

MYSTICAL QUEERINGS: ECSTASY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN LATIN
AMERICAN TEXTS

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Although a mystic aesthetic abounds in contemporary and twentieth century Latin American texts, few scholars have published on this topic. This dissertation establishes that mystic themes are far more prevalent in Latin American texts than the scarce scholarship on the topic would suggest. The authors and filmmaker studied in this dissertation reappropriate the structuring metaphors of early modern mysticism: illumination/darkness, ascent/descent, boundaries, spiritual union and active/passive roles. We will note how the stages of the mystic path serve to explore theories on transcendence. A particularly queer way of knowing—mostly through the sense of touch—links itself to affective noetic understanding via ecstasy and transcendence. However, the authors of the primary texts analyzed in this dissertation no longer preserve the concepts of God, sin, or redemption in the traditional sense.

While other projects on mysticism in Latin America attempt to exhibit the European influence on Latin American texts, this study endeavors to show that the Latin American texts speak back to the European ones. This investigation places George Bataille and Julia Kristeva's theories on non-religious mysticism into dialogue with novels and films by Carmen Boullosa, Jaime Saenz, Virgilio Piñera, and Carlos Bolado. The true revolution of the non-religious mystical genre that emerges from these Latin American texts comes about through breaking with the gender pairings/power dynamic in bridal mysticism and through not relegating the affective solely to the feminine.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Beth Mary Bouloukos received her Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature and Spanish from Hamilton College. It was her senior thesis, which she wrote under the guidance of Carol Rupprecht, that inspired her to pursue a Ph.D. Since then, she has lived, studied, and researched in Spain, Mexico, and Argentina.

To my cousin Patrick (1980 – 1999)

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INTRODUCTION

In the past few years there has been a “spirituality” publishing craze in the United States and many other parts of the world. On a recent search of publishersglobal.com, a website that lists 20,000 international companies, there were 398 publishers who print work on spirituality (listed separately from religion), compared to 62 who publish on cinema and 234 on biographies. In the United States, those numbers are: 43 for spirituality, 7 for cinema, and 30 for biographies. Elizabeth Puttick explains the trend in her 2005 article “The Rise of Mind-Body-Spirit Publishing:”

[T]he recent explosion of holistic ideas and practices into the mainstream was facilitated and sometimes lead by influential books and consolidated by bestsellers. Mind-body-spirit (MBS) publishing has expanded from a specialist niche to the fastest growing non-fiction genre in a multinational, multimedia industry. This growth contrasts with traditional religious publishing, which is in decline. In the process, the most successful spiritual authors have become both gurus and global brands (129).

Here, Puttick highlights the important role that publishing trends have played in popularizing New Age ideals.

A renewed (or new, in some cases) interest in different Latin American spiritualities has accompanied this rapid increase in mind-body-spirit publishing. In just one recent edition of the *New York Times* (September 20, 2009) there were three articles dedicated to the topic of spirituality. One piece, “Psychic Surgery: An Anxious Visit to a Mayan Healer,” was written by a playwright, Victor Lodato, who goes to the village of Dziuché in Mexico to receive a *curación* from a person whom he describes

as “El Negrito, a spiritual healer much praised by the local Mayans.” Even though Lodato originally expresses skepticism, his friend convinces him to travel to this remote town where he waits “in a long line of peasants” to see the healer. Lodato recounts his trip through the jungle with romantic optimism: “The next day, in Karson’s tiny red VW, we drove deep into the jungle, often through great agitations of yellow butterflies.” Lodato does not seem to know going into this psychic surgery that beyond his praise from the locals, el Negrito (Arsenio España Dzul) has cured famous artists and politicians, and is representative of the current debates about ancestral healing.¹ Some have accused him of extorting money from locals and tourists alike (there are even bus tours to his jungle *consultorio*), while others claim that he is a miraculous healer whom doctors in Mexico City have conferred with about difficult cases. One thing is sure for Lodato: he enters into the process with an uninformed hope that this “world beyond logic,” as he calls it, will heal him from his moderate anxiety.² (Lodato’s friend poses his options to him as either the *curadero* or Xanax.)

Latin America has provided not only a source for these New Age theories but a market for them. It is harder to locate the statistics on publishing in Latin America, but the concept of New Age has been exported to the region. Most of the books sold in Latin America on New Age spirituality—sometimes translated to *Nueva era*—are from North American and South Asian writers producing texts in English, such as John Powell and Deepak Chopra. Vicente Merlo is the only best-selling writer to publish works in Spanish, which are easily accessible in the major bookstores of Mexico and Argentina.

On the other side of this popular self-help genre, we also find an increase in

¹ For a glimpse at this specific debate, see <http://blogs.elcorreo.com/magonia/2009/7/23/un-chaman-trata-ninos-con-cancer-un-hospital-mexicano-con>.

² Obviously, counter examples of people from the United States more invested in understanding traditional indigenous curing exist. The director, Darren Aronofsky, who studied with a *curadero* in Guatemala before making his film, *The Fountain*, presents a good example.

interest and publications on spirituality in the academic realm. A few weeks before the publication of the September 2009 edition of the *New York Times* that included the Mayan healing story, the *New Yorker* ran an article (August 30, 2009) about a book by Terry Eagleton, one of Britain's most influential literary critics. In his book, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009), Eagleton "defends the Supreme Being from the new atheists." Along with the new atheists, Eagleton finds he must shield his vision of Christianity from fundamentalism and positive psychology. Eagleton explains that: "The New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do. The stark signifier of the human condition is one who spoke up for love and justice and was done to death for his pains. The traumatic truth of human history is a mutilated body" (27). Eagleton's views prove important to the framework of this dissertation inasmuch that they seek to refresh the negativity that is at work in many Christian teachings. With his famous wit, Eagleton comments that: "Negativity is often looked upon [in the United States] as a kind of thought crime. Not since the advent of socialist realism has the world witnessed such pathological upbeatness" (138).

This dissertation asks what literature and film from Latin America can add to this debate on the state of atheism, religion, and spirituality. I question in what ways these texts might propose unique philosophies that help us to understand spirituality in a region that boasts some of the most reverently/irreverently religious and anti/non-religious people in the world. Artists and intellectuals in Latin America have been struggling with what types of spirituality can exist outside religious institutions. The author and filmmaker discussed in the second half of this study have become particularly interested in how contemporary understandings of indigenous philosophies and traditions offer theories on ways to understand what it means to be

human and the human being's relationship to the universe.

Before we delve into these questions, it must be noted that while this dissertation focuses on the ways in which Catholicism and Christian symbolism have mixed with (and sometimes have rejected) indigenous theories, atheism, and other philosophies in Latin America, this is not to say that Latin America represents a homogenous culture in terms of religion and spirituality. Within the confines of Christianity, Latin America has incredibly diverse traditions; this spiritual multiplicity expands when we take into account that many Jews, Muslims, and Hindus live in this region. The author Zulfikar Ghose, who was raised Muslim in India and England, finds inspiration in Latin America through travel to places such as Quito, Ecuador (a trip to a farm there forms the basis of one of his novels) and his wife's native Brazil. In regards to the topic of this dissertation, Clarice Lispector's biographer, Benjamin Moser, argues in his recent book, *Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector*, that much of her writing comes from the teachings of Jewish mysticism. Moreover, we will see that authors like José Lezama Lima have developed their fascinations with the religious and philosophical traditions of Asia through their writing.

Although a syncretic Christian mystic aesthetic abounds in contemporary and 20th Century Latin American texts, few scholars have published on this topic. One exception is the book-length study *Sacred Eroticism* by Juan Carlos Ubilluz, which successfully demonstrates the influence of Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski on the erotic novel in Latin America. Ubilluz selects texts by the canonical authors Julio Cortázar, Salvador Elizondo, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Juan Garcia Ponce to prove how their novels reflect the atheist mysticism outlined by Bataille and Klossowski. This dissertation will show that this leaves by the wayside many non-canonical texts in the genre. Other than Ubilluz's book, there are two articles on ecstasy in relation to the work of Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges, though they do not have the same overall

interest in mystical structuring metaphors.³ Also, Gustavo Pellón has studied the issues of transcendence and epiphany in relation to the narrative and poetry of Lezama Lima. In Pellón's book, *Lezama Lima's Joyful Vision*, he speaks of textual epiphany that is grounded in Catholicism, but, again, he does not specifically concern himself with mystical structures.

There was one study written on other mystical elements of Lezama Lima's narrative by Claudia Joan Waller called "'Paradiso': The Theme of Light and Resurrection;" however, instead of Christian mysticism, her investigation traces Buddhist structures. I would like to highlight this article because of the similar focus on structuring metaphors that Waller's argument and this dissertation share. Lezama Lima's novel *Paradiso* is clearly interested in the concept of resurrection and the metaphors used to arrive at this final state remind us of San Juan and early modern mysticism: the struggle between light and dark (the flame being an important metaphor here), the attainment of gnosis, and, ultimately, of a resurrection. Waller explains:

An examination of the...novel affords the possibility of a further application of the Buddhist symbols, particularly with regard to the characters' association with and search for light and clarity, the Buddhist essential for all knowledge. If one accepts the Buddhist idea, this theme of light provides a major element of thematic unity in the novel and logically prefaces the spiritual resurrection of the protagonist to the state of higher consciousness or Paradise...The soul must struggle though the lower planes, symbolized by the dense night that resists light and music (280).

³E J Wilson's, "Vision, Ecstasy, and Eastern Thought in the Poetry of Octavio Paz." *Symposium* 29 (1975): 164-79; Willis Barnstone's, "Poet of Ecstasy." *Borges the Poet*. Ed. Carlos Cortinez. U of Arkansas P: Fayetteville, 1986. 134-141.

All of these statements could be applied to the Christian *vía mística*, and this is where we see how *Paradiso* can be read on many different levels and through various lenses. I agree with Waller that the last scene of the novel represents a “spiritual resurrection to [a] higher consciousness.” Waller does a fine analysis of the completion of the Buddhist path through an investigation of the metaphors in these final paragraphs. I would like to propose that we could also read the final dream scene in the novel in terms of early modern peninsular mysticism (something that Julio Ortega points to in his commentary on the last chapter of the novel in *El reino de la imagen*). We have the structuring metaphors of fire and the fountain, which are both seen in San Juan and Santa Teresa. Furthermore, the dream-vision is a highly important mode of access to the divine in early modern mysticism.

This dissertation will demonstrate that mystic themes are far more prevalent in 20th century Latin American texts than the scarce scholarship on the topic would suggest. Throughout the chapters of this investigation, I place the theories of Bataille and Kristeva, two European thinkers responsible for a breed of non-religious mysticism, into conversation with texts from Latin America. Might these texts from Latin America propose more convincing, modern theories on this type of mysticism? Could their interest in syncretic religious traditions point towards a connection between what we find “modern” and certain indigenous philosophies? Could we treat this turn towards local theories as a reaction to diaspora?

In order to tackle these complicated topics, we must ground ourselves in the basic concepts of the dissertation by asking the following questions: What can spirituality mean in a post-religious context? How does this relate to the concept of the sacred? How are spirituality and religion similar and/or dissimilar? What is the connection between spirituality and mysticism? What is involved in the traditional mystic process? What are characters’ responses to the stages of the mystic path? Can

mysticism exist without the divine? Can these Latin American texts propose new answers to these spiritual and philosophical questions?

Let us begin with the most basic concept framing this dissertation: spirituality. I use “spirituality” to mean a connection with the sacred that, even if it co-opts methods or symbols from religious tradition, is not mediated by religious dogma and exists outside of an institutional framework. In the texts analyzed in this dissertation, the “sacred” is a human’s connection to nature, the cycle of life, historical origins, and other humans beings (we will see examples of this through parenthood, romantic love and familial love). No transcendent supernatural being (i.e. God) controls or represents access to the sacred. This conception of the sacred is both immanent and transcendent in that it is within our grasp (sometimes within us) and also beyond our perceptive abilities.

Popular movements in North America, such as New Age beliefs, non-religious yoga, and positive psychology, have diluted elements of this type of spirituality in an attempt to mass market them. The Mexican town Tepoztlán, about 30 miles outside of Cuernavaca, reflects this essentializing tendency. Although known as a weekend destination for residents of Mexico City, on my last visit to Tepoztlán I came across more californianos than chilangos. Frommer’s includes the following characterization of the town in its Mexico guide: “Most Tepoztlán residents, whether foreigners or Mexicans, tend to be mystically or artistically oriented—although some also appear to be just plain disoriented. The village wears its New Age heart on its sleeve—homeopathic pharmacies and health-food stores coexist happily alongside Internet cafes, tortilla stands, and satellite-dish companies.” Thus, Tepoztlán’s original spiritual currency as the birthplace of the god Quetzalcoatl has turned it into a fashionable yoga/spiritual retreat destination. This is one of many examples that result in a capitalist, colonialist gesture that idealizes elements of spirituality, ignoring the

cultural context of the theories' origins. What remains after this adulteration is a cheery product intended to attract consumers steeped in a culture obsessed with happiness. Many of these consumers have become disenchanted with formal religion and, for others, religion has become a matter of going through the motions; in a 2005 Newsweek poll about 25% of US Americans claimed that they consider themselves "spiritual but not religious."

Most brands of this "spirituality" offer paths to romanticized contentment while disregarding the pain and fear in many of the non-Western traditions they draw on for inspiration. In that same Newsweek poll, 91% of religious and spiritual people said that they practiced because they find it important (70% very important, 21% somewhat important) in order to obtain "happiness and peace of mind," versus 79% who consider it important (55% very important, 24% somewhat important) to connect "with something larger than [themselves]." A consummate example of this trend towards happiness spirituality is Oprah Winfrey's promotion of the Mexican "neo-shaman" Miguel Ángel Ruiz. With Oprah's endorsement of his 1997 book, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Wisdom (A Toltec Wisdom Book)*, Ruiz sold 4 million copies. The "agreements" outlined in the book allow believers to rid their lives of unhappiness. Ruiz further broke away from the darkness and negativity in the traditions that he draws on in the book *Beyond Fear: A Toltec Guide to Freedom and Joy*. It should be noted that Ruiz has not enjoyed the same fame or publishing success in his native Mexico.

Another Oprah book club read, *Eat, Pray, Love*, represents an immensely popular example of happiness spirituality. Oprah dedicated two shows to the book and it was on the New York Times Bestseller List for 158 weeks. Brad Pitt's company produced the film version, which was released in August 2010 with Javier Bardem and Julia Roberts starring as the protagonists. The author of the 2006 memoir, Elizabeth

Gilbert, cites Santa Teresa and other spiritual leaders of various faiths while recounting the depression that caused her to renounce her former life and set out on a spiritual path to happiness, which she ultimately obtains by finding worldly romance. While Barbara Fisher of *The Boston Globe* calls Gilbert “the epic poet of ecstasy,” many critics openly attack Gilbert. Maureen Callahan of *The New York Post* describes the book as:

a narcissistic New Age reading...the worst in Western fetishization of Eastern thought and culture, assured in its answers to existential dilemmas that have confounded intellects greater than hers. You may be a well-off white woman, but if you are depressed, the answer can be found in the East, where the poor brown people are sages...Christopher Hitchens surgically dismembers such nonsense in his recent bestseller (and tonic to this book) *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. He writes that Westerners tend to ‘revere’ Eastern religions as a reaction to Western colonialism, and that some readers, ‘will be shocked to learn of the existence of Hindu and Buddhist murderers and sadists.’

Because of its treatment of faith and gender, both Christians and feminists alike bashed the book. The feminist magazine *Bitch* published one of its harshest criticisms. Joshunda Sanders and Diana Barnes-Brown observe that:

Eat, Pray, Love is not the first book of its kind, but it is a perfect example of the genre of priv-lit: literature or media whose expressed goal is one of spiritual, existential, or philosophical enlightenment contingent upon women’s hard work, commitment, and patience, but whose actual barriers to entry are primarily financial...The spending itself is justified by its supposedly healthy goals—acceptance, self-love, the ability to heal past psychic wounds and break destructive patterns. Yet often the buzz over secondary perks (weight loss, say, or perfect skin) drowns out less superficial discussion.

This commodification of spirituality has a decidedly female target, as the authors of the aforementioned article explain by citing a *New York Times* Style section piece that describes the New York City “gurus” who provide services mostly to women.

On a much smaller scale and in self-published digital dissemination, the Nahua Reconstructionists or Aztec Reconstructionist Pagans (many reject the latter term because of its colonialist nature) share their interest in restoring pre-Colombian religious practices into the modern experience. One such priest of Tezcatlipoca, as he calls himself, maintains the website Aztec Gateway where he “spread[s] accurate information on Aztec religious beliefs and practices,” and also delineates where his own personal thoughts diverge from this tradition: “Throughout this site, it is my goal to present historically accurate information on ancient Aztec beliefs and practices as they once were. While I will speak on what I believe as well, and any differences between the beliefs of the past and my own, I shall keep it clear as to what has historically been, what my own personal beliefs are, where they differ and where they are the same.” The priest seeks to maintain the “darkness” in the Aztec faith, but explains quite clearly that he does not engage in human sacrifice: “The concept of sacrifice is a vital portion of my spiritual path. This does not mean that I sacrifice people, because I don't. But what it does mean is that I believe that the idea of giving up something vital and valuable to the gods is important, and also that being willing to endure pain for the gods is an act of piety and devotion.” Thus, this reconstructionist spiritualism makes a concerted effort to set itself apart from the essentializing goals of the New Age movement.

De Certeau’s historical work on mysticism explains that scholars, along with the agents of popular culture, were once guilty of the same colonialist readings of this genre of religious experience: “The attention directed by European analyses toward the mysticism of others is guided more or less explicitly by internal interrogations and

disputes, even when these analyses consider foreign traditions” (13). Thus, in order to evade a similarly offensive gesture, this dissertation attempts to treat these literary and filmatic experiences in terms of the cultures in which they are located. Moreover, I do not claim that the exploration of this type of spirituality in Latin American texts conforms to any one universal theme or philosophy. I begin with works by Virgilio Piñera and Jaime Saenz in order to demonstrate two different Latin American views on the impossibility of union. These chapters serve as counter examples to the texts I analyze in the rest of the dissertation by showing how this type of mystical path does not always lead to transcendence. In all of the texts, however, the connection between these spiritual experiences and death/terror is maintained.

Along with the over/misuse of “spirituality,” the term “mystic” has been misappropriated and popular media often use it as a synonym of “religious.” Before delving into the unique *via mystica* that the texts analysed in this dissertation propose, I must clarify how I use the term “mysticism” in my research. Scholars like Denys Turner, Jeffery John Kripal, and Bernard McGinn have debated what mysticism means in the ancient, medieval, and early modern contexts, but by far the shiftest definition involves what “mysticism” encompasses in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My definition presupposes certain negations of the concept of mysticism in the traditional Christian sense: we are no longer faced with a type of spirituality where the possibility of redemption or where the idea of sin or God in the traditional sense exists.

I hope to revive the true significance of the term inasmuch as it connotes the journey towards the unveiling of a cloaked truth or mystery; de Certeau clarifies a similar stance in his investigation on mystical language: “[T]his study has been lead to consider mystical language as a symbol—possibly the metaphor—of a hidden ‘Essence’ that must be identified philosophically, or a ‘meaning of life’ to be

elucidated in the conceptual terms of a society that has ceased to be religious” (19). De Certeau goes on to detail this historical detachment of mysticism from religion:

[O]ne no longer designated as mystical that form of “wisdom” elevated by a full recognition of the mystery already lived and announced in common beliefs, but rather an experimental knowledge that slowly detached itself from traditional theology or church institutions, characterized by the consciousness, received or acquired, of a fulfilling passivity in which the self loses itself in God. In other words, what becomes mystical is that which diverges from normal or ordinary paths; that which is no longer inscribed within the social community of faith or religious reference, but rather on the margins of an increasingly secularized society and a knowledge that defines its own scientific objects (13).

We will see in all of the texts analyzed that not a single character has contact with any formal religious institution. However detached from religion these characters have become, through my argument, we note how the authors and filmmaker utilize the traditional medieval and early modern stages of the mystic path. The structuring elements of purgation, illumination, and union still mold the trajectories of the texts. The artists also use traditional Catholic sacraments such as penitence and baptism to explore theories of mystical transcendence to knowledge.

The characters in the texts I analyze venture into these experiences using many of the same methods as Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de la Cruz, two mystics with a voluptuous style of early modern peninsular mysticism that these works cite both directly and indirectly. By “voluptuous” I mean to convey the sensual spirit of these experiences, though the term does not necessarily imply pleasure, and often this type of mysticism wields the intense power to horrify. I argue that vision and touch—sometimes in relation to eroticism, but always directed by issues of gender and

sexuality—are necessary tools for the attainment of ecstasy. This ecstasy relates to extreme affects and issues of space. Bataille explains this type of mysticism in terms of proximity and contends that space provokes the bodily affects also seen in early modern mysticism. Here Amy Hollywood describes Bataille’s sense of mysticism: “an encounter, affective and ecstatic, with the other in his or her bodily specificity, as mortal and lacerated, but also as the source of joy and the simultaneous pleasure and annihilation of the senses. Bataille understands mysticism...as the apprehension of the other in his or her bodily specificity and particularity” (15). Ecstasy itself, of course, is a spatial and affective term. The Greek word, *έκσταση*, literally means to stand (*σταση*, from *histemi*) outside (*έκ*) of one’s self; it also connotes a feeling of wonder, astonishment, and bewitchment. Many incidents provoke ecstasy in these texts, but in all of them the sense of touch, whether warm or abusive, often pushes the characters outside of their normal consciousness. Along with the tactile, the other senses sometimes play a role inciting the ecstatic states and we will note how and when these senses combine and which senses are more influential than others. All the emphasis on the senses corresponds to the interest in lived experience and phenomenology.

During these states of ecstasy, the characters are transported to another level of consciousness. This comes in the form of crossing boundaries, as the Real Academia Española explains in the definition of the term: “Aquello que está más allá de los límites naturales y desligado de ellos.” This transcendence (or literally going beyond) normal awareness leads to a type of illumination, which sometimes is nothing more than an unveiling of non-knowledge. This can lead to an acquaintance with a different realm, like in the poetry of Saenz where the poetic subject contacts the “other side of the night” or in the film of Bolado when the characters communicate with familial history. Transcendence does not necessarily imply mystic union and with the first two chapters on Piñera and Saenz we will see that the transcendence does not bring about a

sense of plenitude in union. The affect that most often results from these states of ecstasy and transcendence is fear, which is precisely what neoshamanism and other “spiritual” movements extract from the path towards transcendence.

The debate between the supremacy of affective versus intellectual mysticism reaches back to the Middle Ages and this dispute resurfaces with the renewed interest in mysticism in the 1930’s and 40’s. When we think of much of the theoretical work on mysticism, of Michel de Certeau and Jacques Derrida for instance, we note a fervent emphasis on language and an intellectual understanding of the experience. Most of the theorists of Bataille’s time looked to Master Eckhart (b. 1260) when analyzing the usefulness of mystic principles and Hollywood notes that: “In the modern era, affective forms of mysticism were denigrated” (13). Bataille, a trained medievalist, turns to the work of San Juan and Santa Teresa for their style of mysticism. Santa Teresa laments the shortcomings of language in her description of mystical experiences (given their inherently ineffable nature) and sometimes relies on affective images to depict her moments of ecstasy.

Compared to the other French thinkers of his time, Bataille presents an alternate means of understanding based on the emotional economy of affect. Bataille outlines his theories in a work called *L’expérience intérieure*, published in 1943 as part of his three-volume collection *La Somme athéologique*. Much as the title would suggest, Bataille goes about disturbing some of the canonical Judeo-Christian dogma by first erasing God. The manner in which Bataille approaches his negation is theological by nature; even the title to his *La Somme athéologique* “evokes the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas” (Boldt ix). The scholar and translator of Bataille’s work, Leslie Anne Boldt explains:

Bataille’s texts may be said to operate in relation to Judeo-Christian doctrine, to the extent that they set out from its basic tenets in order to displace them.

Given that the Judeo-Christian tradition situates the realization of the completion of Spirit in what is “beyond”—the infinite Being of God—the parameters of its experience are defined in relation to the Unlimited which transcends them. Bataille’s texts, however, operate within a space which is no longer incomplete vis-à-vis a transcendent unlimited “beyond”, but within one which is “made and unmade” by the transgression of its own limits—in particular as sexual experience reveals the absence of God. It is a space which is *interior* and *sovereign*, locked by the Unspeakable which exists at its margins, an impossible abyss glimpsed at the moment of transgression” (ix).

Bataille works within the structure and lexicon of Christian mysticism to disrupt the goal of transcendence towards union with God. The objective of this spiritual marriage traditionally comes in the form of salvation, but like the eradication of God, Bataille eliminates this concept. He finds that any dogma imposes “experience with undue limits,” thus he also eliminates sin and confession (3). What replaces God is Nothingness and this vision of the abyss provokes anguish.

For Bataille, affect does not counteract the intellect involved in the experience; here, emotion is not diametrically opposed to philosophy. This relates to Bataille’s interest in the coexistence of the rational and non-rational, clarified here by James Luchte:

[Bataille] is speaking of a religion outside the limits of reason alone, outside a merely logical or economic conception of reason—and inside a sense of reason which is a radical phenomenology of existence, thinking, and acting—one that is manifest to him amid historicity, but, as with each of us, as an event, in a moment of vision. Bataille traces the genealogy from ancient sacrifice and the economy of the gift to the era of the rationalisation of the political economic life of the planet.

In this quote, Luchte broaches the controversial topic of Bataille's bond, or lack thereof, to politics and history. Hollywood explains Sartre's 1943 review of *Inner Experience* where he accuses Bataille of attempting to escape from history: "Bataille, Sartre argues, is a 'new mystic' or a 'pantheist noir,' who claims to confront human contingency, history, and the death of God only in order to evade them in a flight to the transcendent" (27). Hollywood disagrees with Sartre's reading and her book *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* argues that: "Bataille does not desire to escape history and temporality but to engage with them differently, and he makes use of the ambiguities of his mystical sources to help him think, write and live a new relationship to history and to the other. This new relationship involves a continual contestation of the distinctions between content and form, mysticism and history, and atheism and theism" (35). We will see that some of the texts analyzed in this dissertation struggle to find their place in history via mystical experiences, which succeed in linking the present to the past and the future. Further, the characters in the last two chapters of this study achieve union precisely because of their interaction with history and a transcendence of the exclusively "inner" nature of the experience.

We will note other similarities between Bataille's approach to mysticism and the ways in which the subjects of the texts in this dissertation understand/experience their journeys. The authors and filmmaker presuppose an eradication of a traditional Christian God, sin, and confession. More specifically, like Bataille, the characters in these texts shed or distort the traditional Catholic symbols used by the nuns whom Bataille cites; however, the contemplation of a passion still remains: "Through representation, fiction and spectacle, Bataille repeatedly reenacts that death he can never experience directly" (Hollywood 46). Bataille adopts new passion characters to reflect on, and he offers the example of the picture of an unknown Chinese man being

tortured, which he stares at to incite ecstasy as if it were a religious icon.

Bataille's conception of the affects related to inner experience (anguish and desire) will resurface in all of these texts. In contrast to the New Age movement, Bataille not only understands and maintains the horror related to the spiritual experience, but endeavors to make it more germane for the subject, as we have observed with the example of the picture of the Chinese torture victim. The ambition of this anguish is to provoke ecstasy: "In anguish there appears a nudity which puts one into ecstasy" (Bataille 52). Bataille offers another method of reaching ecstasy: the erotic encounter. For Bataille, "desire is not emotion as pure presence but a continual interplay of presence and absence" (Hollywood 35), and we will see the impossibility of the erotic encounter along with this play on presence versus absence in many of the texts analyzed.

It is precisely within the roles of the subjects in the erotic/sacrificial encounter where these texts radically diverge from Bataille's mystic schema. There are two separate but related issues at work in Bataille's use of gender in how he explains inner experience: the first deals with how he appropriates, and then claims to exceed, the writing of female mystics whom he uses as the basis of his conception of anti-mysticism; the second relates to how he treats the female in the erotic encounter that leads to ecstasy. As for the first concern, Hollywood elucidates:

Bataille himself does not explicitly gender mysticism in the *Atheological Summa*, yet a number of factors suggest an implicit and complex gender dynamic operating within these texts. Most obviously, Bataille focuses on the work of a woman mystic [Angela of Foligno]. He reads and takes with utmost seriousness a woman's text; yet in that he claims to surpass her experience, this attention might be seen as another instance of the male appropriation of women's experience. Even more tellingly, Bataille suggests

that inner experience's superiority to Christian mysticism is a mark of its virility, thereby explicitly gendering his relationship to more traditional form of Christian mysticism (115).

Even though Bataille does not "explicitly gender mysticism" his book *Inner Experience* reestablishes the masculine dominance of the written word over the emotional, lived nature of mysticism described by Angela of Foligno. Hollywood goes on to explain that Bataille treated his initial interest in the lived experience of sacrifice, as naïve, and eventually replaces the written word for actual experience.

The second matter related to the gender dynamic in Bataille's writing on mysticism can be best understood in a short work of fiction called *Madame Edwarda*, which Bataille maintained should be read as part of and in conjunction with *Inner Experience* (116). In this text, Bataille outlines the female role in masculine ecstasy: the woman is the object through which the man transcends the realm of typical consciousness: "Madame Edwarda's genitals are the site of woundedness and castration, inscribing her body fully within a phallic logic in which the female sex is experienced and represented only as an absence. Understood as 'the all,' God does not exist. But in recognition and active embrace of the absence, another God emerges" (117). As Madame Edwarda works as a prostitute, Bataille relegates the responsibility of ecstatic object to a female character he perceives as perpetually accessible; Hollywood explains that for Bataille "The prostitute is the sacrificial object through whose death (through abjection and objectification) the sacred is made present" (117). Hence, the male gains access to the sacred through his violence towards, and objectification of, a woman.

Some scholars, like Jacques Lacan with his famous discussion of Santa Teresa's ecstasy, have argued that women themselves are the true sites of the mystical experience. He believes women experience the spiritual in a more affective, physical

way.⁴ In this theoretical approach, affect is relegated to the feminine, and with other scholars such as Kristeva, the affective is often linked to the feminine/non-Western. Kristeva begins her epistolary exchange with Catherine Clément by discussing the trances of African women. In his article on “‘Mystic Atheism’: Julia Kristeva’s Negative Theology,” Arthur Bradley states that Kristeva feels as if “the experience of the sacred is realized most intensely—if not exclusively—by women” (283). In Kristeva’s first letter to Catherine Clément, she explains: “The sadomasochism of the sacred connection (body/meaning) seems more obvious to a woman, more operative in a woman. She is there, she is ‘in step,’ she manifests it. In a trance. Woman, being on the borderline, biology and meaning, is likely to participate in both sides of the sacred” (16). This quote demonstrates how Kristeva originally tries to relegate the mystical exclusively to the female body in her correspondence with Clément (the basis of the epistolary book they published together, *Le féminine et le sacré*). However, Clément cautions Kristeva about this kind of binary reading and reminds her of the “frequent bisexuality of mystics” (30). Clément’s training in anthropology exposed her to various examples of this “bisexuality,” which these two women use to mean gender queer. Thus, through Clément’s spirited encouragement, Kristeva acknowledges that: “bisexuality and transvestism seem to dominate the possessions” (21). Yet throughout their exchanges, Kristeva insists on a return to the privileged access that women have to the sacred because of their location between zoe and bios.

Even though Bataille and Kristeva’s thoughts on the gender dynamic at work in mysticism diverge, both extract religion from the experience. Kristeva separates “belief and religion, on one hand, and the sacred, on the other” (26). Kristeva continues by explaining that “Belief and religion, as constructions, may be

⁴ This does not negate, however, man’s access to these types of experiences. For more on Lacan’s treatment of this dynamic, see the chapter of Hollywood’s book titled “Jacques Lacan, *Encore: Feminine Jouissance, the Real, and the Goal of Psychoanalysis*.”

imaginary... they propose figures of consolation and healing omnipotence” (26); whereas, she postulates that the sacred may be:

[T]he unconscious perception the human being has of its untenable eroticism: always on the borderline between nature and culture, the animalistic and the verbal, the sensible and the namable[.] What if the sacred were not the religious *need* for protection and omnipotence that institutions exploit but the jouissance of that *cleavage*—of that power/powerlessness—of that exquisite lapse? This incompleteness is explored in metaphysical ceremonies, it is celebrated in sacrifices (27).

Before Kristeva proposes her description of the sacred, Clément details this connection between the sacred and ritual when she writes, “It strikes me as an amusing ruse of reason that they should recover the power to heal by resorting to the archaism of the rite, and I like that historical regression might stand in the way of the most well-spoken modernity” (19). A ritualistic approach to a connection with the sacred arises in almost all of the texts at hand and we will return to this issue of modernity throughout our analysis.

Even after the encouragement of Clément, Kristeva remains stagnated in a 1980’s version of French feminism that maintains “a sexualized opposition between femininity and masculinity... French feminist theory was interested in neither individual liberty nor the eventual eclipse of sexual difference. For thinkers influenced by Jacques Lacan’s ideas about subjectivity, freedom was a necessary casualty and sexual difference an inescapable condition of human being” (Marcus 194). This dissertation moves in the direction of a more contemporary approach, summarized here by Sharon Marcus: “Feminist theory shifted from studying women to studying gender as a set of relations, and lesbian and gay studies analogously moved from tracing historically stable identities based on choice to defining queerness in relation

to sexual norms” (195). In light of these changes, we will challenge Bataille and Kristeva’s theories of gender and sexuality and also the constructs of traditional Christian “bridal mysticism” (consisting of the woman—often a nun—as the bride and Christ as her bridegroom or a man’s soul as the bride and Jesus as the groom). We will observe how authors and filmmakers since the 1950’s have disturbed these traditional gender pairings in the mystic path.

A key term I use in my investigation, queer, relates to these changes in feminist theory. I am interested in pushing the definition of queer past the popular understanding of the term as sex that is not between a man and a woman. Marcus explains how this definition appears in scholarly work: “While queerness is supposed to signify the instability of all sexual identities, scholars who define queerness as the lability of sexual identity in general almost always do so with reference to gay identity in particular; there is little extant work on the queerness of those conventionally considered heterosexual” (196). The term queer as it is used here means that which does not fit into the dominant vision of hegemonic, heteronormative, middle or upper class, white social sexual and gender behavior: pairings of sexual couples distanced by decades, religious kinks, orgiastic spectacles, and total negations/eradications of gender.

