's steady ticking.

Instead of the static of official history, it is *Radio Bemba* ("the Cuban term for word of mouth") upon which Fusco focuses in her radio piece on the Sixth Havana Biennial for NPR's *Latino USA*. Unlike *Radio Reloj*—which annihilates the present by immediately declaring it to be history—*Radio Bemba* is about inhabiting the present. "We didn't have to make posters or invitations—people started knocking on our door hours before our opening," Fusco explains, describing what is in fact the undisciplined temporality of lived history, which continues to throb beneath the radar of official channels ("The Havana Bienal"). She identifies this encounter as "the most beautiful experience of performing in a community I have ever known," citing the way in which the neighborhood spontaneously spread the word about and participated in the evening's performances (*Corpus Delecti* 17).<sup>52</sup> The sentiment which Fusco externalized in her

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Station Celebrates its 61<sup>st</sup> Birthday," Radio Rebelde, 30 October 2008, 24 November 2008  
<<http://www.radiorebelde.com.cu/english/cuba/nacionales1-020708-eng.html>>.

<sup>52</sup> It is the immediate interest the community took in the art-making taking place in the home gallery that allowed the performers to avoid discovery by officials: "By the time the police arrived to find out what the

performance of slow tears then perhaps communicates not only the sorrow of the exiled, but the gratitude also, of the exile reunited with her native community: “I was lying on the floor like a corpse set out for a country wake, but my eyes were open, and tears rolled out, one by one” (*Corpus Delecti* 17).

Similarly poised to provoke an uncanny encounter with Cuban history, the performance by Havana-based artist Tania Bruguera that same evening in 1997 was no less “shocking” in its disturbance of settled accounts of history. Bruguera’s and Fusco’s pieces served to “inaugurate [Bruguera’s] new home-gallery” (“The Havana Bienal”). As Fusco recounts it, Bruguera’s performance implicitly refused the logic of revolutionary progress by returning to the scene of an overwritten past:

Then a neighbor showed up to behead the lamb Tania was planning to drape over herself as a shield. As a crowd begins to form in the patio, Tania takes her place before an enormous Cuban flag that she made of human hair, and began to feed herself handfuls of dirt. The power of her act came in part from the fact that in Spanish, the phrase to be swallowed by the earth also means to be overwhelmed by it or to vanish from it. (“The Havana Bienal”)

Jose Muñoz discusses Bruguera’s piece, *El peso de la culpa* (*The Burden of Guilt*), in terms of its performance of cultural guilt, citing an interview with Bruguera, in which she links the act of eating dirt “to the collective suicide of indigenous Cuban people during the Spanish occupation” (qtd. in Muñoz 403). As Muñoz argues, “Bruguera’s work offers an expanded timeline of cubanía,” which begins with the genocidal act of Spanish colonization and unsettles all subsequent claims to “pure” Cuban identity (as there are no pure descendents of the island’s original natives) (404). This narrative of origins “displaces the 1959 revolution’s central and organizing position, offering a more

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ruckus was, we had finished our performances, and even had an official permission slip for a party which Tania had shrewdly procured in advance to circumvent any measures that might be taken to stop us” (*Corpus Delecti* 17).

productive mapping of Greater Cuba,” according to Muñoz (404). The beheaded lamb, a symbol of Afro-Cuban religion, serves as a reminder of the Spaniards’ turn to the African slave trade as a response to indigenous resistance (Gott 18).

It is possible to imagine the productive dissonance created for the audience between the act of witnessing Bruguera’s dirt-eating rite and the experience of entering Fusco’s candle-lit room, as Bruguera’s implicit account of national origins ironizes the refusal of Cuban earth to “those who could not die in their country” (the ones to which Fusco dedicates her performance). Fusco’s performance invokes the desire for return as a site of interrogation: the original colonial encounter to which Bruguera’s piece testifies complicates the desire for return that defines the experience of exile. Performing within the same house, Fusco and Bruguera stage a politics outside of the frame of the machismo nationalism that seeks to limit positionality to the binary of the revolutionaries who stayed and the counter-revolutionaries who fled.

Embodying the deferral of her title, Fusco returned to Havana in 2000 with *El Evento Suspendido* (*The Postponed Event*) for another unofficial biennial performance in which she inhabited the deferred space of repatriation. She performed at the Espacio Aglutinador, an independent gallery run out of artist Sandra Ceballos’ home. While inside the gallery there was an exhibition of “fetishes and memorabilia” from private collections,<sup>53</sup> Fusco performed outside: “...I was buried in a vertical position up to my chest in Cuban soil in the yard outside the gallery for three hours, beginning at dusk. During that time I wrote the same letter (in Spanish) over and over, leaving the copies out

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<sup>53</sup> See “Collective Permanence 2000 (*Permanecer Colectivo*),” 7<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial November 2000-January 2001, Alternative Exhibitions and Projects, *Universes in Universe*, ed. Gerhard Haupt and Pat Binder, 4 November 2008 <<http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/habana/bien7/expo-alt/e-aglutinador.htm>>.

for members of the audience to take if they wished” (*The Bodies* 166). Invoking the dirt of Bruguera’s performance as well as the soil that was denied her grandmother, Fusco’s half-buried body transmits the psychic displacement of exile. Titling her work *The Postponed Event*, Fusco inhabits the sense of belatedness that possesses the exiled.

Fusco explains, “Like many other children of exiles, I am haunted by not literally being part of that soil. But most of all, I sought to find a means of evoking that sense of always communicating with another part of the self one knows but cannot see” (*The Bodies* 166).

The photograph that Fusco published of the performance is cast in a ghostly light that radiates from the earth and highlights her writing hand and face (half-hidden behind the hair falling in her eyes). The compulsive repetition of her act suggests both the trauma of a divided self and the enactment of a communal dilemma.

The letter Fusco writes “over and over” is “adapted from a passage in *The Incredible Disappearing Woman*” (*The Bodies* 166). A one-act play written by Fusco, *The Incredible Disappearing Woman* is about a Chilean woman who “disappeared” off the streets of Santiago in 1975, and who had to “play dead” in order to escape her torturers. When the play opens, she is working as a security guard in an art museum in Southern California many years later. The letter that Fusco modifies for her Cuban performance is the one the disappeared woman writes to her parents years after her escape, to let them know she is, in fact, alive:

My dear ones,

I am writing this letter to tell you that I am alive. For many years I feared that if I told the truth you would suffer at the hands of those who buried another woman in my name. I can no longer stand not being able to tell you that I exist. Not a day has passed without my dreaming of you. Fortunately I can say that I recovered from the ordeal that resulted in my departure. I will send more news soon.

With love, C. (*The Bodies* 166)



The translation of this letter into the Cuban context suggests the promise of reunion, of which the exile dreams. Burying herself in the soil, however, Fusco complicates the notion of return by enacting the desire of the exile as linked to the condition of burial for the Cuban national. The romantic dream of the re-united national body (“communicating with another part of the self one knows but cannot see”), which is mapped onto the exile’s psyche, occurs in the final space of immobility, the grave. By enacting the “wrong” of a divided national body, while half-buried in Cuban soil, Fusco locates mobility in the writing wrist that defies the rootedness of the body. In this gesture, she negates the notion of a prelapsarian return, while still capturing the uncanny allure of return’s psychic structure.

The complex temporality of the piece resides in the idea of postponement, which extends beyond the burial site from which Fusco writes and permeates the entire exhibition space. Inside the gallery, the exhibit by the *Permanecer Colectivo* also draws on the notion of postponement to present an unofficial history of Cuban art. The “permanence” of the group show’s name (*permanecer*, as in *to remain* or *to stay*) is ironized by the ephemeral nature of its holdings. The collection catalogue announces:

These are objects, projects, drafts, invitations, cards, gifts, obligations, charms, fragments of installations. Modest and unusual works made without calculation or high standards. Mysterious constructions, informally fabricated by a group of artists, living or already passed away, old, young, Cubans (at home or abroad) and foreigners – meticulously compiled by ardent collectors of fetishes and memorabilia. (“*Permanecer Colectivo*”)

If we assume that the collectors are the members of the Collective, then this description enacts the inclusion of the exiled community into the art community that has been defined by its staying, thus playfully breaking down the exclusive “permanence” of its self-definition. The fragmented nature of the exhibit is an eloquent testimony to the

vicissitudes of Cuba's social experiment: at times requiring clandestine operations, and always with limited resources. The catalogue description encapsulates the unfinished and ongoing nature of this work, marking a scene of dissensus by its inclusion of the excluded. The inclusion of work by Cuban exiles (exemplified by Fusco's haunting presence outside) stretches the notion of *permanecer* to delimit a psychic, rather than physically bounded, geography.<sup>54</sup>

Thus reframing Cuban exile politics through her enactments of the deadening effects of nationalist discourse, Fusco poses new possibilities for exilic mobility. During her 1997 visit, Fusco interviewed another Cuban-American artist, Ernesto Pujol, about the site specificity of his work for the official biennial. Pujol responds:

I think that my work here says something about fragmentation, about cultural fragmentation, that outside just gets washed into the whole multicultural presentation and means something totally different. Here it is very much about revolution, it's very much about separation. It is very much about escape, and about returning. It's about a dynamic that is very specific to a specific cultural, political experience. ("The Havana Bienal")

The exiled artist's incorporation into the official biennial simultaneously suggests a loosening of restrictions in the art world in the neoliberal era (which fuels multicultural explorations) and the need to return to the site of the nation to achieve a truly multicultural approach. Rather than the decline of the nation, such a paradox implies the radical potential of the nation as a construction in the era of globalization, which, of course, depends on demanding the recognition of the nation (of both immigration and emigration) as "always-already multicultural," as John Beverley articulates (*Testimonio*

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<sup>54</sup> A "Cuban Artists' Books and Prints: 1985-2008" exhibit at the Grolier Club in New York City the summer of 2009 very much evoked the aesthetic sensibility of "mysterious constructions" often assembled under conditions of scarcity described in the *Permanecer Colectivo* catalogue above. The innovative use of simple, everyday materials like cloth, mirrors and old printed matter suggests, in the recycling of metaphors of flight and psychic death, that an exilic structure of feeling dominates creative production within the island as much as without. According to the Grolier Club's press release, "As a group, these artists and artisans expand the definitions of the book to express their fluctuating Cuban identities."

23). Fusco's Cuban performances similarly depend on their interaction with a Cuban audience in order to register as politics. According to Rancière's translator, "The essence of *politics* [for Rancière] consists in interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility" (Rockhill 3). By inserting herself into the Cuban frame, Fusco asserts her belonging as exile, thereby altering the "field of possibility." Enabled by her Cuban collaborators making work on the fringes of the official art scene, Fusco enters a dynamic zone in which movement is made possible by the countering of static with performance—that is, by playing dead to make the "unsuspected possibilities" come alive.

### **Clashing Temporalities**

The Zapatistas' declaration of war marked the surfacing of a simultaneously pre-Columbian and postmodern force. Their brazen performance of indigeneity shone a spotlight on the vitality of the unplugged, or those previously excluded from the flows of transnational capital. In his essay entitled "The Fourth World War Has Begun," EZLN spokesman Marcos theorizes neoliberalism as a planetary war aimed at the capture of markets opened up in the aftermath of the Cold War and based on the exclusion of "all those deemed unsuitable to the new economy" (561). Citing that fact that 300 million indigenous people "inhabit areas containing 60 percent of the planet's natural resources," Marcos attests to the endangered status of indigenous ways of life (561).

The turn to performance in Latin American arts more broadly at this historical juncture was largely inspired by the Zapatistas' "project of wresting [the] national and

international terms of political representation for themselves” (Saldaña-Portillo 194).<sup>55</sup> Refusing to go along with the neoliberal erasure of globalization’s occluded, many Latin American artists seized onto the possibilities for “the [re-]mapping of world-historical time and the [re-]temporalizing of geolocalities” that the Zapatistas’ performance of resistance suggested. As Gómez-Peña testifies, “[T]here was a time in recent contemporary Mexican history in which we all experimented with the realm of unlimited utopian possibilities. And [...] these possibilities [...] were partially created by the performance skills of Marcos and the EZLN” (95). While there are specific national legacies of the avant-garde and genealogies of feminist art (which clearly should not be overlooked) at play here, it is nevertheless equally important to note and account for the explosion of performance art—bearing witness to anything but the end of history—across the Americas in the 1990s.

Contrasting the time-keeping functions of a punch card to those of an hourglass, Marcos, in a 2001 interview, portrays the Zapatistas’ ongoing difficulties in negotiating with the Mexican state as a problem of clashing temporalities. He attributes the punch card to the party of (the then newly-elected) President Vicente Fox, establishing a discrepancy between “the discipline of the factory clock” and the “slipping of the sand” which marks time for the Zapatistas (“The Punch Card” 73). The image of the hourglass invokes the long duration of mythic time that supports indigenous claims to the land. Rejecting the harnessing of time to productive labor as an attempt to “proletarianize” the peasantry, the Zapatista model of time is a pregnant present, composed as much of the

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<sup>55</sup> This surge in Latin American performance art at the end of the twentieth century was confirmed by the publication of several important anthologies at the dawn of the twenty-first, including Coco Fusco’s *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (2000) and Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino’s *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform* (2003).

future, as of the past. (That is, until the sand runs out, and time turns static, mired in the past—then it remains for the time-keeping instrument to be overturned for the future to rush back in.)<sup>56</sup>

Through his use of figurative language, Marcos translates the temporal-spatial problem of “colonial difference” in this tale of incompatible timepieces. Latin American theorists of neo-colonialism define colonial difference as “the differential time-space where a particular region becomes connected to the world system of colonial domination” (Moraña et al. 6); these differences result not only in physical but also epistemic forms of violence. Rather than “subordinate the struggle against capital to the time of capital,” resistance in the neoliberal era necessitates the affirmation of “forms of cultural and psychic difference, time, need, and desire that are at odds with the ‘ontological conditions that Empire presents’” (Beverley 11). Thus, as Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar argues in *Encountering Development*, only a struggle that links political change to revalidating indigenous ways of knowing can challenge neoliberalism’s assault on the peasantry in the Americas. Upholding alternative schemes of time—such as the hourglass Marcos plants on the table—is a crucial vector in this equation.

