

**Neoliberal Noir:
Bearing Witness to Systemic and Subjective Violence in Mexico**

by

Karen Marie Frazier

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Katharine M. Jenckes, Chair
Associate Professor Colin Gunckel
Associate Professor Daniel Noemi Voionmaa, Northeastern University
Assistant Professor Ana Sabau Fernández

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ABSTRACT

This study is focused on the *novela negra* in twenty-first century Mexico and the ways in which authors have used the genre to engage with the realities of violence, fear, and insecurity in their nation. In Latin America this genre is defined as much by its transgression of conventions as by its adherence to them. Given the fluidity of the *novela negra* genre in the Latin American context, we must ask precisely how the authors examined in this project engage with the genre given the political, economic, and social context in which they live. The three novels explored in this study were written and published in the first decade of the twenty-first century by Mexican authors—*La voluntad y la fortuna* (2008) by Carlos Fuentes, *Hotel DF* (2010) by Guillermo Fadanelli, and *La muerte me da* (2007) by Cristina Rivera-Garza. Analysis shows how they have adapted the *novela negra* to attempt to make sense of the symbolic and subjective violence in recent decades in Mexico.

By centering their narratives around the *novela negra*'s void, what Slavoj Žižek calls the "blank of the unexplained," each of these authors count on the genre's tendency toward dark and disenchanting narration of the present and a pessimistic vision of the future, to examine the crimes of contemporary life in Mexico. These are crimes that reverberate throughout the entire national community and have done so for centuries, affecting everyone to differing degrees but affecting everyone nonetheless. As such, each of these novels is concerned with examining the nation

through narrative, but in such a way that it stands in opposition to the totalizing narratives of the mid-twentieth century. Rather than attempting to establish a unifying ideal to subsume a radically heterogeneous nation under one coherent narrative, these novels explore the ways that distance and interconnection are negotiated within the national community, offering alternative accounts of the nation and questioning its viability as a construct, but ultimately being unable to abandon the nation as a concept. Moreover, functioning in opposition to the traditional detective narrative, which celebrates knowledge, mastery, and certainty, these narratives have turned the *novela negra* genre on its head to reinforce the need to recognize what we do not know and what we cannot explain in a context of generalized violence.

INTRODUCTION

The hardboiled detective novel, which first appeared in the United States during 1920s prohibition and was popularized by authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, is generally recognized as a point of departure for the Latin American *novela negra* that began to proliferate in the 1970s.¹ However, in Latin America the genre is defined as much by its transgression of conventions as it is by its adherence to them. This is first evident in the tension between the generic norms of the hardboiled detective tale—the detective’s search for truth, the conclusion of the narrative with a clear resolution to the crime, and the restoration of order and justice to society—and the genre’s subsequent adaptation to the political and social realities in Latin America. Indeed, as Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis argued in 1973, detective fiction was incompatible with the reality of the Mexican context given the “triviality and obsolescence of detective justice in the era of unrestrained

¹ Typically, the first examples of detective fiction in Latin America are traced to the 1940s with Jorge Luis Borges (“La muerte y la brújula” in *Ficciones* (1944)) and Adolfo Bioy Casares (with Borges, *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (1942)). Together, they founded and edited *El Séptimo Círculo* in 1945, which published translations of classical detective tales while avoiding U.S. hardboiled fiction, which Borges “denigrated as violent and pornographic” (Close, *Crime Fiction* 11–12, 15). *El Séptimo Círculo* was a primary source for disseminating detective fiction in Spanish and by the early 1960s, under a different editors, it also began to publish hardboiled tales from writers like Raymond Chandler as well (Close, *Crime Fiction* 14). During this period (1950s-1970s), translations of U.S. hardboiled were also made available in Spanish from publishers in Mexico, Argentina, and Spain (Close, *Crime Fiction* 14–15).

state criminality,” referring specifically to the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre and the 1971 assault on students—both perpetrated with impunity by the government (Close, *Crime Fiction* 29). In addressing this disjunction, authors like Rafael Bernal in *El complot mongol* (1969) began challenging, experimenting with, and rejecting generic norms—often through parody and irony—in favor of a literature that would correspond to and reflect their lived reality. In Latin America, then, the *novela negra* could be characterized as a genre in “perpetual flux” because of writers’ continual need to test and expand its limits such that it reflects their own reality (Braham xiv).

Historically, Mexico was one of the first Latin American nations (along with Argentina) to publish translations of foreign hardboiled fiction, thus spreading its influence throughout the Spanish-speaking market (Close, *Crime Fiction* 14). Moreover, early examples of an autochthonous *novela negra*, such as Rodolfo Usigli’s *Ensayo de un crimen* (1944), began to appear in Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s (Braham 3), although it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the genre began to expand and proliferate, notably through the foundational novels of Paco Ignacio Taibo II² (Braham 3; Close, *Crime Fiction* 17). These historical developments reveal a rich tradition of engagement with the genre in Mexico as well as a history of and potential for broad experimentation with its boundaries in writing the realities of the nation.

In studying the contemporary Mexican *novela negra*, literary critics like Glen Close in *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction* (2008) and Persephone Braham in *Crimes Against the State, Crimes Against Persons* (2004) have argued that the turn of

² Taibo II’s first novel, *Días de combate*, was released in 1976.

the century ushered in certain generic trends within the *novela negra* that reflect the violence and insecurity of the 1990s and early 2000s. Such trends include the movement away from a detective protagonist—on whom Taibo II had relied to foster social solidarity within the community in the face of the impunity of institutionalized criminality in his novels in 1970s and 1980s—towards a criminal narrator, as well as the introduction of heavy subjective violence and a dirty realist aesthetic. In general, this represents a transition away from the more traditional hardboiled detective tale—in which the protagonist attempts to address crime and violence—in favor of in-depth portrayals of crime with privileged access to the perspective of the perpetrator. However, these general observations about broad trends in the genre within Mexico’s contemporary reality do little to illuminate the specific ways in which twenty-first century authors have used the *novela negra* to engage with the realities of violence, fear, and insecurity and its impact on the nation. In response to this gap, this project examines three novels written and published in the first decade of the twenty-first century by well-known Mexican authors—*La voluntad y la fortuna* (2008) by Carlos Fuentes, *Hotel DF* (2010) by Guillermo Fadanelli, and *La muerte me da* (2007) by Cristina Rivera-Garza—to explore how they have incorporated and adapted the *novela negra* in such a way as to attempt to make sense of the symbolic and subjective violence that has structured the nation in the twenty-first century, and to challenge and move beyond the generic conventions that they inherited from their predecessors.

That the *novela negra* in Mexico is characterized by a corpus of texts that move fluidly in and out of the generic boundaries recalls Jacques Derrida law of

genre, which suggests that binding generic characteristics to a highly structured category with precise boundaries is insufficient to the task of understanding the work that genre does across distinct historical (and cultural) contexts. Rather than basing genre theory simply on clear and rigid categories, he advocates an approach that acknowledges its limits and moves beyond them. Derrida's conception of genre is founded on:

precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy [...] a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set. The trait that marks membership inevitably divides, the boundary of the set comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole; and the outcome of this division and of this abounding remains as singular as it is limitless. (Derrida 206)

For Derrida, genre is excess such that the mark of a text's membership within a given genre is really a point of departure for exploration and creating meaning beyond pre-established borders. Therefore, the definition of genre itself anticipates contamination and impurity, what he calls a "participation without belonging." This approach to genre in Latin America generally, and Mexico specifically is acknowledged by Brigitte Adriaensen and Valeria Pla who argue that detective fiction has become "una literatura que juega libremente con sus principios constructivos, rompiendo esquemas preestablecidos y combinándolos con otras tradiciones y formas preestablecidas de narrar" (Adriaensen and Pla 13).³

Therefore, given the fluidity of the *novela negra* genre in Mexico, this project is

³ Adriaensen and Pla employ the terms *género negro* or *género policial* to indicate the detective genre, under which they identify several different categories including the *novela negra* as well as the *narconovela*, the *novela de enigma*, and the thriller (9).

concerned with examining precisely how Mexican literature engages with the genre in an attempt to grapple with the idea of the nation in its contemporary context.

The last few decades in Mexico have seen enormous political, economic, and social changes in Mexico that have ushered in a new era of systemic violence—a concept developed by Slavoj Žižek to identify the violence that results from the “often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems”—as well as an explosion in subjective, or physical, violence directed at bodies within the community (Žižek, *Violence* 1). Namely, President Carlos Salinas’s wholesale adoption of neoliberal policies, including the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, has led to increasing inequality through unemployment and informal employment; falling or stagnating wages; social and spatial fragmentation; and increasing violence particularly in urban areas like Mexico City and regions with explosive growth like the border city of Ciudad Juárez. This increase in insecurity among many of the nation’s most vulnerable citizens was further exacerbated when President Felipe Calderón inaugurated a war on drugs in late 2006, ushering in what is perhaps one of the most violent periods in Mexico since the Revolution in the early 20th century. In the decade since the drug war began, the nation has witnessed the deaths of over 200,000 individuals and the disappearance of 30,000 more at the hands of drug cartels as well as police and military forces, in addition to the displacement of at least one million citizens (Conde). Given the extreme systemic violence of neoliberalism and the spectacular subjective violence of the drug war, as well as the resulting sense of insecurity and fear that pervades the community, it is not

surprising that authors have turned to the *novela negra*—a genre that has been recognized as an “espacio de reflexión tanto sobre la violencia como sobre [...] los modos de representación, circulación y resignificación de la violencia” (Adriaensen and Pla 9)—to attempt to make sense of present-day Mexico.