I am aware that queer is a North American term and the employment of the concept without care while analyzing Latin American texts would constitute intellectual colonization. Nevertheless, I can find no other word to fit the type of alterations of normalized gender and sexuality that these texts explore. Roberto Strongman confronts this same quandary in his article “Syncretic Religion and Dissident Sexualities”:

The indiscriminate imposition of such gender categories as “gay” or “lesbian” without questioning the culture-specific conditions that gave rise to them in the

United States and their noncorrespondence to local Latin American categories is an act of cultural hegemony that the wealthier United States imposes on its neighbors in the hemisphere...Moreover, as U.S. cultural products are exported, often by the demand of other cultures around the world, U.S. categories of sexual orientation start to subsume local modes of sexual alterity...It seems more appropriate to speak of Latin American homosexualities than, for instance, a Latin American “gay” or “lesbian(a)” identity. Nevertheless, because of the current usage in Latin America of the U.S.-fabricated terms “gay,” “lesbian(a),” “queer” to refer to some types of Latin American homosexualities—especially among the U.S.-influenced upper classes—I will be using those labels throughout the essay. I will also be using more native designations for same-gender sexualities. As a rule, I will use the sexual label that the subject referred to is likely to use in identifying to him/herself according to his/her geographical, linguistic, and class position (178).

The problem with onomastic designations becomes even more complicated in this dissertation because the investigation also confronts alternative types of gender. I have resigned myself to using the term queer, though I have made every attempt to address the issues of gender and sexuality I deal with in their local settings.

Before presenting the chapter descriptions, I would first like to address the genres of the texts at hand. All of the characters this dissertation analyzes tend toward the laconic; as opposed to their speech, the characters’ affects inform us of the manifold stages of their journeys. As dissimilar as the genres of these texts appear (narrative, poetry, and film), they all share a lyrical sensibility, which closely relates to the importance of affect. They may represent different genres but all are poetic in the sense that they elect strong images over copious words: Piñera goes directly against the complex linguistic style of his Cuban contemporaries Carpentier and Lezama

Lima, moving towards a more stylized prose; the concise nature of Saenz's poetry and prose is fleshed out by powerful imagery; Bolado replaces the marked lack of dialogue in *Bajo California* with hermetic images (much like Saenz); and Boullosa sprinkles her narrative with dialogue but shies away from excess, employing images rather than words to convey meaning. This limited dialogue and succinct style relates to the central topic linking these texts: the ineffability of spiritual experience.

Along with their lyrical similarities, the texts by Piñera, Bolado, and Boullosa share a generic attraction to the plastic arts. In Piñera's novel, *La carne de René*, the protagonist is confronted by various art objects that bear his likeness (some religious themed: a crucifix and a painting of a saint); upon contact with them, these pieces cause René's ecstatic states. Likewise, in Boullosa's novel, *Duerme*, the protagonist's inclusion in a codex allows for contemplation and inner experience when s/he is presented with the text. It is in Bolado's films, however, where this investment in the power of the plastic arts to inform and create spiritual experience is the greatest. The protagonist of the film *Bajo California*, Damián, creates installations on the beach and in the desert while on his literal path to transcendence through Baja California. Bolado's other film, *Sólo Dios sabe*, includes stills of works by young Mexican artists that deal with gender and the body's relationship to ecstasy and transcendence. While the story follows the main characters, Damián and Dolores, we learn early on that Ana Mendieta is a favorite artist of theirs when they reenact the Cuban-American artist's earth body works at the bank of a river.

The metaphor here is that the experience of art is what provokes the ecstasy that leads to knowledge. One of the most important figures of the conceptual art movement, Bruce Nauman, addresses this connection between the artist and a mystic revelation in his piece "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths" (figure 1). As with Nauman's piece, these writers question how the act of

producing/consuming art mirrors and provokes ecstasy and transcendence. Through this, they restore the importance of ritual to the experience of the sacred. Northrop Frye describes this in his essay “New Directions from Old:” “There is thus a close analogy between the poet’s subject matter...and the actions that we call rituals” (116-7). The experience of the text, whether creating it or reading/viewing it, has replaced religious rituals for these writers.⁵ Nauman also shares the idea that there is something empty in the knowledge that that transcendental art attempts to reveal; he demonstrates this with his tongue in cheek display of this message in tacky neon. What if the privileged message that the artist unveils is a sort of emptiness of purpose and a feeling that no one great truth exists?



Figure 1. Bruce Nauman, “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths”

⁵ An interesting contemporary development that may be related to this shift is the use of de-sanctified churches as exposition space for artists.

In my first chapter we will observe the emptiness that the ecstatic encounter brings about. René, in Virgilio Piñera's *La carne de René* (1952), exhibits an extreme level of affect in relation to ecstatic events. A detailed investigation of René's experiences and his ecstatic relationship to pain, torture, and eroticism (all experienced via relations of propinquity involving touch) eventually bring us to the acute affects they incite. René's ecstatic states inflame emotional and physiological responses (such as horror, disgust, vomiting, nausea, and laughter), which assist us in understanding René's reactions to various traumatic and erotic encounters. I explore how scholars have mistakenly imposed pre-existing types of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as "bipolar, transitive relations," such as subject/object and self/other, to the text and how René's experiences resist definition in this binary mode. Piñera presents an alternative to Bataille's misogynistic theories of erotic inner experience. Throughout this chapter I undertake a comparative analysis of the different published versions of the novel, a method not yet employed by any Piñera scholar.

In the second chapter I move on to Jaime Saenz, whose verses flow both to and from the traditions of early modern mysticism and towards existential philosophy. Especially in his poetry of the 1970's, we find a highly syncretic blend of phenomenology's interest in the relationship to the object, mysticism's questioning of the subject's connection to the sacred, and theories on trance. Saenz adds to this complexly-informed poetry plays on the gender, sexuality, and ethnicity of the poetic subject and object. Saenz' second novel, *Los papeles de Narciso Lima Achá*, fleshes out his mystical philosophy and explicitly outlines his ideas on a queer "universal love." Again, as in Piñera's text, I suggest that this queering of transcendence offers a more attractive theory than what Bataille developed. In relation to this queer inflection in Saenz's work, I question why the English translations of Saenz's poetry, no doubt

intended for a North American audience and classroom, have universally heteronormalized his poetry, consistently inserting the pronoun “she” for the love object where it never appears in the original.

From here I move on to Mexico in chapter three where I examine two films written and directed by Carlos Bolado, *Bajo California: el límite del tiempo* (1998) and *Sólo Dios Sabe* (2005). In the first film, the protagonist Damián, a Chicano artist, enters into a spiritual quest in the same way the ascetic saints journeyed into the desert—only here the barren land of San Francisco, Baja California serves as the backdrop. The cave paintings Damián seeks—in actuality famed to be the largest in the world—prove important in terms of vision and touch. When Damián finally encounters the paintings, his overwhelming need to touch them ignites a supremely ecstatic state. Proximity and touch continue to push Damián into inner experience through contact with the locals and their history, which culminates with Damián receiving a shamanistic vision. In the second film, *Sólo Dios sabe*, the protagonist, Dolores, realizes that she must return to Brazil after her passport is stolen in Mexico where she is a graduate student in art history. As Bolado models Dolores’ character after the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, I question how the production of art relates to the mystic path in both these films. Through Dolores’ experiences in a Salvadorian house of Candomblé (where she finds out that her great-grandmother was the high priestess), she transcends to an alternate consciousness during ecstatic states by way of induced trance. Bolado shows how an understanding of a syncretic spiritual past (and a re-evaluation of race and ethnicity) can lead to union. I end with a discussion of how concepts of masculinity and gender in both films influence the stages of the mystic path.

In Carmen Boullosa’s *Duerme* (1994), the subject of chapter four, pre-Colombian water as a mechanism of transcendence takes on a vital role. In this novel,

set in the time of the “Conquest,” ecstatic experiences fix themselves to issues of history and origins. For Claire, the French-born pirate protagonist, desire does not only develop in the same erotic sense as we noted in the works by Piñera and Bolado, but also concerns other gender and race issues. Claire identifies as male and a new connection to an indigenous identity arises through ecstatic experiences. As different situations force Claire to go back and forth from male to female, European to Mexica, and oligarch to servant, we examine the borders between self and other, which Boullosa complicates through the use of transcendence via the sense of touch. This chapter addresses how Kristeva recognizes the “bisexual” nature of mystic experience but eventually relegates the mystical exclusively to the female body; conversely, Boullosa queers this by making her protagonist neither male nor female.

CHAPTER ONE

EXCESSIVE EMOTION: ECSTATIC AFFECT IN VIRGILIO PINERA'S *LA CARNE DE RENÉ*

In the past twenty years, Virgilio Piñera's vast corpus of writing has finally enjoyed some of the attention it deserves. In particular, Piñera's long-neglected novels have sparked fresh criticism, and the work the writer deemed his masterpiece, *La carne de René*, has recently provoked at least as great a reaction as the genres for which he had received the most accolades: theatre, poetry, and the short story. In terms of this recent interest in Piñera's work, many critics have claimed that the novel negates the basic principles of Catholicism or, in other words, that Piñera's famous *envés* turns what we know about this tradition on its head.⁶ Thomas Anderson discusses this line of criticism when he analyzes the "traditional Christian concepts" (157) in his study, *Everything in its Place: The Life and Work of Virgilio Piñera*. Likewise, Fernando Valerio-Holguín's arguments in his seminal *Poética de la frialdad: La narrativa de Virgilio Piñera* center on possible religious symbols in this novel. Although these scholars recognize the importance of religious images in the text, I argue here that some might miss a number of these Catholic references because they work with more recent editions of the text. There are four versions of the novel:

⁶ Much of this scholarship on Piñera obsesses about his famous "envés" and *La carne de René* is not exempt. Some criticism on Piñera suffers from the pitfall of analyzing the inversion only deep enough to see its first layer and does not follow it through its subsequent distortions and refractions. Instead of simple inversions, a far more subtle relationship develops between the concepts Piñera turns upside down. This relates to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick laments as the trap of applied theory's focus on "bipolar, transitive relations." These binarisms —along with pain/pleasure, male/female, teacher/student, among others— appear in *La carne de René*, but, throughout the course of his writing, Piñera becomes highly interested in limits and the extent to which we can contain these binarisms.

Piñera started the original in 1949 and published it in Buenos Aires in 1952; he then began revising in the late 1970's and friends of the author published this edition posthumously in 1985; Arrufat published the Cuban edition with Pedro de Oraá in 1995; and, finally, Arrufat published the Spanish version after further revisions in 2000 (this is the most circulated and studied edition). This study constitutes the first truly comparative analysis of different versions of the text.

I propose that rather than merely a parody or inversion, a far more nuanced relationship emerges in terms of a highly specific type of Catholicism: the mystic tradition. The particular images and themes that Piñera chooses reflect an unmistakable awareness of early modern concepts of voluptuous peninsular mysticism. In his introduction to the English-language version, Arrufat comments that: “we must emphasize Piñera’s mockery throughout *René’s Flesh* of mystical concepts of the soul and its opposition to the body, and his intrepid parody of Christian metaphors and terminology. The cult of the flesh replaces the cult of the spirit” (RF xvi). However, we should note that throughout the course of the novel René resists this cult of the flesh and displays a marked propensity towards introspection and contemplation. I do not believe that this results in simple “mockery,” but that these distortions lead to a more complex understanding of what the concepts of mysticism might mean in 20th century literature and thought.

With the term “voluptuous mysticism” I hope to convey various facets of the particular type of mystic experience I believe Piñera develops in *La carne de René*. The first element of these experiences is the erotic, and Piñera reinstates and then intensifies the relationship of eroticism to ecstasy. “Voluptuous” does not necessarily mean a purely pleasurable experience and often this type of mysticism wields the intense power to terrify and cause pain, though these emotions are not mutually exclusive. I also mean for “voluptuous” to refer to the visual and tactile nature of the

mystical journey. In *La carne de René*, vision and touch are necessary tools for the attainment of ecstasy.

Although Piñera proposes radical alterations in the early modern mystic paradigm—most notably the erasure of the possibility of salvation and an objective awareness of a God conscious of his own existence (both completely impossible in Piñera’s world)—he follows a rather typical mystical schema, particularly the one outlined in San Juan’s *Noche oscura* and Santa Teresa’s *Moradas* and her autobiography *La vida*. This investigation will mirror that same blueprint: an active state of the senses leading to ecstasy and the passive state of “noche del sentido” and “noche del espíritu,” as explained by Ángel Cilveti in his study on Spanish mysticism. I will also employ Cilveti’s definition of ecstasy, which he bases on Santa Teresa’s *Vida*, particularly in the twentieth chapter, and on San Juan’s *Noche II*: “Consiste en la suspensión de las facultades y sentidos producida por la intensidad de la contemplación y la debilidad del sujeto. Cuando es violento se llama arrobamiento y raptó” (Cilveti 21-2). Oftentimes twentieth century scholarship confuses ecstasy with union or transcendence (*unión transformante* or *matrimonio espiritual*), although they constitute separate stages of the *vía mística*.

I borrow the term “inner experience” from George Bataille’s famous book that describes the various stages of “turning in on oneself” through a journey. Bataille complicates the process that, although remaining closely aligned with the *vía mística* of San Juan and Santa Teresa, finds the individual before a “labyrinth”; Bataille does not begin with a particular goal as the final destination (i.e. God) or follow a set of linear steps to achieve that end result. This proposes a radical modification in terms of traditional mystical practices, as Amy Hollywood describes: “Bataille wants to develop a mystical theology without God, an atheology in which God (as this concept is understood, according to Bataille, within the modern Christian West) is subverted

through a radical experience of the limit and the unknowable” (66). The critics who understand there to be no mystical element of *La carne de René* do not fully comprehend inner experience as it can exist in the twentieth century. Clearly, no God exists in Piñera’s version. Further, all of René’s inner experiences constitute failed mystic journeys because he does not arrive at communion or spiritual marriage. Nonetheless, Piñera *does* present the mystical path (strewn with ecstasy) as a privileged type of phenomenology.

Piñera changes Bataille’s schema by exploring how gender and sexuality—understood in ways other than Bataille’s simplistic, heterocentric woman-as-passive-receptor model—(dis)orient a subject in this maze of inner experience. In Bataille’s 1957 book *L’Erotisme*, translated in English to *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, is Bataille’s treatise on precisely what the English version conveys in the translated title: the connection between death and sensuality. The book also ties these themes in to Bataille’s constant obsession with mysticism. In his introduction to the body of the text he explains that: “I intend to speak of three types of eroticism in turn, to wit, physical, emotional and religious. My aim is to show that with all of them the concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity” (15). This “continuity” comes from the unification of the male with the female: “In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution” (17). The female partner loses her identity in the act of dissolution and “paves the way” for the male to reach full union. It is true to say that in Bataille’s conception of union both partners achieve the same “degree of dissolution,” though the process to this state is far from

egalitarian. As if to remind the reader of this dynamic, Bataille feels that he “must emphasise that the female partner in eroticism was seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer” (18). We will see how Piñera continues to be interested in the dynamic of victim and sacrificer, but he changes the gender dynamic in the eroticism.

Ecstasy is a key stage in the progression to union in the Bataillian and early modern schema. Particularly in essays and interpersonal exchanges around the time that Piñera wrote this novel, he often refers to this kind of ecstatic state. During one of Piñera’s many stints in Buenos Aires he meets a fellow writer, Adolfo de Obieta, and soon befriends him. He calls de Obieta a “santo laico (único modo en este siglo de ser un santo eficaz)” and he claims that “Aldolfo se extasía ante la belleza” (Espinosa Domínguez 75). Likewise, Piñera depicts Adolfo’s father, Macedonio Fernández, in the same way by calling him a “místico” twice in his “Nota sobre la Argentina de hoy,” an article he writes as a sort of cultural correspondent for *Orígenes* in order to update the Cuban literary circles on the state of Argentina’s artistic production.

Piñera does not reserve these ecstatic descriptions for his new-found porteño friends; on the contrary, in another contribution to *Orígenes* called “El país del arte,” (which summarizes Piñera’s own thoughts on the state of art and literature) he complains that he has become fed up with “esas pláticas, con esas exclamaciones, con uno mismo; que basta ya de Arte, de Belleza, de Sacrificio, de Rigor, de Seriedad; que no hay tal predestinación, tal éxtasis, tal destino...” And then what happens? “Que el resto del día me lo paso en artista, sacrificando, como un perro, buscando y diciendo que encuentro, y gozando, y extasiándome...” (186). Here we note that ecstasy directly relates to art, and we will have the occasion to see this again with Piñera’s character René. Finally, in an introduction to Piñera’s short stories, José Rodríguez Feo extends personal details about a conversation he had with Piñera, “me contó que durante un tiempo tuvo ataques en que se sentía caer en un abismo. Al recobrar el

conocimiento tenía la sensación de que sus miembros iban reintegrándose poco a poco al cuerpo. En ‘La caída’ se describe esta terrible sensación...” (110). “These “attacks” closely mirror ecstatic experiences where the subject loses bodily consciousness and is transported to an extreme limit. Rodríguez Feo goes on to explain that even though scholars should not typically link an author’s life to her/his work, “en el caso de Piñera pienso que su vida y su obra se entrelazan de tal forma que apenas logramos discernir lo que separa muchas veces lo real de lo imaginario” (110). It would seem, then, that Piñera’s personal experiences with ecstatic-like states would appear in his writing.

In Piñera’s novel, the protagonist, René, constantly stumbles into states of inner experience and often appears utterly dazed after certain events that incite ecstasy. This movement towards inner experience and ecstatic states begins in the first pages of the novel when René’s father, Ramón, forces him to go to the butcher shop as a type of pedagogical exercise in understanding flesh/meat,⁷ which so obviously repulses René that he passes out upon seeing the dismembered, skinned body parts of the various animals hanging around the shop. After this traumatic experience the narrator describes his transition back to normal consciousness: “Saliendo de su ensimismamiento René paseó la vista por el público” (LCR 1985, 11). René has turned so far into himself that he detaches from reality and does not realize that there are other people around him at the butcher shop. This is one of many similar incidents that develop throughout the trajectory of the novel, and the narrator and characters use the following terms and phrases, among others, to describe René’s appearance during these states of heightened inner awareness when he detaches from normal consciousness: hipnotizado, ensimismamiento, confundido, embargado (note that this is a synonym of *arreatado* or one of the teresian states of ecstasy), más muerto que

⁷ The translator of *La carne de René*, Mark Schafer, prefaces his work with an explanation of the difficulties of translating the word “carne” from Spanish into English: “Whereas English distinguishes between “flesh” and “meat,” Spanish fuses the two concepts in a single word *carne*” (RF xxi).

vivo, and embobado.

René processes information through all of his five senses to get to these detached states. We will begin the analysis with the less revered sense of vision and work our way up to touch, the sense with the most mystical weight.⁸ The first state of inner experience in the novel shows how the visual relates to ecstasy. Though the 1985 revision of the novel leaves the reader to imagine what René could have been contemplating during this particular moment of detachment, the 1952 original includes an entire section about René's thoughts while in this first of many disconnected states. The description begins: "¡Pero qué importaba después de todo la visión material del matadero si ya la imaginación estaba empapada de toda esa sangre y se representaba el sacrificio con el mismo realismo!" (LCR 1952, 10). René's presence at the butcher shop and the sight of flesh/meat transport him back to the obligatory observation of the slaughtering that Ramón subjects him to before this incident.

René compounds the image of that earlier experience at the slaughterhouse, now burned in his memory, with what he sees at this instant in the butcher shop:

El cuchillo del expendedor, cortando aquí y allá trozos de carne, astillando huesos, aserrándolos, desgarrándolos, estremecía a René con la misma violencia de una descarga eléctrica...y si hubiéramos podido preguntarle, nos habría confesado que todo eso era tan horroroso como la cuchilla que cercena una cabeza humana o la daga que penetra hasta la empuñadura en un corazón (LCR 1952, 10).

The first part of this quote introduces three important themes that Piñera will develop as the plot and René's characterization progress. The first theme is René's empathy in

⁸ I will not discuss the other senses in depth, though they too throw René into ecstatic states. Take for example his reaction to hearing the tape of conjugations of *querer* played on repeat in his cell. The school's attempt to toughen René up by making him immune to mental torture—forgetting the spirit by way of the body—provokes the opposite effect than the one desired. The repetition of the recording while the school places René in solitary confinement stimulates contemplation and eventually ecstasy instead of a greater desire for corporal abuse.

a world marked by detachment; this quote establishes René's natural propensity to internalize the suffering of others. This compassion for others leads to a desire to truly communicate with people, but this only ends in disappointment for René when he finally understands at the end of the novel that true union never materializes. The second theme presented here is the association of the animal with the human. This rare insight into René's thoughts informs us that the dismembering of the animals at the butcher shop causes René to move from sympathy towards the animals to human empathy. The third theme unveiled in this quote is the transgression of physical borders to the point of reaching the innermost part of that which has been traversed. In this scene, the butcher not only chops apart the flesh but also "splinters" the bones of the animal, getting to the deepest part: the marrow. The skinning of flesh will emerge as a recurrent theme in the novel, as will the cutting up of flesh. Here, however, there is a complete penetration to the core of the being. Marrow, then, becomes a metaphor for a complete transcendence of the body, but unlike the *médula* of early modern mysticism, this entrance into nucleus of existence does not enable union.

The last part of this quote ("la daga que penetra hasta la empuñadura en un corazón") immediately brings to mind Santa Teresa's exceedingly famous transverberation in *La vida* when a burning dart pierces to the depths of her heart, thus provoking a supremely erotic/ecstatic state:

Víale en las manos un dardo de oro largo, y al fin de el hierro me parecía tener un poco de fuego; este me parecía meter por el corazón algunas veces y que me llegava a las entrañas... Era tan grande el dolor que me hacía dar aquellos quejidos, y tan excesiva la suavidad que me pone este grandísimo dolor, que no hay desear que se quite, ni se contenta el alma con menos que Dios. No es dolor corporal sino espiritual, aunque no deja de participar el cuerpo algo, y aun harto (384).

Valerio-Holguín also likens René to Santa Teresa when discussing the painting in Ramón’s office, “Este San Sebastián-René, que está representado en un éxtasis de dolor...remite a *El éxtasis de Santa Teresa* de Bernini (53).” Here, with what René imagines during the incident in the butcher shop, we find ourselves before an even more explicit reference to Santa Teresa than in the Sebastián painting, because instead of arrows piercing the flesh, the weapon penetrates straight through the heart and “llegava a las entrañas.” This, therefore, serves as another metaphor for depth that is first addressed in this scene with the splintering of the bones. Piñera’s version diverges from Santa Teresa’s transverberation by replacing the love of the divine and the sweet sensations of plenitude—described by the saint as a sort of post-orgasmic bliss—with horror.⁹ In the next section of the chapter, Santa Teresa reflects on the experience: “no hay lugar de tener pena ni de padecer, porque viene luego el gozar” (385). As opposed to the other character in the novel, René does not derive sexual energy from this violence. Thus, this ecstatic vision for Santa Teresa unifies her with God, while for René it is an empty vision, leaving him with nothing but emotional pain.

Arguably even more so than the scenes René witnesses, the artistic representations (the drawings, sculptures, and paintings seen through the course of the novel) horrify him in a highly personal way, as each one of them somehow reproduces his likeness. René encounters the first of these images in Ramón’s office; his father commissioned a painting of Saint Sebastian in his classic pose—tied up and pierced with arrows. René, absolutely repulsed, recognizes the face of this “Sebastián” because as he gets closer he realizes the figure in the painting looks just like him. After this, Ramón then decides to superimpose his son’s face on the bodies in the

⁹ Later in the novel, René witnesses another sacrifice with equal horror, when, by chance, he comes across two sons killing their father in the chapter titled “Perfumed Flesh.” This shocks René so profoundly that he loses touch with the actual scene: “Tan embargado estaba, que no se dio cuenta de la nieve, casi cubría el cadáver del viejo” (LCR 1985, 146). The extreme emotions that this sight evokes push René out of reality and into himself.

anatomy album that Dalia, a grown woman and René's would-be seducer, employed in her first failed erotic attempt with René. Ramón unveils this altered album to René on their train ride to the boy's new boarding school, where René will stumble upon the statue of his crucified double in the bathroom of his cell. Finally, René escapes the misery of the school, but not of these art-object clones. When he runs to Dalia's house for comfort, he again—interestingly enough in the bathtub as with the other double—encounters what he mistakes as a corpse but after further inspection realizes that this “corpse” is actually a mannequin: one with his own face.

When confronted with these images, René is not merely struck or scared but “fascinado.” For example, observe his reaction upon first seeing the statue of his crucified double at school in his bathtub: “René, chorreando agua y tiritando, la miraba fascinado” (LCR 1985, 67). Similarly, René appears to disconnect at the initial sight of the Sebastian/René painting, though his father's voice eventually breaks through to him: “Como en un sueño oyó la voz de Ramón: ‘Se parece a ti, ¡eh!’ René no respondió” (LCR 1985, 32). René clearly departs from normal waking consciousness and loses the ability to answer his father. In many of the textual and visual representations of saints on the verge of ecstasy from early modern Spain, we see the subjects often on the threshold of sleep, which is almost always a sure sign that they will receive some type of ecstatic dream-vision. René again inhabits this space between waking and sleeping consciousness when Dalia presents him with the anatomy album: “Como en una pesadilla oyó la voz de Dalia que le formulaba la misma pregunta de Ramón ante el San Sebastián” (LCR 1985, 49).

These shocking visual stimuli often combine with the more powerful tactile sense: “Las imágenes visuales se encuentran íntimamente vinculadas a las táctiles” (Valerio-Holguín 38). This falls into line with mystical phenomenology: “En cierto modo los cinco sentidos espirituales pueden reducirse al tacto, puesto que toda clase

de experiencia es como una especie de tacto” (Cilveti 59). After the initial visual shock that shoves René out of the world around him, the touch that often accompanies these visions pushes him even further. For instance, the Sebastián/René painting fascinates him, but as he approaches this work of art, René cannot resist the need to touch it: “René se acercó al cuadro y poniendo un dedo sobre la mano que sostenía la flecha clavada en la frente de San Sebastián...” (LCR 1985, 38). Not only is the painting of the saint shocking in the sense that he looks just like René, but it is also unconventional because unlike in the typical renderings of the scene where the soldiers are shooting him with arrows, this Sebastián stabs himself with the arrows. René touches the figure’s hand as if to try and communicate with his double to ask why he inflicts pain on himself. Communication with Sebastián, and with all the other actual living humans in the novel, remains futile.

During this same upsetting incident in Ramón’s office, we learn that he too recognizes touch as the ultimate sense in understanding as well. He encourages his son to touch the wound on his chest: “Sí, mira, no te canses de mirar, de examinar, y si quieres hasta puedes tocarme” (LCR 1985, 25). Ramón’s invitation to René, of course, invokes Christ’s interaction with Thomas the Apostle, who unlike Mary Magdalene, must probe the gash in the resurrected Christ’s chest to confirm that it is truly him. Thomas’ touch validates his vision and solidifies his connection to Christ. The wound draws Thomas towards Christ and allows him to experience his passion, whereas René backs away from his father after he tells him to touch his wound.

As with the visual combining with the tactile, the main scene involving an olfactory experience combines with the tactile sense, and the latter prevails as a more effective instrument in the path to knowledge. This scene occurs when the second year students sniff the neophytes at La escuela del dolor, “cincuenta muchachos que, como perros de cacería, se lanzaron sobre los neófitos y empezaron a olisquearlos

afanosamente. Y todo eso parecía un paso de baile: llevando sus manos hacia atrás sólo tocaban con sus narices al cuerpo de los neófitos” (LCR 1985, 72-3). For the second year students, merely smelling the neophytes does not prove sufficient and the older students begin to touch the bodies of the younger students with their noses as they sniff them. Piñera underscores the fact that the senses combine because the students do not use their hands to touch the neophytes, but employ their noses, the appendage we usually associate with the sense of smell. This incident precedes another school exercise where the older, third-year students grope the neophytes with their hands: “con sus manos semejantes a tentáculos, empezaron a palpar el cuerpo de los neófitos” (LCR 1985, 73). These closing strokes appear as the finale in the school’s didactic sequence, which demonstrates that understanding can be attained through the combination of olfactory and tactile experience.

The animalistic nature of the students’ actions, framing them as hunting dogs and working together as a giant octopus, alienate René. The reader only receives the following sentence describing René reaction to the older students touching him: “René pensó en el médico cuando hace sus tactos sobre la anatomía del paciente” (73). René’s cold response to this episode contrasts with the third year students who appear almost as if possessed: “aparecieron, pero caminando con paso tan lento que René habría jurado que sus miembros les dolían horriblemente o que habiendo sido sacados de un profundo sueño, no estaban aún despiertos del todo, o que posiblemente sufrían los efectos de alguna droga” (73). Although the students seem as if they are disconnected from normal consciousness as if in a type of ecstatic state, this incident appears at a key time to demonstrate that the students are now devoid of any sort of “spirit” and are, therefore, incapable of experiencing true transcendence of self.

The timing proves important in terms of the school’s pedagogical scheme, because the headmaster gives his opening address to students after these exercises and

informs them that that the “spirit” does exist but that “si por espíritu se entendía el cuerpo, entonces la escuela que él dirigía era altamente espiritual” (74). The detachment of the students is ecstatic in the sense that the school’s corporal manipulations push them outside of themselves, but here we have an even emptier type of transcendence, because, unlike René, these young men do not perceive a sense of the nothingness beyond the human—like the protagonist—but only that the body and, not even intellectual understanding, exists. The faces of the students are now those of their statue-doubles that the school presents them with upon matriculation. These doubles reflect the likeness of each student in the position of the crucified Christ, but instead of the “angustiada faz de Cristo,” the artist replaces the face with the student’s own in a state of “plenitud” (67). The students have reached a state of plenitude but not in the sense of early modern mysticism, because here the sense of completeness comes from shutting off intellectual capacities and not by gaining privileged knowledge. The subject experiences the pleasure of fullness because, for them, there is only the body and nothing else. This represents the only instance of affect for the students, because when faced with torture, they react like unfeeling drones. This lack of understanding, intellectual capacity, and affect in turn dehumanizes these animal-like characters.

René sets himself apart from the other students inasmuch that instead of lacking affect upon being transported outside of normal consciousness, he often finds himself experiencing the same deep emotions as mystics do prior to entering into union/communion/matrimony. This passive condition, or “purificación pasiva del espíritu,” provokes a desperate state as described by Santa Teresa in the first eight sections of chapter thirty in *La vida*, which follows directly after she has been pierced in the heart by the dagger. The saint’s typical bodily anguish is accompanied now by spiritual devastation:

Otras veces tenía males corporales más graves y, como no tenía los del alma, los pasava con mucha alegría; mas cuando era todo junto, era tan grave trabajo que me aprestava muy mucho. Todas las mercedes que me havía hecho el Señor se me olvidavan; sólo quedava una memoria, como cosa que se ha soñado...(390).

The anguish involved for early modern mystics in this stage comes from the sensation that they have experienced God in a fleeting encounter but then they become anxious that it was a singular incident and that they might never connect with the sacred again. Santa Teresa explains in the next segment of chapter thirty, section nine, that this is all foolishness invented by “el demonio.” This state of “escuridad” and “aflicción” contrasts with the light from God that will come after it (391). The saint goes on in the tenth through twelfth sections of the chapter to describe that “después de salida de ello” she realizes she has not lost her faith and “como una cosa que oyó de lejos” God is waiting for her to find him again. In other words, this state of darkness, anxiety and doubt is a temporary state that will eventually result in illumination.

I postulate that René sees in his moments of ecstasy the void or nothingness, which culminates in anguish, as opposed to the early modern mystics who get a glimpse, albeit fleeting, of the glory to come in spiritual matrimony. Unfortunately for René, his limits are constantly tested and these experiences with the perimeters of being repeatedly toss him back into torment. Instead of the mystic experience of ecstasy, which relates to knowledge of the divine, in Piñera’s version the noetic quality of the experience is the realization of the negation of the divine. This, in turn, terrifies René. This perpetually repeating state of vacuous ecstasy does not have a “salida” unlike the tormented state of Santa Teresa. The bleak phrase “no hay escapatoria” reoccurs in Piñera’s novel to remind of us of this.

When confronted with this sense of nothingness, our protagonist often finds

himself horrified, terrified, and/or disgusted, as each of René's experiences with various objects via the five senses provokes a conspicuous affect.¹⁰ Piñera extends extraordinarily little (or almost nothing after the revision that results in the 1985 publication) to his readers in terms of the characters' thoughts, and we can only judge René's reaction to his various states of ecstasy through his affect. Scholars could make much of the similarities between René and turn of the century stereotypes of women or even a character like Dorian Grey. René appears excessively emotional in a world devoid of affect—particularly for the male gendered characters; for example, Ramón calmly talks with his son as he mutilates his own hands. Likewise, the entire goal of the boarding school, of course, is that it makes the male students resilient enough to not react to severe physical and mental abuse. The students cannot sympathize with others who find themselves in complete distress, and, as a result, the school instills in the young men a dramatic lack of empathy. This type of hyper masculinity turns them into animals, which is reflected in the narrator's descriptions of the characters in the school as dogs. As the early modern mystics use human compassion, love, and communication as metaphors for the force that binds humans to what is beyond the human realm, the deficiency of human empathy in the novel metaphorically reflects the lack of communication between humans and the sacred.

I use the qualifier "male gendered characters" because, although sexually female, Dalia exhibits more stereotypically masculine gender traits than feminine ones. Anderson does an astute reading of her character in his book, but suffice it to say here that Dalia proves the sexually aggressive male in her interactions with René (she is the penetrator and acts as the predator), which accompanies other gender inversions

¹⁰ I will be combining Silvan Tomkins's research on affect discussed in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's book, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* with Sara Ahmed's understanding of emotions in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Tomkins claims there are a set of affects (disgust, fear, interest, surprise, joy, anger, and distress) that "combine to produce what are normally thought of as emotions, which...are theoretically unlimited in number" (24).

she exhibits in the novel. Dalia's complete lack of affect represents another gender reversal; for example, she politely changes the subject of conversation from a brutal murder (one that utterly traumatizes René) to yet another murder (that of her own friend), all with the air of complete distance from the topic.