Marcos makes a distinction between the “spectacle” of the peace process and the possibility of “a real dialogue” (“The Punch Card” 74).<sup>57</sup> Echoing Debord’s claim that “the spectacle is nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation, its use of time,” Marcos identifies the deep-rooted refusal to abandon a specific “use of time” as central to Fox’s attempts to carry out the plans of the neoliberal

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<sup>56</sup> Contrast the profound multi-temporality of the present of the hourglass to the one-dimensional shallowness of the continuous present of postmodern capital, which seeks to obliterate past and future.

<sup>57</sup> For Debord also, the spectacle “is the opposite of dialogue” (2005: #18).

order (despite the President's surface gestures toward compromise). Bringing Marcos and Debord together, we discern that it is as much a consequence of the dislocating forces of time (which are at the disposal of power), as geography, that the dominant and diffuse forms of neoliberal governance exist in varied relationships to different locations. Speed-up for the worker located in the free-trade export processing zone is experienced as a weight and monotony unknown to the transnational company stock holder who experiences time as dynamic flux both because of his mobility and relationship to the market. The velocity of a few is made possible by the stagnation of the many; therefore, laying claim to alternative temporal formations is an essential aspect of resistance in the postmodern era.

This putting forth of alternative temporal formations has repeatedly played itself out in the Zapatistas' negotiations with the Mexican government, which have highlighted the alternate, slowed-down rhythms of grassroots democracy (as anyone who has endured an all-night mass meeting without reaching consensus knows well). In addition to the historic negotiations, the Zapatistas have staged "strategic public performance[s] of democratic practice, repeatedly calling for and hosting national and international forums, conventions and delegations on issues of social justice, indigenous rights and representative democracy," further re-orienting the nation's clock (Saldaña-Portillo 223). According to Marcos, "Dialogue means simply agreeing [to] rules for the dispute between us to shift to another terrain. The economic system is not on the table for discussion. It's the way that we're going to discuss it that is at issue" ("The Punch Card" 75). Issues of translation (Spanish versus the numerous indigenous languages which are the Zapatistas' mother tongues), register of language (official government-speak vs. the

more informal and poetic language of the Zapatistas), and especially the speed of procedure were at stake in these negotiations. As has often been noted, the Zapatistas' insistence on the primacy of breaking open hegemonic discourse, distinguishes them from previous revolutionary movements in the Americas. Dialogue (within the context of both staged media performances and international grassroots forums) supersedes the military struggle, as it is democracy rather than power which is the Zapatistas' end. The strength of such a movement is not its arms, for it stands no chance of upending the state machinery through brute force, but its ability to alter the terms of the debate within the wider culture.

The question of audience is what determines the nature of the Zapatistas' performance. The military struggle emerges as a relic of the spectacular state: "What the table has to achieve is to allow us to emerge with dignity, so that neither I nor anyone else has to go back and don all that military paraphernalia again" (Marcos, "The Punch Card" 75). Armed engagement is referred to as a kind of playacting—"military paraphernalia" the costuming necessary to get the state's attention. Performance allows the Zapatistas to gesture above the heads of the government officials they negotiate with to reach a mass audience through the very media channels that the state has until then used to promote its hegemony. As Marcos declares, "The challenge before us it to construct not only the table, but also our interlocutor. We need to make a statesman, not a marketing product designed by image consultants, out of him" ("The Punch Card" 75). An unlikely project, unless, of course, we consider the Zapatistas' true interlocutor to be those historically excluded from the negotiating table, on the receiving end of this mass technology. By contesting the time of capital, while exploiting its channels, the

Zapatistas manage to “conform to the temporal code within which capital comes into being while violating that code at the same time” (Dipesh Chakrabarty qtd. in Beverley 22). The spectacle of the President as depicted by Marcos recalls Debord’s formulation of the spectacle as “the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself” (#24). Through dialogue, the Zapatistas aim to reach a mass audience by re-signifying the “self-portrait of power” as anachronistic in its punch-card rule—that is, as unable to adapt to new modes of democracy enabled by the contested flows of globalization (Debord #24). For Marcos, the problems of dialogue and temporality are inseparable: “I arrived in that jungle with one watch and the other dates from when the ceasefire began. When the two times collide it will mean that Zapatismo is finished as an army and that another stage, another watch and another time has started” (“The Punch Card” 75).<sup>58</sup> Beginning a new time represents the collective desire to rupture the state’s disciplining of labor time irrevocably.

### Staging Politics

In their collaboration *Dolores from 10 to 22*, Coco Fusco and Ricardo Dominguez interrogate the invisibility of gendered labor in free-trades zones such as Tijuana, and reveal the ways in which time is wielded to discipline labor. A 12-hour performance based on the testimony of a Mexican maquiladora worker, Fusco and Dominguez’s innovative multi-media work conceptualizes politics as a risky performance whose reenactment alters the audience’s experience of time and space by bringing the unseen

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<sup>58</sup> Following the government’s betrayal of the historic San Andrés Accords in 2001, the Zapatistas constructed autonomous zones from which to self-govern according to a collective, land-based (vs. individualistic, capital-based) temporality (see *El Kilombo Intergaláctico*). The state violence that these liberated territories have constantly had to deflect merely reflects the perceived threat to the neoliberal order’s hegemony.



forces of globalization into visibility. That is, as an act of dissensus, Fusco's performance, like Marcos' gesture of the hourglass, turns the neoliberal clock on its head and skews its compass by exposing the hidden and exploited labor that ensures globalization's instant excesses.<sup>59</sup>

*Dolores from 10 to 22* explores what Fusco has elsewhere termed "the underside of the post-human"—that is, the exploitation of labor which has enabled the digital revolution (*The Bodies* 188).<sup>60</sup> Fusco met Delfina Rodriguez—the woman whose civil rights case inspired *Dolores from 10 to 22*—while conducting research into the social conditions of women living and working along the Mexico-U.S. border zone. In 1998, she wrote a public radio piece about the maquiladora worker's experience of being coerced into signing a letter of resignation; accused of unionizing efforts by her boss, Rodriguez was locked in a room for twelve hours without food, water, or a toilet. In an artist's statement on her website, Fusco attests that she "was convinced that there must have been surveillance cameras recording what happened to [Rodriguez] during her internment. *Dolores from 10 to 10* is my interpretation of what the cameras saw" (*"Dolores from 10 to 10"*).

*Dolores from 10 to 22* was a twelve-hour "streaming video net.performance" filmed on multiple surveillance cameras on November 22, 2001 at Kiasma, Helsinki's Museum of Contemporary Art ("On-Line Simulations" 156). Fusco and Dominguez employed closed circuit television technology (CCTV) to simulate surveillance footage

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<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that the maquiladoras were a key site of mobilization in the Zapatista's 2006 *La Otra Campaña* (The Other Campaign), which sought to reach beyond the borders of Chiapas and galvanize a national Left outside of the context of official electoral politics.

<sup>60</sup> Fusco contends, "...I am extremely wary of the ways that the celebratory views of the virtual domain elide pressing political questions about the toll that globalization enacts upon the millions of displaced, disenfranchised, and brutally exploited people" (*Bodies* xvi).

for the live Internet broadcast. Visitors at Kiasma that day did not have direct access to the performance space, but could watch the performance from CCTV monitors placed throughout the museum. Fusco then later created *Dolores from 10 to 10*, a video installation (based on edited footage of the twelve-hour performance) that simulated the CCTV system.<sup>61</sup> I am interested in examining how Fusco's reenactment of Rodriguez's testimony realigns the political along the axis of dissensus—or the performance of a wrong that reframes the status quo by “putting two worlds in one and the same world”—and the clashing of temporalities that this type of performance invites. Employing the technology of surveillance in order to stage their critique of the disciplining of labor in the multinational era, Fusco and Dominguez negate the inexorable laws of time-space compression by slowing down time to reclaim conceptual space.

Emblematic of the shift from Fordism to more flexible modes of accumulation, the maquiladora model acutely raises the problem of space for a politics of resistance to corporate globalization.<sup>62</sup> Sustained by the third-world poverty that guarantees a desperate workforce and the support of local government against human rights claims, the multinationals that move their operations to these export-processing border zones resort to unfair labor practices with impunity. In her research on the conditions of female workers in the maquiladoras, Fusco cites, for example, “unwarranted searches of personal belongings, sexual intimidation, and the gratuitous control of bathroom breaks in the name of productivity quotas” (*The Bodies* 198). As a consequence of the fragmentation and insecurity of the working class in these zones of maximum exploitation, the leverage that labor has traditionally wielded in its occupation of space is severely diminished. Yet,

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<sup>61</sup> I want to thank *The Project* gallery in New York City for opening their archives to me and allowing me to examine the surveillance footage Fusco edited for the *Dolores 10 to 10* video installation.

<sup>62</sup> See Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

the testimony of Rodriguez, which Fusco re-enacts in the role of Dolores, suggests an alternate way of thinking about politics in the maquiladora era.

Through her re-enactment of Rodriguez's refusal to relinquish civil rights she formally did not have, Fusco performs the act of coming into political subjecthood. As in Rancière's formulation of dissensus, Rodriguez, as political subject, and then Fusco, in her re-enactment, "acted as subjects that did not have the rights that they had and had the rights that they had not" ("Who is the Subject" 304). That the *Dolores* performance haunts the 12-hour period of disciplining that lead to Rodriguez's dismissal concurs with Rancière's sentiment that democracy, as politics in action, is less about the securing of rights than the demonstration of an injustice. Each of Dolores's small acts of resistance—from repeatedly refusing to sign a letter of resignation to writing on the walls of the prison-like room in which she is confined—testify to her assertion of rights that remain outside of the maquiladora frame, and which she therefore does not possess.

It is not a coincidence that in their shop-floor struggles, maquiladora workers have most often used slow-down as a means of resistance against speed-up. A clandestine form of sabotage, *tortuguismo*, or working at a turtle's pace, is a form of subaltern struggle that bypasses formal mediation (Peña 103-107). By mirroring this tactic in their performance, Fusco and Dominguez acknowledge the agency of these non-unionized female workers. Fusco observes, "These workers are interpolated into the global economic order under the sign of the passive subaltern female, forced by necessity into absolute obedience to hierarchical managerial structures with invisible but omnipotent bosses..." (*The Bodies* 194-195). As Dolores, Fusco stages multiple scenes of dissensus by repeatedly disputing her manager's claims on her and withstanding his

sexualized threats and acts of violence for twelve hours. Mr. Jorge (played by Dominguez) charges that she is “creating a disturbance” with her insistence that “this is not how you treat a person.”

In broadcasting their performance live to the Internet through streaming video, Fusco and Dominguez engage with the technology that has made possible both the instantaneous financial transactions driving spatial collapse, and the international mobilizations of the global justice movement in response to conditions of flexible accumulation. As co-founder of the Electronic Disturbance Theater, Dominguez has been at the forefront of the movement for politically progressive uses of electronic communication in his digital support of the Zapatistas.<sup>63</sup> EDT’s virtual performances involve mass actions geared to flood the servers of targets, such as the Mexican government website, as a mode of electronic civil disobedience. As Fusco explains, “EDT’s theater is resolutely non-mimetic”: as a virtual sit-in participant, it is not “sharing a physical space,” but rather “shared time and a consensual collective hallucination” that constitute participation (*The Bodies* 71). A similar conceptualization of participation is at work in *Dolores*, as it is time, rather than space, that the audience shares with the performers.

By manipulating the audience’s experience of time, the performers aim to expose the hidden, so as to ultimately inspire a rethinking of the relationship between cyberspace (that most intangible of commodities) and labor in their audience. In her interview of Dominguez for *TDR*, Fusco asks: “Can we use the Internet to present simulations of the unseen?” (“On-Line Simulations” 160). Her question follows an elaboration of globalization’s unseen:

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<sup>63</sup> See Jill Lane’s “Digital Zapatistas” and Amy Carroll’s “Incumbent upon Recombinant Hope.”

The dramas of everyday violence in border zone maquiladoras are never seen on-line, the subjection of women workers to the rule of machines is not acknowledged as politically problematic, and multinationals do not expose themselves or allow investigative reporters to expose them, though management routinely surveils workers. (“On-Line Simulations” 160)

By sending the re-enacted images of Rodriguez under surveillance streaming out into the Internet, Fusco and Dominguez open the circuit, so to speak, of the closed-circuit system. In addition to the four cameras recording Dolores’s twelve hours of confinement, four other cameras monitor the hallway outside the room, a darkened stairwell which other maquiladora workers shuttle up and down, a women’s bathroom, and a room full of computers and monitors which Mr. Jorge occasionally enters. From these cameras outside the space of Dolores’s containment, it is clear that Mr. Jorge’s come-ons and intimidation tactics are the norm in his supervision of the female factory workers. In composite, these form a rare, behind-the-scenes look at the staging of working life under the rule of corporate globalization.

