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WOMB GENEALOGIES: CONCEIVING THE NEW WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Despite the advancements made by feminist activists and civil rights movements in the twentieth century, the status of women in the Americas began to deteriorate sharply in the 1970s and 1980s as dictatorships and neo-conservative regimes emerged. In this political climate, the reproductive lives of female citizens became an issue of national interest as women were often expected or forced to relinquish certain rights (both civil and human) and to assume traditional gender roles. At the same time, literary texts from several countries of the Americas dealt explicitly with the relation between language, reproduction, and the nation. These novels, namely Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Ariel Dorfman's *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* (1987), Diamela Eltit's *El cuarto mundo* (1988), Carlos Fuentes's *Cristóbal Nonato* (1982), Clarice Lispector's *A hora da estrela* (1977), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), made the female body, actually and figuratively, central to their political critiques of the nation at a time when women's reproductive lives had become yet again a site of population control. I argue that when these texts use the female body as a metaphor for the nation, it is actually the womb that becomes symbolic of national space, for any agency on the part of the embodied female subject in terms of nation formation is belied by the passive description of its birth: the nation is born. Further, I propose that the rhetoric of biopolitics, which describes the way that power is organized and instrumentalized through definitions of life itself, reveals how figurative language serves to perpetuate the relation of inclusive exclusion that the feminine has with the nation and the body politic. At the core of this study is the question of how to escape this ideational cycle which links figurative and material violence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction: Womb Genealogies: Conceiving the New World	1
Biopolitics and the Feminization of Bare Life	9
Womb (Con)figurations	16
Ethical Concerns: Gender, Race, Class, and Nation	23
Chapter One: Origin Stories: (Re)producing the Nation in the Americas	27
The Colonial Period: “Discovery” and Conquest	27
A. Holy Lands	32
B. New World Husbands	36
C. Native Bodies, Raw Materials	43
Scientific Transmutations, Gender Dominations	47
The Trouble with Gender and Nation	56
Chapter Two: Barren Lives, Dangerous Figures	63
Biopolitical Stakes	72
Bodily Figures	80
A. The Sexual Life of Plants	86
B. Life’s Blood	94
C. Fetal Positionings and Ovoid Symbolism	102
D. Space Travel and the Darkness Within	109
Unreliable Witnesses	116
Chapter Three: Bare Life Conceptions	124
Genre and Gender: The Politics of Reproducing Bare Life	128
Voices from Beyond and Within	144
Domestic Disturbances, or Why the Personal is Political	160
Chapter Four: Revolutionary Wombs and Body Politics	178
Charting Novel(tie)s	186
The Birth of the Author	199
A Symbolic Mother for the Nation: Whose Body Politic?	218
Corporeal Conclusions	233
Works Cited	243

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Carol Sparling
(1922-1994)

INTRODUCTION

Womb Genealogies: Conceiving the New World

Figurative representations of the female body, especially the womb, have been used at different moments in the history of the Americas to rationalize the subordination of women. Despite the advancements made by feminist activists and civil rights movements in the twentieth century, the status of women began to deteriorate sharply in the 1970s and 1980s as dictatorships and neo-conservative regimes emerged throughout the Americas. My project is particularly interested in the political climate of this historical moment and how the reproductive lives of female citizens became an issue of national interest. At a time when American¹ nations were in crisis, citizens were often expected or forced to relinquish certain rights (both civil and human) and to assume traditional gender roles. In the midst of this social and political turmoil, a group of literary texts surfaced that dealt explicitly with the relation between language, reproduction, and the nation. Given the fact that these novels made the female body, actually and figuratively, central to their political critiques of the nation, I ask the following question: What makes the female body a particularly apt metaphor for the nation?

First, I would like to clarify how I am using the term “metaphor.” In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson situate the formation of our most basic metaphors in the locus of everyday experience: “[i]t follows from this that some natural kinds of experience are partly metaphorical in nature, since metaphor plays an essential role in characterizing the structure of the experience” (118). According to Lakoff and Johnson, however, these seemingly “*natural kinds of experience*” are produced by “[o]ur bodies,”

¹ When I use the adjective “American,” I am referring to the Americas as a hemisphere as opposed to common usage in which the term is used to refer solely to the United States.

“[o]ur interactions with our physical environment,” and “[o]ur interactions with other people within our culture” (117). At the most basic level, they conclude, cultural understandings of the body are what determine, in many ways, how we understand metaphorical concepts. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson propose that “our experiences with physical objects (especially our own bodies) provide the basis for an extraordinarily wide variety of ontological metaphors, that is, ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” (25). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that these experiences that produce metaphorical concepts do not occur *ex nihilo*, but rather are determined very much by the context in which we live.

Therefore, Lakoff and Johnson clarify that what we understand by our “direct physical experience” is also culturally mediated, including the ways in which we imagine our bodies functioning in the world. They write,

[W]hat we call “direct physical experience” is never merely a matter of having a body of a certain sort; rather, *every* experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions. It can be misleading, therefore, to speak of direct physical experience as though there were some core of immediate experience which we then “interpret” in terms of our conceptual system. Cultural assumptions, values, and attitudes are not a conceptual overlay which we may or may not place upon experience as we choose. It would be more correct to say that all experience is cultural through and through, that we experience our “world” in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself. (57)

If metaphorical concepts are formulated via our “direct physical experience with the world,”

at the same time that our “direct physical experience with the world” is not impervious to cultural influence, then it is through this process that metaphorical concepts of the body become fundamental to the understanding of our selves as gendered beings in the world.

Moreover, as Anne McClintock establishes in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, metaphors of the body are not “just metaphors,” but can have real material effects on actual bodies. In this context, metaphors are “just metaphors” when people assume that figurative language does not carry any conceptual weight and that it has no effect on our experience of “reality.” McClintock positions herself against this stereotypical understanding of metaphor and its accompanying political agendas when she claims that “seeing sexuality only as a metaphor runs the risk of eliding *gender* as a constitutive dynamic of imperial and anti-imperial power” (14). What McClintock seems to allude to here is the power that metaphors can have in mutually constructing the power dynamics of personal and political relationships.

The issue at stake seems to be one of directionality—one might assume that because, as Lakoff and Johnson claim, “we *tend* to structure the less concrete and inherently vaguer concepts (like those for the emotions) in terms of more concrete concepts, which are more clearly delineated in our experience,” that this indicates that the “more concrete concepts” (such as the female body) remain unaffected by their comparison to the “inherently vaguer concepts” (in this case, the nation) (112, my emphasis). It is in this way that metaphors become “metaphors we live by” and that the critical exigency for our exploration of how metaphorical concepts of the body arise is established, especially since these rhetorical figures factor into definitions of life and citizenship, which, in turn, affect the social roles and social value of individuals. What, then, does the female body-nation metaphor reveal about

our cultural understanding of the female body? What aspects of the female body and its explanatory power make this metaphor function and what aspects do not line up? And, what “kind” of female body is this?

I argue that the female body-nation metaphor relies on a womb-female body metonymy.² That is, when the female body is used as a metaphor for the nation, it is actually the womb that becomes symbolic of national space, for any agency on the part of the embodied female subject in terms of nation formation is belied by the passive description of its birth: the nation is born. Lakoff and Johnson argue that “[m]etaphor and metonymy are different *kinds* of processes” because metonymy “has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another” (36). They provide the example of a metonymic structure in which the part stands for the whole, claiming that “[w]hich part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on” (36). The selection of the womb as metonymic of the female body is telling, since, in this construction, the nation co-opts the reproductive power of the womb as its birthplace and the site of its continuance, but, at the same time, excludes the female subject from any accompanying rights and privileges. This relation of inclusive exclusion is explored at length throughout my analysis.

The literary texts under investigation, namely Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Ariel Dorfman’s *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* (1987; *The Last Song of*

² Throughout this study, I will use the distinction between metonymy and metaphor as outlined by Lakoff and Johnson in their Afterword (2003) to *Metaphors We Live By* as a model: “When distinguishing metaphor and metonymy, one must not look only at the meanings of a single linguistic expression and whether there are two domains involved. Instead, one must determine how the expression is used. Do the two domains form a single, complex subject matter in use with a single mapping? If so, you have metonymy. Or, can the domains be separate in use, with a number of mappings and with one of the domains forming the subject matter (the target domain), while the other domain (the source) is the basis of significant inference and a number of linguistic expressions? If this is the case, then you have a metaphor” (266—267).

Manuel Sendero), Diamela Eltit's *El cuarto mundo* (1988; *The Fourth World*), Carlos Fuentes's *Cristóbal Nonato* (1982; *Christopher Unborn*), Clarice Lispector's *A hora da estrela* (1977; *The Hour of the Star*), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), make the womb the center of their works at a time when women's reproductive lives had become yet again a site of population control. These novels highlight and problematize the ways in which biopolitics, which describes the way that power is organized and instrumentalized through definitions of life, continue to have a role in determining where the value of human life is located, and which lives are disposable. Writing from diverse contexts, such as Brazil, Canada, Chile, Mexico, and the United States, these authors demonstrate how metaphorical language can affect the ways in which we conceptualize the body, can influence lived experience, and can shed light on the social and cultural values that inform public policy. My research suggests that literary representations of the female body reveal a consistency in the ways that the symbolic power of the womb operates as a metaphor for the nation in these novels of the 1970s and 1980s. Given that these authors are often writing in response to the biopolitical strategies of their respective governments, this consistency suggests an underlying assumption regarding the nature of the womb and the particularity of the female body in debates about rights and citizenship.

In this study, I perform genealogy in the Foucauldian sense; that is, I trace the development of a concept that is often thought to be without a past—in this case the womb as a literary device. My subtitle, “Conceiving the New World,”³ refers both to women's labor in reproducing actual bodies (and the body politic) and the way that the figure of the female

³ This title plays off of Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp's edited volume, *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, which the editors claim is part of a critical trend that focuses on “the transnational inequalities on which reproductive practices, policies, and politics increasingly depend” (1).

body is used to conceptualize national and hemispheric origins in the Americas. I argue that what Alys Eve Weinbaum calls the “race/reproduction bind” (5) in *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* is re-established in postmodern literature of the Americas through metaphorical representations of the female body that tie reproduction to nationalism. As such, my research focuses on the following question: what are the larger ethical implications of using the female body as a metaphor for the nation or as a site onto which national desires are projected? By engaging with the female body, and the rhetorical strategies by which it is rendered symbolic, my project contributes to the ongoing discussion concerning the ethics of representation in feminist, scientific, political, and literary discourse. What is more, my research establishes the ways in which biopolitics relies on figurative representations of the female body for its effectiveness.

This project adds to three major conversations within the field of comparative literature: inter-American studies, feminist criticism, and political philosophy. Scholarship dealing with the topic of reproduction in the Americas tends to be centered on individual nations (e.g., United States, Mexico) or regional categories (e.g., Latin America, the Caribbean). One of the principal reasons for this critical trend is the modern co-optation of reproduction for nationalist purposes. Scholars have observed this phenomenon especially at the turn of the twentieth century, when the “racial health” of the nation became increasingly important to securing a nation’s powerful position in the world order. However, as my study reveals, the particular impact of reproductive metaphors in America can be best understood through an *inter*-national comparison, since the categories of First World and Third World cannot be contained by national boundaries and since cross-national comparison yields a consistent pattern of state rhetoric. Giorgio Agamben also forges this connection in *Homo*

Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life when he claims that the Third World has been transformed into “bare life” by the First World through its politics of development, which function, directly or indirectly, to eliminate the poorer classes: “today’s democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life” (*Homo Sacer* 180). Agamben uses the term “bare life” to refer to those who “*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*,” namely those who are dispensable to the state and “unworthy” of its protection (8, his emphasis). Indeed, bare life, as Agamben describes it, is composed not only of those who are excluded from the nation, but also of those whose lives and reproduction are considered to be “undesirable” or “unsustainable,” on a global scale. At the core of my work is the question of how to escape this ideational cycle which links figurative and material violence.

Since the connection between figurative and material violence has a strong history in the Americas, the first chapter takes a step back to consider the genealogy of this project, itself, and its participation in an ongoing conversation about reproduction and American national and hemispheric identities. Each of the following chapters addresses one of the principal discourses that structure the way that we think about the womb. The womb tends to be defined according to three common tropes: as an empty space, as the site of reproduction, and as the place from which the nation’s future speaks. The fact that these common tropes serve to displace the female subject by privileging the womb not only as the site of sexual difference but as the actual center of women’s identity provides an overarching ideological link between these chapters. The first, “Barren Lives, Dangerous Figures” uses *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *A hora da estrela* to examine the scientific, philosophical, and cultural

conceptions that construct the womb as an empty space and as metonymic of the female body. In effect, the female subject is reduced to her womb, which serves to justify the reduction of women's social roles to their reproductive capacity, so that barrenness also becomes social impotence and virginity signifies social undesirability. In "Bare Life Conceptions," the next chapter, I draw on *El cuarto mundo* and *Beloved* as proof-texts that examine the symbolic and material implications of women's reproduction when those women hail from marginalized social groups. Both authors employ the collective experience of groups who have been treated as racially "inferior," subhuman, and disposable in order to highlight how individuals experience bare life differently in terms of gender. They also expose how bare life women's reproduction is coded in opposition to that of citizens whose rights are officially upheld. "Revolutionary Wombs and Body Politics," my final chapter, analyzes *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* and *Cristóbal Nonato* to reveal the repercussions of imagining the womb as a metaphorical site for re-enacting national history and projecting national futures. Since the womb is often considered to be a pre-symbolic and a pre-linguistic space, this chapter also poses the question, what does it mean to give the sperm (and later, the fetus) voice and agency within this extended national metaphor and deny that same right to the ovum, or the mother for that matter? This chapter asserts that these textual mothers are not only marginalized by the voices of the fetuses they carry, but that they also are rendered bare life by their symbolic inclusive exclusion from the body politic.

Placing these novels in conversation, I argue, sheds light on the ways in which the rhetoric of biopolitics, especially in terms of bare life, depends on a particular configuration of the female body. In order to understand how this rhetoric operates, we must first unpack

the theoretical discourses of biopolitics and of the womb as a figure, then examine the ethical implications of these constructs. For this reason, I've divided the rest of this introduction into three sections. "Biopolitics and the Feminization of Bare Life," the first section, establishes the ways in which globalization, neoliberalism, and bare life contribute to the deployment of biopolitical strategies. Biopolitics, as defined by Michel Foucault in his lectures titled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, describes "the way in which the specific problems of life and population have been posed within a technology of government" (323). Throughout these lectures the female body is the unidentified locus of biopolitics; therefore, an understanding of biopolitics is crucial for making sense of the ways in which certain women's reproduction is valued and others' is not. The following section, "Womb (Con)figurations," explores the etymology of the term "womb" and the structure of womb metaphors and womb metonymies that underlie the national imaginary. This section also allows us to explore how national metaphors give meaning to the structure and function of the female body. Lastly, "Ethical Concerns: Gender, Race, Class, and Nation," analyzes the context of 1980s America in light of human rights violations that were often justified on the basis of biopolitics and the declaration of a state of exception. This final section provides the social contexts out of which these novels emerged and establishes the circulating national discourses that these authors were often writing against.

Biopolitics and the Feminization of Bare Life

Giorgio Agamben's ethical imperative "to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any

longer as a crime” (*Homo Sacer* 171) resonates with my own work in this project. Moreover, his theoretical writings are important because he attempts to understand how political ideologies determine which forms of life are sacred, protected, and valued (i.e., the citizen) and which forms are not (i.e., bare life). One of the central claims of my work is that Agamben’s explanation of bare life, while politically powerful, fails to account for questions that concern the female body. In this way, my work engages with Elizabeth Grosz’s general observation in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, that, when many philosophers write about the human body in the abstract, they use the male body as the model.⁴ Although Agamben is not writing explicitly about gender, he, perhaps inadvertently, signals the female body’s participation in the production of the nation-state when he writes:

It is not possible to understand the “national” and biopolitical development and vocation of the modern state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries if one forgets that what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject but, above all, man’s bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty. (*Homo Sacer* 128)

If, as Agamben points out here, the nation-state tends to understand its identity as a birth at the same time that it posits actual birth as the site of its continuance, then what role does the female body play in the production of the nation-state, especially if we consider women to be both producers of the national body and, at the same time, independent subjects? Also, what

⁴ Grosz also observes the way that philosophers use women to represent the body when they are trying to distinguish between the mind and the body. She writes, “[w]omen can no longer take on the function of being *the* body for men while men are left free to soar to the heights of theoretical reflection and cultural production” (22). However, when talking about the “body as the norm by which all others are judged” (22), she refers to the tendency of philosophers to leave unquestioned their use of the male body as a model for the human body.

are the ontological implications of womb metaphors for those women who are not protected or valued under the social contract, and what marks does it make on their own potentiality to bear new life within?

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben reintroduces the classical distinction that philosophers made between two categories of life: 1) *zoe*, or what he calls “bare life,” which for him connotes “a simple, natural life” that is potentially dispensable and outside of the laws governing the state, and 2) *bios*, or human life that is defined in terms of its inclusion and participation in the social contract. Since the state controls the ways in which these two forms of life are categorized, Agamben concludes that the citizen is “the new biopolitical body of humanity” (9).⁵ Indeed, when classical philosophers upheld the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, women were not allowed citizenship, and were therefore excluded from *bios* (“the good life”) and relegated to the category of *zoe* (bare life) (Agamben 2). Moreover, domesticity, the space that bare life occupies, and reproduction, its primary task, are traditionally associated with women. Agamben observes, “In the classical world, however, simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined—as merely reproductive life—to the sphere of the *oikos*, ‘home’” (2). But the women being referenced here are not the fully actualized subjects that we might think of today; rather, what is being inferred is the concept of woman *as* body, *as* “merely reproductive life.”

While this reversion to the Greek structuring of the polis might serve to help Agamben describe how the modern state structures life, Agamben’s writings make clear what

⁵ Giorgio Agamben is highly indebted to Michel Foucault, whose theoretical work on biopolitics establishes the basis for Agamben’s analysis. In this project, however, I am most concerned with the ways in which Agamben articulates the concept of “bare life” as a biopolitical concept. Agamben also writes in response to Carl Schmitt, author of *Political Theology*, who has written extensively on the concept of sovereignty as it relates to liberal democracy and the totalitarian state.

I will call the *feminization of bare life*. I do not intend to suggest here that the aim of Agamben's project is to consider the role of gender in the construction of his theory, nor do I think it is necessarily intentional that he omits a discussion of gender or sexual difference in this particular theoretical text. However, I would like to point out that his use of the birth metaphor and his attribution of reproduction and domesticity to bare life implicitly feminizes his conceptualization. My goal is not to determine whether the origin of the nation is actually like a birth or whether bare life is actually feminine in nature. Rather, for me, as Lakoff and Johnson put it, "what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor but the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it" (158)—and it is with these aims that I take on this project.

Because the event of birth is a universal experience, in the sense that all people, barring technological innovation, are born of women, this originary moment that defines citizenship, bare life, and human life necessitates the presence of the female body. Therefore we can conclude that, via this metaphorical concept, the female body is transformed (although in some instances only by defining that which the nation excludes) into the site of national foundation:

If the structure of the nation-state is, in other words, defined by three elements *land, order, birth*, the rupture of the old *nomos* is produced not in the two aspects that constituted it according to Schmitt (localization, *Ortung*, and order, *Ordnung*), but rather at the point marking the inscription of bare life (the *birth* that thus becomes *nation*) within the two of them. (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 175)

In fact, the “passive” female body is assumed here, not the female subject, because there is no agency in this “birth,” since its completion marks the transition between the verb and the noun; likewise, it is bare life’s “inscription” into land and law that make it intelligible, a feat unaccomplished by mere birth itself.

Once again, the body/mind dualism—“the assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 6)—that so plagues feminist scholars resurfaces, and along with it, the propensity of some philosophers to reduce femininity and womanhood to the body, the “inferior” component of the dichotomy. Yet, this form of reductionism that establishes gendered hierarchies does not fully account for the complex relation that the mind has with the body. As Grosz argues in *Volatile Bodies*, “There are not only good philosophical but also good physiological reasons for rejecting reductionism as a solution to the dualist dilemma. As soon as the terms are defined in mutually exclusive ways, there is no way of reconciling them, no way of understanding their mutual influences or explaining their apparent parallelism” (7). But politics, as Agamben describes, seems to function based on the perpetuation of the body/mind distinction: “[p]olitics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the *logos* is realized” (*Homo Sacer* 8). In this instance, it is “man’s” bare life that seems to threaten his position as *bios*, a position which he tries to defend with evidence of his intellect.

It is not surprising, then, that “man’s” faculty for language is what enables him to position himself above bare life. Agamben explains that through language, politics is made possible because of “man’s” effort to distinguish himself as human: “There is politics

because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion” (8). But, this “inclusive exclusion” of bare life seems to locate itself also in the body of the citizen:

If it is true that the figure proposed by our age is that of an unsacrificeable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree, then the bare life of *homo sacer* concerns us in a special way.

Sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens. (114–115)

In this way, bare life not only functions to mark those outside the social contract, but also remains an underlying threat to the citizen himself/herself. As such, the biological life of the citizen is also subject to state regulation since it serves to threaten the social order with its bare life.

According to Foucault, neoliberalism (a concept that dominates his lectures in *The Birth of Biopolitics*) became the means by which the relative value of life was determined in biopolitics. The specific brand of American neoliberalism that originated in the United States and became influential in its adaptations in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico was one that aimed “to extend the rationality of the market, the schemas of analysis it offers and the decision-making criteria it suggests, to domains which are not exclusively or not primarily economic: the family and the birth rate, for example, or delinquency and penal policy” (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* 324). Along with globalization and the opening of markets to the world economy, a transnational relativization of the value of labor and life emerged based roughly

on an economic world order. A prime example of the combination of neoliberalism and biopolitics is the U.S. government's support of population control abroad under the Reagan administration. Nira Yuval-Davis explains:

The “national interest” behind severe population control measures in the South, however, often is not the result of an internal governmental initiative but is induced from outside because of the North's (especially the USA's) perception of their own “national interest.” A CIA report leaked a few years ago described the effects of high birth rates as leading to “political instability in the 3rd World which in turn would create security problems in the US” [...]. Thus, the Reagan administration gave \$3 billion for population control as part of its “development” aid—three times the total amount spent for this purpose under Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter (although, owing to the Christian right's pressures, they banned any aid which would have supported abortion services). The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has given money for family planning purposes to 95 countries—including all the 45 states in sub-Saharan Africa (all), and also notably Mexico and the Philippines, despite the fact that, as Elizabeth Sobo remarks [...], the population density of people in Africa is one-tenth that in Europe. (34)

This form of “population control” is enacted primarily on female bodies, especially those belonging to Third and Fourth World women, and, as I argue, it is precisely the way that the female body is configured in the national imagination that such an intervention is made possible and justifiable.

Womb (Con)figurations

An examination of etymology is crucial for understanding and tracing what I will call “womb genealogies” or, one could say, the origins of origins. Tracing their etymologies can make it easier for us to understand the way these metaphors contribute to an individual’s experience of his/her own body. However, this is never a clear unilateral relationship; the “real world” may produce language just as much as language serves to constitute the “real world.” For instance, in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur argues that the metaphors of gender and sex differentiation did not always correspond with reality, but with a socially-desired reality, so that “[s]erious talk about sexuality is thus inevitably about the social order that it both represents and legitimates” (11). I would like to make it clear that it is not my intention here to examine all of the possible relationships that exist between reality and its representation, but rather I would like to approach this topic through the lens of metaphor; that is, I aim to demonstrate that reproductive (and non-reproductive) metaphors are embedded in the very language we use to speak about reproduction, and, more specifically, that the womb has become a locus point where multiple discourses about reproduction overlap.

So, to begin, I present an overview of the varied terminologies used to describe the womb, as well as how the understanding of the concept of womb invariably had social effects on women, for whom the womb became their defining attribute, and in some cases, their definition. “Womb,” which is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)*, a derivative of Old English, can refer to the “belly” (now considered obsolete), “[t]he uterus,” or “[a] hollow space or cavity, or something conceived as such” and more generally “[a] place or medium of conception and development; a place or point of origin and growth.” *The*

Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology: The Origins of American English Words also asserts that “womb” can be traced back to the Old English term “*wamb, wamme*,” literally meaning “belly” (887). “*Ventre*” and “*ventre*,” which also mean “belly” in Portuguese and Spanish, respectively, are often used to refer generally to the stomach and, depending on the context, to the womb. We can also observe this phenomenon in English, when mothers explain to their children that they had carried them in their “bellies” or “tummies.”

Historically, this connection between the stomach and the uterus has also been made, as both organs were considered to function in a similarly “passive” or latent way and metaphors of nutrition were often used to describe the changes the maternal body undergoes in order to develop the fetus (see Laqueur 51). The *Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* provides us with some additional information: “Old English *wamb, womb* is Germanic in origin. Early use was also as a term for the ‘abdomen’ or ‘stomach.’ Figurative use indicating ‘conception and development’ dates from the late 16th century” (553). While the earliest known appearance of the term “womb” dates back to the ninth century (*OED*), by the sixteenth century both its literal and figurative meanings seem to be in common use.

When one peruses the dictionary for the Latin term “uterus,” one usually finds that its definition is simply “the womb.” The uterus, however, is understood as mere medical or biological terminology, whereas the womb, in contemporary English, designates both a poetic concept and a bodily organ. In *Making Sex*, Laqueur remarks on an ideological and linguistic shift in the eighteenth century, from the one-sex body model to the two-sex body model, from the “inverted penis” to the uterus, from a more analogical way of looking at the body as a microcosm of the natural order to the empiricism of modern science. Laqueur summarizes the argument of Angus Fletcher to describe this last paradigm shift as follows:

Modern science works to reduce the metaphoric connections between various orders of the world to one, to explain man and nature, the heavens and the earth, in one neutral mathematical language and not, as in the cultural world with which we are concerned here, by adumbrating a complex structure of resemblances, creating levels upon levels of connectedness between and within the micro- and the macrocosm, engendering correspondences as the demands of meaning dictate. (115)

These shifts also mark, according to Laqueur, a change in definition and terminology: “The womb, which had been a sort of negative phallus, became the uterus—an organ whose fibers, nerves, and vasculature provided a naturalistic explanation and justification for the social status of women” (152).

The Spanish and the Portuguese terms also substantiate this differentiation between their somewhat literal and figurative distinctions. The translation for uterus is the same in both Spanish and Portuguese: *útero*. The *Real Academia Española (RAE)* defines *útero* as “[m]atriz de la mujer y de las hembras de los mamíferos” (“womb of woman and female mammals”), while the *Dicionário Priberam da Língua Portuguesa*, defines it as a specifically anatomical term, “[ó]rgão em que se gera e desenvolve o feto dos mamíferos; madre” (“organ in which the fetus of mammals gestates and develops; mother”).⁶ *Matriz* (“matrix; womb”), a term used in both Spanish and Portuguese, performs the same function that “womb” does in English, in the way that it can designate a physicality and/or a figurative space; we can observe this phenomenon as the *RAE* lists its wide range of symbolic as well as scientific meanings, e.g., “[e]ntidad principal, generadora de otras” (“principal entity,

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

generator of other entities”); “[l]etra o espacio en blanco de un texto impreso” (“letter or blank space of a printed text”); “[e]n minería, roca en cuyo interior se ha formado un mineral” (“in mining, rock in whose interior a mineral has been formed”); and “[m]olde de cualquier clase con que se da forma a algo” (“any type of mold that gives form to something”). In Portuguese, *matriz* has biological, mathematical, figurative, and adjectival meanings, such as “útero”; “molde” (“mold”); “lugar onde alguma coisa se gera” (“place where something is given origin/generated”); “que é fonte de origem; principal; primordial” (“that which is the source of origin; principal; primordial”) (*Dicionário Priberam da Língua Portuguesa*).

Matrix appears to have been borrowed from the Old French word, *matrice*, and the Latin word, *mātrīx*, meaning womb and from the Latin *māter*, or mother. Taking this into consideration, one could easily see the way that the womb could stand in for its “possessor,” the mother. If one also looks to the etymological roots of a sister term, “matter,” one discovers that it comes “directly from Latin *māteria* substance from which something is made, timber, from *māter* origin, source, mother” (*The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology* 463). This definition is consistent with and at times at odds with the one that Aristotle provides for the definition of the function of men and women in reproduction: the male supplying the form, the sensitive soul, the idea, and the female supplying the matter, the corporeal, the brain (as a space of conception): “the female always provides the material, the male that which fashions it, for this is the power we say they each possess, and *this is what it is for them to be male and female*... While the body is from the female, it is the soul that is from the male” (qtd. in Laqueur 30).⁷ What remains clear is that the etymology of the womb

⁷ Perhaps this differentiation that associates women with the body accounts for the fact that, as Weinbaum so eloquently explains, women are often held responsible for handing down race (21).

fluctuates from being the source of new life to being the medium or vessel in which new life develops—these definitions, as we shall see, reveal an ideological investment in sexual difference and can be taken to reflect the scientific paradigm out of which they emerge.

In naming this project “Womb Genealogies: Conceiving the New World,” I hope to signal the ways in which metaphors are often employed to talk about reproduction as well as other creative processes (as in artistic and/or thought production). These metaphors are so embedded in our language that it makes it quite impossible to talk about intellectual production or physical reproduction in their own terms (whatever those might actually be/whether this is even possible) without, even unwittingly, implicating the other process. In fact, some ancient philosophers and early scientists actually equated the conception of an idea with giving birth to a child or used one as a metaphor for the other (see Laqueur 49; 52; 142–148). The verb “conceive,” for example, has two primary definitions, according to *The New Oxford American Dictionary*: to “become pregnant with (a child)” and to “form or devise (a plan or idea) in the mind” (351). *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* traces “conceive” back to Old French, *concevoir*, and to its Latin root, *concipere*, which literally means “take to oneself,” a combination of the prefix “con-” (“with”) and *capere* (“to take”) (200). In an almost identical entry, *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* asserts that “conceive” originated around 1280, originally signifying “receive (seed) in the womb” or “become pregnant,” and much later, “take into or form in the mind” (200). Thus the “concept,” whether material or abstract, is a direct result of the act of conceiving (present participle of the verb), or conception (the noun describing the action of conceiving, or the way we understand something). “Conceiving the New World,” therefore, refers not only to

our idea (or conception) of the New World, but also to the process of giving birth, of engendering New World subjects.

At the forefront of the debate/discussion about sexual and gender difference are the reproductive organs. Traditionally, what becomes an issue for women is their “lack” of a penis or, conversely, their possession of a womb, which is, more often than not, actually “possessed” by a force greater than their own, whether it be God, Church, State, or Father. For this reason, the womb is the center of my project since it is often considered to contain/effect the essence/difference of womanhood; this choice to put emphasis on the womb and its metaphors is not in any way meant to serve as a reduction of the woman or the female body to a reproductive organ, to re-inscribe an overused synecdoche—that of the womb standing in for the woman, or to romanticize or minimize the role that the womb plays in women’s daily life experiences. Rather, my intention here is to demonstrate the ways in which the womb still plays a crucial role in the determination of sexual difference, gender roles, and individual rights.

In the Western tradition, the womb has held symbolic power, beyond its status as a bodily organ, since at least the sixteenth century. In addition to its special aura as the part of the body that sustains new life, the womb has often been read as a site of origin, as holding some secret knowledge or truth, and as a pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic space.⁸ Regardless of the unique hold that the womb has on the Western imagination, the woman, surprisingly enough, does not figure in beyond her “role” as a “receptacle.” Indeed, the symbolic power of the womb is exploited in the two most pervasive tropes that I am concerned with here: 1)

⁸ Luce Irigaray reads these conceptualizations of the womb into Plato’s allegory of the cave, which she documents in “Plato’s *Hystera*,” the final section of *Speculum of the Other Woman*: “The cave is the representation of something always already there, of the original matrix/womb” (244). See also Julia Kristeva’s *The Powers of Horror* for further insights concerning the role of the womb in feminist psychoanalysis.

the scientific, philosophical, and cultural conceptions of the body, which posit the womb as metonymic of the female body (in effect, the female subject is rendered body), therefore, naturalizing traditional gender roles and 2) the way political and literary discourses employ the womb, and the female body by implication, as a metaphor for the nation.⁹

As the reproductive logic of the aforementioned figures of the womb would dictate, a positive value is assigned to fertility and pregnancy and a negative value is associated with barrenness and “emptiness”; that is, these are the values if a particular woman’s reproduction is economically and socially desirable in terms of nation-building. In this configuration, the metonymical relation established between the womb and the woman (in this case, the female subject as body) makes a metaphorical relation between womb and nation possible; as such, these figures set up an unrealistic impermeable boundary that, in effect, excises the womb from the female body and disregards the woman’s agency and her labor. Both of these rhetorical strategies that employ the womb are dangerous, I argue, for they dehumanize the female subject by reducing her value to the capacity of her reproductive organs, which is used as justification for social marginalization, economic subalternity, political abjection, exclusion from the social contract, and denial of human rights. Since literary texts are an obvious resource of figurative language, literary analysis of fiction in which the womb is made the central figure can shed light on the underlying concepts that enable metaphors and metonymy of the womb to function so convincingly.

⁹ I employ the term “female body” when the theory I am discussing reduces the female subject to her body, as it is defined by Cartesian dualism. This should not be read as an indication of any support of body/mind dualism, but rather a recognition of the way discourses pivot around the female body, rather than the female subject. See Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* for an elaboration of this idea.

Ethical Concerns: Gender, Race, Class, and Nation

The biopolitical structure of the modern state that relies on bare life's inclusive exclusion for its existence, and the fact that this figure is feminized, naturally lead to the question: who, then, is bare life? As I mentioned earlier in this introduction, Agamben suggests the possibility that the entire Third World has been rendered bare life by the First World's projects of development (*Homo Sacer* 180). But economic interest is not the only the determining factor of bare life; for instance, race also plays an important role in the construction of national identity and of the "ideal" citizen. But this is not to suggest that those who occupy "other" classes, races, and genders or those who hold certain ideologies exist outside the physical borders of the state, since, under the state of exception, all citizens have the possibility of being rendered bare life based on their nonconformity. Bare life becomes, then, a catch-all for those who do not enjoy the rights and protections of the state.

Women also have a particularly precarious position in relation to bare life because the origin of life and citizenship resides in their bodies. Sometimes the life of the unborn citizen is valued more than that of its mother. In other instances, women's reproduction is only desired as surrogacy or as the production of a labor force, thus rendering her "merely reproductive life" and nothing more; at other times her reproduction is discouraged or her infertility is made into a sign of her social undesirability. The authors in this study dramatize these effects of biopolitics, whether it is their intention or not, as it plays out specifically on the bodies of their female characters. Ultimately, what their novels reveal is the link between figurative and material violence. Indeed, there is a violence done to the female subject when the womb is configured as metonymic of the female body in order to sustain a national metaphor.

While not all of the texts examined engage to the same extent with both the artistic conventions and the political trends of their time, what remains clear is that they all take up the complex metaphor of the womb as the locus for exploring the relations between sexual reproduction and the nation, the similarities/disparities between the female body and its textual representation, the relationship of mother-fetus, and/or the function of traditional gender roles in shaping social mores. Besides drawing on the multiple and complicated existing metaphors of the womb and shaping them to their own ends, the texts that I analyze in this project have some striking commonalities. For example, many of the wombs in question belong to female characters who are economically or socially disadvantaged. Even though this may be an indication of the authors' commitment to undermine master narratives and recuperate silenced voices, it also signals a heightened preoccupation with the Third World and Fourth World woman's reproduction and her somewhat contentious relation with the state, which also makes her reproduction its preoccupation. While in certain contexts the reproduction of the marginalized woman is encouraged by the state, such as in the case of the handmaids of *The Handmaid's Tale* and in the national contest to birth another Christopher Columbus, who will become the national symbol of the bicentennial in *Cristóbal Nonato*; in others, her failed reproduction signals her dispensability (as in *A hora da estrela* and again in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the case of the Unwomen) or her ability to reproduce is considered her downfall, since she and her undesirable progeny become an unnecessary burden on society (as in *El cuarto mundo*).

But the marginalized woman is not the only lens through which these stories are told; in fact, we are sometimes given a fetal perspective and the emphasis on agency is often skewed toward the developing fetus. In some instances, such as that of Dorfman's *La última*

canción de Manuel Sendero and Fuentes's *Cristóbal Nonato*, undue emphasis is placed on the agency of the sperm (and later the fetus), which/who has a fully developed consciousness and a superhuman capacity to sense and even influence the happenings of the outside world. Indeed, the fetus-protagonists enact (in both cases) their masculine wills, which can on occasion override that of the gestating mother. The case of Eltit's *El cuarto mundo* presents a more complicated vision; although the male of the fraternal twins is given the privilege of narrating both his sister's and his own conception, his version of the story is challenged by the second half, which is narrated by his sister. However, this choice on the part of Eltit seems to be less motivated by a desire to privilege a male voice than to establish a history against which her female protagonist can narrate a counter-history.

In the texts in which there is no fetal perspective (most often because there is no fetus), as in the works of Atwood and Lispector, the female protagonists are tainted by their empty/sterile wombs or their eugenically unfit status at the same time that their agency is structurally or systematically limited. In fact, they are often rendered undesirable and considered have little social use value. Morrison's *Beloved*, however, presents some difficulties in this taxonomy because we do not get a fetal perspective, but rather that of the dead baby's ghost, who, having been "murdered" by her mother, comes back to haunt her. The spectral perspective of the dead (and later pregnant) Beloved, who cannot seem to let go of her premature end, overpowers and almost destroys her mother Sethe.

Placing these texts into conversation with one another reveals the possibility that late twentieth-century biopolitics is still haunted by the trauma of modernism, and its eugenic program. Indeed the social contexts in which these texts were written—a *ditadura militar* (the military dictatorship) of Brazil, the military coup in Chile led by General Augusto

Pinochet, the dirty war waged by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico, and the neoconservative, neoliberal Reagan-era politics in the United States—often made the life of its citizens a subject of debate and, at times, took the life of its nonconformist or “undesirable” citizens. These regimes often called for a return to traditional patriarchal values, which, more often than not, was framed in gendered terms to mean family values, and inevitably implied a restriction on civil liberties for the sake of the family/nation. In this rhetoric, women are relegated back to the “private” space of the home, to their “proper” roles as wives and mothers, and to perform their “natural” and national duties. Accompanying this reinforcement of the nineteenth-century notion of the separate spheres of production and reproduction is also a reduction of the options for reproductive control available to women, as the female body becomes the border of the national body and, thus, subject to policing.¹⁰ In the chapters that follow, I explore the ethical implications of the womb configurations that underlie the structure of the modern state and its relation to bare life. When nations are in crisis, as was the case in many parts of the Americas in the 1980s, there is a tendency toward reinforcing and literalizing this gendered structure of the nation. As such, my project establishes the crucial role that figurative language and gender plays in biopolitics as a discourse and as a form of population control.

¹⁰ For a further discussion of the notion of separate spheres, see Rosalind Rosenberg’s *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism*.

CHAPTER ONE

Origin Stories: (Re)producing the Nation in the Americas

This study takes the late twentieth century as its point of departure with the understanding that this particular historical moment is also a product of a long history of figurative language that links the female body to the discovery and subsequent “development” of the New World. For this reason, I have decided to include a literature review of the texts that are foundational in terms of this project, so that the reader may glean a sense of the major rhetorical constructs at work. In addition to providing some examples of primary texts written throughout the history of the Americas, this chapter also explores more recent feminist interpretations and analyses of these moments and their lasting implications for gender relations. Finally, this chapter will address some of the actual material effects of interventions into reproduction that, in my view, have often been justified rhetorically through figurative language that renders the female body as a metaphor for the nation or the hemisphere.

The Colonial Period: “Discovery” and Conquest

Well before, during, and after their “discovery” of the “New World,” which was technically a rediscovery, Europeans struggled to conceptualize the position of the Old World in relation to what they considered to be a newly found one.¹¹ They often established

¹¹ I hesitate to use the term “discovery” to describe Europe’s encounter with the “New World” for two reasons: 1) there is evidence that the Vikings and other sailors had already known of the existence of the Americas well before the European imperial fight to claim American lands and also 2) the Americas existed well before Europe’s discovery of them, and to suggest that the Americas come into existence only by their integration into the realm of European knowledge symbolically erases the rich cultures that were already thriving there. Edmundo O’Gorman and Enrique Dussel have contributed to the discussion regarding the use of the term “discovery” in reference to the Americas in their texts, *The Invention of America* and *The Invention of the*

this relationship by positioning themselves, directly or indirectly, in relation to the land and its inhabitants, although sometimes for different ends. McClintock goes as far as to suggest that “Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination—a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (22). Writings about the discovery, conquest, and colonization of the Americas often asserted the superior position of the author in relation to other interested parties (whether they be indigenous peoples, fellow countrymen, opposing religious groups, representatives of rival empires, or foreign investors). Naturally, they often configured themselves as right possessors, proper husbands, and true discoverers, which they justified on the basis of pre-conceived notions regarding gender relations. For example, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda,¹² a Spanish theologian of the colonial period, argued for the subjugation of the indigenous peoples of the New World to the Europeans based on a gendered hierarchy, in which everything feminine is subordinated to everything masculine, an idea that can be traced back to Aristotle by way of Augustine. Stafford Poole summarizes Sepúlveda’s position as follows:

The conclusion drawn from this is that the Indians are obliged by the natural law to obey those who are outstanding in virtue and character in the same way that matter yields to form, body to soul, sense to reason, animals to human beings, women to men, children to adults, and, finally, the imperfect to the

Americas, respectively. For a discussion of the rhetorical construction of the New World before its “discovery,” see Djelal Kadir’s chapter “Charting the Conquest” in *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*.

¹² See Stafford Poole, “Summary of Sepúlveda’s Position,” which can be found in a volume he translated, edited, and annotated, *In Defense of the Indians: The Defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, Late Bishop of Chiapa, Against the Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas*.

more perfect, the worse to the better, the cheaper to the more precious and excellent, to the advantage of both. This is the natural order to which the eternal and divine law commands be observed, according to Augustine. (11–12)

Here we can observe the way Sepúlveda's logic serves to inscribe the indigenous peoples of the Americas into a series of metaphors whose relation is one of degree, and whose intrinsic value is virtue, or male.

Indeed, McClintock asserts that gender provides the governing logic common to founding and foundational texts of the Americas, as well as other colonies: "In the minds of these men, the imperial conquest of the globe found both its shaping figure and its political sanction in the prior subordination of women as a category of nature" (24). Even so, it is important to realize that the "discovery" of the Americas happens in a context in which metaphor is heavily embedded in everyday speech as much as it permeated philosophical understandings of the world. As Laqueur remarks, "nothing in this cultural system is *just* metaphor—but it is not just corporeal either" (109). What Laqueur highlights here is a process of knowledge production prior to the invention of modern science, a process which was based on "adumbrating a complex structure of resemblances, creating levels upon levels of connectedness between and within the micro- and the macrocosm, engendering correspondences as the demands of meaning dictate" (115). So, for instance, at the same time that landscape metaphors said something about a common (mis)understanding of the "nature" of the female body as a vacant womb that desires to be husbanded, they also claimed erroneously that the newly "discovered" lands were unoccupied territories waiting to be possessed and cultivated. Based on these premises, one can see how easily metaphors that

connected the functions of nature to the female body could translate into action—by shaping relationships between men and women; by governing rules of interaction between discoverers, colonizers, conquistadors and the indigenous inhabitants of the New World; and by impacting “man’s” relationship to his natural environment, which was often gendered female. And these metaphors did become the basis for action, often to the detriment of indigenous peoples, female members of the New World population, and the American landscape (not necessarily in that order).¹³

In fact Annette Kolodny observes an even tighter linkage between the landscape and the feminine and posits this connection as something typically American in *Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*.¹⁴ Kolodny claims that “when America finally produced a pastoral literature of her own, that literature hailed the essential femininity of the terrain *in a way European pastoral never had*, explored the

¹³ However, I do not want to give the impression that all landscape metaphors were necessarily detrimental to female and indigenous groups. In fact, the menacing geography and apparent sterility of some American landscapes discouraged the rape and pillage common in many inaugural scenes of the New World. At times, these descriptions were also used against the inhabitants of the Americas, as proof of their inferiority, as if somehow their intrinsic value was determined by their environment. A good example can be found in the writings of Corneille de Pauw, in his controversial work, *Recherches Philosophiques Sur Les Américains* (1770), which used geography to justify the New World’s inferiority to the Old World: “America was a land covered wither with precipitous mountains or impassable forests and swamps, *an immense sterile desert*; so much so that the first adventures and colonists were forced to eat the Indians and even each other to avoid starvation. Immense areas of land were covered with putrid and death-dealing waters on which the heat of the sun caused a sort of fermentation and fogs of poisonous salts. These horrible swamps produced poisonous trees, in fact the chief food of the Americans was a deadly plant which it required great skill to render edible. The surface of the earth was overrun with serpents, lizards, reptiles, and monstrous insects, all of which, filled with the poison they drank from the earth itself, grew to prodigious size and multiplied beyond the imagination. In Louisiana there were frogs that weighed thirty-seven pounds and bellowed like calves. Europe is warm; America is cold. Even in the tropics the earth is so cold that if seeds are planted a few inches too deep they freeze, and the trees grow horizontal roots to avoid the frost in the soil” (qtd. in Church, 185–186, my emphasis).

¹⁴ See Annette Kolodny’s *Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* for a more in-depth discussion of landscape metaphors in the U.S.-context. While Kolodny’s text covers geographically the U.S. and linguistically English texts, many of her arguments can be applied to the Americas as a whole. Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* takes a step in this direction.

historical consequences of its central metaphor in a way European pastoral had never dared, and, from the first, *took its metaphors as literal truths*” (6, my emphases). Kolodny calls this “yearning to know and respond to the landscape as feminine [. . .] the uniquely American ‘pastoral impulse’” (8). Lorraine Dowler, Josephine Carubia, and Bonj Szczygiel, in their introduction to *Gender and Landscape: Renegotiating Morality and Space*, propose a re-examination of “landscapes as a system of power relations which are vital to the production of gendered identities” (1). According to these authors, landscape (although defined in multiple ways in their introduction), at the most basic level, “requires a deliberate act of looking and this act engages all sorts of interpretive strategies” (3). Furthermore, this “act of looking” contains multiple variables and, as such, human geographers have made distinctions between vision (what one is physically able to see), visuality (“how vision is constructed in different ways”) and the material landscape, itself (3). More recently, as Dowler and her co-authors illustrate, scholars have argued that landscape refers to “a ‘way of seeing’ (rather than an image or an object), which incorporates socio-cultural and political processes,” thus further supporting the claim that “landscapes are actively produced, programmed and scheduled. In other words they are not innocent; rather, they are the palette of a specific moral agenda” (3, 7).

Thus, my concern here is to examine specifically the gendered and sexualized landscape metaphors that were taken up on a large scale (often at the level of nation or empire), the factors that enabled these metaphors to be taken up so readily, and how they were often implemented, unwittingly or not, in order to justify pre-existing hierarchies or new desirable social relationships. Indeed, Laqueur remarks: “Serious talk about sexuality is thus inevitably about the social order that it both represents and legitimates” (11). Therefore,

the metaphors that I have chosen to examine here reveal a shared attempt on the part of European pilgrims, conquistadores, and merchants to convey the New World in terms that their audience would understand. Although not all of these metaphors use the female body as a direct correlative, they point us to a complex system in which sexual and gender metaphors are already embedded, and where the female body is implicated.