In terms of the lack of affect, in the 1985 version of the novel there are some conspicuous revisions from the 1952 text, as the more recent edition notably excludes the following observation about Ramón: "Abandonó el sillón y se puso de espaldas a René. Dudoso que Ramón diese las espaldas a su hijo para ocultar un acceso de melancolía. Sabemos que Ramón no puede ser melancólico; la causa desconoce este estado" (LCR 1952, 35). Here we observe that the Cause does not deem any form of emotion acceptable, giving the impression of René as a completely hysterical subject. His consistently fervent emotions recurrently materialize and are generally that of fear, distress, surprise, disgust, and sometimes anger. Some common physiological reactions often accompany René's affects: nausea, vertigo and laughter, follow disgust; whereas, screams, faints, and tears often accompany fear and distress.¹¹

Disgust provokes strong physical reactions early in the narrative and the first instance occurs in the second chapter when Ramón forces René to contemplate his wounds. Alicia, René's mother, wakes him up early on the morning of his twentieth birthday, because his father eagerly awaits him in the study. As René cautiously enters the room, his father stuns him by revealing a gruesome, raw wound on his chest. Ramón urges René to look at the scars and even touch them, although René does not react quite as Ramón would like: "René se puso lívido [y llevó sus manos al pecho como para protegerlo (LCR 1952, 22)] se incorporó, empezó a retroceder. '¡Por favor, papá, me da ganas de vomitar!'" (LCR 1985, 24). René's initial anger pivots towards

¹¹ I say "often" because as Tomkins explains, the affects can combine in any number of ways and these affects sometimes intersect, creating René's complex array of emotions and sensations.

fear and finally lapses into disgust to the point that he almost vomits. Notice how René puts his hands to his chest, which suggests that he understands Ramón suffering, indicating that he empathizes with his father. There is a complete disconnect here in terms of his empathy, obviously, because his father does not actually suffer. The ecstasy that the viewing of these wounds provokes does throw René out of himself, thus transcending normal consciousness, but no union is possible because there is no mutual empathy.

This last affect, disgust, brings us back to the importance of the tactile sense and issues of propinquity, in this case both of blood and space. Sara Ahmed explains that: “Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects...It is only through such a sensuous proximity that the object is felt to be so ‘offensive’ that it sickens and overtakes the body” (85). René instantly retreats, imposing a greater distance between the object that disgusts him and his own body. Through this we note how disgust functions as what Ahmed deems a “contact zone; it is about how things come into contact with other things” (87). Ahmed adds that disgust actually maintains limits: “borders need to be threatened in order to be maintained, or even to appear *as* borders, and part of the process of ‘maintenance-through-transgression’ is the appearance of border objects. Border objects are hence disgusting, while disgust engenders border objects” (87). Had René not been disgusted by his father’s gashes, the border objects, he would in some way be part of his father’s Cause of flesh for torture; therefore, René’s affect assists him in maintaining his autonomy.

As we have observed in prior examples, the disgust René suffers when coming into contact with that border results in “*ganas de vomitar*,” which is renewed in René’s case for the second time when he quickly peeks at the anatomy album during his trip to La escuela del dolor. In this tampered album, he finds a figure of himself skinned

alive with a burning arrow in his hand, and this sight provokes a vomiting episode. We note Piñera's rising interest in nausea and vomiting, as in the 1952 edition René reacts by spitting uncontrollably, which then provokes a hallucination, and Ramón returns to find him "tan pensativo." This original version does, however, more explicitly present the ecstatic element involved in the scene.

Along with nausea, ecstasy stimulates terror, and in Tomkins' slightly less theatrical, more "scientific" terms, he would call this "fear." René's reactions usually follow a set pattern: initial fear (Piñera is fond of "terror" and "horror," in Tomkins' terms "distress") resulting in screams, extreme pallor, or passing out, which often ends in absurd laughter or copious tears. Piñera characterizes René as markedly more emotional in the 1952 original; in the first version, for example, René "was sobbing" (*sollozaba*), as opposed to "started to cry" (*se echó a llorar*) in the revised edition. When he first sees the album he screams in both editions, but in the original he then sticks his head out the window and "gruesas lágrimas" fall down his face (LCR 1952, 56). The incident in the butcher shop, which introduces René's character, best illustrates this change: "Nosotros, grandes conocedores del alma de René, aseguramos al lector que dicha palidez es debida al terror, a un desbordado terror por los establecimientos expendedores de carne. Nuestro héroe... tenía sagrado horror a todo lo que fuese carne descuartizada y palpitante (LCR 1952, 9)." Compare this to the scene in the 1985 edition: "exhibe una palidez espantosa... Le horroriza todo cuanto sea carne descuartizada y palpitante" (LCR 1985, 14). In the second version, we lose the sensation of terror as well as the adjective "sacred."

As we have seen in other cases, Piñera eliminates some of the religious terms that appear in the original. Note the striking omission from the 1985 version when René has to go to his father's office "en ayunas," which clearly sets it up as a type of communion. The 1952 edition adds: "¿Es que se le iba a prescribir una purga como

primer acto de sus festejos de cumpleaños? ¿O debería ayunar todo ese día cual lo hace un monje?” (LCR 1952, 31). Purging in the first stage of the mystic path is key to progression. In a complete inversion of the type of purge that early modern mystics undergo, Ramón would like René to eradicate his intellect and emotions in favor of a corporeal understanding of life. This thought about fasting is important inasmuch as everything that happens to René at the school his father will shortly send him to represents a completely different type of asceticism. The school does not deny the students food or other worldly luxuries, but they are supposed to display self-discipline by withstanding severe pain without reacting.

René cannot be socialized by the school and even with the aforementioned exclusions of crying scenes, René's tear-drenched moments abound in the 1985 text as well. For instance, when still a student at the school he undergoes shocks in the electric chair and the instructor thinks René might collapse because of the emotion brought out by all his tears. Again when René arrives at Dalia's house after seeing the murder of the old man, he breaks into “un llanto convulsivo... René no oyó lo último dicho por Dalia. Estaba en otro mundo...” (LCR 1985, 153). Through this absurd laughter, René's consciousness breaks away from this world. We note this once more in the following incident:

René se echó a reír como un tonto cuando al llegar a su casa, abrumado por el peso de unos cuantos kilos de carne, vio a sus padres haciendo las maletas. Ramón le dijo que embarcarían hacia Norteamérica en el término de una hora. El paquete de carne se le cayó de las manos, y, con la boca abierta, parecían la estatua del estupor. No lo dejaba boquiabierto el anuncio del viaje (estaba hecho a tales sorpresas), sino ver la inutilidad de su compra. Esto le produjo tal acceso de risa que Ramón lo reprendió, pero René, revolcándose en el piso, gritaba con convulsas carcajadas...(LCR 1985, 21-2).

Although we tend to associate tears with distress, in René's case his distress results in insane, uncontrollable laughter. René essentially seizes up in frenzied laughter not because of the element of surprise, but because of a sense of distress.

Sometimes the pattern does adhere to this screams/fainting/tears followed by fear formula, particularly after seeing the art objects. As previously discussed, René is at first "fascinado" (this probably aligns itself most clearly with Tomkins' "surprise") and then fear sets in afterwards. This affective trajectory transpires in Ramón's office when he urges René to get closer and look at the Saint Sebastian painting more carefully. Again we find René "fascinado:" "René estaba fascinado; como se dice se le iban los ojos dentro del cuadro" (LCR 1952, 32). Upon a closer inspection—note the relation of proximity again—René identifies the face of "Sebastian" as his own. This presents problems in terms of translation because literally in English it would read: "his eyes were going into the painting," though it does have this double meaning of a more colloquial phrase ("como se dice") like "his eyes were popping out of his head." The following description reinforces this literal meaning of the phrase and the view that René and the painting no longer constitute discrete entities: "Seguía con los ojos clavados, cual otras flechas, en la cara del joven Sebastián" (LCR 1985, 32). Now René *is* an arrow on the body of the Sebastian/René in the painting; the painting quite literally incorporates him. The recognition of this blurring of boundaries is what incites fear in René.

Piñera again introduces the theme of borders between René and these artistic renderings in the crucifix scene.¹² When a servant at the school, Pedro, explains to René that the body of his crucified double will bear the markings of all the lessons the

¹² We must remember that for the early modern mystics the contemplation of paintings narrating the martyrdom of Christ/saints (Valerio-Holguín also notes this) and particularly paintings or statues of the crucifix assist in pushing one inward towards contemplation; René too gets closer to an internal awareness via this method. For instance, according to Santa Teresa, the passion and the crucified Christ present the most efficient starting point for meditation.

students learn in red pencil, “René le arrebató el lápiz y se puso a darle vueltas entre sus dedos en tanto se escrutaba su propio cuerpo. Parecía buscar un sitio donde probar la calidad del creyón. Por fin lo encontró en medio del pecho. Entonces se lo marcó con una cruz” (LCR 1985, 69). A shocked Pedro admonishes him, “¡Qué hace...!” –le gritó Pedro—. ‘Usted no es el doble. Es al doble a quien tendrá que marcar cuando llegue el momento’” (LCR 1985, 69). The painting and album wield the power to consume René and through repetition he has moved away from understanding his body as detached from these art objects. Though disgust maintains borders, instances in the novel arise where these divisions break down and loss of reassuring binaries like self/other and subject/object begin to be blurred.

We should also place the erotic in this category of boundaries and divisions that cannot be upheld. The early modern mystics wield eroticism in a metaphorical way as a state in the process of love towards God. Piñera utilizes the erotic as an ecstatic tool, but in his transformation of mysticism, the eroticism clearly does not prove metaphoric. To speak of eroticism in *La carne de René* is inevitably to enter into the debate on René’s sexuality. A good deal of the recent scholarly discussion surrounding this novel concentrates on the “homosexual” element in the narrative.¹³ To do this, however, yet again highlights the bipolar anxiety of criticism since post-structuralism, especially when to claim that René’s sexuality performs in one direction would ignore other sexually charged events in the narrative. Many others have already tried to out René as a homosexual, but I hope to out him as queer.¹⁴ The same can be said of René’s masculine and feminine characteristics, as he performs in ways that do not fit into traditional conceptions of masculinity. In René’s case, arguing that he is

¹³ See articles by Thomas F. Anderson, José Quiroga and Lee L’Clerc. The latter presents a nuanced argument on a “homo esthetic” in the novel but falls short of calling René gender queer, although this is quite possibly what the author is working towards.

¹⁴ For the inherent problems of outing a Cuban text, see José Quiroga’s “On the Weight of Insular Flesh.”

either hetero or homo would indeed, in either case, constitute a type of closeting, as it would close off potential for analysis from different angles. Just as much of Piñera's work eludes classification, René's gender and sexuality resist traditional male/female, hetero/homo labeling. I will follow this corporeal cartography (the marks that particular experiences leave on René's body) in order to map out the protagonist's orientation.

To auspicate the journey to René's queerness, let us begin with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of the concept, "'Queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8-9). Scholars have produced blindsided arguments in attempting to prove that René's sexuality and gender signify "monolithically." In Sedgwickian terms these critics come from a separatist model of homo/heterosexual and gender definition, which privileges minoritizing, essentialist constructions of sexual orientation and gender separatism; whereas, the integrative model, comprised of universalizing potential and gender inversion/transitivity, informs my reading (*Epistemology* 80-90). In my definition of René's sexuality and gender I hope to show how he resists definition.

René sexual experiences (his run-ins with Dalia, the all-male licking scene in the school, the Bola de carne incident) present the reader with various examples of sexual gender matchings. During René's first private encounter with Dalia, she approaches him with an amorous gaze, though René does not demonstrate any interest, and, actually, whether his excuses about his father waiting are true or not, Dalia's advances panic him. In René's second encounter with Dalia, the predator finally conquers her prey. She acts in an extremely aggressive manner and her characterization as a "gladiadora" seems fitting. René continues to resist her insistent

advances, but Dalia finally proves capable of sexually arousing him. The claim that René has distaste for women based on his experience of an older woman assaulting him remains unwarranted.

As for the two explicitly charged homoerotic moments in the novel, the group licking orgy and the Bola de carne incident, critics have already commented a great deal on the homoerotic desire that René demonstrates. I would, however, like to draw attention to some elements of these events that directly relate to the mystical. In the group licking scene when Cochón, a teacher at the school, calls in his “equipo de urgencia” because René “se ha endurecido,” René reacts in a typically mystic fashion in the face of ecstasy. As Elizabeth Howe explains in her study on symbols in San Juan and Santa Teresa, the body often appears lifeless while experiencing ecstasy (206). In the trance of orgy, René appears completely incapable of movement.

We note how Piñera’s version aligns with Bataille’s model of mysticism; Bataille states, “My principle against asceticism is that the extreme limit is accessible through excess, not through want” (*Inner Experience* 21). This might constitute one of the most “excessive” scenes in the Cuban literature of its time. Furthermore, René arrives at this state via the ultimate form of touch: a kiss. Roger, the star of the third year students, mounts René and “pasó la lengua por los labios del rebelde” (LCR 1985, 113). While not recognizable as a conventional kiss, Roger's advance nonetheless imparts its erotic fervor.

The second issue that is important to this investigation is: What happens to Bataille’s mystical/erotic schema (where the sacrifice of the woman brings the man closer to ecstasy) when the sexual act is comprised of two men and neither subject appears to fill an exclusively passive or active role? This erotic act between Bola and the Príncipe clearly incites an ecstatic state: “Bola estaba exánime en el borde del colchón. Se apagaron los reflectores y de nuevo se prendieron las luces. Entonces se

oyó un llanto como de recién nacido; eran verdaderos vagidos lanzados por Bola, un llanto tan puro, tan desamparado” (LCR 1985, 216). With this, Piñera challenges Bataille’s misogyny and even the principle that the active agent uses the other as a means to transgress the limits of the possible. If anything, we could consider the Príncipe the active participant, as he rolls Bola around. Through this new paradigm, one can achieve proximity to the limit via erotic contact with people of any gender and through passive and active roles.

Even before any sexual situations occur, René’s gender construction begins on the second page of the novel. The reader first encounters him in a feminine realm, waiting for his turn at the butcher: “En la cola predomina el elemento femenino: señoras elegantes y mujeres del pueblo, criadas, jovencitas” (LCR 1985, 10). Soon after, Dalia Pérez characterizes René’s flesh as in a perpetual state of awaiting penetration: “La señora Pérez la imaginaba herida por un cuchillo, perforada por una bala o pensaba en su uso placentero o doloroso” (LCR 1985, 15). Continuing in the first few pages of the novel, René appears as the embodiment of the fin de siècle vision of women: exceedingly pale and susceptible to fainting spells. The narrator later describes the René as “histérico,” which immediately conjures up images of Freud’s hysterical women.¹⁵

René’s characterization as a generally passive subject, the traditional female role, further assists Piñera in inverting typical macho roles.¹⁶ Note Ahmed’s interest in the etymology of the word passive: “It is significant that the word ‘passion’ and the word ‘passive’ share the same root in the Latin word for suffering (*passio*). To be passive is to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt in suffering. The fear of

¹⁵ Much could be made of René’s characterization as a hysterical woman in the Freudian sense: “I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable” (Freud 28).

¹⁶ For more on this see Thomas Anderson’s book chapter: “Religion, Philosophy and Sexuality.”

passivity is tied to the fear of emotionality” (2). René’s tendency towards emotional outpourings, deemed excessive by every character in the novel and also by the narrator, is connected to the feminine, as we see in the following quote where hysteria and female are one in the same, “René con sus histerismos de doncella tímida” (LCR 1985, 159). While René plays the role of the faint damsel, Dalia plots her sexual conquest of his perfectly intact (virgin) flesh.

Piñera rejects the typical gender constraints of bridal mysticism. In Bataille’s misogynistic schema, the woman always plays the passive role of the beloved, “The lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim. The woman in the hand of her assailant is despoiled of her being” (*Erotism* 90). Other than the already disturbing parallel Bataille makes between human sacrifice and sex, the role of the woman as an object used for her ability to bring the male lover, or active participant, closer to the limit of the possible renders his theory painfully misogynistic. In Piñera’s version, however, Dalia plays the active role and through her encounters with René she too enters into ecstatic states; she even sees René’s flesh for its sacrificial value, “Ese aire que pedía protección se manifestaba en su carne de víctima propiciatoria” (LCR 1985, 15). Clearly, Dalia represents the priest(ess) and René her oblivious virgin. Dalia goes into a state of inner experience when speaking of René’s flesh, she appears “extasiada ante un René con su carne sabiamente templada para el amor” (LCR 1985).

Just as Piñera inverts the gender dynamics of bridal mysticism, he complicates the workings of gender between Dalia and René. Although René provokes these states in Dalia and acts as her muse, Dalia herself reacts in a highly emotional manner. We have René, a female-like character, provoking typical female responses from an empowered male-like female character, Dalia. The reader comes across examples of Dalia breaking out into mad laughter demonstrating an excessive emotional state while

in the presence of René. One such moment occurs when Dalia attempts to excite René with the anatomy album of naked bodies while she drapes herself over a sofa, “Ella sólo acertaba a reír y sentíase deliciosamente excitada” (LCR 51). These “famous laughs” of hers, and, moreover, her overly dramatic affect and mood swings in general, places her back in the realm of the traditionally feminine.

As Piñera problematizes gender, he eventually shifts the importance of sexual object choice based on gender to a “perseguidores y perseguidos” relationship. In this novel it is not the gender of the sexual partner that defines one’s orientation, but the role of pursuer or pursued that proves the defining feature of sexual relations (initially, at least, but we will see how Piñera further complicates even this new binarism he creates). Piñera alters the paradigm of sexual orientation and stresses power opposed to the gender of the sexual object as a delineating characteristic of orientation. We will note, conversely, that René does not always play the passive role; for example, when Mármolo goes to brand him in the initiation ritual, René screams out and breaks free. If we think of this in terms of René and his so called “closetedness,” we must ask the question, does he actually come out—not when he experiences sexual intrigue at the sight of Bola de Carne and el Príncipe, the moment that Anderson and other critics have placed his coming out—but when he chooses *not* to partake in the sexual act, when he ceases to be the prey of others?

Now that we have looked at the various instances of ecstatic affect in the novel, we must turn to the next stage of the *vía mística*, that of a transcendence towards spiritual matrimony; here we will find the greatest departure from the early modern concepts in the work of both Bataille and Piñera. There is no type of set or “grasped” knowledge to be had in the experience and the goal is the experience itself as opposed to gaining some form of otherworldly knowledge: “nothing, neither in the fall nor in the void, is revealed, for the revelation of the void is but a means of falling

further into absence” (*Inner Experience* 52). Here we note the departure from the importance placed on the noetic quality of the mystical experience; the experience itself becomes the knowledge gained in the act of confrontation with nothingness.

Even though he clearly has not encountered it before, in his final gesture René seeks transcendence: “Clamó al cielo por un Socorro Salvador, pero el cielo permaneció destellante. Su comba no se abrió para dar paso al milagro. Entonces, René recurrió a sí mismo. (LCR 1985, 262).” Union with an object outside of the self is completely impossible. As he has before, René again appears as the Christ figure; here we can see the early modern mold broken inasmuch as the mystic turns to Christ to transcend towards him, whereas René appears as Christ and he must look to himself. The subject and object are one in the same; Piñera does not present a hierarchy (specifically, where the subject rises to meet God), rendering union in the traditional sense unattainable.¹⁷ Finally, this mystical trajectory has neither goal nor pragmatic outcome in the early modern sense. On one hand, Santa Teresa reminds us that “De esto sirve este matrimonio espiritual, de que nazcan siempre obras, obras” (Cilveti 30). The saint only deems spiritual matrimony valuable when the mystic takes what he or she has learned and helps others. For René, on the other hand, inner experience has no end but its own.

We are still left with the question of why Piñera decided to make the revisions cited throughout this investigation. I would like to conclude by questioning what might have caused Piñera to edit out words and scenes from the 1952 version when he began to revise it in the late 1970’s. The two major changes I have noted in my chapter are the reduction of religious words, phrases, and, to a lesser extent, a

¹⁷ Cintio Vitier criticizes Piñera precisely for this lack of transcendence in the note he writes in 1945 for *Orígenes* where he juxtaposes Piñera’s work with that of José Martí. Piñera rebuts with his own contribution to the journal, “El secreto de Kafka.” For a careful study of this dialogue, see the article by Marcela Zanin “Un mundo sin calificativos: Virgilio Piñera y la ficción.”

diminution in René's affect. The lackluster response *La carne de René* received upon its publication in 1952 in Buenos Aires crushed Piñera, who was already depressed and had struggled for years through René's gestation. It is possible that the thought of publishing the novel he deemed his masterpiece in Spain could have prompted these revisions. If he began to revise the original in the mid 1970's, and we assume that he was thinking he might be revising it for a Spanish audience, it could be possible that in order to make it more palatable for a new public he thought it wise to downplay some of the overtly mystical references (like the heart penetrated by the dagger, a possible reference to Santa Teresa). This would be the beginning of the post-Franco period in Spain and perhaps Piñera thought that a version where René appears as slightly less mystic might unearth the success and recognition that he so craved for this novel.

CHAPTER TWO

“AMOR UNIVERSAL:” JAIME SAENZ’ FAILED LITERARY UNION

As the (in)famous story goes, one day Jaime Saenz arrived at home with the leg of a cadaver from the morgue, which, at the urging of his mother and the police, he willingly, if not begrudgingly, surrendered. After this incident, friends noted that Saenz could occasionally be found looking at the cadavers in a local morgue (*The Night* 1-2). To say Jaime Saenz was eccentric by just about any cultural standard or threshold does not capture the extent to which he exceeded, or at least attempted to exceed, this description. Saenz the (outrageous) person seems to, at times, outshine Jaime Saenz’ (outrageous) characters—he himself possibly being the best character he ever created. Friends of the author describe how he spent the majority of his time cloistered in what some have called the “marginal” bars of La Paz along with his study, the “Krupp Studios,” which was perpetually set up for literary séances. The time spent in these private spaces on the fringes of polite society was countered by Saenz’ periods of employment teaching university classes.

The work of this twentieth century Bolivian poet, novelist, essayist, dramaturge, and artist enjoys a paradoxical semi-canonical status in his country. Many scholars working on Andean authors, such as Stefan Baciú, Juan Quirós, and Yolanda Bedregal, acknowledge Saenz’ publications, especially his poetry, as an important contribution to the literature of the region.¹⁸ At the same time, Saenz’ work was not often rigorously read or appreciated by a wider audience until more recently. To truly

¹⁸ See Elizabeth Monasterios Pérez’ book *Dilemas de la poesía latinoamericana de fin de siglo* (123-5) for an exhaustive description of the criticism published on Saenz and his movement from little recognition to inclusion in the most important poetry anthologies published in the 1970’s.

understand Saenz' artistic project we must question why, although he never received widespread recognition during the beginning of his career, his work now posthumously enjoys a growing readership in Bolivia and in South America in general (in Argentina, for example, the Instituto de Literatura Hispanoamericana in Buenos Aires boasts a strong collection of documents on Saenz). Beyond Latin America, translations of his poetry now exist in Italian and English. Leonardo García-Pabón, a Saenz scholar and friend of the author, refers to this growing popularity as the "Saenz effect." For many years in the beginning of Saenz' career, however, the only scholars to publish on Saenz also appeared in the dedications of his poems. With my research I question why Saenz' work now seems so relevant to people in various cultures around the world.

In order to comprehend why Saenz enjoys more readership and critical attention than when he was alive, we must ask why his work was not popular with a larger audience beginning in the 1950's. The translators of his poems into English offer their theory: "His work was certainly innovative, absorbing the fantastic, the psychological, and the symbolic. But it wasn't formally radical enough to situate him among the international avant-garde; it wasn't politically specific enough to find favor with the ascendant literary left, and it was too weird to ride into popularity on the coattails of writers like Cortázar and Vargas Llosa during the Latin American boom of the 1970's" (*Immanent Visitor* xii). I believe Saenz suffered from some of the same issues as Virgilio Piñera did in Cuba; both proved innovative authors, but not in a formal manner.

Further, Saenz' interest in the Aymara people did not strikingly influence his poetic syntax, as he spoke little Aymara. This is unlike some of the famous writers of the *indigenismo* movement, such as José María Arguedas, who grew up speaking

Quechua.¹⁹ Saenz' knowledge of the Aymara people did not come through the study of their language, but through the study of their lives; he tried to comprehend how they lived by sometimes dressing like an Aymara porter and drinking in their bars. In states of complete inebriation, Saenz would share stories in these bars and, presumably, edge closer to an understanding of Aymara cosmology. Although anyone who knew Saenz recognized his interest in the Aymara people of La Paz, it was not until Monasterios Pérez published her study on Saenz in 2001 that the connection between this Bolivian poet's work and Aymara philosophies was explored in depth. This omission in critical attention may be yet another reason that Saenz' work was left out of the major movements of twentieth century Latin American literature.

Along with these theories, I would like to expound on what the translators call the "weird" factor or the enigmatic nature of Saenz' poetry. In order to analyze this, it will serve us well to address Saenz' approach to life, as it is mirrored in his fiction. It just so happens, for example, that the character Jaime Saenz in the author's novel *Los papeles de Narciso Lima-Achá* is also fascinated by peering at corpses in the morgue. Further, Jaime Saenz' characterization in the novel closely resembles the stories recounted by the friends of the real Jaime Saenz:

A esto se escucharon unos gritos; y los profería el famoso amigo Jaime Saenz, el cual entró de pronto, y empezó a lanzar amenazas y maldiciones sin ton ni son. Y como todos sabían que era medio loco y que escribía poemas, su comportamiento no sorprendía a nadie. Ahora sacó a relucir una botella, y bebió ávidamente; y de buenas a primeras me preguntó si seguía escribiendo mis memorias, y yo le contesté que sí; y luego me dijo que había decidido escribir un libro acerca de los muertos, pero que tenía ciertos problemas de

¹⁹ Monasterios Pérez does discuss "la sencillez del habla común" in Saenz' poetry, which she believes mirrors the transfer of knowledge in oral language that pre-Colombian Andian civilizations used for centuries before the arrival of Europeans (145).

lenguaje (423).

This description from the novel could be placed next to the testimonies of Saenz' friends and it would be difficult to decipher reality from fiction.

Saenz, the person, much like his fictional character, was not easily understood, as his life was a perpetual contradiction. In his youth, Saenz treated his study of fascism with naïve intrigue, even travelling to Germany in 1938 as a Hitler Youth recruit for military preparation. Fourteen years later, he used this training to fight with the left-wing revolutionaries in the Bolivian revolt of 1952 (*The Night* 10-11). As an adult, Saenz became the voice of the disenfranchised and marginalized, though he never publicly renounced his early interest in the Nazis.²⁰ In his novel *Los papeles de Narciso Lima-Achá*, the main plot of the second half of the novel recounts Narciso's love affairs with Elbruz and Kluge, two young Germans captivated by Nazi thinking. However, Narciso, the Bolivian protagonist who could be a veiled Jaime Saenz, never directly engages with the explicitly Nazi theories of his lovers.

The question of Saenz' sexual orientation presents an even more nebulous topic than that of his political affiliations. Scholars and friends of Saenz have published conflicting accounts of his sexuality, ranging from claims that he was an "unabashed bisexual" to questionably gay at best and non-practicing at that. It is possibly because of Saenz' unwillingness to define himself that he did not fit in well with polite society; he did, nonetheless, marry a German woman. Winston Morales Chavarro claims that Saenz' suicide attempt in 1950 was provoked by the abandonment of his wife, Erika, but we may also take Saenz' desire to communicate with the dead and witness the un-seeable as a possible explanation. It could be that he

²⁰ When asked about Saenz' contradictory politics, the Bolivian poet Humberto Quino commented that "[I]sn't it fantastic that the little fascist came to be such a big and freaky poet? Look, there's a big movement of young, working-class poets and artists in Bolivia right now. They live up there on the hills of El Alto in concrete-block houses with no plumbing. Almost all of them are of the hard left... Who is their number one poetic hero? Saenz!" (Gander and Johnson 4).

did not intend to actually kill himself but to edge close to the border of existence. In another attempt to experience a death-like state, Saenz began lying in a coffin. Through his lived provocations (though the one he attempts to truly provoke may have actually been himself) we approach an understanding of why he endeavors to destabilize the dichotomy of life and death and why in his work we find that death is not contained in a neat plane of existence. Once we truly understand Saenz' artistic production, his eccentricities appear to make sense, at least within the realm of his highly wrought world, one based on a personal religion composed of mystical philosophy, phenomenology, Aymara trance, gender relativity/universal gender, and extreme drug and alcohol consumption.²¹ This last fascination, that of drunkenness, becomes Saenz' version of mortification and he uses this altered state as a tool to incite mystic experiences.

A deep subversiveness is somehow at the heart of what we have come to call mysticism; Saenz seems to have made this subversiveness part of his artistic quest. As Michel de Certeau explains in the following quote, the line between mysticism and madness is often hard to discern:

A dangerous closeness—dangerous for its witnesses, but even more for society—often binds, at the limits of experience, the “mystical” to the “pathological.” The bonds between madness and truth are enigmatic and do not constitute a relation of necessity. But it is still more erroneous to posit social conformity as the criteria of spiritual experience. Psychological “balance” complies with social norms (however changeable) that the mystic transgresses again and again (de Certeau 22).

Saenz constantly pushed the limits of the possible in search of truth, which places him

²¹ Monasterios Pérez also notes these elements in Saenz' poetry in her book chapter “La metáfora del otro lado de las cosas.”

outside normal “social conformity.” He used theatrics in his life and literature to challenge elitist concepts of ontology, though to the outside world, he often seemed like a bizarre bohemian.

Saenz constantly enters into dialogue with the texts of early modern mysticism as a way of getting closer to truth, but he puts his own twist on this approach to understanding Being. Though Saenz appropriates manifold themes from early modern mysticism, we will explore the ways in which he proposes a new *vía mystica* that eventually leads to an innovative type of transcendence and non-union. Saenz maintains various elements of early modern mysticism: the stages of the *vía mystica* (purgation, illumination, and transcendence) and the metaphors used along the way. At the same time, Saenz’ poetry presents the reader with the following innovations to the mystic process: a type of *vía mystica* that incorporates an experiential quality; a disenfranchised, alcoholic tavern dweller as the mystic figure (note that this is not the type of sinner-to-saint character so popular with early modern mysticism, as no possibility of redemption exists); a change in setting to an urban landscape while still maintaining the use of natural metaphors, a heightened use of violence in mortification images, a restructuring of the life/death paradox, and a non-gendered framework.

Saenz’ type of mysticism does not assume communion with God or any power cognizant of its existence as the goal of the mystic path. As Saenz explains in his poem *La noche*: “eso que llaman lo uno y absoluto, no existe” (74). Saenz finds his own master, which is the night/nothingness/unknowing (*el no saber*). This is no longer the unknowing of San Juan, because no union awaits the subject after this period of unknowing. In San Juan’s poem “Entréme donde no supe” the mystic subject has traversed the boundary of typical consciousness through deep contemplation and finds himself in a realm where his earthly senses no longer allow him to comprehend his surroundings as one does in normal, waking life:

Estava tan embebido
tan absorto y ajenado
que se quedó mi sentido
de todo sentir privado
y el espíritu dotado
de un entender no entendiendo
toda sciencia tracendiendo (264).

Here, the poetic subject demonstrates a heightened sense of affect, even as he leaves behind earthly modes of feeling; this paradox reinforces the theme of knowing by not knowing. This stanza would appear to fall in line with Saenz' concept of unknowing until the final stanza of the saint's poem:

Y si lo queréis oyr
consiste esta summa sciencia
en un subido sentir
de la dibinal esencia
es obra de su clemencia
hazer quedar no entendiendo
toda sciencia tracendiendo (266).

In San Juan's poem, even in his state of unknowing, the mystic subject acknowledges that the "summa sciencia" emanates from divine mercy; in Saenz' transcendence the poetic subject finds only nothingness with no origin. The mystic trajectory ultimately fails for Saenz' subject, because a neat plenitude in union never emerges. San Juan's mystic subject follows a poetic "camino" that is structured by regular meter, versification and rhyme, whereas Saenz' poetic subject traverses a poetic landscape with little stylistic order. Thus, what I specifically refer to here with Saenz when I employ the term "mysticism" are the basic elements of the mystical path: purgation,

illumination and transcendence, though not union.

Two Saenz critics, Luis H. Antezana and Blanca Wiethüchter, called Saenz a mystic in their publications on his work. Antezana briefly addresses this topic and concludes that Saenz centers his “mystical theology” around a “transcendental search” that skirts plenitude by meeting absence head on, and that “Saenz roots this...in [his] immediate material and cultural surround” (134). Wiethüchter studies mystic topics in Saenz’ poetry at greater length in her seminal study that brought Saenz to a wider audience; she explores the metaphors of ascent and descent that structure mystic writing and how these metaphors cyclically and inversely organize Saenz’s poetic project.

I would like to propose that along with these general connections to mysticism, Saenz demonstrates some marked similarities to early modern peninsular mysticism. This voluptuous mysticism maintains the importance of affective states of ecstasy produced by touch and vision. This emotional, palpable, fleshy type of *vía mystica* contrasts with the more austere mysticism of medieval Germany, for instance. Specifically, Saenz takes as a starting point a type of “negative” mysticism that San Juan has become famous for in the scholarship of this century. In order to discuss Saenz’ new type of mysticism, we will begin with a look at the themes he appropriates from early modern mysticism that he uses for the foundation of the innovate type of transcendence he proposes. Though Saenz was clearly drawn to German philosophical thought—his obsession with Nietzsche is well known—it appears to me that his poetry stylistically reflects a lucid understanding of San Juan. Here I will draw upon the similarities that Saenz’ and San Juan’s poetic subjects exhibit in terms of the use of the senses to traverse the *vía mystica*. The investment in this comparative analysis of San Juan and Saenz further serves to demonstrate Saenz’ appropriation of a sanjuanian style, but this twentieth century poet complicates the saint’s poetic relationship to the

Other.