In order to expose the commodity fetishism that blinds consumers to the exploitation of labor in such export-processing zones, Fusco and Dominguez subvert the technology of consumption to send audience members images of “the unseen.” As David Harvey acknowledges, “The concept of fetishism explains how it is that under conditions of capitalist modernization we can be so objectively dependent on ‘others’ whose lives and aspirations remain so totally opaque to us” (*The Condition* 101). Rather than show the shiny toys that Mattel Inc. (Rodriguez’s employer) produces for the market, Fusco and Dominguez show the cost at which such goods are manufactured. In their attempt to make the opacity of Rodriguez’s life transparent, Fusco and Dominguez arrive at a scene of discipline. Implicitly, then, to simulate “the unseen spaces of social production” is to

simulate the unseen disciplining of labor (“On-Line Simulations” 160).

The question of space and labor in the multinational era is refracted through the performers’ indifference to the location of the audience members in determining their level of participation. Through the chat room Fusco and Dominguez set up, the Internet audience had more of an opportunity to impact the course of events, despite their distance, than the audience within the same space of the museum, which watched the performance on surveillance cameras distributed throughout the galleries. In this way, the chat room audience became complicit with the unseen forces of capital that determine the outcome of workers’ lives, while the museum audience of passersby more closely resembled the distracted and passive consumer.

Yet, the work urges its audience to go beyond this complicity to experience a form of affective identification counter to the spectacle of sexualized violence they encounter in the performance. Dominguez, for example, relates the desire to “build-up an empathetic moment beyond the screen” (“On-Line Simulations” 161). As Fusco explains, the performance urges its audience to become critically aware of its viewing position:

*Dolores from 10 to 22* was not just a commentary on the political situation of women workers on the global assembly line, but about living in a society obsessed with surveillance and voyeurism, two interrelated kinds of looking that theatricalize the objects under observation. (“On-Line Simulations” 159)

Mr. Jorge’s objectification of the “hot chicks” photographed in the magazine he flips through while eating a burrito in front of the food-deprived Dolores, calls forth the response of “pig” from her. It is not long before he is attempting to force her to engage in oral sex with him. If commodity fetishism is about the erasure of the labor that goes into producing culture and its material artifacts, then voyeurism is complicit in that erasure as

a violence of seeing that seeks to discipline unruly bodies. According to one review of the net.performance, “Some of the participants in the chat seemed to be increasingly interested in the escalation of violence, wondering when Dolores would be punished. According to the artist statement, this troubling sample is a signifier of the tensions between pleasure and terror, intimately linked within the narratives of surveillance systems” (Salgado). Just as the response to the Guatinaui tour surprisingly revealed a colonial structure of feeling animating much of audiences’ interactions, the desire to view a scene of punishment indexes the way in which voyeurism encourages an unconscious identification with systems of discipline.

So how does a performer encourage the kind of witnessing to which Dominguez alludes? “[T]he audience was distributed and invisible, so we could not feel the existential presence of audience that one would in a traditional theatre,” Dominguez tells us (“On-Line Simulations” 159). Related to the problem of space then is the problem of form. On the one hand, the performers can create a Brechtian alienation effect by distancing their audience from the surveillance footage: by refusing to give us the performance “straight” (on a stage, or in a gallery, for example), Fusco and Dominguez foreground the coercive uses of a technology too often solely associated with the erotic and entertainment by affluent consumers. However, this distancing alone cannot guarantee the kind of affective witnessing that Dominguez expressed hope for. Paradoxically, it is through the technology of distance that the performers must overcome distance. Dominguez comments on the importance of gesture for communicating to audiences through Internet technology: “Streaming works best if one approaches it as media for gestures that can be read as black and white photographs” (“On-Line

Simulations” 159).

As Elin Diamond demonstrates in *Unmaking Mimesis*, Brecht’s notion of the *gestus* provides a dramatic language for the kind of gesture that allows the social to leak into and expand the frame of representation: “The gestic moment in a sense explains the play, but it also exceeds the play, opening it into the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production” (53). Fusco and Dominguez adopt a realist acting style (which verges on the facial and bodily expressiveness of melodrama), that, in this context (because of their exaggerated gestures), breaks the illusion of surveillance to urge the audience to critically reflect on the unfolding scene.

A particularly remarkable gestic moment occurs when Dolores, after hours of enduring harassment and confinement, gets down on the floor and disassembles the hard drive of the computer, which until this moment she had ignored as she inspected her surroundings. By literally taking apart the hardware of the digital revolution, Fusco’s gesture reminds her electronic audience of the invisible labor that goes into assembling the machinery enabling their connections. In this action, she simultaneously disrupts the stereotype of the passive Latina worker and raises the question of access to cyberspace. According to Fusco, “political engagement begins with assuming the role of witness, exercising pressure via oppositional surveillance tactics and refusing the role of passive consumer” (*The Bodies* 201). By recognizing our connection as electronic consumers to the labor of the maquiladora worker, we create space for new gestures of transnational solidarity.

More than just inform us about the condition of maquiladora labor through its manifestations of the unseen, Fusco and Dominguez’s work asks us to *feel* what it is like



to endure immobility in the multinational zones of free trade. According to Rancière, “political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world,” but rather, involves “the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification” (*The Politics* 63). Dominguez addresses the first aspect of Rancière’s equation in his statement that “[i]t was important that simple images be created that allowed anyone to quickly get a sense of what may be happening and why it is wrong; that the issues of exploitation of women and laboring in the Free Trade Zones be readable” (“On-Line Simulations” 159).

Subtler to detect, however, is the role of the uncanny in the *Dolores* performance. We can begin to approach it though, by thinking about the experience of time and Dominguez’s hope that audiences who kept watching would “sense the weight of duration that Dolores was living through” (“On-Line Simulations” 159). More than anything it is the length of the performance itself, and perhaps the bodily deprivations Fusco re-enacts (such as the moment when she is forced to urinate in a waste basket, draping her company shirt discreetly across her lap), which create a creeping sense of shock in the audience. In these moments, an alternative meaning of the interconnectedness globalization enables may be registered. As in the dilation of time that the *gestus* provokes, the present is infused with the uncanny and unruly sensory potential of lived history which the neoliberal order seeks to discipline and erase.

It is only after Dolores has signed the letter and been dismissed that Mr. Jorge notices the writing she has etched on the wall. As he puts on his glasses to inspect the wall with his back to the camera, we are reminded of what the surveillance scene always

occludes—the materiality of the unseen woman’s life. Our impossible desire to know what she has written can only be answered by a decision to re-enter history.

In “Time and History,” Giorgio Agamben writes, “Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated” (99). It is my contention that Fusco and Dominguez’s multi-media work elucidates the clashing temporalities that most accurately define our neoliberal moment in all its productive chaos. Though time is forcibly slowed down for Dolores during her 12-hour imprisonment, time is anything but homogeneous during this interval. According to Agamben, “This representation of time as homogeneous, rectilinear, and empty derives from the experience of manufacturing work” and “expropriates man [sic] from the human dimension and impedes access to authentic historicity” (106). As viewers, we witness how the boredom of waiting is punctured by moments of danger and concentrated activity for Dolores. In these intervals, we see Dolores returned to her human dimension and possibly even gain access to our own historicity.

Against the continuous time of capitalism, Agamben posits a more liberating model of time, the *cairós*: “the abrupt and sudden conjunction where decision grasps opportunity and life is fulfilled in the moment” (111). This Benjaminian concept of history, of a charged *now*, in which a revolutionary actor “grasps favorable opportunity and chooses [her] own freedom in the moment,” resonates with Fusco’s depiction of Dolores as absorbed in her dismantling of the computer, or in the act of writing on the wall (115). Though hardly presented as revolutionary acts in the sense imagined by

Agamben in his moment of writing, Dolores's acts of resistance are staged to "construct a dissensus against the denial of rights [she] suffers" (Rancière "Who is the Subject" 306). The ways in which Dolores repeatedly tests her rights offers a model for political becoming—one that halts the homogenous flow of time with actions that enliven the heterogeneous present. Tuning into the time of Dolores's body—with its waste and unruly affects—shows us how to cross over from the screens of our own bare lives into the unsettled field of politics.

### **Re-entering History**

If the 1990s opened with a seductive invitation to forget history, they closed with an anti-neoliberal vengeance. The protests that disrupted the meetings of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in November of 1999 marked the full-fledged emergence of a new global force, the global justice movement, in the United States. Based on a strategy of unity across differences, the global justice movement united progressive sectors that previously acted independently, such as labor and environmental rights groups, radical students and older human rights activists. The international global justice protests against the major international economic institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, in London and Quebec City, Genoa and Prague, signaled the possibility of a transnational politics of solidarity based on recognition of the ongoing and interlinked legacies of colonial conquest, planetary devastation, and labor abuse. While activists from the global South certainly participated in these demonstrations, and inspired the vision of "globalization from below" that defined the global justice movement, the predominant role of international non-governmental organizations in shaping the agenda

of the movement posed its own set of problems. Critics such as Gayatri Spivak and Inderpal Grewal demonstrate how the discourse of human rights taken up by cosmopolitan NGOs has resulted in a retrenching of national differences through Eurocentric means,<sup>64</sup> which has undermined civil society in the so-called developing nations and opened the door to the rise of the humanitarian intervention as a means of consolidating the neoliberal order.<sup>65</sup>

Because globalization is an uneven process, a uniform international response to its excesses is not necessarily desirable.<sup>66</sup> For cultural theorist Pheng Cheah, the critical question is: “In an uneven neocolonial world, how can struggles for multicultural recognition in constitutional-democratic states in the North be brought into a global alliance with postcolonial activism in the periphery?” (37). It is precisely this question, in its balancing of the radical potential of both nation and international organization as sources of neoliberal resistance, which Fusco’s body of work seeks to answer. Through her embodiment of the colonial subject, dispossessed exile and disenfranchised laborer, for example, Fusco recalls us to our forgotten and hidden histories: “The refusal to forget that history [of colonialism and slavery] and the insistence on returning to it in order to perceive the parallels between old and new forms of dehumanization are globalization’s undertow, the postcolonial’s strategic means of debunking the triumphalist narratives of modernism and postmodernism” (*The Bodies* xvi). Fusco’s simulation of a scene of labor discipline in a maquiladora plant, and her evocations of death and burial in Cuba, index

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<sup>64</sup> See Spivak’s “Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World” (1996) and Grewal’s *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005).

<sup>65</sup> Consider, for example, the way in which the discourse of women’s rights was cynically deployed in the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Political economist Samir Amin, for example, “suggests that popular nationalism in the periphery is a necessary step towards socialist cosmopolitanism because we live in an uneven capitalist world-system... For social redistribution to occur, the state must resist structural adjustment” (Cheah 33-34).

these global relations in uncanny ways. As a postcolonial actor, Fusco lays bare the positions of Cuba and Mexico in the global economy of the 1990s, as the two offer stark examples of the options presented to the nations of Latin America by the United States at the zenith of the neoliberal era: cooperate and live by our clock (NAFTA), or resist and die a slow, painful death (embargo). She strategically positions herself at sites of exclusion so as to bring her audience into a dynamic present that will implode the opaque commodity mirror with its historical force. It is our job to then make something larger of that tear in the fabric of time-space compression.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Poetics of the Common: Landscape, Trauma, Love

One primary effect of globalization...is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no 'outside'.

-Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*

In its creation of a 'common world', contemporary globalization offers no escapes, no untouched terrains of innocence. It is perhaps surprising then that two of our major poets of globalization, Ed Roberson and Raúl Zurita, invoke the pastoral form—famed for its escapist and idyllic properties—as a space in which to rethink and refigure the economic and cultural landscape. That both poets write a critical poetics of globalization without leaving home serves as a reminder that internal forces of dislocation, such as policies of urban renewal/removal and repressive state violence, are as integral a part of the neoliberal landscape as forced exile and migration.

As a hemispheric phenomenon, the neoliberal state has its origins in the 1973 US-backed Chilean coup that ousted the socialist government of Salvador Allende. The military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet viciously repressed the Left as it pursued policies of deregulation and privatization against collective decision-making and ownership. Soon thereafter, a 'democratic' form of neoliberal governing was initiated by the Reagan presidency in the United States in the early 1980s. Jumping forward to the twenty-first century, a time when the neoliberal model is all-encompassing, what today's Chile and United States share in 'common' is an ideology that reduces all politics to

questions of individual freedom based on market imperatives. As David Harvey summarizes, the ideology of neoliberalism is such that “All forms of social solidarity [are] to be dissolved in favor of individualism, private property, personal responsibility and family values” (*Spaces of Global Capitalism* 17). The form the neoliberal consensus takes in both countries, however, is not identical, but rather based quite solidly in their different (if intertwined) national histories. Thus, while neoliberalism as global mode of governing links nation states in unprecedented ways, how these policies translate varies significantly for different locales and populations. The neoliberal landscape to which Ed Roberson responds is one consumed by a post-racial politics of personal responsibility that denies the historical basis for structural inequalities. Zurita, on the other hand, intervenes in a social order struggling to bury its recent dictatorial past in an oasis of consumer freedoms.

Both Roberson and Zurita evoke the pastoral form to bypass the limits of political discourse and give expression to “a new landscape of the sensible” (Rancière 149). Traditionally, the pastoral seeks the imagined purity of rural life as a flight from the corruptions of city life. From Virgil’s *Eclogues* to Milton’s “Lycidas,” the pastoral is a capacious form that has often been used as a forum for imagining ideal human relations, whether through the vehicle of romance, elegy, religion, politics, or some combination of all of these. The blatant artifice of the pastoral, that is its idealized picture of nature, is often a vehicle for performing the social precisely by what it is not. The (anti)pastorals of Roberson and Zurita play off of these conventions in a manner that accepts the contamination of our ‘common world’, but nevertheless retains the pastoral principle of an imagined space of hope. A thoroughly political gesture for these poets, the turn to

(what I am broadly referring to as) the pastoral is an attempt to reconnect with the anti-individualistic sentiments of an earlier era, and carry them over into the present. The performance of this recovery and transmogrification of ‘hope,’ through recourse to the pastoral, is the focus of this chapter.