A. Holy Lands

Christopher Columbus's reports on the New World through his letters to the Catholic monarchs describe the Americas as abundant, fertile, and treasure-laden lands¹⁵:

[La] cual [Juana] y todas las otras son fertilísimas en demasiado grado, y ésta en extremo: en ella hay muchos puertos en la costa de la mar sin comparación de otros que yo sepa en cristianos, y fartos ríos y buenos y grandes que es maravilla: las tierras della son altas y en ella muy muchas sierras y montañas altísimas, sin comparación de la isla de Teneryfe, todas ferrosísimas, de mil fechuras, y todas andables y llenas de árboles de mil maneras y altas, y parecen que llegan al cielo; y tengo por dicho que jamás pierden la foja, segun lo pude comprender, que los ví tan verdes y tan hermosos como son por mayo

¹⁵ Indeed, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas remarks on the bounty of the Americas after having accompanied Columbus to the New World, only to lament its de-population by the *conquistadores*, “la peor dellas [de las islas] es más fértil y graciosa que la huerta del Rey, de Sevilla, y la más sana tierra del mundo, en las cuales había más de quinientas mil ánimas, no hay una sola criatura” (76; “the worst of them [of the islands] is more fertile and attractive than the king’s orchard in Sevilla, and the most healthy land in the world, in which there were five hundred thousand souls, there is not a lonely child”). Although not commenting necessarily on the landscape, Hernán Cortés is impressed by the highly developed civilization and the vast riches that he encounters in *Nueva España*, “estábamos en disposición de ganar para vuestra majestad los mayores reinos y señoríos que había en el mundo” (43; “we were at our disposal to win for your majesty the greatest kingdoms and dominions that exist in the world”).

en España. Y dellos estaban floridos, dellos con fruto, y dellos en otro término, según es su calidad [...]. (Colón, *La carta de Colón: anunciando el descubrimiento del Nuevo Mundo* 8)

[And the said Juana and the other islands there appear very fertile. This island is surrounded by many very safe and wide harbours, not excelled by any others that I have ever seen. Many great and salubrious rivers flow through it. There are also many very high mountains there. All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by various qualities; they are accessible, and full of a great variety of trees stretching up to the stars; the leaves of which I believe are never shed, for I saw them as green and flourishing as they are usually in Spain in the month of May; some of them were blossoming, some were bearing fruit, some were in other conditions; each one was thriving in its own way. (Columbus, “From *The Letter of Columbus on the Discovery of America*” 24)]

Although he does not always find the gold he is looking for, at least he can report rumors that there is gold to be discovered there. Nonetheless, and most importantly, we learn that the land is accessible; in fact, the generosity of its inhabitants is mistaken for an open invitation to the land and everything in it. Columbus remarks that “[v]erdad es que, después que [se] aseguran y pierden este miedo, ellos son tanto sin engaño y tan liberales de lo que tienen, que no lo creería sino el que lo viese” (*La carta de colón* 9; “when they [Native Americans] perceive that they are safe, putting aside all fear, they are of simple manners and trustworthy, and very liberal with everything they have, refusing no one who asks for anything they may possess, and even themselves inviting us to ask for things” “From *The Letter of Columbus*”

25). In fact, the land and its “simple-minded” and “servile” inhabitants seem to offer themselves up to Columbus, as if they had been awaiting his arrival and willingly become subjects of the Crown and the Cross. This narrative fits easily into the trope in which the virgin female landscape freely submits to the will of her male discoverer and conquistador; this rhetorical move on the part of Columbus results in the naturalization of the conquest in terms of pre-scripted gender roles that regulate sexual experience.¹⁶

But Columbus takes a step further in his narratives relating the third voyage and begins to characterize this newly discovered world, more specifically embodied in the island he calls Paria, as an earthly paradise (222), and his description of this land centers on the metaphor of a woman’s breast, a part of the female anatomy often associated with reproduction:

[M]e puse a tener esto del mundo, y fallé que no era redondo en la forma que escriben; salvo que es de la forma de una pera que sea toda muy redonda, salvo allí donde el pezón, que allí tiene más alto, o como quien tiene una pelota muy redonda y en un lugar de ella fuese como una teta de mujer allí puesta, y que esta parte de este pezón sea la más alta e más propinca al cielo y sea debajo la línea equinocial y en esta mar oceána en fin del Oriente. Llamo

¹⁶ Louis Montrose, in his convincing article, “The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery,” cites an instance where the discoverer Keymis describes the landscape as a young female prostitute: “Is it not meere wretchednesse in us, to spend our time, breake our sleepe, and waste our braines, in contriving a cavilling false title to defraude a neighbour of halfe an acre of lande: whereas here whole shires of fruitfull rich grounds, lying now waste for want of people, do prostitute themselves unto us, like a faire and beautifull woman, in the pride and floure of desired yeeres” (qtd. in Montrose 18). Montrose’s insight on this passage is worth citing here: “In Keymis’s representation of the Spaniards, the rape of the Indians’ lands and the rape of ‘their women’ go hand in hand. In the case of the Englishmen, however, masculine sexual aggression against the bodies of native women has been wholly displaced into the exploitation of the feminized new found land. Indeed, the Englishmen’s vaunted sexual self-restraint serves to legitimate their exploitation of the land [...] as passive beneficiaries of the animated land’s own desire to be possessed” (19).

yo fin de Oriente adonde acaba toda la tierra e islas [...]. (*Los cuatro viajes del almirante y su testamento* 180–181)

[I have come to the following conclusions concerning the world: that it is not round as they describe it, but the shape of a pear, which is round everywhere except at the stalk, where it juts out a long way; or that it is a round ball, on part of which is something like a woman's nipple. This point on which the protuberance stands is the highest and nearest to the sky. It lies below the Equator, and in this ocean, at the farthest point of the east, I mean by the farthest point of the east the place where all land and islands end. (*Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* 217–218)]

The world in the shape of the breast may have been an easy move for Columbus, considering the context in which he was writing, where the world was understood in terms of its interconnectedness, so that the body could be easily be taken up as a metaphor for a world phenomenon as easily as a world phenomenon could be used to explain the body. Likewise, his argument that the highest point on the earth, in this case the nipple, is the site of the earthly paradise due to its proximity to the heavens makes sense in this schema. However, the use of the breast makes for an interesting metaphor for the garden of Eden; in place of virgin land, the newly discovered fourth part of the world seems to not to be a potentiality, but already a maternal, nurturing, life-giving source whose milk flows like sweet water. Although the concept of a virgin mother is not necessarily unheard of, this trope is not typical of discovery narratives of the New World and adds yet another layer to the female landscape-female body metaphor.

McClintock makes this particular passage regarding the Third Voyage a focal point in

the opening chapter of *Imperial Leather*. She maintains that “Columbus’[s] image feminizes the earth as a cosmic breast, in relation to which the epic male hero is a tiny, lost infant, yearning for the Edenic nipple. The image of the earth-breast here is redolent not with the male bravura of the explorer, invested with his conquering mission, but with an uneasy sense of male anxiety, infantilization and longing for the female body” (22). McClintock’s somewhat psychoanalytic interpretation may seem a bit far-reaching and inadequate for explicating what Djelal Kadir suggests is Columbus’s perceived appointed role as an instrument of God (see *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth* 2). Indeed, Kadir argues that “Columbus himself, convinced of his messianic mission that leads him to the gates of the Earthly Paradise—the Paria of his third voyage—and all too conscious of the telling simultaneity between his initial sally and the Spanish Jews’ exodus into yet another Wilderness in 1492, embodies the prototypical exemplum of New-World providentialism” (17). Nonetheless, Columbus’s use of this particular metaphor is noteworthy and deserves critical attention, since the shape of the earth says something about its creator—in this case, the divinity as it is revealed through Columbus. That the world would be created in the shape of the breast implies a glorification and idealization of the form and function of the breast by emphasizing the nurturing and nutritional role that mother earth performs for her infant inhabitants.

B. New World Husbands

While the Spaniards, and others who sailed in name of the Catholic monarchs, could justify their claims to the New World by the fact of their having arrived first (among the

Europeans) by way of Columbus and, therefore, having the hand of divine providence¹⁷ already on their side, the English excuse their belated appearance (in terms of actual settlement) on superior moral grounds. According to Kadir, the Puritans' obsession with the fact that the second coming could not come soon enough exacerbated the sense of urgency that they felt in their pilgrimage:

Like the expectant faithful of the second century, the anxiety of New England's settlers was not over the possibility that the world would end, but over the obstinate tardiness with which the millennial end was delaying its advent. And, like the second century, the anxieties of the founding Puritans found a venue, a safety release, in the parenetic injunction of metaphor and *figural* transfiguration of the end that was *literally* anticipated in the beginning. (*Columbus and the Ends of the Earth* 38, his emphases)

In the case of the Puritans, the claimed superior moral grounds happened to be literal as well as figurative because God would provide these grounds through his covenant with them to "plant a colony" for them in New Canaan, which the Puritans located in New England. As such, the English texts I discuss here are littered with gendered landscape metaphors,¹⁸ which, in my estimation, were more rhetorically expedient for the English because of their belatedness, and therefore more fully developed and extended.

In many instances, the English seem to be directly addressing their Spanish rivals in

¹⁷ In fact, as Kadir has elucidated, Christopher Columbus took his namesake seriously and literally, as a bearer of Christ when he signs his name as *Xpo-Ferens*, Greek for "the bringer of the anointed one, the bearer of the Messiah" (*Columbus and the Ends of the Earth* 1).

¹⁸ Indeed, as Louis Montrose suggestively contends (and corroborates my argument regarding landscape metaphors in the colonial Americas): "[w]hether the action is physical or metaphorical, whether its object is a woman, a man, or a 'countrey,' that object is always positioned as feminine" (32).

their founding and colonial narratives. Sir Walter Raleigh, for instance, who claims Guiana for Queen Elizabeth I, justifies his appropriation of lands already explored by the Spanish based on the grounds of possessing superior moral character and behavior. As Louis Montrose points out, for Raleigh the indigenous woman “function[s] as the collective instrument for making comparisons among *men*” (21, his emphasis); “[h]ere,” he argues, “misogynistic sentiments subserve anti-Spanish ones, in a project aimed at mastering native Americans” (21). That is, the sexual restraint of the English (as opposed to the rapaciousness of the Spanish) in relation to the indigenous women situates them as better caretakers of the virgin land (“Guiana is a countrey that hath yet her maidenhead”); that is, they make better husbands (qtd. in Montrose 12).¹⁹

Even more blatant, however, is John Cotton’s explicit utilization of the language of Columbus’s self-proclaimed role as instrument of divine providence. In “God’s Promise to His Plantations,” Cotton compares the “providential” nature of Columbus’s voyage to the covenantal pilgrimage of the Puritans: “He gives them the land by promise; others take the land by his providence, but God[’]s people take the land by promise: And therefore the land of *Canaan* is called a land of promise. Which they discern, first, by discerning themselves to be in Christ, in whom all the promises are yea, and amen” (6). Indeed, the Puritans took many of the biblical metaphors literally; being uprooted from Old England, they “discerned” that God, as Husband (16) and Landlord (12), had set aside a place for them in the New World, which he first cleared for their proper settlement. In his many papers and letters, John Winthrop enumerates multiple reasons why this settlement is justifiable to those who might object to the displacement of the natives. Among these reasons, Winthrop argues that the

¹⁹ On this point, see Montrose 11–12.

American natives are improper husbands to the land, and do not fulfill the injunction from Genesis to “subdue the earth” (Gen. 1:28), which therefore justifies the Puritans’ usurpation of the land. He writes:

The whole earth is the Lord’s garden and hee hath given it to the sons of Adam to bee tilled and improved by them, why then should we stand starving here for places of habitation (many men spending as much labour and cost to recover or keepe sometymes an acre or two of lands, as would procure him many hundreds of acres, as good or better in another place) and in the meane tyme suffer whole cuntryes as profitable for the use of man, to lye waste without any improvement? (*Winthrop Papers* 118)

The very language associated with planting, as Carl von Linné (Carolus Linnaeus) will later exemplify, is highly sexualized. As such, phrases like “planting the seed” and “fertilization” are often associated with human procreation. The utilization of the planting metaphor, in this case, is complicated by the fact that the Puritan man is at once a plant and a planter, a fruit of God’s labor and a husband, a member of the feminized body of the Church and Church leader. Likewise, in a diary entry on July 3 of 1645, John Winthrop expounds the complex gender relationships that emerge from the Puritan understanding of covenant:

The woman’s own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom, and would not think her condition safe and free, but in her subjection to her husband’s authority. Such is the liberty of the church under the authority of Christ, her king and husband; his yoke is so easy and sweet to her

as a bride's ornaments; and if through forwardness of wantonness, etc., she shake it off, at any time, she is at no rest in her spirit, until she take it up again; and whether her lord smiles upon her, and embraceth her in his arms, or whether he frowns, or rebukes, or smites her, she apprehends the sweetness of his love in all, and is refreshed, supported, and instructed by every such dispensation of his authority over her. ("From *Winthrop's Journal*" 255)

But the relationship between God and the people he plants in the New World is also expressed in the same language used to describe the relationship fathers should have with their offspring. Cotton, himself, draws attention to the role of husbands in the Puritan community in his warning: "[H]ave a tender care that you looke well to the plants that spring from you, that is, to your children; that they doe not degenerate as the Israelites did; after which they were vexed with afflictions on every hand" (19). And it is precisely this concern, which so much obsesses the Puritans, and has its culmination in the Antinomian controversy (1636–1638). Due to this controversy's reliance on metaphors of reproduction, it deserves critical attention here.

Antinomian was the adjective applied to those Puritans, led by Anne Hutchinson, who maintained that church members were initiated into communion with God (and the Puritan community) through a covenant of grace. In opposition to the more orthodox Puritans, or legalists, who believed that the basis for church/community membership was a covenant of works, the Antinomians argued that salvation was always already guaranteed by God's grace rather than dependent on individual behavior. Besides her gender non-conformance, in her adoption of roles traditionally held by men (e.g. preacher, leader), Hutchinson also held that God had revealed himself directly to her, which contested the legitimacy of the ministers in

power as elected interpreters of God's will. In spite of these transgressions, the most compelling evidence of Hutchinson's heresy was to come much later in her "monstrous birth" (Winthrop, "From *Winthrop's Journal*" 252). But Hutchinson wasn't the first of the Antinomians to be reported to have had a "monstrous birth," as John Winthrop reveals:

The manner of the discovery was very strange also, for it was that very day Mistris *Hutchison* [sic] was cast out of the Church for her monstrous errorrs, and notorious falsehood; for being commanded to depart the Assembly, Mistris *Dyer* accompanied her, which a stranger observing, asked another what woman that was, and the other answered, it was the woman who had the Monster (qtd. in Hall 281)

Winthrop's use of the word "monstrous" to describe Hutchinson's errors parallels nicely with the "Monster" that her companion Mary Dyer²⁰ had given birth to, suggesting a linkage between the bodies and the minds of the allied friends, which would be later confirmed by Hutchinson's own "monstrous birth." In the minds of the Puritans who persecuted her, Hutchinson's body betrayed her in the failed reproduction of her womb, which Winthrop's journal entry in September of 1638 discloses:

Mrs Hutchinson, being removed to the Isle of Aquiday in the Narragansetts Bay, after her time was fulfilled that she expected deliverance of a child, was delivered of a monstrous birth, which, being diversely related in the country, (and, in the open assembly at Boston, upon a lecture day, [was] declared by Mr Cotton to be twenty-seven several lumps of man's seed, without any alteration or mixture of anything from the woman, and thereupon gathered

²⁰ For a more detailed account and analysis of the role of Mary Dyer in the Antinomian controversy, see Anne G. Myles's "From Monster to Martyr: Re-presenting Mary Dyer."

that it might signify her error in denying inherent righteousness, but that all was Christ in us, and nothing of ours in our faith, love, etc.). (Winthrop, “From *Winthrop’s Journal*” 252)

The comparison that Winthrop makes draws parallels between her rejection of her husband’s sperm with the rejection of the “inherent righteousness” of God’s will. The gendering of the stillborn fetus as male reaffirms her lack of agency in its formation, which is reflected in the lack of agency that Winthrop attributes to Hutchinson in her heretical act. But it is Thomas Weld’s account in the preface to Winthrop’s *A Short Story* that provides a more direct correlation between faulty reasoning and faulty reproduction, interpreting the “monstrous births” as testimonials to the nature of their mothers; in the case of Hutchinson, Weld emphasizes that “*none at all of them (as farre as I could ever learne) of humane shape*” (qtd. in Hall 214). As such, he writes,

And see how the wisdom of God fitted this judgement to her sinne [in] every way, for looke as she had vented mishapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monsters; and as about 30. Opinions in number, so many monsters; and as those [opinions] were publike, and not in a corner mentioned, so this is now come to be knowne and famous over all these Churches, and a great part of the world. (qtd. in Hall 214–215)

Here, the womb, and its (in)capacity for reproduction, becomes a metaphor for the conception of an idea as it is physically made manifest in the conception of human life.²¹ The success of this conception, however, is dependent on whether or not the woman is in God’s favor because any failure to reproduce is automatically her sole responsibility, which

²¹ For a detailed analysis and comparison of Anne Hutchinson and Anne Bradstreet, see Bethany Reid, “Unfit for Light’: Anne Bradstreet’s Monstrous Birth.”

represents her only socially acceptable role; her husband's planting of the seed has been, in this case, rejected—a fruitless cultivation of degenerate ideas, a sterile landscape that bears no fruit for her Puritan husband. Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan poet, employs the metaphor of the degenerate bastard child to describe her book of poetry in its preface (titled “The Author to Her Book”). In this preface, Bradstreet directly addresses her work, a collection of poetry that was published by her brother-in-law unbeknownst to her, as “Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain” (1). Ultimately, Bradstreet takes up the same reproductive metaphor to describe her own intellectual endeavors, thereby equating artistic creation with the act of giving birth and naturalizing her role as a mother/poet. As a pre-emptive strike against her Puritan(ical) critics, as Bethany Reid explains, “Bradstreet depicts herself as the unwed mother of a malformed child” (525). Here Bradstreet distorts the reproductive metaphor prevalent in the social discourse of her time to deny any male agency in her creative efforts at the same time that she belittles the critical attention paid to her by describing her poetry as deformed.

C. Native Bodies, Raw Materials

In terms of the Portuguese, it has been suggested that, due to their superior skill in navigating the Ocean Sea (i.e., Atlantic Ocean) and regulating trade, they happened upon Brazil much before the official letter marking their discovery was written in 1500 by Pero Vaz de Caminha on behalf of explorer Pedro Alvares de Cabral.²² Indeed later on, in his *História do futuro* (1718), António de Vieira claims that the superior navigational skills of the Portuguese are evidence of God's hand, since “Os Portuguezes forão aquelles

²² See Earl E. Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context* 29.

cavalleyros, a quem Christo abrio o primeyro caminho pelo mar” (319; “The Portuguese were those gentlemen, to whom Christ opened the first path by sea”) and that we owe revelation of the invisible world, or terra incognita, through the discovery, to the Portuguese: “A parte maritima deste triunfo, que tambem foy naval, pertence principalmente aos Portuguezes, por meyo de cuja navegacão, & prégação sugeytou Christo á obediencia de seu Imperio tantas gentes de ambos os mundos” (318; “The maritime part of this triumph, that also was naval, belongs principally to the Portuguese, through which their navigation and preaching Christ subjected so many people of both worlds to obey their Empire”). Parallels can thus be drawn between the divine callings that provide the rhetorical impetus for the empires of England, Portugal, and Spain, a connection that Kadir has made explicit:

In this terrific apprehension, [the book of] John prefigures, as well, the anxious foundations of a New World, whether New Spain, New England, or New Portugal, where God’s promise to His people ends up as a hare/tortoise race between prophetic impatience and plotting history, a race, as we shall see, that repeatedly culminates with the generalization of the imminent into the immanent and the transumption of temporal eschatology into its geographic and political corollaries. (*Columbus and the Ends of the Earth* 17)

However, A. H. de Oliveira Marques explains an important strategic difference between the Portuguese and her other competing empires: “Along the African and the Asian coasts, up to present Indonesia, Portugal owned a long chain of fortresses and trading centers, generally having very little surrounding territory. This was a deliberate policy, for Portugal did not have the demographic or military resources to master vast areas. Hers was a commercial, maritime empire rather than a territorial one,” but that, in effect, “[t]he only real ‘empire’ the

Portuguese had was Brazil” (4). Perhaps this can account for what, in Fitz’s estimation, is a more “restrained” and more “realistic” prose style in Caminha’s founding letter,²³ since the Portuguese navigators were accustomed to encountering different lands and peoples (“Narrative of Discovery and Conquest” 30). Moreso than giving an account of the landscape itself, Caminha focuses on native bodies and the flora and fauna of Brazil. The central argument seems to be that because of the natural beauty and innocence of this newly found land and its inhabitants, they would be easily converted to Christianity, “Parece-me gente de tal inocência que, se nós entendêssemos a sua fala a eles a nossa, seriam logo cristãos, visto que não têm nem entendem crença alguma, segundo as aparências” (“To me they seem people of such innocence that, if we were to understand each other’s speech, they would then be Christians, given that they apparently do not have nor understand any belief”). In fact, Caminha spends a good amount of time describing the female body of the indigenous woman: her beautiful form and the fact that she is not ashamed to walk around naked seem to shock him. Later on, he ventures a brave comparison between Brazilian women and Portuguese women in terms of their sex, which clearly situates the Brazilian woman as *the* object of desire: “e sua vergonha tão graciosa que a muitas mulheres de nossa terra, vendo-lhe tais feições envergonhara, por não terem as suas como ela.” (“and their such gracious shame that many women of our land, seeing such parts so made, would be embarrassed for not having theirs like her[s]”) Of the men, however, he assures the audience that “Nenhum deles era fanado, mas todos assim como nós” (“None of them were circumcized, but all like

²³ It is important to note that Pero Vaz de Caminha’s *A Carta*, although written in 1500, was not actually published until 1817. Therefore, his descriptions of the discovery did not have a wide-reaching impact on Old World conceptions of the New World at the time, although today *A Carta* is included in the Brazilian canon of the discovery and conquest. Nonetheless, the letter is of lasting importance as a first impression. The only version I have been able to find in Portuguese is online and, for this reason, I do not cite page numbers.

us”)–by claiming that the indigenous men are their equals in terms of their “manhood,” Caminha’s remarks highlight an anxiety regarding masculinity that arose in the Portuguese, for whom the genitals of their rivals were in plain view, and the potential for forging an alliance with the indigenous peoples as non-Jews.

In an attempt to fit the indigenous peoples of Brazil into the biblical world order, Father Manuel da Nóbrega, in *Diálogo sobre a conversão do gentio* (1556-1557), claims that they are “descendentes de Chaam, filho de Noé” (14; “descendants of Ham, son of Noah” 88), and therefore salvageable souls (88). What is more, the two metaphors that Nóbrega uses most heavily throughout the dialogue, in the voice of Matheus Nogueira, that of “fazendo brasil no mato” (13; “harvesting brazil-wood in the jungle” 88), a euphemism for “converting the Natives of Brazil” and that of God the blacksmith, who lights the fire of the spirit in the cold iron hearts of his people, provide interesting insight into his world view. In the first metaphor, the indigenous peoples are reduced to *pau-brasil*, the trees that become one of the major export commodities for the Portuguese empire in the colonial period. In the second metaphor, the matter/substance of which the indigenous peoples are made, like all heathens, is cold iron, not wood, which gives them the added characteristic of being malleable, and therefore more easily molded: “Façamos logo do ferro todo hum, frio e sem vertude, sem se poder volver a nada, pore, metido na forja, o fogo o torana que mais parece fogo que ferro; assi todas as almas sem graça e charidade de Deus sam ferro frio sem proveito, mas quanto mais se aquece no fogo, tanto mais fazeis delle o que quereis” (12; “Iron is all the same, cold and without virtue, but in the forge, fire makes it more like fire than like iron. Thus all the souls without grace and the charity of God are worthless cold iron, but the more they are heated in the fire, the more you can do whatever you wish with them” 87). Later Nóbrega

concludes, in the voice of Nogueira: “Do parte do gentio digo que huns e outros tudo são ferro frio, e que quando os Deus quizer meter na forja logo se converterão” (17; “Regarding the Indians, I say that they are all cold iron, and when God places them in the forge they will be converted” 91). This use of iron is an interesting move on Nóbrega’s part, considering that in the New World it was often the apparent lack of iron that surprised its discoverers, and also was used as a measure of what the discoverers determined was their own “superior” civilization. Nonetheless, this obsession with raw material that is scattered throughout Nóbrega’s text reflects not only the trade exploits of the Portuguese, but also the possibility for transformation of raw materials into end products, through crafting or alchemical processes. Indeed, the allusion to alchemy justifies the role of the priest/chemist as an active agent in facilitating the transmutation of baser metals (or heathens) into their purest form, i.e., gold (believers in Christ). Alchemy, which relies heavily on reproductive metaphors for its processes, effectively displaces women as male alchemists were able to provide “the sensitive soul,” as it were, to transform mere “matter” into one of God’s people.

Scientific Transmutations, Gender Dominations

I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave –Sir Francis Bacon

To support the notion that the Enlightenment was merely a European philosophical import in the New World is to oversimplify the complex relationship that the Americas have with Enlightenment thought. Although the Americas may have had exposure to the same sources as those of the French and British Enlightenment, American scholars had a debate of their own regarding its principles. In an edited volume titled *Latin America and the Enlightenment*, Harry Bernstein highlights what he considers to be “Some Inter-American

Aspects of the Enlightenment.” Bernstein observes that the ideas of the Enlightenment were fostered in the New World in “an age of freshly born inter-American interest, and cosmopolitan eighteenth-century life offered newer channels for transfer and exchange of thought between the Americas” (53). Indeed, Bernstein reveals that a more hemispheric awareness of the Americas in opposition to the Old World (and the Old World’s argument about the inferiority of colonial America and its inhabitants²⁴) develops in this time period the notion that “[d]emocracy, science, and learning were based upon man’s progress in the New World, compared with European decline” (55). According to Bernstein, the Chilean political economist Manuel de Salas “perceived New World thought to be continental in type, different in its youth and strength from worn-out Europe which had contributed knowledge for so long. New World culture was no longer a dependent daughter of mother countries” (qtd. in Bernstein 55–56). In fact, Salas inveighed against the rhetoric “that we are inferior, that the writings of de Pauw and Sepúlveda make us unfit for science” (qtd. in Bernstein 56), claiming that “Americans were vindicated [...] by the works and just fame of Peralta, Franklin, and Molina” (Bernstein 56). While this quote confirms an awareness of Salas’s contemporaries as intellectual leaders and the esteem which many Latin Americans held for Benjamin Franklin, it also confirms that practitioners of science were beginning to perceive themselves as scholars and participants in a particularly American intellectual movement (Bernstein 56).

But this interest in a hemispheric collaboration did not initiate solely on the part of

²⁴ In his essay “The Dual Rôle of Latin America in the Enlightenment,” Arthur P. Whitaker argues that European Enlightenment philosophers “used the Black Legend as a weapon in their assault on all revealed religion, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic [...] to discredit ecclesiastical power and establish secular power in unchallenged control of human affairs throughout their world” (8).

Latin Americans. North American scholars were also attracted to the cultural, political, and scientific developments that were taking place in Latin America, which is evidenced by many factors that Bernstein outlines in his article: a renewed interest in the study of Spanish and Spanish American civilization (57–64); a marked increase in the inclusion of Spanish American scholars in U.S. Academies—such as The American Philosophical Society—and invitations for collaboration (57); newspaper attention to developments (especially in terms of agriculture and mining) in Latin America; expansion of the collection of Latin American works in U.S. libraries; and an increase in translated publications (60–61). What is more, Bernstein remarks that Puritans such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall studied Spanish language (and literature, in the case of Sewall) to be able to better communicate with their Hispanic counterparts. Cotton Mather reportedly wrote a religious tract in Spanish titled *Religion Pura, to which is added La Fe del Christiano; En Veynte Quatro Articulos de la Institucion de Christo: An Essay to convey Religion into the Spanish Indies* (1699), and Samuel Sewall conveyed his belief that New Spain would be the new seat of the earthly paradise when he wrote “I rather think that Americana Mexicana will be the New Jerusalem” (54; qtd. in Bernstein 55). This statement by Sewall is particularly significant given the Puritan belief in a providential history that determined their settlement in New England; thus, one can reasonably conclude that he must have thought Mexican civilization worthy of being designated the Promised Land.

Americans not only fostered an intellectual community with their neighbors, but also, as I have mentioned, actively engaged in the debates of the European Enlightenment. “Americans,” as John Tate Lanning argues, “did not so much receive the Enlightenment; they reproduced it from the sources upon which its exponents in Europe depended” (90).

Indeed, there is evidence that scholars from Chile, Mexico, Peru, and the United States were in direct correspondence with the French and the Academy of Sciences in Paris and that the Americas had access to many of the same sources that stimulated French Enlightenment (see Hussey 33).

However, the French philosophers were not the only ones to infiltrate American thought. According to Roland D. Hussey, “The Portuguese Almeida and the Spanish Feijóo, religiously orthodox but philosophically eclectic, greatly popularized, in their respective lands, the ideas of Bacon, Newton, Bayle, and the *Encyclopédistes*” (24). Hussey argues that “[t]hose [influences] of Anglic origin were strong in Mexico, Chile, and the Plata, and may have outweighed the French in Brazil and Cuba” (47–48). A crucial figure to the Enlightenment in the New World was, without a doubt, Sir Francis Bacon. As the scholar whom the Royal Society of London championed as providing the vision for what modern science should be, Bacon endowed the scientist with the power to reveal Nature’s truths. America was a fertile ground for the development of “useful knowledge,” since experience showed them that they needed to better understand the nature that surrounded them, a nature that they could no longer understand by looking to the ancients or their European forebears.

Although Brazil’s adoption of Enlightenment philosophies is later than that of English, French, and Spanish America, one can still find traces of it. Some scholars attribute this delay to the delay of Brazil’s mother country in embracing Enlightenment thought, but it is clear that some Brazilians were educated in France, due to the lack of universities at home, and had access to both English and U.S. Enlightenment tracts (99). What seems to be the major difference between Brazil and the rest of the Americas, is that the Enlightenment was not openly or widely accepted by the public; nonetheless, one can observe in this time a

substantial increase in the formation of secret societies and academies dedicated to Enlightenment principles.²⁵

Upon re-visiting the epigraph by Bacon that begins this section, one cannot help but be reminded of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis. As a punishment for Eve's curiosity, men are forced into labor with the imperative to subdue the earth in hopes of returning to their former Edenic state, in which they had dominion over the earth. In "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative," Carolyn Merchant explains that this possibility of returning nature to its original garden-like state "functioned as ideology and legitimation for settlement of the New World, while capitalism, science, and technology provided the means of transforming the material world" (137). As I have already demonstrated, the period of discovery, conquest, and colonization marked a time in which the control over knowledge production concerning the New World and the possession of its secrets could be secured and justified through the rhetorical gendering of the American landscape. However, a "paradigm shift"²⁶ occurs in the seventeenth century, when metaphorical language is held with suspicion and a new, supposedly "more neutral," scientific language emerges to accommodate the advent and

²⁵ For a more detailed account of the effects of the Enlightenment in Brazil, see "Aspects of the Enlightenment in Brazil" by Alexander Marchant.

²⁶ In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn uses the term "paradigm" to indicate "an accepted model or pattern," which "is an object for further articulation and specification under new or more stringent conditions" (23). Kuhn's work admittedly draws from Ludwik Fleck's *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, which argues that scientific fact emerges not solely from direct observation of nature by an individual, but rather comes to light only under the auspices of a thought community and its accompanying thought style that enables its revelation (see especially the second chapter, "Epistemological Conclusions from the Established History of a Concept" 20–51). Most scientific facts, as Fleck elucidates, have their origin in "primitive" beliefs or myths: "Many very solidly established scientific facts are undeniably linked, in their development, to prescientific, somewhat hazy, related proto-ideas or pre-ideas, even though such links cannot be substantiated" (23). These understandings of the world, he argues, are true in relation to their context and, as such, he openly disagrees that somehow scientific thought is necessarily a sign of progress (47–50).

institutionalization of modern science.²⁷

As Londa Schiebinger explains in *The Mind Has No Sex?: Women in the Origins of Modern Science*, “Poetic style was identified with the feminine at the same time that it was being cast out of scientific culture. Labeling poetry ‘feminine’ heightened the sense that it was inappropriate to science and outdated” (154). In this text, Schiebinger demonstrates that, prior to the scientific revolution, science was often personified as feminine and that Western women were more active participants in knowledge production (and what we would classify today as scientific endeavors) than directly following that revolution.²⁸ Schiebinger explains the later exclusion of women from participation in modern science as parallel to the relegation of the feminine to Nature, which, in all its complexity, is reduced to an object of scientific inquiry: “The equation of the poetic and the feminine ratified the exclusion of women from science, but also set limits to the kind of language (male) scientists could use” (159). Thus, one can reasonably conclude that science (like every other discipline) and its self-imposed authority has never been apolitical or neutral.²⁹

This linguistic shift, however, is incomplete—as traces of older paradigms often co-exist with new ones—a shift that is exemplified in what Evelyn Fox Keller describes in her

²⁷ See Laqueur 115; Schiebinger 147.

²⁸ A good illustration of this shift can be found in Schiebinger’s discussion of midwives (104–112).

²⁹ Schiebinger eloquently highlights the process by which authority is gained through exclusion, and how that exclusion is justified by claiming the interestedness of the parties it excludes. This pattern can easily explain the relationship between modern science and alchemy as it can the attitude on the part of scholars who maintain that their work is apolitical while discrediting other scholars who they claim have an explicit agenda: “Feminists today continue to suffer from the assumption that their scholarship is marred by their allegiance to an explicitly political agenda. Their work is often discounted by those in positions of authority who are unaware of (or refuse to recognize) the ways in which gender structures knowledge and power. Thus while the academy continues to operate under the flag of an imperfect neutrality, feminists continue to fall victim to the very power relations they are trying to uncover and alter.” (Schiebinger 269–270)

Reflections on Gender and Science as: “the sexual language pervading much of seventeenth-century discourse on what a ‘new science’ should look like” (47). That is, although scientific tracts were to limit the use of figurative language, the debates about the “nature” of science and the “nature” of nature were still couched in gendered terms, while gender relationships, in this case the relationship of the male scientist to female nature, became more polarized. One of the most influential leaders of this discussion, as Keller maintains, is Sir Francis Bacon:

The most explicit source of the new imagery that emerges in the modern age is Francis Bacon, the man sometimes credited as the architect of modern science and perhaps is best known for his celebration of the equation between knowledge and power. Bacon envisions science, not as a sublime love affair with the “essential nature of things,” but as “a chaste and lawful marriage between Mind and Nature.” (31)

But this Baconian marriage, although purportedly distinct from the erotic desire and sexual union that permeated alchemical rhetoric, is still based on a narrative of violence: “the root image of the alchemists was coition, the conjunction of mind and matter, the merging of male and female. [...] Whereas Bacon sought domination, the alchemists asserted the necessity of allegorical, if not actual, cooperation between male and female” (48).

Bacon’s insistence on the need to create an objective, pure science (59) made the expulsion of the alchemical concept of spiritual and physical union of masculine and feminine necessary, considering that science was to be a rational enterprise and that the allegorical language of alchemical practices gave the impression of bordering on the

irrational.³⁰ Insightfully, Keller remarks that although Bacon's language does not directly intimate sexual intercourse or rape (as the other previously discussed landscape metaphors have), the desire for domination remains: "Chastity in Bacon's metaphor [...] protects the relationship of knower and known from Eros rather than from aggression" (31). Nonetheless, this enterprise is also sanctioned by God because it is an active God who converts the passive scientist "into a forceful, potent and virile agent in its relation to nature" (Keller 38). It is this element that Keller claims is eradicated from Western science as we know it today: "For most scientists today, there is only one Nature, and only one mind. The scientist himself has assumed the procreative function that Bacon reserved for God: his mind is now a single entity, both phallus and womb. However, his kinship with Bacon survives in his simultaneous appropriation and denial of the feminine" (42). This notion of masculine and feminine as mutually exclusive and complementary is later taken up by anatomists and biologists (and also social contract theorists, such as Rousseau) who begin to talk about the uniqueness of both male and female, as thus having distinct social roles. This discussion will pave the way for the notion of separate spheres and the cult of domesticity in the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, however, the paradigm of the two-sex body model emerges as the dominant one and likewise a specialized linguistic distinction between male and female sex organs can be observed. The womb is considered to be unique and incomparable to any organ in the male and the medical term "uterus" begins to take hold (Laqueur 151–152; Schiebinger 190). As a matter of fact, Schiebinger argues that:

³⁰ This is an interesting argument, considering that alchemists were supposed to abstain from sexual intercourse while performing their work. Bacon seems to be commenting rather on the public perception of alchemy, as a secretive practice whose language is highly sexualized.

The most important reform in medical views of female nature was the change in attitude toward sex organs. Since ancient times the uterus had been much maligned. Plato thought it an animal with independent powers of movement; Democritus cited the uterus as the cause of a thousand sicknesses. Galen and even (for a time) Vesalius reported that horns bud from the sides of the womb [...]. By the 1590s, however, anatomists had reversed this picture of women as “imperfect men” or monsters of nature. In 1615 Helkiah Crooke reported that many now considered Galen’s views on the similarity of sex organs “very absurd.” In her sexuality the female was now considered perfect. Crooke and others waxed eloquent on woman’s unique womb, ordained by nature to “conceive and cherish the seed.” The Parisian doctor L. Couvay, too, argued that women were to be esteemed because only they can produce children and thereby replenish the human race. (178)

But this appreciation for the uniqueness of the female body did not necessarily result in women’s liberation. In fact, her uterus became her primary organ—and the locus of her primary function, thus relegating her to the private domestic sphere. The introduction of Cartesian dualism presented a particular problem for those who sought equality among men, not equality for men and women: the immaterial mind was something universal that *all* people possessed. But, as Schiebinger brings to our attention, “Anne Conway [...] found a solution to the mind/body problem in the union of the male intellect with the female body. At the same time Conway left intact the ancient subordination of the feminine to the masculine” (175). Thus, it is through the ideology of complementarity that—despite all of the potential for Cartesian dualism to undo the now too familiar Aristotelian association of female with

matter and male with sensitive soul—sexual union once again restores humanity to its most noble state, redeeming the female momentarily from her degraded state.

The Trouble with Gender and Nation

Another key discursive moment for the history of concepts of reproduction in the Americas is that of modernity, modernism, and modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A crisis began as nations were trying to consolidate their own identities amidst massive immigration, increased urbanization, and mounting fears of degeneration caused by new technologies, modernization, and a fast-paced life. Increasingly, concerns about the level of progress and civilization of a particular country depended literally on the racial “health” of its citizens. Nationalist movements, therefore, necessarily involved, in some capacity, the “disciplining,” to use Foucault’s term, of citizens’ bodies.³¹ Yuval-Davis “differentiate[s] between three major dimensions of nationalist projects”: those “based on notions of origin,” those “based on culture”; and those “based on citizenship of states” (21). Since this project is primarily concerned with the last of these, namely citizenship, and its accompanying rights, it will be useful to clarify how I am using the terms “nation,” “state,” and “body politic,” in the upcoming chapters of this project. I use Yuval-Davis’s definition of “state,” which she cites from one of her earlier works, as “a body of institutions which are centrally organized around the intentionality of control within a given apparatus of enforcement (juridical and repressive) at its command and basis” (qtd. in Yuval-Davis 14). And, for “body politic,” I work with the *OED*’s definition, or “the nation in its corporate character,” to refer to the national body and the individual bodies that comprise it.

³¹ See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

My concept of “nation,” however, is informed by the multiple theoretical frameworks that follow. For instance, Benedict Anderson’s argument that the emergence of “print culture” enabled the consolidation of the nation as an imagined community resonates with this project, especially his statement that: “in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender” (5). Many feminists have focused on the implications for such an assertion that perhaps unwittingly captures one of the major feminist concerns regarding the nature of the relationship between gender and the nation. Indeed, through this musing, Benedict Anderson naturalizes “nationality” and “gender” by explicating the former in terms of the latter. In *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, for instance, Doris Sommer remarks on this moment in Anderson’s text: “Said inversely, everyone not only ‘has’ a nationality and gender in the same imagined way, but these imaginings constitute us as modern subjects” (40). In her book, Sommer applies Anderson’s claims to what she calls the “foundational fictions” of Latin America. She argues that tensions regarding the white man’s legitimacy in the New World and anxieties about racial mixing were resolved through the literary creation of a national romance:

Without a proper genealogy to root them in the Land, the creoles had at least to establish conjugal and then paternity rights, making a *generative* rather than a *genealogical* claim. They had to win America’s heart and body so that the fathers could found her and reproduce themselves as cultivated men. To be legitimate, their love had to be mutual; even if the fathers set the tone, the mothers had to reciprocate. (15, her emphases)

As Sommer observes in this passage, national foundation is tied to a heteronormative

narrative of reproduction within the institution of marriage. She is not, however, the only one to make this observation; other scholars such as Michel Foucault and George L. Mosse have made similar arguments, with more emphasis on the role of sexuality in this representation.³²

Weinbaum's more recent study, *Wayward Reproductions*, sheds more light on the complicated role of reproduction in nation building. Here she demonstrates how our concept of nationhood (and, by implication, modernity) is dependent upon a conceptual duo, or what she calls "the race/reproduction bind" (5). She justifies her use of this term and its theoretical centrality as follows: "The interconnected ideologies of racism, nationalism, and imperialism rest on the notion that race can be *reproduced*, and on attendant beliefs in the reproducibility of racial formations (including nations) and of social systems hierarchically organized according to notions of inherent racial superiority, inferiority, and degeneration" (4, her emphasis). Weinbaum's conclusion has become one of the underlying assumptions of this project, since the novels under examination reveal, in their content and composition, a deep-rooted national concern with women's reproduction, hence configuring the womb as an important discursive locus. For this reason, this project is also concerned with troubling what Weinbaum refers to as "the role of the maternal body in transmitting racial property across time" (21). In a way, my project builds on Weinbaum's analysis, whose time period is early twentieth century and whose geographical focus is transatlantic, by examining how discourses on reproduction operate through figurative language in late twentieth century literature in the Americas. In my analysis, "the race/reproduction bind" can be found primarily in my discussion of population control and its governing principles, especially the well-known fact that certain women's reproduction is considered to be more desirable than

³² See Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* and Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*.

others.

The relation of population control to nationalist ideologies is taken up by Nira Yuval-Davis in her comprehensive study, *Gender and Nation*. She observes that “[o]ne or more of three major discourses tend to dominate nationalist policies of population control. They are the discourse[s] I call ‘people as power’; the eugenicist discourse; and the Malthusian discourse” (29). Certainly, all of these discourses implicate some kind of intervention into women’s reproductive lives, regardless of whether or not their reproduction is encouraged or discouraged. The first discourse, “people as power,” refers to the notion that a larger population will necessarily endow a nation with more political prominence. The Malthusian discourse refers to the economic forecast provided by Thomas Malthus, who argued that at the current rate of population growth, the earth would not be able to produce enough to sustain that number of human inhabitants. The solution, as Yuval-Davis puts it, is that “[o]nly human misery—caused by poverty, famine and pestilence as well as wars and slaughters—would keep the human population size under control” (33). Of the three, the eugenics discourse is the most complicated, since it is a social movement as well as a scientific enterprise; and its concepts have more readily taken root in American cultures.³³

Francis Galton, who coined the term, attempted to make sense of what he understood as the degeneration of the British nation and proposed a solution to scientifically manage demographic forces through social control. That is, by encouraging (directly or indirectly) the mating of “fit” couples (i.e., positive eugenics) or by discouraging (directly or indirectly) the “unfit” from reproducing, the state takes stock in the racial “health” of the nation. Although

³³ Adele Clarke assesses the impact of such discourses on the formation of the reproductive sciences in the United States in *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and ‘the Problems of Sex.’*

initially rejected by the U.S., the dynamic changes in demography due to increased immigration, heightened industrialization, the entrance of women into the workplace, and population shifts from rural and agricultural areas to cities, intensified the popularity of the eugenics movement there.

Charles Davenport, a leading proponent of eugenics in the U.S., felt that particular human beings (i.e. those who he deemed “fit”) were ethically bound to intervene when societal structure became more conducive to breeding those people he deemed “unfit.” The height of sophistication or the most eugenically fit for Davenport were “largely middle to upper middle class, white, Anglo-Saxon, predominantly Protestant, and educated,” precisely those who eventually became primary supporters of the eugenics cause (Kevles 64, 47). Unlike his contemporaries in Britain, who proposed a positive solution to degeneration, or that the fit should mate with the fit, negative eugenics became Davenport’s platform. The common tactics included: educating the people against mating with the eugenically unfit, segregating the eugenically unfit from the rest of the population, establishing a selective immigration policy, and signing into law state-enforced sterilization. Daniel J. Kevles’s *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, Alexandra Minna Stern’s *Eugenic Nation: Faults & Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, and Dorothy Roberts’s *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, are just a few of the more recent studies that attest to the racist and classist legacy of eugenic policies in the United States. While eugenics is largely based on the idea of improving national stock, efforts were also made by the U.S. that, whether intentionally or not, supported eugenics programs in the Third World by promoting the use of birth control through education and financial support, testing out new reproductive technologies on Third World women, e.g.

Norplant, and performing involuntary sterilization on immigrants.

One of the few studies that addresses the tradition of eugenics policy in Latin America is Nancy Leys Stepan's *"The Hour of Eugenics": Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*. Stepan argues that "not only was Latin America oriented to Western science and medicine, and very receptive to European values and ideas; it was the only 'third world' and yet postcolonial region where eugenics was taken up in a more or less systematic way" (2). Latin American eugenics, according to Stepan, was influenced by "neo-Lamarckian notions of heredity" and took shape as "a 'preventive' eugenics directed to improving the nation by cleansing from the milieu those factors considered to be damaging to people's hereditary health" (17). Her research, which focuses primarily on the eugenics movements in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, also points to the international focus of eugenics policy and the desire for collaboration among some New World nations. Furthermore, Stepan observes that "the United States had many reasons to try to stimulate the development of eugenics in Latin America and incorporate it into the United States's sphere of eugenic influence. Not the least of these reasons was Latin American racial hybridization and immigration, which to Davenport and others seemed to threaten the New World's 'purity of race.'" (174). These attitudes, however, were not only found in men, but were also propagated by women as well. More recent research on two well-known American women writers, namely Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Gabriela Mistral, has demonstrated their acceptance and promotion of eugenic principles.³⁴

The racist, classist, and sexist discourses and policies of population control have been

³⁴ See, for instance, Weinbaum's chapter on "Writing Feminist Genealogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Reproduction of Racial Nationalism" in *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* and Licia Fiol-Matta's *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral*.

an underlying concern that motivates this project. As the following chapters will demonstrate, residues of this thought are still integral to national discourse, which is reflected and refracted in the literature of the 1980s of the Americas. Once nations are in crisis, they often revert to these ideals aimed at conserving national integrity. The novels under discussion in the next chapters provide evidence of the lasting effects of the discourses surrounding the discovery of the New World, the Enlightenment, and population control. What remains even clearer is the role of figurative language in explicating and naturalizing these discourses in terms of social ideals concerning reproduction.

CHAPTER TWO

Barren Lives, Dangerous Figures

In this chapter I demonstrate the many ways in which the politically subversive texts under examination employ rhetorical figures of the womb to highlight how barrenness is used to rationalize the social marginalization, dehumanization, and individual futility of their female protagonists. At the same time that they make the womb the center of their analysis, they also attempt to deconstruct the conceptual weight of the womb by exposing the theoretical apparatus that supports the continuance of its figuration. I analyze *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Canadian Margaret Atwood and *A hora da estrela* [*The Hour of the Star*] (1977) by Ukranian-Brazilian Clarice Lispector as case studies that map out the extreme consequences of these figurative imaginings of the womb, which ultimately determine the destinies (both personal and as part of a collective) of their female protagonists, Offred and Macabéa.³⁵ As we shall observe, it is their societies' blatant acceptance of the womb as metonymic of the woman that causes the female protagonists' (in)ability to reproduce to ultimately determine their social value. Their literary texts reveal the violence that privileging one bodily organ as representative of the body politic incurs for the female subject—physically, psychologically, and politically. Moreover, examining these

³⁵ Lispector's *A hora da estrela* was translated into English in 1986 as *The Hour of the Star* by Giovanni Pontiero; however, the translations of passages cited here are my own. Although a published translation of *A hora da estrela* exists, it has been deemed problematic by many critics. Since linguistic nuances, which are so important for reading Lispector's text, are foreclosed by the current published translation, I have decided to translate the text myself. Earl Fitz refers to *The Hour of the Star* as "problematically translated by Pontiero" in *Brazilian Narrative Traditions in a Comparative Context* (169). In addition, in "'Mãe é para isso': Gender, Writing and English-Language Translation in Clarice Lispector" Tace Hedrick argues: "que muitas traduções da obra de Clarice para o inglês distorcem sua linguagem e sua intenção, e que os conceitos feministas de tradução são necessários para identificar estas distorções" (56; "that many translations of Clarice's work into English distort her language and her intent, and that the feminist concepts of translation are necessary to identify these distortions"). The reader should also note that part of my analysis of Atwood is adapted from my forthcoming article, "Deauthorizing Anthropologies and 'Authenticating' Landscapes in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Diamela Eltit's *El cuarto mundo*."

works together serves to highlight common metaphorical understandings of the womb as, literally, the site for the propagation of the nation as concept and conception. By representing women who occupy the margins, both texts reveal how metaphors of the female body function differently based on class.