This study is not the first to note this similarity between Saenz and San Juan. Antezana mentions it in passing in his afterward to the book of poetry *The Night*, and Humberto Quinto also states that “Saenz was a great poet in the tradition of San Juan and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, fascinated by death and the occult” (4). Monasterios address how Saenz’ poetry relates to that of San Juan and Santa Teresa in one paragraph of a section of her chapter called “Poesía y discurso místico.” Here she claims that Saenz’ brand of mysticism more closely resembles that of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s ideas in *Primero Sueño*: “Sólo a partir de este texto es posible hablar de discurso místico y de experiencia mística en términos contemporáneos, puesto que por primera vez se da en lengua castellana un proyecto poético que se propone ver lo invisible y decir lo indecible sin atribuirlo por definición a la presencia divina” (129). However, Saenz’ interest in San Juan and Santa Teresa is evident in the structuring of his work and not just its thematics. Even in terms of thematics, I would argue that Saenz does have an investment in a type of sensory ecstasy that is absent in Sor Juana’s work (as Monasterios notes in her reading of Octavio Paz’ reading of Sor Juana’s poem), but is present in San Juan and Santa Teresa’s work, albeit in regards to the spiritual senses.

As with San Juan’s approach, in Saenz’ work all the senses lead the poetic subject towards a final state of transcendence. Mysticism has a paradoxical relationship to the senses, as mystics must purge them to reach different levels of consciousness, but, at the same time, utilize them in a final state of union. This becomes even more complicated depending on the allegorical level with which one treats the mystic experience; for example, if one takes the stage of illumination to involve some sort of actual, real light, a mystic would need her sense of sight to perceive this. The actual experience in true phenomenological fashion proves

indispensable for Saenz; therefore the importance of the senses is heightened, and real, lived experience equates to mystical knowledge.

This shift in the importance of experience or, indeed, even the definition of the term, relates to the convincing argument that Denys Turner puts forth in his study on mysticism in the Middle Ages, *The Darkness of God*, where he insists that scholars since the turn of the century (William James being the most prominent example in my opinion) imposed their contemporary anxieties on the writers they slowly grouped together to form what we now consider the “mystics.” James, among others like Evelyn Underhill, did not recognize that “For though the medieval Christian neoplatonist used the same language of interiority, ascent and ‘oneness’, he or she did so precisely in order to deny that they were terms descriptive of ‘experiences’” (Turner 4). Turner goes on to argue that the “negativity” in medieval mysticism represents the “restraint of the experience” (4); in Turner’s opinion we have misread and misunderstood the great Christian mystics as “we have retained the metaphors, evacuated them of their dialectics and refilled them with the stuff of ‘experience’” (5).

So, what then, of this misreading? Turner doubts the usefulness of seeing the traditional Christian mystics in this experientialist light, even if it does allow for these texts to take on a renewed popularity and recognition. I concur with Turner that we should read the medieval mystics in their social and historical contexts, though I believe these misreadings present the exciting possibility of a type of contemporary mystic process. Saenz’ artistic production represents a supreme example of an understanding of the apophatic metaphors in traditional Christian mysticism in combination with an “experientialism” (this is what Saenz adds) that strikes the reader today as germane.²² Saenz likely valorizes the experiential aspect of the mystic

²² For a reading of Saenz’ poetry in light of Heidegger’s phenomenology, see Monasterios’ chapter section titled “Poesía y filosofía” (133).

journey in part due to the same philosophical currents that push James, Underhill, and those scholars who come after them, into this mode of thinking. The analysis of these relationships will begin with a study of how the senses in Saenz' work relate to San Juan's poetic schema.

All of the senses factor into the mystic experience in Saenz' poetry, but we will focus on sight, hearing, and ultimately smell and touch—the last sense constituting the ultimate in Saenz' poetry. Saenz underscores the use of the senses in his poem *Recorrer esta distancia* from 1973. The poetic voice tempts the reader by telling her/him that once the subject has crossed the distance (i.e. transcended), there will be “Ruidos que seguramente uno desearía escuchar, formas y visiones que seguramente uno desearía mirar, / cosas que seguramente uno desearía tocar, revelaciones que seguramente uno desearía conocer” (129). With the poem “Muerte por el tacto” (1957), and the next one in the series, “Aniversario de una visión,” written three years later in 1960, Saenz enters into the age-old mystical debate regarding what sense mystics should most trust to indicate to them not only their current location on the path to ecstasy or union, but also what signs they should take as real or illusionary.

We will begin the discussion with the visual and auditory senses, as Saenz links both to melancholic nostalgia, which instead of orienting the subject on his/her mystic path, ultimately results in displacement. Saenz' poetry often presents a memory of an ephemeral vision; the poet begins “Aniversario de una visión” with the following epigraph/dedication: “A la imagen que encendió unos perdidos y escondidos fuegos,” which sets up the sense of loss that the poem will develop. The vision is a gaze towards absence, doubt, and unknowing: “y no sé si tú eres o si es el demonio quien me deslumbra y me hace ver lo que no se ve” (16). What the subject sees are things that cannot actually be seen, such as a soul: “y nadie habrá visto tu alma, excepto yo” (17). The “aparición” in this poem does not actually constitute an epiphany in the

traditional sense, because we are not sure that what is seen can actually *be* seen. Can one *see* nothingness? The “feeling” is often not only the melancholic desire for the image, but that of terror. In “Aniversario de una visión,” the subject fears a sort of cannibalistic, permanent union or a loss of identity in the other: “No me atrevo a mirarte por no quedarme dentro de ti” (10).

Though in San Juan the poetic subject experiences fear during the state of purgation, the thought of union with something beyond itself does not panic the poetic subject. In San Juan’s poem “En una noche oscura,” for example, the final union of the soul with God is described as two lovers embracing:

Quedéme y olvidéme
el rostro recliné sobre el amado;
cessó todo, y dexéme
dexando mi cuydado
entre las açucenas olvidado (262).

There has been some controversy as to whether the *amada* in the Sanlúcar version of the *Cántico* continues to display a sense of fear in the final state of union, as described here by Damaso Alonso: “en la primera ordenación, la de Sanlúcar, el alma, con un impulso irresistible, se adelanta hacia la unión, estado en que le sobrevienen todavía celos y temores; en la segunda, el proceso purificativo es más perfecto, y la posesión ya no perturbada” (153). Even with the presence of “temores” and the feeling of loss experienced by the *amada* when the *amado* abandons her, the subjects exude a sense of joyous union in the last sections or stanzas of San Juan’s poems. With Saenz, however, the poetic subject never overcomes the horror of absence felt in the state of purgation.

We again note this feeling of absence in the sense of hearing, as auditory elements link themselves to the present via memory (hence the importance of echoes

in Saenz' poetry) and further this idea of the presence of absence. In Saenz' poem "La canasta de lana," from *Al pasar un cometa*, a book of poetry from the early 1970's, the thought of music provokes a strong affect without the actual presence of music: "una música japonesa que me hace llorar recordando mas no escuchando" (31). The poetic subject has only the memory of the music, and the sadness arises not only from the song but also the absence of the song. The remoteness or foreignness of the "Japanese music" reflects the distance between that which the subject perceives and the reality of the experience. The theme of music without the ability to listen mirrors Saenz' desire to experience death while still remaining alive; the impossibility of truly understanding the music without listening but by merely remembering it from afar resembles the complex and seemingly unfeasible nature of experiencing death within life.

This music that Saenz' poetic subject remembers but does not hear invokes San Juan's "música callada" in the fifteenth stanza of the *Cántico*:

La noche sosegada
en par de los levantes del aurora,
la música callada,
la soledad sonora,
y la cena que recrea y enamora (252).

This stanza comes in the transition into the state of illumination, which follows the *vía purgativa*. Alonso breaks up the *Cántico* into four parts: "La salida de la Esposa y su primera búsqueda del Amado corresponde a la vía purgativa; la respuesta de las criaturas y los afectos y ansias antes del encuentro, a la iluminativa. Sigue luego el encuentro con dos grados: el de desposorios y el de matrimonio espiritual o perfecta unión" (152). However, within these sections, there are various transition stanzas. Here in the fifteenth stanza, night is quiet but dawn slowly creeps into the poem.

Hence, this key paradox of silent music represents the “desposorio” because the lovers are engaged to be married, but the union has not yet occurred. Howe explains that “[t]he double oxymoron of ‘la música callada, / la soledad sonora’ foreshadows the ineffability of the transcendent mystical experience” (255). On one hand, Saenz’ absent music harkens to the ineffable nature of the mystic experience because we wonder how it is possible to remember music when we cannot hear it. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, Saenz’ use of the absent music goes beyond this metaphor of ineffability and represents the near inability to realize the desire of remaining alive while experiencing death.

Saenz expands on the theme of the relationship between longing and the presence/absence of sound in “Aniversario de una visión:”

yo te echo de menos a tiempo de escucharte,
 una música sepulcral se pierde en el olvido y mi muerte sale de ti,
 a los músicos se les aparecen las imágenes amadas
 cuando escuchas tú

—todo el tiempo, los músicos se alegran del silencio cuando escuchas tú (10).

This “música sepulcral” starkly contrasts the music in San Juan’s *Cántico*, as the “música callada” transitions into actual music by the twenty-first stanza: “Por las amenas liras / y canto de serenas” (253). Even though the *amado* asks them to quiet down, the “canto” reappears in the final stanzas with “el canto de la dulce filomena” (258) that confirms the spiritual union. The *amado* and *amada* move towards the “canto” in the trajectory of this poem, which crescendos as the poem develops. The music in Saenz’ “Aniversario de una visión” moves in the opposite direction: instead of progressing into real music, it fades away into memory; instead of creating life (represented in San Juan’s poem with all the nature metaphors), it moves towards death. In San Juan the music becomes a perfect two-part harmony of the soul and God,

while there is no eventual resolution in Saenz.

Once the music gets lost in forgetting, it provokes a type of ecstatic state where death leaves the body. The “tú” here “listens” to silence, which like the ability to “see” a soul questions the possibility of using the senses in the face of absence. The musicians present the type of divide between the stimulus and the sense. In this inverted relationship, the “tú” wields the power to create noise, while the musicians remain silent, but they receive visions of “las imágenes amadas.” The sense we typically relate to musicians is not associated with them in the poem.

The theme of echoes reinforces the sensation of a disconnect between the origin of the stimulus and what the subject senses. Again, as with musicians being associated with silence or images, the description of the echoes does not suggest sound, but vision: as the poetic subject in “Visitante profundo” speaks of “ecos lucientes.” Saenz likens the experience of hearing an echo to an altered state of consciousness in a poem from *El escarpelo*: “Caminan en el eco. Caminan oscuramente, como caminan los trances” (59). It is in the echo (or a dream) where one can gain access to the realm of the night, that which the subject hopes to reach through transcendence: “en el eco que hace no sé cómo el piano y el chelo, en el clímax de un atardecer frío y deslumbrante. Inevitablemente había de caer la noche” (59). The echo is a distorted representation of the original sound, but if we hear it we can come closer to an understanding of what the actual noise sounds like; therefore, the echo in Saenz’ poetry metaphorically represents the simulacrum of death that one needs to experience in order to comprehend what real death is like.

The concept of a dream state—which appears in many of Saenz’ poems, and in particular “Aniversario de una visión”—represents a type of echo of our normal consciousness. Dreams lead us to question whether or not it is actually possible to see

or hear in this altered state of consciousness.²³ The poetic subject again displays a fearful affect while contemplating the possibility of experiencing in a dream what we normally do not have access to: “vivir una vida que no es vida ni es sueño, pero miedo, un miedo de soñar en lo que mi alma no conoce” (16). Along with the dream-like states that Saenz explores, Monasterios, speaking of *Muerte por el tacto*, notes that the actual structure of his poetry follows the oneiric lack of linear structure: “Como en el sueño, aquí las imágenes y la voz que las enuncia ignoran criterios de sucesión lineal y no están sujetas a referentes reconocibles. Al contrario, aparecen y desaparecen, provocando asociaciones insólitas y cambios inesperados de perspectiva” (138). The subject of the poetry cannot orient him/herself in a chronological manner.

Much like sounds in Saenz’ poetry, smells are provoked in improbable ways. In “Aniversario de una visión,” the smell comes from images:

en el olor que se desprende de ciertos dibujos que nos hacen llorar y que a la
vez
nos causan júbilo
por un miedo al sabor de las evocaciones tu visión conmovedora (12).

These sensory elements cause contradictory yet simultaneous affects. One other combination of dualities occurs with the way Saenz’ employs the sense of smell in *Recorrer esta distancia*. The subject recognizes his/her arrival at the abyss where the world originally formed through a unique odor:

en el abismo en que comenzó la creación del mundo, y que se hunde en la
médula del mundo,
se hace perceptible un olor, que podrías reconocer fácilmente, por no haber
conocido otro semejante;

²³ Monasterios compares Saenz’ interest in dreams with Sor Juana’s *Primero Sueño*: “Existe una tradición hermético-poética en la que el sueño es visto como vía de acceso a realidades desconocidas” (131).

el olor de verdad, el solo olor, el olor del abismo—y tendrás que conocerlo
(129).

The paradox is that “nadie tiene idea del abismo, y por lo que nadie ha conocido el abismo ni ha sentido el olor del abismo” (130). The scent is ineffable because no one has smelled it, so how can one describe or even truly recognize it? This demonstrates the difficulty of Saenz’ poems in comparison to Santa Teresa and San Juan who speak of particular scents that one will encounter on the mystic path. The scent of roses and lilies in San Juan “symbolize the flowering of love between the mystic and God” (Howe 109) and “the mystical garden of the soul presented by San Juan and Santa Teresa does emphasize the unitive aspect of the mystical experience” (102). The eighteenth stanza of the *Cántico* describes the height of the union between the lovers: “en tanto que en las flores y rosales / el ámbar perfumea” (253). In contrast to this “ámbar perfumea” of the flowers, Saenz describes the inexpressible with an indescribable scent, thus enhancing the ambiguity of the experience.

As with smells that do not actually exist, when taste appears in Saenz’ poetry it is not usually of things that we actually consume. In section II of “Aniversario de una visión,” the poetic subject speaks of “sabor” twice: “por ser un miedo al sabor de las evocaciones tú visión conmovedora” and “sabor de juventud a la espera de fundirse con la hora de la muerte” (12). Saenz again links the senses to a type of nostalgic fear/desire. One of the only mentions of a taste linked to a particular type of food still provokes this same feeling of absence: “el abandono con sabor de pan, en una casa entre sueños me persigue” (37). Because of the unreal, psychological stimuli for the senses of smell and taste, I propose that along with a phenomenological interest in experience, these incidents of sensation are also of a spiritual kind, not merely just physical, because there is a disconnect between the physical reaction and the stimulus.

Although the poetic subject first becomes cognizant of the fact that s/he has

transcended to another place through the senses of taste and smell, it is the through touch that revelation and a potential union occurs. In the final section of *Recorrer esta distancia* the subject questions:

Qué mano habrá sido tocada por esta mano.

Qué boca habrá sido besada por esta boca...

Dónde habrá sido encontrada esta mano por mi mano; cuándo habrá sido revelada esta mano por mi mano (133).

The use of the future perfect active tense and the lack of question marks point to the fact that no definitive answers exist for these questions. We find this in contrast to the “mano” of early modern mystical poetry, which emanates from God and represents his authority over the subject, such as when the hand in “En una noche oscura” wounds the beloved: “con su mano serena / en mi cuello hería” (262). Howe makes the connection between the “mano” of mystical poetry and God’s influence over the poetic subject in the poem “Llama de amor viva:”

It is fitting as well as conventional imagery to speak of God’s power in terms of manos. In the works of both mystics [Santa Teresa and San Juan], references to mano symbolize power...In each of San Juan’s major poems, therefore, mano appears at key moments...in the *Llama de amor viva*, the “mano blanda” of God consummates the union with the alma with a touch. A poem which effectively summarized the essence of a spiritual union thus relies on the language of the sense to convey its message (182-3).

Unlike the sensation of plenitude that the *amada* experiences in her contact with the divine, here we have nothing but a series of ruminations with no answer as to the source of this touch. Further, when we take into account the importance of the body in Saenz’ project, we do not have a spiritual union described in terms of the senses, but a corporeal encounter. While the posing of these questions does not reveal any truth, we

learn a few stanzas before this that as soon as a living person “no puede comprender, ya desconfia.” The doubt is representative of non-knowledge.

Through a close reading of Saenz’ poetry we see that he concurs with the theories of San Juan in terms of the saint’s hierarchy of the senses that mystics should trust in their progression towards ecstasy and union: both poets place the olfactory and then the tactile and gustatory senses at the top of the hierarchy. In her study on images in San Juan’s work, Elizabeth Howe turns to the criticism of Helmut Hatzfeld to explain the progression of the senses: “Evident in the gradation of San Juan’s interpretation of *toque* is a hierarchical ordering of the senses, which reflects ‘In the spiritual senses, sight and hearing are the lowest (though not scorned), whereas smell and, even more, taste and touch are the most exalted... And with the sense of touch the kiss was the supreme expression’” (191). As with Saint Thomas’ gesture, one can confirm faith through touch. These events in the *Gospel According to John* emphasize the acts of touching and seeing in relation to witnessing/experiencing the Other. Mary Magdalene observes the resurrection of Christ in John 20:17, and when she reaches out to touch him, he turns to her and advises: “noli me tangere,” as the Latin version states. Later in John 20:24-29, Thomas the Apostle doubts that his vision truly is the resurrected Christ:

Thomas’ response to the information/witness offered by the other disciples, includes in an emphatic way the very same verb of sight: “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails ... I will not believe” (*ean me idon ... ou me pisteuso*) (Jn. 20:25)... The condition imposed by Thomas is clear and absolute: personal verification by sight, direct access by eye contact and nothing less. Thomas even intensifies his terms by adding the need not only to see but also to touch Jesus at the very marks of his crucifixion: “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the

nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe” (Jn. 20:25). Thus, Thomas makes his own individual test, his personal direct seeing of the visible marks of the crucifixion and even the touching of these marks, the absolute condition and the non-negotiable term for believing. Any other evidence is inadmissible” (Trakatellis 6-7).

It is not surprising, taking into account the importance of seeing and touching for mystics, that many early modern religious figures appropriate these two biblical scenes by using them to describe their mystical experiences.²⁴ These incidents highlight the point that along with seeing, touching is believing. The reliability of the different senses comes into question for San Juan and Saenz, and the subjects in their poetry pass from a reliance on sight and hearing to the more mystically reliable senses of smell, taste, and touch.

In his short introduction to a collection of Saenz’ poems, Oscar Riviera-Rodas comments on the use of the senses for Saenz’ mystic subject, “The sense of vision, traditionally linked to cognitive capacity—hence to see is to believe—is rendered invalid in this conception: it is not a reliable source of knowledge. On the contrary, touch receives complete confidence” (61). Saenz states in “Muerte por el tacto:”

Cuando se comprenda muchas cosas por el tacto
incomprensibles para los demás sentidos
se sabrá que todo es lo mismo
y que es sin embargo distinto (109).

In Monasterios’ book chapter on Saenz’, she develops the argument that this focus on touch comes from Saenz’ phenomenological approach. I concur, however, as previously noted, San Juan prizes the sense of touch as the most important to the

²⁴ For example, María de Santo Domingo, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic, fashions herself after Mary Magdalene and relates a vision to her confessor where she relives the *Noli me tangere* scene.

mystic and we can link this interest in touch to the saint as well. That said, San Juan refers to the senses of the soul and how they are “symbolic of spiritual understanding... Even as they call for the mortification of the exterior senses in purgation in order to advance spiritually, the mystics discuss in sensual terms certain phases of mystical progress. When they do so, however, both Santa Teresa and San Juan stress that they are referring to the spiritual senses and not the corporeal ones” (Howe 184-6). Bataille concurs with Howe’s stance when he discusses San Juan and Santa Teresa in his book length study of *Inner Experience*; he explains that “On the subject of ‘visions’, of ‘words’ and of other ‘consolations’, common in ecstasy, Saint John of the Cross evinces if not hostility, at least reserve. Experience has meaning for him only in the apprehension of a God without form and without mode. Saint Teresa in the end only valued ‘intellectual vision’” (4-5). In Saenz’ 20th century context, Monasterios correctly concludes that bodily knowledge accompanies the gnosis obtained by the spirit. As we noted in the introduction to this chapter, Saenz puts a more literal twist on San Juan’s theory via his own lived performances.

The senses orient the poetic subjects on their journeys through unknown realms, regardless of their hierarchical ordering. Santa Teresa and San Juan are extremely fond of spatial metaphors to describe these unfamiliar spiritual territories. Santa Teresa represents the path to spiritual matrimony by using seven “moradas;” as one traverses the *moradas* s/he gets closer to the innermost part of the castle, i.e. union between the soul and the divine. San Juan’s constructs his own architectural metaphors in his poetry, such as with “En una noche oscura” when the *amada* leaves her “casa sosegada” by descending a ladder and entering into the dark night which signifies purgation. San Juan develops other spatial metaphors as is seen in the pastoral setting of the *Cántico*.

When there are actual spatial references in Saenz' poetry, they are no longer in castles or in the country, as Saenz situates his search within a dark urban landscape. Although Saenz' poetry mostly does away with rural and architectural metaphors, two clarifications should be made on this topic. First, some nature metaphors still structure Saenz' poetry, though they are located in an urban landscape, for example, a grove of trees in the city. Second, in *Recorrer esta distancia* Saenz situates his subject in relation to a "morada," which could directly reference Santa Teresa:

Pienso recorrer esta distancia descansando en algún lugar.

De espaldas en la morada del deseo

sin moverme de mi sitio—frente a la puerta cerrada, con una luz del
invierno a mi lado (116).

With these verses, Saenz inverts many of San Juan and Santa Teresa's metaphors. Saenz' poetic subject claims that s/he will traverse the mystic path not by frantically pushing towards union as with the *amada* in the *Cántico*, who impatiently moves en route to union, but by "descansando" in some yet unknown place. The stagnation that this poem begins with—"sin moverme de mi sitio"—paradoxically contradicts the title/intention of the poem: to cross this distance. Further, as opposed to moving closer to the innermost *morada* and passing through a series of dwellings as in Santa Teresa metaphor, Saenz' poetic subject begins facing away from the "morada del deseo." Finally, in contrast to the spaces penetrated by the dark night with which many of San Juan's poems begin, *Recorrer esta distancia* commences with a type of intermediary light, a grayish "luz del invierno," that complicates the early modern mystic path of passing through the dark night towards illumination. We will return to transitional, intermediary light metaphors with a discussion of "crepúsculo."

In his two poems from the compilation *Al pasar un cometa*, "La ciudad" and "En lo alto de la ciudad oscura" Saenz explores the "alta ciudad" and like many of the

other symbols in his work, this is both a real city, La Paz, and an imagined city at the same time. As Antezana explains, Saenz locates the *vía mística* in his “immediate material and culture surround” (134). The “alta ciudad” no doubt refers to the poorer parts of the city, which tend to be the Aymara face of the paceño landscape. Unlike Mt. Caramel for San Juan, the poetic subject here must descend the city in order to transcend normal consciousness.²⁵ One needs to literally and figuratively escape (transcend, to go beyond) the real and imagined city to reach union. With his later poetry, like this verse from *Recorrer esta distancia*, Saenz’ city metaphor becomes even more complex and paradoxical: “una ciudad deshabitada. En una ciudad perdida, una ciudad habitada” (132). The fact that the city does and does not have inhabitants intensifies the idea that the city does and does not exist.

The inhabitants in the poem “La ciudad” are the “infinitos ancianos” that contemplate “el futuro en busca del pasado,” which ties into Saenz’ use of non-linear time. The poetic subject must not construct his/her world in the typical chronological sense, because this would make the goal of experiencing death within life impossible. This reoccurring theme weaves its way into *Recorrer esta distancia*: “Y yo digo que uno debería procurar estar muerto. / Cueste lo que cueste, antes que morir” (130). Thus, a more fluid organization of time is necessary in order to transcend normal waking consciousness. Saenz reinforces this matter throughout *Recorrer esta distancia* by affirming in his verses that “no hay tiempo” and “nunca hubo tiempo” (132). Instead of chronologically progressing time in *Recorrer esta distancia* there is a constant competition between motion and stagnation: “Al contacto del secreto que fluye, del tiempo que se detiene, del fuego que se consume, y del hielo eterno y presente” (118). The fixed “hielo eterno” counterbalances the “fluye” in the verse, whereby Saenz restructures our typical conception of linear time. Apocalyptic events

²⁵ For a close reading of ascents and descents in Saenz’ poetry, see Blanca Wiethüchter.

constantly halt a normal progression of time: “todo ojo, toda imagen, arderá en llamas y se quemará. / Toda concavidad en el seno de la tierra, toda oscuridad que descienda, se quedará para siempre” (118), though this would appear to signify some definitive end, the “para siempre” is followed by: “Con los años que discurren” (118). Again, after time recommences, another seemingly time-ending line follows it: “toda alma se diluye en las aguas torrenciales con el alma universal” (118). These events are not truly apocalyptic in the sense that they represent a definitive ending: time starts, stops, and starts again: “Fluye la vida, pasa y vuela, se retuerce en una interioridad inalcanzable” (123). Here the themes of time and space combine to show how there is no linear progression of time that leads the subject to a final destination. The subject is forced inwards to a realm without beginning or end.

These urban spaces ultimately terminate in discussions of personal psychological spaces; thus, it comes as no surprise that Saenz’ poetry shares the saint’s interest in caverns. The employment of these closed-in spaces as metaphors is particularly pronounced in *Recorrer esta distancia*:

Hay que pensar en los espacios cerrados. En las bóvedas que se abren debajo
de los mares.

En las cavernas, en las grutas—hay que pensar en las fisuras, en los antros
interminables,
en las tinieblas.

Si piensas en ti, en alma y cuerpo, serás el mundo—en su interioridad y en
sus formas visibles (131).

Now the caverns are not just a metaphor for interiority, but for the vast, overwhelming, endless nature of the journey; as a result, Saenz develops another more abstract spatial metaphor: the abyss. Saenz explains in his poem *Recorrer esta distancia* that:

En las profundidades del mundo existen espacios muy grandes
—un vacío presidido por el propio vacío,
que es causa y origen del terror primordial, del pensamiento y del eco.
Existen honduras inimaginables, concavidades ante cuya fascinación, ante
cuyo encantamiento,
seguramente uno se quedaría muerto.
Ruidos que seguramente uno desearía escuchar, formas y visiones que
seguramente uno desearía mirar,
cosas que seguramente uno desearía tocar, revelaciones que seguramente uno
desearía conocer,
quién sabe con qué secreto deseo, de llegar a saber quién sabe qué (128-9).

In the first part of the stanza, this space ruled by emptiness appears to reproduce the “cavernas” purgation metaphor of “profundas cavernas del sentido” in San Juan’s *Llama de amor viva*. However, the second part of the stanza negates this metaphor because unlike the subject in San Juan who will purge corporeal sensation to reach spiritual illumination, in Saenz’ metaphor it is precisely in this space of darkness and death where sensation is heightened and through this experience understanding is revealed. In *Llama de amor viva*, the stanza in which the “profundas cavernas del sentido” appears is flanked with two metaphors of light:

¡O lámparas de fuego
en cuyos resplandores
las profundas cavernas del sentido
que estaba oscuro y ciego
con estraños primores
calor y luz dan junto a su querido! (263)

The metaphor here expresses that in the darkness of the cave in the innermost part of

the soul—experienced without the weight of corporeal sensations—the subject will reach the illumination and warmth of the divine. In Saenz’ poem, however, the subject never leaves the cave and is plunged into the unending nothingness: revelation will not result in union. The subject harbours no expectations as to what s/he may find: “quién sabe con qué secreto deseo, de llegar a saber quién sabe qué” (263). There are no answers revealed in this experience of the abyss, just more questions.

Throughout this exploration of the mystic’s path and the spaces that this figure passes through, the reader may have begun to ask, “Who exactly is this mystic character?” In order to address this element of the analysis, we will discuss the gender, sexuality, class and race of Saenz’ mystic subject. I posit that Saenz’ approach shifts the paradigm of traditional bridal mysticism, queering the rhetoric involved in theories of transcendence. As we have seen, the mystic “knows” through the senses, and here I question how gender, sexuality, class and race queer the use of these senses (or in some cases, push the already queer mystic path further).

The senses remain important on the mystic’s journey, but the true goal is to purge oneself of them through the process of mortification or literally the “putting to death” of the flesh, freeing their consciousness from the body (prison) and allowing it to access unknown realms. In Saenz, the abject nature of the human body is omnipresent, which he most explicitly explores in *Recorrer esta distancia*: “His book *Recorrer esta distancia* opens with the speaker gazing upon a cadaver. As the poem progresses, we begin to realize that the speaker is a literally disembodied voice meditating upon its own lost body across the distance of the reader’s mind. For Saenz, poetry is the practice of seeing through another consciousness from the afterlife” (*Immanent Visitor 2*). This purging of materiality allows one’s consciousness to get

closer to gnosis or knowledge through experience or direct contact.²⁶ The completion of this type of mortification is the main pillar that holds up the beliefs of Gnosticism, a philosophy that by all accounts intrigued Saenz. Scholars and devotees of Gnosticism have debated as to whether Gnostic principles fall under asceticism or libertinism.²⁷ Saenz himself does not promote any forms of denial, nor does he explicitly encourage overindulgence in sex; he does, however, glorify the extreme consumption of alcohol, and his poetic subject induces mortification not through asceticism, but through excess.²⁸

Saenz devotes the roughly seven hundred pages of his first novel, *Felipe Delgado* (1979), to “an alcoholic in search of his identity and the meaning of life and death” (García Pabón 390). Felipe’s alcoholism is not merely a tangential part of the plot but the force behind his ontological quest. In the novel the protagonist is much more committed to drinking and destroying his physical body than to pursuing any kind of erotic mystical experience. (Saenz most explicitly explores homoerotic themes in his novel *Los papeles de Narciso Lima Achá*, which we will shortly discuss.) Felipe does have a series of profound interpersonal relationships in the novel, but his ultimate loyalties lie in emulating the *aparapita*; this implies a total dedication to drinking in a particular bodega the he frequents, to reproducing the clothing of the *aparapitas*, and, ultimately, to embracing the slow ritual suicide of a subaltern alcoholic. This extreme mortification falls into line with Saenz’ mystic project and many of the same themes

²⁶ Along with different words to describe love, the Ancient Greek used by Plato and the philosophy that informs the Neo-platonic thought that much of Christian mysticism is based on allows for more than one concept of “knowing.” Gnosis is the special type of knowledge gained in the mystic state that implies knowledge through contact or experience. It can be thought of as similar to “conocer” in Spanish.

²⁷ For a basic framework of this debate, see Karen L. King’s book *What is Gnosticism?* where she claims that this binary of pairing of Gnostic ethics into the categories of asceticism or libertinism “has become a superficial and stereotypical cliché” (King 208).

²⁸ This is similar to Bataillan theories of transgression outlined in *Inner Experience*: “My principle against ascesis is that the extreme limit [of Being] is accessible through excess, not through want” (Bataille 21).

that we have seen in Saenz' poetry arise in the novel. When Felipe confronts his double—which represents his death—towards the end of the novel, he is able to experience death within life: “En efecto, Delgado se hallaba frente a su propia imagen, tal como si hubiera salido de la tumba en el futuro, dentro de muchos años, habiendo alcanzado tras largo tiempo de espera el aspecto que ahora ofrecía” (463). The old man then speaks to Felipe: “A partir de ese día, tú empezaste a seguir mis pasos, y cuantas veces me encontrabas, invariablemente y como enajenado, me mirabas con odio, sin darte cuenta de que te bastaba detenerte para encontrarme en ti” (465). In this pivotal scene Felipe experiences a series of revelations: “El sueño es el vehículo que nos permite ser una realidad; por el sueño se destruye el presente y culmina el futuro” (466); “El cuerpo es la desesperanza, pero el acto de sobrellevarlo es una esperanza” (469). In this scene we note that Saenz employs many of the same tactics in his narrative as in his poetry, such as the use of paradox and metaphor. The importance of dreams and ontological planes of existence shape this revelatory scene in the novel.

Five years after the publication of *Felipe Delgado*, Saenz publishes *La noche* (1984), a poem in four parts, and we see that his interest in this particular type of mortification continues in his work. The first section of this poem illustrates how alcohol offers “a paradoxical path of terror and knowledge” (Antezana 136). Only through drinking to the point of near death can one appreciate “el otro lado de la noche” because: “Es privativo de los bebedores que, por haber bebido y bebido sin piedad, han estado muchas veces a un pelo de la muerte” (39-40). Alcohol wields the power to bring a drinker closer to a death in which the subject gains privileged knowledge (gnosis), but this does not occur with just your average drinker, one must be a full-fledged alcoholic:

Es cosa que sólo ocurre con los bebedores que han enloquecido a causa del alcohol.

Con los que no pueden estar un minuto sin beber.

Con los que deciden acortar al máximo las horas de sueño—digamos a dos horas—, a fin de tener más tiempo para beber.

Con los que no ven la hora de estallar de una vez con el alcohol, y que se regodean al sólo pensar en ello.

Con esos.

Sólo a esos el alcohol les concede la gracia de sumergirse para siempre en el otro lado de la noche (64).

For those who reach this level of alcoholism, “el alcohol, en efecto, abre la puerta de la noche; la noche es un recinto hermético y secreto” (68) because “[n]adie podrá acercarse a la noche y acometer la tarea de conocerla, sin antes haberse sumergido en los horrores del alcohol” (67). Clearly, this type of privileged knowing comes not to the typical early modern ascetic, but to the tavern dweller.

This alcoholic character is not just any barfly in Saenz’ work, but an *aprapita*: an Aymara porter who lives in abject poverty in the blighted areas or slums of La Paz. Saenz’ friend Antezana explains the cultural significance of this character and its importance in the poetry at hand:

One of Saenz’ most famous characters is the *aprapita* of La Paz...In Saenz’ world, the *aprapitas* also frequent the garbage dumps and spend their nights drinking alcohol in taverns. When he knows his life has run its course, an *aprapita* works tirelessly to make enough money to drink himself to death...according to local beliefs, his “spirit” now protects his friends in the tavern. This ritual, known as “sloughing off the body,” highlights the way death reconciles an individual with his community...This concept is part of many mystical traditions, but in the *aprapita*’s case, it stresses the (alcoholic) excesses and the possible transcendence, through death, of such excesses

(134).