Roberson cites the pastoral only to undo the city/nature binary intrinsic to the form in *City Eclogue* (2006); he does so largely by uncovering the dynamism of the ‘natural’ world at work in the urban landscape. Roberson’s work has recently been lauded as exemplary of the genre of black nature poetry, and takes a central place in the groundbreaking anthology *Black Nature* (2009). As Evie Shockley argues, “Roberson’s poetry negates the supposed opposition between the natural world and the socio-political (human) world” (730). Recalling Hardt and Negri’s formulation of ‘a common world,’ Roberson, in an interesting reversal, claims, “There is no outside of Nature” (“We Must Be Careful” 3). In my examination of *City Eclogue*, I test Hardt and Negri’s expansion of the notion of ‘the commons’ of the natural world to ‘the common’ of social production, against Roberson’s poetics of the metropolis.

The pastoral landscape of Zurita’s *INRI* (2003/2009) is composed of the living dead, radically stretching the idyllic bounds of the form. Haunted by Chile’s disappeared, Zurita’s pastoral recalls Pablo Neruda’s majestic explorations of the natural world—but from the other side of the Pinochet dictatorship. In *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* (*Heights of Macchu Picchu*), Neruda summons the unsung dead workers and peasants of the Americas, declaring, “Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta” (“I come to speak for your dead mouths”) (68/69). The dead of Zurita’s pastoral are not only muted but blinded as well, mutating the landscape itself. Try as he may to summon their



voices, the poet of *INRI* cannot maintain the heroic stance of Neruda towards the dead (to whom he is so close).

Given Jacques Rancière's claim in "The Paradoxes of Political Art," that the role of critical art in the era of neoliberal consensus is to invoke the imaginary as a means of reframing the real, we can see how the pastoral offers an entry into this refiguring of the real. There is no clear divide between the work of art and political reality for Rancière: "There is no 'real world.' Instead there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions. The real is always a matter of construction..." (148-149). It is not that the material world does not exist, but rather that what is possible as a form of intervention into the real depends on what can be seen and heard, the sensible. Political art is not in itself a form of politics according to Rancière, but retains the possibility of opening a political space for new subjects through its work of 'fiction.' Fiction here does not refer to a specific genre of prose, but rather to a mode of creation: "Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective" (141). It is my contention that the 'fiction' of the pastoral is what enables Roberson and Zurita to disrupt the neoliberal consensus of their respective locations in a manner that suggests alternative socio-spatial configurations for Roberson and re-opens the wound of trauma for Zurita.

**"A Common Place/Hope Expects There To Be": Ed Roberson's *City Eclogue***

The subject of a long-awaited special issue of *Callaloo*,<sup>67</sup> Ed Roberson has been writing award-winning innovative poetry for four decades, yet only recently has begun to receive some of the critical attention he deserves. He has published nine books of poetry to date; *City Eclogue*, published in 2006, is his seventh book. Evie Shockley “consider[s] *City Eclogue* [Roberson’s] masterwork, to date,” arguing, “it is and will likely remain one of the most important poems of the new century”—a statement with which I fundamentally agree (742). As a number of critics have acknowledged, coming to terms with the black experimental poetry tradition (of which Roberson is a central figure) has meant radically rethinking what African American poetry looks like, sounds like and does, and goes a long way in explaining the critical lag.<sup>68</sup>

Conventionally a form of pastoral dialogue, the eclogue, as appropriated by Roberson, sidesteps the fantasy of the rural idyllic to project possibility into the abandoned spaces of the city. The major U.S. cities Roberson surveys are comparable to other global cities in their domination by centers of finance that for the last four decades have systematically dismantled community operations. Given this neoliberal reality, the poem’s major political accomplishment is to see through gentrification to a space of the common.

Neither public nor private property, the common extends beyond our shared (and diminishing) ecosystem to describe the products of social labor that exceed the control of capital, according to Hardt and Negri in *Commonwealth* (2009), the final volume in their

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<sup>67</sup> See Brent Hayes Edwards’ introduction, entitled “Black Serial Poetics,” to the Roberson special section in *Callaloo* 33.3 (2010).

<sup>68</sup> See Aldon Nielsen’s *Black Chant*, Crown’s “Reading the ‘Lucid Interval,’” Shockley’s “On the Nature of Ed Roberson’s Poetics,” and Edwards’ “Black Serial Poetics” for more extensive discussion of how critical expectations of orality and transparency in African American poetics have overlooked a rich and extensive tradition of black textual experimentation.

collaborative trilogy. Concomitant with the shift from industrial to immaterial production in the neoliberal era is the increasing extraction of profit from the production of codes, affects, and other forms of social relations. Such a shift is what makes it possible for Hardt and Negri to propose a radical alternative to the expropriations and alienations of Empire—from within Empire itself. The possibility of the common lies in the democratic potential of the multitude, defined as “a production of social subjectivity that results in a radically plural and open body politic, opposed to both the individualism and exclusive, unified social body of property” (Hardt and Negri, 40).

A serial poem centrally concerned with “the loss of neighborhood,” *City Eclogue* formally explores dislocation to arrive at a vision of ‘the open’ (Roberson quoted in Crown’s “‘We Are Not’” 750). Formally, the poem is defined by its polyvocality, achieved through disjunctive phrasing, syntactic fragmentation, and interrupted rhythms, and the complexity and flux of its cycles of imagery. Brent Edwards defines the serial poem as “a book-length work composed of discrete individual poems, clearly interrelated but not assembled into a suite or sequence,” observing that Roberson’s serial innovations are “a mode of grappling with history” (626). The nonlinear form of Roberson’s poem enacts a critique of the developmental logic of the global city in its refusal of sequential progress: Roberson’s associative style, in which images and words rapidly take on new meanings through shifts in perspective, creates a density of allusion that halts forward movement and keeps drawing its reader back to what came before.

In her study of trauma and witness in Roberson’s poetry, Kathleen Crown locates Roberson’s work within a black experimental poetics that “preserve[s], as a potentially liberatory space, the ‘outside’ or ‘interval’ that the exclusionary violence of the public

sphere creates” (“Reading” 188). She defines this space of exclusion as both a formal poetics and site of social practice: “For Roberson, the term *interval* most often indicates the chaotic but productive space between sign and sound, and between the visual and aural—a space he insists on rendering *lucid*, as in fully visible, readable, and accessible to reason and the intellect (“Reading” 189-190). Crown thus associates the “lucid interval” with an attempt to make historical trauma legible. In *City Eclogue*, Roberson continues to employ disruptive techniques to access difficult-to-locate spaces of collective memory.

A product and producer of modern globalization, the slave trade haunts current manifestations of neoliberal globalization in Roberson’s work. In order to make sense of spatial displacement, the book recalls a long African American history of displacement that begins with the slave trade and ends in our post-9/11 moment. The historical drama the poem enacts is not one of linear progress, but of jagged movements. Just as Reconstruction was a betrayal of Emancipation, the neoliberal present registers as a betrayal of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. The serial form allows Roberson to literally jump around in time: he telescopes the nation’s slave past into the present as contemporary processes of dispossession recall the auction block, for example. Roberson connects the disorientation that accompanies the systemic clearance of marginalized neighborhoods under the guise of urban renewal to a dizzying historical trajectory of black progress and setbacks. As the speaker of “The Open” insists, “People lived where it weren’t open, / a people whose any beginning is disbursed/ by a vacant progress, // whose any settlement/ is overturned for the better// of a highway through to someone else’s/ possibility” (63-64).

The poem abounds in critical terms and tropes associated with globalization discourse. Consider the following motifs, which recur throughout the poem: a) *flows* (“...not the body of this space they make/ only the flow through it”); b) *displacement* (“when the city tore down like shooting/ all the houses living on our street”); c) *privatization* (“something is off// re: the water”); d) *ecological destruction* (“...the heat/ is out of control the land toxic”); e) *city centers vs. peripheries* (“we lived in a distant separation as if// across the low valley we never knew/ our ward flowed through// or knew the downtown was as close to/ as the gold dome on the new municipal/ horizon”); f) *borders and immigration* (“their refugee/ or here employed status”); g) *surveillance* (“red revolving patrol// lights”); h) *globalization as maelstrom* (“the maelstrom we had all outrun/ dances us”); i) *alienated labor* (“he went at the alarm clock as if to kill/ before that something about waking killed him”); j) *mapping* (“scale legend map”); k) *paranoiac subjectivities* (“the kind of walk that’s always taking cover”); l) *neo-colonialism* (“land people pour into/ to colonize”) and m) *bio-power* (“one more occupation of her body...”).<sup>69</sup> Ultimately though, it is through his own formulation of ‘the open’ that Roberson most efficaciously disrupts the neoliberal developmental logic of the global city as we know it today.

For Roberson, the open functions as an alternative spatial-temporal framework for penetrating the spectacle of the late capitalist city and tapping into the common. Its vast and shimmering quality suggests the pastoral, but is overlaid on the privatized and deserted spaces of the city. In what follows, I show how Roberson performs the subjectivity of what we *might* want to call the multitude through his development of an unbounded lyric speaker. Roberson’s lyrical strategy, in which overlapping voices

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<sup>69</sup> Roberson a)42, b) 57, c)41, d) 41, e) 64, f) 52, g) 49, h) 44, i) 56, j) 25, k) 43, l) 41, m) 135.

compete within sentences and blur into each other to form a composite of the present resonates, to a degree, with Hardt and Negri's notion of "singularities in common" (181). While the individual is defined by property rights, the singularity, according to Hardt and Negri, is defined by openness to multiplicity within and outside oneself, and as such, is a much more fluid construct (339).

Playing off of the shepherd's invocation of his muse in the traditional eclogue, the poet presents a clairvoyant in her lieu:

One of your clairvoyances who could've  
seen her way to speak    stared clearance through  
A New York scoping out instead of eye  
contact. No voice or vision, no called muse. (lines 1-4, 15)

The clairvoyance—that is, the one who can see what is hidden—simply “stared clearance through.” She has witnessed a dispersion of which she will not speak. Perhaps she is one of the displaced. The clairvoyance rejects voice and is multiple: she is “one” among others. Because the emphasis is on her faculty of perception, her *clairvoyance*—and not on her identity as a *clairvoyant*—she is able to inhabit multiple bodies at once. Indeed, as we read on, other bodies step forward as “clairvoyances” or channels of knowledge. The poem's optic—“A New York scoping out instead of eye/ contact”—implies perception based in something other than intimacy and cuts against the romantic tradition of the male poet calling upon his ethereal muse for inspiration. “No voice or vision, no called muse,” the clairvoyance summoned is one who sees through to “the open beyond what's seen” (lines 4 and 8, 15). She prepares us for the poem's deferral of the singular lyric voice, the “clearance” of landscape and displacement of communities that troubles much of the book, and an orientation towards the future. In the immediate, “the open” indexes loss—of housing, of culture, of neighborhood. Yet, the poem's insistence on going

“beyond what’s seen” urges us into an “open” space of possibility.

This open space of possibility is sustained by the architecture of the poem, which constantly shifts to accommodate the conventionally (and socially) excluded. Roberson describes the architecture of his verse as “a structure of voices inside the sentences, of the overlap of stations coming in and out, in and out of focus, and someone sitting hearing them all” (quoted in Crown “Down” 655). The soundscape of Roberson’s poetry, with its syntactic fragmentation and disjunctive phrasing introduces static into the lyric structure as a constant reminder of what can’t be heard, of the voices just out of range.

Graphically, the poet signals the singular lyric’s containment of voice through his use of a horizontal line to divide the page “giving the effect of counterpoems or underwor(l)ds” (Crown “Reading” 196). This typographical move underscores how, in order to make its mark on the page, the singular lyric voice excludes other voices, voices which the poet wants to let into the poem. Unlike the regularity of the pastoral dialogue, Roberson’s use of the horizontal line does not suggest a regular back-and-forth or exchange, but rather registers anonymous undercurrents of refusal that erupt into discourse.

The use of the horizontal line in “Stand-In Invocation” divides the sonnet form against itself. Recalling the “could’ve” of the first line, the final couplet is largely erased echoing “ould’ve/ ould’ve” (lines 13-14, 15). The line separates the couplet from the isolated line “She knows the form, her tongue’s just sharp and short of” floating at the bottom of the page (line 15, 15). This statement of refusal prepares Roberson’s readers to recognize (and read *into*) hidden or repressed forms of knowledge in the formal gaps and absences we experience on the page. This act of reading into the ‘open’ or blank spaces of the poem invites a reconsideration of the discarded bodies, buildings and futures the

reader encounters in the book.

Though the clairvoyance the poem invokes as a “stand-in” for the muse is not so much an individual as a way of seeing, Roberson does suggest that the figure is based in an encounter he had with a homeless woman.<sup>70</sup> In locating the possibility for vision in a homeless woman, Roberson turns the neoliberal stereotype of the homeless vagrant—the crazed and dangerous person who cannot accept or rise to the challenge of capitalist competition to secure her own property—on its head. Perhaps the homeless woman is granted the status of seer precisely because of her position as one unencumbered by the myopia of property relations. Such a potentiality resonates with Hardt and Negri’s theorization of “the poverty of the multitude,” which they explain “does not refer to its misery or deprivation or even its lack, but instead names a production of social subjectivity that results in a radically plural and open body politic, opposed to both the individualism and the exclusive, unified social body of property” (40). The clairvoyance of the homeless woman suggests a common field of struggle around displacement. Roberson’s vision does not romanticize the poor—in fact, his poetry powerfully critiques social exclusion—but locates new sites/sights of possibility for the common by honing in on ‘the open.’