The Handmaid's Tale is a speculative fiction in which Atwood imagines Gilead, a puritanical future society, where women's labor is literally divided amongst women: "Wives" who manage the household and care for children; "Aunts" who educate young women into their roles; "Handmaids" who give birth; domestic laborers; prostitutes; and "Unwomen," non-conformist or "barren" women who are exiled to the toxic waste dump of the Colonies. The men, however, are divided based on their relative position within the military regime, and they are rewarded for their service with Wives; reserved for the most powerful Commanders are the Handmaids and the power to reproduce. Writing in times of backlash against civil rights under the neoconservative politics of Ronald Reagan as well as of the rise of "born-again evangelical Christianity,"³⁶ Atwood sets her novel and the center of Gilead in the remnants of an institution that she believes perpetuates a glorification of the Puritan past of the United States: Harvard University. Having studied at Harvard under Perry Miller, who, in her view, contributed to this romanticization of the founding "fathers" of the United States, Atwood plays with the traditional conventions of romance in which the reader identifies with

³⁶ In *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology & Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, Melinda Cooper remarks on the evangelical movement's "intense focus on the arena of sexual politics and family values" and that "[f]aced with a rising tide of new left political demands, from feminism to gay rights, the evangelical movement of the 1970s gave voice to a newfound nostalgia—one that obsessed over the perceived decline of the heterosexual, male-headed, reproductive white family" (168–169). My references to the U.S. context here are not meant to suggest that Atwood is not influenced by her own Canadian context, but are instead reflective of Atwood's own focus on the political climate of the United States in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

the protagonist and love becomes the driving force of the plot.³⁷ The account of her female protagonist, Offred, serves to document her personal experience with the Gilead regime and takes the form of an oral testimony.

Owing to increased sterility caused by environmental pollution, the ruling classes of Gilead use the Handmaids as surrogate mothers to ensure the regime's continuance and secure their positions of power. Offred formerly lived in the United States of the 1980s and later witnessed the takeover of the Gileadean regime, so her narrative shifts back and forth between her memories of her past life and her current predicament. By juxtaposing these two worlds, Atwood links the increase in seemingly random acts of violence against women that she observed in the Reagan era with the systematic rape of the Handmaids by their Commanders; eventually, she forges a connection between both regimes that employ the same ideology that blames victims for crimes committed against them.³⁸ After having sympathized with the plight of Offred, we learn that the entire narrative has been discovered, transcribed, edited, and reorganized by historians, who belittle the content and style of her writing at the same time that they use it to further their own academic careers. Here, Atwood reveals how academic discourse also has the potential, as I have mentioned elsewhere, "to render authoritative certain official documents while trivializing others who represent more marginal positions" (Sparling, forthcoming).

Atwood calls the authenticity of *The Handmaid's Tale* into question and reveals its

³⁷ For a discussion of the influence of Perry Miller on Atwood's novel, see Coral Ann Howells's *Margaret Atwood* (97). Some of these founding fathers are discussed in Chapter One under the section "New World Husbands." Here, the reader can see a link between the way that the Puritans viewed reproduction and women's roles and its resonance with the Gilead regime and, likewise, as Atwood would suggest, the neoconservative politics of the 1980s.

³⁸ See Atwood and Beaulieu, *Two Solicitudes: Conversations* (especially, 74–75) for a discussion of Atwood's observations regarding the Reagan era.

shaky construction only after the reader has nearly finished reading it, whereas Clarice Lispector's *A hora da estrela* immediately destabilizes any easy interpretation of her novel by providing the reader with a series of alternative titles for her text. Pulsating with pain and accompanied by music (or so the narrator tells us), Lispector's novel is one plagued by interruptions, disruptions, and explosions. Lispector's male narrator Rodrigo S. M. Relato reflects on his writing process at the same time that he attempts to narrate the story of Macabéa, a Northeastern Brazilian migrant woman living in Rio de Janeiro. Although *A hora da estrela* is supposed to be Macabéa's story, Rodrigo's belabored account documents his own existence as a struggling and somewhat anonymous writer, thus effectively delaying his discussion of the female protagonist, whose name we do not learn until half way through the text.

Orphaned at a young age and verbally abused by an aunt who is responsible for her care, Macabéa leaves the Northeast of Brazil and moves to Rio de Janeiro, where she lives anonymously. As a typist who is, for all intents and purposes, illiterate, Macabéa struggles to understand even the most basic of concepts, albeit commonsensical to most. Indeed, her inability to read, let alone read between the lines, becomes the source of impatience for those who come in contact with her: Macabéa's boss fires her for incompetence; Olímpico, a social climber and her pseudo-boyfriend, leaves her for a co-worker; a doctor tells her to consult a psychiatrist instead of making a real diagnosis of her poverty; a fortuneteller presages the wrong fortune for her; and, in the end, just when she begins to feel a renewed hope for the future, she is run over by a yellow Mercedes. Since the actual plot is postponed substantially and Rodrigo's attitude regarding his protagonist ranges from apathy, concern, and frustration to disgust, Macabéa's tragic existence and untimely death seem anti-climactic, in the sense

that her end becomes the logical conclusion to a life devoid of “meaning.” In this way, Lispector brings to the surface the power relations and identity politics inherent in our process of reading by mediating the authorial voice through layers of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Not simply a *relato* of a socially marginalized and poverty-stricken woman who represents an entire class of people, Lispector’s novel also makes explicit the process and the ethical implications of writing and representing the other.

Although they have very different approaches to writing the female body, Atwood and Lispector both uncover and deconstruct metonymies of the womb and expose the cultural values about reproduction and nationalism that determine their protagonists’ social desirability. Atwood’s Offred and Lispector’s Macabéa,³⁹ while living in different worlds, share comparable tribulations: the womb, the locus of their reproductive potential, gives shape to their lived experience; they are both members of a female collectivity occupying a lower class (with its accompanying racial implications) in which the women are dispensable and interchangeable; and their stories reach us through male interlocutors who have questionable relationships to the subjects whose lives they are ordering, compiling, representing, or narrating. Offred and Macabéa are marginalized and victimized because they *are* their wombs—the metonymy of womb standing in for woman is literalized in both of these cases and serves to naturalize their roles as belonging to “inferior” social groups. Offred, for instance, internalizes the metaphor that she is merely a “two-legged womb,” so much so that it alters her sense of her own bodily geography, in which the womb is the center

³⁹ In *Linking the Americas: Race, Hybrid Discourses, and the Reformulation of Feminine Identity*, Leslie Feracho, in her discussion of Nelson H. Vieira’s *Jewish Voices in Brazilian Literature: A Prophetic Discourse of Alterity*, develops Vieira’s connection of Macabéa’s name with the Maccabees, who “were the sons of the priest Matathias Maccabaeus who took turns as commander of the Jews against the king of Syria, who wanted to import the Hellenic culture in order to destroy Judaism” (97). For more discussion of Judaic elements in Lispector, see Naomi Lindstrom “The Pattern of Allusions in Clarice Lispector.”

and everything outside of it remains nebulous (95–96). In fact, under the Gileadean regime, Offred's only use value is located in her womb and the concept of the womb permeates the field of objects in her structurally limited vision, which often makes it difficult for her to maintain perspective and critical distance in relation to her situation. Although Offred is somewhat conscious of the rhetoric that shapes her lived experience, Macabéa seems to be only vaguely aware of her own existence and remains, to a large extent, oblivious to the symbolic meaning of the metaphors that pervade her life. According to Rodrigo S. M. Relato antigo,⁴⁰ Macabéa's narrator, her virginal status symbolizes her undesirability as a woman as well as her social undesirability, and her barrenness is a clear indication of her futile existence. As opposed to the situation of Offred, whose reproduction is valuable to the fictional world of Gilead, the people of Rio de Janeiro seem quite indifferent to Macabéa, let alone her capacity to procreate.

In addition, the education and social status of these female protagonists also plays a role in their level of subjection as well as in their ability to speak from a position of subalternity. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred narrates her own story, in spite of the fact that it is later compiled, ordered, and titled by the historians Wade and Pieixoto [sic], who make their patronizing attitude towards her narrative very clear and have taken the liberty to make it more coherent (393). As a reader, however, we wonder how much of her voice has been censored or lost in the transcription. Even though Offred has a voice, she is denied access to reading and writing under Gilead. Nonetheless, it is her education and middle class status before the takeover that enable her to garner some perspective on the way

⁴⁰ Marta Peixoto, in *Passionate Fictions: Gender, Narrative, and Violence in Clarice Lispector*, comments on Rodrigo's name when she writes, "given the context of cruelty, it is difficult not to think of the sadomasochism these initials sometimes signify" (91).

that women are treated in Gilead. In *A hora da estrela*, however, we learn from Rodrigo that Macabéa is not educated beyond gradeschool, as compared to Offred, who is a college graduate. Macabéa struggles in her job as a typist—Macabéa types, but only to copy someone else's words whose meaning she cannot grasp. Perhaps this, in addition to her lack of self-awareness, is what prevents Macabéa from narrating her own story—it is possible that she would not even be capable of it or it would never occur to her to do so.⁴¹ However mediated the stories of these marginalized women might be, what remains clear is the residual effect of figurative language on their actual bodies.

While Atwood and Lispector use different styles and genres to achieve their political aims, both of their novels also deal, to some extent, with representations of women who occupy Third World positions.⁴² According to Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*: “today's democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that are excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life” (180). Agamben seems to suggest here that the guarantee of the social contract is also contingent upon the social class of an individual, since Third World peoples live in the First World just as First World peoples inhabit the Third World. In

⁴¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak concludes from her case study of the practice of *sati*, as it is performed by Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, that it is impossible for the female subaltern to speak and be understood in her own terms (e.g., “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak” and “[t]he subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (307; 308)). .

⁴² Throughout this project, I will use First World and Third World not to refer necessarily to geographic regions, but to the relative economic conditions of individuals and groups of individuals; that is, when I refer to the First World, I am cognizant of the fact that First World men and women live in both First World and Third World countries. I do not base my analysis on a simple constellation in which the First World designates the United States and Canada and the Third World designates lands south of the U.S.-Mexico border; as such, I agree with Sophia A. McClennen, that we cannot understand the nature of inter-American relationships as driven solely by the desires of the “North” in relation to the “South”; but it can be described, rather, as a complex network, which allows for multiple sources, destinations, and exchanges. See McClennen, “Inter-American Literature or Imperial American Literature?” *Comparative American Studies* 3.4 (2005): 393–413.

Agamben's theory, as discussed above, bare life, or "simple natural life," which is also a life that "can be killed but not sacrificed," is opposed to the citizen who is included and protected by the social contract as "the new biopolitical body of humanity" (2; 8–9).

This transformation of the Third World into bare life also takes on other resonances in McClintock's discussion of what she calls "abject peoples" in *Imperial Leather*. In McClintock's view, it is not only economic disadvantage, but other issues of identity, such as race, gender, and sexuality, that also play a role in this process. McClintock explains, "[a]bject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on." (72). What is more, in addition to sharing with bare life an inferior social status, "abject peoples" also seem to occupy the same position of inclusive exclusion that makes modernity possible. By representing protagonists who are bare life and members of a larger collectivity of abject peoples, Atwood's and Lispector's texts serve to highlight the role of gender in making this dehumanization possible.

In the following sections, I will develop some of the ideas that I have set forth in these introductory remarks. The first section, "Biopolitical Stakes," provides a brief account of the historical moments that inform Atwood's and Lispector's representation of the female body. Atwood writes in response to the rhetoric and policy of the Reagan administration, during which, as Melinda Cooper argues, definitions of life and speculations regarding the future of the nation were centered on the unborn fetus, while human rights violations against women and minorities were commonplace and wars were waged.⁴³ Lispector grows up and

⁴³ Regarding the evangelical influence in politics during this time period, Cooper adds, "[u]nder Reagan the rhetoric of the pro-life movement, with its rewriting of the Declaration of Independence as a right-to-life tract, entered into the mainstream of American political discourse" (171). For a more extensive discussion of the way in which biological science, neoliberalism, and what she calls "the culture of life" intersect in the Reagan era,

writes during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985), which was also supported by the U.S. government, under which, among other human rights violations, citizens were tortured and disappeared at the same time that the government enacted a strict policy of censorship against anything that would place the regime into question.⁴⁴ In order to discuss how the representation of women’s reproduction in these two contexts reveals something about the state of the nation, I read Agamben’s theory of bare life alongside Grosz’s theory of corporeal feminism to provide insight into what I am calling *the feminization of bare life*. In addition, I argue that Atwood’s and Lispector’s female protagonists manifest similar relations to language and potentiality that figure prominently in Agamben’s notion of bare life.

“Bodily Figures,” the subsequent section, develops a theory of how the womb metaphors and metonymies function ontologically and become the controlling metaphorical and metonymical concepts in the two literary texts under examination here. Moreover, this section elucidates how these authors posit the real consequences of perpetuating these rhetorical figures of the womb.⁴⁵ By engaging with other ways of speaking figuratively about the female body, Atwood and Lispector demonstrate the ways in which a traditional interpretation of the female body permeates human thought and experience at the same time

see Cooper. About “Reagan-era science policy,” she writes, it was “a policy that combined virulent antienvironmentalism and cutbacks in redistributive public health with massive federal investment in the new life science technologies and their commercialization” (18).

⁴⁴ On censorship during the military dictatorship in Brazil, see Tania Pellegrini and Sabrina E. Wilson, “Brazil in the 1970s: Literature and Politics.” For an overview of human rights violations by Brazilian government, see Catholic Church, Archdiocese of São Paulo (Brazil), *Torture in Brazil: A Shocking Report On the Pervasive Use of Torture By Brazilian Military Governments, 1964–1979*. This document was originally published as *Brasil, nunca mais*.

⁴⁵ Lakoff and Johnson’s book, *Metaphors We Live By*, which I discuss in more detail in the Introductory Chapter, makes precisely the argument that our thoughts are structured by metaphorical concepts, which are shaped both by our individual and cultural embodied experiences.

that the authors allow for alternative ways of reading bodily geography. “Bodily Figures” is divided into subsections—“The Sexual Life of Plants,” “Life’s Blood,” “Fetal Positionings and Ovoid Symbolism,” and “Space Travel and the Darkness Within”—that deal specifically with these linguistic interventions. The final section, “Unreliable Witnesses,” examines the metafictional structures inherent in both Atwood’s and Lispector’s texts and how these structures trouble notions of authenticity, truth, the limits of language to capture the “other,” and the possibility for unmediated representation. In addition, this section also reveals how the stories of the female protagonists are told through male interlocutors, a fact that makes it difficult to establish a clear genre for their narratives and also functions rhetorically to deconstruct womb metaphors and metonymies.

Biopolitical Stakes

Although fictionalized and highly experimental in their presentation, the consequences that Atwood and Lispector imagine for their female protagonists are not that far off from the reality of women contemporary to them. Through defamiliarization, Atwood and Lispector force us to consider how womb ideologies serve to justify the subordinate position of women. I argue that their use of mixed genre and unstable narrative, in effect, enables the reader to read their texts as “other” and reflect on his/her own, often unstated, cultural values.

Contrary to the critics who attempt to label Atwood’s fiction as science fiction, Atwood asserts that her texts are instead speculative fiction, “I said I liked to make the distinction between science fiction proper—for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t

go—and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less at hand, and takes place on Planet Earth” (*PMLA* 513). Furthermore, as Atwood remarks in *Two Solitudes*, a collection of published conversations between her and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, “This novel is closely based on history and reality. The details are all real. That is to say, there have been times when men did things exactly that way. The rules of dress. The kidnapped children—in Argentina, for example. And during the war, the Germans stole blond Polish children to raise them as good Aryans. This concern is very, very old” (75–76). Atwood continues to relate her novel to the history of slavery, women’s limited access to education and political rights, environmental crises, and more specifically to the rhetoric of former President Ronald Reagan and the fundamentalist Christian Right, both of which echo many of the basic Puritan tenets of the founding fathers. According to Shirley Neuman, “Atwood kept a file of these inroads on human rights and women’s freedom, which she took with her on book tours as evidence for her insistence that she had ‘invented nothing’ in *Gilead*” (859).⁴⁶

Since the action of the novel is situated in what was formerly the United States⁴⁷—with its headquarters at what once was Harvard University—*The Handmaid’s Tale* emerges amidst the overriding conservative tone of the Reagan era, the backlash of so-called post-feminism, the marked increase in domestic violence, and the centering of “[t]he debate about

⁴⁶ Shirley Neuman documents briefly the contents of this file in “‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (859), as does Rosemary Sullivan in “What If? Writing *The Handmaid’s Tale*.”

⁴⁷ As Ryan Edwardson points out, the policies carried out by U.S. institutions and an increasing economic dependence on the U.S. as an ally had a negative effect on the way that Canadians conceived of their own future. “The mere existence of the United States,” he writes, “was deemed a threat to Canadian livelihood, social fabric and the ability of its institutions to maintain a sovereign and distinctive state. Canada, according to Atwood and Grant, was being turned into an ‘exploited colony’ and a ‘satellite of the empire’” (139).

freedom of choice for women” on “the court rulings about the rights and freedom of the fetus” (Neuman 860). As such, if we consider the political context and social reality of the 1980s in light of Atwood’s speculative fiction, the comparison is disquieting, especially for women, since the Reagan administration conveyed similar ideas about the use-value of women as does the Gilead regime. As Neuman argues, “Offred, in short, is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women’s rights that gathered force in the early 1980s” (858). Although many critics, especially her contemporaries, have traditionally characterized Atwood’s feminism as problematic because they read *The Handmaid’s Tale* as valorizing the romance plot, they often forget the role of metafiction or leave it unexamined in their analyses.⁴⁸

While Atwood’s narrative confronts a backlash against second-wave feminism in the United States, the feminist aspects of Lispector’s textual production do not necessarily establish her alliance with a particular national feminist movement in Brazil, even though the 1970s was what Earl Fitz calls “the decade in which a new women’s literature emerged in Brazil and became, in the years following Lispector’s death (1977), a force for change—

⁴⁸ For further analysis of Atwood’s feminism, see Neuman. Also, for a summary of the critiques and more in depth analyses of the romance plot in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, see Sandra Tomc’s “The Missionary Position” and Sarah R. Morrison’s “Mothering Desire: The Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s *The Madness of a Seduced Woman*.” Sandra Tomc, for instance, reads Atwood as reinforcing conservative values: “[a]lthough *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not generally regarded as part of Atwood’s nationalist canon, its understanding of female independence is nevertheless determined by Atwood’s sexually coded understanding of the relation between Canada and America. In this, Atwood’s only full-scale parody of American society, what concerns her is not a feminist politics of emancipation, but the nationalist politics of self-protective autonomy, an autonomy which, as I will argue, eventually translates into an advocacy of traditional femininity” (82). Morrison, on the other hand, maintains that “her novels are often viewed as feminist metafiction that call particular attention to the restrictive patterns and conventions of literary genres that, viewed negatively, have bound woman as writer and woman as fictional creation and, viewed positively, have nonetheless helped to define a women’s tradition” and considers Atwood’s inclusion of the romance plot as “parodic” at the same time that she recognizes it as still performing an important literary function (317; 321). I align myself more with Morrison in this regard.

literarily, socially, and politically” (*Brazilian Narrative Traditions in a Comparative Context* 89). Nonetheless, Lispector is taken up by feminist poststructuralist Hélène Cixous as the example *par excellence* of her concept of *écriture féminine*⁴⁹ and at the same time criticized by some scholars for not having been overtly political or socially aware because of her highly poetic (and, to some, inaccessible) style of writing. This critique, however, assumes, mistakenly, that somehow complex language, in terms of form and content, cannot be politically or socially engaged. As Earl Fitz elucidates, “it is her obsession with the ethical and speculative implications inherent in the human dilemma that, in general, determines the peculiar form her feminist inclinations take in her fiction” (“Freedom and Self-Realization” 55).

In addition, it is important to recognize that Lispector writes in spite of the censorship of a *ditadura militar* (1964–1985), which constitutes a political act in itself.⁵⁰ But her political motives in writing *A hora da estrela* seem to be connected more with the real economic conditions of Northeastern Brazilians. According to Leslie Feracho,

Historically, particularly since the 1920s, Brazil has seen large migration patterns of rural citizens of the northeast territories moving to the more

⁴⁹ In the introduction to Cixous’s *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, Verena Andermatt Conley summarizes very succinctly Cixous’s theory of *écriture féminine*: “a working term referring less to a writing practiced mainly by women than, in a broader logical category, to textual ways of spending. It suggests a writing, based on an encounter with another—be it a body, a piece of writing, a social dilemma, a moment of passion—that leads to an undoing of the hierarchies and oppositions that determine the limits of most conscious life. By virtue of its poetry that comes from the rapport of the body to the social world, *écriture féminine* disrupts social practices in the ways it both discerns and literally rewrites them” (vii–viii).

⁵⁰ As Fitz reminds us, “When considering Brazilian fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, we cannot overestimate the significance of the dictatorship that began in April 1964 and stayed in power for twenty-one years. [...] The authors who came of age under the *ditadura militar*, for example, found the writing of fiction itself to be a subversive act that could have serious, even fatal, consequences” (*Brazilian Narrative Traditions* 133). Incidentally, it is “with the support of the United States government and the CIA, [that] President João Goulart was deposed by the military” (Fitz, *Brazilian Narrative Traditions* 22).

industrialized south (especially cities like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro) in search of work and ultimately a better life. Despite their desires for the Brazilian dream, many faced obstacles of unemployment (in part because of too few jobs for such a great demand), lack of any or adequate housing, and experiences of discrimination. The continuous pattern has been documented by not only historians and sociologists alike but by writers [...]. (8)

In my observation, her novel inherently does the work of critiquing the eugenicist logic and rhetoric that blames the poor for their own poverty and lack of education by considering these socially formed conditions to be inheritable traits. Largely concerned with the role that language (especially when our access to it is controlled or restricted) plays in our understanding and experience of “reality,” which is also a primary concern of this project, Lispector’s writing often functions to deconstruct words, concepts, metaphors, narrative structures, and genres.⁵¹ *A hora da estrela* is a perfect example of the politically and socially engaged use of language, in which Lispector simultaneously deals with the long standing class-based and racially inflected prejudices and stereotypes that plague poor Northeastern Brazilians, who are forced to migrate south to find work, and explores the ethical implications and linguistic limitations of narrating this experience belonging to an “other.”

⁵¹ Due to this emphasis on language, she has often been allied with poststructuralist, postmodernist, modernist (of the Brazilian sort), and existentialist thought. See, for example, Earl Fitz, “The Passion of Logo(centrism), or, the Deconstructionist Universe of Clarice Lispector,” “A Discourse of Silence: The Postmodernism of Clarice Lispector,” *Sexuality and being in the poststructuralist universe of Clarice Lispector: the différance of desire*, and the Twayne’s World Author Series on Clarice Lispector. See also Anna Klobucka, who refers to *A hora da estrela* as “a brilliant enactment of the paradox of postmodern ambivalent critique, self-consciously engaging the exercise of (textual) power, even as it unmask its own guilt-ridden complicity” (59). What is more, Tace Hedrick argues that faulty translation of Lispector’s *A hora da estrela*, has lead to a misinterpretation of Lispector as “a flawed existentialist writer,” especially considering that her primary focus is often the female body, with which existentialist philosophy held a problematic relation (“Mae é para isso,” 65–66).

Indeed, the female protagonists that Atwood and Lispector choose to make the center of their literary works and the writing style and genre that they employ reflect the difficulties inherent in narrating the other. For instance, the “Historical Notes” appended to *The Handmaid’s Tale* destabilize Offred’s already shaky narrative, by revealing the process of its reconstruction. Likewise, Rodrigo proves to be a somewhat unreliable narrator, since his real intention in writing Macabéa’s story seems to be more self-serving than emerging out of compassion for his protagonist.⁵² Because of the complicated structures of these novels, it becomes difficult to categorize them in terms of subgenres. Atwood engages with the genres of speculative fiction, historical metafiction, and romance (in addition to what would later be called *testimonio*) in order to challenge traditional historical epistemologies and to forecast the consequences of idealizing the Puritan past of the United States and its “family values.”⁵³ On the other hand, Lispector invokes the rhetoric associated with martyrdom, the conventions of the popular regionalist Brazilian novel,⁵⁴ and anthropology, as well as the tradition of *testemunho* (as established by Maria Carolina de Jesus with *Bitita’s Diary* in Brazil) in order to highlight the inevitable fate of Macabéa, who embodies bare life, or, as

⁵² Cynthia A. Sloan refers to Rodrigo as “embod[ying] the voice and structures of patriarchal society and, by extension, phallogocentric language and writing practices” (91), although I would argue that Sloan gives Rodrigo too much credit and power that Lispector’s narrative suggests he may not have.

⁵³ See Sandra Tomc’s “The Missionary Position’: Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” for a brief documentation of Atwood’s engagement with Puritan principles and American history. In addition, Atwood’s texts have also been read more specifically as dystopia or satire. For an in-depth discussion of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* as dystopia see Shirley Neuman’s “‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*” and Dunja M. Mohr’s *Worlds Apart?: Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*. For an analysis of the role of satire, specifically Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, see Karen Stein, “Margaret Atwood’s Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid’s Tale*.”

⁵⁴ Lucia Helena in “A Problematização da Narrativa em Clarice Lispector,” situates *A hora da estrela* as challenging positivism and Naturalism “[p]ela paródia, pela ironia e pela alusão, Lispector busca recuperar outras formas narrativas, uma delas também é cara ao Nordeste, o cordel” (1169; “through parody, irony, and allusion, Lispector searches to recuperate other narrative forms, one of them is the face of the Northeast, the *cordel*”).

discussed above, what Giorgio Agamben describes as “an unsacrificeable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed” (*Homo Sacer* 115). Lispector’s eccentric “lyrical narrative,” as Earl Fitz describes it, also disrupts any romanticization of the *sertanejo* (from the country/backlands) at the same time that it is disrupted by onomatopoeic “explosions,” such as the beat of the drums, and Rodrigo’s textual asides that function to destabilize and alienate the reader (“Freedom and Self Realization” 54).⁵⁵ In both cases, Atwood’s and Lispector’s texts resist any easy appropriation of the “otherness” at the same time that they elicit some kind of ethical or political response on the part of the reader.

One of the principal aims of this chapter is to describe the way in which the female body’s potentiality for reproduction unsettles the notions of “sovereign power” and “bare life” set forth by Agamben. In addition to its exclusion from the social contract, an absence whose presence also makes the social contract possible, it is bare life’s potential not to be that also marks its existence.

Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it [...] other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself. (*Homo Sacer* 46)

Agamben’s discussion of potentiality here relates to our female protagonists, who struggle to

⁵⁵ In “Freedom and Self-Realization: Feminist Characterization in the Fiction of Clarice Lispector,” Earl Fitz claims that Lispector “utilizes the framework of narrative to convey a story, but relies upon the emotive power of poetry to bring it to life on various levels of meaning and significance” (54). In this same article, Fitz also remarks that the form and the content are crucial to understanding Lispector’s work, especially since “Lispector’s unique interpretation of feminism has a direct impact not merely on the formation of her characters, but on the very nature of the novel or short story in which they appear” (52).

deny their potentiality not to be and gain sovereignty over their lives. Although Offred and Macabéa have somewhat different relations to their position as bare life, Offred seems to be aware of “the *political techniques* (such as the science of the police) with which the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center” and she seems to be somewhat complicit in “the *technologies of the self*” by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself [or herself] to his [or her] own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power,” whereas Macabéa does not imagine herself as part of this ideological system so artfully exposed by Michel Foucault (*Homo Sacer* 5).⁵⁶ However, Macabéa, whom McClintock would designate an abject person, seemingly occupies an “anachronistic space,”⁵⁷ and does not call her own existence into question until it is about to come to its conclusion. The fact that Macabéa always interprets language in its very literal sense not only suggests her internalization of the rhetorical figures that pervade her life, but also signifies her inability to understand their ontological implications, which determine her future. For Offred, on the other hand, her potential banishment from the social contract is directly related to her ability to convert her potentiality for reproduction into an actuality. In fact, Offred is held directly responsible for her failure to reproduce, and therefore for her own transformation into bare life according to the rhetoric of the Gilead regime: “It’s only women who can’t [reproduce], who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 264).

⁵⁶ I use Agamben’s summary of Foucault’s theoretical framework here because I think he captures the spirit of Foucault’s work well.

⁵⁷ In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock describes how native peoples, women, and other groups that threaten to undo the legitimacy of conquest and imperial power, and by extension modernity, are banished to an “anachronistic space,” that is, an uncivilized, pre-historic space that perpetuates the ongoing stereotype of America as new and Europeans as her “true” discoverers (30).

Bodily Figures

In both Atwood's and Lispector's texts the womb becomes at once the "controlling metaphor" and the "controlling metonymy," concepts which are so pervasive in the narrative that they color the other figures in the texts. Even though they do so in very indirect ways, these authors use metaphors—plants (especially flowers), blood, eggs, the fetus, empty spaces, and pregnancy—that refer back to the womb. Because the womb is so central to the definitions of the female protagonists of these works, the observations made about their bodies, their environments, their spatial relations and their futures are all tainted by the way the womb is discursively figured in these narratives.⁵⁸ *The Handmaid's Tale* and *A hora da estrela* also converge in terms of the centrality of these female protagonists to their male interlocutors. In the same way that Gilead relies on the Handmaids for the perpetuation of the regime while the historians who write about Gilead use Offred's narrative for their own academic gain, Rodrigo needs Macabéa for his own survival and self-fulfillment. However, this centrality is displaced by the essentialist rhetoric that they use to undermine the authority of these female characters. In order to examine these rhetorical figures more effectively, I have divided them into the following categories of metaphors: plant, blood, fetal and ovoid, and spatial. Each of these metaphors serves to re-inscribe the concept of the womb as an empty space, to represent the futility of the female body that does not reproduce, and to

⁵⁸ Tace Hedrick argues that "[Lispector's] writing *is* in point of fact essentialist. That is, Lispector's writings privilege woman's reproductive capacity, her fecundity, as the immutable essence of what it means to be female" and that "Lispector's 'question of the womb' is also [...] the question of the source or origin, and it is finally in the womb where Lispector locates the originary essence of being female" ("Mother, Blessed Be You," 41; 42). However, as I will argue, Lispector's use of essentialist rhetoric and the centrality of the womb in her narrative does not necessarily mean that she promotes essentialism in the case of *A hora da estrela*. See also, for instance, the debate over Atwood's use of the romance plot as indicative of her desire to reinforce traditional gender roles. In both cases I argue that Atwood and Lispector are doing something much more complicated with the womb, although their novels may lend themselves to the aforementioned interpretations.

justify the marginality of the female subject. But before moving on to these complementary metaphors/metonymies, I will review the major controlling metaphors and metonymies of the womb in each novel.

The Handmaid's Tale documents the struggle of a female protagonist to assert her own subjectivity in a regime where a metonymical interpretation of the womb as representative of the female body has been taken to its literal extreme. As a result, the Handmaids, a group of women to whom this rhetoric applies most directly, begin to experience their own embodiment as structured and organized like a womb. We first learn about the Gilead regime, a projection of the future of the United States based on the Puritan principles of its founding, through the eyes of a Handmaid, "Offred," whose newly given name signifies that she is now a possession "of" Commander "Fred," one of the elite members of the Gileadean government. We quickly learn that Offred is a member of the first generation of a class of Handmaids who act as surrogate vessels for Gilead's progeny and whose bodies are scripted for the sole act of conception. Separated from their friends, families, and children, the first generation of Handmaids can still remember their former lives and their memories pose a major threat to the regime's legitimacy. Accordingly, the new society is designed to make them forget by denying them access to the written word in all forms and preventing their communication with those who would give substance to their memories. Gilead responds directly to the threat of the extinction of its moral and political elite—i.e., the rising infertility caused by environmental pollution—by forcing those who are deemed morally unfit but have demonstrated reproductive potential to be surrogates, or Handmaids, a move which they justify through biblical precedent. The Handmaids, stripped of their roles as mothers, must surrender any of their offspring to the possession of those who

ceremoniously rape them, i.e., the Commanders and their Wives. Offred guards her former name as a powerful secret—endowing her self with the sole authority to narrate her story. Powerfully, she recounts the erasure of her existence by the oppressive regime that, at the same time, relies on and demands the presence of her body for its continuance.

Thus, in this novel, the womb becomes the controlling metonymy *and* the controlling metaphor of the female protagonist's existence: the womb stands in for the woman, and this metonymy, in turn, becomes a metaphor for the Handmaid's social roles. Offred feels the effects of this discourse in her ambivalence regarding her position as a Handmaid when she admits, "nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for" (121). The pre-scripted responses for her interactions with other women, especially other Handmaids, leaves little room for opinion or conversation that does not remind her of her "choice" to sacrifice control over her body for the sake of the nation, obscuring the fact that her choices, themselves, were limited. Responses such as "Blessed be the fruit," "May the Lord open," "Praise be," "Which I receive with Joy" express the "desire" of the Handmaids to be made into vessels, willing accomplices in their own rape (25, 26). Indeed, as Offred observes, Handmaids are to perform no other function than breeding—desire, pleasure, and love are out of the question—"[w]e are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (176). In addition, Offred's structurally imposed myopia, which limits her visual and perceptive capacities, enables her to focus on the minutest of detail regarding her daily existence. As such, her experiences with ordinary objects become extraordinary moments for her deconstruction of signs. At the same token, these signs take on new meanings under the Gileadean regime that threaten to forcibly obliterate all other resonances, in an attempt to permanently fix signifiers to the signified.

The womb metaphors in *A hora da estrela* also become metaphors that structure the protagonist's life. For instance, Macabéa's bare life is established by Rodrigo, who concludes from the very beginning that she is not quite a woman by privileging the womb as the site of sexual difference. Rodrigo makes this claim because she is an infertile virgin—he interprets her virginity and her infertility as evidence of her undesirability. But, as is the case with unreliable narrators, we do not always get the full story. In fact, Rodrigo also hints at his own prejudices, which he brings to the text, when he claims to have glimpsed her face, or the face of a poor Northeastern Brazilian girl like her, and was able to detect “o sentimento de perdição” (12; “the feeling of disgrace”), which compelled him to write his story. But Macabéa's story, as Rodrigo makes clear from the very beginning and in a very patronizing tone, could be any other girl's story, that is, if she happened to be from Northeastern Brazil, economically disadvantaged, and of the same indigenous racial stock. Moreover, he writes that these girls are, for him, anonymous and interchangeable: “Não notam sequer que são facilmente substituíveis e que tanto existiriam como não existiriam. Poucas se queixam e ao que eu saiba nenhuma reclama por não saber a quem. Esse quem será que existe?” (14; “They don't notice that they are easily substituted for one another and that they would exist as much as they would not exist. Few complain and, as far as I know, no one protests for not knowing to whom to protest. Could it be that this ‘whoever’ exists?”). It is precisely this judgment and Rodrigo's mixed assessment of the “use value” of the protagonist (since he also needs her story to confirm his identity as a writer and, eventually, relies on her existence for the continuance of his own) that suggests that Rodrigo might have selfish and self-sustaining motives for writing.

Nevertheless, the long collective history of the labor migration of Northeastern

Brazilians to the more metropolitan south, and the discrimination that they have faced, remains unexamined by Rodrigo while he uses Macabéa's wilted ovaries and decaying body in order to naturalize her status as bare life. What is more, in Rodrigo's account, Macabéa's futile existence lies not only in her infertile and undesirable body, but also in her incapacity to understand metaphorical and metonymical references, or language beyond the literal.⁵⁹ In fact, Macabéa's practical illiteracy (for all intents and purposes) makes her job as a typist ironic—she seems condemned to copy and repeat that which is dictated to her, without fully understanding the multivalence of its significance. Although she does not openly ponder her existence, which Rodrigo interprets as a sign of her lack of self-awareness, Macabéa's questions are often attempts to understand, at its most basic level, the word. Her approach to language reflects that Macabéa often accepts metaphor and metonymy as literally true statements. For instance, Macabéa imagines her interior as containing an actual flower, which indicates her (possibly unconscious) acceptance of the metaphor of the flower to represent sexual organs. Although she remains unaware of Rodrigo's role in determining her biology, this does not mean that she remains unaffected by his characterization.⁶⁰ Rather, Macabéa's destiny is predetermined for her by the culturally constructed womb metaphors and metonymies that transform her into bare life, which makes her violent end inevitable.

Grosz sheds light on this crucial interplay between culture and the body, which also

⁵⁹ Sloan describes Macabéa's relation to language as follows: "Macabéa, in contrast, is caught up in a process of trying to apprehend reality, not through intellect, but through intuition. Instead of the word searching for the 'not-word' (as in the case of the narrator), her experience is comprised of the 'not-word' in search of a reality, often hinted at by magical-sounding words" (96).

⁶⁰ Sloan also remarks on the violent effects that language has for Macabéa, "Unable to see the destructive energy of those who wish to control her through language, Macabéa nonetheless intuits that words are powerful enough to do away with her. Early in the story we find her lying in bed one evening frightened by the silence of the night. She felt as if the night were about to pronounce 'uma palavra fatal'" (97).

could provide some insight into the way that Clarice Lispector (via Rodrigo) writes her female protagonist Macabéa. Although, as Grosz recognizes, the body cannot merely be understood as pure “natural life” or reduced to a mere social construct, she also claims for the body an “organic openness to cultural completion” and “a certain resistance of the flesh, a residue of its materiality left untouched by the body’s textualization” (*Volatile Bodies* xi, 118). In this way, she develops a more explicit relation between culture and the ontological concerns of the body:

I will deny that there is the “real,” material body on the one hand and its various cultural and historical representations on the other. It is my claim [...] that these representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce them as such. [...] As an essential internal condition of human bodies, a consequence of perhaps their organic openness to cultural completion, bodies must take the social order as their productive nucleus. Part of their own “nature” is an organic or ontological “incompleteness” or lack of finality, an amenability to social completion, social ordering and organization. (*Volatile Bodies* x–xi)

While Grosz recognizes the effects of social constructs on the body and the body’s influence in social conceptions of the body, she argues that there is a limit to these effects. Conversely, “there is another limit imposed by the inability of particular texts or particular languages to say or articulate everything” about the body (*Volatile Bodies* 118). Therefore, both the limits of language and the “resistance of the flesh” enable the opening of a space for challenging both metaphorical and metonymical conceptualizations of the body. It is with Grosz’s insight that we might be able to interpret more accurately the significance of Macabéa’s death in the

final scene of the novel, which suggests a last resistance of Macabéa's flesh.

A. The Sexual Life of Plants

In both of these novels plants, especially flowers, emblemize the sexual organs of the female protagonists and serve to justify and naturalize their subjection. In the case of Atwood, plants carry a special resonance, in addition to their sexual connotation, with the rhetoric of the Puritans, who imagined themselves as having been transplanted to the New World by God for the purpose of creating God's Plantation, thus justifying their displacement of the Native Americans. Within this logic, tilling the land and planting the seed are perceived as the roles of husbands, while the feminized land remains passive and awaits cultivation. In Lispector's novel, however, the narrator references plants not so much to refer to a national history as to naturalize Macabéa's social position by making her a seemingly insignificant piece of the background, since, like a blade of grass, she is not readily visible, valued, or contemplated as an individual.

Although Atwood and Lispector use these flower metaphors to highlight and critique their female protagonists' social impotence, they also serve to perpetuate very traditional understandings of the female body as lack, and, in some cases, as impotent. Flowers often pervade the thoughts of the female protagonists, especially in terms of their own self-conception. Offred, for instance, thinks that her contemplation of the flowers in Serena's garden is evidence of her desire to focus on the trivial and the beautiful. She shares with the reader, "I've tried to put some of the good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?" (344). At this point in the narrative, the reader can no longer ignore the metaphorical significance of flowers based on this misleading assertion by

Offred, especially given Offred's myopic obsession with the images of flowers. Indeed, Offred's statement could be interpreted in multiple ways based on the context of the novel: first, the triviality of the flowers represents the dispensability of the Handmaids, who are rendered useless once their blooms wilt; second, it is in this glimpse of the beauty of the flower that Offred is able to contemplate the meaning of life, which is more fragile than ever; and third, it is also Offred's own flower, or reproductive organs, that keep her alive.

We know, for instance, that after her secret meetings with the Commander, Offred comes to grips with the dehumanizing implications of the flower metaphor during the Ceremony, especially as it is applied to human relationships. She writes, "[t]his act of copulation, fertilization perhaps, which should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower, had become for me indecorous, an embarrassing breach of propriety, which it hadn't been before. He was no longer a thing to me. That was the problem" (207). Offred finds this act indecent, and rightfully so, since she has developed a relationship with her Commander, however power-stricken it might be. In this way, she experiences first-hand what often happens when these metaphors of the body are taken literally—namely, dehumanization, or her transformation into bare life.

Offred also makes the connection between flowers and fertility⁶¹ in regards to Serena, the Commander's post-menopausal wife: "Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere" (104–

⁶¹ According to Wilson, in the Bible, flowers also represent "menstruation" (172).

105). Nonetheless, Serena is able to enact her revenge, albeit symbolically, through the maintenance of her own garden and literally through the appropriation of any child that Offred might bear. Offred is reminded of the power that Serena has over her when she watches Serena snip off the seedpods of the plants in her garden: “She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seedpods is supposed to make the bulb store energy” (195). It is clear from Offred’s reaction that she would like to have that kind of power over her own body: “What I coveted was the shears” (196). Maybe this is why Offred attempts to reclaim the possession of her own body through her first transgressive act: stealing a flower from the sitting room (126–127). Motivated by her desire to be valued and to possess, she transcends her own objectification by transferring her desires onto another object. Perhaps, Offred’s reaching out to grasp the already drying daffodils in the sitting room is also an attempt to recuperate her own desire, or at least the remnants of it.

Offred’s corporalization of the flowers indicates that when she is talking about the flowers, she is also talking about bodies, perhaps even her own. In one of the first mentions of the flowers in Serena’s garden, Offred focuses in on the red tulips: “The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there” (16). At this moment, the redness resembles the blood from a bodily wound, although Offred does try to distinguish between the redness of blood and the redness of flowers. Later on in the narrative, the flowers take on new resonances with Offred’s own body: “The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn

themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards” (59–60). Here, Offred does not understand why the tulips, like the Handmaids, insist on living, given their futile emptiness, nor does she understand why they insist on opening themselves up for so long to no avail. This reproductive futility of the tulips is contrasted with the “mattress stains” of “old love” that Offred recalls, stains that remind her of “dried flower petals” (68). However, in Offred’s memory, these stains did not necessarily represent reproductive failure, but rather the culmination of desire; although, under the current regime, her view of these stains might take on a new meaning—that of a wasted opportunity for pregnancy.

In contrast to the overabundance of flowers in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the flowers in *A hora da estrela* are sparse and wilted. In fact, Rodrigo announces to the reader that Macabéa is a flower that has never bloomed and remains underground: “Ela era subterrânea e *nunca tinha tido floração*. Minto: ela era *capim*” (31; “She was subterranean and *had never really flowered*. I lie: she was *wild grass*”). However, Rodrigo changes his mind directly after his first assertion and claims that actually Macabéa belongs to a different species—unlike normal women, who are known to flower, she is actually grass, and her flowering is not readily apparent, especially given that grass reproduces asexually as well as sexually. This connection between Macabéa and grass takes on new significance when she muses over a blade of grass growing out of the gutter where her body rests after being hit and run over by a yellow Mercedes. It is this blade of grass that leads Macabéa to contemplate her own existence:

Ficou inerte no canto da rua, talvez descansando das emoções, e viu entre as pedras do esgoto o ralo capim de um verde da mais tenra esperança humana. Hoje, pensou ela, hoje é o primeiro dia de minha vida: nasci.

(A verdade é sempre um contacto interior inexplicável. A verdade é irreconhecível. Portanto não existe? Não, para os homens não existe.)

Voltando ao capim. Para tal exígua criatura chamada Macabéa a grande natureza se dava apenas em forma de capim de sarjeta—se lhe fosse dado o mar grosso ou picos altos de montanhas, sua alma, ainda mais virgem que o corpo, se alucinaria e explodir-se-lhe-ia o organismo, braços pra cá, intestino para lá, cabeça rolando redonda e oca a seus pés—como se desmonta um manequim de cera. (80)

[Macabéa lay inert in the corner of the street, perhaps emotionally tired, and she saw amongst the stones surrounding the sewage drain a blade of grass of a green of the most tender human hope. Today, she thought, today is the first day of my life: I was born.

(Truth is always an inexplicable inner contact. Truth is unrecognizable. Therefore it doesn't exist? No, for men it doesn't exist.)

Returning to the grass. For such a small creature called Macabéa, the greatness of nature presented itself only in the form of grass in the gutter—as if the mighty sea or tall mountain peaks were given to her, her soul, still more virginal than her body, would hallucinate and her organism would explode, arms here, intestines there, round and hollow head rolling at her feet—like you would dismantle a wax mannequin.]

In biblical terms, grass, according to Wilson, is in some instances “a type of the weakness, instability and transient character of the ungodly, who soon die and are forgotten” (202). Consequently, if we take into consideration this biblical symbolism, Macabéa's

characterization as grass makes sense, especially in terms of her social position as bare life and an abject person.

Although the grass becomes significant at the story's end, throughout the narrative Macabéa imagines her own interiority as a flower. However, this flower, although holding much significance, considering that a flower is a symbol of virginity,⁶² is for Macabéa literal: “É que tinha em si mesma uma certa flor fresca. Pois, por estranho que pareça, ela acreditava” (39; “She had within herself a certain fresh flower. Since, as strange as it might seem, she believed.”). This interpretation is consistent with the literal way in which Macabéa reads and interprets the world and how she internalizes that which is supposed to be a metaphor but becomes her truth. Here we can observe the transition between a simile (e.g., Macabéa's interior is like flower) to an ontological metaphor (Macabéa's interior *is* a flower). In this moment, the metaphorical concept does not function in Macabéa's mind the way it normally would; that is, Macabéa's literal interpretation overrides any symbolic resonances of the flower. Even though she remains largely unaware of them, this fact does not mean that the metaphorical meanings do not impact and pervade her life.

For the narrator, however, the living flower (in stark contrast with her wilted eggs and ovaries) represents her genitalia, and by extension her sexuality. When Rodrigo contemplates

⁶² In *Systema Naturae* (1735), Carolus Linnaeus described plant reproduction and classification in terms of common understandings of human sexuality. Schiebinger explains the politics behind this system of classification in *The Mind Has No Sex?: Women in the Origins of Modern Science*: “And at the same time that Linnaeus emphasized the sexuality of plants, he made it palatable to young minds by assimilating plant life to European mores: through rich metaphors Linnaeus suggested that plants joined in lawful marriages whereby stamens and pistils met as brides and grooms on verdant nuptial beds” (242); According to the *OED*, a flower is “[a] complex organ in phenogamous plants, comprising a group of reproductive organs and its envelopes. In the popular use of the word, the characteristic feature of a *flower* is the ‘coloured’ (not green) envelope, and the term is not applied where this is absent, unless there is obvious resemblance in appearance to what is ordinarily so called.” In another definition, now obsolete, flowers have been used as a term for describing “The menstrual discharge; the menses,” which again has its connections with blood and sexuality.

Macabéa's body, he compares her sex to a sunflower⁶³ within the tomb that he claims is her body: "Penso no sexo de Macabéa, miúdo mas inesperadamente coberto de grossos e abundantes pêlos negros—seu sexo era a única marca veemente de sua existência. Ela nada pedia mas seu sexo exigia, como um nascido girassol num túmulo" (70; "I think about Macabéa's sex, minute but unexpectedly covered with thick and abundant black hairs—her sex was the only vehement sign of her existence. She asked for nothing but her sex demanded, like a sprouting sunflower in a tomb"). In fact, Macabéa's sex seems to be very alive with a will of its own, almost as if it operates independently of her "dead" interior⁶⁴; this metaphor used to describe Macabéa's sex should be held in contrast to the way that Rodrigo characterizes Macabéa's eggs as wilted, as if they were flowers: "Embora os seus pequenos óvulos tão murchos. Tão, tão" (33; "Although her tiny eggs are so wilted. So, so").