The aparapita here represents a specific type of Saenzian union in the final stage of the *vía mística*. Only the aparapitas, through their mortification of the flesh, may access this true reality via contact with death and the night. Those of the beau monde, conversely, are not progressing towards any type of transcendence, but merely keeping up appearances consumes all their energy. Saenz details this in the fifth section of his poem *Recorrer esta distancia* by using his characteristic humor, “la elegancia con que acuden a consultar al psiquiatra, a tiempo de mirar el reloj y ponerse nerviosos—un poco nerviosos no demasiado, con rictus aristocrático y nobleza en la frente” (121). Unlike the aparapitas who confront terror in the face, thus transcending to the other side of the night, the bourgeoisie “pretenden ocultar el terror que los domina” (121).

Along with alcohol as a tool for mortification, Saenz employs other types of corporeal violence in order to rid the poetic subject of the body:

me cortaré una mano por cada suspiro suyo me sacaré un ojo por cada sonrisa
suya
me moriré una vez dos veces tres veces cuatro veces mil veces
hasta morir en sus labios
con un serrucho me cortaré las costillas para entregarle mi corazón
con una aguja sacaré a relucir mi mayor alma para darle una sorpresa (25).

Here we have an extreme version of the wounds that the “mano” inflicts in San Juan’s poetry, such as with his poem “En una noche oscura:” “con su mano serena / en mi cuello hería” (262). Both the poems are similar in the sense that the poetic voice recounts the violence with a mellifluous tone. As opposed to wounds as in San Juan, in this Saenz’ poem we have a tearing apart of the human body (which is not unlike Saenz’ interest in the real life dismembered leg from the cadaver mentioned in the introduction to this chapter).

Not only the images but also the structure of the poems present this violent type of mortification, as Saenz employs an interesting use of purgation with his grammatical structure, which buttress his brutal images. His excessive use of dashes props up and reinforces these violent mortification images, as the dashes scar the surface and cut apart the flesh of the poetry. As opposed to a comma or period, the dashes aggressively intrude and chop up his verses. Something could also be said of Saenz' corpus of poetry and its link to the literal body of Saenz and/or his characters. As Michel de Certeau explains in his influential study on mystic language, *The Mystic Fable*, poetry itself also stands in for the actual mystic experience. The poetry is Saenz' body, the poetic subject's body, our body (we as readers are possibly implicated through one of the uses of the "you" in the poetry), and the poetry is the mystic experience.

Through mortification, the subject is led to an ecstatic state, that of a simulacrum of death (also talked about as a dream state or purgatory), which represents a type of freedom from the living senses. Although death in some cultural contexts conjures up negative sensations, for Saenz, it actually represents the only way to true knowledge. Saenz takes his mystic phenomenology seriously (stealing a limb from the morgue, for example), but he pushes this experience to its height via his poetry. This relates to de Certeau's theories as explained here by Luis Dupré: "[I]n the modern period language has in fact become a substitute for experience...According to this thesis, language functions in a performative way, as a means for acquiring what it expresses" (3). The act of writing, then, enables Saenz to create this experience that his real, lived actions just fall short of capturing.²⁹ In Saenz' actual life, he cannot procure this state of death that he seeks because the key is to experience a deathly state without actually dying. This proves impossible in real life, but achievable in poetry.

²⁹ Blanca Wiethuchter also comments on this "mystical-poetic experience."

Thus far we have the *aparapita* and the poet himself as possible poetic subjects. Though this would suggest a male subject, no one is explicitly revealed in terms of his gender. For all that Bataille does to rid medieval and early modern mysticism of queerness, replacing it with his painfully misogynistic model of the male seeking transcendence through the erotic (and often violent) encounter with a woman, Saenz presents a fresh model. Saenz evades what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick laments in her last book, *Touching Feeling*, which is the propagating of “bipolar, transitive relations,” such as subject/object and self/other. In “Aniversario de una visión” from 1960, we note that the love object in the poem is a male, with the use of the pronoun “él” just two times. This could be the use of the default pronoun in Spanish, but, even so, the gender of the object is never exactly clear. As time progresses, Saenz eventually removes most references to gender and proposes a new type of gender-neutral transcendence.

In the following poem from 1970-2, “Alguien tendrá que llamarse crepúsculo,” from the collection called *Al pasar un cometa*, note the way in which Saenz purposefully does not give either the subject or object a gender:

Yo te confundía con el crepúsculo al confundirme contigo; tú me confundías con el crepúsculo al confundirte conmigo, y tú y yo nos confundíamos con el crepúsculo, que nos confundía a ti conmigo y a mí contigo, confundiéndose contigo el confundido conmigo, para confundirse conmigo el confundido contigo. Y muchas veces se confundían en una y misma persona el crepúsculo y tú y yo, y otras muchas cada cual se confundía con otras tres personas distintas, que con esto se volvían nueve en total, o sea cero. Y no había tal persona llamada crepúsculo, sino que en realidad no había persona que no se llamara crepúsculo, excepto las llamadas tú y yo, que sin embargo no podían dejar de llamarse crepúsculo (28).

If we assume early modern mysticism as a potential source, we could interpret these verses as entering into dialogue with the gender roles used by early modern mystics like San Juan, whose “En una noche oscura” we could treat as the paradigm: a woman seeking out her beloved, a man. This poem symbolizes the union where the “you” and “I” reside within the same being or as Willis Barnstone, the great scholar and translator of San Juan, elucidates, “man’s soul (the *esposa*, or bride) is consumed in perfect love as it joins in spiritual matrimony with God (*esposo*, or husband)” (27). Amy Hollywood, a scholar on issues of gender and sexuality in mysticism, explains that medieval and early modern concepts of gender and sexual identity did not fit into our more definitive categories. In San Juan’s case, speaking of man’s soul as a bride already sets up what we might think of as a queer dynamic in the poetry.

Furthermore, upon a close reading of this line from “En una noche oscura,” we encounter a gender dynamic whose complexity makes it effortful to untangle: “¡oh noche que juntaste amado con amada, amada en el amado transformada!” (262). How are these lovers transformed? If a complete union takes place, then how is it that the lovers hang on to their genders? This could be partly due to the inconvenience of talking about gender in the third person, but the issues go beyond just this, as the stickiness of gender is hard to shake off. The balance of moving from the feminine, to the masculine, and back to the feminine (“amada en el amado transformada”) creates a sense of oneness, but the three stanzas that follow the fifth stanza where this line appears again re-establish the separate genders of the lovers. If San Juan sets complete union and the obliteration of self out as the goal of the mystic path, then in this sense, union can only be fully realized when using more abstract metaphors such as music in which two parts can be completely combined and harmonized.

Saenz’s poem, however, achieves a transcendence of gender that San Juan’s cannot fully express. The poem quoted above, “Alguien tendrá que llamarse

crepúsculo,” begins with the subject seeking out the beloved, as with San Juan’s poem, it reads, “Muchas veces al buscar sin poder encontrarte,” but, unlike in “En una noche oscura,” once the subject finds the object, Saenz never exposes the gender of the “you” nor the “I.” The poem follows Saenz’ desire to merge all existence into one being, which he beautifully demonstrates with the wild convergence of alliteration, consonance, and assonance to the extent that the reader has trouble disconnecting the words and, therefore, metaphorically the separate entities. A realm where no dualities exist renders meaningless the concepts of split genders or sexual orientations defined in terms of the sex of the love object. The poem *Recorrer esta distancia* reinforces this philosophy when the poetic subject reaches a type of underworld circus where “mujeres y no mujeres, hombres y no hombres” abound (128). Though the poetic subject longs for this realm, we find that it may not be possible anywhere other than the non-space of the night; thus, Saenz’ lyric expression accomplishes transcendence but a true union of the subjects can never materialize.

Saenz lays out all the clues to his enigmatic mystic philosophy in his poetry and then fleshes these concepts out in his second novel, *Los papeles de Narciso Lima Achá* (1991). This novel is published posthumously, which may be fitting, considering the speculation that much of the content of the novel might be autobiographical and that an acquaintance of Narciso’s publishes the second section of the novel—Narciso’s autobiographical “papeles”—after his death. García-Pabón explains that “The need to avoid any implication of homosexuality in the real Saenz forces the author to place himself as a character in the novel, assuring the reader that Saenz is not Narciso Lima Achá and is not gay like his character. Still, this does not erase the impression that the text has a strong dose of personal experience and/or knowledge of male homosexuality” (391).

Regardless of the possible autobiographical nature of *Los papeles de Narciso*

Lima Achá, in this novel Saenz adds to his mystic paradigm the explicit genders—which we will see are not so clearly delineated—of the lover and the beloved. The first and most important romantic relationship in the novel is between the protagonist, Narciso, and Elbruz. Narciso is a young Bolivian who is traveling to Europe with his wealthy uncle Luis; during their transatlantic passage on a ship, Narciso forms a physical and emotional bond with a young German man, Elbruz. The symbolic nature of the beloved's name gives us more information about the relationship between Narciso and Elbruz, and, therefore, more insight into how Saenz's mystic subject approaches transcendence and a potential union with the Other. I would like to propose that there are two sources for Elbruz's name: an incident with Nazi troops that takes place on a mountain in the former Soviet Union called Elbrus and also the Russian supercomputer named after said mountain. When Narciso and Elbruz first meet aboard the ship en route to Portugal, the name of this bizarre and dashing young German surprises Narciso: “[D]ígame una cosa. Elbruz Ulme, en realidad, es un nombre original y raro” (258). To which Elbruz replies, “Ni original ni raro. Como usted sabe, Elbruz es el nombre de una montaña de Asia, y Ulme es simplemente un apellido. Ni original ni raro. Pero hay una cosa...Le voy a confiar un secreto. Según afirman los que saben, Zaratustra apareció en el monte Elbruz; por eso yo he querido llamarme Elbruz. En realidad, mi verdadero nombre es Wolfgang, pero hace ya tiempo que lo tengo archivado” (258). In contrast to Narciso's vapid uncle Luis who pontificates in horrible French, the characterization of Elbruz frames him as a mysterious intellectual. As his characterization progresses, the reader learns that more than mere intelligence, Elbruz is a type of Nietzschean Übermensch figure, which he reflects when choosing his adopted name.

During one of their intense encounters, Elbruz confesses to Narciso that he has prophetic dream-visions: “Me sueño a veces con un ser que no es de este mundo; ese

alguien tampoco es un sueño; es alguien que solo puede presentármese por medio del sueño. Yo lo veo, es como una sombra, pero escucho su voz, que siempre me nombra. Y entonces me dicta lo que yo debo hacer... Y me dice que soy un elegido” (288).

This disclosure is key not just because it reveals Elbruz’ role as a type of spiritual leader, but also because Narciso then realizes that Elbruz has access to other levels of consciousness symbolized by the night. It is through their sexual amalgamation that that Narciso gains entry into the realm of the night.

A heightened sense of affect marks this shared transcendence, which Elbruz clarifies when Narciso recounts his own nightmares. Narciso questions: “[C]ada noche me sueño contigo. Y me infundes miedo. Me despierto aterrorizado. ¿Por qué será?” to which Elbruz wisely explains “Yo sé por qué. Es porque nos hemos unido en las tinieblas. El miedo que yo debería tener es el que tienes tú. O sea, mi miedo es tu miedo. Yo te he transmitido el miedo” (289). This is not the early modern fear experienced because of the absence of the divine, but a positive type of fear that marks transcendence rather than pre-transcendence. Further, rather than the early modern goal of ridding oneself of the “vela” that is the body such as in Santa Teresa’s poem “Vivo sin vivir en mí,” in this novel, the knowledge gained is not a rational, intellectual knowledge but a corporeal kind. The last words of the same heated discussion between the two lovers in which they talk about their dreams deal with this inversion of the body/soul dynamic in mysticism. Elbruz rebuffs a comment by Narciso about knowing that you exist if you have the capacity to feel fear: “tus palabras me recuerdan las patrañas de los filósofos, que tienen la mala costumbre de pensar con la cabeza. Eso es mera lógica, y yo soy enemigo de la lógica... tengo la Buena costumbre de pensar con el cuerpo” (290). This real, lived experience of the body is necessary in order to transcend normal consciousness.

The importance of the mountain continues into the Nazi era of the novel, thus

adding another layer to the symbolic nature of the name. In what one historian calls an “extraordinary episode” during the Nazi troops’ crossing through the Caucasus in August 1942, the alpine battalion “took time off from the push southward to plant the swastika on the Summit of Mt. Elbrus—an achievement which received much excited publicity in Germany, though it left Hitler himself unimpressed” (Mazower 152). This absurd nationalistic gesture of becoming sidetracked to the point of scaling the highest mountain in Europe while supposedly on a combat mission would have appealed to Saenz’ fascination with the anti-rationalism of Nazism (García Pabón 391). Furthermore, given Saenz’ attraction to the early modern structuring metaphors of ascent and descent, the connection with the name becomes clearer; for Narciso, Elbruz represents this extreme climb towards knowledge.

The third signification of the name Elbruz falls into line with the link between this character and knowledge, as the Soviet Union’s first supercomputers shared this name. A 1999 article in *Wired Magazine*, “The Cold War Yields a Superchip,” explains that Elbrus International is a “firm [that] grew out of the Soviet government's Institute of Precision Mechanics and Computer Technology, which built three generations of Elbrus supercomputers for Soviet missile-defense systems and space-mission control centers. The department built its first Elbrus supercomputer in 1959 out of vacuum tubes.” Technology both captivated and scared Saenz as we note in the description of the photo below: “Saenz with U.S. Embassy personnel, ca. mid-60s, mysteriously rubbing his hands before an early-version computer” (*The Night 2*). In his late poetry, Saenz will “excoriate the technology of war and condemn the technophiles to the ninth circle of Hell” (*The Night 2*). This attraction to an overwhelmingly threatening thing (Nazism and supercomputers) that could potentially be a source of some dark secret knowledge is exactly what draws Narciso to Elbruz.

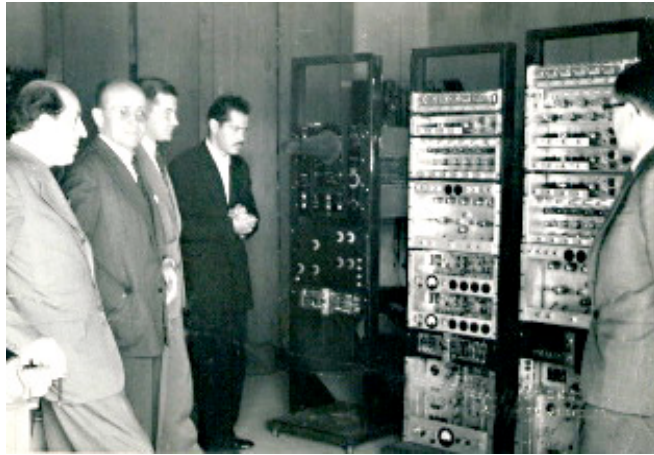


Figure 2. Saenz contemplating a computer

At first, as readers, we think the main thing that attracts Narciso to Elbruz is that he is gay, but beyond that first drunken encounter when they out themselves to each other, it is Elbruz' mysterious understanding of death that solidifies Narciso's love. This leads Narciso to proclaim that "el lazo que nos une se llama amor universal. El amor entre hombre y mujer es el amor particular" (304). Elbruz reproaches him for his simplistic reading of the situation. As the narrative progresses, Narciso learns that this binary of homosexual/heterosexual with homosexual as the only method to transcendence was naïve. In the last series of interaction between these two lovers, Elbruz transforms into a woman (at least from Narciso's perspective): "Pues el ver a Elbruz, el solo mirarlo, me bastó para saber que él, a mis ojos, se había transformado: era *realmente* una mujer" (390). Rather than alienating Narciso, this gender change incites overwhelming desire. After Narciso's second male lover, he falls in love with a woman, Mariana Wolf: "Y la quería mucho, y la quería de verdad. Cuando la miraba desde lejos, yo me condolía de mí mismo, y pensaba en mi muerte. Mi muerte era ella, y la muerte era yo" (443). Not only does Narciso find that he has the capacity to love a woman, but he also recognizes that this type of love has the potential to bring one close to death. Granted, this relationship with Mariana and Elbruz' transformation take up a

short part of the narrative, but these episodes serve the purpose of breaking away from binary gender/sexuality standards for transcendence. García Pabón astutely clarifies this same point when discussing Saenz' general philosophy, "It is important to remember that homosexuality is always defined as universal love, true love, beyond gender and, many times, beyond flesh, space and time. Following this argument, Narciso realizes that in universal love, women can be loved and desired... Love is universal and therefore transcends genders" (392). Unfortunately, no kind of love truly represents a consummated union: Mariana leaves him and Narciso commits suicide. Transcendence does not lead to a complete union of plenitude, because Narciso is left with emptiness and feelings of loss.

In relation to this queer inflection in Saenz's work and the anti-taxonomy that Saenz presents, I would like to question why the translators of his poetry into English—no doubt intended for a North American audience and classroom—have consistently inserted the pronoun "she" for the love object where it never appears in the original. We have seen that Saenz's later poetry mostly remains a gender-neutral zone, and a queer realm in terms of the enduring romantic metaphor of the lover and the beloved; one where the hetero-prototype of bridal mysticism no longer holds. For example, in one of Saenz's most shockingly beautiful love poems "En lo alto de la ciudad oscura," we note no subject pronouns appear: "es seguro que suspirará" (87). I sympathize with the translators because inevitable issues arise when one translates from Spanish to English. Possessive pronouns do not modify for gender in Spanish ("su" means both his or hers) and Spanish does not require a subject pronoun, revealing the gender of the subject, before a verb. We could interpret the translators' decision in one of two ways: that the authors have an awareness of mystical poetry where the male poet takes on a female voice (in the case of San Juan, for example), and their introduction of the female pronoun represents their attempt to return the

poem into a queer plane. This clearly would still pose a problem because the queer nature of Saenz's poetics takes defined gender pairings out of any explicit romantic verse. However, considering that when a poetic subject *does* appear in Saenz's earlier poetry it is always a male "un hombre metido en el fuego" (102) or a young boy, this translation heteronormalizes the mystic schema.

The transcendence of typical polarized gender in Saenz' poetry is mirrored in his use of intermediary symbols. We note the use of "twilight" in this poem above as opposed to the typical darkness/night generally paired by mystics in contrast to light/day. The importance of this intermediate zone of light that represents neither night nor day illustrates ambiguity. At times there is even a grey area within the grey area: "y mientras perduras en el eco yo contemplo tu partida con el humo en pos del horizonte" (75). As was previously discussed, the echo represents a type of intermediate consciousness and within that we now have "humo," which is neither solid nor liquid. This sensation of being neither here nor there emerges in Saenz' last poem *La noche* when the subject describes the location of other side of the night: "está a la vera de tu cuerpo / y está al mismo tiempo a una distancia inimaginable de él" (32). The object that the subject seeks is at once close and far, or nowhere, which represents a type of geographic grey area.

In the Spanish version, the reader never knows the gender or identity of the poetic subject and object (except in the case of the "bebedores"), as they exist in the noplacement grey area. But, are these "yo" and "tú" even different entities?³⁰ This question

³⁰ Various scholars have commented on the poetic "yo" and "tú" actually comprising parts of the same poetic subject (Antezana, Wiethüchter, Mitre, García Pabón, Orias Medina), but Monasterios is the one scholar to investigate the possible influence of Aymara beliefs in relation to this particular issue. In a chapter section titled "La dimensión estética de la lógica cultural andina," Monasterios convincingly argues, using the work of Verónica Cereceda on Aymara aesthetics, that Saenz' poetry acts as a space that parallels the Aymara ritual of *Tinku* which is "precisamente destinado a crear zonas de contacto donde los contrarios se enfrentan sin necesariamente confundirse en un equilibrio restaurador" (135). This, indeed, explains the type of non-union that Saenz explores in his work, but the ritual curing of *susto* and the Aymara ordering of the soul further clarifies Saenz' use of the "yo" and "tú." The Aymara

relates to the general belief in unitive Christian mysticism that the infinite and the finite coexist on some terms; Dupré explains that “The *unio mystica* overcomes God’s otherness. In Himself God is not opposed to anything, since He integrates all things into His divine being. Transcendence, thereby, ceases to consist in a negation of the finite and turns into its elevation” (9). Saenz removes God in the traditional Christian sense from this equation, but the fact that the Other, this infinite, exists in us still holds, and Saenz argues that we must turn inward to find that Other.

Even when the subjects search within, they do not achieve union. In *Recorrer esta distancia*, the possibility of union seems likely in the third section of the poem:

“Toda alma se diluye en las aguas torrenciales con el alma universal” (118).

Conversely, in the following section Saenz puts forth one of his most scathing criticisms of the dynamic between the rich and the poor, maintaining the division

believe that people have three souls (the alma, ajayu, and animu): “One of these souls follows the Hispanic curve of growth and development. A second does not separate from the body until death. A third soul, however, can be lost by children and adults...” (Crandon 4). One loses this third type of soul when frightened, hence the name “susto” for the illness. The “terror” and “espanto” that Saenz’ poetic subject faces no doubt could cause susto. This fear generally comes from staring death in the face, “cuando miras de cerca la muerte” (60). The dislodging of the third soul causes various symptoms, some highly affective, leading the anthropologist Libbet Crandon to claim that susto presents a “culturally appropriate way of expressing hysterical anxiety” (156). The “júbilo” and “angustia” that results from the sustos in Saenz’ poem *La noche* may indeed represent this type of frantic response. The poem demands that the subject display “aplomo” when challenged with this severing of the body/soul, and in that composed state, one must recognize that this susto presents the opportunity for a connection to noetic understanding, “en momentos de supremo terror, que son momentos decisivos en el aprendizaje” (60). This poem appears to demonstrate an awareness on the part of Saenz of what Joseph W. Bastien calls “Shamanistic Curing Ritual[s] of the Bolivian Aymara,” the title of his article on the subject. Bastien describes that, “The structural process of shamanistic rituals is to bring the dead into conflict with the living sick [those suffering from susto, that is]. Zacarías [the shaman] employs trance as a means to call forth the complementary yet conflictual symbols of the sick person” (79). As we have noted, these intermediate stages of dreaming and drinking act as a type of trance. We may link this interest in the synthesis of binary pairings to the shaman’s role (called *wayt’iri* or *yatiri* in most of the Aymara regions) in the curing of psycho-physical ailments. Bastien likens the rituals that cure susto to *nuwasis* or the process of “settling boundary disputes” (76). Bastien argues that with *nuwasis*, shamans use a type of “dialectic” that “accentuates the opposites into a whole while establishing their independence as reciprocal units...As shown in the ritual, opposition between husband and wife, living and dead, and deities of upper and lower levels is elicited within a ritual context that contains verbal accusations, confrontation, mediation and reconciliation. Although the healing ritual is not called a *nuwasi*, it follows similar structural dynamics” (76). This “independence as reciprocal units” develops into the type of problematic union that is at work in Saenz’ poetry.

between subjects:

Si no tienes qué comer sino basura, no digas nada.

Si la basura te hace mal, no digas nada.

Si te cortan los pies, si te queman las manos, si la lengua se te pudre, si te partes la espalda, si te rompes el alma, no digas nada (118-9).

This continues for the rest of the section and sets up a dynamic of a subject and an object, negating the possibility of the “alma universal” apparent one section earlier. In section IV quoted above, the soul is broken, a far cry from the unified soul in section III. “Aniversario de una visión” follows this same structure of the desire for unification and then its negation. The first lines of section IV read: “yo clamo por el olvido de la palabra, la unificación de los reinos y la comunicación por medio de los ojos, el retorno del alma” (17). However, halfway into the section we learn that “hay y no hay comunicación” (18). Even when the poetic subject desperately longs for union, a simple “unificación” in the traditional mystical sense is not possible.³¹

Through these updates of the *vía mystica*, Saenz proposes a new type of mystical transcendence—though still grounded in some of the stages of the mystic path from early modern mysticism—that does not necessarily lead to union. Saenz’ treatment of phenomenological experience modernizes the mystic path, while at the same time mocking some concepts of modernity. The poetic subject of Saenz’ poem *La noche* offers the reader a satire on the state of modernity:

Sencillamente, resulta sorprendente que hasta el momento la noche no haya sido eliminada de la faz del planeta;

liquidada y abolida para siempre, en aras del progreso de la humanidad y para mayor gloria de la tecnología;

³¹ Monasterios singles out another verse to illustrate this same point in “Aniversario de una visión:” “sino que tú y yo seremos, y también yo seré tú y tú serás yo.”

en procura de soluciones radicales para extirpar el mito y la fantasía, así como también para que la gente trabaje más y no duerma tanto. Capaz que en una de esas le inyecten a la noche unas cápsulas de láser y le endosen quién sabe qué artefactos de cobalto, para que cumpla una función verdaderamente útil (69).

The poetic subject warns that with modern “progress” the loss of myth follows. In an even more explicit explanation in the penultimate section of *La noche* the poetic subject explains this risk: “Y como no podría ser de otra manera, profesaban la tecnología por toda religión” (90). The treatment of technology as a system of belief erases local concepts of ontology and cosmology. What has been treated as civilized and modern is often seen as opposed to and above myth and the “imaginary.” Saenz inverts this hierarchy with his last poem *La noche*; even though technology replaces the spirituality of myth, destroying nature in its path in the penultimate section of the poem, the final section restores “la realidad verdadera,” which is revealed in a type of otherworldly, non-rational consciousness (91).

However, the restoration of the mythical does not negate the rational; further, this does not mean that there is an escape from realism here. Monasterios stresses that: “En un país cuya literatura es tendencialmente realista, la presencia de un poeta tan singularmente alejado del canon levantó controversia y debate. ‘La realidad pura y simple me disgusta’ escribió Saenz en *Felipe Delgado*” (123). Could it be that the genre of “pure and simple” realism that Saenz and Monasterios speak of represents a colonized idea of the real? Other canonical texts surely depict Catholic religious symbols or beliefs, but those are not treated as “unreal.” Saenz’ poetry illustrates something that is quite real for him while developing his own sort of post-religious cosmology.

CHAPTER THREE

CREATION AS THE PATH TO TRANSCENDENCE IN THE FILMS OF CARLOS BOLADO

Although Carlos Bolado was a well-known film editor in the early 1990's for movies such as *Como agua para chocolate* and many historical documentaries, he did not write and direct his own feature film until late into that decade. Since then, he has directed an Academy Award nominated documentary, *Promises*; lauded shorts; feature films; and has been involved in the production and editing of no less than thirty films. Bolado was the recipient of a fellowship from the Rockefeller/MacArthur Foundation and has been nominated for an Emmy. He has won numerous prestigious prizes: Audience Award for Best Feature at the San Francisco International Film Festival; Best Film at the Los Angeles Latino Film Festival; Grand Jury Prize & OCIC Award at Amiens International Film Festival (France); and National Critic's Award at Guadalajara Muestra in Mexico. Still, there has been only one academic publication on Bolado in the United States, an unpublished dissertation chapter by Trino Sandoval. Although a winner of seven Ariel Awards (the Mexican "Oscar"), including best picture for *Bajo California*, Bolado has often found himself without financial backing for his projects. This may explain why his second feature film, *Sólo Dios sabe*, maintains some of the same philosophical concerns as his first feature film, *Bajo California*, but was clearly made in a style that was meant for wider consumption—complete with a theme song by the Mexican pop star Julieta Venegas and a leading role played by Diego Luna.

In this chapter I examine two films by Bolado: *Bajo California: el límite del*

tiempo (1998) and *Sólo Dios sabe* (2005).³² *Bajo California*, an art film, explores the mystic trajectory of purgation, illumination, and union via the atonement of the protagonist's perceived sin of hitting a pregnant woman with his truck. The film's slow-moving attention to beauty and lack of dialogue attracts aesthetic athletes and was most likely not meant for wide distribution. *Sólo Dios sabe* is a more mainstream film about the story of Dolores and Damián, two twenty something art-loving characters who fall in love and accidentally conceive a child. In the beginning of the film, Dolores does not share Damián's interest in a connection with history and the sacred, but after the death of her grandmother, who practiced Candomblé, Dolores moves towards an understanding of her place in the cosmic order.

Regardless of the intended audiences for these films, they show how humans embark on a voyage to connect with something greater than themselves. Because these journeys take the form of literal trips, some reviewers have mistakenly placed these films in the generic category of Road Trip Movies. There is indeed a type of path that the characters follow, but it represents something more profound than merely a road trip. The films record various journeys that lead to a higher understanding of the interconnectivity of humans with each other, the past, and the environment. San Juan lays out the road to mystic knowledge in his *Subida al monte Carmelo*, which explains in an extended metaphor the "senda" that leads to the "cumbre" of the mountain or union with the sacred. We will note how Bolado incorporates indigenous Mexican thought into this mystic path in *Bajo California* and West African religious practices in *Sólo Dios sabe*. The mode of transportation toward gnosis is, as we have noted in the other texts studied in this dissertation, ecstasy.

³² Unfortunately, at the time of redaction, Bolado's latest film, *Peregrina, A Revolutionary Love Story*, has not been released. This film is expected to explore some of the same themes as Bolado's first two feature-length films: "fate, faith, romantic love and the legacies of our ancestors" (Michael Guillen). Bolado has various other projects that are currently in production.

Penance is the new element in the mystical path that has not yet been discussed in the other chapters. The characters in the films are “pagando una manda,” as one character explains it in *Bajo California*, and they do so by making offerings and traveling to their geographical origins. The *Diccionario breve de mexicanismos* describes “manda” as a “Voto o promesa hecha a Dios, una Virgen o un santo, de efectuar un sacrificio, un acto de abnegación, si concede cierto favor. || pagar una manda. loc. Cumplir con lo que se ofreció en una manda” (Gómez de Silva). In the traditional structure of Catholicism, one must atone for her/his sins, which are clearly laid out in church doctrine. In these films, however, the guilt that provokes the characters to feel as if they must atone does not come from the imposed laws of a religious institution. Moreover, it would be impossible to objectively classify the “sins” as such, because the characters never actively or knowingly commit them. In the case of *Bajo California*, we cannot even be sure that the “sin” ever occurred.

In these films, experience is key in the movement towards transcendence, and art/music provoke the ecstatic states; thus, each discussion of the two films will first begin with a description of the how the creation or appreciation of art/music leads the main characters to ecstasy. The works of art in the films represent metaphors of the cyclical nature of life/death, and the transcendence that comes from the experience of the art inserts the viewer/creator’s into this life cycle. The act of creation in the artistic process relates to the theme of human creation represented by pregnancy in the films. Thus, the second phase of the analysis will address how motherhood and fatherhood are linked to the characters’ mystical experiences. Just as with the artistic creations in the films, the role of active or passive creator or observer in the conception of children does not dictate whether or not this experience presents the possibility of transcendence.

In order to engage a critical analysis of gender in the mystic process, this

chapter will investigate how the role of active/passive agent in the act of creation challenges the Batallian misogynistic vision of the mystic path. A complex relationship emerges between normalized visions of gender and more fluid understandings of gender and power dynamics result. With the aim of comparison between these films and current discourse on the role of gender in the mystic experience, this chapter will propose a discussion between the films and the theories of Julia Kristeva and Grace Jantzen. An analysis of the protagonist in *Bajo California* will challenge Kristeva's notion that contact with the sacred is most deeply felt by women. Alice Braga's character in *Sólo Dios sabe*, Dolores, will confirm Jantzen's argument that the philosophical and affectual can coexist in female spirituality.

In the first film, *Bajo California*, the protagonist, Damián, crosses the border from California to Mexico and enters into a spiritual quest in the same way the ascetic saints journeyed into the desert. Damián searches for his grandmother's grave in the arid town of San Francisco de la Sierra in Baja California. Damián literally ascends the mystic path outlined in San Juan's *Subida al monte Carmelo*, enduring all the hardships that the saint lays out in this allegorical work: thirst, hunger, and fatigue. San Juan describes this path in chapter seven of this work: "es angosta la puerta para dar a entender que para entrar el alma por esta puerta de Cristo, que es el principio del camino, primero se ha de angostar y desnudar la voluntad en todas las cosas sensuales" (305). Damián rids himself of these earthly sensations by trekking through the desert with barely any water and then by climbing a mountain. After this purification, proximity, vision and touch push Damián into inner experience on this mystic path via contact with the locals and their history, not with Christ. I will focus on the three incidents that exemplify ecstasy in the film: Damián's installations in the desert, on the beach, and in the water; when he sees and then touches ancient cave paintings; and when he rubs a *metate* and a shaman appears to him on top of it in a

vision. Just like early modern mystics, Bolado uses the four elements: earth, air, water and fire to depict the mystic path.

The destruction of Damián's pickup truck, which he sets on fire before starting his desert trek, precedes the creation of his sculptures on the beach close to the edge of the water. Fire is a symbol of destruction but also of regeneration. This act of burning the truck represents a required purgation of a material reality that leads to the conception of Damián's renewed life, which he sets in motion through the nature sculptures.³³ Much like we will observe with the theme of the cyclical nature of life and death, Bolado emphasizes his filmic metaphors; therefore, when Damián picks up and shakes a rattlesnake's discarded skin, we recognize that the protagonist has also shed a layer of his former self via the abandonment of his truck. San Juan develops these same themes in his *Subida al monte Carmelo*: "through virtually the entire commentary of the *Subida*, he describes the cleansing fires of purgation, citing Biblical examples at length to support his exegesis" (Howe 301). One such example of this analysis occurs in chapter two with an example of Santo Tobías who must burn a fish heart because it represents: "el corazón aficionado y apegado a las cosas del mundo; el cual, para comenzar a ir a Dios, se ha de quemar y purificar todo" (39). Again, the symbolism is the same in San Juan and Bolado, but this purification of the spirit does not initiate a trajectory that leads to God in Bolado.

The burning of the vehicle (along with the sculptural installations which we will shortly discuss) represents a type of offering in the process of Damián's atonement for a possible hit-and-run accident involving a pregnant woman. After Damián thinks his truck collides with a woman, he finds himself in a state of shock and unable to stop and help the woman; he later returns to find that she is gone. An

³³ We note a similar sentiment to Superflex's 2008 work *Burning Car*, a ten-minute video of a Mercedes engulfed in flames. Along with the group's *Flooded McDonald's* (2009), *Burning Car* presents a harsh commentary on the effects of consumer culture and globalization.

intense sense of guilt, particularly in light of his wife's concurrent pregnancy, sets him out on his desert journey where he performs penitence. Damián, however, is not completely sure that he actually hit the woman and the fact that she was not there upon his return leaves his doubts unresolved. The act of burning the truck is a performance that relates to a goal of Earth Art: "It seemed that if Performance could reintroduce into Western civilization, now thoroughly secularized, a degree of sacred ritual, then Earth Art might at least formalize the growing concern for salvaging the ecology and preserving or revering such spirituality resonant archaeological marvels as Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, and the ruins of pre-Colombian America" (371).