Contrasting a politics of love based in social solidarity and the creation of the common to corrupt forms of identitarian love based in sameness (such as the family, nation and race), Hardt and Negri posit a love of the stranger and of alterity as central to this politics. They acknowledge that, given the dominance of identitarian forms of love in capitalist society, a “process of sentimental and political education [is] necessary” for

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<sup>70</sup> In an interview with Crown, Roberson directs his readers back to the poem “The Wanderers” in *Atmosphere Conditions* for an earlier take on the same encounter (“We Are Not” 748).



the multitude to effectively move towards a politics of love (195). Though much of contemporary poetry may be complicit in straightjacketing love within the narrow confines of the romantic couple and/or domestic sphere of the family, Roberson's serial poem efficaciously explores its own political concept of love. For instance, in his visionary three-part poem "Sit In What City We're In," Roberson interrogates the language of identitarian love to uncover other possibilities for living in 'common.'

"Sit In What City We're In" opens from a distanced perspective that urges historicity about the present: "Someone may want/ to know one day..." (26). In the first section, the poem moves in from a general examination of the complex layout of the modern U.S. city ("our hive grid as plumb/ as circles flanked into the insect/ hexagonals, / our stone our steel") to a focused probing of a civil rights lunch counter scene (26). In the description of city as hive, human construction ("our stone our steel") blurs into nature ("insect hexagonals"). Here we see how Roberson's language realigns human cultural production with the natural world, insisting on their mutuality.

As in Shockley's formulation of the collapsed boundaries between nature and culture in Roberson's poetic project, Hardt and Negri in their representation of the shared world that globalization creates, privilege social productivity as integral to the common. Unleashing this biopolitical production from the dictates of capital and harnessing it to the common good to achieve new forms of social solidarity is the aim of Hardt and Negri's politics of love. A future in which culture and nature are inseparable—that is a future in which creative flourishing is unleashed—is prefigured through Roberson's description of city as hive. The hive, itself an artificial construction, suggests the sweetness that can be tapped through social production, while retaining the threat of

violence of the swarm. In this way, the hive incorporates both the positive and negative potential of the multitude.

Turning to the metropolis as a site of possibility, Hardt and Negri distinguish their critique from studies that treat the increasing breakdown in distinction between urban and rural centers in apocalyptic terms: “The metropolis not only inscribes and reactivates the multitude’s past—its subordinations, suffering, and struggles—but also poses the conditions, positive and negative, for its future” (249). The city not only carries the traces of historical trauma, but is also “the space of the common, of people living together, sharing resources, communicating, exchanging goods and ideas” (250). This emphasis on biopolitical production reformulates the postmodern city or metropolis as a site of encounters with difference, not just a consumer sinkhole. Similarly, Roberson represents cities not only as sites of suffering but also potential spaces of liberation.

In “Sit In What City We’re In,” the “mirrors around the lunch counter” which “reflected the face/ to face” encounter between the demonstrators and belligerent servers are foregrounded as a site where history can be read into the present (26). It is the site of “infinite regressions” of the ongoing past (27). The poem offers neither easy answers nor easy feelings, plunging in and out of the scene’s “cross-mirrored depth,” which resists resolution (26). The poem does what the nation cannot. It faces the past from as many angles as possible:

this regression this seen stepped  
back into nothing both ways  
From which all those versions of the once felt sovereign  
self    locked together in the mirror’s  
march from deep caves of long alike    march back  
into the necessary    together  
living    we are  
reflected in    the face to face we are

a nation facing ourselves our back turned  
   on ourselves    how  
 that reflection sat in demonstration  
 of   each face  
   mirror reflecting into mirror generates           (27)

A painful tension between the linked fates of those captured in the scene—on both sides of the counter—and the gulf between them is registered. The poem mirrors its own language so that the same words take on multiple, contradictory meanings. “Regression,” for example, carries both the negative connotation of reversion to a less developed state, but also suggests, in this context, a return to a more hopeful era; navigating the syntax here is suggestive of the difficulty of confronting this history. It is as if the demonstrators are themselves mirrors whose faces reflect the nation’s racial history, so that each individual face stands in for many more; at the same time, however, the dizzying operation of multiplying reflections threatens to decompose the scene.

The allure of identitarian love (“deep caves of long alike”) is a strong pull away from “the necessary   together/living.” Without reducing the trauma of racial violence, the poet insists on the inseparability of the fate of black and white America. By entangling the reader in his syntax, Roberson urges us to locate ourselves in this scene, to “generate” our own reflection within the poem, before arriving at the following stanza’s concluding “one face” (27-28). The single face or reflection is the historical whole that the individual cannot escape, which gives lie to our sense of autonomy. Yet, within this “long likeness” the individual retains her difference: her agency or complicity (27). To think “singularities in common” means to recognize racial and other forms of difference as significant, but not as an ineradicable barrier to solidarity. There is only one side of the counter that will allow for this making of a common space, that is the demonstrators’

“march back/ into the necessary together/ living.”

The future city can never erase this past: “a street cobbled of the heads of/ our one/ long likeness/ the infinite regressions” (27). As if trapped in a hall of mirrors, the attempt to escape the nation’s racial past, which extends back to “the oceans” (surely an allusion to the slave trade) is futile (27). That the reflected image of the “one face” has been “hosed by riot cops” does not split the unity of the nation’s face, but rather exposes the terror housed therein (28). The dream which has gone “down the gutter” does not disappear but returns in the form of nature: “The sphere surface/ river/ looked into reflects/ one face” (28). Even though the dream of civil rights recedes, it reappears in the flows that compose the city. The spherical surface summons the image of a globe.

As a transnational formation the multitude extends across the bounds of nation states. Yet its very possibility seems blocked by the same internal divisions that compose the nation—how can we imagine common action beyond the claims of identity (“the deep caves of long alike”) given the racial and gendered history of the nation itself? Given the uneven development between nations? The multitude, unlike previous international formations (the proletariat, for example), does not require the suppression of individual differences in the interest of an overarching category (such as class). The multitude that makes the common, as elaborated by Hardt and Negri, is more a potentiality than a reality. Similarly, the common city “Sit In” proposes is emblematic of the desire for (rather than a reflection of) a more democratic world.

For Roberson, the return to the civil rights scene challenges an official post-racial reality that denies the structural problem of race in the ‘free market’ United States. Yet the gap “between impoverished inner cities and affluent and exclusionary suburbs,” that

is, what David Harvey identifies as the problem of “uneven geographical development” within the United States, is undeniably a racial issue (*Spaces of Hope* 177). In order to make this reality visible, a new theory of time is necessary the poem suggests. In the second section of “Sit In What City We’re In,” the poem’s tactic of simultaneously exploring multiple temporalities is foregrounded: “...the faced and yet to be/ faced/ in one frame” (29). This is a succinct statement of Roberson’s strategy throughout the book: past and future embedded in a vertiginous present. African time is contrasted to Western modes of instrumental time that only register progress: “where the future is in the same/ place as the past, is/ maybe one of the African/ masquerades of time like these facing mirrors,/ in which time is making faces/ at you from the elemental/ moment” (29). The typographical gap between “African masquerades of time” and “these facing mirrors” suggests the historical gap between the slave trade and the confrontation of racial trauma today. In “Reading the Lucid Interval,” Kathleen Crown contends that the open spaces or “intervals” of Roberson’s verse provide “access to traumatic knowledge that resides unclaimed and unregistered within historical ruptures” (195). In these “facing mirrors” history distorts the image of the self with disfiguring traces of the past, thus “making faces” (29).

The self is transformed by the act of looking: “In the glass, the face/ observed, changes the looking at that face, cancels both/ their gaze to transparency, opens/ around it a window containing right here/ around us” (29). Here, seeing past the self into the other is revealed as the aim of opening oneself to the past, and thus opening a “window” of possibility into altering the future. This is accomplished by recognizing that what the other sees is not one’s face, but one’s back, which the self cannot see. The poem longs

for the “impossible” touch of self-knowledge: “your impossible/ hand that reaches to give the pat, to okay touch you/ at the unfamiliar, those stubs of your/ back” (30).

This impossible touch forms the utopian vision of the poem’s third section: “and finally, us with no you nor I/ but being/ —with all our world— inside the other” (31). This vision of unity does not exclude difference, but rather bases itself upon the recognition of difference: “our each part yet having/ no displacement of the other,/ just as each wishes the self not lost, shared/ being in common in each other” (30). The image is of many overlapping worlds within one world, and as such evokes not only an alternative vision of the self, but like Hardt and Negri’s concept of “singularities in common,” by extension, of the globe itself.

Sobered by four decades of “infinite regressions,” Roberson’s poem re-enters the transitory space of utopian possibility that the demonstrators made in common to imagine what an “ideal city” might look like in a truly pluralistic future (Roberson quoted in Crown “We Are Not” 758). The vision is a planetary one, in which the cycles of the globe are invoked to imagine difference as cooperative: “as different as/ night and day still of one spin” (31). Distinctions between public and private space are abolished: “where the street runs/ up the walk to the door” (31). Returning to the opening premise that “Someone may want to know...,” the poem closes “what city we’re in/ that curves glowing over the edge/ into an earth” (32). The poem suggests that the civil rights project is an unfinished one and takes a visionary leap into a future that picks up from where Rosa Parks (figured as a ghostly bus rider) left off.

What lies between the present and the realization of such a ‘common’ vision is brutally brought home in “Place Lit By A Window,” the poem immediately following

“Sit In.” From the outset, the squalor of public housing overwhelms “a common place/ hope expects there to be” (33). The dystopia of “somewhere between the four crack walls/ and trash deep stair-less floor” suggests that the state’s continued complicity in public forms of segregation (such as schooling and housing) rules out a public or state-mandated solution to the current state of living. The poem ironizes a “bootstrap” mentality that suggests if one fails it’s because one didn’t try hard enough, revealing the structural racism that belies the Booker T. watchword (33, 35). The politics of personal responsibility are part of the neoliberal consensus that Roberson’s reframing of the urban landscape seeks to disrupt.

Scenes of precarious living litter the collection. In the book’s second section, “Beauty’s Standing,” images of waste and environmental hazard are invoked to describe (what are presumably) public housing structures: “The buildings stood, a bunch of/ garbage odd-sized barges//lashed together between the currents/of the railroad and river, scuttled//sinking upend into an oily sky” (41). Made to fail, the buildings are compared to casks with holes in them that “upend into an oily sky.” (The word ‘scuttled’ also recalls Eliot’s “ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas”—those modern emblems of impotence). The way the buildings are “lashed” together captures the violence that traps inhabitants between competing “currents,” while the image of “garbage odd-sized barges” calls to mind public housing structures built on landfills. The book mourns the “clearance” of such public housing structures as monuments of failed promises.

The dangers of unsafe housing are not appeased, but rather exacerbated, by the constant threat of state surveillance and repression. For example, one of the ‘under-

voice' poems in "Beauty's Standing" opens, "the kind of walk that's always taking cover" (43). This is the voice of a dispersed paranoia: "...where people look for what's against them, / we slouch that walk" (43). Unclear what the source of fear is the language turns to the "government," yet the proper word eludes the speaker: "just a stink// of sense that something's wrong here..." (43). Perhaps guilty of the same crimes that "our enemies" are defined by, "our government" defines itself in contradiction to rogue regimes it accuses of "dictatorship, takeovers, military/ class rule, compromised legitimacies" (43). The couple of extra spaces between each of these terms suggests a gap or absence in language; as the speaker charges, "we can't think/ without our common term yet" (43). The linguistic trickiness of the poem's last lines attempt to uncover a repressed social truth:

These words hide    as understood    our denial of such  
with exclusive meaning    by definition never the us

*or) By*

our self-referent definition    none of these words  
admits us and are    (still in our habit    Colored Only.    (43)

The choppy rhythm these lines achieve through their use of spacing suggests both difficulty and precision in phrasing—they want us to slow down and take stock of the hidden. The first two lines clarify the conundrum: that the words that most closely resemble the current social situation are the words that are used to describe national enemies, and thus feel strange on the tongue as a description of one's own government. The irony of such a predicament is explored in the last two lines of what is set up as a logical equation: either A (we cannot use these words to describe our government) or B



(we are not included in the national self-definition). The word choice of “habit” suggests a reaction formed from a repeated experience—here, the speaker attests that the way to bring these swirling terms together is to acknowledge that only by admitting racial exclusion into the heart of what it means to be “us” (the U.S.), can the dispersed fear described above be parsed. The open parenthesis suggests that the problem of race is not a closed topic, but one that opens out into the future.

The theme of violent social repression is picked up in a poem ironically entitled “(*the first casualty is where you live*)” (49). Literally bringing home the fear of the streets, the title suggests that racial segregation in housing is part of the legacy of an unacknowledged national history. The irony resides in the fact that it is the law with “red revolving patrol// lights a spun radiant weapon a night-/ stick elucidation a beating without a given reason” which represents the random violence that enters the home (49). In his review of *City Eclogue*, Thomas Fink notes how the image of a ghost in red lights recalls Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which the landscape and characters are haunted by slavery’s legacy, its ongoingness. In Roberson’s poem, “...the ghost with its candle/ floats across the walls red revolving patrol/ / lights...” and becomes a form of historical haunting, an omen of state violence associated with incarceration. There is no place of safety here, no inside from which to escape the outside. The neighborhood is always under an official surveillance that can at any moment knock down the doors. This vulnerability to police violence is reminiscent of the unprotected slave body, the memory of which haunts the walls inside the home. A cycle of history is spun in the “red revolving patrol/ lights” which the poet, in turn, spins the reader through so as to make the terror of the state palpable.