Rodrigo uses the same language that one would use to talk about flowers when he compares Macabéa's wilted ovaries to a form of fungus, a cooked mushroom: "E como já foi dito ou não foi dito Macabéa tinha ovários murchos como um cogumelo cozido" (58–59; "And as it already has been said or left unsaid, Macabéa had shriveled ovaries like an overcooked mushroom"). What is more, Rodrigo does not have to be explicit here about the resonances of his metaphor—part of the function of metaphor is that an understanding is

⁶³ Hedrick compares the symbol of the sunflower in Lispector's *Água viva* with that of *A hora da estrela* and concludes: "This again connects Macabéa with Lispector's play on gender and the 'parthenogenetic' sunflower in *Água viva*; Lispector's ironic juxtaposition of Macabéa's social situation as an uneducated, poverty-stricken, literally starving girl from the Northeast of Brazil with the liveliness and demanding biological nature of her sex makes it clear that for Lispector the signs of biological 'femaleness' operate at a level quite apart from individual women's lives" ("Mae é para isso" 73).

⁶⁴ Hedrick reads the sunflower here as providing evidence that Lispector's texts imply that "there is indeed a female 'truth': the originary, demanding 'truth' of fecundity, like a 'sunflower in a tomb,' both life-giving and death bound" ("Mother Blessed Be You," 53); however, I think that this interpretation applies, instead, to Rodrigo's reading of Macabéa, and the socio-cultural constructions that make that reading possible, rather than providing evidence for Lispector's essentialism.

established between the reader and the writer, which is also based on shared experience. What is left unsaid here is that Macabéa's infertility is a metaphor for her social impotence. Perhaps this living flower surprises Rodrigo because it is unexpected that anything could grow out of this body; or, perhaps the issue is that Rodrigo is not really concerned with understanding how Macabéa reads her own interiority at all. Nonetheless, we are left with the conclusion that Macabéa has the potential for desire, but that that desire is futile in her social context, in the sense that it is non-productive because of her decaying body, her unviable ovaries, and her inability to channel her own desire because she is unaware of its existence or its nature. He writes, "Macabéa, esqueci de dizer, tinha uma infelicidade: era sensual. Como é que num corpo cariado como o dela cabia tanta lascívia, sem que ela soubesse que tinha? Mistério" (60–61; "Macabéa, I forgot to mention, had one misfortune: she was sensual. How is it that within a decayed body such as hers there could be so much erotic desire, without her knowing that she possessed it? A mystery").

Earlier on in the narrative, before Macabéa's name is even revealed, we learn that she is undesirable and a virgin: "Mas a pessoa de quem falarei mal tem corpo para vender, ninguém a quer, ela é virgem e inócua, não faz falta a ninguém" (13; "But the person of whom I will speak poorly has a body to sell, no one wants her, she is a virgin and innocuous, no one needs her."). It seems to be her bodily condition that prevents her from being able to enact anything meaningful or significant; her infertility, her status as a virgin, and her undesirability all seem to determine her ineffectiveness. In fact, she cannot even sell her own body because no one would desire her; she exists below the level of prostitutes, she embodies bare life. Macabéa, like Offred, represents a group of women who, if they are not already invisible, will be so to future generations; the primary difference is that Offred is aware of

her possible erasure, is able to narrate her own story, and still holds some social importance, albeit precarious, as a “two-legged womb,” whereas Macabéa has no hope of a future, both in terms of her own life and her infertility.

B. Life's Blood

In *Wayward Reproductions*, Weinbaum observes an inextricable connection in the modern era between race-based nationalism and reproduction, which she calls the “race/reproduction bind.” Within this ideological system, blood carries a special weight as a symbol of national unity and genealogical inheritance; that is, if its “purity” is maintained. Atwood’s and Lispector’s texts reveal that the shedding of blood is read differently based on how an individual fits into the national framework. In both instances, blood becomes an ontological metonymy for the protagonists—the presence or absence of blood defines the current social value and relative future of their existence, which is ultimately connected to their (in)ability to reproduce. Walter L. Wilson’s *A Dictionary of Bible Types* also establishes that in Bible the metonymical concept of “blood” has ontological implications, as “a type or a symbol of the universal character of human beings as distinguished from all animal life” (45). Therefore, the blood that establishes humanity could find its correlation in the modern notion of citizenship.

Blood, in the case of Offred, comes to stand in for the reproductive “failure” of menstruation regardless of the potential fertility that menstruation implies; in the case of Macabéa, however, blood affirms her human existence as well as a physical culmination of her sexual desire, or what her narrator Rodrigo refers to as “a coisa secreta de cada um” (71; “the secret thing of each one”). Offred, the narrator and female protagonist of *The*

Handmaid's Tale makes the connection between the red habit⁶⁵ that she is required to wear and the menstrual blood that has come to represent her only social use value under the Gilead regime: “everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us” (11). Although menstrual blood normally would provide some physical evidence of fertility, Offred often reads her own menstrual blood as reproductive failure, which serves as a reminder that her own life is also precarious. In fact, there is a time constraint on her life if she does not give birth:

I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own. (95)

In this passage, Offred assumes that she has agency and will power in her ability to reproduce, which is confirmed by Gileadean rhetoric that blames “unsuccessful” reproduction on women: “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially.

⁶⁵ Atwood also connects this red habit that Offred wears to the figure of Little Red Riding Hood, whose naïve journey into the woods to her grandmother’s house looms with threats of attack by a wolf-like sexual predator. She describes the red habit: “like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood” (11). The irony of this comparison is that Offred is far from virginal, as we might expect Little Red Riding Hood to be, and she is well aware of the role she must play as opposed to the all-too trusting fairytale character. Moreover, Offred “chooses” her role and, in this way, she is made, to a certain extent, complicit in her own rape.

There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (79).

Moreover, the concept that time is running out is so pervasive that the time of Offred's life seems to be measured in accordance with her menstrual cycle: "Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time" (95–96). Here we can observe that when the womb becomes the controlling metonymy of the female body, this can ideologically shape the way that a woman experiences her body in the world.

For this reason, Offred reads her menstrual blood as a failure (to give life and to save her own) while Gilead reads it as the loss of an unborn citizen that would ensure the future of Gilead. Here menstrual blood is held in stark contrast with the way in which Gilead sheds the blood of its own citizens who threaten its ideological continuance. Indeed, the blood shed for the sake of preserving the Gilead regime is rhetorically construed both as a victory and as a warning for the members of Gilead. A somewhat desensitized Offred observes the bodies hanging on The Wall after the Men's Salvagings, their faces hidden with white sheets. Only when she finds evidence of blood does she register that these are actual bodies and human lives:

But on one bag there's blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child's idea of a smile. This smile of blood is what fixes the attention, finally. These are not snowmen after all. (43)

But even this blood is difficult for Offred to discern from the other red objects that surround

her. As she lets her mind wander, the associations that she makes reveal something about the pervasiveness of the dehumanizing rhetoric of Gilead, which assigns different values to different kinds of human blood.⁶⁶

Offred begins to deconstruct what she formerly understood as the multiple relation between signifier, namely blood, and its various signifieds from the time before the regime took over (or 1980s United States). She reflects:

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (44–45)

Here we see Offred struggle with the need to distinguish between and designate different values for the red of blood and the red of tulips—the loss of human life (in this case from murder) and the reproductive organs of a plant.⁶⁷ Perhaps, it is the context under which

⁶⁶ See my earlier discussion of Cooper, who observes a similar relativization of the value of life in the rhetoric of Reagan and Bush.

⁶⁷ In a published conversation with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu titled *Two Solicitudes*, Atwood reflects on the symbolic meanings of the color red in *The Handmaid's Tale*, “Red has a lot of meanings in Western culture. It's the colour of Mary Magdalene, the great sinner of the church of sinners, and it goes without saying that it represents sexuality. But it's also the colour of blood and, as such, the colour of sacrifice. And it was also the colour worn by prisoners-of-war in Canada. Why red? Because it snowed a lot, and it was easy to spot the prisoners against the snow when they escaped. It's also the colour of the Red Cross and the colour for wet nurses. And of course I'd read *The Scarlet Letter*” (72).

Offred observes redness that determines its significance, since red, the color of blood, can symbolize both life and death. As we read Offred's description of her own narrative, we learn that the instances in which Offred contemplates the color red are not as incidental as she might make them out to be. She remarks, "all at once these *red events*, like explosions, [that occur] on streets otherwise decorous and matronly and somnambulant," thus indicating the ways in which these events disrupt and interrupt the rhetoric of Gilead that streams through Offred's consciousness (343, my emphasis).

Macabéa's blood does not directly reference her womb, as is the case with Offred, but her blood is, in fact, representative of her bare life status, which is also reinforced by the characterization of the womb. Rodrigo admits that Macabéa "não parecia ter sangue" (26; "did not seem to have blood"), as if she were not fully human, which could be a function of her marginalized position or the fact that she is a literary character or construct, who does not become actualized until the narrative's end. Therefore, the moments where we do witness Macabéa bleeding or references to her blood become crucial to our interpretation of the narrative and for understanding how the rhetoric of bare life functions.

Macabéa's attempts to assert her sexuality through her red lipstick, for instance, end in a bloody mess, the exact opposite of the desired effect. Making an effort to appear glamorous like the movie stars she idolizes, she wears lipstick to work one day; unfortunately, her inability to wear it properly makes her appear to be a victim of domestic violence: "Pois em vez de batom parecia que grosso sangue lhe tivesse brotado dos lábios por um soco em plena boca, com quebra-dentes e rasga-carne" (62; "But in place of lipstick, it seemed like thick blood that spurted from her lips because of a punch straight in the mouth, along with broken teeth and torn flesh"). Perhaps it is Macabéa's embodiment as a member

of an invisible class that makes the red lipstick seem indecent and out-of-place, as a sign of her aberrant gender and sexuality. The underlying assumption in this comparison between the red lipstick and the battered woman is that Macabéa's body is undesirable and requires discipline, an assumption that is reinforced by her inability to properly apply and wear red lipstick, which becomes yet another sign of her dispensability.

Macabéa admits to her fear of seeing blood, and by extension of facing the actuality of her being, since we know that blood, for Rodrigo, is the secret essence of life: "Talvez porque sangue é a coisa secreta de cada um, a tragédia vivificante. Mas Macabéa só sabia que não podia ver sangue, o resto fui eu que pensei" (71; "Perhaps because blood is the secret thing of each individual, a life-giving tragedy. But Macabéa only knew that she could not handle seeing blood, the rest was what I thought"). It is clear from this passage that this metaphorical connection is a step that Rodrigo thinks he is capable of making and of whose significance Macabéa seems utterly unaware—Macabéa only knows that she could not handle seeing blood, but she does not understand why this is the case. It is not incidental that once the psychic reveals that she has a future, her vision is coated in the color of blood, red⁶⁸: "Mas ela de olhos ofuscados como se o último final da tarde fosse mancha de sangue e ouro quase negro. Tanta riqueza de atmosfera a recebeu e o primeiro esgar da noite que, sim, sim, era funda e faustosa (79; "But her eyes, overshadowed as if the last half of the afternoon were bloodstained and almost black gold. So much richness of atmosphere received her and the first mockery of the night that, yes, yes, was deep and sumptuous"). Through the color red, Rodrigo equates Macabéa's desire to live with her loss of sexual innocence, as if her virginity were a death sentence from the very beginning. In fact, Macabéa's death, or "the hour of the

⁶⁸ Red also marks the moment of Offred's capture: "Outside, the light is fading. It's reddish already" (374).

star,” becomes the time of her self-actualization, something that she was seemingly incapable of in life. The blood that Macabéa sheds as she lies dying, according to Rodrigo, finally indicates resistance and evidence of self-awareness, which suggests that ironically, in her death she becomes more than bare life: “E da cabeça um fio de sangue inesperadamente vermelho e rico. O que queria dizer que apesar de tudo ela pertencia a uma resistente raça anã teimosa que um dia vai talvez reivindicar o direito ao grito” (80; “And from her head a trickle of blood, unexpectedly deep red. What I wanted to say was that despite everything, she belonged to a resistant and stubborn race of dwarfs that would one day vindicate the right to scream”). Somehow Macabéa, who “queria vomitar o que não é corpo, vomitar algo luminoso” (85; “wanted to vomit something that was not bodily, something luminous”) is able to surpass the corporality that Rodrigo insists on attributing to her. This “algo luminoso” becomes the thing that separates Macabéa from Rodrigo, so that she establishes some kind of essence for herself beyond the body and beyond the blood that supposedly determine her: “ela vomitou um pouco de sangue, vasto espasmo, enfim o âmago tocando o âmago: vitória!” (85; “she vomited a little blood, a great spasm, finally essence touching essence: victory!”). In my view, Macabéa’s final scene demonstrates Grosz’s notions of the “resistance of the flesh” (and blood) and the limits of language in capturing everything about the body—here Macabéa’s self-actualization occurs in spite of Rodrigo and, as a result, the text can no longer capture her body while she maintains the silence of her ecstasy.

Even Rodrigo recognizes that it is in fact Macabéa’s death and the story’s end that gives significance to the rest of the narrative, “como a morte parece dizer sobre a vida” (12; “like death seems to say something about life”). However, it seems that Rodrigo wants us to read his narrative as if it were a biography of a saint, given that the way that Macabéa dies

tells us something about her life, and how the blood she sheds takes on special significance. Much later on in the text Rodrigo makes this connection more explicit, when he compares Macabéa to a biblical figure: “Embora a moça anônima da história seja tão antiga que podia ser uma figura bíblica” (30–31; “Although the anonymous girl of this story is so ancient that she could be a biblical figure”). However, in this instance, it is actually her anonymity and primitiveness that allows him to make this association; indeed, she might be considered a martyr of history, in the sense that official history elides her existence as bare life. Moreover, this process of elision recalls McClintock’s concepts of “abject peoples” and “anachronistic space” in *Imperial Leather*.

In the Acknowledgements titled “Dedicatória do autor (Na verdade Clarice Lispector)” (9; “Dedication of the author (In truth Clarice Lispector)”) Lispector, through the voice of the narrator, Rodrigo, reveals a dedication to the bright red color of blood similar to his own blood: “Dedico-me à cor rubra muito escarlata como o meu sangue de homem em plena idade e portanto dedico-me ao meu sangue” (9; “I dedicate myself to the bright red scarlet of my blood, the blood of a man in his prime, and therefore I dedicate myself to my blood.”). In this passage, we can observe that it is in the similarity of the color of the blood to his own, not the actual blood of the “other” that concerns him. However, read a different way, the boundaries that Rodrigo sets could be construed as the difference between the human and the non-human, or those who share in the color of his blood and those who do not. This reference to the color of blood could also indicate, symbolically, some sort of racial alliance or social inheritance that Rodrigo might feel connects him with those who share similar roots or citizenship. Since Rodrigo’s purpose in writing seems to be the corporalization of Macabéa (i.e., her transformation into a body that wills its own existence),

it is telling that Rodrigo compares his narrative to a bloodclot, which acts as the textual residue of her body at the same time that it preserves his life: “Escrevo neste instante como algum prévio pudor por vos estar invadindo com tal narrativa tão exterior e explícita. De onde no entanto até sangue arfante de tão vivo de vida poderá quem sabe escorrer e logo se coagular em cubos de geléia trêmula. Será essa história um dia o meu coágulo?” (12; “I write in this instant like some former shame for invading you with a narrative that is so out in the open and explicit. From which, however, even gurgling blood so full of life will be able to gush and then coagulate into cubes of trembling jelly. Will this history be my clot one day?”) The bloodclot in this instance could be interpreted as a sign of life working towards its own preservation, or, taken further, also a sign of the wounded Macabéa’s fight to preserve herself. Here we can observe the connection Rodrigo establishes throughout his narrative between the text and his own body. It is the story, like a bloodclot, that keeps him alive and functions as a future record or remembrance of both his and her life.

C. Fetal Positionings and Ovoid Symbolism

Although, as we have already seen, both protagonists are defined by their womb, they are also, at times, referred to in terms of the womb’s progeny (fetus) and the reproductive organs that make that progeny possible (ovaries)—in fact, these protagonists cannot escape the pervasiveness of their wombs. By imagining their female protagonists as fetuses, Atwood and Lispector highlight the vulnerability and innocence of their protagonists and place into question the hierarchization of the value of human life. In the same way, Offred’s limited supply of viable eggs and Macabéa’s wilted ovaries remind us of their fragile existence on the margins. During the “Birth Ceremony,” Offred and the other Handmaids appear to be

imagining themselves as a collectivity within the womb—”[t]he soft chanting envelops us like a membrane”—at the same time that they experience the birth of their own “phantom, a ghost baby” (159; 164). There is also the sense that they are being enclosed in a uterine space and that all of their perceptions are shaped by this geography:

The room smells too, the air is close, they should open a window. The smell is of our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet, and another smell, more animal, that’s coming, it must be, from Janine: a smell of dens, of inhabited caves, the smell of the plaid blanket on the bed when the cat gave birth on it, once, before she was spayed. Smell of matrix. (158)

Here, we can see the narrator’s confusion of her own body with the collective body and that of Janine. She argues that it “must be” Janine’s body, as if she were trying to convince herself that this ritual has no real relation to her own.⁶⁹ The reader can observe, very easily, the power that the phantom baby has over the Handmaids, as a specter of their desire and the fulfillment of their destiny. In fact, the image of the unborn has such a powerful effect on the imagination of the people of Gilead, that when Offred witnesses the body of a doctor who had performed an abortion in the pre-Gilead era hanging on the Wall with the sign of the fetus around his head, the irony does not seem to register (43–44). The value of human life here is relative, since the innocent fetus seems to be valued unconditionally (that is, as long as it is eugenically fit), but the doctor tainted by shedding the fetus’s blood is not.

Lispector also positions her female protagonist as a fetus when Rodrigo refers to

⁶⁹ The importance of ritual in reinforcing metaphors and metonymies has been discussed by Lakoff and Johnson, who maintain that “The metaphors we live by, whether cultural or personal, are partially preserved in ritual” (234).

Macabéa, herself, as an accident, an unwanted child, a discarded, aborted fetus: “Acho que julgava não ter direito, ela era um acaso. Um feto jogado na lata de lixo embrulhado em um jornal. Há milhares como ela? Sim, e que são apenas um acaso. Pensando bem: quem não é um acaso na vida?” (36; “I guess she did not think she had the right, she was an accident. A fetus wrapped up in a newspaper and thrown into a garbage can. Are there thousands like her? Yes, they are merely an accident. Thinking it over: who isn’t an accident in life?”) Here we learn that she is not the only one; in fact, she is, according to Rodrigo, part of a large community of lives that are also abject. Rodrigo goes even further to claim that we are all here by chance, highlighting the precariousness of our own positions as living subjects. By making this comparison in passing, the narrator momentarily elides differences between the class to which Macabéa belongs and the rest of the world—in this sense, we are all, in our most basic form, bare life.

However, this does not remedy his problematic representation of Macabéa’s existence. The discarded unwanted fetus is not that different from Macabéa, who, at the moment of her death, takes on the fetal position as if her death were a return to the safe place of the womb:

Tanto estava viva que se mexeu devagar e acomodou o corpo em posição fetal. Grotesca como sempre fora. Aquela relutância em ceder, mas aquela vontade do grande abraço. Ela se abraçava a si mesma com vontade do doce nada. Era uma maldita e não sabia. Agarrava-se a um fiapo de consciência e repetia mentalmente sem cessar: eu sou, eu sou, eu sou. Quem era, é que não sabia. Fora buscar no próprio profundo e negro âmago de si mesma o sopro de vida que Deus nos dá. (84)

[She was alive enough that she moved slowly and curled up in the fetal position. Grotesque as she always was. That reluctance to give in, except that desire for the great embrace. She hugged herself longing for that sweet nothing. She was damned and didn't know it. She held on by a thread of consciousness and repeated incessantly in her mind: I am, I am, I am. Who she was she didn't know. She went searching, in the deep and black essence of herself, for that God-given breath of life.]

In this symbolic return to the womb, Macabéa is finally able to search for the truth about herself in the darkness within her, although she is unclear as to the nature of this darkness. She wills her own existence with the repeated affirmations of "I am," which solidify her own self-consciousness. As one experiencing "ecstasy," she is "beside [her]self," in the sense that she is fully aware of how she is literally trying to hold herself together under "the state of rapture in which the body was supposed to become incapable of sensation, while the soul was engaged in the contemplation of divine things" (*OED*). In this case, Macabéa's ecstasy, as Rodrigo narrates it, is not without its sexual undertones, so much so that we could conclude that Macabéa's encounter with death, then, becomes the instantiation of her loss of virginity and marks her transformation into a woman (84).

Nevertheless, we must consider that Rodrigo's conceptualization of Macabéa's womanhood has certain structural limitations. To be a woman, for him, is to live out one's biological destiny, which is exemplified in Macabéa's realization that "O destino de uma mulher é ser mulher" (84; "A woman's destiny is to be a woman"), but also that the essence of womanhood is somehow inextricably tied to sexuality and reproductivity. In this instance, however, Macabéa's statement does not reveal anything about her own understanding of

what it means to be a woman; in this case, she uses the same term “woman” unequivocally and unproblematically. Nonetheless, Macabéa’s “biological” destiny, as we know, is tainted by her wilted ovaries, her virginity, her empty womb, and her undesirability—all characteristics that position her, in Rodrigo’s view, as less than a woman (and less than human), which consequently prevents her from enjoying rights and protection as a full citizen.

Contrary to Macabéa, whose musings seem to be somewhat less self-reflexive and less self-aware until her death (given Macabéa’s lack of formal education, her orphan status, and her economic class), Offred’s thoughts are incessantly overpowered by reproductive images and metaphors, although she may not always be conscious of them. One of Offred’s major fixations is the egg, so much so that references to it infiltrate her games of Scrabble with the commander; for instance, Offred plays with words, such as “zygote” (or a fertilized egg) and refers to the egg-like characteristics of certain letters: “It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world [...] That was the way my mind lurched and stumbled, among the sharp *R*’s and *T*’s, sliding over the ovoid vowels as if on pebbles” (180; 199). Furthermore, her stream of consciousness consistently brings any attention paid to the egg back to her own body. An illustration of this is the way that the eggcup in which her breakfast is served reminds her of “a woman’s torso, in a skirt,” which is also representative of the way Gilead dehumanizes yet values the Handmaids as “two-legged wombs” (140; 176).

The variety of associations that the egg evokes in Offred’s mind have gendered, geographical, ontological, and religious connotations. Since her vision is structurally limited,

Offred begins a somewhat myopic contemplation of the egg, itself, scrutinizing every detail:

The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon. It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg.

The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside.

The egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure.

The sun goes and the egg fades.

I pick the egg out of the cup and finger it for a moment. It's warm.

Women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them. That would have felt good.

The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg. Blessings that can be counted, on the fingers of one hand. But possibly this is how I am expected to react. If I have an egg, what more can I want? (141)

In this passage, Offred compares the surface of the egg to a barren landscape and a desert frequented by saints hoping to gain access to God, while granting the existence of the life under its surface. Indeed, Offred finds herself closer to understanding God while contemplating the egg: "this is what God must look like: an egg." However, the tone of this passage changes once Offred asks herself: "If I have an egg, what more can I want?" The conversation shifts from the pleasure Offred finds in contemplating the egg to her own desire. Her interrogative refers to the egg she ingests (the hard-boiled egg that nourishes Offred's body), but also to the eggs inside (the ova released by her ovaries). Once again,

Offred's life is reduced to her ability to reproduce; her desire is to live and her egg is a means achieving that end. This exemplifies the extent to which Offred's pleasure and desire is reduced to her sustained fertility; in this context she is, in effect, made bare life by her own biology. By ingesting the egg, Offred accepts and incorporates its symbolic value into her body; what is more, she waits in anticipation for its arrival, driven by the clock on the wall as well as by her biological one (141).

But Atwood is not without a sense of humor: the image of the cracked egg is often paired with human experiences of "cracking up" or "(s)he cracked." When Offred cracks up following one of her secret meetings with the Commander, she tries to suppress her uncontrollable laughter: "My ribs hurt with holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter" (190). Because she feared the worst ("Judgment: emotion inappropriate to the occasion. The wandering womb, they used to think. Hysteria. And then a needle, a pill. It could be fatal" (189)), Offred falls asleep huddled up in the cupboard. When Cora brings Offred her breakfast, she believes Offred is dead and drops both eggs, which crack open (193–194). If in fact Offred does see herself in the egg, then her "cracking up" in the cupboard is represented by the fragments of egg all over her bedroom floor. Later, when the Commander is trying to justify his actions as a leader in Gilead, he uses his own ovoid symbolism: "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, is what he says. We thought we could do better [...]. Better never means better for everyone, he says. It always means worse, for some" (273–274). This metaphor is strikingly suitable in the way that human lives, and in many cases *women's* lives, are represented by "eggs," and that this "breaking eggs" is seen as a necessary sacrifice made in the name of the greater good.

D. Space Travel and the Darkness Within

In addition to the biological metaphors previously discussed, spatial metaphors also function to recall the controlling metaphors and metonymies of the womb. Recurring images of emptiness, vacancy, absence, lack, barrenness, and decay of the female body reflect the values of biological determinism and define the social value of the female protagonists, namely Offred and Macabéa. Nonetheless, the extent to which these metaphors are internalized by the female protagonists differ due to their social positioning and level of education. As a Handmaid, who “signed up” for her role, Offred is conscious of the way her value is reduced to her womb and viable ovaries. Although she knows that this is the case, she finds this fact difficult to face: “I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (82). The spatial metaphors that the Gileadean regime uses in order to justify the social positioning of the Handmaids are not without historical and religious resonances. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood references Puritan ideals through Gileadean rhetoric, in which the female body (along with God, himself) is considered a national resource, which becomes property of the state, and therefore must be guarded with the utmost care and surveillance. By creating a copulation ceremony, the Gilead regime claims to be protecting its female citizens from random acts of sexual violence and abuse, which ultimately requires a restriction of women’s freedom to choose their partners. Ironically, the former threats of random acts of sexual violence are replaced with systematic ones that are framed as a woman’s duty to her nation. The dignity of the female body, then, is understood in terms of the woman’s willingness to open her self up to receive the gift of life. Her reproductive success is, therefore, an outward sign of her “womanness,”

which exposes the instability and unpredictability in maintaining that position. As a result, the use-value of women is reduced to their reproductive capacity, and they become disposable objects—as “Unwomen,” they are dumped like toxic waste in the colonies.

During the course of her re-education as a Handmaid, Offred learns that she “must be a worthy vessel” (85), a reproductive metaphor that posits the womb as an empty space and a sacred receptacle. Moreover, the copulation ceremony that takes place on “Serena Joy’s outsized colonial-style four-poster bed,” with its white canopy, is reminiscent of the ships in which the English colonists came with the intentions of settling North America, a reference that suggests she is also participating in a national conception. For this reason, Offred imagines her success, her future, as being “[p]ropelled forward by a swollen belly” (120), which represents some kind of hope that her life will continue. In her mind, Offred wills the gale to fill the canopy and transform it into a billowed sail, since her body currently reflects its concave posture. As such, the metaphor is interpreted very literally; the Handmaids are not *like* vessels, but *are*, as their lived experience attests, mere vessels: “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.”⁷⁰ The emptiness or empty space within the chalice or the vessel becomes the focus, rather than the matter that surrounds it and constitutes it, a concept that we will observe later with Macabéa’s obsession with purchasing a hole (Macabéa is unaware that it is the land that you purchase, not the empty space).

What is more, as their prayer time at the Red Center reveals, the Handmaids must not

⁷⁰ This reference to the chalice is also significant in relation to Offred’s earlier discussion of the tulips—“The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty” (59)—as a form of self contemplation. In Catholic theology, a chalice is a container holding the Blessed Sacrament (the blood of Christ), which represents Christ’s sacrifice of himself for the salvation of his people. In the case of Gilead, both God and the Handmaids are subordinate to the nation—they are both national resources (85; 276–277).

only be empty, but they must also be worthy:

What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled:
with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies.

Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man.

Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled...

Some of them would get carried away with this. The ecstasy of abasement.

(251)

Like the canopy of the bed that is “both ethereality and matter” (120), Offred imagines her body as “a cloud congealed around a central object,” a pear-shaped organ containing an empty space (95). Offred’s body seems to have dematerialized in her imagination, being substituted by her womb, the organ that most characterizes her existence.

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as stars. Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes it out of sight, and I see despair coming

towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart,
wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time. (95–96)

Offred's description of her inner sanctum here evokes that of outer space. As a matter of fact, the egg takes on the immensity and power of the moon, the space of her womb becomes a galaxy of stars, and the rhythm of the menstrual cycle becomes conflated with lunar time. Offred is no longer in possession of her own body; it is her womb that contains the vast possibilities of a universe in which she occupies the periphery. It is only by God's grace and his assessment of Offred's worthiness as a vessel that she can be impregnated in this bodily configuration; without any timely outward sign of God's approval, Offred will be rendered bare life, and therefore become disposable.

Yet, Offred gains some control over the access to her interiority by claiming that although men seem to have power over women's reproduction, they cannot necessarily gain full access to the "truth" of the darkness within women's bodies. What is more, men are limited by what Offred refers to as "vision." She imagines sexual intercourse for men as a "journey into a darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward. She watches him from within. We're all watching him" (113). In this narrative, women take control over the gaze from an internal perspective, from within the womb.

In *A hora da estrela*, however, it is Macabéa's potential for self-actualization that gives Rodrigo hope and drives the narrative. He seems to be rooting for her through his desire for a sign of resistance from her, a bit of self awareness. Nonetheless, this potentiality is made futile by the "emptiness" of her body. Lest we forget, it is actually Rodrigo who characterizes Macabéa in this way, and therefore has some kind of agency in her

essentialization into bare life. But this “emptiness,” according to Rodrigo, also has a value contrary to its negative associations, since “o vazio tem o valor e a semelhança do pleno” (14; “emptiness has the value and the semblance of being full”). Here, Rodrigo highlights the distinction between being empty but appearing full and actually being full, and the value associations that we ascribe to these states. On the surface, he compares Macabéa’s emptiness to that of a saint who prays to be filled with the Holy Spirit and whose significance is rendered by a collective recognition (which will happen later on the day of her accident):

“A maior parte do tempo tinha sem o saber o vazio que enche a alma dos santos. Ela era santa? Ao que parece. [...] Mas parece-me que sua vida era uma longa meditação sobre o nada. Só que precisava dos outros para crer em si mesma, senão se perderia nos sucessivos e redondos vácuos que havia nela” (38; “The majority of the time she had, without knowing it, the emptiness that filled the soul of saints. Was she a saint? It would seem. [...] But it seems to me that her life was a long meditation over nothingness. Only that she needed others to believe in herself, if not she would lose herself in the consecutive and round empty spaces that were inside her”). At the same time that emptiness has a negative value in constructing the female body as “lack,” it also has a positive value here in its associations with openness to accepting the Holy Spirit, which transforms material emptiness to spiritual fulfillment.

However, Macabéa, unlike a saint, is not conscious of her emptiness, nor does she seem to have the desire for spiritual realization. Inside her, rather, the consecutive and round empty spaces, which could be interpreted as her non-viable ova, become threats to her self-preservation. This topic resurfaces in the pregnancy metaphor Rodrigo uses to describe Macabéa after her meeting with Madama Carlota. He writes that she was “[u]ma pessoa grávida de futuro” (79; “[a] person pregnant with future”). In this case it is a hope that fills

her once vacant interior; here, pregnancy is associated with life's transformation and continuance, not necessarily with the production of a new life. Macabéa is empty with the semblance of fullness.

She fantasizes, on the other hand, about possessing an exterior space. Indeed, her fixation with purchasing a hole in the ground could be read as her unconscious desire to access her own "interiority." But this "interiority" is not to be understood in the metaphysical sense, but rather as a desire to possess a physical space of her own. Macabéa nostalgically recalls seeing a house with a backyard and a well, a well into which she liked to gaze:

Em pequena ela vira uma casa pintada de rosa e branco com um quintal onde havia um poço com cacimba e tudo. Era bom olhar para dentro. Então seu ideal se transformara nisso: em vir a ter um poço só para ela. Mas não sabia como fazer e então perguntou a Olímpico:

— Você sabe se a gente pode comprar um buraco? (49)

[As a little girl, she had seen a house painted pink and white with a backyard where there was a well with a hole and everything. It was good to look inside. So, her ideal transformed into this: to come to possess a well only for herself. But she didn't know how to do it and so she asked Olímpico:

— Do you know if one can buy a hole?]

It is ironic that Macabéa does not see the connection between her desire for a "space" of her own and her own body, in the same way that she does not understand that you cannot simply purchase a hole in the ground without also purchasing the land that surrounds it.

Although the reader might be able to read the well as a metaphor for the female body, Macabéa does not interpret the world in this way. Moreover, she does not understand her

body metaphorically (although Rodrigo does); that is, she does not read her body in terms of metaphor in the way that Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor in its most basic form—as originating from a network of relations of experience between the body and physical objects. This fact is made evident when Macabéa is unable to clearly map the space of her interior or communicate very much about her bodily experience. When asked by the doctor to pinpoint the location of her constant pain, Macabéa can only respond: “Dentro, não sei explicar” (62; “Inside, I don’t know how to explain”).

In addition, Macabéa’s lack of formal and limited informal education about her own body makes her unaware of the many ways in which her class marks her body and her life trajectory. She does not necessarily understand that it is both the pangs of hunger and the beginnings of tuberculosis that are causing her discomfort.⁷¹ The doctor, embarrassed by Macabéa’s poverty and shocked by her lack of education, suggests that she see a psychoanalyst for her problems. Without addressing the real issue of her poverty he tells her to stop dieting and prescribes her a medication that she cannot afford, let alone understand its purpose (67). Here the doctor implies that it is Macabéa’s insanity that brought on her current condition, and that she is therefore is no longer his responsibility. In actuality, however, it is the society that needs evaluation—the real diagnosis here is the poverty and dehumanization of an entire class of people. Some might be hesitant to characterize Northeastern Brazilian migrant workers as bare life since they are technically citizens. Nonetheless, Agamben himself reminds us that bare life is just as much about class because poverty is also an assault on human rights. In this way, the doctor’s apathy regarding Macabéa’s situation becomes

⁷¹ Lispector’s choice to use tuberculosis as Macabéa’s illness is significant here as indicative of Macabéa’s role as a victim, especially given the history of the disease’s social and literary romanticization. Susan Sontag, in *Illness as Metaphor*, writes, “TB is celebrated as the disease of born victims, of sensitive, passive people who are not quite life-loving enough to survive” (25).

emblematic of the eugenicist ideology that makes the unfit responsible for their own condition.

Unreliable Witnesses⁷²

Atwood and Lispector employ metafictional strategies and parody romantic genres in order to show how the male interlocutors in their texts are unable to fully and adequately represent (let alone have access to) the experiences of their female protagonists. Although these authors satirize metaphors and metonymies of the womb in order to frame their female subjects as bodies, we, as readers, experience first hand how this figurative language fails to do justice to the female subject. At the same time that the female protagonists prove to be unreliable witnesses, who have difficulty communicating their experience, the prejudices of Wade, Pieixoto, and Rodrigo also cloud any assessment of “truth” about Offred and Macabéa. In this case, it is the reader who is called to respond to the multitude of voices in competition with each other in each text and to align herself/himself with the most “true”; the power struggles between these voices are left exposed, so that the reader becomes more aware of the politics that inform his or her own *exegesis*. Moreover, these power struggles also occur at the level of genre, which also has gendered implications.

Atwood and Lispector engage with genres that have been traditionally considered to be “feminine,” such as romance (more specifically, *literatura de cordel* in Lispector’s case), in order to represent their female protagonists. In both instances, these authors, well aware of the power of romance to affect the emotions of the reader by creating sympathy, manipulate

⁷² The discussion of authenticity in Atwood’s novel is adapted from my article, “Deauthorizing Anthropologies and ‘Authenticating’ Landscapes in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Diamela Eltit’s *El cuarto mundo*.”

the genre to reveal this process. In Atwood's novel, it is Offred who first narrates her daily intimate experience with the structural violence of a regime that claims to be protecting her best interests. It is only after we finish reading this heart-wrenching tale that we learn that the entire structure of her narrative has been interfered with or placed in a more "logical" order by sexist historians Pieixoto and Wade. The sense that somehow Offred's story has been toyed with, coupled with the inability of the historians to authenticate her voice, force the reader to justify her/his own interpretation of her text. Lispector adopts a different technique by writing her narrative in a style twice removed—she writes the narrator Rodrigo writing Macabéa. The fact that Lispector takes on a male voice here is significant, since Rodrigo tells us that a woman could not narrate this story because she would not be able to stop weeping (14). Here, Rodrigo creates a false sense of superiority by claiming that, as a male, he can be more objective, somewhat emotionally detached, and therefore better represent his subject, Macabéa. We learn later, however, that this is not true, but rather that, at times, he even expresses his emotions through disdain or deep sympathy for her.

One of the principal differences between the two texts is that Macabéa does not attempt to tell her own story, which suggests that her quasi-illiteracy may render Macabéa relatively more bare life than Offred. In fact, Giorgio Agamben has suggested that one of the communicational differences between *zoe* and *bios* is that of degree—bare life has access to voice, but not to the language that characterizes the citizen (*Homo Sacer* 11). It is important to understand that voice requires the production of sound whereas language obliges that sound to be intelligible through a semblance of order and convention. Under this light, Offred's limited ability to express her "sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story" (344) could be read as her existence between two spheres—her past life in which she

was a citizen and her current position, which is more precarious. What is more, Macabéa's inability to recuperate her "direito ao grito" (80; "right to scream") seems more in line with Agamben's association of bare life with voice, since we must read intent into the scream whereas language can more readily express that intent. As such, the distinction between voice and language made by Agamben also recalls Spivak's question ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"), which Atwood and Lispector seem to answer with their texts.

Although both Atwood and Lispector are writing before Spivak published on subalternity and the emergence of the *testimonio*, their work engages with some of the very same ethical concerns.⁷³ In *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, John Beverley sheds light on the nature of the *testimonio* as a genre, which he defines loosely as "the voice of the subaltern," a voice that "speaks to us as an 'I' that nevertheless stands for a multitude. It affirms not only a singular experience of truth in the face of grand designs of power, but truth itself as singularity" (27). For Beverley, *testimonio* "has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself" (32) and most importantly, "[w]e [as readers] are meant to experience both the speaker and the situations and events recounted as real" (33) and develop a feeling of solidarity with this voice (37). In fact, in Atwood and Lispector's texts we get the sense that the narrators are narrating to survive, that the current situation is dire, and that the urgency of the situation warrants some kind of action/reaction from the reader.

Accordingly, given this definition provided by Beverley and the fact that *testimonio*,

⁷³ In fact, Atwood describes that "In a way, [she] created a historical character" in Offred (*Two Solitudes* 79).

as a genre, troubles the distinction between historical and literary texts, between nonfiction and fiction, why do Atwood and Lispector choose to fictionalize or aestheticize the testimonial voices of their narratives? My hypothesis is that they are constructing and deconstructing the genre of *testimonio* (or *testemunho*, in the case of Lispector) as a viable and recognizable medium through which to convey the voice of the subaltern at the same time that they want to avoid any easy appropriation of that subaltern experience. Likewise, with *testimonio*, Atwood and Lispector are able to represent a collective experience of exploitation as well as the urgency of the current political climate without putting themselves in any immediate political danger.

Offred's narrative as it stands alone seems convincing because we hear her story first and through her belief in our existence, we believe in hers. Sarah R. Morrison makes it clear how this process works. "Atwood," she writes, "sets their [Wade and Pieixoto's] 'plot' or interpretation of events and their significance against Offred's romance plot. The Historical Notes demand the sacrifice of the reader's experience of Offred's narrative, which involves the relinquishing of the romance plot" (323), thus making the reader more aware of the way in which genre, and more specifically gendered genres, affect the way we read and how we understand truth. By appending the proceedings of The Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies (a history conference) to the end of her text, Atwood reveals how the academy has the power to render authoritative certain official documents while trivializing others that represent more marginal positions.

Fictional characters Professor Pieixoto and his co-author Professor Wade look for facts that corroborate the details she gives concerning the powerful men of the regime, and nostalgically wish for more information to understand the inner workings of Gilead. Pieixoto

laments, “[s]he could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from Waterford’s private computer! However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us” (393). Here Pieixoto and Wade participate in the privileging of men’s experiences of history, with the assumption that they are the “prime actors” and their stories are, therefore, the most important to recuperate (see Enloe 102). They are looking for “hard” data and the inner workings of the empire, not the testimony of a woman who experienced the real effects and violence of the empire itself.⁷⁴ While Pieixoto and Wade recognize the systematic oppression she experienced as probable and agree to the likelihood of her belonging to the first generation of Handmaids, it is difficult for them to confirm with any exactitude the authenticity of her narrative, which they reduce to “crumbs.”

The source for the tale told by the Handmaid is not, in fact, a written text, but a recording of a woman’s voice onto a series of cassette tapes. Pieixoto and Wade also note that the order of the tapes is not specified and after grueling hours of study in the lab they are able to make sense of it, titling their discovery and product of labor, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Regardless of the many narrative discrepancies in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, including the fact that Offred’s story is recorded on a series of cassette tapes and later transcribed and ordered

⁷⁴ One can see the link here to the debates over the veracity of Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio*, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. One of David Stoll’s primary critiques is to question the factual basis for select portions of Menchú’s narrative in *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. As John Beverley remarks, “Stoll poses as a defender of the fact-gathering and evaluation procedures of anthropology and investigative journalism against which he characterizes as a ‘postmodernist’ position that would grant authority to subaltern voice as such” (5).

by Wade and Pieixoto,⁷⁵ Atwood is able to manipulate the sympathy of the reader for Offred's plight. By juxtaposing both the narrative and the historical documentation of the narrative, she forces the reader to pick a side. As such, our decision to side with Offred or Wade and Pieixoto also has implications related to the rhetorical weight we give genre.

In the same way that Atwood employs the genre of romance to create an emotional response to her handmaid's tale, Lispector invokes a traditionally Northeastern Brazilian genre, with its popular and romantic undertones, at the same time that she undermines the reader's expectations that this romance will make them sympathize with the characters. This genre, *literatura de cordel*, which according to Mark J. Curran, "[c]omo literatura popular em verso e jornalismo popular em verso [...] é, e sempre será 'romance' e 'jornal do povo'" (570; "[a]s popular literature in verse and popular journalism in verse [...] it is, and will always be a romance and a newspaper of the people"). *Literatura de cordel* also had a poetic aspect to it, which may explain why Fitz refers to Lispector's style as "lyrical narrative," in the way that "she utilizes the framework of narrative to convey a story, but relies upon the emotive power of poetry to bring it to life on various levels of meaning and significance" ("Freedom and Self-Realization" 54). Given what Fitz observes as a fusion and consistency in form and content in Lispector (52), it seems fitting that she would use the *literatura de cordel* to talk about her Northeastern Brazilian protagonist.

But it is not only the parody of genre that destabilizes the reader, but the physical disruptions and unsettling explosions that occur throughout *A hora da estrela*. In the Dedication, for instance, we learn about Rodrigo's obsession with music (often, we hear a

⁷⁵ According to Beverley, this is characteristic of *testimonio*, which "generally involves the tape-recording and then the transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer" (32).

drumbeat or a violin at different moments in the narrative) as well as the sharp pains of the toothache, which plague him (and us) throughout—in fact, it is, as he explicitly states, our mouth: “A dor de dentes que perpassa esta história deu uma físgada funda em plena boca nossa. Então eu canto alto agudo uma melodia sincopada e estridente—é a minha própria dor, eu que carrego o mundo e há falta de felicidade. Felicidade? Nunca vi palavra mais doida, inventada pelas nordestinas que andam por aí aos montes” (11; “The toothache that imbues this story causes a deep shooting pain in our mouth. Therefore I sing a syncopated and strident melody loudly and sharply—it is my own pain, I that carry the world, and there is no happiness. Happiness? I never saw a word so painful, invented by Northeasterners that walk through the mountains”). What is more, Rodrigo suggests that this is a communal pain and that the pain that he feels will affect his singing ability, and therefore the pace of his narrative. In this instance, the reader can observe the connection with *literatura de cordel*, which was traditionally sung and what Rodrigo depreciates as its normal content, an idealized “felicidade.” Indeed, we are made more conscious of Rodrigo’s performance of this narrative when we learn that a violinist will accompany him (23) and are surprised by the sound of the drums and the explosions of pain that interrupt the narrative flow.

It is even more surprising to the reader, and disruptive to the romance, that Rodrigo openly shares his initial disdain for his protagonist, since we might be expected to feel sympathy for Macabéa’s plight (13). As Rodrigo claims, he has a right to be painfully cold towards his protagonist, although we should not—but why should we feel what he does not? In this instance, Lispector establishes the icy indifference of her narrator at the same time that, through Rodrigo, she tells us how we should feel, thus fostering a sense of guilt in the reader who does not feel “properly.” Lispector’s lyrical narrative, in effect, tells us how to

feel about Macabéa, but in reality provokes the opposite impression, thus highlighting the multiple ways in which representation through language can frame our relationship with the “other.”

Conclusion

As I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, metaphors and metonymies of the womb often overlap and function in very specific and concrete ways in the lives of our female protagonists. Although these rhetorical figures are unable to grasp the essence of the female body or explain its complexity, they still have the potential to do violence to women’s bodies. As we have seen, the womb, as a metaphorical and metonymical concept, is made central to the ways we understand sexual difference. It is indeed this acceptance of the womb as the primary locus of femininity that is damaging to the way we understand social roles through gender. Through Atwood and Lispector, not only do we learn that the content of the metaphor and metonymy matter, but also that the social, cultural, and generic structures that support and reinforce these concepts matter and that they are equally important for understanding how the metaphors and metonymies we live by operate. Examining these rhetorical figures helps us to understand the sociopolitical situation of marginalized women in the United States and Brazil in the late twentieth century and exposes the process of the feminization of bare life and the ease by which the womb comes to represent the female body and, in turn, the nation.

CHAPTER THREE Bare Life Conceptions

While the previous chapter exposed the ways in which metaphors and metonymies of the womb functioned to render certain women bare life, this chapter shifts the focus to the representation of the reproduction of bare life. It might seem to be a matter of logic that bare life would beget bare life, especially in a system where, as Agamben describes, “what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject but, above all, man’s bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty” (*Homo Sacer* 128). Indeed, the pseudo-sciences of the modern era that dealt with reproduction, namely sexology and eugenics, held the mother responsible for passing down the national (and by implication, racial) legacy. Given the residual effect of eugenicist and sexologist traditions on the Western conceptions of nationhood, bare life, or “merely reproductive life,” in its dialectical opposition to citizenship, carries with it nationalist and imperialist ideologies about hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Weinbaum argues that these discourses are readily mapped onto the maternal body owing to a phenomenon she calls “the race/reproduction bind” (4). In this way the mother as birthplace determines the social inheritance of rights.

Two novels that dramatize the reproduction of bare life as conception and concept are *El cuarto mundo* (1988; *The Fourth World*) by Chilean writer Diamela Eltit and *Beloved* (1987) by U.S.-American writer and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison.⁷⁶ Juxtaposing these texts reveals the process by which certain members of the population (and even certain nations)

⁷⁶ Eltit’s *El cuarto mundo* was translated into English as *The Fourth World* in 1995 by Dick Gerdes; however, the translations of passages cited here are my own. Portions of my analysis of *El cuarto mundo* are adapted from my forthcoming article, “Deauthorizing Anthropologies and ‘Authenticating’ Landscapes in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Diamela Eltit’s *El cuarto mundo*.”

are transformed into “disposable peoples”⁷⁷ and attests to the fact that this process of dehumanization can occur both under the state of exception and within normal state operations. Eltit and Morrison, I contend, are writing about contemporary predicaments (the Pinochet dictatorship and Reagan-era neoconservative politics), but they employ narrative genres of metafiction (Eltit) and historical fiction (Morrison)⁷⁸ to place the subject of their works elsewhere, in space and time. They use the collective experience of bare life, especially of groups who have been treated as racially “inferior,” at the same time that they uncover the complicated ways in which individuals experience bare life differently in terms of gender. Such a reading could account for their focus on traditionally feminine domains, such as reproduction and the domestic. Eltit’s story begins with rape and is told by her fraternal twin narrators who are its by-products. As such, *El cuarto mundo* is a gendered allegory of life under the Pinochet dictatorship, linking domestic violence to state violence and prostitution to the selling out of Chilean labor to the world market. Morrison’s historical fiction tells and re-tells (from multiple perspectives) the story of a slave mother who kills her baby girl to prevent her enslavement. *Beloved* explores what it would mean for the dead baby

⁷⁷ I adapt this term from Kevin Bales’s *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, which discusses how slavery has changed shape in the twentieth century. This term is fitting for both novelists, given that Morrison is clearly addressing the legacy of slavery in the United States and Eltit suggests that Pinochet’s neoliberalist policies create “una forma de esclavismo” (“a form of slavery”) by “encadena[ndo] al sujeto a la estructura de la deuda” (“chaining the individual to the structure of debt”) (*Diamela Eltit: Conversación en Princeton* 59). My interest here lies in the connection between the global economy and the “disposability” of peoples.