In light of the realities of systemic and subjective violence in the twenty-first century Mexico, this project is specifically focused on the ways that three of Mexico’s most prolific authors—each with distinct narrative styles and histories—engage with the *novela negra* to think through the contemporary nation. For example, in *La voluntad y la fortuna*, Carlos Fuentes, one of the most well-known Mexican authors who wrote prolifically for half a century before his death in 2012, reveals a significant break with his own past of prophetic nation-building narratives. Among his first and perhaps most well-known novels are *La región más transparente* (1958) and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), both of which share similar themes to *La voluntad y la fortuna*. However, while these earlier narratives attempt to define and establish a modern nation, *La voluntad y la fortuna* presents a darker national narrative that questions the possibilities for its future by recognizing the crimes perpetrated by the powerful “nation-builders” from the colonial period through the twenty-first century and calling for a vision of the nation that recognizes its radical heterogeneity. Guillermo Fadanelli, on the other hand, published his first novel in 1997 and is currently one of the most well respected authors of crime narratives and urban life in Mexico. While his many novels tend to embrace a similar nihilistic vision of the city and the nation, *Hotel DF* itself examines the degree to which everyone in the community is implicated in and affected by the crimes of the nation

while offering a tentative glimpse of possibility for the future through brief, imperfect connections with the other. Finally, Cristina Rivera-Garza, an author well-known for her experimentation with narrative form and fragmentation, represents one of the very few female authors to engage with the *novela negra*—what has been a historically masculine genre—and in doing so, explores the experience of victims of violence while revealing the impact that a generalized culture of violence has had on the nation and recognizing the impossibility of making sense of such spectacular subjective violence within the community.

Common to each of these novels is their use of and experimentation with the *novela negra* to grapple with a conceptualization of the contemporary nation in the wake of neoliberal economic policies and spectacular drug violence. At the most elemental level, each of these novels is based on what Slavoj Žižek considers a central feature of the detective story:

a void, a blank of the unexplained, more properly, the *unnarrated* (“How did this happen? What happened on the night of the murder?”). The story encircles this blank, it is set in motion by the detective’s attempt to reconstruct the missing narrative by interpreting the clues. In this way, we reach the proper beginning only at the very end, when the detective is finally able to narrate the whole story in its ‘normal,’ linear form, to reconstruct ‘what really happened,’ by filling in all the blanks. (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 58)

It is this void that is at the center of each of the three novels that are examined here, a void that represents the unnarrated and incomplete story of contemporary Mexico (and its past), that each of these authors believes has yet to told. And yet, although Žižek’s version of the detective tale offers the hope and security of a clearly narrated sequence of events, this has never been a facet of the Mexican *novela negra*, which has traditionally called attention to the systemic corruption and impunity of

government institutions and its representatives. Given that none of the novels in this project commit to the possibility of narrating the void, this analysis asks instead: What, for each of them, is the unnarrated and potentially unnarratable tale? What are the crimes that have led to the inability to narrate such a tale? Who are the criminals responsible for those crimes, and what do we make of the victims? Finally, what possibilities do each of these authors envision for Mexico's future? Fuentes, for example, sets forth the failure of the twentieth century's totalizing ideal of the nation as revealing a void in the national narrative that ultimately may or may not be able to be recounted, depending on the degree to which the most powerful state actors choose to recognize (or not) those members of the community that have historically been objectified and erased. For Fadanelli, on the other hand, the void is found in the melancholy and dysfunction of the national community whose members are all exposed (to differing degrees) to the effects of state sponsored violence with impunity—traumas that have left their traces throughout the national landscape and that continue into the present through a general state of exception. Although he too offers tiny glimpses of possibility that this void could be reconstructed into a whole, he ultimately suggests that history is more likely to continue its endless repetitions of the same pattern. Finally, Rivera-Garza recognizes the inevitable distance in any attempts to communicate the self to the other, but also narrates a deepening void between individuals within the nation, revealing the impossibility of making sense of and communicating with the other in the midst of the spectacular violence that has pervaded Mexico in recent decades. By centering their narratives around the *novela negra's* void, the "blank of the

unexplained”—which in Latin America has traditionally never been able to be fully narrated in a linear fashion, thus denying the possibility of restoring order and justice to society—each of these authors can count on the genre’s tendency toward dark and disenchanting narration of the present, and a pessimistic vision of the future, to attempt to make sense of contemporary Mexico.

Each of these authors traces the void that they are narrating to the systemic and subjective violence that has saturated Mexico for the past few decades as well as its historical legacy of colonialism and state sponsored violence. By incorporating the *novela negra* as their starting point and centering the narrative around institutionalized violence, these corporate crimes are situated as the basis for the narrative void, just as the murder of a socialite would establish the narrative void in a hardboiled detective novel. And yet, these are not crimes that bring an unexpected sense of chaos and anxiety to a sheltered and insulated bourgeoisie as in the traditional detective tale, rather they are crimes that reverberate throughout the entire national community and have done so for centuries, affecting everyone to differing degrees but affecting everyone nonetheless. As such, each of these novels is concerned with examining the nation through narrative, but in such a way that it stands in opposition to the totalizing narratives of the mid-twentieth century, created as “ideological constructions of what the Mexican nation was or was meant to be” (Long 1). Rather than attempting to establish a unifying ideal to subsume a radically heterogeneous nation under one coherent narrative, these novels explore the ways that distance and interconnection are negotiated within the national

community, offering alternative accounts of the nation and questioning its viability as a construct, but ultimately being unable to abandon the nation as a concept.

By situating these national crimes within a tradition that was established based on the detective protagonist's search for truth and knowledge, and yet offering no such comfort, these novels underscore the fundamental inability to make sense of the violence or bring order to the chaos of contemporary Mexico. The traditional detective protagonist's role is to reveal mastery over his surroundings and the broader reality, and as Žižek suggests, to ultimately "fill[...] in all the blanks" of what begins as a fractured and disordered narrative. In contrast, however, the novels in this study reveal few or no answers in their examination of the void, rather as they gaze directly into its depth and darkness, the incapacity to produce a linear narrative is reinforced. There is nothing to clarify the uncertainty of this void and any hope for the future of the nation is merely tentative and, according to these authors, improbable. And so, functioning almost in opposition to the traditional detective narrative, which celebrates knowledge, mastery, and certainty, these narratives have turned the *novela negra* genre on its head to reinforce the need to recognize what we do not know and what we cannot explain about contemporary Mexico.

This project has been divided into three chapters, each of which closely examines one of the novels under consideration. The first chapter is dedicated to Carlos Fuentes's *La voluntad y la fortuna* because it represents a clear connection to and break with the past as it undertakes to reprise the totalizing national narratives of mid-twentieth century Mexico, a tradition in which Carlos Fuentes himself played

a significant role. It begins by closely examining the assumptions of unity and interconnectedness inherited from the idealized national narratives that began as a strategy for consolidation and modernization of the nation after the Mexican Revolution, and continued through the middle of the century. *La voluntad y la fortuna* connects the totalizing narrative with the willful blindness of the most powerful in order to establish and further their own dominance at the expense of the nation and its most vulnerable. This crime—the blind will to power of the nation’s actual and future elites—effectively erased large populations of the nation from their own narrative. In recognizing the void that this crime of erasure has left, the novel offers an alternative vision of the nation that acknowledges the interconnectedness of the community through each individual’s shared potentiality but suggests that any complete vision of the nation must acknowledge its radical heterogeneity and allow for the distance between the self and the other. Ultimately, while Fuentes offers this new prophecy for his nation, he recognizes that those in power will likely never recognize it and that there is little chance for change. The likely failure of this alternative narrative is reinforced by Fuentes’s patriarchal approach to truth and knowledge, in which the writer adopts a prophet-like posture toward the nation, subtly reinforcing the historical national narratives that he is simultaneously criticizing.

Chapter two examines how *Hotel DF* recognizes the distance that has been imposed on the nation through social and economic barriers that are reinforced and exacerbated by a history of state sponsored violence and the present state of exception. By gathering a diverse group of locals and foreigners in the heterotopia of

Mexico City's Hotel Isabel and examining their public and private interactions in a series of interconnected episodes, the novel reveals the degree to which the state's past and present criminality has penetrated the private space of the nation such that pervasive dysfunction and melancholy are characteristics of the entire urban and national community. In this way, the novel reveals the interconnectedness of a nation that has suffered from social and economic divisions from its inception. Moreover, this interconnectedness calls into question the degree to which the metaphorical and literal walls that divide the community can insulate the nation and its most privileged members from the dysfunction and chaos that is engendered by the crimes of the state. Although Fadanelli does acknowledge isolated moments of utopic connection between individuals within the hotel allowing for the improbable possibility that barriers within the nation could ultimately be overcome, the novel suggests that the more likely outcome is the continuous repetition of the same pattern of national dysfunction and melancholy into the future.

Chapter three argues that *La muerte me da* calls for the reader to recognize the distance that is inherent in any attempt to connect with an other, particularly during periods of overwhelming trauma, while also grappling with the distancing implications of spectacular violence and the resulting importance of approaching victims with the intimacy of an empathetic and humanizing gaze. In attempting to make sense of a nation saturated in violence, the novel explores the impact of fear and trauma on the national community through the characters' simultaneous desire for and withdrawal from intimate connections with others. This ambivalence between connection and distance within the community reveals a challenge to the

idea of the nation in twenty-first century Mexico. The same tension between distance and intimacy is present in the novel's rejection of the voyeuristic consumption of the other that is characteristic of spectacularized violence. In navigating this tension, the novel recognizes the importance of moving past a posture of consumption and appropriation of the victim, to a gaze of respect and empathy that recognizes the uniqueness of the individual—that they lived and died within specific context—perhaps a glimpse of possibility for a nation mired in spectacularized violence. It simultaneously recognizes that any intimate gaze is in danger of objectifying the victim, erasing his uniqueness, and relegating him to just one more body, again challenging the possibility of ever addressing the void that is inherent within the nation. In exploring this tension between distance and connection in a nation that has been saturated by intensely spectacular subjective violence for over a decade, Rivera-Garza reveals the impossibility of making sense of this culture of generalized violence and the nation.