The following poem, “(*there was no gun*),” historicizes the threat of police violence through reference to the killing of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed black man who was shot 41 times by police officers in New York City in 1999. One of a number of high profile cases of brutal police violence during the years Rudolph Giuliani served as the mayor of New York, the allusion to Diallo historicizes the nervousness of the poem in an era of increased racial profiling consistent with urban policies of gentrification. The jumpiness with which the poem opens (“we blink our eyes at any sudden loud noise”) is interrogated as one of two kinds of response formation: “we blink our eyes to erase what we see/ or to clear the eyes to see what we don’t” (50). That is, closing the eyes is either a gesture of denial or an attempt to see more clearly. The post-blinking eye that sees “more clearly” is the one that sees into the open.

In the section entitled “The Open,” knowledge is paradoxically associated with loss—the poet seeks a vantage point of “clearance” that allows for “clairvoyance.” Though at first look clearance or the open is the result of systemic discrimination, this violence also can spur the vision of a radically different setup. At the heart of *City Eclogue* is the juxtaposition of enclosure with the common. At the site of demolished buildings, the poet registers “...the loss/ felt in the openness// suddenly able to see/ as if across a drained lake from below// a missing surface: the knowing...” (63). There is something behind these torn-down structures that the poet wants to access. This knowledge takes both a negative and a positive form: the terror at the heart of the nation, which is epitomized in the 9/11 poems, and a vision of the common that struggles to surface and is associated with the subjectivity of the squatter (discussed below).

The inescapable racial terror that permeates many of these poems comes to light

powerfully in the 9/11 poems. In “Not Brought Up,” the poet inflects the terror of the contemporary tragedy with the imagined terror of the black witness of a lynching: “must have felt that/ magnitude against them    stacked/ high    come down out of the hills” (123). The language is disjunctive, interrupting itself, and indeterminate in time and space: “Just as a matter of scope it felt/ like that/ was the numbers of people/ we wanted justice/ brought down upon—that many gone along/ keeping silent kept in office for—/ Just the sweep of the complicit terror/ against us—“ (23). The speaker has felt this terror before—abruptly cut off statements represent an attempt to excavate a buried past that is “not brought up” in the media or other official channels.

In other poems the speaker meditates upon the altered landscape (“when we’d see the lit towers on the island/ we were headed for    we see now the hour”), and imagines himself inside the bodies of the individuals who leapt from the flaming Towers (“I jump backwards off the burning upper floors”) (132, 122). Roberson suspends these “jumpers” outside of time by telescoping the history of lynching into their suicidal plunges.

Kathleen Crown observes that Roberson’s poetry is “concerned with the dangerously suspended or falling body as the forgotten condition and risk of any movement” (212). The figures of the lynched body and the body in free fall are related to the pitfalls of a referential language that cannot adequately convey the trauma of the past, Crown argues.

In “Height and Deep Song,” the poet realizes this relationship between the falling body and the failure of referential language to transmit trauma: “but unable to jump strapped in// with the wonder the words can come up with/ stripped    in the scramble of birth spill—/ the speechless// cover binding/ the know this/ on the spine/ the body screaming” (58). Roberson’s jumpers and rappelling bodies anticipate the falling dead

bodies of Zurita's poem. In Zurita's *INRI*, the corpses sing as they fall: "Caen, cantan" ["They fall, they sing (13)] (33).

The book's concluding "Eclogue" presents a grim picture of the post-9/11 landscape, closing on an image of a homeless woman who recalls the 'clairvoyance' of the opening "Stand-In Invocation": "Of her destroyed sun say/ it endows the landfill on which to build a/ new development" (135). The woman's body ruined ("...the dirt on her feet cracks/ into sores..."), we do not take the poet at his sacrificial word (134). Compared to the garbage that is buried under soil on the building site, the woman is disposable only according to the neoliberal logic of development. The dehumanization of the development schema undercuts in a devastating manner the hopeful veneer of the language. The pastoral form does not redeem here—rather, it cuts right into the skin of the city's simulacra.

The serial form in tension with the anticipated promise of the pastoral, a poem embedded in the book's center suggests an alternative response to 'clearance':

standing in the last building standing,  
in a bare window, barely in his shorts;  
his as none of the windows is curtained nor show  
any sign but him of habitation—  
the doors off the building, panes gone from  
the frames—  
but him on the upper floor just wakened,  
standing there, late foot on the sill as if  
balanced on the prow of his ghost ship he  
hasn't even had to take over,  
he,  
a lone survivor, a squatter keeping it  
open  
drifts out into the open (70)

What the squatter keeps "open" is his relationship to property. The building's lack of window dressing suggests all tenants have been evicted. Without windows or doors, the

division between inside and outside, private and public is dissolved. Autonomous from property relations, the squatter navigates “a ghost ship he/ hasn’t even had to take over.” To imagine the “ghost ship” out in “the open” is to return to the “elemental moment” of the Middle Passage and envision a radically different kind of encounter.

That the squatter is seen at all is noteworthy. The abandoned structure on which he stands typically “sailed past unseen” during “work commutes,” his remarkable possibility—like “the catch of broken glass” that “shoots back the light/ that lit its flash” in “a flattened sea of housing brick rubble”—suddenly and surprisingly manifests (70). To recognize the possibility of a different world in the ‘poverty’ of the squatter is the blinding lesson of the flashing shards of glass.

### **“En Un Tierra Enemiga Es Cosa Común”: Raúl Zurita’s Blind Landscapes**

The act of blinding operates at several levels in Zurita’s *INRI*, indexing the literal gouging of eyes that served the machinery of state terror during the military dictatorship, as well as refracting the amnesiac condition of post-dictatorship culture. The title, *INRI*, alludes to the Latin inscription ‘Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews’ and intimates a setting of persecution. The book is composed as a response to President Ricardo Lagos’ January 2001 televised admission that hundreds of bodies ‘disappeared’ by the Pinochet government had in fact been dumped from planes into the ocean. The visionary poem revisits this traumatic national history through the conceit of a screeching landscape.

A prominent figure in the Chilean *avanzada* or neo-avant-garde scene that emerged during the early years of the Pinochet dictatorship, Zurita was a key member of the art collective CADA (*Colectivo Acciones de Arte*) and published his first book of

poetry, *Purgatorio*, in 1979. Chilean critic Nelly Richard, among others, argues that CADA's gutsy performances wedged open a critical space for oppositional discourse in the 1980s, an era of mass mobilizations against the dictatorship.<sup>71</sup> At the time of writing *INRI*, Zurita had recently been recognized with the prestigious Premio Nacional de Literatura in 2000. A major Chilean poet, recognized as the literary heir of Nicanor Parra and Pablo Neruda, Zurita is as well-known for his monumental inscriptions of poetry and notorious acts of self-mutilation as he is for his bound verse.<sup>72</sup>

Written nearly fifteen years after the 1988 plebiscite that determined the end of Pinochet's dictatorial rule, the blind landscape of *INRI* recalls Zurita's (failed) attempt at self-blinding in 1980. The poet's desire to sacrifice his physical sight at the age of twenty-nine was fueled by a romantic notion of negation—would the act of skywriting poetry not be immensely more powerful if the poet could not physically see his own creation but had to imagine it instead, he reasoned. Initially conceived as a means of turning the machinery of state terror against itself, Zurita explains the original thinking behind the act of skywriting: “pensaba que si los mismos aviones que habían bombardeado La Moneda lograban escribir un poema en el cielo, entonces pareciera que el arte alguna esperanza tiene, al menos emblemáticamente, de transformar al mundo” [“I thought that if the same planes that bombed La Moneda [referring to the bombing of the presidential palace that led to Allende's death and the inauguration of the military dictatorship] succeeded in writing a poem in the sky, then it might appear art has some

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<sup>71</sup> See Nelly Richard's “Margins and Institutions.”

<sup>72</sup> In 1975 Zurita branded his cheek with a seething hot iron and included a photograph of his scarred cheek in *Purgatorio* (1979). In 1980 Zurita attempted to blind himself with ammonia and chronicles this act in the paratext of his second book, *Anteparaiso* (1982). Associated with the unsuccessful blinding is an act of skywriting, in which he hires five planes to write out the 15 lines of his poem “La Nueva Vida” over the skies of New York in a four-hour performance, which is also documented in *Anteparaiso*. In 1993, under the Transition government of Patricio Aylwin and with its financial support, Zurita bulldozes the phrase “ni pena ni miedo” [“neither shame nor fear”] into the Atacama desert.

hope, at least symbolically, of transforming the world”] (quoted in Piña 217).<sup>73</sup> The poet’s urge to blind himself, however, coincided roughly with the knowledge that he would not be able to skywrite his poem “La Nueva Vida” over the skies of Chile.<sup>74</sup> The impossibility of reaching his intended audience seems to temporarily turn the poet’s utopian thinking towards a more solitary form of visionary ecstasy.

By the time he writes *INRI*, Zurita is not optimistic about the possibility of justice following the nation’s transition to democratic rule. As Juliet Lynd asserts, “if the Transition era arguably witnesses gestures toward forgiveness and reconciliation in his work, Zurita’s most recent poetry expresses the profound and obstinate memories of violence and the unshakeable legacy, both personal and collective, of the human rights abuses committed during the regime” (“Hondo” 407). In 1990, President Patricio Aylwin (1990-1994) oversaw a Truth and Reconciliation Committee, inviting testimonies from hundreds of Pinochet’s victims.<sup>75</sup> Though a consensus was reached stating that human rights abuses indeed had occurred, the issue of justice was much more controversial, as Pinochet and his followers in the military camp made sure that perpetrators were neither named nor held accountable. Liberal forces largely complied, and in an attempt to avoid ‘divisive’ politics, pushed to leave the past behind in a bid for the future of the ‘new Chile’. The 1998 London arrest of Pinochet under international charges of human rights

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<sup>73</sup> All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, with the help of friends, Zurita raises the necessary funding to hire planes to skywrite the poem over New York City. It’s also worth noting that CADA did pull off a number of public interventions in Chile that are astonishing for their audacity. For example, for their 1981 piece *Ay, Sudamerica! (O, South America!)*, they somehow convinced three airplane pilots to fly in formation over a poor neighborhood in Santiago as they dropped 400,000 pamphlets with the following message: “...the work of improving the accepted standard of living is the only valid art form/ the only exhibition/ the only worthwhile works of art. Everyone who works, even in the mind, to extend his or her living space is an artist” (cited in Richard “Margins” 205).

<sup>75</sup> It was under the presidency of Aylwin that Zurita served as cultural ambassador to Italy and acquired state funding for his desert inscription “ni pena ni miedo.”

abuses renewed the street clamor for justice in Chile, but his eventual release for ‘medical reasons’ making him mentally unfit to stand trial, stalled efforts.

In his extensive study on memory in Pinochet’s Chile, Steve Stern describes the “partial redemocratization in the 1990s” as a time of “memory impasse” (10); while victims and surviving family members were given a certain freedom to air their grievances, these ‘open wounds’ were left vulnerable without a concomitant pursuit of criminal justice against the perpetrators of torture and disappearances (in the name of keeping the fragile ‘peace’). While transition signaled a new commitment to social justice, which activists capitalized on, “the accelerated modernization that took hold in the 1990s” marked a continuation of the dictatorship’s neoliberal economic policies and “built a more privatized relation of society and individual” (Stern 176). Ultimately, Chile’s official post-dictatorship culture has been defined by a consensus to leave the dirty past behind and move boldly into a dazzling/blinding future of economic growth for all; it is precisely such a consensus that Zurita’s work, which insists on revisiting and repeating the past, contests.

As a work of negation, *INRI* goes beyond the act of testimony in its recovery of the nation’s disappeared bodies, and asserts an alternative reality based in the promise of paradise—which the poet simultaneously parodies and powerfully performs. Utopia, an abiding current in Zurita’s work, is a collective condition defined by the total dissolution of the boundaries between life and art. In his preface to the English-language edition of *Anteparadise* (1986) Zurita explains, “I’ll never write a *Paradise*, even if such a thing could be written today; but if it could, it would be a collective enterprise in which the life of everyone who walks the face of the earth would become the only work of art, the only



epic, the only *Pietá* worthy of our admiration.” As Scott Weintraub argues in his article on “Messianism, Teleology, and Futural Justice in Raúl Zurita’s *Anteparaíso*,” utopia is a “necessarily postponed ‘paradise-to-come’” in Zurita’s poetry (216). Why this is the case though is not so clear cut. Weintraub alleges, by way of extensive treks through Kant and then Derrida that it’s an ethical question for Zurita—that such a paradise ought *not* to be realized, its dangers manifold. Though I agree with Weintraub that what is at stake in the question of paradise or utopia for Zurita is something other than “the recuperation of hope” (234), which is how his visionary poetry often gets cast, Zurita’s commitment to collectivity does not stem from the same fount of liberal prudence that I detect in Weintraub’s piece. Rather, the impossibility of paradise is a political one in *INRI*. The progression towards the resurrection of the landscape in the book’s final pages is less an invitation to hope than a critical condemnation of the ghosting (i.e., non-realization) of justice.