Likewise, one of the major figures in the Earth Art movement, Richard Long, maintained that "art should be a religious experience" (372). This type of contemporary spiritual experience of performing penance is unlike the traditional Catholic routine in the sense that there is no mediator between the "sinner" and the sacred. The sacrament of penance takes place in three stages: *contritio*, *confessio* and *satisfactio*; the penitent repents, confesses, performs penitential acts suggested by the priest (such as reciting prayers), and the priest absolves the penitent. In Damián's case, this penance becomes a personal act given that no one forces the "sinner" to atone nor mediates the penance.³⁴ Arce is the only person who plays a role in Damián's penance and as a layperson he only passively listens to Damián's confession; it is Damián who decides what penitential acts he will perform and only he has the power to absolve himself.

Damián's penitential performances come in the form of artistic creations. His sculptural installations take their cues from the Process Art movement of the late 1960's and early 70's and from the Earth and Site works of the early 1970's. Some

³⁴ One could argue that the viewer is the witness and that, for example, Mendieta often taped her execution of the siluetas; however, we do not play the role of interceders.

branches of Process Art stress the importance of the artistic procedure as opposed to the actual material product; one such group within the Process Art movement was composed of Italian anti-materialists “who found vitality as well as metaphysical import in every kind of common, even perishable material—rags, twigs, fire or smoke, charcoal—and chose to present rather than represent it” (Hunter, Jacobus, and Wheeler 370). Likewise, Damián utilizes found objects in nature such as shells, branches, and rocks to create his installations.

The first sculpture (fig. 3) is assembled from a massive mound of shells that Damián finds on the beach. The project evokes the form of Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (fig. 4), a reference to the site-specific work that many consider the masterpiece of the genre. We may, then, read Damián’s sculpture in the same way that Smithson’s has been analyzed: “Smithson saw the poetic possibilities of an earthen gyre build with bulldozers as a beautiful but melancholy symbol of entropic realities of all creation. Yet, since *Spiral Jetty* appears to open outward as well as inward as if decaying into its own dead center, the piece could be read as emblematic of life’s complex process of simultaneous self-renewal and self-destruction” (Hunter, Jacobus, and Wheeler 371). Thus, we observe how the *Spiral Jetty* represents the cyclical nature of life and death, much like Damián’s beach spiral, which expands on this theme with the use of shells, often associated with water, fertility and are a sign of life and creation in Aztec symbolism.³⁵ Conversely, the precarious nature of the structure with its position close to the waves—and no doubt waiting to be destroyed by the incoming tide—counters the creation symbolism. This relates to Smithson’s obsession with the entropy of his work; I will return to this concept in the discussion of the cave paintings.

³⁵ Although this film takes place in northwest Mexico, Bolado mentions the importance of Aztec thought and representations in conversations with the film critic Michael Guillen.

Another addition to Smithson's format is a thin branch that juts out of the center of the spiral; Damián fastens two sticks tied together on top of the branch and with wind, it rotates in a wheel-like way. This branch structure reappears a few scenes later after Damián collapses with exhaustion on the desert sand. While Damián appears as if on the brink of death, he sees a person dressed in a black cloak carrying the branch from his sculpture, which confirms that art is a communal good belonging to the land and humanity, as opposed to a commodity, emphasizing the endless iteration of life cycles.



Figure 3. Carlos Bolado, *Bajo California*



Figure 4. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*

Bolado further develops this animistic interest in nature with the rock sculpture that Damián creates inland after he leaves the shore. The sculpture is composed of two concentric circles with one stone in the center (fig. 5). This relates to the growing use of stones as a metaphor for human life in the film, which continues when Damián eventually has to put small stones in his mouth to create saliva so as to not become

dangerously dehydrated in the scorching desert. Similarly, Damián uses stones to represent his relatives when creating a family tree. As Damián and his guide, Arce, share the same great, great, grandfather, Damián demonstrates this by picking up a stone and saying, “this is our great, great grandfather,” as he places another stone next to that one to represent their great, great grandmother, and proceeds down their lineage, creating a rock family tree. The metaphorical connection is made between the rocks (and more generally the land) and human spirits. This scene foreshadows Bolado’s growing interest in animism, which he develops further in his second film, *Sólo Dios sabe*. During an interview about *Sólo Dios sabe*, Bolado clarifies his curiosity in animistic traditions when asked if he practices Santería, “[I do not practice] but I was close to trying to understand it, because the animistic religions they were always interesting [to me], so it was more for that animistic side, that you give this spirituality to the rivers, to the mountains, to the rocks, to the trees. The Hispanic religions, the Aztecs basically you have the same idea” (Bolado in Michael Guillén).



Figure 5. Carlos Bolado, *Bajo California*

Through the focus on these sculptures at the beginning of the film, the cyclical nature of life and death and the interconnectivity of humans and their natural environment emerge as the central themes of the film.³⁶ Damián not only understands the universal connection of living creatures via the design of his own work of art, but also through experiencing (i.e. viewing and touching) the famous cave paintings in the town where his family came from before their migration to the United States. Damián originally sets out to find his grandmother's grave and not the cave paintings, but when Damián finally encounters her grave after much fatiguing exploration (this would constitute another level of his purgation in a mystical schema), we realize that his grandmother's grave is not his final destination but the starting point of his true spiritual journey. Damián recognizes that "we cannot live without knowing where we

³⁶ The shell spiral is so central, in fact, that it becomes the image used to publicize the film.

are from; knowing where we are from is knowing where our grandparents are buried.” To truly *know* this place, Damián must not merely see his grandmother’s grave, but understand the land and the history that shaped his ancestors—this means contact with the cave paintings.

As Arce leads Damián from his grandmother’s grave and through the mountains, they slowly approach the area of the caves. The viewer and Damián’s first contact with the caves is from a *plan américain* and then the shot slowly pans into the cave paintings. We then go back to a medium shot of the men’s backs with the caves in the background, and the shot again pans into a medium close-up of the caves. Our first view of the actual paintings is the next shot: a close-up of the images on the cave, which Damián sees through his binoculars. From this close-up, the camera moves to a long shot with the men in the far right corner of the frame and then back to a close-up of the human figures painted on the cave again. I highlight this series of long/medium shots to close-ups, because it gives us the impression that the men, like the cave paintings, are ontologically integrated into the rocks. This is a return to the important connection between humans and rocks that was initiated with the rock sculptures earlier in the film.

After this series of long/medium shots to close-ups, we see Damián next to the rocks and as soon as he approaches the paintings, he reaches out towards the images and touches them. Damián’s overwhelming need to touch, and not just look at, the rocks and the paintings, ignites an ecstatic state. It is this literal contact with the border between the present and the past, the understanding, the experiencing of its surface, that ultimately allows Damián to transcend to a union of the present with the past and future. Upon the tactile combining with the sight of the paintings, Damián experiences a vision of the pregnant belly of his wife; it is not coincidental that Damián mentions that the women of that area used to go to this cave to give birth to their children. The

rocks, like the symbol of water (a river and the ocean provoke similar visions), connect themselves to the cyclical trajectory of life: they are both representative of Arce's ancestors and of the future generations of the family, like Damián's future child. The paintings epitomize Smithson's sculptural concept of entropy, which Arce highlights in a comment to Damián. Arce mentions that when he was young the paintings were more vivid but they have started fading. When Damián replies that this fading away is impossible to avoid, Arce adds "Why avoid it if that's the way life is."

The first paintings that provoke Damián's ecstatic state portray non-descript human figures, but the second set of figures that the men observe depict shamans, and Damián describes to Arce how these shamans distributed the proper amount of herbs in order to provoke trances. From this dialogue between the two men, the camera focuses into extreme close-ups of the shaman's hands. If we follow the rationale that Damián is in the process of integrating himself into this ontological cycle, it does not surprise us that the next morning Damián begins to make paint from natural sources in his surroundings and paints his own hand on one of the rocks. Damián counts on his fingers in the cochimí (mti'pai) language of one of the original groups, the Guaycuras, of this area in Baja California and alludes to their numerical system, which went up to twenty and was based on the fingers and toes. After Damián leaves his impression, he has yet another vision of his pregnant wife.

The second ecstatic state that leads to transcendence occurs after Arce and Damián leave the site of the cave paintings. As they continue on their mountain trek, Damián comes across a *metate* or a smooth surfaced rectangular utensil carved from stone that women used, and some still use today in many parts of Mesoamerica, to grind corn. Damián slowly feels the surface of the *metate*, which appears to thrust him into another ecstatic state; as he inches back from the *metate*, he recognizes that his proximity and contact with the stone draw him into another realm. The shot of Damián

backing up fades into another one of his visions, one in which—instead of the figure of Christ that an early modern Christian mystic might see—a shaman appears. The shaman first recites the “Our Father” prayer in Latin and then says something in what I believe is cochimí, though if it is, it is not the “Our Father” in this language, as there are translations of this prayer into cochimí through the texts of the Jesuit missionaries who evangelized the area.

After this vision, we have a scene of a single rock falling with a slight overcranking of the shot. I imagine that we could interpret this shot in many ways, but I offer the theory that this rock represents Damián, the lone mystic, turning into the lone shaman. When the two men are in front of the painting of the shamans a few scenes before, Damián notes that they were painted on separate rocks from all the other humans and they stand apart, alone. This separation from the rest of the people presents the paradox that although these shamans physically remain separated from everyone else, they symbolize the link between this world and the present with the past and future. In addition, when we compare this overcranking of the present with the undercranking of the past—which appears to be shot with Super 8 mm film, or at least that is the desired effect—Bolado’s commentary on the complex nature of time emerges through his use of cinematic time. Alternatively, this rock could represent the newest stone that will be added to the family tree, consequently linking the future with the past.

The repeated focus on rocks treats these natural elements as if they were sculptures; the camera often lingers on the edge of a rocky cliff or a single falling rock (as discussed above) and painstakingly explores its form and texture. This cinematography relates back to Smithson and other earthwork sculptors like Richard Serra who began making films in the late 1960’s. In an article on Tacita Dean, a contemporary filmmaker, Tamara Trodd argues that: “this shift by Dean from

sculptural to architectural model is enabled by her particular use of one strand in the lineage of 1960's sculptural film; that supplied by Robert Smithson, and the important shift in his work from sculpture as an art form of immediate physical presence to one marked by a condition of absence (something which to him was an essentially filmic quality)" (375).³⁷ We similarly observe "the presence of absence" in Bolado's film, although his metaphor is realized through the use of natural elements as sculpture instead of Dean's architectural approach (Guillén).³⁸ For instance, the sand itself is treated as sculptural in the shots following Damián's completion of the shell installation. The camera appears to sculpt the sand into a three-dimensional art piece with its focus on the indentations and mounds in the sand; this simultaneously exposes the limits of film in terms of dimensionality. Bolado's text teeters on the edge of sculpture/film. This reminds us of the precariousness of boundaries that Bolado explores with the Mexico/USA border, but also—more importantly to this study—death/life, past/present, and self/other. No convenient binary pairings can be contained as discrete entities.

The integration of these binary elements is what Damián accomplishes by way of transcendence. With Bolado's presentation of successful transcendence he starkly contrasts the sentiment of "lack of fit" that Trodd notes in Dean's films. Dean's "displacement" focuses on subjects that find themselves out of time and out of place, such as the central characters in *Boots* (2003): an abandoned Art Deco villa in Portugal and the elderly man Robert Steane, who speaks three major European

³⁷ It should be noted that what has been called "sculptural film" is generally thought of as gallery videos. I would like to propose that the length of the film should not exclude it from this generic classification if the text demonstrates an inherent interest in sculptural issues. If we were to extract many of the shot sequences and place them in a gallery, no one would suspect they came from a feature-length film. There are extended periods of time without dialogue when Damián is alone on his desert trek.

³⁸ There is an exploration of an abandoned lighthouse (a structure also used by Dean in her film *Disappearance at Sea*) before Damián creates his shell sculpture, but Bolado is more interested in this structure for its orienting metaphors. The camera does not devote nearly as much attention to this building as it does any of the other natural elements.

languages, though does not feel at home in any of them. Damián seeks to erase this sense of alienation or disconnection; as opposed to the type of atemporal stagnation in Dean's films, Bolado emphasizes the crossing of these borders via transcendence, which we can relate to the cyclical metaphors of life/death in *Bajo California*.

We note how humans are integrated into history and nature when Damián goes beyond the limits (the literal definition of transcendence) of typical human existence. Our protagonist is most easily seen as assimilating into the past through his ecstatic vision of the shaman. He starts his incorporation into nature with his earthworks, but the true fusion comes when he uses his own body as a sculptural medium. Damián first begins to do this after creating the shell sculpture when he approaches a huge cactus in the shape of a cross. He places himself in front of the towering saguaro (the well-known species seen in Western Films and native to Arizona and Baja California) and, facing the cactus with his back to the camera, puts out his arms and mirrors the cross shape of the cactus. The significance of a cross for Catholicism and a cactus for Aztec religion is fused into one symbol. Here we have Damián's body echoing natural forms (his voice echoes in a canyon after this scene).

This progresses until Damián has a dream where he sees himself lying by the cave paintings and then getting into the ocean naked. This baptism absolves Damián of his "sins" and also harkens to Ana Mendieta's "Untitled" (Creek #2), which depicts the artist floating nude in water. This immersion in the water contrasts with the thirst that Damián experienced in the stage of purgation while trekking through the desert and up the mountain. This is similar to the culminating metaphors that Santa Teresa uses in her *Camino de perfección*. She also develops many different metaphors related to water throughout the *Vida* and *El castillo interior*, but the last chapter of her *Camino de perfección* most fully expresses this metaphor of plenitude: "ya habéis visto encierra en sí todo el camino espiritual, desde el principio hasta engolfar Dios el

alma y darla abundantamente a beber de la fuente de agua viva que dije estaba al fin del camino. Parece nos ha querido el Señor dar a entender, hermanas, la gran consolación que está aquí encerrada” (143). The “fuente de agua viva” that awaits the mystic at the end of the journey satiates the thirst that the subject experiences at the beginning of the “camino” and represents a union of the spirit with the divine.³⁹

The reference to an immersion in water by Mendieta, whose work often revolved around issues of gender, highlights Bolado’s awareness of the ways in which gender has been conceived of in relation to this type of ecstatic experience. Mendieta’s performances pushed the boundaries of gender performativity, “A very early series of photographs shows Mendieta trading genders with burly poet Morty Sklar: She clips off his hippie beard and glues it on her tiny face. The piece insists on the possibility of gender-bending, while acknowledging the vexed issues involved” (Gopnik). Likewise, with Bolado’s character, Damián, the filmmaker problematizes the role of gender by questioning the extent to which biology influences the spiritual experience of ecstasy and transcendence.

Damián has killed a woman (or at least he perceives he has) and for this destruction there must be a creation; the fissure between this destruction/creation is where union occurs and one has contact with the sacred. Kristeva presents her thoughts on how parenthood enables the subject and object to transcend themselves and communicate: “Outside motherhood, no situations exist in human experience that so radically and so simply bring us face to face with the emergence of the other. The father, in his own less immediate way, is led to the same alchemy; but, to get there, he must identify with the process of delivery and birth, hence with the maternal experience, must himself become maternal and feminine” (57). Like when Kristeva

³⁹ For more on water in the mystic tradition, see Linda Sue Francisca Schlee, *A Meditative Study of the Mysticism of the Waters in El castillo interior of Santa Teresa de Jesús and El cántico espiritual of San Juan de la Cruz*.

offers Clément the concession regarding the bisexuality of mystics and then insists on returning to the privileged female access to the sacred, here Kristeva seems to edge towards an egalitarian approach, but ultimately places the male role in parenthood outside of the “immediate” realm of union. As a man, Damián clearly cannot give birth to new life, but the physical connection between Damián and his unborn child is made clear. Through the shots of Damián’s hand reaching out to touch the pregnant stomach of his wife, his role as connected to this new life is confirmed. Damián does not have to defer an understanding of union until he can emulate motherhood, as it is immediate for him. The “tenderness” that Kristeva refers to in terms of motherhood is already present (57).

This deep bond to fatherhood confirms the groundbreaking work on the changing nature of “machismo” in Mexico by anthropologist Matthew Guttman. Specifically, Guttman’s book, *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, urges us to “revise our beliefs that all men in Mexico today and historically have little to do with children...Such, however, is the opposite of official discourse regarding men and machismo, where working class men are said to valorize brute virility and ignore their offspring” (87-8). As opposed to the stereotyped macho image, which holds that Mexican men should father many children and not take part in their rearing, Arce advises Damián that he should go back to his child. It is only upon Damián’s return to Mexico that he realizes that his child links him to the cycle of life. Although unclear if this is an explicit criticism of some types of families in the United States, Damián the USAmerican was the character who abandons his child, whereas Damián with his newfound Mexican identity comprehends the importance of fatherhood.

Self-absolution takes place at the end of the film when Damián decides to return to his wife and baby daughter after successfully completing his journey. In the last scene of the film, Damián sees a picture of his daughter that his wife sent him and

smiles; he appears carefree and content, acting in a way we had not yet witnessed before in the film. Having absolved himself, Damián walks out of the post office and past a church, notably without going inside. This final act metaphorically demonstrates that Damián's absolution is singular, not institutional.

This absolution and return to fatherhood relates to Guttman's claim that "As much as this study is dedicated to debunking stale generalizations about common national cultural traits, children and parenting do seem more central to more people in Mexico than has ever been my experience in the United States" (5). Could Bolado be saying that USAmericans are disconnected with their offspring and consequently their ancestors? Ancestor worship comprises a large part of the understanding of the sacred for Bolado (he expands on this theme in the next film we will discuss) and the original goal of Damián's trip is to find his grandparents' grave. When he arrives at the cemetery, he realizes that his grandparents are only the first link in the understanding of the sacred and that he must go thousands of years back to connect with the past, i.e. the sacred.

The connection between motherhood and the sacred is one reason that Kristeva gives to prove that women experience the sacred more easily or deeply than men. Another argument is that the sacred manifests itself in highly affective states and that women are more likely to go into "trances." Kristeva believes that the space women occupy between "zoo (biological life) and *bios* (the life to be told, capable of being written)" allows them to "participate in both sides of the sacred," that is to say the affectual/corporeal and the philosophical (13-5). We see with Damián that men may also occupy this borderland. Even though he is generally laconic and measured, Damián appears to be in complete shock while in his trance after touching the *metate*. Further, Damián has an emotional episode afterwards where he confesses to Arce that he believes that he ran over a pregnant woman. (In the second film we will discuss,

Sólo Dios sabe, the protagonist, Dolores, also has an affective response to a trance episode and, like Damián from *Bajo California*, she is able to process this corporeal experience into philosophical understanding.)

With these examples we have seen how Damián passes through ecstatic states to his eventual transcendence. But Damián is not the only one who experiences ecstasy. I believe that Bolado, like Smithson, is interested in the “atopia” that films create for the viewers. Smithson claims that: “Going to the cinema results in an immobilization of the body. Not much gets in the way of one’s perception. All one can do is look and listen. One forgets where one is sitting. The luminous screen spreads a murky light throughout the darkness. Making a film is one thing, viewing a film another. Impassive, mute still the viewer sits. The outside world fades as the eyes probe the screen... One thing all films have in common is the power to take perception elsewhere” (138). As ecstasy means a sense of being outside of one’s self, we can see how the act of watching a film in a cinema could be likened to this state. Just as Bataille considers poetry to hold this same capacity, Smithson argues that watching some types of film might provide a means of transportation of perception. In his short essay “A Cinematic Atopia” Smithson goes on to explore the possible types of films, subjects, or viewers that would best provoke this type of state. He never quite gets to an answer, but I would propose *Bajo California* as an exceptional example.

The second film that this chapter addresses, *Sólo Dios sabe*, does not provoke a similar type of affect in the viewers, although it tackles some of the same concepts (albeit in a less stylistically profound manner). Due to the fact that the metaphors and content are more straightforward, the section on *Sólo Dios sabe* will be markedly shorter than the argument developed on *Bajo California*. This is not to say that this more popular style presents fewer examples of the primary concerns of this chapter, though they do not necessitate the same level of unpacking as in *Bajo California*.

Something that these films do share, however, is the name of the protagonist: Damián. The Greek root of the name Damianos means to tame, but it also relates to the Ancient Greek words for spirit and fate—two concepts that structure these films. The two protagonists both engage in soul-searching journeys that allow them to discover the nature of the spirit and how this correlates to the lived experience of the past. The topic of fate ties into the theme of the cyclical nature of life and death. The Damián of the first film is destined to connect with his dead ancestors in order to welcome new life into this cycle via the birth of his daughter. The Damián of the second film firmly believes in providence and that he has met Dolores for a reason. When Dolores attempts to send Damián back to Mexico City, denying him the connection that he has traveled to find, he frantically attempts to explain to her his stance on destiny: “I believe that destiny is what God knows is the best for us, whether we realize it or not. Sometimes things seem like coincidences, but they’re not. I know that you don’t believe in God, so you can call it whatever you want.”

Both Damiáns embody the traits of Damon and Pythias from the ancient Greek myth where this name originated as it is used in the modern “West.”⁴⁰ Dionysius the Elder, the reigning tyrant, accuses Pythias of slander and sentences him to death. Pythias announces that as his dying wish he wants only to say goodbye to his mother and sister. Damon, Pythias’ best friend, offers to take his place in jail while he is gone; Dionysius allows this on the condition that if Pythias does not return after two weeks, he will kill Damon for Pythias’ wrongdoings. The sovereign expects that Pythias will flee and escape with his life, sacrificing his friend. At the end of two weeks, everyone gathers for Damon’s public execution just as Pythias rushes in to save him and apologize for his tardiness (pirates, predictably, attacked his ship at the most inconvenient time). Dionysius, shocked at the friends’ loyalty, pardons them both. We

⁴⁰ We can further trace this name back to its Sanskrit root, which also means to tame.

can easily draw comparisons to the films: a return in the form of a journey, Damon paying for a sin that he did not commit, and the nature of this sin being subjective. The intertextuality here reinforces the idea that Damián maintains his loyalty under extreme circumstances (Damián from *Bajo California* returns to his wife and baby and Damián in *Sólo Dios sabe* remains devoted to Dolores regardless of the situation), but, more importantly, it highlights that Damián has faith when everyone else is in doubt.

The myth of Damon and Pythias parallels the theme of destiny in *Sólo Dios sabe*. Damon seems destined to die at the hands of Dionysius but the eternal question of where destiny ends and human will begins arises when Pythias arrives to save his friend. Dionysius decides to pardon Pythias, therefore changing his destiny. In *Sólo Dios sabe*, the characters—and also the audience—question the role that destiny plays in the course of their lives. When Damián gives Dolores his speech about the power of destiny, she answers, “So I decide what’s predetermined by destiny?” To which he answers, “You can change destiny, but that would be to go against your happiness.” Dolores accepts her fate of death from uterine cancer, which encroaches on Damián’s happiness. This leaves us with the question that the screenwriter, Diane Weipert, hoped to plant in the audience: “We don’t know if Dolores’ sacrifice was unavoidable and destined to be and something good or if it was a tragedy of a young woman too consumed by faith and obsessed with the idea of her destiny, with the importance of this sacrifice.”

As with the Greek myth, the notion of return arises in the first scenes of the film *Sólo Dios sabe*, as Dolores, a graduate student in Art History studying in southern California, realizes that she must go home to Brazil after her passport is stolen while clubbing across the border in Mexico. During the first few minutes of the film, the viewer recognizes that Dolores’ character has a great appreciation for the artist Ana

Mendieta.⁴¹ As Mendieta is possibly most well known for her “earth body works” from the mid 1970’s – the early 1980’s (her performances with blood are also well known), we will first look again at how these type of natural sculptures relate to ecstasy, transcendence and knowledge of the sacred.

The second mention of Mendieta in the film (we will shortly return to the first) comes when Damián’s car overheats while he and Dolores travel to Mexico City from the California border. Damián, a young journalist, has offered to drive Dolores to the Brazilian embassy in Mexico City presumably out of intrigue and romantic interest. As Damián curses his bad luck for not having water for his overheated radiator, Dolores says that she can hear a river. While Dolores runs towards the water, Damián yells that he cannot hear the water. When they get to the bank of the river, Dolores mentions Mendieta and delights in the fact that she is one of Damián’s favorite artists. The two decide to reenact Mendieta’s earth body works and Damián traces the outline of Dolores’ body in the sand. Unlike the video and photographs of Mendieta’s siluetas, Bolado’s version includes Damián’s footprints, Dolores’ partner in the creation (fig. 6). In comparison to Mendieta’s siluetas, which she was said to trace herself, and, at the very least, no visible evidence remains of any assistance in the creation of her works, Bolado implies that this integration of humans with nature via art can also emerge through collaboration.

⁴¹ Bolado explained in an interview that he knew Braga was the actress to play the part of Dolores upon seeing a picture of her: “I think I said, ‘She’s the one!’ Because she looks so similar to Ana Mendieta and, at that moment my movie had more of Ana Mendieta, this Cuban artist. At the end we didn’t get the rights to use [the Mendieta material] because the gallery—she’s dead now—the gallery’s very [protective]” (Bolado in Guillén).



Figure 6. Carlos Bolado, *Sólo Dios sabe*

Speaking about these earth body works, Mendieta claimed that: “Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs” (Mendieta quoted in LACE introduction in Manzor 378); these “primeval” beliefs came from Mendieta’s interest in and study of Santería⁴² and pre-Colombian cultures in Mexico and the Caribbean. Mendieta called one of these *Siluetas*, as this series is known, Ochún (fig. 7), as the artist expressed a deeply felt connection to this orisha (after her performance “Sweating Blood,” she declared that it was propelled by her possession by Ochún). Like the Ochún silueta, many of Mendieta’s earth body works took place on the banks of lakes, rivers, and oceans, reinforcing the artist’s connection with Ochún, the orisha of fresh water.

⁴² I use the name Santería because this is how Mendieta referred to this belief system. I recognize the problematic nature of the term and how many practitioners reject this name as colonial and devised under the Catholic system. For more on this topic see Salvador Vidal-Ortiz’s dissertation “‘Sexuality’ and ‘Gender’ in Santería.”



Figure 7. Ana Mendieta, *Siluetas*, “Ochún”

Even before the episode of the overheating car, Dolores has already been linked to the sound of rushing water in the first few minutes of the film. During her lecture on the young Mexican artists influenced by Mendieta’s work, we hear the sound of calm flowing water.⁴³ The incidents associating Dolores to water and consequently to Ochun (or Oxum as is more correctly the case in the film, as Dolores recognizes this connection in a Bahian house of Candomblé) ceaselessly continue throughout the course of the narrative. The film begins with Super 8 footage of Dolores and her grandmother dancing on a rock at the edge of a flowing river and ends

⁴³ Dolores mentions two Mexican-born artists in her lecture: Tatiana Parceró and Erika Harrsch. Images of their work flash across the screen while Dolores lectures to a group of students. The themes explored in these pieces share many of the same concerns as the film. Of her “Mapa de mi cuerpo” images, Parceró says, “By means of combining pictures of fragments of my body with diagrams from anatomy as well as old codices, I have constructed maps—metaphoric/rituals—and reinvented my history. I explore inner and outer spaces guided by such maps as a starting point. With these images, I try to see through the memory of my body that which goes beyond the boundaries of the skin” (Tatiana Parceró website). Of the images from “Traps” Harrsch explains that she “seek[s] to expose the mysterious, voyeuristic contemplation of the subject held captive in the far reaches of the trance state, the irreverent pleasure and joy of the witness who observes the vulnerability, suffering, ecstasy and eventual decease of any human being” (artist’s website).

with a shot of Dolores' picture in a basket of yellow flowers (Oxum's color) being cast off into the water by her daughter. During the film, Dolores seemingly has the power to make it rain, because every time she experiences an intense emotion, a downpour follows. Bolado also cuts in clips of what looks like Super 8 video of Dolores' dead body dressed in white, floating down a river on a wooden raft. Along with water, Oxum is associated with honey and female sensuality and we note Dolores' similarities with the deity when she licks honey off of Damián's body.

Bolado confirms this Oxum symbolism when Dolores travels to Bahia with the purpose of returning the rocks from her grandmother's Candomblé altar to the river where they originated. Dolores arrives at the Candomblé house or *terreiro* of the woman she believes was her grandmother's nanny on the feast of Oxum and attends a ceremony for the festival. At the beginning, Dolores slowly sways to the drum beats, smiling and watching the women dance in the center of a circle of onlookers, but after she witnesses one of the women fall into a trance, she loses her center of gravity. Then Dolores experiences a brief trance-like state. When a woman guides her into an adjoining room, Dolores sits in a chair to regain her center of gravity. Dolores is again able to talk and she expresses her fear by saying that she needs to get out of the *terreiro*. Dolores' reaction to her experience is on par with the fear expressed by Damián in *Bajo California*, demonstrating that Bolado does not differentiate between genders in terms of level of affect related to an ecstatic state.

Before this episode at the ceremony, a woman at the *terreiro*, Duda, reads the cowry shells that she tosses in front of Dolores. Duda informs Dolores that she is a daughter of Oxum and must be very fertile. Oxum is not only "the embodiment of fertility and sexual appeal" but is also the perfect mother (Hale 217). Dolores says that this is impossible (when they are still in Mexico, she tells Damián that she cannot have children), but when she returns to São Paulo she realizes that she is pregnant with

Damián's child. Dolores informs Damián of the pregnancy and the viewer finally gets an explanation for the scene where Damián acts out of character when confronted by his ex-girlfriend. We learn that his ex-girlfriend terminated a pregnancy without consulting Damián, and like the Damián of the first film, although the "sin" is not premeditated, Damián in *Sólo Dios sabe* expresses guilt. The "sin" itself is not the abortion, as this would represent too simple of a reflection of Catholic doctrine for Bolado, but the fact that a decision was made without the thoughts of the other person involved in the process of creation. Soon thereafter, Dolores finds out that she has uterine cancer and that in order to survive the doctors must terminate her pregnancy. Dolores comes to terms with her fate and decides to keep the baby; she will inevitably die, incorporating herself into the cycle of life and death, thus arriving at a final transcendence. While Damián atones in a more traditional Catholic manner by creating an altar and praying, Dolores decides to sacrifice herself as an act of penance for her sin of ignoring the connection of her grandmother to history and a spiritual past.

Dolores' sacrifice begs the question: What is the sin for which she atones? If we begin to think about how Dolores' worldview changes from the beginning to the end of the film, we can see that her perceived sin is reinforcing modernity. When she and Damián first meet, she smirks at the prayer ritual he undertakes before setting out on their car trip. She cannot understand why when Damián hits a zopilote (turkey vulture) on the first leg of their trip he has to bury it and pray over its resting place. Damián tries to explain to her that the zopilote is the only animal that does not kill to survive. This makes the zopilote a privileged creature in the cycle of life and death and one that was pivotal in Aztec mythology, but Dolores does not appear to sympathize. As the narrative progresses, however, Dolores is the one who travels to Bahia and attends a ritualistic observance while returning the stones from her grandmother's altar

to their origins.

Thus, I would like to conclude by proposing that the characters in these films have committed the sin of accepting modernity—forgetting about their origins, and, consequently, the sacred. This is geographically reinforced by the fact that both Damián in *Bajo California* and Dolores reside in California at the beginning of the films. They have been colonized by a North American form of modernity that constructs a border between them and transcendence. In order to go beyond that limit, they must purge themselves of colonization and return to a local understanding of the sacred, which is accompanied by a literal return to their origins. Mexico is under California (where *Bajo California* gets its title), and an uncovered spiritual past lies underneath the lifestyles that these characters lead in the United States. The protagonists in these two films attempt to tame or conquer modernity; their penitence represents a type of reconquest. The root of Damián, as we will remember, means to tame. Then, of course, there is the most popular meaning of the name Damián, possibly stemming from the film series *The Omen* produced in the 1970's, where the protagonist, Damien, is a child born of Satan. The demonic spirit that the characters try to repress in themselves is an imported lifestyle which is characterized by a disconnect from an understanding of nature and the past.

Bolado demonstrates the taming of modernity through his plot lines, but as a skilled filmmaker he also challenges modernity through superb cinematography in these two films. The shots that most clearly undermine modernity's fierce individualistic focus are the ones where the protagonists appear small (and sometimes blurry) in the context of their greater surroundings. The same gesture was something that interested Mendieta: "Embracing the ambitions of feminism, Mendieta quietly subverted the monumental gestures of male land artists such as Robert Smithson and Walter de Maria by working on and emphasizing the human scale in relation to the

landscape” (Hirshorn catalogue). When Dolores is once again in São Paulo, we see a shot of her walking through the city. The shot leading up to this begins with an extreme long shot of crowded city buildings and cars zooming through the urban landscape, emphasized by the undercranking of the shot. Through a series of axial cuts, we focus in on Dolores walking across a bridge and emerging from a crowd of people. The soundtrack that accompanies this scene allows us to make sense of this series of shots: Dolores moves out of step with the electronic music and there is a slight overcranking of the shot once the camera focuses in on her. Although Dolores’ pace does not sync with the faster electronic music, the sound of rushing water combines with the manmade beat. Like when the series of long shots dwarf Damián in *Bajo California*, here Dolores appears miniature in scale compared to the vast city. However, when Dolores is in a natural context, the shots present her in a different ratio to her surroundings. Bolado does not include extreme long shots and Dolores appears in more closed-in shots.

Bolado’s interest in how people relate to their different geographies is nothing new in Mexican visual culture. In particular, Juan Rulfo’s striking photo series “Polvo eres” depicts the relationship between the residents of northwest Mexico and this barren region. Rulfo brought the portrayal of Jalisco and its people to its literary height in a collection of short stories titled *El llano en llamas*. The topic of Rulfo’s second book, *Pedro Páramo* structures his son’s film *Del olvido a no me acuerdo*: a male protagonist returns to a dusty Mexican town in order to have contact with the legend of his deceased relatives through interactions with the townspeople. Bolado’s films also chart a return to origins that situates the characters in a personal history, one that they have lost touch with because of immigration. The process of reintegrating themselves into the cycle of life and death via the creation rituals discussed in this chapter allows the characters to understand the sacred.