CHAPTER I

¿Cómo sabemos quién es culpable? **Power and blindness in twenty-first century Mexico**

Carlos Fuentes, one of Mexico's most prolific and well-known authors, and considered one of the central figures in the Latin American "Boom" of the 1960s and 1970s, built a literary career spanning over half a century. His first novel, *La región más transparente*, published in 1958, presents a totalizing vision of the nation that "strives to isolate, rescue, and mobilize that which can be defined as properly Mexican" in an attempt to shape a unified, coherent nation within a community that is marked by difference and was founded on a legacy of violence and exclusion (Long 18). This attempt to define and unify the nation, both politically and culturally, was a hallmark of the modern Latin American nation-state which relied on cultural production, particularly literature, to provide what Patrick Dove terms compensatory modernity, or "an alternative, supplementary path to modernity in circumstances where the project of social and economic modernization otherwise remain[ed] unfulfilled" (Dove 11,13). Its goal was to set forth an image of the state as a space that represented the entire nation in a community that was characterized by an intensely heterogeneous population and contradictory accounts of progress (13). This trend can be clearly identified in the varied cultural production of post-Revolutionary and mid-century Mexico, such as in the cinema of directors like

Emilio Fernández; state-sponsored muralism including artists such as Diego Rivera; and the literature of figures such as Octavio Paz and, as previously mentioned, Carlos Fuentes. Common to the totalizing project of these cultural products is their look to the past—to the Revolution, to the country's indigenous roots, or both—to develop a unifying narrative that will shape the future of a coherent and inclusive nation.

For Emmanuel Levinas, who has written extensively about the relationship between the self and the other, the very concept of totalization is infused with violence (Robbins 5). For him, identification of the self with the other—even if done with a posture of respect—subsumes the other into the self and destroys its alterity. In fact, the very idea of unity incorporates a sense of possession and power over the other, erasing all distance between individuals, what Levinas calls the “imperialism of the same” (qtd. in Robbins 4). In this way, the totalizing political and cultural discourses of twentieth century Mexico functioned not to unify the nation, but to violently erase all difference and distance between its constituent parts in favor of an invented national ideal.

In order to better understand the literary trend of nation-building narratives in modern Latin America and the violence that corresponds with the totalizing narrative's erasure of distance, Dove employs Hegel's analysis of tragedy's formal characteristics to examine the ways in which it has been mobilized by these foundational narratives to establish an inclusive, unifying tale of the nation as well as to question the limits of the national hegemonic narrative. Using Hegel's assessment of tragedy's formal structure, Dove allows that one central characteristic

of tragedy is that it narrates an encounter between “distinct and seemingly incommensurable social orders, epochs, or ‘worlds’,” ultimately leading to their reconciliation—as seen in the foundational narrative (Dove 16). At the same time, tragedy also recognizes that there are “certain facets that are not easily assimilated into the final tally of aesthetic reconciliation,” allowing space for difference and a recognition of the possibility of an alternative narrative that does not elide, suppress, or ignore the radical heterogeneity of the nation (16). In this way, for Dove tragedy can be a narrative of the conciliatory origins of the nation *and* the loss that accompanies the requisite suppression of difference and the inevitable abandonment of segments of the community in support of a unified and cohesive ideal. As such, he argues that “‘the nation’ can be understood as a fundamentally tragic thought” (19–20), which reminds us—through traces and specters of difference—of the violence and loss inherent in the process of reconciliation under the mantles of unity and progress.

As Mexico’s conciliatory discourse of a unified national ideal began to fracture over the course of the second half of the twentieth century with events such as the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968 and the economic crisis of the early 1980s, the violence and exclusion underlying the official political and cultural construction of the nation could no longer be suppressed beneath foundational narratives and totalizing discourses. By the time Fuentes publishes *La voluntad y la fortuna* in 2008, fifty years after his first novel, the promise of a “gradual, complete incorporation of all Mexicans into a more just and equal nation” had long been unveiled as nothing more than a charade (Long 8). The novel, narrated by the abandoned son of the

nation's wealthiest man, offers a portrait of a heterogeneous nation that is heavily divided along lines of political and economic power. While relying on generic elements of the *novela negra* to interrogate the crime of failing to recognize difference within the nation—leading to the radical abandonment of its most vulnerable—and to question who is responsible, *La voluntad y la fortuna* narrates this violence as a tragedy which “both mourns a loss it cannot repair while asserting the need to testify to experiences for which we have no adequate words” (Dove 29). In other words, the novel is Fuentes's reprise of a national narrative, in which the certainty and idealism of a unified nation have been replaced by a void, which signals the impossibility of erasing national heterogeneity and questions the ability to find reconciliation in the narration and representation of the nation.

In attempting to narrate this void, Fuentes explores the twenty-first century nation by mobilizing the *novela negra* to examine the crimes and culpability of the most powerful in Mexico who represent the heights of political and economic domination. For Žižek, this void of the unexplained and the unnarrated is the heart of the detective novel. In the classical and hardboiled detective narratives of Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler, the void signals the circumstances surrounding the crime—often a murder—that the detective is charged with solving and thus narrating in a linear fashion:

What we have at the beginning is a void, a blank of the unexplained, more properly, of the *unnarrated* [...]. The story encircles this blank, it is set in motion by the detective's attempt to reconstruct the missing narrative by interpreting the clues. In this way, we reach the proper beginning only at the very end, when the detective is finally able to narrate the whole story in its 'normal' causal chain." (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 58)

In the Latin American *novela negra*, this void represents a rupture in the social order that is commonly never resolved because the criminals are typically state institutions and the neoliberal economic system. The implication, then, is that even if specific perpetrators and motives are identified, narrating a linear resolution is unrealistic and impossible because justice is always elusive. In much the same way, while the failure of totalizing discourses to define a unified and coherent nation have left a void in the ability to comprehend and narrate the nation, Fuentes offers no attempt at a resolution and in fact reveals that the nation may ultimately exceed any attempt to narrate “the whole story in its ‘normal’ causal chain.” Regardless, functioning as the detective figure, the narrator examines the crimes that have led to this rupture—the will to power of the nation’s economic and political elite and their blindness to the diversity of needs of the community—and the impact these crimes have had on the nation. Through his ethical-philosophical examination of the interactions of will and fortune, desire and need within the heterogeneous community of contemporary Mexico, he encircles the blank left by the failed foundational narratives, attempting to understand the nation’s (and his own) origins, the structures of power that condition its fate, and the question of how to determine culpability for the violence and malfunction that have plagued the nation for centuries. He ultimately finds that in order to move beyond the recurrent historical discourses of a unified nation that do nothing more than serve the needs of those in power and do great violence to the people, the community must embrace its heterogeneity as a nation by acknowledging the diversity and distance of the other. The void that was left by the totalizing discourses of the twentieth century

will remain incomplete, and likely never fulfilled by a linear narrative, because those in power will refuse to listen to the narrator as he warns them about the crimes and violence that they have enacted upon the nation. And so, in *La voluntad y la fortuna*, Fuentes no longer endeavors to capture the nation in its totality, but rather to examine the crimes that have led to its present malfunction and suggest a tenuous possibility, against the odds, for its future.

Josué as national allegory

La voluntad y la fortuna begins in the aftermath of Josué Nadal's decapitation in which he becomes an allegory for the nation through the destruction of his body and his ghostly presence throughout the novel. He embarks on his first person narration as a disembodied head that cannot find its body in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Guerrero. Speaking directly to the reader, he introduces himself and begins to tell the story of his life beginning as a high school student until his murder at the hands of an ambitious executive and a deranged drug-trafficker at age 27. As a child, his origins are shrouded in mystery and he has no knowledge of the nature of his relationship to his caretaker, María Egipciaca, or the identity of the mysterious benefactor who provides just enough resources for his material needs. He is completely alone in the world, considering himself an orphan, and living in a large house with just his caretaker, a house that he considers a "jaula de elefante ocupada por dos ratones" (Fuentes 61).

Josué's only close relationship as a child is with Jericó—also without family and of unknown origins—who becomes an intimate friend in the moment that Josué

defends him against his tormentors in school.⁴ In that moment, they become inseparable—ultimately discovering that they are brothers—and go on to share major milestones of youth, including their intellectual awakening through extensive reading, philosophical exercises, and the disciplined exploration of ideological extremes. Most notably, they both adopt opposing viewpoints in a debate embodied by philosophers Saint Augustine, espoused by Josué, who argues that behavior is determined by fortune, fate, or predestination, and Friedrich Nietzsche, embraced by Jericó, who purports instead that existence is determined by will. Together, they discuss alternative viewpoints with their mentor, Padre Filópater (their philosopher-father) who warns the two young men against extremes and himself espouses the writings of Baruch Spinoza in favor of individual choice, independent of religious or cultural doctrine. As Josué recognizes, Filópater “[n]os dejó para siempre un sentimiento de dificultades indispensables para vivir la vida con seriedad. Spinoza practicó la rebelión y el escándalo a propósito con el fin de ser expulsado y ser independiente” (96). In other words, Filópater challenged them to recognize life’s complexities and the essential task of choice when faced with fortune and will, needs and desires.

With their secondary education complete, the two young men take different professional paths, each appointed to apprentice with one of the most powerful men in Mexico: one in the private sector, the other in politics. The lawyer and spokesperson of their mutual benefactor, Antonio Sanginés, sends Josué to work for

⁴ As the reader will notice, the names evoke the Biblical history of the Israelites’ enslavement in Egypt and their subsequent search for the Promised Land, which plays into the present narrative of Mexico’s search for a future possibility that would allow for the heterogeneity of the nation.