A landscape composed of decomposing bodies, the opening of *INRI* viscerally suggests the “dismembered landscape of postcoup Chile” that Nelly Richard associates with the performance of memory “on the postdictatorial stage” (*Insubordination* 1-2). Poet and critic Joyelle McSweeney employs the evocative term “necropastoral” to describe the “literary mass graves” Zurita exhumes.<sup>76</sup> McSweeney’s term calls attention to the way in which death contaminates the pastoral so that the genre itself is called into question, its idyllic retreats revealed as perverse fantasy. The corpse-saturated landscape

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<sup>76</sup> Causing a stir on poetry blogs in the early months of 2011, McSweeney’s term was quickly taken up by others. She applies the term broadly to multiple forms of cultural production, including film, poetry and photography. In response to a question about the political uses of the ‘necropastoral’ she claims, “The necropastoral exposes the pastoral as saturated with the counterfeit, with anachronism, with death: counterfeit in that it was an urbane and courtly form supposedly trading on rustic and agrarian simplicity; anachronistic as it purported to embody a both an earlier Golden Age and a continual present tense, just adjacent to courtly, urban or imperial time; and deathly in that it was a twin or doppelganger of the Afterlife.” Thanks to Michael Leong for alerting me to this ongoing conversation.

is fed by the disappeared, its brilliant transformations dependent on this food. The tease of paradise that the book carries forth in its renewed and blooming landscapes formally rejects the principles of order and hierarchy that sustained the totalitarian ideal, while parodying the liberal promise of a bright future.

In an introductory statement for the English translation of *INRI*, Zurita explains that Lagos' admission of the dumped bodies was not shocking in its content, as the fact of the mass graves of the disappeared was common knowledge in 2001, but in its form—that is “the formality of the act beside the magnitude of what was being acknowledged,” or “possibly the ridiculous pretense of solemnity in the face of sheer brutality.” The poet aligns himself with the natural landscape as he imagines it screeching in shame at this belated admission. He dedicates the book to “all the rose-pink tombs of the sea, rivers and cordilleras of Chile.”

The screeching landscape is emblematic of the problem of witness. Divided into three parts, each of which opens with a New Testament epigraph, the book's first quote establishes the problem: “And I say to you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out. Luke 19:40” (5). The epigraph refers to Jesus telling the Pharisees that if his disciples were to be silenced, the very earth itself would testify to his miracles. The miraculous landscape that materializes in Zurita's book, however, is composed of muted bodies dropping from the sky:

Sorprendents carnadas llueven del cielo. Sorprendents carnadas sobre el mar.  
Abajo el océano, arriba las inusitadas nubes de un día claro. Sorprendentes  
carnadas llueven sobre el mar. Hubo un amor que llueve, hubo un día claro que  
llueve ahora sobre el mar.

Son sombras, carnadas para peces. Llueve un día claro, un amor que no alcanzó a decirse. El amor, ah sí el amor, llueven desde el cielo asombrosas carnadas sobre la sombra de los peces en el mar. (27)

[Strange baits rain from the sky. Surprising bait falls upon the sea. Down below the ocean, up above unusual clouds on a clear day. Surprising baits rain on the sea. There was a love raining, there was a clear day that's raining now on the sea.

They are shadows, baits for fishes. A clear day is raining, a love that was never said. Love, ah yes, love, amazing baits are raining from the sky on the shadow of fishes in the sea. (7)]<sup>77</sup>

As Zurita's dedication makes evident, the "strange baits" that rain down are the body parts of Pinochet's victims. *Carnada*, the Spanish word for *bait*, carries within it *carne*, the word for *meat*. The less fleshy "strange" or "surprising baits" of the English, unable to hook into the skin of the reader as viscerally as the Spanish, nevertheless opens onto a hallucinatory landscape where flesh becomes love. As soon as they appear though, these bodies are threatened with disappearance, as if the frame of the "clear day" cannot accommodate them; un-locatable, the shadowy bodies sink below the ocean or hide above the clouds. Yet the day itself is constituted of love. The eerie and irrational quality of a "clear day" raining body parts indexes the violence of the 1973 coup—in a gesture that refuses closure, revealing the 'open wound' of collective trauma.<sup>78</sup>

A recently graduated civil engineering student at the University Federico Santa María in Valparaíso, Zurita was arrested by Pinochet's forces during an early morning raid that preceded the bombing of the presidential palace in Santiago on September 11, 1973.<sup>79</sup> He was eating breakfast in the campus canteen. The sudden terror experienced by Zurita—and the hundreds of teachers and students detained with him in Valparaíso that morning—must have undermined the reality of an otherwise temperate morning. For

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<sup>77</sup> All translations from *INRI* are William Rowe's unless otherwise specified. In addition to Rowe's translation of *INRI* in 2009, a new translation of *Purgatorio* by Anna Deeny and of *Canto a su amor desaparecido* by Daniel Borzutzky both followed in 2010, indicating a significantly growing interest in Zurita's poetry from English-language readers.

<sup>78</sup> See Stern on the "open wound" of trauma, especially for the families of the disappeared (44).

<sup>79</sup> See Piña's interview of Zurita in *Conversaciones Con La Poesía Chilena*.

six weeks, Zurita was held hostage on a military ship and tortured.

In the Spanish prologue to *INRI*, Mexican poet and critic Alejandro Tarrab cites Zurita's account of torture. Zurita was detained in the cellar of a large boat with hundreds of others—though the space was large, perhaps room enough for 100 or 200 people, 800 or so were forced to sleep and live (literally) atop each other. At the time he was detained Zurita was carrying a folder of poems on him. These poems were of significant interest to his interrogators. Confronted with his experimental verse, which included visual poetry, the soldiers who beat him accused him of harboring secret codes. After several days of this abuse, a senior officer determined the papers were in fact poems (and therefore useless) and threw the packet overboard. It is in the act of being separated from his poetry that Zurita identifies the total breakup of his world:

“Lo que pasó entonces es tan extraño, la carpeta me decía que había habido un antes, que ahora era algo que estaba sucediendo, pero que yo me llama Raúl Zurita y había tenido una vida antes. Después comenzó literalmente la pesadilla, no sabía quién era, si los golpes y el hacinamiento eran reales, claro, me dolía, o era un invento mío.” (16)

[“What happened then is quite strange...the folder told me that there had been a before: that now was something that was happening, but that I am called Raúl Zurita and I had a life before this. Afterwards began the literal nightmare, I didn't know who I was, if the overcrowding and beatings (sure, they hurt) were real, or if they were an invention of mine.”]<sup>80</sup>

His arms bound with ropes, the poet clamps the folder of poems in his teeth between beatings. The extraction of the poems from his mouth induces a traumatic loss of identity that dissolves time. The poet can no longer tell reality from fantasy, as all ties to his former life are instantly severed in the officer's throwaway gesture.

Recounted from memory, the disposed poems are included in the poet's first book of poetry, *Purgatorio* (1979). A photographic image of the poet's scarred cheek opens

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<sup>80</sup> Translation mine.

the mixed-genre collection, documenting an act of protest, in which Zurita burned his cheek with a seething hot iron in the privacy of his bathroom in 1975. Though he does not explicitly link the two events, the act of self-burning horrifically recalls the marked faces of the student leaders who Zurita witnessed branded with an “x” by their captors during his detention (Piña 205). As Roberto Vela Córdova points out, “the mutilated self also finds its expression in a mutilated language ultimately reflecting within its boundaries a traumatized society” (80). Throughout his career, Zurita’s formal innovations are linked to his quest to land on a language capable of dislocating the official discourse that denies trauma.

In *INRI* Zurita combines incantatory language and intense synesthesia to simulate for his reader the experience of blindness that will paradoxically permit her to see past the binding/blinding of the neoliberal consensus that discourages obsession with the past and the dead. In order to arrive at this ‘open’ vision, the poet alludes to the victims of the state, many of whose eyes were gouged out before their bodies were dumped. It is also a well-documented fact that many of Pinochet’s torture victims were blindfolded during interrogations (Stern 76, 78). The marginalization of sight and heightening of aural and tactile imagery bids the reader to identify with the protean landscape itself, bypassing the subjectivity of the poet. The experience of repetition without advance, that is, the situation of “memory impasse” for survivors marginalized by the consensus to forget, is enacted and worked through in *INRI*’s figuring of the dead. The landscapes of *INRI* thus form the symbolic body of the traumatized nation:

El revés rosado de los párpados. Es el rosa revés de los lagrimales cuando lloran.  
 Los arrojaron y ahora son grumos de nieve rosada abrazados por la gasa de tul  
 que fosforecen las cordilleras. Mañana vendrá el deshielo y oirán la piedad de las  
 montañas, oirán el vendaje rosa de la nieve que llora desde los lagrimales color

sangre de todas las montañas, de todos los ríos y deshielos. (56)

[The pink underside of the eyelids. It's the rose-pink inside of the tear ducts when they weep. They were thrown and now they are lumps of pink snow embraced by the fine gauze that phosphoresces on the cordilleras. Tomorrow the thaw will come and they will hear the pity of the mountains, they will hear the pink bandage of snow that weeps from the blood-colored tear ducts of all the mountains, of all the rivers and thaws. (36)]

The teary and blood-drenched mountain tops grieve what the official culture denies in its pursuit of neoliberal glory. Figured as a tear duct, the landscape returns us to the problem of sight and witness that governs the poem. The insistence on the raw bodies that were thrown down monumentalizes the weeping landscape so that grief becomes inescapable—in contrast to the introduction of the “mura de cal con nombres” [“limestone wall with names” (45)] that keeps the disappeared at a safe distance, contained in its elegant silence (65).<sup>81</sup>

The appearance of the memorial wall within the poem though marks its impossible expansion into sky and desert, the explosion of a frame that can contain the dead: “Las piedras gritan al estrellarse con el aire, con el cielo que cae” [“The stones cry out as they smash into the air, into the sky that's falling” (45)] (65). The figure of a grieving mother haunts the landscape. The “flores de plástico” [“plastic flowers” (46)]—(in a culture of oblivion only the artificial thrives)—she lays in front of the ship in the desert are tokens of memory (66). Yet, the memorial grows, overtaking the landscape until the entire nation is dead:

Un país de desaparecidos naufraga en el desierto. La proa de los paisajes muertos naufraga hundiéndose como la noche en las piedras. El sol ilumina abajo una mancha negra en el medio del día. En la distancia parecería solo una mancha, pero es un barco sepultándose a pleno sol con su noche en los pedregales del

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<sup>81</sup> Though this section performs an implicit critique of the limits of the memorial, it's worth noting that a couple of lines from Zurita's *Canto a su amor desaparecido* are inscribed in the Memorial to the Disappeared in Santiago.

desierto. *Si ellos callan las piedras hablarán.* (70)

[A country of the disappeared is shipwrecked in the desert. The prow of dead landscapes sinks wrecked like the night on the stones. The sun shines down on a black stain in the middle of the day. In the distance it seems like just a stain, but it's a ship in bright sunlight burying itself with its night in the stony fields of the desert. *If they keep silent the stones will cry out.*] (50)

Through an accumulative poetic logic, what from a distance appears to be a contained stain reveals itself to be a blinding all-encompassing reality. The ship, emblematic of what Stern terms 'memory impasse,' does not silently sink from visibility but pulls the entire landscape into its vortex. The imagistic logic works to invert or negate the operation of consensus that attempts to bracket off the tortured and disappeared as an unfortunate but limited minority.<sup>82</sup> The entire nation is disappeared. In this way, the poet reframes the sensible so that the past of torture and disappearance is literally inescapable.

Returning to the Biblical allusion to witness, the first section closes on this re-figuration of the nation as wholly disappeared. Zurita (an avowed atheist)<sup>83</sup> invokes Christian symbolism in startling ways, drawing on its apocalyptic energies. Precisely because he does not believe in Judgment Day can he summon the visionary magic of a belief system in which bodies and souls are reunited and ascend in *INRI*'s third section, in which the broken body parts of the disappeared are reunited.

Following an epigraph alluding to the sepulcher of Christ, the second section, "El Descenso" ["The Descent"], opens with a page of braille. Confronted with the faintly

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<sup>82</sup> Stern refers to this consensual strategy as "reductionism," an attempt to "reduce memory of repression to its narrowest possible terms—the maximal cases, deaths and disappearances definitely documented by the Rettig Commission" (194). Repression, however, was experienced at a much broader level Stern explains: "State punishment included not only execution and disappearance of people after abduction but also the violence and degradation of torture, the roundups of young males and the spraying of bullets to quell protests in the poblaciones, the exile of Chileans abroad or to isolated provincial towns, the purging of schools and universities and labor unions, the behind-the-scene intimidations that also contributed to fear and self-censorship, the condemnation of almost half the society to dead-end lives of poverty" (194).

<sup>83</sup> See Piña 219.

raised dots, the invitation to touch the page prepares the reader for a shift in perspective. The lyrical “I” that came in and out of focus in the first section as witness to the bodies falling from the sky is now located within those fallen bodies. The poet speaks from inside the space of the dead.

As in *Canto por su amor desaparecido* (1985) (*Song for His Disappeared Love* (2009)), the poet adopts a strange form of romantic address, in which one victim calls out to another: “Te papo, te toco, y las yemas de mis dedos, habituadas a seguir siempre las tuyas, sienten en la oscuridad que descendemos” [“I touch your skin, your body, and the tips of my fingers, which always used to follow yours, sense in the darkness that we are descending” (61)] (83). The “touch” that connects one dead lover to another is not a privatized form of experience here. The act of brushing one’s finger over the braille invites the reader to identify with this impossible voice. It is thus unfortunate that the English version of *INRI* does not reproduce a page of braille, but offers the following translation: “*This page represents a page written in braille in the original book published in Chile. The aim was for readers to enter a non-visual experience of reading, through the sense of touch.*” This omission distances the English-language reader from the more direct experience of dislocation that a reader of the original book encounters, as there is no explanatory note in the Spanish, simply what appears at first glance to be a blank page.