It must be noted, however, that Bolado's approach to the exploration of the reconnection to spiritual history at times does align itself with positive psychology and New Age spirituality's glorification of different Mexican understandings/experiences of the sacred as the means to happiness. As discussed with the Californians who visit Tepoztlán in order to find spiritual harmony in the introduction to this dissertation, Damián of *Bajo California* embarks on his Mexican journey to expiate his perceived sin so he may live a joyful life with his wife and new baby. Dolores, aptly named, of course, finds love and harmonious union only after leaving her depressing and disappointing existence as the lover of a married man in southern California and traveling through Mexico and Brazil. Even though she tells Damián in Tijuana that nobody calls her Lola (the common nickname for Dolores), when she really crosses the border into Mexico and then finally into Brazil, she no longer is Dolores but "Lola" or "Lolita." Ironically, Lola's true "dolores" actually begin while in Brazil, and this could represent Bolado's rejection of the simplistic treatment of the happiness and/or plenitude found in Latin American spiritual traditions by positive psychology and New Age spirituality.

Although the characters in these films find answers to North American unhappiness in Mexican and Brazilian spirituality and rituals, Bolado's handling of this topic does diverge from the general capitalistic impulse of positive psychology and New Age spirituality. These films were funded by the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE), a public organization that promotes the production of national cinema. They were produced by Sincronía, a smaller-sized Mexican production company that has only produced one other film (they primarily specialize in sonorization, which they have done for approximately fifteen internationally distributed films). There was no doubt for Bolado that *Bajo California* would be treated as an art film and would not gross much in box office revenue; it was released

in small distribution by Columbia Pictures in Mexico and Terrapin Pictures in North America. *Sólo Dios sabe* was also produced by Sincronía but in conjunction with nine other companies; its distributor was Buena Vista International (Argentina), a well-known and prolific distributor in Latin America, and Palm Pictures in North America. Its premiere at Sundance clearly brought it a wider audience than *Bajo California*, but during the actual filming of the movie Bolado had trouble even raising enough funds to keep production going in Mexico and Brazil. Although *Sólo Dios sabe* had a bigger budget and more distribution/production backing than *Bajo California*, this funding was basically necessary for Bolado to get this expensive project off the ground. In the interview that accompanies the film on DVD, Bolado explains that because of the cost and complicated nature of producing the film, he was forced to completely overhaul and edit down the original script. Therefore, it is possible that Bolado's original vision for the film was less capitalistic than artistic, thus distancing itself from pop New Age and positive psychology texts.

CHAPTER FOUR

“PSUEDO-CRISTO DES-SACRALIZADA:” GENDER AND THE SACRED IN CARMEN BOULLOSA’S *DUERME*

In his article on Carmen Boullosa’s seventh novel, *Duerme*, César Rodríguez de Sepúlveda claims that the indigenous characters have “conocimientos mágicos” and positions this novel somewhere between magical realism and testimonial novels (78-9). Paola Madrid Mactezuma similarly notes the “magical powers” of the ancestors in the novel (4). The treatment of *Duerme* as both magical and spiritual within the same argument by Ute Seydel demonstrates the general difficulty that *Duerme* has presented scholars. Seydel, in an otherwise highly meticulous study of the book, claims that water in the novel possesses “magical” aspects, but later qualifies that by calling the water “sacred” (164). Tomás Granados Salinas’ attempt to categorize the novel places it in a genre of Mexican literature with a particular political agenda:

Boullosa no pudo evitar el cliché, o lo persiguió, y caracterizó a esa personaje como la de ‘las manos tibias’ se convierte en el símbolo de una confusa herencia prehispánica, latente, que da el título a la novela, aguarda la ocasión de su próximo vigila. Con este componente místico y mítico, la novelista parece inscribirse en la escuela del nacionalismo milenarista de Antonio Velasco Piña, en cuyos libros se anuncia el advenimiento de los auténticos mexicanos, hijos de la línea directa del esplendor precolombino (59-60).

While Granados Salinas correctly observes that a buried pre-Hispanic history rests beneath the surface of *mexicanidad* in *Duerme*, he wrongly incorporates this text into

the movement of “mexicanismo” and its literary subgenre.⁴⁴

Boullosa, for her part, has said that, “The market joyfully promotes...third-world writers as long as they reinforce the idea that South American nations are unintelligent but full of magic and fantasy” (Boullosa in Gallo 5). When we deem something “magical” it connotes a certain judgment on the part of the critic, and might problematically imply that this text somehow constitutes magical realism. Boullosa’s comment highlights the need for caution when selecting these terms. This relates to Michel de Certeau’s argument that the great academic interest in mysticism seen at the turn of the century until about 1930 attached the mystical to a “primitive” mentality. This treatment of mysticism puts the mystical in opposition to the scientific and “to an intuition that had become foreign to the intellectual understanding” (de Certeau 12). We risk a colonialist reading of *Duerme* if we insist that it has “magical” elements, since magical events have often been associated with that which is non-Western. To consider a text “magical” serves to dismiss its importance (note how Boullosa links unintelligent to the magical in the aforementioned quote).

We rarely hear scholars talk of the transfiguration or transubstantiation of Christ as “magical,” though, indeed, these events parallel the incidents in the novel. Magical qualities are linked to the affectual and the non-rational, while the sacred represents rationality and a system of knowledge. Could it be that these scholars mean to say “mysterious” instead of “magical”? “Mystery” denotes a cloaked truth that

⁴⁴ As *mexicanismo* reached its height around the time of the publication of *Duerme*, we can understand the initial confusion, though now with some distance from *mexicanismo*’s peak, we can revisit this generic classification of the novel. *Duerme*’s project diverts from the ambitions of *mexicanismo* in various ways. First, the text does ask for a reinterpretation of past rituals, but not in the way that *mexicanismo* does. The message of this text is not dogmatic in the sense that it promotes the reenactment of these rituals, but Boullosa challenges readers to relive and rethink this history through the literary experience. Second, *Duerme* does not call for the reinstatement of pre-Colombian civilization in the empirical sense (a thought that to most would seem equally comical and depressing), but it suggests a reevaluation of how some indigenous concepts persist in Mexico, and how this in turn extends an autonomous spiritual orientation. Third, this novel paints neither a completely positive or negative picture of the pre-Hispanic past, compared to the universal glorification of an indigenous history in the *mexicanismo* movement.

somehow positions itself outside of our normal, waking consciousness; the attempt to experience and understand this truth serves as the basis for mysticism. Indeed, the root of the word mysticism in Greek, *μυστικός*, or secret in English, relates to a hidden truth that is unveiled to the mystic in revelation. Rather than magical, we can better understand the phenomena in the novel if treated as events that allow for transcendence to a consciousness beyond our normal existence and the ability to rationally analyze the experience afterwards. This chapter serves to explain Boullosa's philosophical project via the exploration of a potential Mexican cosmology and spirituality fixed upon an artistic or literary understanding of History.

While *Duerme* has received little attention in terms of spirituality, Boullosa's other novels have generated a few studies on this topic. In a conference paper given in 2000, Juanita Garcíagodoy addresses the possibility of "A Spiritual Proposal for the New Millennium in *Cielos de la tierra, Earthly Heavens*" (the title of her talk). As for *Llanto*, Tracy Ellen Seymour explores the implications of Georges Bataille's theories of sacrifice and transgressive eroticism in Boullosa's novel. Finally, an astute article by Emily Hind develops the argument that "history offers a pathway to spirituality" via an "independence from religious belief" in several of Boullosa's novels: *Cielos de la tierra*, *Krisis*, and *El amor que me juraste* (97).

Though these other novels certainly propose approaches to spirituality, it is in *Duerme* that Boullosa most fully enters into the contemporary debates on gender and sexuality in relation to an understanding of the sacred. In *Duerme*, binary classification of Claire's spiritual experiences proves impossible and leads us to an exploration of how Boullosa counteracts the way gender and erotic metaphors traditionally function in Christian bridal mysticism. Although Boullosa disturbs these conventional metaphors, she maintains the mystical path of purgation, illumination, and transcendence. Boullosa emphasizes the function of ecstasy in the stage before

illumination, and, therefore, the text engages in the debate surrounding the role of experience in the mystical process towards transcendence. I argue that the sense of touch—directed by issues of gender and sexuality—proves a necessary tool for the attainment of the affective ecstasy that Claire experiences while on a mystical journey towards union. This chapter will map how Boullosa frames this mystical trajectory in terms of the relationship between the sacred and following concepts: religion, gender, sexuality, and ritual.

The “spiritual proposal” in the novel negates traditional Christian concepts and symbols (indeed, it represents the act of freeing oneself from the religious dogma that Hind discusses in Boullosa’s other novels), and problematizes this tradition by putting it into dialogue with Greek mythology and Aztec cosmology. Issues of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality shape the trajectory of this spiritual path as manifold situations—at once logistical and spiritual—force Claire to go back and forth from male to female, French to Mexica, and oligarch to servant. I chart Claire’s amorous connections to explore how these situations relate to a growing sense of self-awareness. For Claire, desire not only develops in the erotic sense but also concerns other gender and race issues, as our protagonist identifies as male and a new connection to an indigenous identity expands through her/his ecstatic and ultimately unifying experiences.

With *Duerme*, Boullosa proposes a space for all those seeking transcendence—a sort of queer realm for the questioning of Being. In a section of her article titled “Notes about spirituality and Mexican literature,” Garciagodoy mentions other novels including works by Carlos Fuentes and Laura Esquivel (we could also add the work of Octavio Paz to this group): “Several writers consider these matters through their fiction, representing the vitality of Mexican spirituality, animated by pre-Colombian beliefs and practices and sustained by popular Catholicism and

contemporary culture” (1). Boullosa builds upon these spiritual themes by questioning the relationship of sexuality and gender to the sacred. The novel attempts to unify the “cosa partida” (personified in Claire) and obliterate the binary pairings of elements through transcendence. Through a reading of *Duerme* we will note how Boullosa resists the standard theoretical dichotomies; in particular, she disturbs, or queers, the relationships of sacred/profane, male/female, and finite/infinite.⁴⁵ The protagonist’s experiences refuse definition in a binary mode, highlighting the necessity of analyzing this “trans-rhetoric” when reading the text. However, it must be noted that this type of spiritual mestizaje does not glorify hybridity.⁴⁶ The violence of the Conquest represents a rupture that seeks to destroy the sacred, whereas the search for the sacred element that has been lost represents a type of spiritual reconquest.⁴⁷

Boullosa’s project parallels Julia Kristeva’s when the latter defines the sacred in mysticism as “Not religion or its opposite, atheistic negation, but the experience that beliefs both shelter and exploit, at the crossroads of sexuality and thought, the body and meaning” (Kristeva 1). Boullosa reinstates ritual into the experience of the sacred with the *curación* in the novel. In contrast to Kristeva, Boullosa recognizes the queer element of the mystic experience and makes the protagonist of her novel *Duerme* neither male nor female. Although it appears at times that Clément successfully persuades Kristeva of the bisexuality of mystics, Kristeva returns to the importance of gender difference in spiritual experience and ultimately to the supremacy of the female

⁴⁵ In this chapter, I discuss how the text renders insensible pre-existing types of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as “bipolar, transitive relations” (such as subject/object, self/other, etcetera). In Sedgwick’s last book, she laments how theoretical frameworks continue to operate within a schema of counter-opposed pairings.

⁴⁶ Laura Pirott-Quintero highlights the ways we must look critically at hybridity in her essay “Strategic Hybridity in Carmen Boullosa’s *Duerme*” by using the theories of Shohat and Stam, who argue that “a celebration of syncretism and hybridity *per se*, if not articulated with questions of historical hegemonies, risks sanctifying the *fait accompli* of colonial violence” (Shohat and Stam in Pirott-Quintero 1).

⁴⁷ For more on this see Garcíagodoy’s article “A Spiritual Proposal” where she discusses the “spiritual consequences of violence in the conquest and modern politics” (2).

subject in regards to access to the sacred.

Boullosa's first move in separating the sacred from the religious begins with her description of the protagonist. Claire is a French Lutheran in the newly Catholic Nueva España of the 16th century surrounded by indigenous Mexica people with their own religion. Further, Claire disregards any typical concepts of sin in the Christian sense: s/he works as a prostitute in France before going to the new world without any noted guilt, s/he has sex with a woman, and s/he does not subjugate her will to men (that is, of course, unless you read "the head of the woman is man" from Paul's Corinthians as something quite different).⁴⁸ The concept of sinning against Christian law is not Claire's concern, and it would be impossible to think of that as the motive behind his/her eventual sacrifice. The concept of sin as that which disobeys divine law would have no place in the world of this novel. Whose divine law would that be?

This shedding of Catholicism reflects Boullosa's own formation as a child; she attended a Catholic school where the nuns not only indoctrinated the girls with Christian dogma, but also with shame in relation to their developing bodies. In an introduction to an interview he conducted with Boullosa, Rubén Gallo states that:

Carmen recounted an anecdote about the nuns who ran her elementary school in Mexico City, and how, with their veils and habits, they would teach the girls not only history and geography, but also to be ashamed of their bodies. In part, Carmen's career as a novelist could be seen as a reaction against the grave Catholic nuns of her childhood. Her work makes explicit all that was suppressed from convent school: love, eroticism, the body and the pleasures that can be experienced through the senses (1).

Much of the author's revolt against Catholicism is a reaction to the church's

⁴⁸ Cynthia L. Thompson proposes this definition in her "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," *Biblical Archaeologist*, June 1988, p. 99.

misogyny. It comes as no surprise that when Boullosa develops her “pseudo-Cristo des-sacralizada,” as she described the protagonist of *Duerme*, she does not portray the character as the established male Christ figure. During our first contact with Claire, s/he is dressed in men’s clothes, though when an indigenous servant undresses her/him, we come to find out that “he” has “she” parts: “Me descubre y me revisa... Sí, soy mujer, ya lo viste. Yo me siento humillada así expuesta. Creí que ya lo había vencido, que nunca más volvería a ser ésta mi desgracia, el cuerpo expuesto, ofrecido (como si él fuera mi persona) al mundo” (19). This quote brings up two essential principles of the pseudo-Christ figure: first, Boullosa preserves the sacrificial nature of Christ and later negates it, as her character is not offered for sacrifice to “die for our sins” (as Paul explains in *1 Corinthians 15:3*); second, the quote exposes that this figure is not the sexually male version from Christianity.

Before Jesus’ sacrifice, John must baptize him; Boullosa compounds these two events in her novel and the baptism is at once the sacrifice. During what the characters in the novel call the “curación,” an indigenous woman who Claire first believes is named Juana and later finds out is named Inés, slices him/her with a stone and pours sacred water into his/her veins, “me clava con todas sus fuerzas la piedra en mi pecho desnudo, el izquierdo... en la herida abierta deja caer agua del cántaro” (20). Boullosa has called this *curación* “un bautizo femenino, un bautizo vía penetración, interno, íntimo” (Pfeiffer 47).⁴⁹ Instead of the traditional Christian baptism between two men, Jesus and John, Boullosa queers this foundational myth by placing it into a feminine realm. While Inés performs the curación she says “altia nite,” which translates to “bañar a alguien” in the *Diccionario de la lengua nahuatl o mexicana*. The Christian rite of *βαπτισμός* represents a ritual purification, which is also the case in this novel, as

⁴⁹ Kroll also discusses this scene as a “feminine baptism” in her “(Re)opening the Veins of the Historiographic Visionary.”

the waters come from “los lagos de los tiempos antiguos. Era una agua tan limpia que estancada en ollas de barro desde hace muchos dieses de años no da muestra de pudrición” (28).

Inés continues describing the purity of the water for almost an entire page and then explains that although Claire will shortly go to the gallows, s/he will not die (we later realize that the *curación* makes Claire immortal by replacing her/his blood with sacred water). In this way, Claire cheats death like Jesus; Inés explains to him/her, “Usted no guardará nada en el silencio de la tumba... Ya le cerré la puerta que le correspondía para entrar al mundo de los muertos” (127). Claire does not escape mortality in the traditional Christian way, which Boullosa clarifies when she chooses to have Claire violently reject the ceremony of last rites. Our protagonist refuses to hear the priest speak when he arrives to read the last rites, but when the priest continues, s/he screams: “Si no salís, Vuesía, por la puerta, yo os retorceré el pescuezo y os haré cruzar las puertas del Cielo, sin Sacramentos” (30).

Although Claire’s sacrificial ritual proves dissimilar to Jesus’, both leave with a corporeal branding of these events. After Christ’s sacrifice, the Roman soldier’s lance slices him under his nipple in order to make sure that he has died.⁵⁰ By studying images and written texts, scholar Vladimir Gurewich observes that early Christian renderings of the scene place the wound on the left side of Christ’s body, though after the Rabula Gospels written in 586 CE, the wound appears on the right side—purportedly because of this side’s association with blessedness (359). In Christian theology, a type of new beginning for humanity emanates from this wound as “the wound was the place where the sacrament flowed forth and the Church was born ‘for

⁵⁰ Apocryphal *New Testament* accounts, such as the *Acts of John*, claim that the Roman soldier inflicted Jesus with the wound before he expired and then this lance wound caused Christ’s death; however, the canonical texts hold that the wounding with the lance by the Roman soldier occurred after Jesus’ death (Gurewich 359).

the Church, the Lord's bride, was created from His side, as Eve was created from the side of Adam's'" (359). Gurewich takes the last portion of this quote from Psalm 127, which, at first glance, genders the wound as male and its consequence as female. Boulosa exposes the underlying queerness of these traditional Christian metaphors—namely Christ's womb envy and the feminine nature of Christ's wound. Although it might be surprising to some readers of 20th century texts, this could actually constitute yet another similarity between Claire and Christ, as his wound was often feminized in medieval texts. Amy Hollywood's article on feminism in Christianity in the *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (heavily focused on female mystics) describes how medieval nuns spoke of Christ's wound as a vagina.

Along with positioning the characters outside of the Christian concept of sex as sinful, the aforementioned quote serves to place the protagonist in a realm where gender and sex do not function as they do within Christianity (i.e. where sexual organs correspond to gender identity, and, therefore, to sexual orientation based on reproduction). Upon being discovered as sexually female, Claire laments, “Yo no soy lo que ves’, quiero gritarle. No puedo y no me serviría de nada. Ella ve que no soy lo que quiero ser” (19). Claire's thought about gender makes us wonder: is the feminine related to what can be seen? Here the visible is not reliable because when Inés unveils the “truth” of Claire's female sex, it represents a type of failed revelation. The visible truth does not equate to the actual truth. This genuine truth has more to do with the emotional than the physical or visible. Claire *feels* that s/he is a man, which is a type of ineffable characteristic that cannot be seen. The second part of this quote “Ella ve que no soy lo que quiero ser” uses the verb *ver* to mean perceive. Inés “sees” that the physical does not match Claire's emotional desire to live as a man. Many critics have

already focused on the topic of Claire's gender identity,⁵¹ but the following two elements remains unexplored: the literary transvestism introduced by the epigraph from Sor Juana Inés' *Carta a Sor Filotea* and the role of gender and sexuality in "spiritual orientation."⁵²

Boullosa's epigraph comes from Sor Juana Inés' *Carta a Sor Filotea*: "Pensé yo que huía de mí misma, pero ¡miserable de mí! Trájeme a mí conmigo y traje mi mejor enemigo." In their article "Redes textuales: Los epígrafes en *Duerme* de Carmen Boullosa," Justo C. Ulloa and Leonor Álvarez Ulloa clarify that "Tanto Claire como el personaje femenino del epígrafe son mujeres víctimas de su condición femenina. Son prisioneras de las reglas impuestas por la sociedad y aunque son producto del momento histórico en que viven atrapadas tratan de traspasar las barreras que las contienen disimulando su condición femenina bajo el hábito religioso o la ropa de varón" (105). I suggest that Boullosa's selection of a quote from this particular work by Sor Juana Inés does not merely introduce the theme of physically "passing" for another gender but engages a type of literary transvestism.⁵³ Though Sor Juana Inés surely realizes that the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, penned the letter she famously responds to, the nun astutely makes use of his literary transvestism

⁵¹ For other views on the role of gender in the novel, see: Laura Pirott-Quintero on "cultural transvestism" and the concept of the "mujer varonil," Juli Kroll on clothing in relation to perceived sex and "same sex desire," Andrea Byrum on how Boullosa combines many binary elements into Claire's character, Justo C. Ulloa and Leonor Álvarez Ulloa on the protagonist's "doble identidad o bisexualidad," María Dolores Bolívar on subjectivity via clothing and proper names, César Rodríguez de Sepúlveda on the use of Iphis to justify the "homosexuality" of la italiana, Vanessa Vilches Norat on clothing and Claire's body, Giovanna Minardi on the novel promoting "una vida sin distinción de géneros," Salvador Oropesa on how "lesbian scenarios invalidate Mexican machismo" and the breaking of binary gender categories, Ute Seydel on the cutting apart of binary gender pairings, and Oscar Robles on the "tercer sexo" in the novel.

⁵² I borrow the idea for this phrase from Juanita Garciagodoy who speaks of "religious orientation" in a conference paper on *Duerme*. Garciagodoy claims that many intellectuals reject organized religion but are too open to the Other to completely "negate its wisdom and goodness" (Garciagodoy 1). What I believe she actually means with this phrase is more spiritual orientation than religious orientation, as she makes the rejection of institutionalized religion apparent in her definition.

⁵³ Ulloa and Ulloa do mention in a footnote the true identity of Sor Filotea as the bishop, but they do not comment on the gender of the bishop as an important factor in reading the correspondence.

to mock him and reveal his true male identity. Additionally, it is not a coincidence that Boullosa uses the name Inés for the character who literally cross-dresses and un-cross-dresses Claire, nor that Claire first thinks Inés is named Juana because the indigenous woman does not want to reveal her true identity to Claire. The naming of characters in Boullosa's fiction is never casual, and this is a fine play on cloaked identities that Boullosa reveals in the epigraph and reflects in the novel.

This literary transvestism exposes the superficiality of gender; if one can change his/her (or another's) gender by merely writing it another way, clearly this is not a fixed characteristic. Boullosa supports the possibility of gender fluidity when she describes Claire as “un personaje *transcultural*, no una mujer... Ella no cree ser precisamente una mujer. No le interesa esa identidad. Es un *personaje* (ni hombre ni mujer) limítrofe, que se siente más a gusto vestido de varón guerrero” (Pfeiffer 47).⁵⁴ Typical gender borders no longer hold with Claire's character, rendering facile categorization impossible. Some scholars, such as Pirott-Quintero, have astutely noted that this novel forces the reader out of these binary modes of categorization: “The cross-dressing that operates in this text goes beyond binary divisions between masculine and feminine: the novel postulates a cultural transvestism which breaks with generic/generic, racial, class (estamento), and historical binary modes. Claire's cross-dressed body challenges the reader to reconsider institutionalized classifications such as ‘man,’ ‘woman,’ ‘Indian,’ and especially ‘mestizo’” (2).

Boullosa complicates gender in this novel while questioning sexual orientation and the role of sex in Catholicism. In an interview in 1995, Boullosa explained that part of her reaction against Catholicism has to do with the focus placed on the virginity of Mary:

⁵⁴ This also relates to Boullosa's interest in characters that are, in her words, “strangers to the world.” For this in relation to pirates in Boullosa's work, see Gallo's interview in BOMB magazine.

En un contexto católico, la sexualidad es la llave maestra con la que se puede acceder a la liberación o al infierno, a la cárcel perpetua, al encierro, a la perdición, o a la liberación... Me tocó la suerte—mala—de crecer en un mundo católico y ser mujer... La mujer tiene por modelo a la Virgen María... Cualquier mujer que transponga la infancia, verá como su ideal a la Virgen... En ella [la Virgen], la torre de marfil, la más bella de todas, la perfecta, cabían todas las cualidades porque era virginal (Santos and Spahr 8-9).

Boullosa reacts against this censorship of sensuality and eroticism with her pseudo-Christ figure, as Claire develops an attraction to the Italian woman that Pedro brings in to help him entertain Claire during the recovery from his/her wounds.⁵⁵ When Claire finds Pedro and la italiana (her proper name is never disclosed) naked in bed together, we observe his/her jealousy: “vi abrazados en mi cama a Pedro de Ocejo, desnudo, y a la italiana, también sin ropas, y tuve celos” (116). Soon after, though, Claire has the pleasure of finding him/herself in the same situation with la italiana, “que bueno lo puso en no lastimar con sus manos mis heridas abiertas. Aunque donde las puso puede bien ser considerado herida abierta.” Because of this scene, some critics have categorized Claire as bisexual, while others, like Juli Kroll, have judged it a display of “same-sex desire” (113). The work of categorization is confounded by the fact that Claire does not identify as a woman, which becomes more nebulous when we consider that la italiana recites Greek mythology about Iphis as she begins to caress Claire, “Nazco mujer, pero varón me anuncian” (115).⁵⁶

Regardless of whether we treat Claire as transsexual, transgender, or gender

⁵⁵ Towards the end of the novel, this theme of virginity arises again. Claire is presented with a book in which the Mexicas call for her head, “Ellos tienen la mujer dormida. / La Virgen que sin hacer nada nos protege y nos destruye” (111).

⁵⁶ Kroll and Rodríguez de Sepúlveda also mention the role of the Iphis mythology in their studies on the novel.

queer, s/he introduces eroticism into spirituality. If we take eroticism to mean non-reproductive sex, then this union between la italiana and Claire represents the ultimate act of eroticism. Claire is biologically female and could not reproduce with la italiana, but, beyond that, Claire has ceased to menstruate, rendering her/him completely barren. Claire ponders this lack of desire for a child and recognizes her/his only possible offspring as being reborn as male: “yo, sí, soy mi propio hijo, Claire vuelta varón” (19). Thus, through Claire’s tryst with la italiana, Boullosa destroys the image of the Virgin as the consummate version of feminine perfection via motherhood and asexuality.

Boullosa takes this negation of Mexican cultural preconceptions of the female a step further in her treatment of la Chingada, another dominant female figure in the Mexican collective consciousness. When Inés, Claire, and the other Mexica servants encounter the Conde whom Claire replaced in the gallows (Claire pretends to die so the Count does not actually have to), he instantly becomes fascinated with Claire: “Preciosa, la francesa. La llevo conmigo” (53). Claire complies: “había aceptado el brazo que me ofrecía para subirme, lo que fuera era bueno para irme de aquí” (53). Inés informs the Conde of the *curación* and that because of it Claire cannot leave the vicinity of the city; she warns the Conde that he cannot take Claire, unless he wants to kill him/her (we find out later, that this is a bit of an exaggeration because Claire will fall into a deep sleep when removed from the area, not die; s/he has become immortal, as we noted before). Thus, the Conde literally *takes* Claire in the sexual sense: “Abre sus calzas, me levanta las enaguas, y me posee, sujeta de los pies por sus criados, sobre mi caballo, doblando hacia atrás mi torso, sin importarle que la silla me lastima. En tres sacudidas suelta su emisión” (54).

When the Count raises Claire’s skirt, s/he immediately reacts, thinking “quiero zafarme” and when he touches Claire’s chest before the rape, s/he imagines the wound

wielding the power to attack him: “Entonces el Conde, con un gesto de sus fuertes manos, hace que me vuelva hacia él sobre el caballo. Me levanta el huipil, lo quita de mi torso, quiero zafarme, los criados me sujetan de las piernas y las manos, dejándome herida y pechos desnudos. La herida está ya cerrada por completo. El pecho sigue hinchado, pero es hermoso. Pone su mano en él. ¡Qué la herida estuviera abierta, y lo mordiera, y me vengara!” (53). In this way, the wound itself becomes the site of the violation, and prior to this we have seen how the incision in Claire’s chest symbolizes the vagina, “Ahora con sus dedos abre la herida, jalando cada uno de sus bordes a extremos opuestos” (20). The obvious likening to the female sex organ is not lost on the reader, and this action at once violates Claire’s body and soul (we will see later on how the wound and blood represent the soul in Aztec religion). Claire is neither passive nor active in any clearly defined way, considering that s/he could easily trounce the Conde in a duel—in another chapter of the novel, Claire overpowers many soldiers by him/herself thanks to these swords skills—but does not seem to put up any physical resistance here. Boullosa complicates the notion of passive/active and aggressor/victim as they relate gender because we cannot readily classify Claire as male or female. In Claire’s violent fantasy of the wound biting the Conde there is a confounding of bodily boundaries, a mutual raping.

Established Mexican mythology has blamed la Malinche (an indigenous woman) for Cortés’ success in subjugating the Mexica people, therefore betraying her own people. Claire’s ethnic makeup becomes as complex as his/her gender and sexuality, since s/he arrives to the “New World” as French, though gradually acquires (via the *curación* and her/his developing relationship with Inés) a Mexica and also a Spanish identity (based on his/her performance as the Conde). Particularly during the rape, Claire yearns to reclaim her/his identity as the noble Spaniard (his/her performed identity while on the gallows): “Lo miro con envidia [al Conde], yo querría ser él. ¿Y

no lo soy de algún modo?” (52). After the rape, Claire reflects on the Conde’s identity: “veo cómo se va, con la identidad que yo había hecho para mí, perdiéndose en la distancia” (54). With this complicated inversion, Boullosa removes the blame for the fall of the Aztec empire from the archetypal ambitious indigenous woman, la Chingada, and places it on the figure of the male, Spanish noble.

This description has served to show how Claire’s characterization as an iconoclastic, irreverent, and profane Christ figure (in Boullosa’s evocation of the belief system of 16th century Catholic transplants to the “New World”) undermines religious principles. We will soon see that through the incorporation of pre-Colombian Aztec concepts [or at least a (semi)creative 20th century literary/historical rendering of them] the possibility of transcendence to some version of the sacred exists. Two key ecstatic states impel Claire’s path to transcendence: the *curación* that Inés performs and Claire’s subsequent hanging. As we have observed in the previous chapters, states of ecstasy for neo-mystic subjects continue to have the same complex relationship to the senses as they did for their early modern counterparts—and Claire’s experience is no different.

In order to save Claire from the seemingly inevitable death by hanging that awaits him/her, Inés “cures” or releases Claire from mortality via a ritual during which she pours water from pre-Colombian times into Claire’s veins. The Aztecs called human blood “chalchiuatl” or precious water; in fact, both the Mayas and the Aztecs practiced self-bleeding (reserved for priests and nobility with the Mayas, and just for priests with the Aztecs). The blood from the penis held particular importance because this ritual enabled priests to get closer to the divine (Jones and Phillips 59). The priests did not reserve all types of ritualistic bloodletting for themselves (auto-bloodletting was reserved for them)—they also enacted these rituals on sacrificial subjects. In honor of Xipe Totec (the Aztec god of agriculture—thus of the life and death cycle—

who flayed himself), a priest would wound the martyrs with arrows and let their blood flow to the earth. When sacrificial subjects were purchased at the market, they were known as “esclavos bañados” (5), further expanding the link between ritualistic cleansing and bloodletting. Though I can find no mention of a specific practice of replacing blood with water in popular Aztec sources by contemporary authors, we can follow Boullosa’s various references to Aztec beliefs. Boullosa discusses the ritualistic letting of blood that brought on a state of ecstasy, which allowed one to communicate with the Gods and their ancestors. Hence, the bloodletting rituals allow the supernatural to be viewed in this world. These entities did not need to pass into the world of the living, because they already exist here, but this act would allow them to be seen (67).

Like these sacrificial subjects, Inés frees Claire of her/his mortality through the bloodletting ritual she performs. We may treat this event as an ecstatic state because of the mystic stages used to arrive at this condition and the subsequent affective response. In order to reach the area where the *curación* takes place, Claire and the Mexica servants whom s/he travels with embark on an underground descent which Claire calls “el paso subterráneo” (17). Claire describes that “Nos hemos desplazado bajo tierra” (16).⁵⁷ This correlates to the mystic descent, which comes before illumination. This is sometimes a passage (note the use of “paso” in Claire’s description above) into an underworld or metaphorically into the *subconscious*. Falling in line with the “Dark Night of the Soul” popularized in Hispanic letters by San Juan, Claire also finds him/herself cloaked in darkness during this descent, “Nuestro alrededor sigue totalmente oscuro” (15). What Claire encounters underneath the earth is the pre-Colombian world of the past—History or an originary consciousness. Inés

⁵⁷ In chapter three the voyage on the canals to get to the river is another descent in the text (58). Boullosa may suggest a connection between the *inframundo* of the Aztecs, which one arrived at via underground waterways.

transfers this knowledge to Claire during the *curación* by replacing his/her blood with pure pre-Colombian water. Water as a mechanism of transcendence takes on a vital role in this text, like in *Las moradas* by Santa Teresa. In the fourth mansion, Santa Teresa uses a description of water flowing from a fountain into a basin as a metaphor for the use of prayer as a means for humans to transcend towards God (52-3). Instead of this extra-corporeal image, Boullosa takes the spiritual senses and transfers them to the body. The site of this transcendence is not outside the body, undertaken by the spirit, but within the confines of the body; the water is not something outside which to contemplate but inside, to feel.

Boullosa builds on the overarching theme of water with sub-metaphors of thirst correlating to desire. During Claire's recovery in the palace from battle wounds, s/he seems to be constantly thirsty and implores Pedro to bring him/her water: "Y agua, por favor, que muero de sed el día entero" (108). A couple of pages later s/he comments that "Tengo sed en sueños" (110), which represents an unconscious yearning. Even the landscape reflects this unquenchable thirst; we see that the Conquest has sucked the possibility of plenitude out of the environment, and the lake is now "en su mayor parte seco" (51). While Santa Teresa also uses thirst as a metaphor for the desire to unite with God, Boullosa complicates the plenitude found in transcendence with her insertion of unquenchable thirst as a metaphor.⁵⁸ As we saw in the pervious chapter of this dissertation on the film of Carlos Bolado, Santa Teresa uses the "fuente de agua viva" to describe the plenitude found in the final union with the divine. Here, in Boullosa's text, the thirst is never satiated and true union does not take place.

When Inés cuts Claire open to put the water in her veins, this physical contact proves indispensable in inciting Claire's passage into History, that is to say, Inés'

⁵⁸ On the topic of fountains it is worthy of note that "the wound is thought of as being the fountain from which flows the life-giving, world-redeeming blood of Christ" (Gurewich 359). Once more this reinforces the connection between blood and water.

touch leads Claire to a heightened state of awareness. Boullosa emphasizes the importance of touch right before the *curación* actually takes place. Claire describes Inés as the one with the “manos tibias” and explains that Inés “Se queda junto a mí con las dos manos en mi cara, en completo silencio” (18). Upon reaching this state of ecstasy, Claire detaches from her/his physical senses: “Ya no sé si tengo los ojos abiertos o cerrados... Tampoco dejo de escuchar con claridad lo que dicen cerca de mí. Pero no los entiendo. Sus palabras no pueden entrar en mi cabeza” (20-1). This freedom from the senses that first enabled her/his passage now allows her/him to experience a deeper consciousness.