Max Monroy—a scarcely veiled proxy for Carlos Slim, one of the world’s richest men—and Jericó to work with the President of Mexico, Valentín Pedro Carrera. Josué does very little during his tenure with Monroy, with the exception of ostensibly writing a law thesis on Machiavelli and visiting the prison of San Juan de Aragón. On the other hand, Jericó is tasked with staging elaborate distractions to keep the people of Mexico happy despite their material situation. In their professional lives, the two young men re-enact the extremes that they espoused as students, with Josué assuming a passive stance that allows fortune to govern his fate while Jericó follows his ambition and embraces a will to power in an attempt to overthrow the president. Ultimately, Jericó’s plan is frustrated and he is confined in Monroy’s building, purportedly to keep him safe, where he goes mad. Josué simultaneously discovers that both he and Jericó are Monroy’s sons who were abandoned at birth. Monroy abandoned them as he did his oldest son, Miguel Aparecido, so that they would each forge their own paths unencumbered by the fortune of being his sons and could instead establish themselves based solely on their will. That Monroy has abandoned his sons, one of whom is named Miguel, recalls Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955), thus connecting Josué’s tale to a national narrative of insatiable power, blindness to others within the community, and ultimate destruction.

With two of Monroy’s sons unable to inherit his immense fortune—Jericó is confined in Monroy’s tower while Miguel Aparecido remains voluntarily committed in the San Juan de Aragón prison to prevent himself from murdering his father—Josué is the only remaining heir. Out of desire to assume all of Monroy’s riches, one

of his executives (Asunta Jordán) decides to murder Josué, hiring a drug trafficker to kill him in Acapulco. The crime that establishes Josué's narrative—that of his own murder—frames a broader inquiry into crimes that reveal a fractured and malfunctioning Mexico. These crimes are explored in parallel, and we ultimately find that they are characterized by the will to power of economic and political leaders like Monroy and Carrera or aspirants like Asunta Jordán, and their blindness to and disregard for the fortunes and needs of others. The result is that the victims are left dismembered and questioning their possibilities for the future, a narrative that is as yet incomplete and unnarrated.

Destruction and Potentiality

La voluntad y la fortuna is structured around the gruesome beheading of Josué Nadal, with the prologue documenting his first reflections as a severed head before embarking on a narration that describes his life experiences in Mexico City up to the event of his murder. In this way, the novel is set up as a *novela negra*—centered around a crime and propelling the narrative forward to address the void of who committed the murder, how, and why. Moreover, Josué explicitly connects this crime and his fate with that of thousands of his compatriots, describing himself as just one victim of a crime that is hardly unique in the context of early twenty-first century Mexico. He sardonically notes that although he is the only individual to have been decapitated in the last three and a half hours, he is the seventh to have been decapitated that day, and the thousandth that year (Fuentes 12). The allusion to the prevalence of decapitation in Mexico at the hands of drug cartels—which is a

grotesque, spectacular representation of the violent destruction of members of the community and the social fabric that knits them together—positions Josué’s murder as representative of the disunion, estrangement, and abandonment that permeates his subsequent narrative of Mexico City.

This connection between the destruction of Josué’s body and the people of Mexico calls for us to consider the classic metaphor of the body politic, which has historically held that the head represents the sovereign government and the body corresponds to the people of the nation. In this case, however, the corporate body has been subjected to unthinkable violence at the hand of those in power, resulting in a fractured and malfunctioning state. In this way, the crimes at the center of Josué’s tale are not just the violence perpetrated on him, but also the subjective and systemic violence that has pervaded Mexico for centuries. As the novel explores the complex social and political interconnections within the nation through its examination of will and fortune, desire and need, it engages with colonial and modern discourses of national hope and progress, revealing their limits and failures. Through Josué’s investigation, he reveals a complex portrait of the ways that Mexican political regimes—represented by individuals with distinct desires—have manipulated the will to power over time in relation to the specific political, economic, and cultural conditions of the moment, in order to enhance their own dominance at the expense of the nation and its most vulnerable.

Moreover, as Josué explores his current state of dismemberment, the image of decapitation calls attention to the uniquely distinct but interconnected functions of the mind and body, as well as the consequences of violently separating that which is

connected and interdependent. In this case, Josué's mind and body, which execute separate functions, have been divided and his body has disappeared, recalling the thousands of *desaparecidos* from across Latin America at the hands of the state. The disunion of his head and the body suggest a malfunction in the very basis of Josué's being. By invoking the classic Cartesian mind-body dualism in which the two essential components of Josué's being—his mind and matter—have been irrevocably separated, he begins the novel questioning what the future holds for him and his constituent elements. Moreover, the concept of will versus fortune reveals a rough correspondence with the mind-body duality if we consider the mind's will over the body's fortune, which in this case has been interrupted given that Josué's mind and body are subject to the will of a power beyond them, as his head washes up on shore and his body drifts at sea. As his solitary head lies on the beach, it unleashes “[u]n líquido espeso [...] de la masa encefálica a la arena” (12) leaving the reader with a grotesque image of the effects of violence and the loss of parts of his being, his corporeal ooze spread out on the sand. Not only does Josué—as a disembodied head—sense the chaos of being without his body, he questions whether he will become a soul, joining the ranks of other deceased spirits, or be sentenced to eternal exile, forced to wander searching for his body. By structuring his forthcoming narrative around the savage disunion of his own head and body, Josué frames his story and the story of Mexico in terms of unity and separation, abandonment, exile, and the search for (re)connection.

Josué is aware that his head and body are just one of many instances of simultaneous interconnection and distinction in the universe, and as his head drifts

alone in the Pacific Ocean he begins his narrative by contemplating the nature of unity and disconnection in the landscape that surrounds him. In his consideration of the connection and separation of the landscape, Josué signals the paradox of humanity: that every individual is both entirely distinct from and uniquely interconnected with one another. Moreover, he alludes to a temporal distance and connection in which there is also continuity and difference between the recurrence of historical events.

De noche, el mar y el cielo son uno solo y hasta la tierra se confunde con la oscura inmensidad que lo envuelve todo. No hay resquicios. No hay cortes. No hay separaciones. La noche es la mejor representación de la infinitud del universo. Nos hace creer que nada tiene principio y nada, fin. Sobre todo si (como sucede esta noche) no hay estrellas. Aparecen las primeras luces y la separación se inicia. El océano se retira a su propia geografía, un velo de agua que oculta las montañas, los valles, los cañones marinos. [...] Sé que el día va a derrotar esta ilusión. (11)

As Josué's decapitated head observes, in the darkness of night one can take the varied landscape for a single, unified entity. Without even the faint light of the stars to reveal the distinct forms of land, water, and sky, the universe appears infinite and unbroken. The fact that the darkness allows Josué to sense the continuous nature of the cosmos suggests a fundamental interconnectedness between the topology that surrounds him. Moreover, as he contrasts what appears to be a material change in the landscape at the moment in which "la separación se inicia" and the "océano se retira," he senses that in the darkness of night, in which we are blind to the distinctions and differences in the landscape, that allows the fundamental interconnectedness of the universe to be perceived. With the onset of day, however, the light changes the scene by re-introducing separation and rupture into the landscape, revealing that a landscape without "resquicios" "cortes" or

“separaciones” is nothing more than an illusion, given that the presence or absence of light does not change the physical nature of the universe, just one’s perception of it. The discrete features of the terrain—ocean and land—that are visible in the light of the day are always separate entities. And yet, there is still a clear connection between the elements of the landscape: mountains, valleys, and canyons were all created partially by the effects of water and they continue to exist and transform beneath the surface of the ocean and separate from it. Moreover, beyond the spatial-visual properties of the landscape, the invocation of the cyclical appearance of the sun which brings with it the first light of day, initiates a temporal distinction between the present and past, revealing an additional dimension of continuity and difference in which all present, past, and future events are interconnected but simultaneously different from one another. As Josué observes, the infinitude of the night and the cyclical dawning of day, much like Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, suggests that there is no beginning or end to that which he observes.

As Josué’s considers the dawn, he also begins to explore the events that have left his head searching for its body, repeatedly emphasizing its solitude, and examines the destructive impact of having his torso and limbs—essential elements of his being—violently wrenched from him. While Josué reflects on the distinct roles of the mind and the body, he also explores the ways in which they are profoundly interconnected, such that his entire being’s proper functioning is entirely disrupted by their disunion. The mind—nucleus of the subject’s visual, intellectual, emotional, verbal, and physical activities—becomes chaotic and confused without the body’s functions, fluids, and excretions to regulate (13–14, 17–18). Although Josué

wonders whether his mind will be liberated to undertake new, unexplored activities without his body, developing new pathways and synapses, he ultimately finds that his head has become nearly useless as he begins to:

mover los ojos desorbitados, preguntarse que pasó, dónde estoy, qué me espera, con una lengua que, separada del cuerpo, no deja de moverse, locuaz, idiota, a punto de perderse para siempre en el misterio de saber a dónde fue a parar mi cuerpo trunco, en vez de fijarse con premura en el deber máximo de una cabeza cortada, que consiste en recrear en la mente al cuerpo y decir: Esta es la cabeza de Josué, hijo de padres desconocidos, en busca de su cuerpo vivo [...] Yo, Josué, cuya única preocupación en este instante es no morderse la lengua. Porque aunque la cabeza esté cortada, la lengua busca hablar, liberada al fin, y sólo alcanza a morderse a si misma, morderse como se muerde una salchicha o una hamburguesa. (13–14)

In this description of Josué's solitary head, its standard functions become erratic and purposeless, his eyes—figuratively, but also perhaps literally—come unhinged, bulging out of their sockets and move wildly, his mind is overcome by questions about the past and anxiety for the future, and his tongue is unleashed, moving foolishly and without restraint. He recognizes that rather than abandoning himself to this chaos, he should turn his mind to the recreation of his complete body and his self, the only way to return to the order and structure found in the unification of his severed figure. Although he attempts to do just that by articulating himself and the significance of his body to his whole being, ultimately the best he can do is “no morderse la lengua” as if it were nothing more than a piece of meat—a particular traversal of the mind-body duality—while he tells his tale. He ultimately concludes the prologue by questioning whether he will ever be something other than a corpse, something more than bare life, “Fui cuerpo. Tuve cuerpo. ¿Seré alma?” (14). With the two essential parts of his being separated in death, his soul's existence is called into question. In this way, Josué's experience with estrangement goes beyond the

mere revelation of a paradoxical state of separation and unity as illustrated in the landscape that surrounds him at the first light of dawn. Rather, this natural state of distinction and interconnectedness is exacerbated by his beheading into a violent estrangement that leads to chaos, confusion, and, ultimately, if not addressed, to destruction.