With a slight adjustment, though, the reader realizes there is in fact something to be seen on the page, something that begs to be understood through touch. The English language omission suggests that this performance of trauma cannot cross over. The beauty of this section is the way in which the poet aligns himself with his reader,



tentative about entering the space of the dead, questioning his own devices: “Frente a la muerte alguien nos ha hablado de la resurrección. ¿Significa eso que tus ojos vaciados verán?” [“In the face of death somebody said something to us about resurrection. Does that mean your empty eye sockets will see?” (61)] (83). The poet confronts his own complicity in reanimating the terror of the dead for the sake of an aesthetic structure that cannot—literally, that is—resurrect.

The refrain of “en una tierra enemiga es cosa común...” [“in an enemy country/land it’s a common thing...” (62-69)] followed by images of the landscape taking on both the pain and (unfulfilled) love of the dead grows increasingly dizzying (84-91).

The poet’s blind vision is the receptacle for the nation’s buried affect:

En una tierra enemiga es común que el océano y las montañas yazgan bajo las piedras, que el amor yazga, que tu amor yazga Zurita y que sean una tumba tus ojos ciegos abrazándolas. (88)

[In an enemy land it is common for the ocean and the mountains to lie beneath the stones, that love should lie there, that your love, Zurita, should lie there and that your blind eyes should be a tomb embracing them. (66)]

Throughout the rest of the book, the poet will suddenly address his persona, “Zurita,” which has the paradoxical effect of reminding the reader of the poet’s biography, while distancing the author from his own words, as if he were merely a vessel for what is dictated by the dead. The more the poet repeats the refrain about the enemy country, the more he qualifies it, throwing in “quizás” [“maybe” (68)] and “tal vez” [“perhaps” (68)] on the ninth repetition (90). The section ends as it began, with touching lovers. Yet the poem questions its hallucinations: “¿Será? ¿Será así? ” [“Will it be? Will it be like this?” (70)] (92). The poet acknowledges what is at stake in touching the dead (reader): “si yo te toco y tú me tocas tal vez no todo esté perdido y, podamos adivinar algo del amor”

[“...if I touch you and you touch me perhaps everything is not lost and we can still know something of love” (70)] (92). Without this contact, possibility is eradicated. All that will remain is the disappeared nation, sunken in its denial. Whether the “palabras muertas” [“dead words” (61)] and “páginas muertas” [“dead pages” (61)] come alive with the promise of “todos los amores muertos que fuimos” [“all the dead loves that we were” (70)] is an unanswered question left to the reader (83, 92). Unlike the straight testimony of a witness, the visionary poem does not demand a response, but rather dangles possibility before its reader. The poet seduces us into his world, but acknowledges he cannot guarantee our stay; he tries his best though with images such as this one, of the delicately awakening body, that closes the second section: “...cuando nuestras mortajas de nieve de todas las montañas hundidas nos besan boca abajo y nos vuelvan para arriba las erizadas pestañas” [“...when our shrouds of the snow of all the sunken mountains kiss us as we lie face down and our eyelashes turn bristling” (70)] (92). A page of braille follows.

The third section reverses the movement of the first. The poet returns to the mountains, ocean and desert of Chile, now transformed into sites of resurrection. What fell to the earth rises, flowers bloom from wounded sites. This voice of sacrificial redemption is however interrupted by a more mundane voice that focuses on the gruesome facts: “...desde las coronas de espinas de tus ojos. ¿Te vaciaron las cuencas? ¿Te los arrancaron? Como si pudieras ver de nuevo rosas se levantan por el hueco de tus ojos...” [“Out of the crowns of thorns of your eyes. Did they empty your eye sockets? Did they gouge them out? As if you could see again roses rise up out of your empty eye sockets...” (80)] (104). Accompanying this instability of tone is an unpredictability of

address. Until now the poet has addressed the dead, himself and the reader (as an unspecified witness). Amidst the grandeur of the landscape's renewal, the poem's "you" is suddenly transformed into one charged with violence: "Nos dicen eso: que nos aman. Los maravillosos aromos levantándose desde toda la sangre de los campos... Y se lo dicen a ustedes asesinos, destrozadores de hombres..." ["That is what they say to us: that they love us. The marvelous acacias with yellow flowers rising up out of all the blood of the fields... And they say it to you, murderers, destroyers of human beings..." (81)] (105). This interjection of accusation suggests that the exculpation of the perpetrators of these crimes does not follow from the rebirth of their victims. The collective experience of trauma explodes the form of the pastoral elegy, rendering it unable to soothe.

In a fiery scene of resurrection, the body parts of the dead are re-joined in an orgy of healing. The poet's re-visioning of Judgment Day involves "maravillosos frutos humanos se recomponen cantando" ["amazing human fruits become whole again singing" (98)] (122). The sheer impossibility of such a vision registers a desire for justice not available in 'real life.' William Rowe's description of the "dizzying switches between violation and tenderness" in the language of *Canto a su amor desaparecido* also applies here: "the shock they cause derives from sudden and unsignalled transitions between words which are acts of violation and others which express openness to tenderness" (288). This marriage of brutal and transcendent language indicates that for the poet all language is polluted with violence, that in order to imagine an alternative politics based in love, there is no choice but to begin with the dead.

The movement of time is echoed in the poem's formal movements. The constant shifting of landscape and perspective, which happens both consistently and almost

imperceptibly, enacts the movement of the past through the present. The past is not static, but constantly unfolding in ways that overlap with the present. Zurita's imagistic clusters do not try to freeze these moments, but rather follow their inexorable logic. The book was written over a period of fourteen months (January 2001-March 2002) as indicated in the epilogue. Like a daily prayer, these verses circle back on themselves—while nevertheless advancing, more like a rosary, one bead leading to the next until the cross is arrived at.

Only at the end of the journey does the poet suggest a reading strategy: "...porque como quien se abre a un sueño miraste mis restos y viste un desmembrado país de archipiélagos..." ["...like someone who opens herself to a dream you looked at my remains and saw a country dismembered in archipelagos..." (124)] (148). The reader "who opens herself to a dream" is the one the poet can reach, the one who can see the dead nation behind the blind myth of the 'new Chile.' Given the Dantean trajectory of the work (not to mention Zurita's entire career), the fragmented nation figured as "archipelago" is interesting, recalling the abyss-like quality of the Italian *arcipelago*.<sup>84</sup> The deep trauma suffered is irreversible. Though the poet provides the language for a reunification, it would not be wise to believe him: "Y buscádonos pedazo a pedazo, como un desmembrado país que volviera a juntarse..." ["And searching for us piece by piece, like a dismembered country that comes again into unity..." (124)] (148). The eschatological system of healing the poem proposes is so elaborate that the point seems less to map out a path to healing than to suggest its undesirability.

The epilogue clarifies any equivocation about the work of negation, bringing the

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<sup>84</sup> According to Oxford English Dictionary, the English 'archipelago' derives from the Italian 'arcipelago,' which suggests 'deep,' 'abyss,' 'gulf' and 'pool.'

reader back to earth with a dismissal of the dream of resurrection. Its blunt and curt language is in sharp contrast to the ecstatic language of the preceding section. I reproduce it here in full:

Cientos de cuerpos fueron arrojados sobre las montañas, lagos y mar de Chile.  
Un sueño quizás soñó que habían unas flores, que habían unas rompientes, un  
océano subiéndolos salvos desde sus tumbas en los paisajes. No.  
Están muertos. Fueron ya dichas las inexistentes flores. Fue ya dicha la  
inexistente mañana. (155)

[Hundreds of bodies were thrown over the mountains, lakes, and sea of Chile.  
Perhaps a dream dreamed there were some flowers, there were some breakers, an  
ocean, raising them up out of their tombs in the landscapes. No.

They are dead. The nonexistent flowers were already spoken. The nonexistent  
morning was already said. (129)]

These parting words are followed by location and date: “Santiago, Chile. January 2001-March 2002” (129). And so the poem ends where it began, with a blind landscape of the dead. The exploration of an ongoing past, in which the dead linger on, invades the present, denying its erasures. The landscape thoroughly dislocated by this dance of the dead, the poem ends on an infernal buzz that unable to bring back the dead, nevertheless haunts the living.

The operation by which the poet distances himself from the redeemed vision (“perhaps a dream dreamed”) is vertiginous. Because the 14 months of composition are noted, the effect is of the poet himself waking from a long dream of poetry. The double negations of the final two sentences seem to release the past into the past; that is, “the nonexistent flowers” which themselves stand in for the faces of the dead “already spoken” means that the dead no longer speak and furthermore, that they do not need the poet to speak for them, as they have already spoken. The poet undoes his figuration so that the dead may be released back into history. Yet, letting go of the book’s complex

system of figuration is like waking from a dream into a nightmare.

Zurita's book is furthest from the heights of Neruda's *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* here. The grand claim of Neruda's masterpiece is that the poet gives voice to the voiceless. In *INRI*, the poet repeatedly attempts to voice the dead, yet the questioning of his own methods is also discernible throughout. The epilogue reveals the ambition to voice the voiceless as futile, and, in fact, implicitly doubts the ethics of such a project. So why let the dream stand? Why perform, and at such length (both in terms of time and space), such an operation? What does the poet want us to hear in these simulated voices? No simple disclaimer, the epilogue invites us to think further about the role of political art in a context of enforced reconciliation.

Zurita douses his reader in beauty and music less to heal than to tear the scab off the open wound of trauma. He transforms the entire landscape of Chile into a memorial for the disappeared. The marvelous landscape that screeches "innrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii" recasts the insignia engraved on the cross of the alleged savior to mock him.<sup>85</sup> It is unclear what the poet's position is here—surely there is the despair of sacrificial blood in the air, but one also detects a condemnation of the martyr's vision. Performing martyrdom is perhaps the poet's way of ridiculing the process of reconciliation—following the logic of pacification to its end, only a scene of resurrection as magnificent as the Paradise the poet gives us here could justify such a process.

An epigraph from Isaiah 11 closes the book's third section: "And they were your plains once more" (126). Referring to an exilic return to the Promised Land, the citation suggests a climate of internal exile for those who survived the dictatorship. Immediately preceding the Isaiah in the Spanish edition is an individual poem addressed to Paulina

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<sup>85</sup> See Zurita's introductory note to English-language edition.

Wendt (Zurita's current partner). Though the English edition retains the book's opening dedication to Wendt, it omits this poem. The sentiment of the poem contradicts the epilogue that immediately follows, assuring the beloved that "No nos hemos perdido" ["We are not lost"] (150). The Spanish syntax somewhat ambiguous the refrain alternates among meanings: in a general sense, as survivors of the dictatorship we did not lose, but also, in a more specific sense, because we found each other, beloved, we are not lost.<sup>86</sup> The 'we' of the Spanish feels open here, inclusive of an entire generation; whereas in the imagined English the communal sense of solidarity does not translate as neatly. I assume this is why the translator and/or poet opted not to include the dedicatory poem. As Stern informs, at this time in Chile, "All memory of repression and the military era was at greater risk of becoming 'loose'—the personal experience of individuals—rather than emblematic of a collective experience" (195). Inclusion of the dedicatory poem might make it too easy for English-language readers to 'privatize' the collective experience of repression out of which the book is forged.

## Conclusion

...a certain dislocation of perspective is necessary for the rethinking of global politics.

-Judith Butler, *Frames of War*

In closing, I'd like to consider what Roberson and Zurita have in 'common' and what we gain from bringing these two very different poets and book together. While

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<sup>86</sup> "No nos hemos perdido" reappears as "nosotros no nos perdimos," which could be translated as "we did not lose our way," "we did not lose ourselves," or "we did not lose each other"—the best translation would probably alternate between these (150).

Roberson is modest in extreme, Zurita does not shy away from the role of prophetic bard. Zurita's oeuvre is inseparable from his performances of poetry off the page, while Roberson's performances all happen on the page. Zurita's rhythms are liturgical, reminiscent of ritual; Roberson writes with more discordant rhythms, dissonant phrasing. Yet both poets fashion new topographies of the visible, tune into suppressed sound environments. Their landscapes are drenched in memory, against the dry amnesia of neoliberal culture. If the invitation to forget comes from above, then the imperative to remember comes from below in these poems, in the corpse-littered landscape, in the haunting of landfilled spaces.

Politically, the vision of both poets is firmly rooted in a historically-constructed opposition to state violence. In her most recent book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler proposes a politics of precarity that "cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps, thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit, and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defense" (32). In *Precarious Life*, Butler reveals the common condition of "corporeal vulnerability" to be the foundation of such a vision (29). The bodies that compose Roberson's and Zurita's pastorals are mutually vulnerable to the capitalist forms of violence (some overt some hidden) that shape their environments. Like Rancière, Butler is interested in how power disciplines the sensible and the role art might play in refiguring the sensible in the interest of emancipatory politics. Writing in the context of the so-called war on terror, Butler claims, "Efforts to control the visual and narrative dimensions of war delimit public discourse by establishing and disposing the sensuous parameters of reality itself—including what can be seen and what can be heard"



(*Frames* xi). Roberson and Zurita intervene at the level of the sensuous to dislocate the political blinders that hide from view our common world.

In reclaiming ‘poverty’ as possibility and politics as ‘love,’ Hardt and Negri stake their ground for a new political vocabulary. They assert, “We often find that our political vocabulary is insufficient for grasping the new conditions and possibilities of the contemporary world” (xi); unlocking such a vocabulary is a key challenge of globalization studies today. My aim in this chapter has been to show the role a poetics of globalization might play in furthering us towards this goal. Might we not need Roberson’s squatter to rethink poverty, Zurita’s dead to reimagine love? Not mere representations of the concepts philosophers explore, these figures materialize new concepts—concepts we urgently need to get a grasp on if we are to make our world ‘common.’

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