⁷⁸ Caroline Rody argues that “Though touched by the prevailing postmodern irony toward questions of truth and representation, fiction and history, *Beloved* and most contemporary novels of slavery are not ‘historiographic metafiction’ denying the possibility of historical ‘Truth’ [. . .]. For these novels [...] the inherited conviction of slavery’s evil renders the word of fictional slaves true in a sense not solely epistemological or even political but moral” (94). Bernard W. Bell refers to *Beloved* as “a womanist neo-slave narrative of double-consciousness, a postmodern romance” (9).

girl to return, for the past to come back to haunt, and for a slave woman to imagine her subjectivity outside of her reproduction.

I argue that both texts represent the mother-child relationship as highly problematic, not because they are necessarily taking pro-life or pro-choice stances (which would force them to make a choice regarding which life should be valued more), but because biopolitics, or as Foucault would have it, “the way in which the specific problems of life and population have been posed within a technology of government,” has relativized the value of life based on race, gender, and class in their respective contexts (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 323). In these novels, subjects that traditionally cannot speak (e.g., fetuses and infants) narrate from spaces where most forms of communication are nonverbal and only partially intelligible (e.g., the womb and the spirit world). These voices are figured as the innocent victims that inherit the legacies of their mothers’ shame, and their narratives are, therefore, given priority and more rhetorical weight or significance than the other parties involved. Moreover, in these novels, traditionally safe spaces, such as the womb and the house, are transformed into sites of struggle and contention that close in on and exacerbate their inhabitants’ experiences of claustrophobia and oppression. These small enclosed spaces, I propose, become microcosms that are symptomatic and representative of larger national crises in which groups of marginalized people pose a threat to the “life” of the nation itself.⁷⁹

An analysis of the representation of both maternal and domestic spaces is, therefore, crucial to an understanding of biopolitics in both of these novels. In Eltit, for instance, the maternal body becomes an antagonistic, oppressive, prison-like space that encroaches on its

⁷⁹ By the term “life” I would like to signify both the biological life of the ideal citizen and the symbolic life of the nation as an “imagined community,” to use Anderson’s term. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

intruding inhabitants. Indeed, the experience of the twin fetuses in the womb is reflected and refracted in their domestic space and also indicative of a larger national experience of the effects of a particularly American brand of neoliberalism and population control (in more ways than one) under the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. In her novel, Eltit represents the state of exception declared by the Chilean military as one in which the entire Chilean population is transformed into bare life, but also implicates, through her title, the global economic world order and the resultant complications of this hierarchy. Morrison also presents a complicated case in which the autonomy and individual freedom of the dead baby's ghost cannot flourish without the diminishing of her murderous mother, which makes any real chance of healthy coexistence impossible and suggests the unforgiveability of the circumstances surrounding her death. In this case, the house, including its inhabitants, is invaded, controlled, and haunted by the past, thus suggesting that the legacy of slavery in the United States needs to be unearthed and understood as crucial to our national foundation, but, at the same time, requires an exorcism of its ghosts. Moreover, slavery operates in complicated ways in U.S. history, and one could argue, if applied retrospectively, that biopolitics and the accompanying ideology of neoliberalism might help us to understand how certain people were transformed into property and their worth came to be measured by their labor—and for women, especially black women, this encompassed both productivity and reproductivity.⁸⁰

In order to explore the ethics of representing bare life in these novels, I have divided this chapter into three sections that analyze aspects of representation that are important to

⁸⁰ Naomi Mandel explains that, “as property that produces more property without cost, the slave woman’s body becomes the means by which the institution of slavery is perpetuated and maintained—both physically and discursively—forcing the slave woman into complicity with her own subjugation” (593–594).

understanding how bare life functions, such as genre, narrative voice, and space. The first section, “Genre and Gender: The Politics of Reproducing Bare Life,” investigates the way that the historical backdrop of these novels informs the aesthetic choices of the authors under discussion. In the next section, “Voices from Beyond and Within,” I consider the mother-child relationship in terms of bare life and I assess the implications of privileging and representing the voice of a child that, in reality, cannot physically speak. “Domestic Disturbances, or Why the Personal is Political,” the final section, examines the role of both bodily and domestic space and its figuration as a feminine metaphor for the nation.

Genre and Gender: The Politics of Reproducing Bare Life

At the close of his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault calls for further analysis of “the way in which the specific problems of life and population have been posed within a technology of government which, although far from always having been liberal, since the end of the eighteenth century has been constantly haunted by the question of liberalism” (323–324). Here Foucault suggests that both politics and economics, under the rubric of neoliberalism, play a role in debates about the value and definition of life. The formulation of the value of life in economic terms is, in fact, one of Foucault’s principal concerns regarding the particular phenomenon of American neoliberalism:

American neo-liberalism seeks instead to extend the rationality of the market, the schemas of analysis it offers and the decision-making criteria it suggests, to domains which are not exclusively or not primarily economic: the family and the birth rate, for example, or delinquency and penal policy. (323)

Any conceptualization of the family as an economic unit or the population as economically quantifiable and possessing qualitative properties must also take into consideration the role of reproduction in this economy. Cooper also makes this connection:

As both Malthus and Marx make clear in their different ways, the question of population growth thereby becomes inseparable from that of economic growth. Henceforth, political economy will analyze the processes of labor and of production in tandem with those of human, biological reproduction—and sex and race, as the limiting conditions of reproduction, will lie at the heart of biopolitical strategies of power. (7)

As such, the relative value of an individual's "reproductivity" is informed by shared social beliefs about what constitutes a quality end product (the population as a whole) or a valuable commodity (a productive member of society). Since women are held responsible for handing down race (and, I would add, class), they become the specific targets of "population control" and the value of their reproduction often becomes couched in terms of sustainability or potential labor, which conceals the racist, sexist, and classist *modus operandi* of biopolitics. Alice E. Adams's *Reproducing the Womb: Images of Childbirth in Science, Feminist Theory, and Literature* reminds us that the very language we use to describe the value of the reproduction of human life is imbued with economic undertones about production and use value: "Like the broader system of uterine metaphors, the economic analogies between production and reproduction are unstable and subject to change. The fetus and the newborn find their way into the system as both currency and commodity. The mother's body and the womb are bank, factory, and/or warehouse" (150). In this passage, Adams points to the way that the maternal body, the fetus, and the newborn are incorporated (both materially and

symbolically) into this capitalist schema. Under this rubric the maternal body presents particular issues regarding the relative value of life; i.e., what is more valuable—the labor or the final product, the mother’s life or that of the unborn fetus/newborn infant? Indeed, a choice must be made in both cases since value must be assigned—and this is what happened in the 1970s and 1980s in the Americas with the abortion debate, the resurgence of right-to-life movements, the supreme court decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), and the debates over stem cell research.⁸¹

The novels under discussion in this chapter are written in the context of a compulsive desire to define human life in its purest state and amid an extreme curtailing of civil liberties. Cooper remarks on the work of George Gilder, the author of *Wealth and Poverty* (1981), whom she deems “one of the most influential popularizers of neoliberal economic ideas” (165). She writes, “[t]he unborn, after all, is the future American nation in its promissory form, the creative power of debt recontained within a sexual politics of familial life. And as the new right has made clear, its reproduction is the particular form of debt servitude that is required of the nation’s women” (Cooper 168). The Chilean government’s neoliberalism under Pinochet, according to Eltit, is not much different, for it implicates the body in this economy: “esa forma del neoliberalismo es un poco fascista porque encadena al sujeto a la estructura de la deuda. El cuerpo del sujeto está materialmente encadenado a una estructura

⁸¹ Regarding technological development in this period, Cooper observes: “The early 1980s inaugurated an era of intense conceptual, institutional, and technological creativity in the life sciences and its allied disciplines. Not only did discoveries in molecular biology, cell biology, and microbiology promise to deliver new technological possibilities, they also called into question many of the founding assumptions of the twentieth-century life sciences. This was also the era of the ‘neoliberal revolution,’ where similarly dramatic transformations unfolded in the political, social, and economic spheres. Initiated in the United Kingdom and United States, the neoliberal experiment sought to undermine the existing foundations of economic growth, productivity, and value, while at the same time it forged an ever-tighter alliance between state-funded research, the market in new technologies, and financial capital” (3).

de la deuda y, por lo tanto, su pasión política afloja. En el fondo, es una forma de esclavismo: mes a mes a pagar esa deuda, ¿no? Entonces, creo que hay un asedio extremo al cuerpo”

(*Diamela Eltit: Conversación en Princeton* 59; “that form of neoliberalism [without limits] is a little fascist because it chains the individual to the structure of debt. The body of the individual is materially chained to a structure of debt and, therefore, his/her political passion weakens. Basically, it is a form of slavery: month to month to pay that debt, right? So, I believe that there is an extreme siege on the body”).⁸² However, the political discourse that aimed to protect life itself transformed the unborn child into a symbol of the ideal citizen⁸³ at the same time that the actual governments of Reagan and Pinochet violated the human rights and threatened the life of its own citizens, along with those who are considered to be bare life.⁸⁴ How is it possible, you may ask, that these contradictions could co-exist?

Agamben’s theory of the state of exception might provide a viable mode of entry for understanding the ways in which this rhetoric operates. He writes: “modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system”

⁸² Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine in this chapter.

⁸³ In fact, as Adams reminds us, the fetoscopy that results in photographic images of the fetus usually occurs when women are having an abortion or the fetus is being examined for some kind of defect. While these images are often used to represent a kind of universal humanity, “there is a crisis going on with this fetus that is not inscribed in the photograph” (141), namely a crisis in health or imminent death. For a further discussion of the role of technology in changing definitions of life, see Susan Merrill Squier, *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*. Cooper also observes that George W. Bush, who takes up this pro-life discourse by “extending universal health coverage to the unborn,” effectively “acknowledged the unborn fetus as the abstract and universal subject of human rights” (153).

⁸⁴ Remarking on George W. Bush’s declaration of the National Sanctity of Human Life Day, Cooper makes a similar observation: “What is even more remarkable about the speech is its smooth transition from right to life to neoconservative ‘just war’ rhetoric” (152). See also the traces of this rhetoric under Gilead in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* in Chapter Two.

(*State of Exception* 2). While the neoliberal policies and biopolitical strategies of the Reagan administration and the Pinochet regime might differ on the explicitness of their agendas and the intensity with which they addressed potential threats, the ideologies that justified government interventions into the reproductive lives of its citizens, adversaries, and “undesirables” bear resemblance and deserve critical attention. As such, my project develops the ethical imperative in Agamben’s work, namely, “to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime” (*Homo Sacer* 171).

As historical fiction, Morrison’s novel is based on the true “story of Margaret Garner, a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner’s plantation” (xvii). According to Morrison, Margaret Garner’s “sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of Abolitionists as well as newspapers” (xvii). Indeed, Margaret Garner’s maternal act, would, if taken out of context, seem barbaric and “unnatural,” but within the larger framework of the collective experience of slavery, it takes on symbolic significance beyond her individual circumstance. *Beloved* is a ghost story, although not in its traditional sense, about a murdered child (Beloved) who returns to haunt the mother (Sethe) who murdered her to protect her from enslavement.⁸⁵ In her own words, Sethe makes the distinction between dying free and living as a slave: “if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (236). With this preemptive strike, Sethe denies

⁸⁵ According to Naomi Mandel, Beloved’s name is a palimpsest, “[a]s the murdered baby’s given name is replaced by ‘the way’ Sethe loved her, Sethe speaks the unspeakable: she does not name that which has no name, but rather replaces an existing name silenced by a community’s reluctance to utter it with an expression of her (Sethe’s) personal response to this silencing” (587).

the entrance of her child into the symbolic order of slavery and prevents her subsequent dehumanization and death as a slave.

Morrison's powerful, intimate, and mournful tale is recounted through the multiple voices of the parties involved in a narrative where the past constantly invades and haunts the present, and only fragments are discovered at a time.⁸⁶ The novel is divided into three sections, which are structured around the house (namely "124") that belongs to the family of the female protagonist, Sethe: in the first, 124 is "spiteful" and filled with the rage of the baby ghost (3); in the second, 124 is "loud" with the "conflagration of voices" of Sethe and her two daughters (Beloved who has returned from the dead and Denver who survived the tragedy), whose isolation is later shaken by the community's intervention (199; 202–203); in the final section 124 is "quiet" and almost empty of life, since Beloved has been chased away, Denver has moved on, and a bed-ridden Sethe mourns the loss of her children, or her "best things" (281; 296).⁸⁷ Indeed, 124 has both real and magical qualities that make this family's painful loss ever present, which aligns Morrison's aesthetic with the Latin American Boom writers who made magical realism popular.⁸⁸ But, as Morrison's novel reminds us, this story is a collective one, and the United States can no longer afford to forget the lives of slaves whose lives were sacrificed but not mourned in order to create it.

⁸⁶ Morrison, herself, describes *Beloved* as an attempt "to make the slave experience intimate" (xviii). Roxanne R. Reed remarks that "[p]articularly in African philosophy and theology, the ancestral spirits work in conjunction with deities to provide direction and empowerment to the living. This ideology is represented, for instance, in the African philosophy *muntu*, meaning humanity, which simply recognizes the presence of the dead among the living" (56).

⁸⁷ Bernard W. Bell observes that Morrison subdivides her text into "twenty-eight unnumbered mini-sections, the usual number of days in a woman's menstrual cycle" (9).

⁸⁸ Caroline Rody also makes this connection in "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss'" (93).

However, the question remains, why does Morrison choose to address the Fugitive Slave Law in 1987? In the foreword to *Beloved* Morrison explains,

In the eighties, the debate was still roiling: equal pay, equal treatment, access to professions, schools . . . and choice without stigma. To marry or not. To have children or not. Inevitably these thoughts led me to the different history of black women in this country—a history in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required, but “having” them, being responsible for them—being, in other words, their parent—was as out of the question as freedom. Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal. (xvi)

Although she is living in what some might consider a post-Civil Rights era in the United States, its citizens witnessed a backlash to what were, for some, newly achieved human rights, accompanied by a severe cutback in social welfare programs benefiting women and minority groups during the Reagan administration.⁸⁹ Morrison speaks about the influence of the historical person of Margaret Garner on her character Sethe, “[s]o I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women’s ‘place’” (xvii). In both periods that Morrison addresses through *Beloved*, the issue of women’s reproduction and reproductive rights is at the center. What is more, there seemed to be a lapse in public memory regarding the reasons for a Civil Rights movement in the first place—especially concerning the racism of slavery and the sexism of patriarchy in

⁸⁹ See also my discussion of this backlash in Chapter Two.

constructing systematic barriers to the economic, social, and political advancement of minority groups. As Morrison reminds us, through the voice of Baby Suggs, “[n]ot a house in this country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (6).⁹⁰

A symptom of this forgetful attitude can be found in the mythical figure of the “welfare queen,” who became the scapegoat for the failure of public assistance programs and a buzz-word for conservatives who lobbied for an end to welfare.⁹¹ Dorothy Roberts provides the following description of “the contemporary image of the welfare queen” as:

[T]he lazy mother on public assistance who deliberately breeds children at the expense of taxpayers to fatten her monthly check. [...] Poor Black mothers do not simply procreate irresponsibly; they purposely have more and more children to manipulate taxpayers into giving them more money. A 1990 study found that 78 percent of white Americans thought that Blacks preferred to live on welfare. (17)

Images of the “welfare queen” as a lazy, sexually promiscuous, and unwed single black mother who lived off of the government played into the pre-existing gender and racial stereotypes that belied the larger social issues such as absent fathers, lack of employment and childcare, and the fact that black women were not the only people who benefited from welfare, nor did they represent the majority. In fact, Roberts remarks that “[a]lthough most

⁹⁰ The use of the word “country” here is ambiguous, since it could refer to either the black community (of the story or as a whole) or to the entire nation. I read this term as indicative of a fraught national foundation that starts in the family and the home, especially given the way in which the structure of the white middle and upper class family was made possible by the hard labor and disregard for the sacredness of family of black slaves. Whether the grief is perceptible to all is another issue that I take up later in this chapter. Caroline Rody seems to agree when she states, “Every American house is a haunted house” (100).

⁹¹ For a development of the topic of black women’s reproduction in U.S. history, and the myth of the welfare queen, see Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*.

people on welfare are not Black, many Americans think they are” (111). In fact, many of these same characteristics were attributed to slave women, who often were blamed for not resisting their own rape by slaveowners or were judged for the number of men who fathered their children. Black women, it seems, were held to the same standards of sexual propriety (which were almost impossible for them to uphold) as those of white women. The legislation and political rhetoric of the 1980s in the United States is proof that, in some ways, we often disregard or remain ignorant of the way that the past comes back to haunt us.

Like Morrison, whose narrative is focused on the ways that gender shapes slave experience, Eltit explores how experiences of poverty and dictatorship differ based on gender. Indeed, as Kadir observes, “Eltit’s writing forges headlong into exploring, positing, and demonstrating what that otherness might consist of when it would focus on the question of gender and the politics of dispossession” (“A Woman’s Place: Gendered Histories of the Subaltern” 183). Divided into two parts, Eltit’s novel is narrated by fraternal twins.⁹² In the first section, the male twin (who is later called María Chipia by his mother) narrates his own conception as well as that of his twin sister (whose name is written in lowercase in the text to distinguish her as a character from the author: e.g., “diamela eltit”⁹³). Although the twins are sanctioned by their induction into the family, they are ill-conceived and the unintended by-products of domestic violence. The awareness of the circumstances of their birth shames the twins and determines their future as members of a nation of illegitimate children of mixed

⁹² During a personal interview I had with this writer, Eltit remarked that she wrote the second part of the novel first, and as it was so abstract, she thought that “una articulación faltaba” (“an articulation was missing”), and then “surgió la primera parte y me permitió legitimar la segunda parte” (“the first part emerged and allowed me to legitimate the second part”).

⁹³ Randolph D. Pope suggests that Eltit uses the lower case version of her name “porque no es un nombre propio, sino el nombre de un producto más del mercado editorial” (49; “because it is not her name/a proper noun, but the name of a publishing industry product”).

race, or “sudacas.”⁹⁴ This private shame is later amplified by public shame, or what Randolph D. Pope refers to as “[u]na doble vergüenza” (“a double shame”) of “el adulterio de la madre y el incesto de los mellizos” (“the mother’s adultery and the twins’ incest”), which, he argues, is what leads to the family’s isolation (45). Particularly significant is that the mother’s rape is not made public as are the other family indiscretions. Indeed the originary crime committed by the authority figure of the husband/father is covered up by the existence of the marriage contract, and, as the rhetoric goes, rape is not technically possible in marriage since consent has already been given.

Since their mother was raped by her husband while in a state of fever, she has an antagonistic relationship with her children: “Su existencia sólo era real por la rigurosidad vital de su cuerpo, y por ello nosotros no éramos más que instrumentos de los que ella se había valido para fundar una autofagia. Sentía que su propia creación gestante la estaba devorando” (25–26; “Her existence was only real because of the vital rigor of her body, and because of it we were nothing more than instruments which she had made use of to establish her autophagia. She felt that her own gestating creation was devouring her”). At times the twins’ mother seems apathetic to her children, or “sus sueños bastardos” (95; “her bastard dreams”) and her maternal instincts are revived only when her children are on the brink of

⁹⁴ The *Larousse Concise Dictionary* defines “sudaca” as a “racist term referring to a Latin American” (491, their emphasis). As Gisela Norat explains, “[t]he negative connotation that ‘sudaca’ carries in the land of the Spanish colonizer stems not merely from a geographical vanquished ‘Sud América,’ but a genealogical territory where Spanish and Indian blood forged the mestizo half breed” (144). Eltit’s use of the term “sudaca” suggests that her text could be read as indicative of a larger Latin American phenomenon in the same way that her title implies that she is also trying to represent Fourth World experience. With this derogatory term, she directly acknowledges the hate towards the poorest classes, whose situation has been exacerbated by Spanish colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and global capitalism.

death or when she is trying to avoid sexual contact with her husband.⁹⁵

While María Chipia often undermines his own authority in interpreting the events of his life and family dynamics, his narrative is more legible than the grotesque second half, when he turns the narrative over to diamela. However, it is not until the moment when he decides to “depositar la confesión en [su] hermana melliza” (106; “deposit the confession in [his] twin sister”) that we realize that what we have been reading is actually a confession, not a mere act of bearing witness or *testimonio*, as María Chipia might have us believe. Rather, this is a story he has a stake in, one that assuages his guilt and represents him as powerless over his own condition. In the second section narrated by diamela, she explains: “María Chipia ensaya, ensaya un discurso redentor de las culpas, un discurso en el que transa el peso de nuestra historia. Ensaya su discurso y en sus palabras disminuye el rigor de nuestros cuerpos. [...] María Chipia está haciendo un discurso consagrado a sí mismo utilizando todas las voces que lo habitan, un discurso a sí mismo y al niño” (137; “María Chipia rehearses, rehearses a speech redeeming our guilt, a speech in which he mitigates the weight of our history/story. He rehearses his speech and in his words he diminishes the rigor of our bodies. María Chipia is preparing a speech dedicated to himself using all of the voices that inhabit him, a speech to himself and to the child”). Moreover, as the title of her part of the confession reveals, “Tengo la mano terriblemente agarrotada” (107; “I have a terribly constrained hand”), we are aware that her portion of the text is either coerced or somehow compromised.

In her account, the situation is so dire that the twins, who are diseased, starving, and

⁹⁵ Pope reminds us that the mother never speaks for herself, “Es significativo que no sea la madre quien habla, sino el hijo. El silencio de esta mujer es total. Ella es narrada retrospectivamente, por palabras que vienen años después del violento coito” (38; “It is significant that it is not the mother who speaks, but the son. The silence of this woman is total. She is narrated retrospectively, by words that come years after the violent intercourse”).

imprisoned in their own house, eventually lose their sanity. We learn in the part narrated by diamela eltit that, in fact, the world that María Chipia seemed to see so clearly is nothing more than a ruse. In actuality, María Chipia and diamela eltit occupy the space where language breaks down, where the material body (especially the female body) is oppressive in its needs and desires, where sharing a meal only occurs as a simulation, where their gender and sexuality is a performance, and where constant interrogation, surveillance, and voyeurism by their own family members and other “powers that be” leaves them with little room for resistance.

The second part ends with diamela eltit giving birth to a child that she conceives with her twin brother, which she refers to as an act of defiance, “una obra sudaca terrible y molesta” (114; “a terrible and bothersome sudaca work”). Although the novel seems to be narrated in chronological order, its ending suggests an incestuous circularity, especially since diamela eltit’s “niña sudaca” is born on the same date that she, herself, was conceived and at the same moment when the novel comes to its completion.⁹⁶ Despite all of the odds against diamela eltit and her twin brother María Chipia—their abandonment by their family, their being sold-out by their nation, the alleged erasure of their existence by “la nación más poderosa del mundo” (124; “the most powerful nation of the world”), and their complete isolation—they resist their annihilation by performing and narrating incest, a socially taboo act.

When Eltit is writing, Chile is ruled by the military dictatorship of Pinochet (1973–1990), who suspended civil rights and established a state of emergency with the support of

⁹⁶ Pope includes also remarks on this fact when he enumerates “[l]a cantidad de duplicaciones, reproducciones, especulaciones y reflexiones que dan consistencia a la novela” (46; “[t]he quantity of duplications, reproductions, speculations, and reflections that give consistency to the novel”).

the U.S. government and maintained the practice of torturing and disappearing those who disagreed with his policies or did not fit into his mold of the ideal obedient citizen.⁹⁷

Moreover, this ideal citizen would also fit into stereotypical gender roles—e.g., women were encouraged to return home and perform their national duty as mothers and wives.⁹⁸

According to Mary Louise Pratt, the Pinochet Regime “veía en los valores patriarcales un modo de obtener aquello que no podía lograr por sí mismo: la legitimidad” (19; “saw in patriarchal values a way of obtaining that which it couldn’t achieve by itself: legitimacy”) and was able to mobilize political power by invoking traditional gender roles, which Eltit engages with directly in her representations of gender and the body in *El cuarto mundo*.

Although there are linguistic hints in the text that would situate the story in Chile, it is

⁹⁷ Mary Louise Pratt describes what she calls “la clausura de la sociedad civil” (22; “the closing down of civil society”) under Pinochet: “Los partidos políticos fueron proscritos, el cierre de los órganos de prensa fue seguido por una censura draconiana, se impuso el toque de queda, las asambleas públicas fueron prohibidas, las universidades purgadas, las editoriales cerradas, el sistema judicial suspendido, la oposición aniquilada, y un régimen de terror se instaló en torno a la tortura y las desapariciones” (22; “Political parties were banned, the closing of the newspapers [and other forms of print journalism] was followed by a draconian censorship, a curfew was imposed, public assemblies were prohibited, the universities purged, the publishing houses closed, the judicial system suspended, the opposition annihilated, and a regime of terror was installed around torture and disappearances.”).

⁹⁸ According to Mary Louise Pratt, Pinochet, in his *Mensaje a la mujer chilena: Texto del discurso* (1976), detailed his vision for women’s participation in the nation. She summarizes his position as follows: “A las mujeres el dictador les dicta que de acuerdo a las tradiciones de Occidente su ‘misión como mujeres y madres’ ha sido y sigue siendo la de 1) defender y transmitir los valores espirituales, 2) servir como un elemento moderador (parece ser, frente a los impulsos bélicos del hombre), 3) educar y transmitir conciencia, y 4) servir como depositarias de las tradiciones nacionales [. . .]. Aunque se les reconoce el *derecho* de ejercer una profesión, el General reclama mayor reconocimiento por su contribución en el trabajo que ‘les corresponde’, la educación de los hijos. Mientras la igualdad de derechos y de oportunidad son innegables, dice Pinochet, la ‘participación auténtica’ de la mujer debe ejercitarse ‘en relación a sus características’ [. . .]” (18; “The dictator dictates to women that in accordance with Western tradition their ‘mission as women and mothers’ have been and continue to be that of 1) defending and transmitting spiritual values, 2) serving as a moderator (it seems, opposite the bellicose impulses of the man), 3) educate and transmit conscience [morality?], and 4) serve as places to deposit national traditions [. . .]. Although he recognizes the *right* to practice a profession, the General demands a greater recognition for their contribution in the job the ‘corresponds to them’, the education of children. While equal rights and equal opportunity are undeniable, says Pinochet, the ‘authentic participation’ of the woman should be exercised ‘in relation to her characteristics. [. . .]”).

perhaps this geographic ambiguity or the attribution of *El cuarto mundo* to the experiences of Fourth World⁹⁹ peoples along with her experimental narrative that enabled her work to pass through the censors.

What remains clear is that Eltit's work addresses the resentment of the labor and indigenous classes fostered by Pinochet's regime. According to Pratt, in the 1980s Pinochet opened the Chilean labor force to the world market, which resulted in a severe wage decrease for a large section of the Chilean population and a sharp increase in poverty (22). Chilean laborers were, in a way, sold out and became victims of the subsequent cheapening of their labor in the world market. In the same way, Pinochet has also been criticized for selling Chile's best natural resources to foreign investors. In an interview with Michael J. Lazzara, Eltit expresses her opinion regarding the economic aspects of the military coup:

Lo que a veces está un poco soterrado o escondido con el golpe es que fue una alianza entre la derecha económica y los militares. La finalidad del golpe de estado fue restituir los bienes. La Unidad Popular intervino muchas empresas. Entonces el punto central del golpe fue una problemática económica. Las muertes, la represión, la violencia, el estado de excepción fueron hechos para el capital. En ese sentido, el golpe no es ideológico. El golpe es un proyecto económico. Sólo secundariamente y terciariamente es ideológico. Y para lograr esa economía deseada, para disciplinar, para aterrar, para reinsertarla, era necesario pasar por la destrucción de muchos cuerpos, por los miles y

⁹⁹ Gisela Norat defines "Fourth World" as "a further subdivision of the 'Third World,' which usually identifies the technologically less advanced nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Generally characterized by very weak and largely agrarian economies, poorly fed, rapidly growing, and illiterate populations, these nations typically have unstable governments, and until recently were mostly controlled by Western nations through some form of colonialism" (148).

miles de gentes que fueron prisioneras o que fueron torturadas, y por los miles de gentes que murieron y desaparecieron. (12)

[That which is sometimes slightly buried or hidden with respect to the coup is that it was an alliance between the economic right and the military. The goal of the coup was to restore property. La Unidad Popular [Allende's party] intervened in many businesses. Deaths, repression, violence, the state of exception were done in the name of capital. In this sense, the coup is not ideological. The coup is an economic project. Only secondarily and thirdly is it ideological. And in order to achieve that desired economy, in order to discipline, in order to terrify, in order to rehabilitate it, it was necessary to go through the destruction of many bodies, through thousands and thousands of people that were prisoners or that were tortured, and through the thousands of people that died and disappeared.]

Perhaps, for this reason, Eltit ends her narrative with such a dystopic vision, in which everything is sold (even Diamela's "niña sudaca"/ Eltit's "novela") and everyone is sold out, even the sellers.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ In *Diamela Eltit: Conversación en Princeton*, Eltit observes: "Claro, porque el mercado, que es un sistema inteligente, no tiene ni estética ni ética" (10; "Of course, because the market, which is an intelligent system, does not have an aesthetics or an ethics"). In this interview, she characterizes international adoption as a market-induced exile, when she writes: "Tenemos una población flotante afuera muy alta, y con este neoliberalismo atroz están saliendo otros niños vía adopción. A esos niños los van a buscar a Chile y los traen a los países del primer mundo porque sus madres no pueden sostenerlos en el sistema neoliberal. [...] Entonces, yo creo que es interesante pensar también en esta otra salida, que es otro tipo de exilio si quieres" (13; "We have a very high population floating around outside the country, and with this atrocious neoliberalism other children are leaving through adoption. These children are sought in Chile and are brought to the First World because their mothers cannot support them in the neoliberal system. [...] So, I believe that it is interesting to also think about this other departure, which is another type of exile, if you will.").

By reading Eltit's *El cuarto mundo* and Morrison's *Beloved* against each other we can better understand how life, as a category, has become equated with citizenship, and thus transformed into a political concept, not a natural or universal given. Under this schema, one would assume that, at a minimum, the life of citizens would be held sacred and any threat made against them punishable by law. However, as the stories of Eltit and Morrison suggest, citizenship (and its accompanying rights, privileges, and protections) is contingent upon a national ideal and also on the relative economic value placed on reproduction. For in antebellum U.S., slaves by law were not persons, citizens, or life, but rather property; slave reproduction meant a "free" increase in the labor force and, therefore, more capital for property owners. In the United States of the 1980s, on the other hand, black women were often blamed for the fact that their reproduction implied economic, political, and social responsibility; whereas, reproduction was encouraged for middle and upper class white women. These observations suggest that eugenics continued to have a hold on U.S.-American domestic policy. Likewise, with her depiction of Chile under Pinochet, Eltit dramatizes how dictatorship combined with the dynamic of globalization relativizes the value and the sustainability of the life, labor, and reproduction of Third and Fourth World peoples. In this way, the state of exception accompanied by a globalized biopolitics reproduces class structures. But, the lives that are cut short or severely oppressed by the market, the U.S., and biopolitics are finally given voice by these writers, and the following section will examine the rhetorical motives for this narrative strategy as well as the resultant implications.

Voices from Beyond and Within

By giving the unborn or the newly born the space to speak, Eltit and Morrison endow their intrauterine and extra-uterine characters, who are innocent bystanders of a symbolic order that determines their future as outsiders, with a self-consciousness, an agency, and an intention that may not actually exist. Indeed, the fetus and the newborn narrate and live as subjects in conflict with their mothers; what is more, their stories frame themselves as the innocent victims/by-products of their mothers' weaknesses and indiscretions and fail to recognize how the motherhood of their mothers has already been compromised. For this reason, it would be helpful to consider the implications of such a positioning of these characters.

Alice E. Adams, for instance, argues that "the history of the intelligible fetus begins with the mother's retrospective erasure" (154). Although Adams seems to primarily reference vision when she discusses "the intelligible fetus," I would argue that this term offers a way of conceptualizing the fetal voice:

The physician reveals the "intelligible" fetus by first making the womb "sensible," or available to sensory apprehension. No matter how intently the eye focuses on the figure of the fetus, it is comprehensible only in relation to its background; even when it is represented as pitch-black space, some trace or recollection of the womb remains to interact with the image of the fetus.

(155)

The writer, just like the physician, has the power to make the fetus (or, in the case of *Beloved*, the dead baby's ghost) intelligible to the reader by presenting the unborn's/newly born's perspective as independent of his/her mother and as a fully developed subject. The

true irony in making the fetal/infant voice intelligible lies in the possibility of humanizing the fetus/newly born while their mothers remain dehumanized. Yet, the violence in “the mother’s retrospective erasure” is obscured in this model, and the history of medicine, as Adams observes, likewise has offered few cooperative metaphors to explain the maternal-fetal relationship.

Some physicians describe the fetus as a parasite who takes over the mother’s body; others describe it as a prisoner of the mother’s psychological and physical pathology. Prisoner, parasite, philosopher, astronaut, hermit, patient—all the identities ascribed to the silent fetus have this in common: they are based not on a model of cooperation or union between mother and fetus but on a model of maternal-fetal opposition. They all ascribe to the fetus a degree of intention, a modicum of mature consciousness, and an awareness of self and other. Whether subordinate or superior, invader or captive, the fetus is always alienated from its immediate (maternal) environment. (143–144)

In these medical metaphors, however, while the fetus may be somewhat conscious, aware, even pensive, the fetus is always a “silent fetus,” and, for some, a subaltern that does not speak. In addition to the medical metaphors that naturalize the mother-fetus relationship as oppositional, we can also observe this tendency in the rhetoric of the right-to-life and pro-choice movements to reduce the abortion debate to what they deemed as two mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed beings (mother vs. fetus), and that taking the side of one necessarily meant opposing the life of the other. Adams, however, believes “the mother, as

the speaking and acting ‘member’ in the mother-fetus relationship, must for all practical purposes be considered a fully autonomous individual” (249).

Eltit and Morrison, whether intentionally or not, represent mothers whose autonomy is severely compromised and push the concept of maternal-fetal opposition to its limits in these novels by presenting the point-of-view of those who occupy the space of the non-verbal. Indeed, even as they are able to garner sympathy from the reader, these infantile voices have little consideration, if any, for the desperation of their mothers, or the social conditions that pushed them over the edge. Instead, these characters obsess about the ways in which they were brought into the world or the manner in which their lives were taken, which they perceive as the ultimate violation. María Chipia, for instance, blames his mother for being too weak to resist her own rape and for giving birth to unwanted children. *Beloved*, likewise, finds Sethe’s act of murder unforgiveable, even though her intent was to prevent the enslavement of her children. What is more, the voices of these children are angry and even mournful as they bemoan the injustices done to them, and rightly so; nonetheless, in both cases these mothers share the legacy of bare life and the possibility of being held responsible for their children’s inheritance of this legacy through birth.

There are two chapters¹⁰¹ in Morrison’s novel that provide some insight into the

¹⁰¹ Cynthia Dobbs also performs an insightful analysis of these two chapters in “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited” (570–574). She writes: “Although the prose in each of these chapters can be described as a version of modernist stream-of-consciousness pushed to the edge of incoherence, the chapters do not so much mirror each other in their chaotic prose as they map out a *progression* from a disintegration of identity, narrative, and history to a re-membling of the separate parts of this narrative of physical, psychological, and cultural collapse” (570). However, I attribute this progression not only to “rememory,” but also to the way that language changes as *Beloved* passes between worlds. Jean Wyatt proposes that Morrison “links *Beloved* to the ‘Sixty Million and more’ by joining her spirit to the body of a woman who died on one of the slave ships” and that Morrison confuses her readers in these two chapters, an invocation of “the disorientation of the Africans who were thrown into the slave ships without explanation, suspended without boundaries in time and space” (480).

perspective of Beloved, the dead baby girl, whose ghost comes back to haunt the mother that murdered her. The fourth chapter of Part II is narrated entirely by Beloved from a seemingly intermediate space in which a collective is crammed into a small unlivable place, where, as Beloved explains “we are all trying to leave our bodies behind” (248–249). The use of language is most remarkable in this chapter, since Beloved’s simple statements and limited vocabulary unexpectedly produce a multiplicity of resonances and registers. “[W]e are all trying to leave our bodies behind,” could signify, among other interpretations: 1) we are trying to pass over and must leave our bodies behind; 2) we want to die but we are encountering difficulty; 3) each of us must transcend the prison that is our body; 4) we would rather die than live in a world in which our bodies are so devalued, abused, and tortured; 5) it is possible, but difficult, to separate self/spirit from body. On account of these multiple readings and since “we” is an ambiguous referent, this fragmented passage could easily recall a variety of collective experiences (e.g., the Middle Passage, enslavement, purgatory, death, communal burial) as well as experiences particular to the story’s characters (e.g., Sethe’s time in jail and Beloved’s burial). Since it is difficult to recover a coherent narrative from this section, it would be useful to elaborate on the recurrent tropes that reflect Beloved’s relationship with her mother and that also reverberate throughout the rest of the novel.

The only complete sentence in this chapter is the very first one, “I am Beloved and she is mine,” which seems to shape and motivate Beloved’s search for a lost union throughout the novel (248). Cynthia Dobbs also makes this observation that this is “the only punctuated ‘complete’ sentence” and, regarding the style of these passages, comments that “Morrison’s play here with a radical lack of punctuation works to reinforce the sense of a profound desire to merge, the language itself resists separation, differentiation. Thus, the

substance and style of the prose articulate both a longing for unity and a terror at a disintegration of identity” (571; 570). As such, I agree with Dobbs, whose analysis of the grammatical structure of *Beloved* connects structure to substance: “[b]reaking the back’ of conventional syntax, Morrison describes an erasure of the differentiation between the speaker and her object of narration” (570). *Beloved*, whose grammar often fails to distinguish between her self and her mother, reveals a painful longing for re-possession and posits the maternal-fetal relationship as ontologically linked: “her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too” (248); “I see her face which is mine” (251); “I have to have my face” (251); and “she is my face smiling at me” (252). In these selected fragments, the reader can observe a slippage from possession to self-identification, which is complicated by the reflective and refractive surfaces in which *Beloved* observes her self and mother (e.g., the diamonds, the water, the sea). *Beloved* claims her mother’s face as belonging to her in the same moment that she also claims that her mother’s face *is* her own. The symbiotic inter-dependence between mother and child that *Beloved* would like to recover in “the join,” or in her longing “to be the two of us,” is held in stark contrast to the actual effects of *Beloved*’s return to 124, when her obsessive desire for an ever closer bond with her mother consumes her and the rest of the family (252).

In addition to this confusion of self/(m)other¹⁰², *Beloved* also insists that she is “not dead” although she has been separated from “the man who died on [her] face” and abandoned because “the woman in [her] face is in the sea” (252; 249). In the juxtaposition of this unique word choice and syntax we learn that there is a significant difference in the way that *Beloved* refers to her mother as intrinsic to herself and how she clarifies that “[her] own

¹⁰² I adapt this term from Lorraine Liscio’s “(m)Otherness” (37).

dead man” who could represent a father figure and “whose teeth [she] ha[s] loved,” is “on [her] face” or “is pulled away from [her] face,” and therefore always physically outside of and separate from her (249). Unlike the references she makes to Sethe, she tells us about this dead man: “his face is not mine” (248). Although this difference in identification could easily be attributed to Halle’s physical absence as Beloved’s father or explained by psychoanalysis based on normative gender development, what remains clear is that Beloved not only identifies herself in her mother’s face, but also claims it as rightfully hers and integral to her “self” as “self/(m)other.”

However, Beloved’s strange language takes on a more stable interpretation, once she enters into conversation with her mother and her sister Denver in the fifth chapter of Part II, which Jean Wyatt describes as “imitat[ing] a mother-infant dialectic” (481). Although Beloved repeats the same stock phrases, Sethe interprets Beloved’s questions in relation to the specificities of her own life. For instance, Sethe takes the “men without skin” to mean white slaveholders, particularly those like the schoolteacher, whereas they could also be understood as ghosts, angels, cemetery caretakers, or slave traffickers in the liminal place from which Beloved speaks in the previous chapter. On earth, however, Beloved’s assertion of victimhood¹⁰³ is more clearly enumerated in terms of three specific moments: “Three times I lost her: once with the flowers because of the noisy clouds of smoke; once when she went into the sea instead of smiling at me; once under the bridge when I went in to join her

¹⁰³ Earlier in the novel Beloved asserts her innocence as well in a conversation with Denver. Denver, longing for some kind of lasting connection with her sister, reacts to Beloved’s cold remark that “You can go but she [Sethe] is the one I have to have,” and responds, “I didn’t do anything to you. I never hurt you. I never hurt anybody” (89). Oblivious to the hurt that she causes with her harsh words or her return in the flesh, Beloved replies, “Me either. Me either” (89). With this double insistence, Morrison aligns Beloved’s innocence as the only murdered child with Denver’s innocence in being the only child that remains at the same time that she reveals through Beloved’s child-like response to Denver’s plea, both Beloved’s selfish nature and Denver’s unconditional love for her sister’s ghost.

and she came toward me but did not smile” (253–254). These moments of loss that become so significant for Beloved are tied to a lack of meaningful visual connection (e.g., smiling), which Beloved associates with abandonment, neglect, and even disapproval, as we might assume that an infant would. Since the first visual impediment is strictly environmental, Beloved fixates on the second moment as a turning point, when her mother “went into the sea instead of smiling at [her].” Beloved’s choice of the word “instead” insinuates that these were the two available options and that they are interchangeable, i.e., Sethe chose one when she could have just as easily chosen the other alternative. The following passage where Beloved pinpoints the moment when she loses Sethe in the sea also illustrates this point:

She was about to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea. Sethe went into the sea. She went there. They did not push her. She went there. She was getting ready to smile at me and when she saw the dead people pushed into the sea she went also and left me there with no face or hers. (253)

What do we make of the fluidity in the image of the sea here, especially if the dead are obliged to enter this space and Sethe was able to enter of her own “free” will? Beloved seems to suggest that Sethe’s going into the sea is her decision to sacrifice herself and her children, so that they may die free. But, Sethe was not allowed to execute her plan, and did not join her daughter in the afterlife. Notably, Sethe’s autonomy is compromised by her status as a slave, partly re-asserted in her “protection” of her children from schoolteacher (although some could argue that the full range of choices were not available to her), and later modified by her dependence on the forgiveness of her daughter for her own subsistence. Nostalgic for a more corporeal connection with her mother (as in the womb or during breastfeeding), Beloved

resents her mother's decision to go into the sea as a choice that left her alone, abandoned, and neglected—without a face.¹⁰⁴

The aforementioned passage in which Beloved lays out the wrongs made against her is followed by a series of statements in which the speakers are not identified. The reader can only discern that there has been a change in speaker because each statement or series of statements is separated by spaces that place the response onto the next line. The first in the series seems to happen between Beloved and Sethe, then Beloved and Denver, given that the themes present in these sections relate to those that the characters deal with throughout the novel. We also know that these conversations are separate wholes because of the space between them and because punctuation marks the end of each phrase. The conversations directed toward Beloved are initiated by Sethe and Denver and at no point do Sethe and Denver seem to communicate with each other.

After these two conversations, the speech devolves—punctuation is no longer used, phrases are shortened, and each speaker is less readily identifiable as certain phrases could embody all three perspectives. Stamp Paid, upon approaching 124, compares the voices to a great destructive fire: “he thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn’t nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the

¹⁰⁴ However, it is important to know that in the previous chapter, when Beloved narrates from a liminal space, the sea is a loaded metaphor, which has the capacity to invoke, among other things, the space of 1) collective memory; 2) crossing over; 3) the Middle passage; 4) the womb; and 5) the myth of Narcissus, but all of these meanings function at once in Beloved's strange idiom. Carol E. Schmudde also finds this place “reminiscent both of a womb and the hold of a slave ship” and reminds us of Sterling Stuckley's *Slave Culture*, in which he “discusses ‘the Kalunga line,’ a ‘watery barrier’ which ‘divides this world from the next’ and symbolizes the surface of a body of water beneath which the world of the ancestors is found’ [. . .]” (410). The connection between Beloved's journey through the water to assume human form and Sethe's water “breaking” upon her arrival suggests a link between the womb and the grave, especially since in both Beloved takes on the fetal position (see Morrison 60–61; 88).

order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word *mine*" (202–203). In fact, "You are mine" is repeated six times in this section, and always three times in secession, representing the voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Commenting on this repetition, Wyatt observes,

‘You are mine’ is of course what the slave owners said, and as in the larger social order, the disregard of the other as subject, the appropriation of the other to one’s own desires, leads to violence. Although now Beloved’s disregard of limits eats up Sethe’s life, the logic of ‘You are mine’ originally permitted Sethe to exercise life-or-death rights over the children she conceived as ‘parts of her.’ (482)

While I agree with Wyatt here, I would also argue that because there is no punctuation separating each “You are mine,” the reader can imagine that the characters are speaking simultaneously, and that their desires for possession, acceptance, and unconditional love are what drive this obsessive repetition.

Overall, Beloved’s queries stand out because of their “other” construction: “Will we smile at me?” (254) and “Why did you leave me who am you?” (256). In these two examples Beloved subsumes her mother into the construct of self/(m)other at the same time that she recognizes her own subjectivity, albeit as an indirect/direct object of her mother’s agency. The only other times that Beloved refers to herself throughout this chapter are to signal her location (“this is the place I am”), to express desire (“I want”), or in the possessive form (“mine”), which is a larger indication of her childlike self-absorption. Beloved’s anger at her mother’s betrayal is revealed in these linguistic details that place Beloved at the center of meaning; as a result, she interprets all of her mother’s actions as directly related to her own

self worth. But *Beloved* is not the only one who places herself at the center and for this reason, she is not the only one to blame; in fact both Sethe (who “brought [her] milk”) and Denver (who “drank [her] blood”) claim *Beloved* as integral to their own bodies, and therefore as belonging to them.¹⁰⁵

While *Beloved* is infuriated by having her life cut short by her own flesh and blood, Eltit’s male protagonist María Chipia is angry and resentful for being inextricably bound to the destiny he purports to inherit from his mother. For this reason, the title of María Chipia’s half of the narrative, “Será irrevocable la derrota” (9; “Defeat will be irrevocable”), foretells the implications of an originary moment to which both María Chipia and the reader are made privy. The use of future tense and passive voice in the statement, “Defeat will be irrevocable,” indicates a lack of control in terms of the inevitability of defeat and conceals its primary cause. This section, held in stark contrast to its title, is written in the past tense from a future point in time, which suggests that María Chipia has already experienced the defeat that he sets out to make inevitable. Most remarkably, María Chipia’s narration spans the moments leading from his mother’s rape to his mother’s adultery, a narrative frame that reveals María Chipia’s twisted logic that ties what he perceives as “los terrores femeninos” (12; “the feminine terrors”) of his mother to his own ontology.