In questioning his future as spirit, Josué wonders whether the loss of his body necessarily represents his complete extinction or whether his soul will persist. Despite his physical destruction, he finds that he has not been deprived of his potentiality:

Sólo la muerte me confirma que ahora no soy más que un acto en potencia, una materia a la caza de su propia forma. Ahora siento mi alma como la promesa de un sentido renovado, pero ahora sin contenido y por ello listo a recibirlos todos. Soy algo posible, me digo en este extremo de mi existencia. Aún no soy. Aunque ya soy, acaso, inmortal por la paradoja de haber muerto (541).

As a soul that has been deprived of his physical being, he remains a potentiality, “the presence of an absence” that clings to the possibility of his restored being (Agamben 179). Josué recognizes that he exists in a paradoxical state—he is simultaneously not yet and already existent—with a physical being that existed and was destroyed, but a potential being that lives on and has yet to take shape. Accordingly, by concluding that his spirit persists and holds promise after the destruction of his body, Josué embraces his future being and, ultimately, the possibility of change.

In addition, considering Josué’s body as a representation of the fragmented and malfunctioning body politic, his state of potentiality can also be understood as

the state of the nation during the interregnum, what Antonio Gramsci⁵ described as a disruption in the social order, such that the existing power has lost its hold on social, political, and legal authority while the potential new order is not yet fully formed or prepared to assume such a role. Importantly, the interregnum represents a period of uncertainty, a moment of loss and change, but with the potential for renewal and redemption. The novel establishes this link between Josué's destruction and potentiality and the people of Mexico through the image of the Hebrew community. Specifically, it references the tribes of Israel and their quest to reclaim a spiritual home through a summary of Joshua's (Josué's namesake) incursion into Jericho (his brother's namesake)—the first city that the Hebrews defeated allowing them to gain a foothold in the Promised Land. As the tribes of Israel wander in the desert awaiting settlement in the Promised Land, they remain physically exiled as a nation, a group of slaves having escaped from Egypt, uncertain of their future and separated from God and their own spiritual essence. And yet, this potency remains alive in the community representing the possibility of a spiritual homecoming, a future in which they can claim a place of belonging and unification. In this way, the concept of a potentiality that exists independent of the physical state of an individual or community offers a sense of hope and possibility.

And yet this possibility and hope is simultaneously conditioned by the impossibility of complete unification through the erasure of difference and the elimination of distance, as seen in the nation-building literature of the twentieth

⁵ Gramsci's commonly cited observation states: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci 276)

century. In the case of Josué, his body will never recover from its decapitation, even though his head and body reunite by the end of his tale allowing him to proclaim that “el tiempo de exilio se acaba” (Fuentes 544). His life has ended and he will never again be more than a potentiality. Moreover, despite Joshua’s victory at the town of Jericho—the Hebrews’ first steps toward ending their exile from the Promised Land—the prostitute Hetara⁶ anticipates that they will never overcome their curse of wandering:

Tu pueblo se debatirá para siempre entre la permanencia en un solo lugar o la promesa del siguiente lugar por conquistar, un lugar mejor que el anterior, y así sucesivamente. El éxodo será interminable. Y será nuevo. En sus sucesivos exilios, tus descendientes enriquecerán la tierra que pisen. [...] Serán envidados y serán perseguidos. Serán perseguidos y sufrirán las peores torturas. El gran llanto de tu pueblo en el que se reconocerán, por un trágico y feliz instante, todos los hombres, mujeres y niños del mundo. (28–29)

Hetara’s prophecy of the Hebrews’ millennia-long search for their spiritual home recognizes the impossibility of their ever settling in a Promised Land. The members of the community, tangled up in confluence of fortune and will, are cursed to deliberate for generations over permanence in a physical space, always in search of their ultimate spiritual home. The potentiality of this people is evident in the richness and value that their descendants will bring to the communities in which they participate. However, she predicts that this potentiality will only be recognized in the aftermath of the horrific Holocaust, a event that will reveal to the rest of the world—for just an instant—their shared humanity.

⁶ Although in the Biblical story of Joshua, the prostitute’s name was Rahab, Carlos Fuentes has given her the name Hetara in his re-telling of the story. Hetara comes from the Greek *hetaira* or *hetaera* meaning prostitute.

In much the same way, Ezekiel reveals to Josué that his spirit is charged with prophesying to the truth of the diversity of others' humanity to the community of Mexico City, the "ciudad doliente" (545). Interestingly, the role of the national prophet is one that was occupied by Fuentes himself, along with Paz and other Mexican writers of their generation, in which—as previously discussed—they published literary texts that presented a unified and coherent national ideal to consolidate the cultural discourse behind a promising future of national progress and modernization. However, Josué is charged with communicating quite a different prophesy, a warning about the blindness toward the heterogeneous wills and fortunes, desires and needs within the nation, and the disastrous effects that this blindness will continue to have on the community. Despite his directions to Josué, Ezekiel simultaneously recognizes that the warning will fall on deaf ears: not only will no one will hear him, they will not even recognize his existence. As he says, "Están sentados sobre alacranes. Comen papel y creen que es ambrosía. No te escuchan porque no quieren. Háblales aunque no te escuchen" (545). That is, although they believe that they are eating ambrosia, the food of the gods, and living life to its fullest, they are actually eating paper, a material with no taste or nutritional value, and sitting precariously, poised at the edge of disaster. Notwithstanding, Josué's task is to tell his story—"una narración incompleta" and perhaps even an impossible narrative—and prophesy to the potentiality of the millions in the nation whose diversity has not been recognized (552).

The powerful, the abject, and *los demás*

As previously discussed, a similar crime has been committed in Mexico such that those in power have participated in the destruction of the body politic through their blindness to the radical heterogeneity of the nation while attempting to consolidate power at the expense of the community—particularly its most vulnerable—resulting in the radical abandonment of large segments of the population. In describing the state of twenty-first century Mexico in which “el orden se desintegra,” Jericó describes the criminal impact of this blindness on the community at large. According to his observations, Mexico is:

un país de más de cien millones de habitantes que no puede darle trabajo, comida o educación a la mitad de la población, un país que no sabe emplear a los millones de obreros que necesita para construir carreteras, presas, escuelas, viviendas, hospitales, para preservar los bosques, enriquecer los campos, levantar las fábricas, un país donde el hambre, la ignorancia y el desempleo conducen al crimen y una criminalidad que lo invade todo, el policía es criminal, el orden se desintegra, Josué, el político es corrupto, hace agua la trajinera, vivimos en un Xochimilco sin María Candelaria o Lorenzo Rafael o puerquitos que nos salven: los canales se llenan de basura, los ahogó la mugre, el abandono, las espinas, el cadáver del puerquito, los huesos de pollo, los restos de las flores...” (Fuentes 358–359)

This passage describes a nation and a people that—without the basic elements to structure a community: work, education, or food—have descended into chaos, an image that is directly contrasted with the iconic images of national salvation from Emilio Fernández’s 1943 film *María Candelaria*. This cultural touchstone presents the nation’s social and cultural unification and redemption through a pure Mexican identity rooted in an idealized indigenous past. As Nestor García Canclini suggests, the preoccupation with the indigenous past was central to the state’s desire to invent a national tradition that would legitimate their power while providing a prophetic vision of the future in which “the failures and limitations of the present

moment can be passed off as merely temporary and epiphenomenal, a necessary collective sacrifice” (Dove 105). In this discourse, the potentiality of the nation was promised through images and narratives of an imagined and idealized past, as opposed to the realities of the present. As Jericó describes the current malfunctioning of the nation, he provides a more realistic portrait of Xochimilco, in which the icons of the indigenous ideal are rotting, destroyed, or nonexistent, revealing a nation that never was nor will be reducible to a romanticized ideal.

In the narrative that follows Josué’s exploration of his body and soul’s disintegration, he examines the ways in which the violent estrangement of his physical being mirrors the chaos of the fractured and malfunctioning Mexican nation, and the increasing alienation of the vulnerable at the turn of the 21st century. Just as the violent separation of essential elements of his physical body led to a breakdown in his bodily functions and threatened his very being, the estrangement of increasing numbers within Mexican society has resulted in an increasing refusal to acknowledge the potentiality of large portions of society, and in turn has threatened the future of the nation itself. As Josué walks through the streets of Mexico City, he distinguishes the ways in which the urban landscape betrays what he calls the “el contraste mexicano,” that is, the enormous and continually increasing gulf between the economically powerful and the vulnerable. He recognizes the social and economic estrangement of citizens as manifest in the tangible separations that are inherent to Mexico City’s urban structure:

Vasta, pululante, movida como un ejército de hormigas sin disciplina, la calle daba cuenta de las cada vez mayores diferencias de clase. Había un abismo entre el mundo motorizado y el mundo peatonal o aun entre quien se movía en automóvil y quien lo hacía en autobús. El contraste mexicano, lejos de

atenuarse, aumentaba, como si el ‘progreso’ del país fuese una opiácea ilusión, contada en número de habitantes pero no en suma de bienestares. La ciudad popular aumentaba sus números. La ciudad privilegiada se aislaba como una perla en la ostra (la costra) urbana. Jericó y yo vimos en un cineclub *Metrópolis*, de Fritz Lang, con sus dos universos férreamente separados. Arriba, un gran penthouse de juegos y jardines. Abajo, un enorme subterráneo de trabajadores mecanizados. En apariencia gris, en el fondo, negro. O más bien, sin luz. (109)

Among the chaos of the streets, Josué observes the abyss between the “dos universos” that exist in Mexico City—the *ciudad privilegiada* and the *ciudad popular*. He sees the privileged isolating themselves from the masses behind the steel doors and glass windows of their personal automobiles while the rest of the city circulates as a collective movement, shoulder to shoulder—on foot or in buses—with millions of fellow citizens. This same chasm exists between the private spaces occupied by these two worlds. Recalling Lang’s *Metrópolis*, he envisions an urban structure in which the wealthy live, work, and play, high above the masses, isolated in penthouses as far as possible from what Max Monroy calls “las calles condenadas.” Monroy himself lives in such a space and remains so disconnected from the rest of the city that he cannot even remember the names of the streets below him (478). In stark contrast to the aloof occupants of the city’s penthouses, below ground in the San Juan de Aragón prison, the city’s most vulnerable members struggle daily for survival. Here, abandoned children inhabit a “gran piscina subterránea de cemento en la entraña obscena del Distrito Federal” (123) that regularly fills with water such that only those that can swim manage to survive (125). This group of vulnerable citizens, engaged in the most basic struggle for survival, remain separated by a physical, social, and economic abyss from the privileged members of society and continue to grow in numbers, just as the material barriers that exacerbate this

violent estrangement become increasingly more entrenched into the fabric of the city.