Once the *curación* has taken place, the connection between sacrificial martyrs and Claire develops as the reader learns that s/he is ready to replace the Conde on the gallows. In the chapter called “Muerte ajena,” Claire, now dressed as the Conde, must act as if dead, but s/he will not actually die, as his/her veins no longer pump human blood, but are filled with the eternal waters of the past.⁵⁹ This experience produces an ecstatic vision: “Veo en mis ojos cerrados la ciudad Antigua, con templos blancos cubiertos de frescos, relieves y esculturas. La cuerda sigue dando vueltas, y yo sigo viendo Temixtitán intacta” (33-4). Claire disconnects from her/his typical waking consciousness and is thrown outside him/herself—a quintessential example of ecstasy. After the hanging Claire recognizes that: “El agua suena viajando por mis venas como el viento que corre en un pasaje. Su suave paso reviste mi cuerpo y mi memoria, agrupando todo de manera distinta, las cosas, los sentimientos, las partes de mí misma” (34). Note the use of “paso” again in Claire’s reflection; these two experiences of the *curación* and the hanging mark the stages that follow Claire’s progression towards transcendence. This water becomes a metaphor for

⁵⁹ We can see the parallels to the “muero porque no muero” of Santa Teresa and San Juan. The metaphor of ecstasy as a death-like state reaches back to early modern mysticism.

transformation, as it has the power to “revestir” Claire’s body and memory. The fact that the water flows is key because this is not a stagnant identity, but an unfixed alteration.

To clarify, the ecstasy that results in union should in no way be confused with any type of religious conversion in the Christian sense. The *curación* places Claire in contact with the Aztec past and converts her/him into a sort of hybrid Aztec deity. But Claire’s relationship to the indigenous becomes complicated when s/he leads an uprising against them. Quite obviously, Claire does not prove a god/goddess with the desire to provide the indigenous with salvation—there are no truly good or bad characters in this novel. In order to try and revindicate Claire as the savior of the Mexica people, Pedro writes a fairy tale about her/him, which comes at the end of the novel.

Although the vision of Temixtitan serves as an ecstatic trigger, the sense of touch again emerges as the ultimate signifier of the union that follows the ecstatic state. The touch that initially pushes Claire outside her/himself then enables a transcendence of self that allows for the unification of the past and present along with the “Old” and “New” World. Just like before the *curación*, after the hanging, Inés touches Claire, “Siento las manos tibias de la india en mí” (34). Clearly, the connection to the Other, who is no longer truly other, is made quite literally. If we take the *curación* and the hanging together as a mystical segment in the novel, it begins and ends with Inés touching Claire. In an article on the novel, Andrea Byrum observes that during the *curación* Inés switches from treating Claire with the formal *usted* to using the informal *tú* (146). I would add that this change in personal pronoun further serves as a marker of the directionality towards union; Claire becomes closer to Inés and pre-Colombian history during the *curación* and is finally unified with them after the hanging. At the end of the last chapter that Claire narrates (the poet Pedro de Ocejó

narrates the final two chapters), s/he identifies Inés as a type of mother: “[ella es] de algún modo la madre de lo que soy” (129).

As with other texts we have examined in this dissertation, intense affect marks this ecstatic path to transcendence. Before the *curación* Claire finds her/himself unable to control his/her own laughter: “Me regresa el deseo de reír y mis músculos entumecidos ceden un poco al impulso. Se envalentona la risa y revienta en carcajadas convulsivas que no estallan” (16). As this laughter returns, Claire comments that “Como la cordura no me ha abandonado, veo lo estúpido de mis reacciones y trato sin suerte de controlarlas” (17). Finally, after Inés touches Claire, s/he finds him/herself again with “esta maldita risa”: “Quiero llorar y aun así no puedo contener la risa. Quiero llorar” (19). Inés having revealed Claire’s female sex explains his/her desire to cry, but the laughter that follows Claire through this first chapter of the novel cannot be rationally explained. Again, if we treat these two incidents as a mystical segment, its culmination after the hanging results in the ability to shed tears, “No sé qué emoción siento, tan extraña, o serán que las enaguas que porto y el susto que acabo de pasar, yo qué sé, pero aquí estoy llorando; unos gruesos lagrimones me escurren por la cara” (45). Here we note the link to gender in terms of Claire’s capacity to shed tears while wearing a woman’s skirt.⁶⁰

These ecstatic states are one way that Boullosa allows her protagonist to experience the non-rational, transcend to a different consciousness, and then recognize the possibility of the rational in the experience. Thus, it comes as no surprise—particularly with Boullosa’s devoted study of early modern texts and manuscripts—that the author employs the literary tool of dreams as a means to access the rational in the seemingly non-rational. With the *curación* we see that Claire attempts to rationally

⁶⁰ Although *enaguas* often means petticoat, in many Mexican dialects, it means, according to the Real Academia Española: “Prenda exterior femenina que cuelga desde la cintura.”

analyze what happens to him/her— “Trato de explicármelo” (20)—and continues to toil with the impulse to explain what has happened in language: “Y no consigo dejar este gesto de poner en palabras cuanto me va sucediendo. ¿Para qué lo hago? ¿Para qué narrarme a mí lo que va sucediendo?” (21). Claire struggles with the same quandary as Santa Teresa, who ultimately grasps that although these experiences have a rational element, they remain ineffable. If the knowledge that comes with these experiences remains beyond our typical limits of the possible, then how would we have the means to translate them into sensible words?

For Santa Teresa, the only way to understand these experiences for those who have not experienced them and to express the inexpressible is through the description of emotion; hence, the importance of affect in both Claire and Santa Teresa’s accounts. In the saint’s *Las moradas*, she illustrates the ineffableness of ecstasy with one of her many impacting metaphors: the experience of looking around a *camarín*. She recounts being in the *camarín* of the duquesa de Alba and the overwhelming sensation of seeing all the glass and earthenware objects stored there. After leaving the *camarín* one could never describe all the individual objects, but s/he could remember the general feeling of the experience (110). This is like ecstasy because one can never exactly recount all the things that s/he saw, but s/he can approach a description of this state by explaining the impact of the entire experience.

Dreams represent a unique form of access to the rational in the subconscious, and from the medieval interest in the recounting and documentation of dreams (whether they are conversion or prophetic dreams), to the Baroque fascination with “la vida es sueño,” mystics have always recognized the potential of oneirocriticism. Shortly after the *curación*, Claire appears to have difficulty discerning the line between the rational and non-rational: “Creo que mientras yo dormía ella derramó más agua del cántaro en la sedienta herida” (26-7). This “creo que” clues us in to the

uncertainty that the dream provokes; Claire is no longer quite sure if s/he dreamed that Inés poured more water into his/her wound or if it actually happened.

Claire's communication with the depths of the subconscious cause him/her to recognize that there are elements of reason in the seemingly non-rational, which we observe with Claire's dream that begins chapter six of the novel. Claire, now serving the viceroy, dreams that his/her men go out to kill a monster: "Soñé, hace ya días, que un extraño monstruo aterroriza en los caminos y pueblos indios. En el sueño, llega una comisión a pedir auxilio al Virrey. Alguna coherencia debía tener el sueño, pues como en la vigilia sigo en su palacio y le soy leal" (93). Although Claire's men kill the monster, when they go back to dig it out in order to prove to the viceroy that they killed it, all they find is a dead snake. A few days after the dream, it still haunts Claire and s/he is forced to analyze it: "No hay monstruos, pero si alguno hubiera serían los españoles, esquilmando esta tierra de indios...Dije ya que no creo en el monstruo. Pero entre el día del sueño y el de hoy, he tenido que convencerme de que parte de este sueño es verdad" (95-6).⁶¹ Claire comes to the realization that just because this knowledge is revealed to her in a dream does not negate the possibility that some of the elements seen while asleep could have a connection to waking life.

Even though the dreams and the mystical segment in the novel might superficially appear magical, we have seen how Boullosa grounds these events in history and philosophy. Boullosa, of course, is not the first Mexican writer to use dreams to elaborate a philosophical proposal—Sor Juana's "Primero sueño" beat her by about three hundred years. In the same vein, Grace Jantzen spent much of her career attempting to bridge the gap between mysticism and philosophy; she argued that over the last century scholars have come to treat mysticism as only an affectual,

⁶¹ Boullosa includes one other dream at the end of Claire's narration, "Sueño que he dado a luz un niño, lo tengo a mi lado. En lugar de cara de bebé tiene el pico ávido abierto rojo visceral de los polluelos. Despierto bruscamente. Bebo agua" (110).

ephemeral experience (she specifically uses the example of Lacan's reading of Santa Teresa) and have ignored its intrinsic, long-term philosophical value. Jantzen calls for the re-examination of medieval and early modern mystics in order to highlight the rational theoretical model(s) they propose. Boulosa also recognizes the philosophical promise in the mystical, and extends her hybrid model mixed with Aztec cosmology as her own version of *mexicanidad*. Unlike Jantzen's move away from the affective in the mystical (Sor Juana's calling is also of an intellectual nature, as opposed to an affectual one), de Certeau argues that: "The emotions of affectivity and the alterations of the body thus became the clearest indicators of the movement produced before or after the stability of intellectual formulations" (15). For Boulosa as well, the experiential, affective side of mysticism can coexist with the philosophical, rational side.

Through a look at how Boulosa's themes relate to Bolado's works, we recognize how these texts propose a vision of the sacred grounded in contemporary versions of indigenous intellectual and spiritual history. This is not to say that the hybridity and turn towards an understanding of indigenous history and thought represents a completely acolonial, equalized power structure. Strongman reminds us of the dynamic at work with syncretism:

The fact that individuals successfully manage an integration of Latin American homosexual identities and Euro-North American models points to the importance of syncretism as a technique for cultural survival in an increasingly homogenized world...Syncretism, as helpful a tool in cultural survival as it is, is not always, if ever, a happy marriage between equal partners. Syncretism is fundamentally predicated by an ideological inequality that persists even after the point of coalescence (183).

Clearly, it may not be the case that the indigenous theories gain equal power to the

imported European ideas, but Bolado and Boullosa attempt to give them agency. Bolado's characters have become disconnected with their ancestors and, therefore, cannot understand themselves and how they fit into the cosmic order. Thus, Bolado takes them out of their foreign U.S. context and migrates them back to their familial origins. Boullosa presents an even more complex vision of indigenous spiritual history, while opening access to this sacred space to more gender and sexual identities as well. This, in turn, presents a more convincing argument than the less inclusive and romanticized movements like "mexicanismo" offer. Mexicanismo encourages a type of "neo-indianismo romántico" that has no place in the texts at hand; with its desire to exalt "lo indio" mexicanistas must "erradicar todo lo 'occidental'" which for them means the eradication of rationalism (de la Peña 97). Quite obviously, the act of studying the pre-Hispanic past as completely non-rational necessitated some serious unpacking by the mexicanistas for the obvious colonialist perspective this presupposed.

In fact, the Real Academia Española (RAE) defines "espíritu" as the "alma racional," and with these texts, we observe how the consideration of spirituality involves rational, intellectual engagement. Further, the RAE characterizes someone spiritual in the following manner: "Dicho de una persona: Muy sensible y poco interesada por lo material." In absolute contrast to happiness spirituality described in the introduction, these texts propose a rejection of materialism and radical capitalism. The rational engagement seen through the stories of these characters relates to the variety of realism that emerges in the texts. For instance, although some may see a highly *Pedro Páramo* theme emerging in *Bajo California*, a classification of "magical realism" here, like many have used to talk about Rulfo's novel, would misconstrue the message of the film. These events do not come from superstition or somehow treat the unreal as part of reality. These ecstatic states do not originate from "magical" sources,

but are real, experienced events for the protagonists. This is not magical realism, but a type of spiritual realism that characterizes the response to growing disconnects related to diaspora, which causes people to lose personal, historical, and spiritual connections to their land and cultures. Damián has lived his entire life in Laguna Beach, California, but when Arce asks him where he is from, Damián cannot answer.

Diasporas create borders between people and shut them off from the possibility of existing in union with history and the future; these two Mexican artists, Boullosa and Bolado, create works that prove that in order to fully exist we must transcend those boundaries. For her part, Mendieta said of her exile: “I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I reestablish bonds that unite me to the universe” (Mendieta in *Fuego de tierra* quoted in Manzor). Thus, as we have noted in the other texts in this dissertation, art, literature, and film act as modes that people use in order to gain access to a sacred understanding of cosmology and ontology.

CONCLUSION

No serious literary or artistic movement escapes parody. As there can be no better evidence that something exists as a genre as when it is parodied, this conclusion will begin with a discussion of parodies of spiritual realism. Mario Bellatin's novel *Poeta Ciego* (1998), published around the same time as the texts by Boullosa and Bolado, parodies spiritual realism by poking fun at the type of all-male schools with inverted religious goals that Piñera depicts. Reinaldo Arenas' *El mundo alucinante* (1966), produced when Piñera and Saenz were still publishing (and dedicated to Piñera), however, represents the pinnacle of this novelistic parody, as it adopts all the conventions of mystic texts.⁶² Arenas creates a fictional version of Mexico's past to expose the subjectivities inherent in "spiritual" History, much like in Boullosa's novel and Bolado's films.⁶³ Arenas' novel addresses all the major topics of this study: access

⁶² In Bellatin's novel, the Brotherhood that runs the school maintains the typical mystical concerns centered on mortification, contemplation and trance, but here the Brothers worship skin moles. Bellatin mocks at the altered states of consciousness related to mysticism while describing the Brotherhood's sacred text: "Se sabía que los textos del Cuadernillo de las Cosas Dificiles de Explicar se encontraban siempre entre la realidad y el sueño" (48). Pedagogo Boris also claims that "somniaferos" are the finest way to "fraccionar la realidad" for the devotees (46). The senses used to get to these altered states provide some of the most cutting elements of the narrative, as many of the characters are somehow impaired. The Hermano de las Gafas de Cristales Gruesos, along with the Poeta Ciego, of course, have a hard time appreciating the Cuadernillo, their sacred book. Additionally, Bellatin makes fun of the reliance on the sense of touch in these "spiritual" experiences, particularly through erotic encounters. Pedagogo Boris must sit in front of a naked dancing woman who performs sexual acts while only a pane of glass separates them. This would be a normal peep show if it were not for the fact that the Poeta Ciego had converted this woman into a Hermana because of her "extenso lunar" (43). This type of temptation, along with going to co-ed steam rooms, was necessary because "sólo en una situación límite se podría probar realmente si se estaba convencido de aquel principio [el Celibato Obligatorio]" (53). However, the Cuadernillo recounted an encounter between the Poeta and a boy scout that would seem to negate the principle of Celibato Obligatorio. Those in power tried to keep this secret from the rest of the Brothers, but one day in the steam room Boris forcefully takes over the microphones that are used to broadcast the teaching of the Cuadernillo and recounts the story of the boy scout and the Poeta. The section of the Cuadernillo that deals with the Poeta's biography states that the cult leader "trató de ver si la piel del boy scout tenía lunares" (49). While the Poeta engages in this highest of religious duties, "no pudo evitar seducirlo" (56). With the addition of pederasty, this incident mockingly queers the mystic path, as the boy scout defies gender categorization: "Aunque aparecía como niño, lo andrógino parecía su característica más sobresaliente" (55).

⁶³ The fact that Arenas, a Cuban author, selects a Mexican historical figure who was imprisoned in Havana and first publishes this novel in Mexico highlights the cultural relationship between these two countries that merits further study. Another example of this mutual influence and interest can be seen in

to different levels of consciousness via dreams and visions, metaphors of illumination/darkness, ascent/descent, transgression of boundaries, and spiritual union related to eroticism and to active/passive roles.

Arenas bases his novel on the memoirs of the Dominican Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1765 – 1827), an eccentric figure even before being fictionalized.⁶⁴ The novel recounts Servando's belief that the Virgin of Guadalupe's appearance in Mexico occurs during the lifetime of Thomas the Apostle, whom he believes the indigenous people of Mexico called Quetzalcoatl. This is the same god whose birthplace, Tepoztlán, has become a New Age destination. Thus, long before Quetzalcoatl was co-opted to sell yoga retreats, Servando uses him to locate Christianity in the New World prior to the arrival of the Spanish. Servando receives this information from one of the most memorable characters of the novel, Borunda. This obese figure appears to Servando after a friar on a flying broomstick brings him to the mouth of Borunda's cave. We could trace the main sources for this chapter to the descents in Dante or Don Quijote's tumble into Montesinos' cave, but the information that Borunda relates to Servando frames this chapter more as a mystic dream-vision.

The humorous passage that describes the interaction between Servando and Borunda mocks religious visions and the “privileged knowledge” received in these

this dissertation through Bolado's captivation with Mendieta's siluetas (many of which she performed in Mexico). Mendieta's own work was shaped by the repeated visits she made to Mexico. In Piñera's case there is no documented link to Mexico, but of interest in terms of this topic is Lezama Lima's trip to Mexico (one of the few times he left the country) and the poems he composed about this trip. There is also a mention of Aztec cosmology in Lezama Lima's novel *Paradiso*.

⁶⁴ The different chapters of the novel begin with incipits like in early modern texts. These incipits were sometimes written by the author but were many times added by the scribe or editor. In the early modern texts, they often do not exactly express what happens in the chapter. In Arenas' novel, the incipits expose who will be narrating a particular chapter. The many different points of view expressed by these narrators demonstrates Arenas' investment in portraying the problems inherent in the retelling of history or the shiftiness of historical truth. I highlight this to draw attention to the similarities between Arenas' and Boullosa's “historical” novels.

states of altered consciousness. Servando portrays Borunda, the bearer of the divine message, as a fantastical character: “Era Borunda algo así como una gran pipa que se movía y hablaba, pero más gorda. Las carnes le saltaban por sobre los ojos y le tapaban las nalgas, lo cual le impedía hacer sus necesidades, según me dijo, y ésta era la causa de su gran gordura” (57). Borunda’s characterization as a giant, fleshy being who suffers from obesity because he cannot defecate contrasts with the seemingly weightless early modern apparitions who flawlessly glide into the dream-visions of saints in the canvases of baroque paintings. Rather than floating into the scene, Borunda enters with a “gran brinco” (57). Conversely, the Dominican friar who leaves Servando at Borunda’s cave mimics the hovering of the early modern saints, but, of course, he is only able to do this by flying on a broomstick.

Following Servando’s dream vision, he delivers a sermon on what he claims are the real origins of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico. The Church immediately considers this a sacrilegious act and thus begins the momentum of Servando’s many incarcerations and escapes. Five chapters later, Servando finds himself far away from home and jailed in Spain. Now, four years after arriving at a prison in Cádiz, Servando still will not concede that the divine message he received was spurious. This conviction causes him to engage in a heated debate about the nature of apparitions with another friar who mysteriously slips into his cell. The protagonist seems compelled to tell this other friar his own version of the Guadalupe story: “¿Sabe usted la leyenda de la aparición de la Virgen de Guadalupe?” The “visiting friar,” as he is referred to in the text, deflects conversation about this topic: “Oh, no sé nada, pero tampoco me interesa saberla. Tratándose de apariciones todo lo que se diga puede ser cierto ya que no se puede comprobar.” Servando, ever persistent, answers: “Y si lo puedo comprobar.” But, again, the visiting friar remains incredulous: “Aun cuando lo haya probado, eso no demuestra que sea cierto. Además, una aparición no pierde su

validez porque se haya desmentido. Lo importante para esa pobre gente es poder creer en algo que esté por encima de ellos y de sus miserias insoportables. Y lo importante para los gobernantes es tenerlos dominados por esas creencias. ¡De modo que todo anda bien!” (94). The visiting friar exposes what he believes to be the true use of these revelatory visions: political manipulation of believers. Although it is for a just cause—the independence of Mexico—this is precisely what the historical Servando attempts to do with his homily on the Virgin of Guadalupe. Servando places the arrival of the Virgin of Guadalupe before the Spanish “Conquest,” because this justifies Mexican independence to the Catholic authorities. If the Mexican people had Catholicism before the encounter with the Spanish, then there could be no religious rationalization for their imperialism. Arenas’ inclusion of this debate between the two friars demonstrates how, although these visions were explained as events that brought one closer to the divine, they were adopted for the most terrestrial of purposes.

Arenas devotes all of chapter ten, where this debate between Servando and the visiting friar takes place, to a mock mystical segment complete with the structuring elements of ascent/descent and illumination, which culminates in a final state of union. The chapter begins with Servando’s climb up to his cell in the prison: “Seguido por el tropel de las ratas avanzó León, llevando consigo el fraile; subieron escaleras que no parecían terminar, y al fin depositaron al condenado en la celda más alta... tan alta era la celda que el fraile miró por una ventana enrejada, que casi llegaba al techo, y sólo pudo ver un abismo” (90). The friar undertakes this climb not out of some profound desire to get closer to God, but because León—working for the archbishop who has condemned Servando for his homily about the Virgin—drags him up the flight of stairs. Once he reaches the top, Servando looks down to see the “abismo,” much like the poetic subject in Saenz. No divine apparition or knowledge awaits him upon descent. As absurd as Servando’s hike up the stairs is—accompanied by a cast of

seemingly choreographed rats and León who acts like a lion—his fall down is far more ridiculous.

After the threatening rats in the cell cause Servando much desperation, a friar-rat (somehow, we are not sure how, one of the rats becomes a friar) convinces Servando that his only hope is to jump out of the window in the cell. If we recall Servando's ascent up the stairs, we will remember that the cell is far above the ground. As the guards knock on his cell door, Servando takes an umbrella from the visiting friar and hurls himself out the window, much to the surprise of the women below: "Las mujeres de la casa, que me vieron descender sobre las sauces y caer luego encima de ellas, destartando la casa, se tiraron de rodillas: yo, con el esqueleto del paraguas y con toda aquella hojarasca sobre la cabeza, debía de haber semejado alguna aparición extraña que ellas tomaron por 'la divina providencia' o sabrá Dios qué santo (que para estas cosas siempre hay sobradas imaginaciones)" (101). Servando dismisses the women's reaction, even though they have as much to base their belief on as the friar did with the apparition of Borunda. As readers we find the comment "que para estas cosas siempre hay sobradas imaginaciones" incredibly humorous because the character with by far the most inventive imagination is Servando.

These themes of illumination complement the typical mystical structure of ascent/descent. For Servando, these moments of luminosity do not necessarily illuminate in the figurative sense, and, in chapter ten, the friar ignores what seems like a sign: "un breve zigzag de luces le señaló al fraile que ya tenía compañía. Pero de todos modos se quedó dormido" (97). He is unmoved by the flash of light in his dark cell and goes back to sleep. Servando's response is justified, as prior to this scene, he has learned that luminosity does not usher in knowledge. In fact, the only thing that light accompanies in this chapter is the rats: "Y ahora las ratas emergían brillantes de entre la oscuridad" (94). As we look back to the previous incidents, we find that

Borunda does not appear in a ray of light like the early modern religious visions, but in the darkness, maintained by the curtains of bats in his cave that block the sun.

Likewise, the metaphors linked to light/darkness in the dichotomy of night/day factor in to the structuring of this chapter. The “illumination” that follows the dark night for Servando is one of negation: “Llegando el día se despertó el fraile. No hay salida—le dijo el fraile—No hay salida” (97). Instead of waking up with a sense of purpose and knowledge, Servando finds himself in obscurity. It seems like Arenas will frame almost the entire chapter as if it were a dream-vision, thus co-opting the framework of dreams that early modern mystics use to describe their ecstatic experiences. However, Arenas destabilizes this metaphor by opening the chapter with Servando’s thoughts while first contemplating his cell: “Este es tu calabozo. Y ahora las voces sonaban como distantes. Como si todo no fuera más que un sueño. Y ahora las voces volvían a retumbar rompiendo tímpanos” (90). It seems like the sight of the cell will provoke some sort of ecstatic state, but the narrator brings the action back into the waking realm; the voices are not just present and audible, but they are popping Servando’s eardrums. There is no dreamy sense of a far away alter reality, but the very present here and now.

Arenas also mocks the erotic metaphors that early modern mystics use to describe spiritual matrimony by employing metaphors of illumination. In chapter ten Servando and the visiting friar become one in a type of sacred union:

Ahora el fraile estaba junto al fraile. Había llegado al punto en que debían fundirse en uno solo. Estaban a oscuras, porque la esperma de la vela ya hacía rato que se había derretido y evaporado. Tanto era el calor. El fraile se acercó más al fraile y los dos sintieron una llama que casi lo iba traspasando. El fraile retiró una mano. Y el fraile también la retiró. De manera que ambos manos quedaron en el mismo lugar. “Horrible es el calor”, dijeron las dos

voces al mismo tiempo. Pero ya eran uno (98).

While the two friars sit in the darkness, the candle goes out because the wick had melted and evaporated. In Spanish, this phrase also jokes about the friars having sex because of the “esperma” pun. The union is no longer a metaphor but about real human sex. When the two edge closer to each other they feel “una llama que casi lo iba traspasando.” Instead of San Juan’s “llama de amor viva” which represents the warmth of the divine, Arenas’ “llama” is alive in a more literal way. This incident queers traditional bridal mysticism or at least pokes fun at the already queer nature of the dynamic in early modern mysticism (a holy man envisioning his soul as female and uniting with a male deity). Here we have two earthly men pulled together by the heat of carnal attraction.

Interestingly, a few pages before this union between the two friars, the visiting friar tells Servando that he should take action and “Así cambiará su condición de víctima y se convertirá en agresor” (92). The visiting friar refers to how the rats harass him in the cell, but we can apply the comment to Servando’s general persecution. Like the early modern mystics and René, the protagonist of Piñera’s novel, Servando is the passive agent who is enacted upon by the aggressors around him. As Arenas dedicated *El mundo alucinante* to Piñera, he could refer to how Piñera complicates the binary of victim versus aggressor while queering his vision of sexuality in the novel. Bataille’s model of the active agent transcending via the “dissolution” of the passive partner breaks down here (we are reminded of Bataille’s comment in *Eroticism* cited in the introduction to this dissertation), because Servando does not become an aggressor but is fused with the other friar in an equitable encounter.

Another scene that parodies the erotic metaphors used in mystical texts takes place in chapter twelve, two chapters after the friars’ union. While Servando is in Valladolid he witness a priest during an act of confession:

he aquí que estoy viendo al padre, completamente desnudo y sudoroso, con el miembro más tieso que una piedra y apuntando como una vara, paseándose entre aquellas señoras arrodilladas en coro...ellas lo miraban extasiadas y a cada momento sus rostros reflejaban la ansiedad y la lujuria, desatada ya en el cura, que seguía caminando rítmicamente, mientras su miembro adquiría proporciones increíbles, tanto que temí llegara hasta donde yo estaba, traspasando la puerta...De manera que la ceremonia avanzaba. Y las damas, desesperadas y con las manos muy unidas, rodeaban de rodillas al fraile. Y he aquí que el cura coge aquella parte tan desarrollada, y con las dos manos la empieza a introducir trabajosamente en la boca de cada dama arrodillada (a manera de hostia) que, en una actitud de plena adoración e idolatría besaba” (113).

The priest performs this act as if he were distributing the consecrated host, though this “communion” is clearly of a different kind. The women are enraptured (“ellas lo miraban extasiadas”) when focusing all their concentration on the priest’s “miembro.” Servando’s reaction to observing this confession between the priest and the woman further condemns the Catholic church; he claims that the act itself does not shock him: “pues cosas parecidas estaba yo acostumbrado a ver desde el primer día en que entré en una congregación católica” (113). Servando becomes apprehensive while witnessing this fellatio sacrament because he does not want to get caught being involved in this spectacle.

This sexual parody of spiritual experience and rituals can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Mikhail M. Bakhtin writes that: “Medieval parody played a completely unbridled game with all that is most sacred and important from the point of view of official ideology” (84). In doing so, medieval parodists often employ “sexual and scatological obscenity” (109) referring to the “material lower bodily stratum” (151).

Arenas makes generous use of sexual puns and jokes as well as scatological humor, seen here in a description of Borunda: “cayendo de espaldas al suelo mullido por los excrementos de los murciélagos, que formaban una camada donde uno se hundía hasta las rodillas” (57). The difference between the medieval grotesque parody and what Arenas does in his novel is a matter of intent. The medieval parodies did not necessarily set out to change the systems or people they were ridiculing, but Arenas’ novel satirizes the powerful characters behind the Mexican Revolution in a thinly veiled criticism of the Cuban Revolution.⁶⁵

Later on in Arenas’ narrative, these base jokes develop in to more derisive philosophical criticism. The most important and serious scene that addresses mystical transcendence comes only a few pages before the end of the novel. Servando narrates the following passage:

El fraile al contemplar a distancia aquella ceremonia sintió un gran escalofrío. Y pensó que ahora sí tendría que morir, que el peso de tanto escarnio, de tanta vileza conocida ya se le hacía intolerable. Y de golpe, oyendo aquel escándalo que volvía a enloquecerlo, presintió que durante toda su vida había sido estafado. Y como no pudo explicarse claramente en qué consistía esa estafa, caminó hasta el centro del gran corredor, se encaramó en el sillón que al momento empezó a crujir, y extendió los brazos. Antes de bajar las manos, miró hacia el poeta extasiado con el desfile, y pensó que sería mejor no llevarlo, que quizá no regresaría de este viaje. Entonces hizo el ademán. Y descendió... Y durante horas estuvo rígido contemplando aquella procesión luminosa, aquella armonía imperturbable. Entonces tuvo la revelación. Pensó que el objetivo de toda civilización (de toda revolución, de

⁶⁵ For more on the potential subversiveness of parody versus satire, see Joseph A. Dane’s article “Parody and Satire in the Literature of Thirteenth-Century Arras.”

toda lucha, de todo propósito) era alcanzar la perfección de las constelaciones, su armonía inalterable. “Pero jamás” –dijo en voz alta—, llegaremos a tal perfección, porque seguramente existe algún desequilibrio (303-4).

While the poet is “extasiado con el desfile,” presumably in some state of plenitude, Servando also transcends to a greater consciousness by way of bodily concentration and the contemplation of luminosity and perfect harmony. The friar’s long awaited revelation, a lifting of the veil or the “estafa,” brings not bliss but displeasure and dissatisfaction. His awareness that the world will always remain unbalanced exposes the truth: there is no possibility of total union. Servando again throws himself into an altered state to “seguir investigando” the cosmic order and the human imbalance:

Y ya iba a desprenderse hacia otros sitios remotos, a habitar un tiempo, donde no existía la memoria, sólo un presente despoblado. El principio. La revelación. “Dios,” dijo entonces. “Voy hacia Dios.” Y ya se impulsaba y ya alzaba los brazos, pero el gran escalofrío (ahora con más violencia) lo recorrió de nuevo. Y el fraile dudó. Y sintió miedo. Miedo a quedarse flotando en un vacío infinito, girando por un tiempo despoblado, por una soledad inalterable donde ni siquiera existiría el consuelo de la fe. Miedo a quedar totalmente desengañado. Y retrocedió. Y ya bajó los brazos. De golpe cayó en el asiento. Y de nuevo escuchó el estruendo de las campanas (304).

The transcendence to an ordinary space and time terrifies Servando. Arenas’ treatment of mystical ecstasy and transcendence exposes the same concerns as Piñera, Saenz, and Boullosa in that it does not result in a balanced and perfect unity.

There is a transcendence of boundaries to the depth of human existence and understanding in these texts, but there is no longer an annihilation of identity in a radical union with the Other. The depth of the cave used as an early modern metaphor

has now transformed into the abyss, as the space the one needs to transcend has no foreseeable end. The illumination here is a type of disillusionment with the non-knowledge that is revealed as the truth. While San Juan also finds a nebulous, incompressible truth in his revelation through ecstasy and transcendence, he has faith that this truth is controlled and understood by a supernatural power. What Piñera, Saenz, and Arenas expose is the fear that this non-knowledge brings about when these characters do not believe in a divine power that will eventually allow them to understand this truth in the afterlife. Boullosa replaces this supernatural power with a truth that only an affective literary understanding of history can reveal. Bolado links this truth to a familial past, but there is less fear than in the rest of the texts studied, which results from the fact that the characters do have some sort of faith in a supernatural power that links families in the cycle of life and death. The contact with this past, however, does provoke anxiety and fear. Thus, these texts preserve the fear in early modern and indigenous conceptions of the experience of the sacred, but also change the nature of this fear, reflecting more contemporary conceptions of the divine.

The French texts on this topic of a non-religious mysticism by Bataille (and later by Kristeva) had already developed theories on a phenomenological *via mystica* of affective ecstasy en route to transcendence towards failed union and non-knowledge.⁶⁶ The true revolution of the genre that emerges from these Latin American texts comes about through breaking with the gender pairings and power dynamics in bridal mysticism and relegating the affective to the feminine. All of the texts studied here represent distortions of the early modern genre of mystical writing. The

⁶⁶ A fruitful area for further research would be the possible influence that Bataille's research on Aztec sacrifice rituals and Kristeva's study of Candomblé might have had on the development of this atheistic mysticism in French Theory. Along with these two writers, Antonin Artaud was drawn to experimenting with peyote in Mexico when formulating many of his theories and Hélène Cixous appropriates the ideas of Clarice Lispector, the Brazilian author, when exploring the concepts of the feminine and the sacred. This French interest in Latin American theories on the sacred in relation to ecstasy and transcendence would open up a new angle with which to study distortions of the genre.

difference between Arenas' novel and the other texts is that he alters these metaphors using outlandish humor, although Piñera's novel is already a dark parody that Arenas uses as a starting point. Joseph A. Dane explains that "[p]arodies are important documents of the state of literature and of social mentalities...By exposing a decadence in a preceding genre, parody encourages either the creation of new genres or a revitalization of old genres" (10). These parodies by Piñera and Arenas were asking for the renewal of the genre that Saenz, Boullosa, and Bolado undertook. Could this new genre of negative, queer mysticism somehow eventually impede the craze of happiness, heteronormative spirituality? Only time, and Oprah, will tell.

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