At the moment of his conception, María Chipia feels and experiences the anxiety and fear produced by his mother’s nightmares, which, in a way, also become his own: “Tuvo un

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Sethe seems to locate her notion of motherhood in her capacity to provide milk for her children, which makes the stealing of her milk even more traumatizing. Caroline Rody, for instance, categorizes Morrison’s novel as a “mother-quest” and argues that “Morrison replaces the prototypical white master’s crime against black slave women—rape—with a virtual rape of Sethe’s motherhood,” which she claims is evidenced by the “family tree” of scars they leave on her back (107). Wyatt also reflects on “the impossibility of separating what belongs to the one body from what belongs to the other when the two are joined by the nipple or, rather, by the milk that flows between them, blurring borders” (481). For an analogy between mother’s milk and language in the novel, see Lorraine Liscio, “*Beloved*’s Narrative: Writing Mother’s Milk.”

sueño plagado de terrores femeninos. Ese 7 de abril fui engendrado en medio de la fiebre de mi madre y debí compartir su sueño. Sufrí la terrible acometida de los terrores femeninos”

(12; “She had a dream plagued with feminine terrors. That seventh of April I was engendered in the middle of the fever of my mother and I had to share her dream. I suffered the terrible attack of feminine terrors”). Indeed, it appears to be that his mother’s fears are passed in the form of dreams to her children through a certain umbilical osmosis, and so too does she intuit the existence of her children in the form of “sus sueños bastardos” (“her bastard dreams”).¹⁰⁶

The multiple layers of representation are apparent here, since her dreams are also her illegitimate children, and therefore the novel itself, which is narrated from these children’s perspectives. What is more, the nature of her dreams, in which she envisions “dos figuras simétricas que terminaban por fundirse como dos torres, dos panteras, dos ancianos, dos caminos” (14; “two symmetrical figures that ended up merging like two towers, two panthers, two elders, two paths”), reveals her subversion in renaming her son (ignoring his father’s namesake) with a feminine name which would preserve this ideal of symmetry in her twins.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ However, maternal-fetal communication not only occurs through dreams, but through their mother’s storytelling of the experience of volunteering to help blind orphans: “Pero mi hermana y yo, que estábamos inmersos en su oscuridad artificiosa, vivíamos sus relatos como premoniciones aterrantes. Era terriblemente duro exponernos a sus narraciones desde el sistema cerrado en que yacíamos” (20; “But my sister and I, who were immersed in her artificial darkness, lived her stories as terrifying premonitions. It was terribly hard to expose ourselves to her narrations from the closed system in which we lay”)

¹⁰⁷ Pope sees this naming as making María Chipia’s sexual difference obsolete because “le resulta imposible anclar una esencia en tan frágil fundamento” (43; “it becomes impossible to anchor an essence in such a fragile foundation”). “Este nombre” (“This name”), Pope writes, “está tomado de una mujer perseguida por la Inquisición española y pareciera que al abrirle a su hijo la posibilidad de integrar su dimensión masculina y femenina la madre le subraya la condición de ser mujer, examinada y sometida a múltiples inquisiciones” (42; “is taken from a woman persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition and it would seem that by opening her son to the possibility of integrating his masculine and feminine side the mother emphasizes the condition of being a woman, examined, subjected to multiple inquisitions”).

The reader cannot ignore the tone of paranoia and indignation in María Chipia's narrative that there is some kind of "feminine" conspiracy against him from the very beginning, which places him on the defensive in this gender "war." He writes, "Así, el conocimiento de que mi madre era cómplice de mi hermana me demandó grandes energías, pues me era imperioso desentrañar la naturaleza y el significado de tal alianza" (17; "Like that, the knowledge that my mother was an accomplice of my sister's took a lot of my energy, since it was imperative to get at the bottom of the nature and significance of that alliance"). This supposed collusion between his mother and twin sister determines María Chipia's strategy for survival in a world where the lines of communication are gendered and in which his sister "portaba la clave de los sueños de mi madre que yo no poseía" (17; "held the key to my mother's dreams that I didn't possess"): "Las formas femeninas, dominantes en la escena, lanzaban mensajes incesantes. Preservarme de su desesperanza era impensable; más bien debía dejar móviles y abiertas mis marcas masculinas" (24; "The feminine forms, dominant in the scene, were incessantly shooting messages. Preserving myself from their desperation was unthinkable; rather I had to let my masculine attributes persist actively and openly").

But it is not only the nature of maternal-fetal communication that obsesses María Chipia; alternately, he reads bad intentions into his twin sister's intrauterine movements such that he construes her desire for closeness as a trap and her contact with him as sexual in nature (16; 22). As the twins gestate, they have the impression that the space of the womb is narrowing and, as a result, María Chipia is increasingly resentful that he must share "el efecto del encierro" (24; "the effect of confinement") with his sister. Here the symbolism of the uterine space multiplies and stands in for other spaces, such as the house, the nation, and

the most powerful nation in the world, that seem to restrict movement and the exit of its inhabitants in similar ways.¹⁰⁸

The suffering that they have in common, however, provides the basis for a potential alliance: “[l]a instalación del dolor entre nosotros fue la primera forma de entendimiento que encontramos” (24; “[t]he installation of pain between us was the first form of understanding that we found”). Once the twins realize that their mother blames them for having invaded and taken over her body, they stage their resistance by inventing dreams for her.

Su orden fantasioso cesó por completo, centrándose en cambio en un empeño imposible. Buscaba visualizar por dentro su proceso biológico para alejar de ella el sentimiento de usurpación. Su empresa era, desde siempre, un fraude para desencadenarnos culpas.

Nuestra culpa se alzó sobre el rigor de las aguas como una masa cerosa. Pudimos invertir el proceso desde el momento en que logramos gestar sueños para ella. Sueños líquidos que construíamos con retazos de imágenes fracturadas de lo real. Nuestros sueños eran híbridos y lúdicamente abstractos, parecidos a un severo desajuste neurológico. (21)

[Her imaginative order stopped completely, centering herself instead on an impossible task. She sought to visualize her biological process on the

¹⁰⁸ Pope, in “La resistencia en *El cuarto mundo* de Diamela Eltit,” interprets the title in economic and spatial terms, “El título de esta novela es enigmático y polivalente, pues por una parte invoca una clasificación—*cuarto* en la serie *primero, segundo, tercero*—y por otra una fracción, la cuarta parte de una totalidad, con especial referencia a una casa. Una habitación que se identifica con un mundo, un cuarto que es un mundo [...]” (35; “The title of this novel is enigmatic and polyvalent, since on the one hand it invokes a classification—*fourth* in the series *first, second, third*—and on the other a fraction, the fourth part of a totality, especially in reference to a house. A room that is identified with a world, a room that is a world [...]).

inside in order to distance herself from the feeling of usurpation. Her enterprise was, since always, a fraud in order to unleash our guilt.

Our guilt rebelled against the harshness of the waters like a waxy mass. We could reverse the process from the moment in which we managed to birth dreams for her. Liquid dreams that we constructed with remnants of fractured images of the real. Our dreams were hybrid and playfully abstract, similar to a severe neurological imbalance.]

Two important tropes regarding the unborn are troubled in this passage: the supposed innocence and the limited mental capacity of the fetus. What does it mean, for instance, to imagine the fetus as having an agenda or as being creative outside of reproductive processes? Given the fetus's vulnerability and reliance on the mother's survival for its own, what would be the implications for the fetus to also have the power to *construct* meaning in its mother's life? Moreover, what paradigms are problematized by postulating that the fetus could resist the guilt imposed upon it by using abstract intellectual thought as opposed to physical movements? The answers to these questions are complicated, particularly because Eltit's novel could be read at a variety of different registers, among others: 1) on the literal level of reproduction; 2) reproduction as an allegory for artistic creation (especially writing); 3) the rape that occurs within the institution of marriage as an allegory for the coup d'état led by Pinochet, in which the Chilean armed forces overthrew democratically elected President Salvador Allende, and the children as its inevitably crazed by-products;¹⁰⁹ 4) as an allegory

¹⁰⁹ María Chipia's description of his mother's rape can also be read here as the symbolic rape of Chile: "lo inusual de su enfermedad lo que enardeció genitualmente a mi padre cuando la vio, por primera vez, indefensa y disminuida, ya no como cuerpo enemigo sino como una masa cautiva y dócil" (15; "the unusualness of her sickness which genitally excited my father when he saw her, for the first time, defenseless and diminished, no longer an enemy body but a captive and docile mass").

for gender relations, especially under Pinochet; 5) as an allegory for Fourth World experience under neoliberalism.¹¹⁰

Perhaps María Chipia's recounting of his birth, or what he calls "el trágico espectáculo" (26; "the tragic spectacle"), could provide us with some answers about the meaning of this representation of the fetus as a conscious subject, given that this moment marks his passage from Eltit's imagined space of the womb¹¹¹ to the world outside the maternal body. Indeed, there is little difference between these two worlds that María Chipia is forced to occupy, which are structured by pain and struggle for survival. Birth is violent and traumatic for María Chipia because he feels vulnerable after the lines of communication are severed along with the umbilical cord, a moment that also indicates his loss of the influence over his mother that he previously had as an "insider." What is more, he interprets his sister's attempted departure from the womb as a personal attack,

Instintivamente mi hermana inició la huida ubicando su cabeza en la entrada del túnel. Hubo una tormenta orgánica, una revuelta celular. Todas las redes fisiológicas de mi madre entraron en estado de alerta ante el hilo de sangre que corría lubricando la salida. [...]

La violenta acometida terminaba por destruir mis anhelos de armonía en el derrame de la sangre que me envolvía, precedida de un terrible eco.

¹¹⁰ Kadir also comments on the use of gendered allegory in Eltit's *Lumpérica* and *Por la patria*, "in both instances the female is circumscribed by and meshed into a social and political order in and through which she has to negotiate her own survival, as well as the corporate well-being of the community she comes to personify as a political allegory" ("A Woman's Place: Gendered Histories of the Subaltern" 182).

¹¹¹ By "the imagined space of the womb" I mean to suggest that like Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" that provide the basis for a sense of national unity, the nostalgia for the forgotten experience of the womb takes on a significance as common human origin.

La animalidad de mi hermana llegó a sobrecogerme. Creí que ambos cuerpos iban a destrozarse en la lucha. (26–27)

[Instinctively my sister initiated the escape by placing her head in the entrance to the tunnel. There was an organic storm, a cellular revolt. All of the physiological networks of my mother entered a state of alert in view of the trail of blood that flowed, lubricating the exit. [...]]

The violent attack, preceded by a terrible echo, ended by destroying my vehement desires for harmony in the shedding of blood that enveloped me.

The animality of my sister began to astound me. I thought that both bodies were going to destroy themselves in the fight.]

Here María Chipia's narrative reads much like a state of emergency, in which escape (or birth) is an act of will in order to survive. Moreover, birth in this description is closely related to death for the mother and her children. The twins' mother interprets each accelerated beat of her heart leading up to her labor "como un síntoma definitivo de muerte" (25; "as a definitive symptom of death"), and resigned to death, she believes that "[s]u muerte no iba a alterar nada, no iba a afectar nada" (25; "her death would not alter anything, it would not affect anything"), forgetting the children fighting for their lives inside of her.

As María Chipia tells us, his mother's antagonistic feelings toward her children are manifested later in her breastfeeding, as if her state of mind could change the contents of the milk's nutritional value: "Mi madre y su leche continuaban transmitiendo la hostilidad en medio de un frío irreconciliable" (27; "My mother and her milk continued transmitting hostility in the middle of a an irreconcilable coldness"). Like the umbilical cord, the flows of communication between mother and child are re-established through this bodily transaction.

By writing a text that is also a body (her “niña sudaca”), and whose production is located in the female body, Eltit challenges the repeated appropriation of birth as a metaphor for artistic/textual creation by male writers, especially when those same men participate in the exclusion of women from art and literature based on their reproductive capacity.

Ultimately, the pre-verbal characters (the dead baby’s ghost and the fetus) who narrate in *Beloved* and *El cuarto mundo* express the vehement desire for connection as they emerge into a hostile environment that questions or qualifies the relative value of their existence. Both *Beloved* and María Chipia struggle with their own embodiment on different terms; the former aims to restore it by taking on a body and the latter wishes to be released from its imprisonment. At the same time, these children blur the boundaries between self/(m)other as they attempt to make sense of a seemingly antagonistic mother/child relationship. The feminization of bare life is apparent in the complaints waged by the fetal/infant voices in these texts against their mothers for not being proper mothers, that is, for not providing for the security and well-being of their children in the ways that mothers might be expected to. Yet, a nurturing mother-child relationship is not possible given that these mothers are positioned as bare life; moreover, the right to have control over one’s own reproduction and to care for and ensure the welfare of one’s children is often denied to them. Indeed, this is a system that confronts the reproduction of bare life with violence against the female and feminized body, which is carried out in the space of the domestic.

Domestic Disturbances, or Why the Personal is Political

As previously set forth in this chapter, the rhetoric of bare life enables its feminization. But the question still remains: how is it that only certain groups of people (men

and women) are systematically denied civil rights and that some women are still able to enjoy these same rights? The exceptional bodies represented by Eltit and Morrison suffer domestic abuse, I argue, not only in the literal sense, but also from their places of residence themselves. The ways in which their domestic spaces become domineering characters, however, reveal something about the experience of bare life, such that all spaces seem to be hostile to the existence of those without rights. In the two novels under investigation here, Agamben's designation of bare life as "*confined* to the home/domestic sphere" is literalized (my emphasis). If we read these haunted and possessed houses as national allegories for the state of exception, and their invasive and even oppressive presence on the lives of their inhabitants as an affront on civil rights, then the constitution of these domestic spaces requires further analysis. In Eltit's *El cuarto mundo* and Morrison's *Beloved*, the figure of the house, which is meant to protect its inhabitants from the elements, does not; rather, the case is quite the opposite, since the house "owns" its inhabitants. In these texts where houses are like prisons, family ties are the chains that forcibly bind the inhabitants together, keep them isolated from the world outside that would like to deny their existence, and, at the same time, prevent them from living full lives.¹¹² Indeed, if the womb, the house, and the nation are structured in similar ways under the state of exception (such that the womb or the house can easily stand in for, or be metonymic of, the nation, whose inhabitants are rendered bare life),

¹¹² Giorgio Agamben suggests that the space that bare life occupies in the modern state is the concentration camp: "When our age tried to grant the unlocalizable a permanent and visible localization, the result was the concentration camp. The camp—and not the prison—is the space that corresponds to the originary structure of the nomos. This is shown, among other things, by the fact that while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is (as we shall see) martial law and the state of siege" (*Homo Sacer* 20). However, as these novels demonstrate, the camp is not the only space that functions this way.

then this representation of nation is highly problematic, especially given the way that it “disciplines” and “punishes” its inhabitants (see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*).

As a “living” structure, Morrison’s 124, “palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut,” bemoans the profound violence that foreshortened her life and furthers her “deliberate abuse” of the occupants (6; 122).¹¹³ Even Denver, Sethe’s only surviving daughter, relates to 124 as a member of her family: “Shivering, Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative (someone dependent but proud)” (35). Whereas Sethe and Denver are accustomed to the antics of the baby ghost, it is not until the entrance of Paul D (a former slave from Sweet Home), who turns Sethe’s attention away from Beloved and even suggests the possibility of moving to a different house (upon which “[s]omething in the house braced” 18), that 124 starts a real fight. As Paul D first “step[s] inside her door smack into a pool of pulsing red light,” he is faced with “a wave of grief [that] soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry” (11). The pulsing red light here is a warning to Paul D to enter at his own risk, but it also symbolizes a particularly feminine locus—a womb-like space that will facilitate “the join”—occupied by Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Every other male figure has been scared away by the haunts of the baby ghost. As soon as Sethe and Paul D share an intimate moment, the house begins “pitching” and Paul D attempts to beat the ghost away, screaming “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got

¹¹³ Carol E. Schumde’s “The Haunting of 124” also provides a good analysis of this haunted house and its structural history. She claims that “the restless spirit of Beloved so dominates the narrative that it is easy to overlook the importance of the first factor in a haunting: an old house representing ‘an unbroken link with the past.’” (409).

enough!” (21; 22). As Sethe, Denver, and Paul D recover from the fight that destroyed the interior of the house and quieted the ghost, we also hear a non-human entity, tired and gasping for breath (22).

Once Paul D beats the ghost out of 124, its inhabitants are forced to face the reality of their living conditions and to acknowledge “how barren 124 really was” (48). The use of barren here is particularly significant, since the absence of the baby ghost signals emptiness and sterility in Sethe’s life at a moment when she must confront loss as permanent.¹¹⁴ According to Sethe, the fact that Paul D “ran her children out and tore up the house” disrupts the structural configuration of 124 (26). Moreover, Sethe perceives “r[unning] her children out” and “t[earing] up the house” as two distinct events, which suggests that she doesn’t believe, like Denver, that the house *is* a person; rather, Morrison intimates a connection between 124 and Sethe’s maternal body, both of which are *possessed by* the baby ghost. Consequently, in the same way that Paul D beats up the house, he also upsets Sethe’s sense of self by reading her scars, listening to her story, and then counting her feet.¹¹⁵ Indeed, Paul D’s failure to comprehend the strength of Sethe’s maternal love or how it translates into action also resurfaces in his dismissive attitude toward her relation to the past and to 124. It is clear that Sethe very much disagrees with Paul D’s assessment, namely that if the house is haunted she should abandon it, when she reflects: “he told her to leave as though a house was a little thing” (26).

¹¹⁴ Before, as Cynthia Dobbs points out, “[t]hinking she doesn’t have to face the loss of Beloved, Sethe loses her self to the embodied memory of Beloved [...]” (569).

¹¹⁵ Jean Wyatt also suggests that there is a connection between the maternal body and the haunted house. In “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” she writes that “when the narrative focuses on either the maternal body or the haunted house, metaphors abandon their symbolic dimension to adhere to a baseline of literal meaning” (474–475).

But it is Paul D's chasing of Beloved out of the house that ultimately enables her return in human form, in search of a place she "could be in" (77).¹¹⁶ 124 is loud again when Paul D, driven by Beloved to "house fits," is out of the picture. Although "the voices [...] ringed 124 like a noose," Sethe and Denver, who are consumed by fear of Beloved's departure, do not notice the danger (215). Sethe, overcome by the fact that her child has come back to her, believes that "[t]he world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be" (215) and refers to 124 as "the no-time waiting for her" (225). In 124 Sethe, Beloved, and Denver find a false sense of security as they re-live the time before the tragedy that so altered the course of their lives and isolate themselves from the world outside.

Denver, however, is still wary of the danger that at any moment Sethe could snap; she is only able to cope with her mother's murderous act by placing the threat outside the house and being protective of her older sister:

I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. [...] I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside this yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too. (242)

Alternatively, Denver later recognizes how Beloved's desire poses a larger threat from inside, since the dependent relationship between Beloved and Sethe has become toxic.

Denver, in a moment of lucidity, "saw themselves beribboned, decked-out, limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out. Then Sethe spit up something she had not eaten

¹¹⁶ See Schmulde for an analysis of Beloved as a poltergeist.

and it rocked Denver like a gunshot. The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved” (286). Here the relationship of mutual dependence is stunted in the “no-time” of 124, since Beloved’s individual growth is not possible without Sethe’s demise.

Indeed Beloved becomes the pregnant mother and Sethe the child in this reversal of roles:

Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. [...] She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it.
(294–295)¹¹⁷

Therefore, Paul D’s impression that 124 post-exorcism is “[l]ike a child’s house; the house of a very tall child” confirms the idea that Sethe has been infantilized by the haunting (318). What is more, Paul D’s sense that “[s]omething is missing from 124” and that it might be “the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses” also indicates how integral the dead baby’s ghost was to the inhabitants’ experience of 124 and to Sethe’s identity as her “best thing” (319; 321). Carol E. Schmudde comments on the role of the haunted house in the character development of this family: “For Denver, Paul D, and Sethe, who all live for a time with Beloved in 124, the force is both external and internal; the house shapes and the ghost

¹¹⁷ This point is also reiterated in the following passage: “The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun” (308).

gives expression to their own repressed inner conflicts. Their perceptions of the ghost are inextricably linked with their perceptions of the house itself; the setting forces self-confrontation” (412–413).

Although the circumstances of the characters that inhabit 124 seem to be extraordinary, Morrison, through the voice of Baby Suggs, suggests that the novel can be read as a national allegory when she claims, “[n]ot a house in this country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (6). Here Morrison reminds us that slavery is the institution on which the foundation of the United States was built; if we read *Beloved* as a national allegory, then the “invasion”¹¹⁸ of the past seems to be sensed only by the bare life inhabitants, whose lives are devalued and constantly threatened by the inherited legacy of slavery regardless of the space they occupy. Cynthia Dobbs locates this past in the body of *Beloved*:

As a body who stalls, even reverses, history, *Beloved* must be destroyed. But as a body who marks an unacknowledged past—both her own murder and the collective horrors of the Middle Passage—*Beloved* must first be remembered, “accounted for,” before she is finally introjected into the “chewing laughter” of the community. (569)

And yet, since, as the narrator tells us, “[t]his is not a story to pass on,” the past can no longer haunt the present in the same way, for it requires a certain national “rememory” that is irretrievable: “Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss.

¹¹⁸ Towards the end of the novel a neighbor Ella assesses the situation and concludes, “She didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion” (302).

Beloved” (324). With this closing, Morrison, helps the reader to experience and mourn this loss.¹¹⁹

Eltit’s novel, however, does not evoke much sympathy for its characters; instead, through her “confrontational” aesthetic,¹²⁰ she alienates the reader at the same time that the novel implicates the reader as a voyeur and as complicit in the conditions of the twin narrators. Because there is very little realist depiction of the actual geography of the house, spaces easily collapse into each other, so that the womb, the house, the city, and the nation share a similar aesthetic and lived experience for the inhabitants (with the city providing some minor contrast). Indeed, María Chipia and diamela never find sanctuary or security, not

¹¹⁹ In her article, “The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century,” Maria Margaronis eloquently refers to *Beloved* as this “unspeakable past made flesh” (150) and considers Morrison’s project to be “a reframing of America’s relationship to its racial history” (158). Sally Keenan also writes that “‘Beloved’ represents the ‘Sixty Million and more’ to whom the book is dedicated But that spectral return also provides an allegory of the way in which slavery has continued to haunt African-American existence during the 130 years or so since emancipation” (qtd. in Margaronis 156). Caroline Rody describes *Beloved* as “portray[ing] that ‘interior’ place in the African-American psyche where a slave’s face still haunts” (98). However, *Beloved* is not only a representation, but also took on a body, and, as Cynthia Dobbs warns, “a rhetoric dedicated to remembering bodies in their particularities and to restoring specific moments of history to cultural memory can ironically lead to the abstraction of these same bodies and cultures, to an erasure of their distinguishing differences. [...] Countering this tendency toward abstraction are particular bodies, bodies that are claimed by separate individuals but whose narratives are shared by a community. However, aestheticizing these particular black bodies-in-pain, as Morrison does at points, is also fraught with dangers” (574), given the history of the circulation of images of lynching in the United States. See also Dobbs’s discussion of scars in *Beloved* (575–577).

¹²⁰ Here I use Kadir’s term to describe Eltit’s aesthetic. He refers to her writing as “a literature of confrontation” (“A Woman’s Place: Gendered Histories of the Subaltern” 184). Although Kadir explicitly addresses Eltit’s *Por la patria* and *Lumpérica* in his analysis, I think that his assessment can also be applied to *El cuarto mundo*: “Eltit’s is an all-out confrontation, not mere resistance, that assails the institutional foundations of Latin American culture and political structures” (“A Woman’s Place: Gendered Histories of the Subaltern” 180). Commenting on the feelings of aggression that the dictatorship evoked, Eltit explains, “Entonces, la cuestión era precisamente cómo acercarse a esa agresividad, que era una agresividad múltiple y difícil de formular. Difícil de formular porque tú no podías únicamente depositar esa agresividad en lo militar. También esa agresividad estaba en todas las instituciones y estaba en el mundo civil” (*Diamela Eltit: Conversación en Princeton* 19; “So, the issue was precisely how to approach that aggressiveness, an aggressiveness that was multiple and difficult to express. Difficult to express because you could not only situate that aggressiveness in the military. That aggressiveness was also in all of the institutions and in civil society”).

even in their mother's womb; as such, they perceive an environment hostile to their existence on multiple levels, from the most personal and local to the national and even global. Eltit's characters seem almost paranoid or insane, as they wrestle with the constant threats that permeate their lives.

The house in Eltit's *El cuarto mundo*, much like Morrison's 124, is an unsettling presence in the lives of the twins, and even more so because its antagonism is not justifiable in terms of past wrongs, but rather in terms of a biological determinism related to the twins' perverse sexual origins. Their house, much like the womb that María Chipia described earlier, "era un caos, sacudida por el rumor de la muerte. El contagio trepaba por las paredes y nos observaba desde las ventanas" (65; "was chaos, shaken by the rumor of death. Contagion climbed the walls and observed us from the windows"). But it is not only death and disease that plagues the house, but also lust, as diamela tells us, "[h]eredábamos la casa y la lujuria de la casa que, intermitente, nos invadía" (151–152; "[w]e inherited the house and the lust of the house that, intermittently, invaded us"). Strikingly, diamela compares their vulnerability to attack in their house to a fetus in the womb confronted with an abortive instrument, "las incógnitas que nos amenazan como un afilado cuchillo desde la oscuridad de las aguas fetales" (125–126; "the hidden figures that threaten us like a sharpened knife from the obscurity of fetal waters"). In her attempt at narrating her experience of bare life, diamela reveals that there is some kind of human agency or willed violence in its creation, but her example also fails to capture the perspective of the woman whose body carries and nourishes the fetus and from within which the fetus senses the danger. Perhaps this is because the

maternal body and the house in *El cuarto mundo* are plagued by malnourishment and starvation and provides nothing more than a thinly protective veil, as in Morrison's 124.¹²¹

More telling is the twins' apparent consensus regarding the "natural" vulnerability of the female body as the perfect simile for their feelings of helplessness, which María Chipia reiterates in the following passage: "La vigilia ciega me asaltaba tal como una mujer desnuda en un terreno erial o como la magnitud cósmica de un parto" (71; "Blind vigilance assaulted me just like a naked woman in an infertile land or like the cosmic magnitude of a birth"). In both of these figures presented by María Chipia, there is a sense that larger and looming natural forces are at work and will inevitably prevail regardless of any individual assertion of control or resistance, as opposed to diamela's portrayal in which the threat is not nature but "a perverse humanity." Here, María Chipia's description of vulnerability and victimhood in terms of womanhood¹²² resonates with my previous discussion of the feminization of bare life, in which figurative language is literalized when women's bodies and the feminine/feminized are violently excluded from the national imaginary and particularly targeted as sites of national violence.

The fear of an imminent death and the paranoia that constant surveillance instills echo real accounts of life under dictatorship. Ironically, what María Chipia considers to be diamela's delusions is such an account:

¹²¹ They are starving but simulate eating meals (138).

¹²² It should be noted that in the second half of the novel, diamela describes María Chipia as a transvestite who dresses as a virgin (there is a clear reference to the Catholic figure of the Virgin Mary here) (109). This fact, in addition to the María Chipia's feminization by his mother renaming of him, reveals that his gender is unstable and troubled, and in many instances feminine, which makes sense in the larger schema of the rhetoric of bare life.

Dijo que había muchas palabras, frases y órdenes en sus cortos sueños, voces que hablaban desde una oscuridad absoluta, clamando por un difunto a quien ella no conocía o no podía recordar. [...] Creía ver guerreros incrustados en las paredes, con horribles tajos sangrando a través de las armaduras. Creyó que aves de rapiña le revoloteaban encima esperando que la sed la derrumbara. Para ahuyentar a esos seres acudía a la luz. La claridad la lanzaba a una sensación insoportable. [...] Prefería retornar a la oscuridad en la que, al menos, podía generar a un otro, aun para escarnecerla. [...] La casa crujía y parecía que las paredes estaban a punto de desplomarse encima de ella. Sentía que las paredes contenían una forma de humanidad perversa que su estado sorprendentemente lúcido había descifrado. Escuchaba pasos, quejidos, escuchaba gemir los objetos y reírse a la techumbre, oía murmullos en la pieza de mis padres, palabras que proclamaban la realización de una escena indecente. (95–97)

[She said that there were many words, phrases and orders in her short dreams, voices that spoke from an absolute darkness, crying out for one of the deceased whom she did not know or couldn't remember. [...] She believed she saw warriors encrusted in the walls, with horrible cuts bleeding through their armor. She believed birds of prey were circling above her waiting for thirst to cause her collapse. In order to flee from these beings she turned to the light. Brightness gave her an unbearable feeling. [...] She preferred to return to the darkness in which, at least, she could generate an other, even if it were to humiliate her. [...] The house creaked and it seemed that the walls were at the

point of collapsing on top of her. She felt that the walls contained a perverse form of humanity that her surprisingly lucid state had deciphered. She heard footsteps, wails, she heard objects whine and the roof laugh, she heard murmurs in my parents' room, words that proclaimed the realization of an indecent scene.]

In this passage diamela appears to be undergoing interrogation and torture techniques, which we later learn are performed by a member of her own family—her younger sister María de Alava—and which indicate an even deeper betrayal, one that many Chileans must have felt when their fellow citizens worked for Pinochet and turned against their own. If the house is indeed a national allegory here, then there is something extremely perverse or indecent about it, which is precisely Eltit's point. Wounded bodies, bodies in pain, and bodies near death abound in this grotesque house and even make up the very structure of the house's walls, which could crumble at any moment.¹²³ For diamela, there is no refuge, for the darkness is filled with monstrous images and the light is unbearable because her every move is under surveillance. Communication here is disconnected, urgent, accusatory, conspiratorial, and painful—with disembodied voices shouting from dark corners, crying and laughter from the very architecture of the house that seems more like an insane asylum, and clandestine whispers.¹²⁴ As such, both twins find themselves fighting to keep their sanity,

¹²³ Later on, diamela complains of her disturbing encounter with these bodies, including her own, “Me siento cercada por cuerpos prófugos, por pedazos de cuerpos prófugos que antagonizan la cárcel del origen. Me siento herida por cuerpos que han capitulado las condiciones de su derrota. Me siento indigna de tener un cuerpo” (135; “I feel approached by fleeing bodies, by pieces of fleeing bodies that antagonize the prison of origin. I feel wounded by bodies that have given into the conditions of their defeat. I feel unworthy to have a body”).

¹²⁴ Commenting on Diamela Eltit's *El Padre Mío*, Mary Louise Pratt observes, “durante el régimen militar sólo el loco de la calle puede hablar, y él sí tiene algo que decir. De hecho, el único hombre de la calle que está hablando libremente está loco” (21; “during the military regime only the crazy person on the streets can speak, and he does have something to say. In fact, the only man on the street that is speaking freely is crazy.”).

“Permanecemos frecuentemente ovillados y apoyados en los muros para evadir una definitiva masacre mental” (106; “We remained frequently wound up in balls and supported ourselves against the walls in order to evade a definitive mental massacre”).

Even more troubling is the institution of the family that occupies this house, which began with a husband’s rape of his wife and is fueled by a cycle of violence and abuse. Not only are the members of the family affected, but also the house, itself, as the father’s “autoridad contrariada golpeaba la casa dando alaridos” (87; “contrary authority continued to beat the house screaming”). For María Chipia the family is a hoax, for instead of producing stability and fulfillment it becomes a medium through which to keep its members docile and intimidated: “La comedia familiar rodaba hecha trizas, y asomaba su real fragilidad. Comparecía ante nosotros una pareja hostil, agobiada por el nudo perpetuo, cuya esclavitud se encadenaba en sus materias filiales” (87; “The family comedy was torn to shreds, and its real fragility surfaced. It presented a hostile couple before us, weighed down by the eternal knot, whose slavery was tied to its filial matter”). The mother, who is resentful of her situation but is left with nowhere else to go, even goes as far as to desire the destruction of this most basic social structure (88).¹²⁵

Domestic disturbances here stand in for national ones that serve a dual purpose: “Para mi padre los disturbios no eran sino una parte constitutiva de su vida. Los consideraba útiles para mantener el equilibrio y recordarnos la extensión de su poder. Jamás pensó verdaderamente en abandonar la casa. Más aún, la sola idea le era insoportable pues el afuera le generaba gran inseguridad” (88–89; “For my father the disturbances were nothing but a

¹²⁵ “En algún lugar esperaba el desplome final y la desarticulación de la familia, pero cerca de la realidad se replegaba, almacenando la tentación” (88; “Somewhere she hoped for the final collapse and the disarticulation of the family, but closer to reality she withdrew, storing away the temptation”).

constitutive part of his life. He considered them useful for maintaining equilibrium and reminding us of the extension of his power. He never really thought of abandoning the house. Even more, that idea alone was unbearable since the outside generated in him great insecurity”). The father’s insecurity in the world outside of his home is exacerbated by the public humiliation of his wife’s adultery, at which the city mockingly laughs (101). What this machista patriarch fears most, however, is that his wife will share her story with the world, and, in effect, air the family’s dirty laundry: “lo atormentaba la urgencia de que ella le hiciera un relato nuevo y completo de su vida. Un relato reproable y sincero. Quería agotarla y, después de saciarse, tirarla sobre las calles de la ciudad para que la acabaran el frío, la infección y el hambre” (105; “the urgency with which she would make a new and complete story of her life tormented him. A very probable and sincere story. He wanted to exhaust her and, after satisfying himself, throw her on the streets of the city so that the cold, infection, and hunger would finish her off”). His fear of being exposed by his wife’s testimony causes him to imagine her suffering and death. This “pecado capital” (“capital sin”) takes on both moral and economic resonances in this city in which lust and capitalism are inextricably linked as the Pinochet regime has, in Eltit’s terms, sold out, “adulterated,” and even “prostituted” its labor force.

In this extended metaphor the house and nation collapse into one, in which the corners of the house/nation become the sites of privilege and power. Indeed, it is the father who controls access to these corners¹²⁶ and he initiates only his youngest daughter (who has seemingly masculine attributes compared to her other family members), María de Alava, to

¹²⁶ Fittingly, María Chipia has the sensation that he and his twin were being watched from this position of power: “soportamos íntegros las miradas que nos juzgaban desde todos los rincones de la casa” (69; “we withstood upright the looks that judged us from all of the corners of the house”).

these spaces: “Fue él quien, personalmente, se encargó de llevarla a la red del lenguaje [...]. Fue él, también quien le enseñó algunos rincones de la casa, advirtiéndole que no se acercara demasiado a nosotros, manteniéndonos en espacios alternos” (51; “It was he who, personally, took charge of initiating her into the network of language [...]. It was he, who also showed her some corners of the house, warning her that she should not get too close to us, keeping us in alternate spaces”). María de Alava, as enforcer of her father’s will, “[s]e paseaba por la casa como única dueña, inspeccionando sus dominios” (82; “[w]alked through the house as its sole owner, inspecting her domain”), could be read as representative of the military government led by Pinochet and/or those who collaborated with the regime and were trained to turn on their fellow countrymen.

Remarkably, María de Alava, the twins’ principal inquisitor, touts the following dictum: “el goce es siempre purulento, y el pensamiento guerrero, bacanal” (128; “pleasure is always pus-filled, and thought warlike, orgiastic”). With this matter-of-fact approach, María de Alava transforms pleasure and thought, which are diamela’s strategies for resistance, into a sign of her perversity. Another voice locates diamela’s wayward nature in her female body, by predicting the moment of the birth of “la niña sudaca” as an inescapable fact (as opposed to an act of will) and by “insult[ando] la abertura genital” (115; “insult[ing] the genital opening”) as if it were the primary cause of her transgressions. As the chaos of the surrounding world is closing in on and isolating the inhabitants of the house to a greater degree, diamela feels that her gestating child “me ataca desde dentro. He incubado a otro enemigo y sólo yo conozco la magnitud de su odio” (147; “attacks me from the inside. I have incubated another enemy and only I know the magnitude of his hate”). As a “víctima de un turbulento complot político en contra de nuestra raza” (129; “victim of a turbulent political

conspiracy against our race”), she does everything in her power to delay the inevitable abandonment by her entire family, especially María Chipia and her child.

While diamela appears to believe, at times, the message of her accusers, she makes us aware of the many instances in which she must perform a certain role in order to survive. Just as diamela “entendió que no había nada natural, sino que la tierra misma estaba construyendo el artificio de un espectáculo” (98; “understood that there wasn’t anything natural about it, rather the earth itself was constructing the artifice of a spectacle”), her performance of her gender is a self-conscious and strategic one.

[C]onstruí para él una interioridad en la que no me reconocía, la interioridad que desde siempre él esperaba, tibia, sumisa y llena de orificios, esperando que él me destruyera. Representé en la pareja adulta la pieza más frágil y devastada.

Fue relativamente fácil levantar un misterio común y conocido; fue, también, muy simple observar el placer por la destrucción. Me dejé entrapar en una debilidad que, en verdad, no tenía y hablé, hablé de sucesivos terrores de mi ser fuera de control y preparé la escena para ser abandonada. (139)

[I constructed for him an interiority in which I didn’t recognize myself, the interiority that he always hoped for, tepid, submissive, and full of orifices, expecting that he would destroy me. I represented, of the pair, the most fragile and devastated part.

It was relatively easy to sustain a common and well-known mystery; it was, also, very simple to observe the pleasure in destruction. I let myself be entrapped in a weakness that, in truth, I didn’t have and I spoke, I spoke of the

successive terrors of my being out of control and I prepared the scene in order to be abandoned.]

Here we can observe the ways in which Diamela employs gender stereotypes of inferiority and “natural” victimhood traditionally associated with femininity in order to gain more time and keep her brother in the home. In fact, Diamela’s capacity for dissimulation becomes a survival strategy under a dictatorship that exhorts traditional gender roles. Although her gender performance, her incestuous relation with her brother, and the fertility of her body emerge as a type of resistance and confrontation of the forces that aim to control her life, Diamela seems to be more tightly bound to her body, the house, and the nation than her twin brother. Here, the womb, the house, and the nation act as a prison for Diamela, whose movement is restricted by the way that her symbolic chains to these structures and institutions are made literal under dictatorship.

Conclusion

In response to the cycle of domestic and national violence perpetuated in *El cuarto mundo* and *Beloved*, Eltit and Morrison confront the particular ways in which this physical, psychological, and symbolic violence targets the female body. At the same time that both authors expose the ways that the rhetoric of bare life operates, they also challenge the primacy of the word as the mark of genesis. As Pope points out, Eltit’s novel proposes instead that “en el principio no hubo la palabra, sino el cuerpo afiebrado, el acto brutal y las imágenes aterradoras” (38; “in the beginning was not the word, but the feverish body, the brutal act and terrifying images”). Indeed, in the beginning is a rape, a fact that Pope understates in his analysis. What makes this rape even more horrific is that it occurs within

the institution of marriage, in which a husband rapes his wife who is weakened by fever. Morrison's novel, on the other hand, replaces the word with sound: "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (Morrison 305). But this sound is not without its violence, for when the community comes to Sethe's rescue, "the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (308). As Cynthia Dobbs remarks, "[t]o 'break the back of words' is a curious image—an image of assault that carries the force of a particular moral and cultural imperative" (567). As such, with their narratives, Eltit and Morrison reveal the violent unspeakable origins that underlie their respective national histories and the equally destructive words that justify this violence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Revolutionary Wombs and Body Politics

The novels analyzed in the two previous chapters demonstrate how the social value of marginalized women is often reduced to the desirability of their REPRODUCTION in terms of national development. As opposed to these novels, which frequently represent the female body as a restrictive barrier and/or a hostile prison, *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* (1982; *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*) by Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman and *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987; *Christopher Unborn*) by Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes appropriate the womb as a space of consolation and hope.¹²⁷ Despite their postmodern narrative strategies, which hold them less responsible for the stories they tell by revealing their construction, these novels effectively frame the female body as a metaphor for an alternative nation that they long for as opposed to the nation that they actually inherit.¹²⁸ Pivotal historical moments

¹²⁷ I have chosen to use the official translations of these novels, since both Dorfman and Fuentes have authorized and collaborated in their production. See Ariel Dorfman, *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero* and Carlos Fuentes, *Christopher Unborn*. When referring to the characters in these novels, I use the original character names. Please note that there are moments when both authors take the liberty to change the structure and content of their prose in the English translation. I have tried to remark on any substantial changes made in the footnotes.

¹²⁸ For an analysis of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern elements in Dorfman's novel, see McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures*. See also Lois Baer Barr's *Isaac Unbound: Patriarchal Traditions in the Latin American Jewish Novel*. Barr categorizes Dorfman's novel as postmodern, given its "self-reflectiveness, allusiveness, and intertextuality" (136). For a discussion of Fuentes's postmodern tendencies in *Cristóbal Nonato*, see Raymond L. Williams, "Fuentes the Modern; Fuentes the Postmodern." In an interview with Claudia Ferman, Fuentes describes his relation to postmodernism: "Frente a Derrida, yo coloco siempre a [Mijail] Bajtin (1895–1975) y la posibilidad de la heteroglosia, de la multiplicidad de sentidos, metas y orientaciones del lenguaje, y a los reformadores tipo [Jürgen] Habermas (1929). Estas últimas son las posiciones a las que acerco más, y que se basan en la pregunta y la reflexión de si es posible tener un proyecto de liberación renovado [...], un proyecto de liberación que incluya la gran diversidad de las culturas del mundo que empiezan a aparecer, entre las que nos incluiríamos nosotros" ("Carlos Fuentes y *Cristóbal Nonato*: entre la modernidad y la posmodernidad" 99; "Opposite Derrida, I always place Bakhtin (1895–1975) and the possibility of heteroglossia, of the multiplicity of the senses, goals and orientations of language, and reformers like Habermas (1929). The latter are the positions I am closer to, and are based on the question and reflection of whether it is possible to have a project of renewed liberation [...], a project of liberation that would include the great diversity of the cultures of the world that are beginning to appear, among which we would include ourselves").

(September 11, 1973 and 1492) are re-imagined nostalgically through the female body, but also gesture toward a different, sometimes utopic, future.¹²⁹ In this vein, these authors render the womb not only “an anachronistic space,” to use McClintock’s term, but also a “parachronistic space”; that is, the womb becomes part of the nostalgic past or a utopic future, but never synchronous with the body that “contains” it. McClintock defines the “anachronistic space” as applying to those who “do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency—the living embodiment of the archaic ‘primitive’” (30). However, when I use the terms “anachronistic space” and “parachronistic space” in relation to the womb, I refer to the relation of time between the womb and the body to which it belongs.

Certainly, outside these imaginary wombs, the actual worlds of these authors and the virtual worlds of these novels are dystopic by comparison. Dorfman, as a political exile from Chile following the coup’d’état that instated the dictatorship, which subsequently suspended civil rights and violated human ones, struggles with feelings of helplessness and longing for his homeland. Accordingly, as Sophia A. McClennen observes in *Ariel Dorfman: An Aesthetics of Hope*, “[e]ach of the narrative lines relates in some way to the notion of exile, internal or national, and each comments on the problems of being socially outcast” (197).

¹²⁹ Kadir provides a similar account of the structure of time in Fuentes’s novel: “the fluid and heterodox reality in this novel’s scripture figures as an unremitting oscillation between a past perfect of nostalgia (called romantic conservatism in the novel) and a future perfect of utopia and messianic delivery (referred to as Ayatollahism or Westering the Pacífica) that belie any possible perfectability” (“Fuentes and the Profane Sublime” 87–88). In *The Dialectics of Exile*, McClennen argues that “Dorfman chooses to narrate two separate alternatives to Pinochet’s Chile. The first refers specifically to Allende’s Chile, but the second version of the nation has no temporal or spatial markers” (94). The latter, as McClennen observes, is “a mythical, manichean nation where the good are able to defeat the forces of evil” (93). Of principal concern for this project is that the female body is implicated in all of these alternative versions.

Lois Baer Barr has suggested that the storyline that corresponds with the title of Dorfman's work is "surely inspired by the martyred folksinger Victor Jara and his wife Joan"; Jara became a target of the Pinochet regime because of his leftist lyrics and his support of Allende (140).¹³⁰ Fuentes too writes amidst corruption, financial collapse, environmental catastrophe, and the dirty war waged by the Mexican government. His novel, set five years in the future from its publication date, is bleaker: Mexico has become a wasteland, in which all that is left for the people to believe in are national symbols and icons that lack substance and are constructed by the government in order to placate the masses. The social context, thus, becomes a point of contrast that Dorfman and Fuentes use to create their imaginary wombs.

But this gesture toward a seemingly positive portrayal of the female body is not without its own politics or limitations, for, in their efforts to "imagine communities,"¹³¹ they ultimately re-inscribe the relation of inclusive exclusion that the feminine and bare life have with the body politic. The problem is that the maternal body, as a good "receptacle," becomes a symbolic and actual boundary between the present and the survival of the past or the alternative future in which Dorfman and Fuentes are so invested. Their metaphors dismiss the creative agency of these mothers, replacing it with that of their male fetal protagonists.¹³²

Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the implications of this process in "Write Your Body and the Body in Theory":

¹³⁰ According to Barr, "Jara, like Manuel Sendero, composed a last song written amidst the torture and the murder faced by those rounded up by the military immediately following the 1973 coup. Jara's song, *Chile Stadium*, was his last act of defiance. Chavkin states that, 'Fellow inmates memorized the lyrics and smuggled them out by word of mouth'" (140).

¹³¹ I borrow this term from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

¹³² Please note that for the sake of readability, I have, for the most part, used the word "fetal" to refer to these intrauterine characters, as it is difficult to determine with exact certainty the stage of development that corresponds with the moment in the text.

This is how the womb is fabricated. Women began to be spoken of as if they were wombs on two feet when the fetus was described as a citizen, the womb was declared state property, legislation was passed to control it, and midwifery was kept under continual medical supervision—in other words, when women were denied the right to create. Or not to create. With their bodies. (259)

Owing to this bodily configuration, in which the fetus becomes emblematic of the future body politic, states are able to subject the womb's "irrationality" and "unruliness" to legislation and exert control over its productivity by placing it under national jurisdiction.

The female "protagonists" of these two novels, on account of their romantic liaisons with political revolutionaries, remain silent or silenced.¹³³ Their bodies, however, become the soapbox for the nation's future, the unquestionably masculine voices of the fetuses they safeguard. Dorfman, for instance, figures the body of Doralisa, particularly her womb, as the symbolic site of social revolution and the source of rebirth for the Chilean nation. Fuentes, alternatively, imagines Ángeles's body as the birthplace of a living and embodied national symbol and likens this symbol's conception to Columbus's transatlantic voyage and its birth to the discovery of America. In both novels, these textual mothers are absolutely essential to a re-conceptualization of the nation, although their own agency in this regeneration is overshadowed by that of the unborn fetuses they carry within.

¹³³ I put protagonist in quotes here because, although they should be, they are not chief actors in their national dramas.

The male fetal narrators, I argue, represent the “head” and “voice” of a future body politic¹³⁴ while their mothers are transformed into an idealized corporeal homeland that nourishes and protects. In *Imperial Leather*, McClintock explains that this kind of inclusive exclusion is typical of women’s relation to the body politic: “Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit [...]. Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation [...], but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (354). That Dorfman and Fuentes replicate this paradigm so well, even as they attempt to imagine an alternative for their respective nations, suggests the difficulty in conceptualizing nation without the symbolic exclusion of the feminine. McClintock also ties this relation of inclusive exclusion specifically to constructs of national time:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity. Nationalism’s anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender. (359)

Ángeles and Doralisa are indeed relegated to the background or, one could say, become the backdrop of the two novels under examination in this chapter. According to their fetal narrators, these mothers are largely abstract, passive, silent, and accept supporting roles in their respective national dramas: Ángeles agrees to conceive a child-icon in order to win a

¹³⁴ Here, I do not mean to suggest through this statement that these fetal narrators are heads of “state;” rather by body politic, I refer to the social body of the nation.

national contest, and Doralisa prefers to live in a world of dreams, while she remains subject to the will of her fetus that refuses to be born. As such, these mothers' wombs are sites of revolution, but little credit for this innovation is attributed to the "environment" that the mother provides for its conception and development. As birthplace, the maternal body, which is often compared to the landscapes of Chile and Mexico in these novels, is a fetal homeland; while for the most part secure, it is also vulnerable to invasion.¹³⁵ Indeed, as is often the case in these novels, the safety of the womb is preferable to the world outside of it; in *Cristóbal Nonato*, the fetus-narrator Cristóbal wonders, "Vale la pena nacer en México en 1992?" (557; "Is it worth it to be born in Mexico in 1992?" 525) and in *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* the fetuses rebel against the adults and resist birth until Chile has been revolutionized. In these texts, Dorfman and Fuentes transform the womb into the stage for social revolution and the revision of national origins, thereby legitimizing the unborn in biological, genealogical, and national terms.