As the unrecognized son of Max Monroy and unknowing beneficiary to his material fortune, Josué functions as a bridge between these two worlds that co-exist within Mexico City and rejects the separation that the privileged have imposed between themselves and the *ciudad popular*. Raised with no knowledge of his family history but supported financially by an anonymous benefactor who he ultimately discovers is his father, Josué spends his final decade living with Jericó in a penthouse, financed by Monroy. Living several stories above the bustle of the masses, Jericó observes, “tenía algo que nos aislaba de la ciudad” (102), positioning him in the same space as Monroy, who remains as far from the *ciudad popular* as possible. On the other hand, Josué also descends to the depths of the city by regularly visiting Miguel Aparecido in the San Juan de Aragón prison and observing the tragedy of the vulnerable children who are left to the mercy of the regular basement floods that are justified to control the excess prison population (125). As the figure who inspires Josué to confront the face of the other as radically different from himself, Aparecido’s name is particularly significant. Translated from Spanish as *appeared*—which can mean that something is visually present or simply an impression—Aparecido’s last name straddles reality and illusion, at once announcing a presence and absence, while also evoking the spectral figure of *Pedro Páramo*’s Juan Preciado, abandoned son of Pedro Páramo. Tellingly, his appearance to Josué directly contrasts with the disappearance of millions from the totalizing national narrative and thus from legitimate participation in the nation.

In his encounters with Aparecido, Josué begins to recognize what Levinas considers the vital importance of seeing the “face”—the irreducible alterity—of the other and, in so doing, transforming his gaze from one of appropriation and possession to one of asymmetry and separation—the only way to establish “a just relation to the other,” which recognizes their radical heterogeneity (Robbins 7).⁷ After his attempt at compassion is savagely rejected by Aparecido, he gazes at his fierce brother and,

algo dentro de mí me dijo, ‘No apartes la mirada. Mira directamente a este hombre. Míralo como lo has visto antes. Como un ser humano vulnerable, adolorido, desconcertado, que rechaza tu cariño sólo porque lo necesita, porque no tiene otro apoyo que no seas tú, tú mismo, mi pobre Josué doble de sí mismo.’ [...] Miré a Miguel Aparecido y me vi reflejado en él no como en un espejo, sino sólo en una pregunta: somos cuerpo, somos alma y jamás sabremos cómo se unen la carne y el espíritu. [...] Vi que los dos pertenecíamos, libre yo, prisionero él, a un mismo dilema: ¿merecíamos todos ser castigados por el delito de un solo hombre?, ¿se podía salvar el alma si no se salvaba, también, el cuerpo?, ¿podía nuestro cuerpo cometer delitos sin castigar el alma?, ¿podía el alma pecar y el cuerpo permanecer limpio del delito? (Fuentes 310–311)

In direct contrast to Monroy’s blindness toward the city and the inhabitants living far below the windows of his penthouse, Josué sees the other and recognizes him as such. For Levinas, it is this face of the other which, “*calls to me* [...] and signifies an order to me by its very nudity, its denuding [or destitution] [...]. Its presence is a summation to respond.” (qtd. in Robbins 9). Aparecido’s appearance to Josué as an exposed and vulnerable being commands Josué to gaze at him, to see his face and not look away from his “misery and wretchedness” (Robbins 9). Josué is aware of the struggle, the intrinsic desire to avert one’s eyes from the anger and brutality that

⁷ This idea of the radical heterogeneity of the nation will be further explored in the following chapter on Guillermo Fadanelli’s *Hotel DF*.

he finds in Aparecido, and he must command himself three times not to look away. In the midst of this struggle, he acknowledges the importance of recognizing the other in front of him, his needs, his humanity, and his limits. As Josué looks at Aparecido he recognizes himself, not as an exact replica reflected in a mirror but as an asymmetric other, and he must acknowledge that they are distinct beings with discrete fortunes, wills, needs, and desires, but that at the most fundamental level they share the same existential condition. This recognition of difference maintains the distance between the two beings by establishing itself as a question and thus structured as “a conversation without reciprocity or recognition [that] is not a dialogue or an exchange in any usual sense” (Robbins 8) but that considers “the things henceforth possibly in common” (Levinas qtd. in Robbins 8). In this instance, Josué recognizes himself in Aparecido through questions about the state of their beings and their potential futures. These unanswerable questions allow for a connection between these two radically different individuals that does not reduce them to a unified totality, and provides a glimpse into an alternative approach to understanding the nation as a radically heterogeneous space.

Aware that Aparecido and the other prisoners of the San Juan de Aragón prison represent, to a certain degree, one extreme of society as “seres marginales y excéntricos” (Fuentes 371), Josué also decides to meet and understand the people that surround him day to day and inhabit the center, *los demás*. To that end, he decides to

frecuentar, piso por piso, oficina por oficina, a los empleados del edificio de la Plaza Vasco de Quiroga en la zona de Santa Fe, sede del imperio de Max Monroy: ¿quienes eran *los demás*? (371).

The presence of these anonymous individuals within Monroy's own empire—*los demás*—is a signal that the other need not be only the wretched souls that inhabit dark corners in far reaches of the city. In fact, there is multitude of people that occupy the space between the underground dungeon and the penthouse with varying degrees of fortune that, nonetheless, are victims of the malfunctioning nation, and the chaos, confusion, and violence that it engenders. These individuals, while not necessarily subject to the same precarious physical and economic circumstances, still comprise the anonymous masses—their potentiality invisible to the community, they do not appear (*no aparecen*) in the historical narratives of the nation—and their fortunes are inextricably dependent on the will of the powerful. Ultimately, for everyone within Mexican society, there is an inescapable interdependence which Josué recognizes as “nuestro destino compartido” (519). Although this specific quotation refers explicitly to Josué's relationship with Jericó, his analysis of their interconnection is pertinent to Mexico at large. Moreover, this shared destiny is complicated by the fact that, as Josué observes, “cada uno escogió por su cuenta a sabiendas de que éramos inseparables” (519). In this way, Josué recognizes the paradox of human interdependence—within a community like Mexico, everyone is asymmetrically inseparable: with existentially interconnected fortunes and beings that are entirely distinct from one another.

Who is culpable?

This question of “¿Cómo sabemos quién es culpable?” is first posed by Miguel Aparecido while Josué is visiting him in jail as they are considering the degree to

which each of the jail's occupants should be considered guilty of the crimes for which they have been imprisoned. As such, the explicit thrust of the question is focused on identifying the degree to which an individual should be deemed culpable or innocent of the crimes that they are accused of committing given the contextual factors of fortune and will, desire and necessity. But in the tradition of the *novela negra* and given the broader crimes of the novels—the blindness to the radical alterity of each individual within the nation and the resultant violence against the people, including the community's most vulnerable—the question also prompts us to explore specifically who can be held responsible for the crimes against the nation that have led to its malfunction. Although the novel explores the dizzying interactions between will and fortune, desire and need, and the degree to which the actions of every being within society have an effect—at times positive, other times negative—on countless others, it also makes clear that the will to power by the nation's religious, political, and economic leaders has had a dramatic impact on the nation's social structures since its inception.

As President Pedro Valentín Carrera⁸ reminds Jericó, emphasizing that a gulf of separation has existed within the nation since its inception, Mexico “ha vivido siempre en la miseria. Desde siempre, una masa de chingados y encima nosotros una minoría de chingones” (Fuentes 234). Here, Fuentes articulates Octavio Paz's well known historical divide between the powerful and the dominated which for Paz was an attempt to define a unified and coherent nation, claiming the “autonomy-to-

⁸ In the novel, President Pedro Valentín Carrera represents the traditional twentieth (and twenty-first) century Mexican president who is concerned above all else with disseminating integrative official discourses designed to conceal the nation's problems and present the illusion of a unified totality.

come that would be secured in the synthesis of cultural expression with a gradual overcoming of the historical experience of debt and dependency, inequality, and tyranny” (Dove 102). However, not only does his totalizing discourse fail to recognize the difference and complexity of the nation—the web of power and subjugation is constantly in a state of movement with today’s *chingados* becoming tomorrow’s *chingones*, or someone simultaneously occupying both positions depending on the nature of a given relationship—it ultimately failed to bring about the transcendence of Mexico’s history of “debt and dependency, inequality and tyranny.” In fact, in this passage, Fuentes is also recognizing an all too common will to power that has influenced Mexican political life since the colonial period. This desire for domination is evident on an intimate level when Josué secretly slips into Asunta Jordán’s bedroom and rifles through her underwear drawer:

Supe en ese instante secreto y sagrado que el deseo nos mueve más allá y más acá de la obtención del objeto del deseo. Supe que deseamos lo que no tenemos y que al obtenerlo, sólo para nosotros, deseamos dominar lo que tenemos, privarlo de su propia libertad y someterlo a las leyes de nuestra propia ambición. (Fuentes 326)

In this moment, Josué recognizes desire—specifically a desire for power—as a force that allows the object of desire to become objectified to the point that he feels that he can reach an intimacy with her through connection with items of her clothing. And this desire, rather than recognizing her as an individual, begins to take on the character of a generalized desire for power over an object that is not subject to its own will or desires. Objectification produces a situation in which an individual pursues a goal to the abandonment of their recognition of the potentiality of those around them, they are never confronted with a face and therefore never called on as

responsible to the other.

As the novel explores fortune and will, it suggests that, for most individuals, being driven by one's will can lead to madness, such as in the case of Jericó whose lack of power to determine his own life and influence the lives of others leads to him being locked in a room in Monroy's penthouse, naked and crawling around on all fours with "una cabeza furiosa, revuelta también, de ojos inyectados, labios sulfurosos y dientes asesinos" (446). Indeed, the very concept of fortune or destiny suggests the presence of a supernatural force that acts from a position of power external to the lives of individual actors whose exertion of will is subject to forces beyond their own control. And yet, this presence of a metaphysical higher power has been supplanted by the most powerful actors in the Mexico who, contrary to what Jericó's experience would lead one to believe, have imposed themselves and their will on the nation, thus influencing the fortune of the community. However, despite their incredible power, these individuals can never actually replace the metaphysical being that ultimately determines the fortune of humanity because they are nothing more than self-appointed forces, determined only to advance their own wealth and influence. It is these actors—both historical and present-day—that the novel looks to as culpable for the crimes that have led to a fragmented and malfunctioning nation, because of their will to power which plays a determining role in the fortunes of millions of *chingados*. Those that are impacted by their actions—*los demás, los de abajo*⁹—are victims of the failure of those in power to gaze upon

⁹ This phrase recalls Mariano Azuela's most well-known novel, *Los de abajo*, which examines the chaos of the Mexican Revolution and the degree to which the people of

their faces and recognize the heterogeneity and potentiality of the nation.

In this way, figures representative of Mexican history such as Vasco de Quiroga, Antigua Concepción, and Max Monroy function as perverse deities within the novel, pursuing their will regardless of its impact on the population. For example, Antigua Concepción, Monroy's mother and a character that recalls Pedro Páramo's insatiable desire for power, wealth, and land, was described by her grandson as being,

una bruja [que] tenía pacto con el Demonio, se proponía algo y lo lograba, cayera quien cayera, era insaciable, jamás tenía riqueza suficiente, si tenía mucho le parecía poco y quería más, valiéndose de todos los engaños, las tretas más siniestras, los pactos más corruptos con tal de no sólo preservar sino aumentar su poder. (420)

The image of Antigua Concepción as a witch who has made deals with the Devil gives a perverted metaphysical quality to her power and suggests a desire for power and influence on par with the supernatural or divine. And yet, she positions herself as a divinity that remains completely remote from the humanity on whose fortunes her own will relies and has a direct impact. As she blindly pursues her own advancement, the lives of the individuals around her are objectified in her narrative of progress: they become *(des)aparecidos* and are excluded from participation in the nation. In a similar way, Josué's compares Monroy's power and influence with that of God, author of humanity, as portrayed in Calderón de la Barca's *Gran teatro del mundo*. He specifically considers Monroy's position as protagonist of the Mexican narrative, such that:

posesionado del personaje central del drama, asume como verdadera su

the nation that fought for the often unclear and continually mutating aims of those in power were always subject to domination, the *chingados*.

propia fantasía y nos conduce a los demás a ser fantasmas de un fantasma, reparto secundario del actor estrella de un auto sacramental pomposamente llamado *La Vida*? ¿Cómo no iba, en este estado anímico, a recordar mi juvenil lectura de Calderón de la Barca y su *Gran teatro del mundo*? la humanidad protagonista espera con impaciencia entre bambalinas a que el supremo director de escena, Dios mismo, la invente y le diga: ‘¡Acción!; Sal al escenario!’ (367)

In this conceptualization of a divine power—“un supremo director de escena”—Monroy places himself at the center of a story that he claims as his own while the rest of the nation, the other actors in the drama, remain abstractions. Separated from their sense self-determination, like the head from the body, these individuals retain only a trace of their fundamental potentiality. Moreover, by placing himself in the position of divine power with claims to authorship over the people of Mexico, Monroy maintains ultimate control over their fortunes, including their very existence within the nation, an existence which he refuses to acknowledge. As he looks out over the city from the Castillo de Chapultepec, he observes “el panorama leonado de la ciudad desde las alturas como viese la inexistencia misma” (407). In this way, Monroy’s “subjects” are objectified into nonexistence, they have *(des)aparecido*.

Moreover, the reference to Calderón de la Barca’s *Gran teatro del mundo* draws an important connection between the present and the past. Calderón de la Barca was one of Spain’s most prominent playwrights of the seventeenth century, and his very invocation links the contemporary Mexico to the baroque period of Spain—a time in which “society had entered into a severe crisis in association with critical economic fluctuations” (Maravall 19). Clearly there are differences between the social and economic situation of baroque Spain and contemporary Mexico, and yet

there are also continuities. The baroque period coincided with the conquest and colonization of the Americas during which time political and religious leaders like Vasco de Quiroga (who remains a specter in Max Monroy's communications empire five centuries later) advocated for the creation of an ostensible "tiempo común a todos." This effort to unify and totalize the Mexican nation—in search of a future "promised land"—would supposedly engender a world in which the indigenous people of Mexico and the Spanish would coexist allowing the indigenous population to be exposed to salvation and the civilizing influences of the Spanish language and culture while they also being permitted to retain a connection to their own language, culture, and spirituality (Fuentes 340).

And yet Quiroga's project, inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*, is an early example of twentieth century Mexico's attempts to totalize the nation into a coherent community under the guise of progress. Through this attempt at unification, the powerful enacted their will on the people—returning to the metaphor of the body politic in which the body is an entity to be ordered and controlled by the mind—for their own economic and political benefit and denied the distance and heterogeneity of the indigenous as other. Through this process, the indigenous became instrumentalized as a means of national prosperity. As the novel narrates, Vasco de Quiroga undertakes this project after his court determines that "El trabajo de los indios es el nervio de la tierra [...] La prosperidad de la tierra depende del respeto a las tradiciones indígenas" (340). The indigenous people were equated with their work: according to Quiroga, their *trabajo* was the heart of the land, not their being. And despite his arguments for the liberation of the indigenous

from slavery, he admits that he is not ultimately interested in their freedom, saying “[h]ay que reclutar a los indios a la fuerza, para que aprendan a ser felices” (342), an approach that, centuries later, finds echo in the presidency of Pedro Valentín Carrera and the business practices of Max Monroy.

Centuries later, Max Monroy’s mother, Antigua Concepción, pursued a similarly oppressive path to power in which she exploited the idea that what was good for her—power and wealth—was good for the nation. Just after the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, many people who had not traditionally been a part of the ruling class “[s]e hicieron ricos gracias a la revolución, que los elevó de la nada abriéndoles oportunidades que antes les negaban a los de abajo” (215). In other words, former *chingados* embraced the opportunity to become the *chingones*. During this period, Antigua Concepción “sum[ó] suelo” with “voracidad,” but never admittedly for her own profit, “sino en favor de ‘la revolución’, de la entelequia que ella creía promover asociando su voluntad a su fortuna” (421). By equating elite power and wealth with the well-being of the nation—even disingenuously—those in pursuit of power totalize the nation into an entity with unified wills, needs, and desires. Moreover, it is those in power who define those characteristics for the nation, rather than submitting to the radical heterogeneity of its people. Thus, we again see that the pursuit of power and wealth necessarily results in violence against the people of the nation and ultimately the radical abandonment of the most vulnerable within the nation. As Miguel Aparecido explains to Josué:

Así construyeron nuestro país. Diciéndose: si es bueno para mí, es bueno para México. Dime. ¿qué conciencia no se salva si repite este credo hasta

creerse su propia mentira? ¿No es esta la gran mentira mexicana: robo, mato, encarcelo, amaso una fortuna y lo hago en el nombre de la patria, mi beneficio es el de la nación y en consecuencia la nación debe agradecerme mi rapiña? (421)

Here, the other becomes the victim of robbery, murder, and imprisonment so that the powerful can “amas[ar] una fortuna.” As the individual pursues his/her own wealth and power, the abyss between the powerful and the vulnerable grows and the nation remains mired in violence and separated from *la entelequia* that Antigua Concepción purports to advocate. Moreover, her will to power reveals the fundamental flaw in the image of the nation as a unified concept—not only can the people not be commanded and directed by the mind, but no one can presume to know the will or desires of the other. Again, the potentiality of the nation lies in its ability to recognize the distance inherent in relations with the other, and the radical heterogeneity that comprises the national landscape.