Obsessed with genealogies, these authors situate the origin of life in the spermatozoa located in male bodies, particular those of Ángel Palomar and Manuel Sendero. As such, they trace the voyage of their gametic characters and their navigation through the uncharted waters of their mothers' wombs. According to Emily Martin, author of "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male- Female Roles," "[e]ndowing egg and sperm with intentional action, a key aspect of personhood in

¹³⁵ Commenting on the diverse representations of reproduction throughout *La última canción de Manuel Sendero*, McClennen remarks: "On the one hand, it [the way that Dorfman represents reproduction] mirrors that of a society that is on the verge of extinction: David's girlfriend Gringa gets an abortion, David gets a vasectomy, his son probably commits suicide, Sarah Barks is infertile, it is suggested that the son of Sendero was aborted, and the fetuses refuse to be born in two massive rebellions. Yet, on the other hand, the female body and the womb, in particular, are depicted as utopian places of sanctuary and refuge and the children born from it are a source of hope" (*Ariel Dorfman* 199). In *Cristóbal Nonato*, the invasion takes the form of Ángeles's rape by Matamoros Moreno.

our culture, lays the foundation for the point of viability being pushed back to the moment of fertilization” (500). Indeed, the ways in which Cristóbal and el abuelo (Grandfather, the nameless son of Manuel Sendero) narrate their own conceptions might suggest that Dorfman and Fuentes are preformationists,¹³⁶ that is, they imagine gametes as if they were already miniature subjects. For example, el abuelo, who performs coitus interruptus so as not to be “un inseminador falaz” (36; “a false inseminator” 34), is described as “inundando el valle de sábanas y no el valle de hijos que clamaban por armar camas y petacas en la caliente corola de Pamela” (36; “flooding a valley in the sheets and not a valley of children clamoring for cradles and beds in Pamela’s warm corolla” 34). Here, spermatozoa become children while the egg is converted into a cradle and the womb opens like the petals of a flower to receive them.

What is more, in these novels little time or attention is given to how the union of egg and sperm alters the “subjectivity” of the sperm. Not only have these spermatozoa appropriated a male identity, but they also perform traditionally masculine traits in their cellular encounters.¹³⁷ In the case of Cristóbal, individual will combined with the natural destiny of his unique spermhood enable “him” to overcome the others to reach “his” mother’s egg; whereas, el abuelo’s conception seems somewhat anticlimactic—“una fracción

¹³⁶ Schiebinger explains, “By the seventeenth century, the Aristotelian view that the woman (through her menses) contributed only formless matter to generation, while the male (through his semen) contributed form or sentient soul, was called into question by one important school of thought among the ‘preformationists.’ Preformationists believed that a fully formed organism exists in miniature in the egg [ovists] or sperm [animalculist], in contrast with the epigenesists, who believed that a fetus gradually develops from a simple to a complex organism” (178–179).

¹³⁷ Often, these sperm, when referencing their membership of a collectivity, refer to themselves in the masculine. Regardless of the X or Y chromosome that they carry, I find it interesting that the fact of possessing one half of the chromosomes imbues the sperm with a gender and a sex. Although Cristóbal does entertain the possibility that he could actually be a Cristina, this musing is cut short.

microscópica de mí mismo subía al encuentro de mi otra mitad redonda y jugosa” (30; “a microscopic fraction of me climbed up to meet my other round and juicy half” 26).

Nonetheless, in these portrayals, the egg effortlessly descends or opens “her” arms to the newcomer, while the sperm actively struggles and physically exerts “himself,” thus reproducing what Emily Martin has called “[a] scientific fairytale” in her article (486). This romance, promoted even at the level of gametes, is used by Dorfman and Fuentes to resolve (albeit temporarily) national catastrophe and disintegration.

In “Embryologies of Modernism,” Susan M. Squier draws parallels between the science of embryology and modern aesthetic practices of character development. While most of her analysis is focused on the early twentieth century, Squier’s conclusion gestures toward a literary trend that relates to this chapter:

In their adaptations of embryological techniques to questions of character construction [...] these modern literary texts demonstrate the range of cultural meanings both borrowed from, and enabled by, the discourse of early-twentieth-century embryology. The interest that modern writers demonstrated in these new techniques in the years between 1900 and 1935 has been echoed, since 1980, by a parallel explosion of global interest in embryology embodied in a number of fictions exploring fetal life, from Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Ariel Dorfman’s *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, and Carlos Fuentes’s *Christopher Unborn* to Kenzaburo Oe’s *A Personal Matter* and Pascal Bruckner’s *The Divine Child*, each of which can be understood as drawing on embryological models to articulate a new, national fetal subject.

(151)

The embryological model on which Dorfman and Fuentes base their representation of “a new, national fetal subject” is that of the preformationists, and more specifically the animalculists, of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. According to Squier, “the seventeenth century saw the development of a ‘fetal subject’ suiting the new requirements of the liberal civil state,” which would make sense for Dorfman and Fuentes, whose neoliberal contexts are very much concerned with and “invested” in issues of individual freedom and rights, both human and civil (“Embryologies of Modernism” 146).

With the aim of investigating the implications of rendering the fetal subject a citizen, this chapter is divided into three different sections. The first is titled “Charting Novel(tie)s,” which explores the ways in which Dorfman and Fuentes engage with the social contexts of 1980s Chile and Mexico and use sexual reproduction to structure narrative. In the second section, “The Birth of the Author,” I examine how both authors engage with the notions of conception and birth, specifically as they relate to definitions of life and authorship. “A Symbolic Mother for the Nation: Whose Body Politic?,” the final section, discusses the repercussions that traditional metaphors of nation and the body politic have for women, and specifically how these implications are manifested in the novels of Dorfman and Fuentes.

Charting Novel(tie)s

Although Dorfman and Fuentes are telling very different stories, they share some similar aesthetic practices. Both novels have what Lois Baer Barr calls “a gestational structure” (142) and directly address the reader, including her/him in the construction of the text. In addition, both defy generic definition, expose their intertextuality, and often

undermine their own narratives by revealing their inherent contradictions.¹³⁸ For these reasons, these texts, which amass almost a thousand pages together, are difficult to recapitulate. Most approaches to these texts read them as participating in a larger literary tradition, in which sexual reproduction also becomes a metaphor for textual creation.¹³⁹ Indeed, in the texts that serve as a model for these authors, such as Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, to name just two, the intellectual activity of the male characters is made possible by the often invisible labor of the female characters.¹⁴⁰ The male characters are the thinkers, writers, and translators while the female characters are made secondary. Therefore, the aspect of these novels that I am concerned with here is their representation of their protagonists' maternal-fetal relationships, since this aspect is often overlooked and since, in my opinion, Dorfman and Fuentes are less reflexive about the ways in which they are using metaphors of the female body than the other authors in this study. For this reason, I have chosen to explore those sections of the narrative that deal with the individual and collective representations of this dynamic and to focus more on the way that metaphors of reproduction connect to nation-building, as opposed to textual creation. In my analysis, I am concerned with examining the ethical implications of an uncritical use of the female body as a metaphor. What if, I ask,

¹³⁸ For an analysis of the role of the reader in Fuentes's text, see Kadir's "Fuentes and the Profane Sublime" 88.

¹³⁹ McClennen remarks on this structure in *Ariel Dorfman: An Aesthetics of Hope*: "Given that *The Last Song* narrates frustrated reproduction, the use of a birth metaphor to structure the novel serves to further complicate an interpretation of the text. At one level the structure suggests the process of writing the novel as similar to that of the act of giving birth. In addition, the novel likens the development of social struggle to that of childbirth. The birth of a just society, Dorfman suggests, requires similar acts of love, patience, strength, and courage to that of giving birth" (197–198). For a discussion of the many literary forebears of *Cristóbal Nonato* and a more extensive explanation of the role of the metaphor of reproduction and its connection to textual creation, see Kadir, "Fuentes and the Profane Sublime."

¹⁴⁰ For a further discussion of this topic in relation to *Cien años de soledad*, see my forthcoming article, "Entre lo físico y lo metafísico: una interpretación alquímica de *Cien años de soledad* de Gabriel García Márquez."

these bodily configurations and gender dynamics were to actually structure our experience as citizens? What if they already do?

Ariel Dorfman's *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* is divided into five parts that are structured from conception to birth, namely "Encarnaciones" ("Incarnations"), "Maduraciones" ("Maturings"), "Dolores" ("Pangs"), "Pasajes" ("Passages"), and "Alumbramientos" ("Bearings").¹⁴¹ In *Isaac Unbound*, Lois Baer Barr writes that "Dorfman gives his novel a gestational structure," since "[t]he total number of chapters titled *Adentro* and *Afuera* is nine—the nine months of gestation. The five parts of the novel refer to conception, the three trimesters of pregnancy, and birth. Dorfman describes Manuel Sendero's story in feminine time" (142). The five parts listed above are subsequently divided into "Adentro" ("Inside") and "Afuera" ("Outside"), signaling two different perspectives on the Pinochet dictatorship and the national imaginary: 1) the point-of-view from inside the confines of the womb and within the physical boundaries of the country 2) the point-of-view of exiles and others that live outside of the Chilean border.

Indeed, it is precisely through these borders that the body and the nation become the focal point of this inside/outside dynamic. Dorfman's acknowledgements from the 1987 translation signal this connection: "This book is about frontiers and how to pass through them without being destroyed." Although there are bodily frontiers that are unidirectional, in Dorfman's imaginary world desire or necessity can make it possible to return to the womb even after birth, to hold on to the collective and genealogical "knowledge" that we have access to in the womb, and to will one's own birth or postpone birth's inevitability. Divisions between inside and outside are a preoccupation for Dorfman precisely because of his

¹⁴¹ These translations are from the official translation by George Shivers and Ariel Dorfman, although the reader should note that "Dolores" can also be translated as "Pains" and "Alumbramientos" as "Births."

experience as a Chilean political exile and the divisions that this trauma of separation created between those who remained behind “adentro” and those that were able to escape and live “afuera.”¹⁴² This novel, written while Pinochet was still in power, is obsessed with the idea of revolution, what makes an individual a faithful revolutionary, and whether or not the goals of the revolution can change. Dorfman dramatizes this dilemma in three principal storylines.¹⁴³

The first major plot, which occupies all of the sections titled “Adentro,” recounts the legend of the Manuel Sendero’s last song, in which his future and hypothetical children dream a different ending for their dear progenitor, an alternative future in which he survives and is able to save his wife and son from the evil ploys of el caballero. The story is originally communicated in utero and later ex utero by Manuel Sendero’s unborn son (who is nameless, except for the narrator’s reference to him as el abuelo). The narrator is not el abuelo himself, but rather a member of the future descendants of Manuel Sendero who recounts el abuelo’s story. The audience is made up of “hijos míos, nietos de mis amígdalas, biznietos que se quedan boquiabiertos y umbilicales a mis rodillas” (18; “you kids, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, you kids sitting here openmouthed and umbilically at my feet” 10), which situates the reader as a typical child listening to the story of how they were (not yet) born.

¹⁴² Diamela Eltit’s novel *El cuarto mundo* provides an interesting contrast to Dorfman’s, since she remained in Chile during the dictatorship and created her own forms of resistance within the artistic and political group CADA. In her novels and nonfiction, she often represents the experience in terms of the *locura* it creates in its citizens.

¹⁴³ McClennen divides Dorfman’s text into six plot lines (196–197). For an extensive analysis of all of these narrative threads and Dorfman’s engagement with high art, mass media, and counter-culture, see McClennen, “Anything Else Would Have Tasted Like Ashes: From Popular Unity to Exile (1970–1990)” in *Ariel Dorfman: An Aesthetics of Hope*. For an analysis of the role of exile in Dorfman’s novels, see McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile*.

We soon learn that, in order to cope with the disappearance of her husband Manuel Sendero and his internment in a concentration camp, Doralisa agrees to take a pill—as a part of a drug test being conducted by el caballero’s company—that will maintain her in a perpetual state of sleep. El caballero, to whom McClennen refers as “the military leader who represents absolute power” (*Ariel Dorfman* 202), assures Manuel Sendero that:

Su mujer se iba a despertar cuando, a juicio de la empresa, se hubiera alcanzado un resultado satisfactorio. Mientras tanto, la futura madre y el presente feto, aunque no se lo nombra explícitamente por disposición del Ministerio de Salud, quedando comprendido en la frase: “y otros residentes en el cuerpo de la madre”, gozan de un estatuto de garantías. (33)

[His wife was going to wake up when, in the judgment of the company, a satisfactory result had been achieved. Meanwhile the future mother and present fetus, which, although it is not explicitly mentioned in the proposal from the Ministry of Health, is also covered under the contract by the phrase *and other residents of the mother’s body*, enjoy the benefits of a Statute of Guarantees. (30)]

Referring to these women as *bellas durmientes* (42; “sleeping beauties” 42), el caballero explains that, in a sense, they are “working” by remaining passive and sedated, but we are not privy to her perspective and only to others’ interpretations of her actions (42; 42). As he is being gestated, el abuelo stages the first fetal rebellion, which fails once Pamela is unable to resist birth any longer; therefore, el abuelo becomes the spokesperson and liaison for a future fetal rebellion since “[e]ra el único no nato de la historia que había conseguido dominar el misterioso arte del espacio exterior. [...E]ra el único nacido del universo que

todavía recordaba y vivía hacia atrás, me había quedado atrapado en esa realidad intrauterina” (137; “[h]e was the only unborn person in history to have mastered the mysterious art of external space. [...H]e was the only born person in the universe who still remembered and lived looking backward to the womb; I had remained psychologically trapped in that intrauterine reality” 170).

In this narrative thread, Dorfman constantly replays a scene of a man on a bicycle being chased by the police; whether Manuel Sendero is on the bicycle or not, whether he is singing or not, whether he is shot or escapes, whether his wife Doralisa and his son survive or not all become issues of grave importance to those who retell it. Since the story is told primarily from the point of view of el abuelo and the other fetuses, the reader, in order to take the fetal perspective seriously, must (even if temporarily) believe in the survival of Manuel Sendero’s son(g). McClennen reflects on this instability and accompanying uncertainty that Dorfman’s novel causes for the reader: “The classic literary metaphor of linking storytelling and human reproduction, though, is frustrated by Dorfman since, even though the writer has been able to produce a novel, the novel itself implies that what has been produced has only a very tentative chance of survival” (199–200). The effect, nonetheless, is that the reader finds herself/himself rooting for the existence and perpetuation of the “last song.”

Yet, this tale of survival (if it really is one) is converted into a utopic dream in the Third Epilogue; as the narrator tells us, it “nos había metido, como hermanos, en el vientre de Doralisa para que confluyeran todos los ríos del dormir mientras ella despertaba, niños por nacer, niños sin secretos, fetos prenupciales e insurrectos” (351; “had placed us like brothers and sisters inside Doralisa’s womb, so that all the rivers of sleep would flow together while she was awakening—unborn children, children without secrets, prenuptial and rebellious

fetuses” 446). Her revolutionary womb, then, is transformed into an ideal collective unconscious, or, one could argue, a brand of national imaginary. A country only united through Manuel Sendero’s music is thus reunited by this shared dream and communal awakening: “acababan de soñar y compartir el vientre del mundo. Les entró la sospecha [...] de que dependía de ellos y de cada uno de nosotros preparar un mundo en que los padres jamás tuvieran que escoger entre su dignidad y la vida de sus hijos, entre esas dos formas del futuro, [...] inventaron la primera marcha contra la muerte” (352; “they had dreamed about and shared the world’s womb. They suddenly suspected [...] that it depended on them and on each one of us to prepare a world where parents would never have to choose between their own dignity and the lives of their children, between those two forms of the future, [...]and] they invented the first march against death” 446–447).¹⁴⁴ In this way, Dorfman calls attention to the ways that dreams and the imagination, by visualizing a homeland that is livable, have the potential to forge another national history alongside the official one.

The other two storylines take up the sections titled “Afuera,” in which a fragment of text that chronicles a dialogue between David and Felipe, two Chilean revolutionaries in exile, has been discovered by archaeologists and is being taught in a course on Prehistoric Amerspanish III 30,000 years after Pinochet (69; 79). This entire section, which we later learn is really a *telenovela* (“soap opera”), is about two Chilean exiles who are meeting up in Mexico to discuss a comic strip that David wants to work on with Felipe. During their conversation, they talk about their reasons for exile, their relation to their home country and to revolution that they were a part of, their strained relationships with women, and how they envision their lives to be.

¹⁴⁴ As el abuelo tells us, “Cuando Manuel Sendero cantaba, ahí precisamente se ponían de acuerdo” (32; “*When Manuel Sendero sang, that was precisely when they were in agreement*” 28, his emphasis).

The comic strip that David proposes is the final narrative strain that is woven in and out of this section. Partly told through David's perspective, partly interrupting the narrative, and partly sketched out in comic bubbles, the comic strip is set in the fictional world of Chilex, in which Carl Barks, an aged Disney cartoonist from the U.S., is hired by the Chilex government to design a national superman, of sorts, whom they will then clone by extracting what they call the "X Factor" from the living to achieve immortality (for a select few). If truth be told, Felipe's assessment of David's ideas for the comic, is accurate, "la cosa está como forzada. Como si no pudieras tomar distancia. Como encerrado en una obsesión, con un país que nadie, salvo tú, reconocería. Una metáfora de país, un delirio" (215; "The whole thing is forced. As if you just couldn't get the necessary distance. Like being locked into an obsession, with a country that no one except you would recognize. A metaphor of a country. A madness" 272). Certainly this obsession with national metaphors permeates the other narrative strands, in which this "madness" is also recognized and communicated.

In a similar vein, the absurd becomes the subject of Carlos Fuentes's *Cristóbal Nonato*, which was written in 1987, just two years following the earthquake that devastated Mexico City, which, according to *The Course of Mexican History*, exacerbated the economic problems already faced by the Mexican government (Meyer, Sherman, and Deeds, 660). Inflation, massive foreign debt, and an unemployment rate of up to 25% were left to President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) from the previous regime of José López Portillo (1976–1982), who used national money to maintain a luxurious lifestyle while much of the nation remained in poverty (657). In his administration Madrid began moral reform, under which Arturo Durazo (Mexico City's chief of police under López Portillo) and Díaz Serrano (PEMEX director) were prosecuted for corruption and embezzlement (658). The editors of

The Course of Mexican History remark that “[t]he country’s comptroller general synopsis the issue perfectly when he stated that Mexican corruption was like garbage: it had to be removed daily” (658). Influenced by neoliberal ideas, Madrid severely cut government social programs and spending. Due to the economic crisis, the population increased substantially on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, as laborers tried to sustain their families by becoming migrant workers who would work below minimum wage and also by crossing the border illegally. Fears about disease, polluted and contaminated water, the drug trade, and the myth surrounding the undocumented worker as a leech on the system troubled U.S.-Mexico relations (662–665).

Regardless of any improvements made by Madrid’s presidency, what remains clear is that the PRI, a political party that had been in power since the late 1920s, tortured, disappeared, and killed dissident citizens. According to an article by Juan Forero in the *The Washington Post*,

The release of the “Historical Report to the Mexican Society” marks the first time that Mexico has officially accepted responsibility for waging a dirty war against leftist guerrillas, university students and activists. It includes declassified government records, photographs and details about individuals who were killed under the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, the authoritarian party that ruled the country for 71 years before being ousted in 2000.¹⁴⁵

However, it is not until 2006, when this report is published, that this fact is publicly acknowledged by the Mexican Government.

¹⁴⁵ For access to the entire *Informe Histórico a la Sociedad Mexicana*, see Mexico and for the article on the report’s release, see Forero.

Julio Ortega even remarks that “Fuentes is the narrator *par excellence*; he is capable of converting the Civil Code, and, it seems, even the governmental program of the PRI into a novel” (286). Amidst all of this corruption, Fuentes projects a bleak future for the country of Mexico, in a matter of five years. Like Dorfman, who structures his novel from conception to birth, Fuentes’s novel spans nine months of his principal character’s gestation during the years 1991 and 1992.¹⁴⁶ Cristóbal is conceived by his parents Ángel and Ángeles Palomar on the shores of Acapulco (on the day of the Christian Epiphany) in the hopes of conceiving a son, whom they will name after Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón) in order to win a national contest.¹⁴⁷ The winner must give birth to a son on October 12, 1992, the anniversary of Columbus’s arrival to the New World, and he “será proclamado HIJO PRÓDIGO DE LA PATRIA” (13; “shall be proclaimed PRODIGAL SON OF THE NATION” 6) and become a symbol of Mexican power.¹⁴⁸ This contest is part of a larger series of diversions that are supposed to distract the Mexican citizens from already extant political corruption, the government’s disappearance of “problem” citizens, and the worsening economic crisis; moreover, in the contest’s rhetoric, reproduction and desire are co-opted in the name of national duty: “¡A procrear, pues señoras y señores! ¡Su placer es su deber y su deber es su libertad! ¡En México

¹⁴⁶ It should be noted that although the novel is divided this way, as Debra A. Castillo observes, “one third of the way through the novel, Cristóbal has advanced no further on his nine-month journey than he had at the first prologue, in the first paragraph of the novel” (11).

¹⁴⁷ The contest stipulates that the winner’s last name should be a derivative of or share semantics with Columbus’s name, which means “dove,” and this is replicated in Cristóbal’s future last name Palomar, which means “dovecote” in Spanish. It is no coincidence that Cristóbal Palomar is conceived on the Epiphany, which, in Christian tradition, is “[t]he festival commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi” (*OED*). For a reading of *Cristóbal Nonato* in terms of Christopher Columbus, see Alicia Rivero-Potter, “Columbus’ Legacy in *Cristóbal Nonato* by Carlos Fuentes.”

¹⁴⁸ Like the wayward son who squanders his inheritance but returns to a forgiving father, Kadir characterizes *Cristóbal Nonato* as “a genealogy whose congenital identifying mark has to be the circuitous waywardness, the dilatory wandering whose circumlocution and digressive restlessness seeks after the name” (“Fuentes and the Profane Sublime” 103).

todos somos libres y el que no quiera ser libre será castigado!” (14; “So, ladies and gentlemen, let’s get procreating! Your pleasure is your duty and your duty is your freedom! In Mexico we are all free and anyone who does not want to be free should be punished!” 6–7). Hoping to influence individual freedom and choice, the utmost principles of liberal democracy, the government provides monetary and reward incentives for birthing the “right” kind of citizen that will become a national symbol (problematically) modeled after Christopher Columbus.

Although we receive this narrative through Cristóbal’s perspective, the plot is a pseudo-*bildungsroman* of his father’s individual development as a “rebelde conservador” (424; “conservative rebel” 397). Orphaned when his scientist parents died trying to test their Inconsumable Taco, “la solución de los problemas de la nutrición mexicana!” (66; “the solution to Mexico’s nutrition problems!” 56), Ángel struggles with the political and sexual revolutions that move and motivate him. Among his enemies are his uncle Don Homero Fagoaga (rhetorician and politician), who continually plots to divest him of his inheritance, and a former classmate Matamoros Moreno (aspiring writer and macho par excellence), who, humiliated by Ángel’s assessment of his literary aptitude seeks revenge and validation through intimidation and violence.¹⁴⁹ Don Fernando Benítez emerges as a better uncle to Ángel; as a Bartolomé de las Casas figure, he spends much of his time with indigenous peoples unaffected by the arrival of the Spaniards to understand their ways of life and advocating for democracy and justice. Deeply disturbed by the excess and exploits of Don Homero, Don Fernando supports a group of misfits, who create a band called “los Four Jodiditos,” or the Four Fuckups, (including Huevo (Egg), Huérfano Huerta (Orphan Huerta),

¹⁴⁹ Kadir refers to Don Homero as an “avatar” of José Vasconcelos (“Fuentes and the Profane Sublime” 95).

Jipi Toltec, and Niña Ba) managed by Ángel, in order to mete out “justice” to the corrupt. Ángeles (who later reveals that she is also Agueda), Colasa Sánchez, and Penelope López emerge as Ángel’s objects of desire, and his idealization of them as objects of conquest quickly dissipates once he gets too close. As he ventures out on his sexual quests, Ángel is ultimately scared away by Colasa’s *vagina dentata* and turned off by Penny’s ordinariness, which forces him to realize that Ángeles, the only constant in his life and the mother of his child, is the one for him.

In addition to this sexual revolution that Ángel experiences, there is also great socio-political turmoil that has severely altered the geography of Mexico—indigenous peoples are even further displaced for the sake of tourism, another earthquake strikes Mexico City, excess governs the Mexican nation in the forms of garbage, greed, wealth, poverty, and violence, and the situation at the borderland has become so dire that the border itself secedes from both the United States and Mexico. Those with political power and military force reveal their intentions to push eugenicist policies on the Mexican people. For instance, Don Homero supports mass sterilization as a solution for “controlling” what he considers to be the growing population of undesirables: “a los escorpiones se los mata, como dijese Horacio el poeta, *ab ovo*, o sea en el huevo, antes de que puedan dañar, y a los cuervos en sus nido, antes de que nos saquen los ojos” (189; “we have to kill these scorpions, as the poet Horace says, *ab ovo*, that is, in the egg, before they can do any damage, and destroy the crows in their nest before they peck our eyes out” 172). Likewise, Reverend Royall Payne, who patrols the border for President Reagan, thinks his goal is “hay que acabar con este país exportador de morenitos que nos invaden como la plaga de las langostas que acabó con el poder de faraón!” (524; “to terminate this country that exports greasers who are invading us like the plague of locusts

that destroyed Pharaoh's power!" 493)¹⁵⁰ Once again, fears related to population control arise particularly in relation to Mexican men: "no hacemos niños mientras todos estos morenos crecen y crecen y cruzan y cruzan y acabarán por juntarse con nuestras propias hijas y madres y esposas" (524; "we aren't having kids but all these greasers grow and grow and cross over and cross over and they'll end up coupling with our own daughters and mothers and wives" 493). Payne proposes a genocide against Mexican men, to "matarlos en la semilla de su padre antes de que entren en el vientre de sus madres" (524; "kill them in their father's seed before they enter their mother's belly" 493) because "no es lo mismo matar a un niño en el vientre de su madre que matar a un mexicano adulto y bigotudo de estos para impedirle que procrea" (524; "[k]illing an unborn child is not the same as killing a grownup Mexican with a mustache to keep him from procreating" 493–494), the latter act being "preferable" to the former. Amidst this utter chaos and threats of extermination, the Four Jodiditos try desperately to con, swindle, humiliate, and even murder those politicians who live extravagantly while the rest of the population suffers in their abject poverty. Their operations, however, are often misconstrued debacles, covered up by official government rhetoric, or in alignment with an already established government agenda.

Just as Dorfman and Fuentes are engaging with issues of aesthetics (the act of writing itself, questions of origin and genealogy, and postmodernism), they are also dedicated to politics (individual rights, political resistance, and social revolution). Confronted with the suspension of civil rights and the extermination of their fellow citizens, they focus on

¹⁵⁰ Although Fuentes's portrayal of Reverend Royall Payne may seem over the top, his message is not far from the truth. Please refer to my discussion of Nira Yuval-Davis's work on this subject in the Introduction to this study (13–14).

conception and birth as points of origin for humanity and citizenship alike. As such, they return to the source and give voice to that life that cannot speak for itself.

The Birth of the Author

An integral part of the ongoing discussion and debate over attempts to define the “human” in human rights is timing. In these novels origins and genealogies are a point of fixation for the two male narrators, whose right to exist and whose humanity is already undecided in the world that they are about to enter. These narrators communicate with us before the moment of conception, placing the origin of life and human subjectivity before fertilization, thus recalling the earlier musings of Plato in which the male was thought to have provided the “sensitive soul,” while the female meagerly provided the matter during reproduction. This idea that the sperm somehow makes a more significant contribution than the egg is reinforced by the fact that these in utero and ex utero narrators turn primarily to their paternal genealogy as evidence that they are genetically predisposed to be pioneers; they imbue their own conceptions and births with larger significance, claiming to be descendants of national “heroes” Manuel Sendero and Christopher Columbus, whose names signify that they are chosen ones in the Christian tradition.¹⁵¹ Ultimately, we can glean from these two experimental narratives that the seeds of artistic creation and national revolution, as evidenced by these representations of the spermatozoa, are located in the male body. Fertilization becomes colonization.

Dorfman’s representation of the unborn is abstract in nature and more focused on genealogical memory than on biological processes. Because the maternal-fetal relationship is

¹⁵¹ Manuel comes from Hebrew, as a derivative of Emmanuel, meaning “God is with us,” and Sendero means “path.” Cristóbal means “Christ-bearer” and Colón has been translated as “dove.”

featured primarily in the narrative thread of Manuel Sendero's last song, I focus on this storyline in my analysis. For instance, the fact that the sperm el abuelo is conscious of and is later able to recall the night of his own conception, when "he" and his father "había[n] establecido lo que se podría llamar conexiones privilegiadas" (30; "had started to establish what you might call privileged connections" 26), suggests that el abuelo has a sense of "self," which humanizes "him" to some extent. However, el abuelo's development of a connection with his father suggests that el abuelo is, like his father, a pioneer, and ignores the collectivity of the sperm of which he is a part, a collectivity that he later recuperates with his fetal network. In response to the reader's doubts regarding the reliability of el abuelo's account, the narrator assures the audience that "[m]ejor testigo que él, improbable" (14; "[a] better witness is unlikely" 7) and that "[n]o había nacido todavía, es cierto, pero no cabe duda de que más cerca que él de los acontecimientos, ninguno, y mayor atención y esmero" (13; "[i]t's true that he hadn't been born yet, but undoubtedly nobody was closer to the events than he was, there was no one who was more involved and paid more attention" 7).

Certainly, el abuelo, "who stands to be obliterated by the versions that disallow his own birth" (McClennen, *Ariel Dorfman* 203), has a stake in this story; in his version, Manuel Sendero comes to the rescue of Doralisa and his son. According to McClennen, "[i]ndicating Dorfman's concern for the future of such tales, Manuel's legendary history is mixed with that of his son, who may or may not be alive, and who never receives a name. When the son returns to help with a second fetal rebellion he finds various competing versions of his father's story" (*Ariel Dorfman* 198). Barr even suggests that "the reader is left in doubt as to the veracity of everything in the text" (144). El abuelo, however, finds solace in the fact that

his story can be corroborated by an entire generation of fetuses, “who” have formed a fetal “intelligence” (7; 11). As the narrator reveals,

Es evidente que su perspectiva, ya que ustedes interrumpen puntillosos y exigentes, estaba algo bloqueada por la incomodidad de su postura y que el feto percibía con un dejo torcido y lejanía frágil las cosas, pero tampoco puede ignorarse que la histeria del encierro agudizó sus facultades y sobredesarrolló otras, amén de que logró armar en su defensa una red informativa vasta y rumorosa, un servicio secreto tan secreto, y eficaz que nadie se dio cuenta de que existía [...]. (14)

[It's evident that his perspective—since you insist on interrupting me so punctiliously, so exactly—was somewhat blocked by the discomfort of his position and that the fetus perceived things with a certain twisted abandon and fragile distance, but neither can it be ignored that the hysteria of his confinement sharpened some of his faculties and exaggerated others, and that, in addition, he succeeded in setting up a vast and buzzing information network in his own defense, a secret service that was so secret and so efficient that no one ever knew it existed. (7)]

However, this “intelligence” network is compromised not only by the fact that it may not actually exist, but also by the fairytale that the other fetuses want to believe.¹⁵² For obvious

¹⁵² Dorfman often employs tropes typical of fairytales when he is appealing to the hope of his audience: “Érase una vez, niños, en el borde de un cuento de hadas, érase un cantante de nombre Manuel, habíase nosotros en ese país que no era de nunca jamás. Érase un país mientras tanto, una época de entre paréntesis, un país de puerta de atrás, un país en que adormecen a las mujeres y toman presos a los niños. Érase que Manuel Sendero había soñado que con su voz intacta él podría rescatar a su amor de los infiernos y resurreccionar a su hijo y mover a piedad a las fieras. Érase que Manuel Sendero, en una palabra, se creía inmortal” (321). [“Once upon a time, kids, on the frontier of a fairy tale, there was a singer whose name was Manuel. Once upon a time there was we ourselves in that country that never was. Once upon a time there was a land of meanwhile, a time of between

reasons, Pamela (el abuelo's love in utero and ex utero) also prefers "[u]n final feliz" (268; "[a] happy ending" 336), or the version of the story in which the son of Manuel Sendero lives (344; 436). We are left with the possibility that el abuelo's story is "una inevitable reconstrucción parcial que dependía de las transmisiones de los otros fetos que deseaban que Manuel Sendero ubicara su fontana, matara el dragón y los rescatara" (46; "inevitably a partial reconstruction, depending on the accounts of the other fetuses, who wanted Manuel Sendero to locate his fountain, to kill the dragon and to rescue them" 49).

By "rechaz[ando] el primero y principal de los privilegios, que es nacer" (136; "reject[ing] the first and principal privilege, birth" 168), the fetuses strategically resist victimization by being incorporated into a system that is antagonist toward those who refuse conformity. In a strange invocation of right-to-life rhetoric (especially as it was promoted by the Catholic Church), in which the fetus is framed as the innocent victim whose point of view is disregarded by contraceptive or abortive practices, el abuelo feels forced into a life he doesn't want. In protest he grumbles, "nadie me había consultado si quería existir" (35; "no one asked me if I wanted to exist" 33), declaring this offense regarding his conception to be "el primero de tantos actos anti-democráticos que me iban a imponer" (35; "the first of many antidemocratic acts they were going to impose on me" 33). Rebelling against a world that he did not want to be born into, el abuelo proclaims: "Bueno, nosotros declaramos el poder de los fetos, la democracia de los que no hemos nacido, la verdadera mayoría. El futuro al poder, ese es nuestro lema" (35; "Well, now we're calling for Fetus Power, the democracy of

parentheses, a land of the back door, a land where they put women to sleep and take children prisoner. Once upon a time Manuel Sendero had dreamed that with his voice intact he could rescue his beloved from Hell and resurrect his son and move the beasts to pity. Once upon a time, in a word, Manuel Sendero believed he was immortal" (407).]

the unborn, the true majority. *Power to the future*, that's our slogan" 33). While the future becomes a source of inspiration for unborn citizens, who are essential to national preservation, this "democracy of the unborn" overlooks and excludes the rights of the already born minority. Pamela also raises this point in her discussion with el abuelo:

Claro que la vida es sagrada. Pero alguna vida es más sagrada que otra. Me cansan esas personas que se preocupan por los que todavía no nacen y les importa tan poco los que ya nacieron. [...] Una vez que los bebés salieron, los mismos defensores de la vida en abstracto dejan a los pequeños que se arreglen como puedan, les da lo mismo si pasan hambre y violencia.

Senderito. A mí me importan más los vivos. (158)

[Of course life is sacred. But some life is more sacred than other life. I'm sick and tired of the people who are so concerned about the ones who haven't been born yet and who couldn't care less about the ones who are already here. [...] Once the babies get here, those same defenders of life in the abstract leave the little ones to fend for themselves. They don't care if they're hungry or abused.

Senderito, I'm more concerned about the living. (197–198)]

To a certain extent, the fetuses seem to agree with Pamela when they contend that sex should be performed responsibly precisely because "no es cosa dejar que el semen fluya y que los óvulos broten y que el universo vuelva a recrearse en cada lecho" (35; "these aren't the times to just let the semen flow and the ova blossom and the universe recreate itself in every bed" 32). Although they value life, the fetuses seem only to do so when the conditions are right, that is, when they will be guaranteed that the current government will be dissolved, that all weapons will be destroyed, that a free market will be replaced with free food, and that

everyone will go naked (287–288; 362). In the meantime, “[h]an declarado su independencia unilateral del género humano” (287; “[t]hey’ve declared their unilateral independence from the human race” 361), and appropriate the right to choose (in terms of whether or not they will be born) from their mothers.

In this novel, birth, rather than being liberating, becomes a form of self-annihilation. The narrator even likens birth to suicide, claiming that just as a universal genealogical connection is broken in the process, so too does the newborn lose a part of himself/herself when s/he makes that choice:

[T]odo recién nacido se mata a sí mismo, destruye sus vínculos consigo mismo, con los meses de embarazo, con los muertos que han acompañado y le han calentado la oscuridad, con los hermanos por venir que ocuparán ese hueco, con los padres que antes de ellos eran idénticos y espejos y pequeños en la concavidad de la abuela, y con la abuela que también llenó un oscuro hoyo tibio que no era de cementerio y así hacia atrás, la mentira de que el útero es uno en particular en vez de ser una constelación donde todos se encuentran y se suceden y se transponen. (141)

[[E]very newborn kills himself, destroys the bonds that link him to himself, to the months of pregnancy, to the dead who kept him company and warmed the darkness there, to the future brothers and sisters who will occupy that space, to the parents who before them were identical and mirror images and tiny in Grandmother’s concavity, and to Grandmother, who also once filled a dark, warm hole that wasn’t in a cemetery and so on, back through time, the lie that

there is a particular uterus not a constellation of uteruses where all meet and succeed each other and change places. (174)]

Owing to this mass resistance against birth, the future descendants of Manuel Sendero (accompanied by a few roaming dead relatives) seem to accumulate in Doralisa's body, which connects them to the other unborn through a vast, perhaps global, inter-uterine network.

The fetal versions of the story of Manuel Sendero's son(g) are, indeed, a form of self-preservation and preferable to the alternate endings provided by Flaquísimo (Skinny) and el caballero (the Gentleman). In Flaquísimo's bleak account, he corrects el abuelo, claiming "la muerte era la muerte, joven. Era un hecho frío y sistemático y las únicas voces eran las de los generales" (25; "death was death, young man. It was cold-blooded and systematic and the only voices were the generals'" 21). As el caballero tells it, he forces Manuel to witness the abortion of his son and the murder of his wife because he refused to sing in order to save his family's life (316–320; 401–405). However, the reader, who learns the story of the last song of Manuel Sendero through a fetal narrator, often finds himself/herself identifying with the ending that would enable the story, and the future generations, to live on, namely, the account of a successful fetal rebellion, which hinges on the survival of the one man that would make it possible. More than a fairytale, this narrative assumes further rhetorical weight as a collective dream, a song which is later shattered by the violent truth:

Ese día común y corriente lo habíamos soñado y construido simultáneamente entre todos. Despertamos a lo que se llama la verdad y en ese mundo lo que verdaderamente estaba ocurriendo no era nuestra rebeldía o nuestro deseo de comunicarla, lo que nos había obligado a interrumpir el sueño era que en esa

intersección de la eternidad una bala había alcanzado la canción de Manuel Sendero, habría traspasado el vientre cantante de Doralisa en su carretela de los despertares, había paralizado las ruedas de la bicicleta en alguna vereda de la ciudad deshabitada donde todos los habitantes soñaban el mismo, idéntico sueño cotidiano, donde abrimos los ojos y no había nada que pudiéramos hacer para salvar a esa pareja de enamorados. (351)

[Among us all we had dreamed and simultaneously created that ordinary day. We woke up to what is called truth and in that world what was really happening wasn't our rebellion or our desire to communicate it. What had obliged us to interrupt our dream was that at that particular juncture of history a bullet had reached Manuel Sendero's song. It must have pierced Doralisa's singing womb in the cart where she was to awaken. It had paralyzed the wheels of the bicycle in some alleyway of the uninhabited city where all the inhabitants were dreaming the same identical everyday dream, where we opened our eyes and there was nothing we could do to save that pair of lovers. (446)]

When this hope for an imagined future of the nation is cut short, the reader is left to face the human toll of the dictatorship and its legacy. Yet the hope of collaboration emerges at this devastating moment: “dependía de ellos y de cada uno de nosotros preparar un mundo en que los padres jamás tuvieran que escoger entre su dignidad y la vida de sus hijos, entre esas dos formas del futuro” (352; “it depended on them and on each one of us to prepare a world where parents would never have to choose between their own dignity and the lives of their children, between those two forms of the future” 446–447). Here Dorfman counters this

feeling of utter helplessness by forging a connection between these “two forms of the future,” one that emerges in relation to its socio-historical context and one that envisions something completely different—neither of which he is willing to give up. Indeed, this moment in the novel is demonstrative of what McClennen calls Dorfman’s “aesthetics of hope,” which “seeks collective responses to social dilemmas and rejects the aesthetic of individualism where superheroes fix the world” (*Ariel Dorfman* 90).¹⁵³

In contrast with Dorfman, who is very much concerned with the unborn as a collectivity and presents multiple perspectives on the same story, Fuentes spends more time detailing the psychology and physicality of Cristóbal’s experience of the womb because he focuses primarily on the point of view and the intrauterine development of his narrator. The narrative begins with the story of Cristóbal’s conception, which Cristóbal himself narrates from his father’s body, “en cuyo saco prostático yo yazco aún, inocente y filadélfico con mis dormidos hermanitos (y hermanitas) cromosómicos y espermatoides” (12; “in whose prostatic sack I still lie in waiting, innocent and philadelphic, with my sleepy chromosomatic and spermatic little brothers (and sisters)” 4). Perhaps inspired by Christopher Columbus, who was also confident in his prophetic abilities, Cristóbal claims, “yo estoy a punto de ser creado” (15; “I am about to be created” 8).¹⁵⁴ With this pronouncement, Fuentes symbolically places the origin of subjectivity, authorship, and creative genius in the male

¹⁵³ According to McClennen, “Dorfman explains that he ‘tentatively’ calls literature with an aesthetics of hope that which is ‘based on the proposition that the dead do not choose for us, but that we choose for them, that we change the past as we forge into the future’” (*Ariel Dorfman* 87). McClennen outlines the elements of an aesthetics of hope in her book: “In addition to the three elements of hope that are fundamental to the aesthetics of hope—the bridging of the past, present, and future, the mutual interdependence of reason and emotion, and the association of the individual with the community—there are three further features that are essential to such an aesthetic theory. An aesthetics of hope is dialectical, provocative, and revolutionary” (*Ariel Dorfman* 107).

¹⁵⁴ For an in-depth analysis of Christopher Columbus and Messianism, see Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*.

body. In an even more hyperbolic statement, Cristóbal expands on this conceptualization of male creativity by crediting the “family jewels” of his father for the origin of America: “por allí empezamos: allí fue inventada la América, allí fue deseada, allí fue necesitada, y no en otra parte: América está en los cojones de mi padre!” (535; “that’s where we begin: that’s where America was invented, that’s where it was desired, that’s where it was needed and nowhere else: America is in my father’s balls!” 504)

What is more, Cristóbal presents his father’s creative capacities as an awe-inspiring, efficient, and productive worlding: “los dobles hemisferios de tu talega huevera, progenitor mío, productor parejo de millones de espermias, ininterrumpidamente de la pubertad a la vejez” (552; “the double hemispheres in your egg sack, my dear progenitor, steady producer of millions of sperm, constant from puberty to old age” 521). The climax, thus, is transcendental— “todo lo que semos desde el origen, todo viene inscrito en él, ay mi DNA del alma, va a encontrar tu huevo Ángeles, tu espermia Ángel, portando por Dios, Nombre de Dios, Española, la Reina por Dios, portándolo, Cristo, Cristo, CRISTÓBAL” (17; “Angel, Angeles, bearing all that we are from our very origins, everything is inscribed in him, ay, my dearest DNA, he’s going to find your egg, Angeles, your sperm, Angel, bearing, my God, name of God, nombre de Dios, Hispaniola, my Queen, by God, bearing, Christ, Christ, Christ . . . CHRISTOPHER” 9)—as it invokes various sources of genealogical history, from the Creator to DNA to Columbus’s founding of the New World.¹⁵⁵

Indeed, Columbus is figured here literally as a “founding father,” when Cristóbal parses the name that he shares with his forebear “Portador de Cristo y Paloma o sea las dos personas que faltan de la Trinidad, el Hijo y el Espíritu Santo, nuestro Descubridor, el santo

¹⁵⁵ This reference to Columbus is reinforced as Cristóbal, as he is being ejaculated from his father, imagines being expelled from the peninsula, namely Spain (17; 9).

que se mojó las patiuix para cruzar los mares y la paloma que llegó con una ramita en el pico a anunciar la proximidad de la Tierra Nueva y el que se estrelló un huevo para inventarnos [...]” (85; “Christ-bearer and Dove, which is to say, the two persons missing from the Trinity, the Son and the Holy Spirit, our Discoverer, the saint who got his footsies wet crossing the seas and the dove that arrived with a little branch in his beak to announce the nearness of the New Land and the one who broke an egg to invent us [...]” 76). Cristóbal, involved in sperm worship, valiantly presents the act of “breaking”¹⁵⁶ the egg as a necessary violence, and in this scenario the sperm also takes all of the credit for creativity as it “invents” the nation. As the creative force, this Columbus-sperm holds not only the privilege of discovery and invention, but also is attributed with the power to narrate these events. Later on, Cristóbal, who claims that he is, at a most basic level, a spermatozoon, also places himself as the victor: “lo que yo soy: un esperma que dejó a sus antepasados y derrotó a sus hermanitos en las carreras charros of ire y ahora ha encontrado el huevo caliente y distribuye sus equis y sus zetas” (196; “what I am: a sperm that left its ancestors behind and defeated his little brothers in the race for the charros of ire and who now has found the hot egg and is distributing his X’s and Z’s” 178).¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Although the official translation renders “se estrelló” as “broke,” it can also be translated as “crashed into.” Moreover, the syntax of the sentence emphasizes the “the one who broke” or “the one who crashed into,” as if this action were to form an integral part of Christopher Columbus’s identity.

¹⁵⁷ Given that Cristóbal is very confident in his ability to make comparisons—“Ocurre que yo Cristóbal soy capaz de encontrar relaciones y analogías (no adivino: relaciono, asemejo!) que los demás no ven porque las han olvidado” (505; “It turns out that I, Christopher, am capable of finding relations and analogies (I don’t divine things: I relate things, make things similar!) others don’t see because they have forgotten them” 475)—, his use of the colon throughout his narrative makes sense. The function of a colon is “to separate clauses which are grammatically independent and discontinuous, but between which there is an apposition or similar relation of sense” (*OED*).

Although Cristóbal recognizes the genetic contribution of his mother on some level, he still maintains his personhood intact: “CON TODO LO CUAL ME OBLIGAN a admitir desde el huevo que Yo soy Yo Cristóbal Más mi Circunstancia” (31; “I’m obliged to admit, from the egg on, that I am Christopher plus my Circumstance” 23).¹⁵⁸ By adding “plus my Circumstance,” he suggests that, once he joins with the egg, his mother merely serves as a context, not an integral part of his identity as Cristóbal. This statement, held in contrast with Cristóbal’s later preoccupation with “no ser lo que mi plan genético ha determinado para mí, sino lo que las fuerzas de afuera, todos esos fenómenos que mi inteligencia (privada, interior) ha venido observando” (489; “not being what my genetic plan has determined for me and instead being determined by outside forces, all those phenomena that my intelligence (private, interior) has been observing” 460), might suggest that his mother also forms part of this environment and continues to construct his “Circumstance.”

What is more, his description of his mother’s reproductive system pales in comparison to the glorified portrayal of his father’s creativity, “[el] huevo racionado de mi madre, a su cerviz tacaña, protegida del mundo con un duro tapón de moco y sólo una vez al mes, un día glorioso, se destapa, se convierte en río de vidrio, en resbaladilla del esperma; el huevo encontró a la víbora, la serpiente encontró su nido fecundo y ME VOILA!” (552–553; “my mother’s rationed-out egg, her stingy cervix, protected from the world by a hard mucous stopper, and only once a month, one glorious day, is it unstopped, and then it becomes a river of glass, a sliding board for the sperm; the egg found the snake, the serpent found its fecund nest, and ME VOILÀ!” 521). Here, the “rationed-out egg” juxtaposes the limited egg supply

¹⁵⁸ This turn of phrase also recalls José Ortega y Gasset’s contemplative statement: “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia, y si no la salvo a ella no me salvo yo” (35; “I am myself and my circumstance, and if I don’t overcome it [my circumstance] then I won’t survive”).

with the “constant” hyper-production of the sperm. Moreover, his mother’s “stingy cervix” and “hard mucous stopper” seem to evidence a hostile environment, reluctant to authorize entrance. Thus, the female body is read in terms of the point of view of the sperm and with the assumption that the sperm is the “ideal” gamete.¹⁵⁹

Emily Martin, who writes on the use of gender metaphors and stereotypes to explain cellular functioning, observes a similar phenomenon in scientific accounts of the egg and the sperm, which also preserve an oppositional and hierarchical structuring of masculinity and femininity. The problem, she claims, lies in the act of attributing “personhood” to molecules:

Even if we succeed in substituting more egalitarian, interactive metaphors to describe the activities of egg and sperm, and manage to avoid the pitfalls of cybernetic models, we would still be guilty of endowing cellular entities with personhood. More crucial, then, than what *kinds* of personalities we bestow on cells is the very fact that we are doing it at all. (501)

It would follow, then, that the character of Cristóbal is, in effect, an atomized version of himself or a personified cell; either option would most likely be problematic given that subjectivity and what Martin calls “intentional action” would be difficult to prove or justify (500).

Nonetheless, Fuentes perpetuates, albeit parodically, this notion of the intentionality of the gametes through his imaginative endeavor, which leaves stereotypical gender roles intact. Fertilization, thus, comes down to the art of seduction and is transformed into a testament to Cristóbal’s masculinity. The spermatozoa, “[t]odos como loquitos, tratando de penetrar, romper la barrera, perforar la coraza y vencer la fidelidad de esta Penélope que no

¹⁵⁹ Debra A. Castillo remarks that “in Fuentes’s text reminders of impotence (the enwombed child, parasite, or proto-‘imbunche’) are always paired with images of sexual potency—the millions of rushing sperm” (10).

admite a cualquier pene lópez de su vecino, qué va!, sólo a uno, al campeón, el Ulixex sin hulisex de regreso de las guerras, the greatest, el Muhammed Alí de los cromosomas, el meromero, el maromero, el estupendo” (113; “[a]ll madly trying to penetrate, break the barrier, perforate the shell, and overcome the fidelity of this Penelope who will not invite just any old dick to dinner, only one, the champ, the Ulyssex returned from the wars, the greatest, the Muhammed Ali of the chromosomes, número uno” 96).¹⁶⁰ Of course, Cristóbal is the winner of the coveted prize, and therefore receives a proper homecoming: “El huevo de mi madre me espera en su escondite. . . En su trono de sangre: la reina Isabel de los Ángeles, mi hermanita piadosa, mi madre cruel, me abren los brazos a mí, el campeón, victorioso sobre los millones de soldados y soldaderas muertos en la carrera inútil por llegar hasta aquí, donde yo estoy calientito, ávido, triste, pidiendo posada” (18; “[M]y mother’s egg awaits me in its hiding place. She on her throne of blood, Queen of the Angels—Isabella, Angeles, opens her arms to me, the Champ, victorious over the millions of soldier boys and girls dead in the useless race to get to where I am, warm and cozy, avid and sad, asking for a room of my own” 10–11).¹⁶¹ Although more recent studies of fertilization suggest that what might have formally been interpreted as “penetration,” is actually a mutual process, Fuentes uses the traditional narrative readily available to him, in which exceptional strength and physical superiority wins over the selective egg.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ This excerpt is from a section titled “Una Vida Padre,” which is translated as “It’s a Wonderful Life,” a translation which disregards the pun that Fuentes employs here. For “Padre” literally means “Father,” but is also used in Mexican slang to refer to something “great” or “cool.”

¹⁶¹ Please note that Fuentes does not translate “mi hermanita piadosa, mi madre cruel,” which means “my devout little sister, my cruel mother.”

¹⁶² According to Martin, these new findings suggest that “[t]he researchers at Johns Hopkins concluded that the sperm and egg stick together because of adhesive molecules on the surfaces of each. The egg traps the sperm and adheres to it so tightly that the sperm’s head is forced to lie flat against the surface of the zona, a little bit, they told me, ‘like Br’er Rabbit getting more and more stuck to tar baby the more he wriggles.’ The trapped

Cristóbal's bravado and self-confidence quickly waver as he asks himself, "cuándo empiezo a contar mi vida? en los testículos de mi padre? en el huevo de mi madre?" (23; "when do I begin to count the days of my life? inside my father's testicles? inside my mother's egg?" 16). Implicit in this question are existential concerns with being (*is he a human life worthy of value and protection?*), origin ("*when do I begin to count*"), and ownership ("*my life*"). Later, Cristóbal contemplates the relative value of life and wonders when he will be recognized as human: "[Y]o digno de respeto y consideración a partir de qué momento? desde cuándo más importante que ella, con tanto derecho a la vida como ella, desde qué instante, digo yo?" (29; "At what moment am I worthy of respect and consideration? At what moment am I more important than she is, with as much right to life as she has, at what point?"; 21) Not only does Cristóbal, who is obsessed with origins, want to know when his right to life will equal that of his mother's, but also when the value of his life will surpass her own, that is, when will their positions be reversed. Without a doubt Cristóbal's disquiet is justified, since the relative value of life determines all sorts of legal, medical, and ethical decisions. Nonetheless, perhaps the primary issue here is not *when* one life in the maternal-fetal relationship will take precedence over the other, but rather why these lives must be opposed in the first place.

Sure to let the reader know of the magnitude of his struggles, Cristóbal, as "[u]n cuerpo extraño dentro del cuerpo de mi madre" (241; "a foreign body within my mother's body" 220), depicts his mother's body as hostile to his own, thus perpetuating this notion of

sperm continues to wiggle ineffectually side to side. The mechanical force of its tail is so weak that a sperm cannot break even one chemical bond. This is where the digestive enzymes released by the sperm come in. If they start to soften the zona just at the tip of the sperm and the sides remain stuck, then the weak, flailing sperm can get oriented in the right direction and make it through the zona—provided that its bonds to the zona dissolve as it moves in" (493).

maternal/fetal opposition. Feeling anxious and vulnerable, Cristóbal imagines his instinct of “self”-preservation as a strategic covert military operation:

[M]e defendí como pude, me trepé a mi nave espacial y me lancé a la guerra de las galaxias intrauterinas: me comí la membrana de la mucosa de mi madre, penetré por los vasos sanguíneos de mi madre devorando su oxígeno y su alimento como una rata del desierto, excavé, Elector, un hoyo dentro del hoyo de mi madre, hasta que mi paupérrima, fragilísima y frugaloides existencia se hiciera, a fuerza de mi voluntad de vivir, parte del cuerpo y de la vida de ella: Me *enterré* en mi madre, Elector, me hice tragar por la matriz de mi madre en contra de la voluntad rechazante de mi madre (una voluntad inconsciente, pero voluntad al cabo) [...]. (241)

[I defended myself as best I could, I scrambled up into my spaceship and launched myself into intrauterine star wars: I ate my mother’s mucous membrane, I penetrated my mother’s circulatory system, devouring her oxygen and food like a desert rat, I excavated, Reader, a hole within my mother’s hole, until my oh so poor, fragile, and frugal existence became, through my will to survive, part of her body and life: I *buried* myself in my mother, Reader, I caused myself to be swallowed by my mother herself (an unconscious will, but a will nevertheless) [...]. (221)]

Perpetuating the antagonistic relationship between Cristóbal and his mother, Fuentes invokes the metaphor of the fetus as a parasite, implying that the growth of the fetus is necessarily detrimental to the mother; in a preemptive strike, Cristóbal takes credit for natural processes that are only made possible by the conditions of the womb. “[E]n contra de los dos” (246;

“[A]gainst both of them [Angel and Angeles]” 225), he declares, “me he instalado en la matriz y yo mismo creo la placenta naciente” (246; “I’ve set myself up in the womb and I myself am creating the placenta” 225). Once his mother Ángeles knows that she is pregnant, however, Cristóbal overcomes his feelings of insecurity and admits to a collaborative effort, “Ella no habla. Yo sólo escucho. No es lo mismo. Pero algo nos une. Ella me crea pero yo me creo también” (280; “She does not speak. I only listen. It isn’t the same. But something links us. She creates me, but I create myself as well” 256).

In spite of this, he chooses to emphasize this relationship as difference that complements, rather than as a natural bond that fuses. What remains clear is that integral to Cristóbal’s intrauterine development and to his relationship with his mother is language.

[S]eremos siempre la diferencia: madre e hijo celebraremos no nuestra unión, sino nuestra alteridad! Somos el espejo de nuestros lenguajes. Yo estaré dentro del suyo para decir lo que ella no puede decir. Ella dirá lo que yo no puedo decir. Señores electores: rueguen por mí, rueguen que la lección del lenguaje aprendido en el seno de mi madre no la olvide, como tantas otras cosas, apenas tenga lugar el parto. (280)

[[W]e shall always be a difference: mother and child, we shall celebrate not our union but our alterity! We are the mirror of our languages. I shall be within hers to say what she cannot say. She shall say what I cannot say.

Gentle Readers: pray for me, pray that I do not forget (as I shall forget so

many other things the instant I am born) the lesson of language I've learned in my mother's womb. (256)]¹⁶³

With this description, Cristóbal intimates that he and his mother will speak that which is unspeakable for each other, but, as a matter of fact, he is the one who has more control over what is actually said out loud, since his mother's form of communication is a silent one to which only he is privy. One could also interpret the fact that Cristóbal must expend an "enorme sobrehumano te lo juro esfuerzo por escuchar al OTRO a fin de saberme ÚNICO" (518; "enormous superhuman effort (I swear it) to listen to the OTHER in order to know myself to be UNIQUE" 487), as a sign that he struggles to reach these conclusions about his relationship with his (m)other, in which he has a stake; his observations are not the result of "detached" observation, which would be an impossibility in his case.

In Fuentes's novel, "the lesson of language" materializes in the female body in a way that is unintelligible to the outside world. Regardless of the way that the female body absorbs the discourses that try to identify her role in creation, Ángeles's way of communicating in silence seems to be, as per Fuentes, a particularly female form that cannot be put into language. Once again, the female body is figured as "empty," although this emptiness is framed somewhat positively:

Ella está exhausta de lenguaje. Vacía de palabras (me comunica en silencio o lo comunica en silencio [...]: la escucho, oigo su maravilloso silencio: su silencio le habla al otro, al ausente; recibe lo que el mundo imprime en su lengua, pero una maravillosa compensación la lleva a encontrar siempre la

¹⁶³ Fuentes's use of "womb" as a translation for "seno" is an interesting choice, since it is translated literally as breast. However, it seems that given the context of this statement, that he means to signal a metaphorical interpretation of the word, which could be translated as "at the heart" or "in the center."

palabra contraria la que le fue dada: su discurso comparte el de mi padre pero también lo completa). (280)

[She's simply devoid of language. She's empty of words (she communicates me in silence or communicates it in silence [...]: I listen to her, I hear her marvelous silence: her silence speaks to the other, the one who is absent; she receives what the world prints on her language, but a marvelous compensation leads her always to find the antonym of the word given her: her discourse shares my father's discourse, but it completes it as well). (255–256)]

Perhaps Cristóbal is his mother's "other" form of linguistic creation? If so, why must she be otherwise silent? And what does it mean that Cristóbal speaks in her stead?

Cristóbal, in fact, asserts that he is coterminous with language itself: "yo que me gesto con el lenguaje porque de otra manera no podría decir nada de lo que estoy diciendo: el lenguaje se gesta conmigo, ni un minuto, ni un centímetro antes o después o menos o más que yo mismo: [...A] mis palabras les salen ojos y párpados, uñas y cejas, igual que a mi cuerpo" (279; "I who am gestating right along with language because if I weren't I wouldn't be able to say any of the things I'm saying: language gestates and grows with me, not one minute, not one centimeter before or after or less or more than I myself. [...M]y words grow eyes and eyelids, fingernails and eyebrows, just as my body does" 254). What is more, Cristóbal also has it on good "authority" that his affiliation with language is ontological, "esto me dicen, en primer lugar, mis genes: eres lenguaje. Mas, qué clase de lenguaje soy?" (279; "what my genes tell me is that you are language. But what kind of language am I?" 255). Cristóbal, "como todo autor minoritario y silenciado, la voz rebelde, censurada y silente ante los lenguajes reinantes" (281; "like all minority, silenced authors, the rebellious

voice, censured and silent in the face of the reigning languages” 256–257), is the voice representing the mother-child relationship while his mother remains silent.

The “gestational structure,” to use Barr’s term, of the novels of Dorfman and Fuentes provides the background for the development of their unborn male narrators and as the screen onto which they project their visions for their nations. While this move that creates the female body as a utopic space has the potential to empower the expectant mothers of the unborn, it does not empower the female subject in these novels. The following section explores the root causes for the difficulty in constructing a new metaphor for the nation that does not somehow compromise female subjectivity.

A Symbolic Mother for the Nation: Whose Body Politic?

Although these national metaphors that Dorfman and Fuentes develop in their works of fiction transform the figure of the mother into an environment for conceptualizing social change, they still perpetuate the relation of inclusive exclusion that the feminine and bare life has with the nation. Perhaps, a further examination of the metaphorical qualities of the body politic could shed some light on this conceptual roadblock. Susan Bordo explains that “[i]n the old metaphor of the body politic, the state or society was imagined as a human body, with different organs and parts symboli[z]ing different functions, needs, social constituents, forces and so forth—the head or soul for the sovereign, the blood for the will of the people, the nerves for the system of reward and punishments, and so forth” (251). If the body politic is an organic entity, in which the parts work together for the vitalization of the whole and individuals have uses or tasks analogous to their corresponding organs, then the question of sexual difference necessarily arises.

For this reason Grosz posits the following question in her article “Bodies-Cities”:
 “What, one might ask, takes on the metaphoric function of the genitals in the body politic? What kind of genitals are they? Does the body politic have a sex?” (383) Moira Gatens believes that the body politic is gendered masculine and is the product of masculine creativity: “Just as man can be understood as a representation of God’s creative power, so the political body can be understood as a representation of man’s creative power, that is, as *art(ifice)*” (80–81, her emphasis). Based on an analysis of the metaphors employed to describe this cultural construction, Gatens concludes that “[t]he artificial man, a creation of ‘the word’ of men united, thus renders itself free from the necessary but difficult dealings with both women and nature” (82). Moreover, it is precisely “the word” or language that distinguishes these male fetal narrators from their mothers who barely speak. If, as Agamben argues, “man is the living being who, *in language*, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion,” then these verbose fetal characters, who would otherwise be pre-verbal, have a surprisingly stark advantage over their silent mothers, who are supposedly already initiated into language (*Homo Sacer* 8, my emphasis).

Yet, if man is considered to be the creative genius behind the body politic, then where does woman’s creativity fit in? How does this conceptualization of the body politic account for women’s role in its continuance? McClintock brings Elleke Boehmer’s argument to bear on the notion of gender as it relates to the body politic: “Boehmer notes that the male role in the nationalist scenario is typically ‘metonymic’; that is, men are contiguous with each other and with the national whole. Women, by contrast, appear ‘in a metaphoric or symbolic role’”

(354–355).¹⁶⁴ Thus, it follows that man, as representative of the body politic, is able to enjoy all of the accompanying rights and privileges, but woman is left outside it as reproducing actual bodies with little agency in this national body. If men are metonymic of the body politic, then women are only metaphorically present as metonymy, through their empty, passive, and docile wombs, it follows that men are subjects and women are mere bodies. Gatens explains how the feminine is subsumed in the metaphorical conceptions of the body politic: “The modern body politic has ‘lived off’ its consumption of women’s bodies. Women have serviced the internal organs and needs of this artificial body, preserving its viability, its unity and integrity, without ever being seen doing so” (82). What is more, Gatens’s description resonates with the depictions of the fetus as a parasite, a metaphor that neglects the “invisible” reproductive processes that occur within the female body, making the fetus’s existence possible. For a better understanding of the ways in which Dorfman and Fuentes reinscribe this national paradigm, a further examination of their portrayals of mothers is necessary.

In Dorfman’s novel *Doralisa*, the only pregnant woman featured, is often depicted as the Andes mountain range, which demarcates most of Chile’s eastern border and is extremely important for Chileans as a point of reference in their conceptual geography. What el abuelo describes as his entrance into Chile, or “atravesar la cordillera-hembra” (138; “crossing the female divide” 171), after being exiled can easily be read as story of his birth.¹⁶⁵ In this expedition, he traverses mountains that resemble a pregnant woman: “[P]ero le resultó un

¹⁶⁴ See Elleke Boehmer, “Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa” 6.

¹⁶⁵ “Cordillera-hembra” can also be translated as a female mountain range, which would suggest a persistence of the metaphor of the female body as part of national geography in this novel.

tránsito amenazante y estrecho, la cordillera alta como hembra, larga como muslos de hembra en calor, apretada y sofocante a diferencia de cómo la había imaginado en las acuarelas” (14; “[B]ut the crossing turned out to be narrow and threatening, the mountains, as high as a woman, as long as the extended thighs of a woman in heat, but narrow and suffocating, totally different from what he had imagined based on the watercolor landscapes” 8). After equating the Chilean landscape to a maternal body, he compares the interior of his mother with the Andes. He writes, “mamá con tu cordillera interior vacía si no fuera por el bebé, un cráter sin cometa si no fuera por el bebé que se agazapa y conspira y sonríe” (19; “Mama, with the mountain range inside you completely empty except, of course, for the baby, crater without a comet, empty if it hadn’t been for the baby crouching there and conspiring and smiling” 12). At this moment, the mountain range is mapped onto Doralisa’s interior, but this mountain range is hollowed out (perhaps the work of el caballero?). According to el abuelo, Doralisa, as earth-mother, and later as a “la derrumbada montaña” (29; “crumbling mountain” 24), safeguards her child from mining as if he were a precious metal. El abuelo also uses other metaphors to describe Doralisa’s body, such as “la carabela dulce” (132; “sweet caravel” 162) and “fortaleza en el desierto” (132; “fortress in the desert” 162) both of which indicate the security that she provides for the “residents” of her body, such that el abuelo and other political dissidents seek refuge in her womb.

Not only is Doralisa a safe haven and “una mujer cósmicamente generosa” (52; “a cosmically generous woman” 57), but she is also the source of the future population of Chile, for when el abuelo sends la ciega (the blind woman) to tell Eduardo “que le cuides a sus hijos como si fueran tuyos” (357; “to care for his children as if they were your own” 453), he “p[iensa] que *los países* tardan más de nueve meses en nacer” (357, my emphasis; “think[s]

that it takes more than nine months for *countries* to be born” 453, my emphasis). Manuel Sendero, however, “no le gustaba mucho esto de que una mesnada de parientes y hasta de apátridas desconocidos recorrieran lo [sic] barrios prehistóricos interiores de su mujer” (53; “was not at all pleased with the idea that a bunch of relatives and even unknown expatriates were wandering around his wife’s prehistoric interior” 57). Converted into a universal and symbolic space outside time, what McClintock has called “anachronistic space,” the womb also becomes a “parachronistic space,” the vessel for the hopes of an alternative future nation (42). The symbolic womb is no longer linked to female agency or understood as a reproductive organ, but rather becomes static and dead, a “crater without a comet.” Regardless of how dependent the male characters might be on the womb for their own survival, they still perceive it as a dead object rather than as integral to a living subject. In another instance, el abuelo remarks that, without a doubt, “la certidumbre y santuario del vientre de Pamela era algo a resguardar a toda costa” (158; “the certainty and the sanctuary of Pamela’s womb was something to be protected at all costs” 197). In both scenarios it is the womb that protects and is to be protected, not the woman.

What further complicates the positioning of Doralisa as a national mother is her dormant state. While Dorfman’s metaphor would certainly be representative of the relation of inclusive exclusion that the feminine has with the body politic, the fact that Doralisa is unconscious throughout almost the entire narrative strips her of any subject agency in its construction beyond the biological processes that keep her and her offspring alive. Physically uncomfortable because her son refuses to be born and mentally exhausted with her husband’s disappearance, Doralisa takes the drugs that el caballero offers her, which leave her incapacitated. It is unknown whether she is manipulated or a willing participant in her own

subjection. Lois Baer Barr suggests that with the character of Doralisa, Dorfman's novel "brings out the horrors of gynecological experiments and violence perpetrated by the military on the bodies of women" (146). Under the guise of a capitalist enterprise to test a new drug, el caballero basically hires women, whom he calls "nuestras bellas durmientes" (42; "our sleeping beauties" 42), in order to sedate them. Claiming that "[e]ste trabajo requiere cierta femineidad" (42; "[t]his work requires a certain feminine quality" 43), el caballero justifies his experimentation on pregnant women by implying that they are particularly qualified to be passive and to live in the world of dreams. Although this might be the only choice for these women, preferable to coping with the reality of Chile under Pinochet, it might also be the case that this was not a choice at all, but coercion. Nonetheless, Lois Baer Barr finds that "[a]lthough the junta seems able to control everything, even whether Doralisa will be able to give birth, there is great strength and resistance in the female bodies" (145). I agree with Barr, in the sense that Dorfman seems to believe in the "great strength and resistance in the female bodies," but he does not go the extra step to develop them as female subjects.

And yet, Dorfman does provide a limited critique of his portrayal of women through the voice of Eduardo, a historian who is skeptical of literary devices: "Metáforas, se quejó Eduardo década más tarde cuando revisaba la bibliografía existente sobre el período: en vez de narrar la historia concreta y testimonial, se dedicaron a hincharnos de ficciones y símbolos vagos" (60; "Metaphors, Eduardo complained decades later when he was revising the existing bibliography about that period: instead of narrating concrete, testimonial history, they dedicated themselves to swelling us up with fictions and vague symbols" 68).¹⁶⁶ Eduardo states that "[e]l cuento es machista" (66; "[i]t's a macho story" 76) and that "sólo se

¹⁶⁶ Barr also considers Eduardo to be the voice of Dorfman's "anti-patriarchal self-criticism" (145).

fija en lo atrasado, lo pasivo, lo manipulable de la mujer” (66; “it focuses on the woman only as backward, passive, and manipulated” 76). Juxtaposing the role of Esmeralda, a sterile woman who dedicates her life to feeding the nation’s poor, with Doralisa, he contends:

[E]sa historia de [Esmeralda] era un hermoso modo de exponer la participación femenina en la resistencia, la fuerza inconmensurable de la hembra que fue capaz de alimentar al país subhumano y conservar el hogar en medio de las peores calamidades. Lástima que se le volvía a adjudicar a la mujer el rol subsidiario, de apoyo, como si su cuerpo sirviera sólo para la maternidad y sus manos para la albahaca. En este sentido, decía Eduardo, revisando textos antropológicos varios, las figuras de Doralisa y Esmeralda venían a ser extrañamente complementarias: una madre que se dormía sin estimarse capaz de parir, y frente a esa extrema apatía, por fértil que fuera, la mujer de inmensos manantiales cuya actividad se pagaba sacrificándose en los altares de la esterilidad. (148)¹⁶⁷

[[T]hat story of Esmeralda was a beautiful way to express the female participation in the resistance, the immeasurable power of women, who were able to feed that inhumane country and to keep a home going in the middle of the worst calamities. A shame that once again the storytellers had relegated to the woman the subsidiary, support role, as if motherhood were the only use for her body and cooking the only use for her hands. In that sense, said Eduardo, reviewing various anthropological texts, the figures of Doralisa and Esmeralda turned out to be strangely complementary. It was as if the legend

¹⁶⁷ In the original Dorfman writes Doralisa, but corrects this in the English translation.

could not conceive a whole female, both active and dedicated to motherhood: that immense fountain of a woman paid for the nourishment she gave to others and her participation in history by being sacrificed on the altars of sterility, and, in contrast, the only mother in the story had to go to sleep, an example of extreme apathy, in order to be sanctified as a nest of fertility (183).]

Eduardo's analysis, however, is marginal compared to the story of fetal rebellion that dominates the sections titled "Adentro." In other moments the novel engages in a feminist critique, but these are also marginal in comparison to the larger narrative strands. For instance, Tomás, a fellow Allende supporter and comrade of David and Felipe, has the following realization: "[q]ue las revoluciones han fallado porque no tomaban en cuenta que eran los viejos hombres quienes las hacían. Que la explotación comienza en la vida cotidiana, en la familia, en las relaciones sexuales, en las miserias emocionales, en la autoridad del padre sobre el hijo y del marido sobre la mujer. Que mientras eso no se modificara, siempre las revoluciones iban a reproducir la vieja estructura de dominación" (208; "[t]hat revolutions have failed because they hadn't taken into account that the ones who made them were the old men. That exploitation starts in everyday life, in the family, in sexual relationships, in emotional unhappiness, in the authority of the father over the child and the husband over the wife. That while that wasn't changed, revolutions would go on reproducing the same old structures of domination" 264). Felipe, however, quickly dismisses a revolution that involves a challenge to patriarchy, claiming that "las mujeres quieren tener más de lo que tenían antes. No puede ser" (203; "women want to have more than they started with. It's impossible" 258) and although David sympathizes, he concludes that a feminist revolution is merely an elitist ideal.

Barr also recognizes the patriarchal elements of Dorfman's novel in which "[w]omen are identified with their bodies" and "[a]ll of the defiant and assertive women are barren," commenting that "[i]n terms of the plot, the women are marginal to the story," and "[w]omen's discourse is practically outside the scope of the text" (145–146). Barr concludes that "Dorfman struggles mightily to make this novel antipatriarchal. He succeeds on many levels. The novel is antihistorical and antiauthoritarian. Matriarchal roles are extremely important. Yet upon close examination we see that the plot, albeit non-linear, still revolves around the all-important questions of male lineage" (139–140). I agree with Barr, especially in terms of the fact that Dorfman has some subversive moments where he places into question the national structure that perpetuates the inclusive exclusion of the feminine in the principal storyline of Manuel Sendero's last song; and yet the female subjects are still made marginal and silenced in the name of revolution.

Fuentes, like Dorfman, often casts his female characters as types. Through the voice of Federico Robles Chacón, Fuentes states the importance of symbolic motherhood to his text: "El más grande símbolo humano jamás inventado: LA MADRE" (42; "*The greatest human symbol ever invented: THE MOTHER*" 34, his emphasis). The irony is that Robles Chacón is referring to the virgin mother figure of Mamadoc, who is in truth an ordinary secretary later made over into a national "virgin mother" for Mexico (46; 38). Forbidden to give birth biologically, her birthing of the Mexican nation is *only* symbolic: "con todo el poder aparente y ningún poder real" (46; "she with all apparent power and no real power" 38–39). Denied any control over her own body or its sexual or reproductive capacities, Mamadoc is successfully transformed into "la indevaluable" (43; "she-who-cannot-be-devalued" 35). The

Mexican government's "empty" symbol, however, makes an interesting comparison with Ángeles, the only principal character who is pregnant.

Ángeles becomes a screen for Ángel's projections of his *suave patria* ("sweet fatherland"). For instance, Ángel maps out continental American geography onto her body: "Reina Mía: dame América, dale Ameriquita a tu Angelito; déjame acercarme a tu Guanahaní, acariciarte el golfo de México, rascarte rico la delta del Mississippi, alborotarte la Fernandina, destaparte el tapón de Darien" (16; "My Queen: give me America, give a little America to your little Angel. Let me come near your Guanahananí, Angeles, caress your Gulf of Mexico, tickle the delta of your Mississippi, excite your Cuba, get engulfed in your Gulf of Darien" 8). Yet Ángeles, who spends most of her time reading Plato's *Cratylus*, is frustrated with Ángel's mad search for a *suave patria* that would match his and López Velarde's vision with a localizable reality, and represents herself as an ideal homeland.

No tengo pasado, Ángel mi amor, por eso se me pegan todas las cosas que me caen encima, todas las causas, todas las ideas, feminismo, izquierda, tercer mundo, ecología, banabomba, Karl und Sigi, teología de la liberación, hasta catolicismo tradicional con tal de ir contra la conformidad, todo se me pega y todo lo que se me pega ha de ser bueno, mi amor, porque lo único que no se me pega es el respeto a la autoridad, la fe en el jefe, las razas superiores, la muerte y la opresión de nadie en nombre de la idea, la historia, la nación o el líder, eso sí que no. Soy un receptáculo bueno, Ángel, un muro blanco sin recuerdos ni pasado propios [...] (61–62)

[I have no past, Angel my love, that's why everything that falls on me sticks to me, all causes, all ideas, feminism, the left, third world, ecology, ban-the-

bomb, Karl and Sigi, liberation theology, even traditional Catholicism as long as it goes against conformity, everything sticks to me and whatever sticks to me has to be good, my love, because the only thing that doesn't stick to me is respect for authority, faith in the chief, superior races, the murder or oppression of anyone in the name of an idea, history, the nation, or the leader, none of the above. I am a good receptacle, Angel, a white wall without memories or my own past [...]. (52)]¹⁶⁸

Once again, the female body morphs into a “good receptacle” and an “anachronistic space,” but one that rejects certain ideologies often tied to nationalism, such as “respect for authority, faith in the chief, superior races, the murder or oppression of anyone in the name of an idea, history, the nation, or the leader” (52). In spite of these stipulations, what do we make of the fact that Ángeles willingly accepts and even touts this configuration of her body? Also, how do we reconcile the two different accounts, one in which she credits Ángel for her nature—“Ángel me dio la felicidad de crearme. No me encontró: me inventó, me hizo suya inventándome” (424; “Angel made me happy by creating me. He didn't find me: he invented me, he made me his by inventing me” 396–397)—and the other, in which she reveals the artifice of her own construction?

Lo vi joven y rebelde. Entonces rápido me apropié de todo lo que creí que le gustaría a él, feminismo, izquierdismo, ecología, Freud y Marx, exámenes a título, la ópera completa [...]. Imagínate mi sorpresa cuando me resultó con

¹⁶⁸ Kadir observes a certain pattern with regard to the relation between women and the past in the texts of Carlos Fuentes: “Generic memory and historical knowledge—as usual with Fuentes plots—are the domain of the woman, who invariably remembers in generation and knows, too, that all knowledge, whether of past or future, is historical and commemorative. And—as in many such Fuentes plots—with the primal couple of this novel, too, man has a history he is prone to forget, while woman has none” (“Fuentes and the Profane Sublime” 93).

que era rebelde conservador! Ni modo; yo ya no podía cambiar mis símbolos sólo para darle gusto [...]. (424)

[I saw him as young and rebellious. So I instantly appropriated everything I thought he liked—feminism, left-wing politics, ecology, Freud and Marx, university exams, every opera ever written [...]. Imagine how surprised I was when he turned out to be a conservative rebel! No way. There was no way I was going to change my symbols just for him [...]. (397)]

Although Ángeles readily appropriates the discourses of the left in order to keep Ángel's interest, the nature of these symbols she refuses to modify—whether these symbols are self-representations or a matter of personal belief is unclear. Nonetheless, because of this incompatibility that she perceives might disrupt their romance, Ángeles resolves to remain silent, “Decidí que mejor era que nos complementáramos y callarme la boca para gozar los actos del amor sin comprender demasiado bien los actos de la ideología” (424; “I decided it was better for us to complement each other, so I kept my mouth shut, the better to enjoy making love without understanding too well about making ideology” 397). Ultimately, the lesson that Ángeles wants Ángel to learn is that it takes time for human creation, whether it is language, art, or a child, to become a reality.¹⁶⁹

El arte es un evento continuo, o una continuidad que acontece: hubiera querido comunicarle esto a Ángel para salvarlo de su *either/or*, sabes, locura o razón, estancamiento o progreso, su mundo de opciones dramáticas que tanto le gusta y tanto daño le hace. Acepté su hijo para darle realidad a esta idea, la idea de una continuidad del acontecimiento entre el relajo y la desesperación

¹⁶⁹ As Kadir remarks, “those who must carry the geste, gesture, or gestation to term—terms of time and terms of language—are not wont to take the process for granted” (“Fuentes and the Profane Sublime” 97).

que van a devorar a mi pobre Ángel si no me entiende. Aunque sea a solas, sin mí, pero que me entienda. (425)

[Art is a continuous event or a continuity that takes place. I would have wanted to communicate that to Angel in order to save him from his *either/or*, you know, his madness or reason, stagnation or progress, his world of dramatic possibilities which he likes so much and which does him such damage. I agreed to have this child in order to bring this idea to reality, the idea of continuity of happening between the nonsense and the despair that will devour my poor Angel if he doesn't understand me. Even if he ends up doing it alone, without me, just as long as he understands me. (397–398)]

Cristóbal, then, becomes the idea realized, the word made flesh, a living symbol for Ángeles. Kadir reflects on the originary moment of the text, in which Cristóbal utters the first words of the novel, which would, in theory, mark the beginning of his life: “His enunciation, subsuming as it does the intercourse and interlocution of his conception, becomes the germinal word transmuted into flesh/text incarnate as bio/graphy” (94).

However, we are faced with the possibility that the entire novel is not a communication from an unborn Cristóbal, a result of Ángeles's gestation, or a product of Ángel's desire. The idea for the story begins *ab ovo*, so to speak, as the creation of the character Huevo, who is trapped in a metallic egg by Don Homero Fagoaga. Huevo, whose name means “egg,” and in popular uses refers to both male and female reproductivity, “vio un latigazo negro en su mente y pensó que en realidad era el espectro oscuro de un espermatozoide perfecto como el que algún día podía conferirle vida a un hijo suyo, o de su amigo Ángel Palomar, o de sus cuates el Huérfano Huerta, el Jipi Toltec y la Niña Ba” (149;

“saw in his mind a black whiplash and thought that in reality it was the dark ghost of a perfect spermatozoon like the one that might give life to his own son or that of his friend Ángel Palomar, or those of his buddies, the Orphan Huerta, Hipi Toltec, and the Baby Ba” 131).¹⁷⁰ Regardless of its many potential origins and genealogies, however, the primary source of this novel is the male body. In the end, as Kadir has observed: “His whole novel, after all, is a scriptive gesture of a spermatozoon’s flourishing loquacity, whether testicular, *phallopaeon*, or intrauterine” (107).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored what it would mean to take Dorfman and Fuentes’s representations of the female body seriously. If the womb represents a national space, then what does that mean for the female body? Also, what does the fact that the womb is included in the national imaginary while the rest of the female body (including the intellect) is excluded mean for the actual participation of women in the body politic? The experimental narratives of Dorfman and Fuentes develop the relationship between mother and child as analogous to the relation between a nation and its citizens. Through their “testicular, *phallopaeon*, or intrauterine” male narrators, these authors figure the male body as the creative locus of the citizen and situate the female body as “his” maternal homeland. Although their female protagonists are at times resilient, these authors are ultimately unable, regardless of their postmodern gestures, to imagine the nation without the symbolic exclusion of the feminine. The real danger is that these are not *just* metaphors; that is, the possibility that

¹⁷⁰ For an extensive reading of this “whiplash,” see Castillo and also Kadir, “Fuentes and the Profane Sublime.”

these metaphors are both representative of and play a role in constructing women's experiences.

CORPOREAL CONCLUSIONS

The previous chapters have demonstrated how figurative representations of the female body are integral to definitions of citizenship and bare life; biopolitics and the neoliberalism that undergirds it; and various body politics and national imaginaries. A sort of violence is done by the metaphorical relationship between the womb and the nation, which relies on a metonymic relation between the womb and the female body. I have five principal objections to this configuration of the female body, which I have explored throughout this project: 1) it reinforces the gendering of a body/mind dualism by positing female subjects as bodies; 2) it reduces the value of the female body to the function of a reproductive organ; 3) it ignores the creative agency of the female subject in producing the body politic by situating the unborn as the future citizen and birth as a passive process; 4) it assumes that the female body is necessarily a maternal body, thus symbolically excluding from the national imaginary those women who do not reproduce, whether voluntarily or not; 5) it transforms the womb into a national space and makes it, and by implication women, subject to jurisdiction. What results, then, is that the nation is born, and through this passive voice we are denied access to the agency, agon, or violence in its construction or the circumstances of its origin; instead, it emerges from a universal ideal rather than from a specific socio-historical context.¹⁷¹ I also propose that the myth of the passive “birth” of the nation undercuts the violence of its originary moment and circumvents the issue of agency. The

¹⁷¹ Indeed, this metaphorical construction of the womb-nation resonates with Anne McClintock’s discussion of the metaphorical construction of the family-national history: “The family as *metaphor* offered a single genesis narrative for national history while, at the same time, the family as an *institution* became void of history and excluded from national power. The family became, at one and the same time, both the *organizing figure* for national history and its *antithesis*” (357, her emphasis).

violence I refer to here is not a violence natural to birth, but rather the violence of exclusion (in terms of bare life and its association with the feminine, certain races, and lower classes) on which the concept of nation and national identity is founded.

The problem with this configuration of the female body, as Yuval-Davis writes, is that while “[w]omen are often constructed as the cultural symbols of the collectivity, of its boundaries, as carriers of the collectivity’s ‘honour’ and as its intergenerational reproducers of culture” (67), it is also the case that “they are often excluded from the collective ‘we’ of the body politic, and retain an object rather than a subject position” (47). In this way, my project shares the impetus of Yuval-Davis’s work in *Gender and Nation*, namely, since “it is women—and not (just?) the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia—who reproduce nations, biologically, culturally, and symbolically,” she asks, “[w]hy, then, are women usually ‘hidden’ in the various theorizations of nationalist phenomena?” (2). In my research, the examination of literary texts as socio-cultural by-products and as a form of resistance against national and international hegemonies reveals that this contradiction is made possible due to the relation of inclusive exclusion that the feminine has with the nation and the body politic. If we recall Lakoff and Johnson’s argument (namely that body metaphors are not only socially constructed, but that also these metaphors affect the way that individuals experience their own bodies), then using the female body as a metaphor for the nation can also connect women’s experience of their nationality with their gender. The danger is in the possibility that the metaphorical relation of inclusive exclusion that the female body has with the nation becomes literalized, or a “metaphor we live by,” as it has in the past. That this trope naturalizes an image of femininity that is damaging to women is one of many the concerns that arise when one employs bodily metaphors. Is it possible, for instance, that women might

experience “nationality and gender in the same imagined way,” as Sommer suggests all modern subjects do? (40) This conclusion would not be far-fetched, given the way that a discourse of gender is used to sustain national rhetoric. Indeed, the editors of *Conceiving the New World Order*, Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, argue that “[r]epresentations provide the arena in which cultural understandings and hierarchies are produced, contested, and revealed” (6) and, although not all of the essays in this collected volume explicitly address issues of representation, they do provide substantial evidence that there are material consequences of this metaphorical construction of the body which links women’s reproduction to national foundation and continuance. What is more, Ginsburg and Rapp observe and lament the fact that “[s]tate, corporate, and patriarchal powers sometimes efface the centrality of women to reproduction, even those aspects that are inseparable from female bodies” (3).

A key point of contention that is at the very foundation of the use of the body as a metaphor is, as Grosz reminds us, that “there is no body as such: there are only *bodies*” (*Volatile Bodies* 19). With this statement, Grosz alludes to the fact that the body cannot be separated from its social, cultural, and historical specificities, which suggests that a representation of the body cannot be separated from its materiality. Furthermore, Grosz’s claim also signals a problem with the symbolic use of “the body,” which is particularly useful for the creation of an imagined community, given that, in its abstraction, the body is singular, united by the complementarity of its organs, and homogeneous. The concept of homogeneity, here, reminds us of Weinbaum’s race/reproduction bind, which suggests that just as the symbolic body is homogeneous, so too are the individuals that make up the national body.

I remind the reader of the following passage, in which Grosz provides us with an alternative theoretical framework with which to discuss bodies:

I will deny that there is the “real,” material body on one hand and its various cultural and historical representation on the other. It is my claim throughout this book that these representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute bodies and help to produce them as such. The bodies in which I am interested are culturally, sexually, racially specific bodies, the mobile and changeable terms of cultural production. As an essential internal condition of human bodies, a consequence of perhaps their organic openness to cultural completion, bodies must take the social order as their productive nucleus. Part of their own “nature” is an organic or ontological “incompleteness” or lack of finality, an amenability to social completion, social ordering and organization.

(Volatile Bodies x–xi)

What inevitably ensues, then, are the real material effects that “these representations and cultural inscriptions” have on the lived experience of individual subjects. Accordingly, if bare life is feminized, if the female body is the symbolic boundary of the body politic, and if, in the process, the womb is excised from the female body to support myths of national origin, what does this mean for women and other marginalized peoples whose otherness has been feminized, and therefore excluded from imagined and actual communities? The exploration of the ethical implications of this question has been the exigency of this project.

Just as the feminine’s relation of inclusive exclusion with the body politic is reinforced through the metaphor of womb-nation, so too is this relation of inclusive exclusion evident in the way that current discourses circulate about the maternal/fetal relationship, in

which the mother is marginalized. Squier writes in “Fetal Voices: Speaking for the Margins Within,” that the maternal-fetal relationship “has social and political dimensions” and cannot be considered to be outside the influence of culture (19). Commenting on, “[t]he current prominence in our culture of fetal images and voices, split off from the gestating woman and womb” (17), Squier observes that “[n]o longer are the fetus’s interests conceived of as linked to those of the mother; now it is argued that fetal rights must be defended against the mother’s—by outside, even state, intervention if necessary” (17–18). Indeed, this perceived antagonism, which Squier aptly describes as colonization (17), is not necessarily innate or natural to the maternal-fetal relationship, but rather, especially in Eltit’s case, is often symptomatic of the social context in which these mothers find themselves. However, Dorfman, Eltit, and Fuentes all exploit the trope of the marginalized fetus, albeit with different political intentions and outcomes. For Dorfman and Eltit, the direness of the political situation accompanied by the actual marginalization and the social undesirability of the fetal narrators seems to be the primary cause. On the other hand, the marginalization of Fuentes’s fetal narrator is caused by a world which questions his ability to speak or write rather than an indication of a world antagonistic to his existence.

The danger of this trope, however, is that symbolic marginalization will divert attention from more severe cases of marginalization, such as the transformation of individuals, groups, and entire nations into bare life. Squier’s article, which was published in the early nineties, accurately assesses the present and predicts the future deployment of the concept of the fetus as a marginal figure: “this specific encoding of the fetus as an autonomous, marginal being serves dominant interests, whether they be to abrogate woman’s rights to bodily integrity or to construct a cooptable, sanitized notion of marginality to

substitute for others less tractable, more troubling” (18). For instance, Cooper observes in George W. Bush’s speech declaring National Sanctity of Human Life Day (2002) a “smooth transition from right to life to neoconservative ‘just war’ rhetoric” (152). Cooper highlights the irony in both Bush’s framing of “the unborn fetus as the abstract and universal subject of human rights” and his declaration of war against terrorism and in his “exten[sion of] universal health coverage to the unborn, who thereby became the first and only demographic in the United States to benefit from guaranteed and unconditional health care, at least until the moment of birth” (153). Here the unborn gain the status and rights of personhood and citizenship, and, in a strange omission, not the gestating mother or mothers-to-be. What is more, the unborn are guaranteed privileges and protections by the state that many of the already born are not. In Bush’s reversion to the “right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” of the Declaration of Independence, Cooper detects the semantic shift of “right to life” and the way in which “the historical legacy of the nation’s founding fathers is catapulted into the potential life of its future generations” (152–153). This example illustrates how figurative representations of the maternal-fetal relationship continue to affect the way that we define life (and citizenship) and gives urgency to the current study, which aims to unpack this relationship between figurative and material violence.

Yet, when nations are in crisis and when the life of the nation, itself, is being threatened, what remains clear is the rhetorical expediency and social efficacy of figurative language. In fact, national metaphors have the potential to make certain people disposable, to justify the violation of civil and human rights, and to mobilize nations to war. Although this project has focused on deconstructing the inner workings of the rhetorical figure of the womb

as a metaphor for the nation, the challenge of imagining a more ethical representation of the female body and the nation remains.

My chapters were divided based on the ways in which these authors were engaging with the womb rhetorically as a figure and politically as a national space. Chapter Two, for instance, focuses primarily on the trope of representing the womb as an empty space, which, in the novels of Atwood and Lispector, served as a justification of the female protagonists' disposability. When womb metaphors are literalized (as in the case of Offred) or are only taken literally because the metaphorical resonances are lost on the person to which they are being applied (as in the case of Macabéa), there are dire consequences for the female protagonists. So that when womb-woman metonymy becomes so ingrained in cultural and national discourse, this metonymy translates into the womb defining the woman, even replacing her, becoming her only social value. Moreover, this rhetoric enables the transformation of the protagonists into bare life, that is, they become disposable. Their existences are erased by those with the power to construct national histories and national imaginaries (the Gileadean government in the case of Atwood and the novelist Rodrigo in the case of Lispector), who include their "labor" only to deny their human rights and sense of belonging.

Chapter Three asks how women who are bare life experience their own bodies when the world is hostile to their reproduction and how this affects the womb metaphors they use to describe their bodies. What I uncovered in this chapter is that, ultimately, there is no space that is not hostile to bare life, which could account for the highly antagonistic maternal-fetal relationship, represented in these texts. These authors, Eltit and Morrison, expose how women's experience of bare life is exacerbated by their reproductive capacities, which

creates the sensation of being more bound or imprisoned by their bodies than their male counterparts. In Eltit, for instance, the layers of meaning and cultural resonances of the womb collapse into one and permeate all spaces, which give the impression that the protagonist, herself, is imprisoned by and in her own womb. Morrison's novel, however, situates 124 as a womb-like space in which to recuperate the "join." In both novels, these womb and womb-like spaces are very much tied to their inhabitants' inability to feel secure in even the most basic of relationships, such as that of mother and child, at the same time that their lives are transformed into the "property" of others and the limitations placed on their individual freedoms and rights are sanctioned by the state.

The final chapter examines the implications for privileging the voice of the sperm (and later the fetus) while marginalizing the voice of the mother, especially as these female bodies are employed as a space of hope for an alternative future nation or as a space for re-imagining national and hemispheric origins. Both of these novels, by Dorfman and Fuentes, parody two literary works, namely Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*], respectively, whose works are "seminal," in more senses than one. Indeed, these literary precursors are obsessed with origins and genealogy, as these notions frame individual and national futures. Although they are participating in a literary tradition, Dorfman and Fuentes re-inscribe traditional use of the female body as a metaphor for the nation; as such, the womb is converted into a space of male authorship, just as the body politic is authorized primarily by male consent. The fact that their imaginary wombs are never synchronous with the body in which they are contained, but rather are conceived in terms of a nostalgic past or utopic future, suggests that the symbolic power of the womb as

an originary and creative space is separated from the agency of the female protagonists in these narratives.

All of these authors suggest a consistency in the way that the female body-nation metaphor operates to include the womb as a passive and dead object, but to exclude the woman as a living subject. However, the aesthetics of these novels vary greatly and fruitful comparisons could be made beyond the scope of the chapters. For example, one could easily find much in common between Atwood and Morrison's aesthetic strategies, which are, in a way, speculative and at the same time based on current and historical moments; additionally, both authors appeal to the reader's sympathies in relation to and identification with their female protagonists. By making the reader aware of their emotional response to the text, these authors bring their characters' experiences to bear on contemporary politics. Eltit and Lisperctor, on the other hand, evoke apathy, disdain, and disgust in the reader, forcing him/her to become conscious of his/her own antagonism against bare life, or those "disposable" members of society. Their aesthetic practices are, in my view, the most innovative of the group, given that they challenge the reader, whether they are fellow citizens or not, to consider what an ethical response to these texts might be, indeed they actively solicit a response. In Dorfman and Fuentes's texts, the playfulness and hyperbolic situations they construct present a distorted version of reality in order to critique the national disorder that they perceive in their respective contexts. Their loquacity, however, in addition to their generic promiscuity, unsettles the reader, whom Dorfman and Fuentes have already included as an interlocutor in their texts, a technique also found in Lisperctor. Thematically, the Chileans, Dorfman and Eltit, both explore the topic of insanity under Pinochet even though Dorfman was exiled and Eltit remained during the dictatorship. What remains clear is the fact

that placing these texts in conversation reveals that there are myriad ways in which they could be combined to speak to each other, especially in terms of the relation between reproduction and the way that the nation is conceived, both literally and metaphorically.

An area that needs further critical examination, but which lies beyond the scope of this project, is to examine the ways that figurative representations of the body are ingrained in scientific and legal discourse of the 1980s. In addition to the study of literature, an analysis of the rhetoric of science and law would provide crucial insight into the social values that determine policies of population control, which have intervened disproportionately in women's reproductive lives. Ultimately, my work contributes to the ongoing theoretical debate aimed at describing the relation that gender has with the nation by confirming the symbolic and actual violence against the female body that underlies our conception of nation and national foundation. What is more, as a scholar of literature, I bring the role of figurative language to bear on biopolitics, which reveals the way in which figurative language serves to perpetuate the relation of inclusive exclusion that the feminine has with the nation and the body politic. Indeed, as Ginsburg and Rapp assert, "[r]epresentations provide the arena in which cultural understandings and hierarchies are produced, contested, and revealed" (6). For this reason, it is absolutely essential to take our most basic representations to task, since they can reveal much about our socio-cultural values and can also affect the ways in which people experience their bodies in the world. Furthermore, we are ethically bound to examine the rhetorical means by which human beings are rendered bare life and the conditions under which their rights can be so blatantly violated.

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