This history of violence and loss continues into the twenty-first century and is represented in the novel by the most powerful businessman in Mexico, Max Monroy. He is a man whose desire for wealth continues to push him toward amassing an ever increasing fortune by fomenting desire and, ultimately, need for his products across the population while his power gradually supplants even that of the presidency. Given his power in both economic and political realms, Monroy’s name is appropriate, suggesting a link between political and commercial realms: in French *mon roi* or in Spanish *mi rey*. Accordingly, Monroy’s ambitions for domination echo that of his predecessors in that it relies on the totalization and domination of *los demás* in the nation—again, the national body ordered and dominated by the mind, originally the king. His connection to Vasco de Quiroga’s purported utopia is explicit

from the physical location of Monroy's communications headquarters on the Calle Vasco de Quiroga in Santa Fe (a business district in Mexico City) to Josué's reference to the building as the "Castillo de la Utopía," the "falsa utopía de Santa Fe," and the "edificio de Utopía" (362, 363, 375). Josué connects the history of that space from Quiroga's purported utopia to Monroy's:

Pensé de nuevo que aquí estableció Vasco de Quiroga la Utopía de Tomás Moro en la Nueva España en 1532 a fin de procurarles asilo a los indios, los huérfanos, los enfermos y los ancianos, sólo para dar paso, más tarde, a una fábrica de pólvora, a un basurero municipal y, ahora, a la Utopía moderna de los negocios: el reino de Max Monroy, largo, alto, vidrioso... ¿a prueba de terremotos? Los volcanes vecinos parecían, a un tiempo, amenazar y proteger. (375-6)

Much like Quiroga, Monroy argues that his product—cellular phones, handheld devices, and internet access—is designed to free the people through access to information for even the most destitute of Mexicans so that they can "actuar con libertad y en beneficio propio y no de una élite política..." (381). He suggests that his products will create a utopia by giving people access to information and connecting them with a community such that they can "conocer los problemas y [...] resolverlos solo o con ayuda, pero [...] resolverlos por fin" (380). Monroy also counts on the access to communications and technology having the additional effect of broadening the universe of consumption for those equipped with Monroy's products, regardless of their material resources. He targets "al campesino más pobre, al indígena más aislado, el analfabeta y al semialfabeta" to make them aware of what they could have, that they could "vivir mejor, que merecen crédito, tarjetas, consumo, igual que los de arriba" (293, 292). By creating the demand and the expectation of a certain level of consumption—even consumption that exceeds their means—Monroy

positions himself to increase his power and wealth exponentially as the person to supply the goods and products based on demand. Although not mentioned in the novel, Monroy's real-life counterpart Carlos Slim has holdings in several industries both inside and outside of Mexico, including telecommunications, hotels, a variety of retail chains, airlines, infrastructure development, news media, and more. The implicit subtext, then, is that any and all consumption is guaranteed to increase Monroy's power and wealth. Of course, with no structural changes or material change to available resources, Monroy's plan for the people is nothing but spectacle—an appearance (*aparecer*) of freedom and autonomy—that offers no substantial promise to bring about change, much less a utopia.

As made clear above, Monroy is unconcerned with addressing the fundamental systemic violence within Mexico. Rather, he is preoccupied with strengthening his own position through increasing economic dominance under the guise of offering freedom through mass communication to communities across the country. To this end, he promotes his plan for what he claims is the unification of the Mexican populace:

[Monroy] [r]econoce que en México hay clases y diferencias abismales entre pobres y ricos. Su utopía [...] es que haya cada vez menos diferencias y que nos convirtamos en un solo río, con mareas incesantes, un solo flujo rumbo a un mar, si no de mayor igualdad, al menos de mayores oportunidades. (305)

Again, we see that another leader of Mexico, this time a business leader—which testifies to the increasing power the corporations hold over state governments in the neoliberal economic system—bases his will to power on the perceived unification of the nation, at the expense of its people. And despite the historical differences in technique and material approach, Monroy's attempt at eliminating

difference within the nation, creating a unified totality, and thus consolidating his own power is in line with that of Antigua Concepción and Vasco de Quiroga. They are all dispassionate about addressing the root causes of the systemic violence or healing the mortal wounds that have severed the fabric of society and they all actually exacerbate the alienation of the vulnerable by failing to recognize the distance and heterogeneity within the nation. Monroy's approach is to foster a false sense of equality through the escalating desire for luxuries and the veneer of access to consumption through a system of credit that ultimately continues to erode the most impoverished citizen's social and economic stability.

Monroy is not the only twenty-first century actor who totalizes the population in order to maintain control and increase power. President Pedro Valentín Carrera—Monroy's rival for control of the country and a traditional Mexican politician—adopts the decades-old custom of the political elites in Mexico of suppressing the problem of a *Metropolis*-like chasm between the powerful and vulnerable by mounting elaborate celebrations—"circo[s] sin pan"—to distract its citizenry from the country's systemic inequalities and maintain the veneer of a functioning community. As such, he represents not only the present-day political system whose hold on power is being threatened by neoliberal economic elites like Monroy, but the traditional power structure of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) over the course of the twentieth century. As he explains to Jericó, "hay que hacerles creer a los jodidos que aunque estén jodidos son más felices que tú y yo" (235). Not only do these diversions do nothing to address the violence and loss inherent in the refusal to recognize the other and its heterogeneity, it

perpetuates the violence to participants as their material situation continues to propel them into desperation. The people—including “los inmigrantes que no encuentran salida, [...] los campesinos arruinados por el TLC,¹⁰ [...] la mano de obra descontenta [...] gente harta, desamparada, desesperada”—continue to search for a way to transform their material circumstances despite the façade presented by the state (359–360). As Sanginés explains to Josué, President Valentín Carrera represents a government whose goal is simply that the “gobierno funcione en paz,” and in the face of his failure to address the country’s fundamental problems—in fact, the exacerbation of these problems—the President refuses to engage saying to Sanginés, “El país es muy complejo. No trates de entenderlo,” and adds with frivolity, “[t]omar decisiones aburre” (459). In other words, the political apparatus is more concerned with preserving their power through empty gestures and maintaining a semblance of peace, order, and well-being than with contending with the destructive structural inequities of the nation.

Potentiality of the Nation

In recognition of the heterogeneity of the people, Miguel Aparecido explains the differences among each individual within the prison to Josué during one of his visits to San Juan de Aragón where Aparecido is incarcerated, focusing specifically on their wills and fortunes, needs and desires. During their conversation, he emphasizes that everyone from the innocent to the most brutal criminals are housed there:

¹⁰ *El TLC* is an acronym for the 1994 *Tratado de Libre Comercio*, known in English as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

—¿Sabes Josué? Entre los criminales de San Juan de Aragón no sólo hay rateros, no sólo hay inocentes, no sólo hay niños a los que hay que salvar, no sólo hay ancianos que se mueren aquí o muertos por la violencia que a veces no controlo [...] —También hay asesinos. [...] —Los hay porque no tienen otro recurso. Digo, si examinas las circunstancias, entiendes que fueron obligados a matar. No tenían otra salida. El crimen era su fatalidad. Eso yo lo acepto. Otros matan porque se les acaba la capacidad de aguantar. [...] Soportan a un jefe, a una esposa, a un bebe gritón, [...] una suegra hija de su chingada, pero un día estallas, ya no, la muerte les urge: mata y la muerte propia se asoma detrasito nomás. [...] Hay quienes matan por hambre, no lo olvides... Su pausa me espantó. Todo su cuerpo se estremeció sin debilidad. [...] —Pero el crimen gratuito, eso no. El crimen que no te involucra. El crimen por el que te dan dinero. El crimen de Judas. Eso no. Eso sí que no. (Fuentes 243–244)

As he reviews the different types of criminal behavior that can be found in San Juan de Aragón, Miguel Aparecido introduces moral nuance to the assumption that prisoners are guilty based on a simplistic guilty-innocent binary and by extension recognizes the radical heterogeneity of the prisoners. By suggesting that among the prison's inhabitants there is a wide variation in their degree of culpability, from the innocent and unfairly imprisoned to those that commit gratuitous acts of murder he reveals the totalizing façade of the prison walls which encourage those that would fail to gaze into the face of the other to assume a simple narrative of guilt. In reality, some of the prisoners are purely victims of fortune: the children of the prison have been abandoned completely by their families and society, and based on their extreme vulnerability are at the mercy of those around them. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Miguel Aparecido himself is a figure whose will dominates his fortune given that he has chosen to remain in prison despite the fact that he has been declared innocent and could be free. Moreover, the spectrum of criminal behavior found in the other criminals reveals infinite combinations of fortunes and wills, which have contributed to an equally limitless variety of needs and desires on the

part of the criminal actor. There are those who have committed gratuitous acts of murder and others that commit crimes because “no le[s] queda otro recurso.” Through this exercise, it becomes clear that totalizing narratives of the nation cannot account for the reality of the heterogeneity that they conceal. Interestingly, it is those criminals who commit violence for money—a category into which we could include Max Monroy, Pedro Valentín Carrera, Antigua Concepción, and Vasco de Quiroga—that Aparecido considers have committed the worst offense, one that cannot be forgiven.

In a letter to Josué, Lucha Zapata reinforces the radical heterogeneity and potentiality of the nation by pointing to the complexity of the central philosophical ideas of the novel: will and fortune. She suggests that the opposition between the two is not nearly as easy as it would seem in a community in which the people are interconnected in a complex web of wills and fortunes. Necessarily, one person’s will becomes another’s fortune, while fortune can influence wills and the power to pursue them, and people’s desires and needs are not only infinite but capricious:

ve, Josué, cómo se entrelazan la virtud y la fortuna, el azar y la necesidad, la inocencia y la culpa en la legión de los que roban por necesidad porque otros, ¿sabes?, necesitan robar o roban sin necesidad, como otros matan por gusto y otros innecesariamente y otros porque necesitan matar, ¿eres caritativo, comprendes, tienes la caridad suficiente para perdonar sabiendo, Josué, o sólo puedes querer si no sabes? ¿Sólo puedes amar a Lucha Zapata si ignoras a Lucha Zapata? (438)

Here, Lucha Zapata asks Josué directly if the only way that he can love the other is without gazing at her face, without seeing her. The implication is that the true measure of caring and love is to be able to do so while simultaneously seeing the other as she is, rather than as an ideal or a self-serving illusion. This idea recalls

Levinas's concept of generosity, which maintains, while gazing at the other, "the radical and absolute asymmetry between myself and other" (Robbins 7). Importantly, this act of generosity requires recognizing her own potentiality—a one-way movement that requires no reciprocity—rather than identifying with the other and thus subsuming her into the self. These same questions posed by Lucha Zapata hold true for the nation's most powerful actors, and as history has testified, the recurring trend in Mexico is for the political and economic elites to instrumentalize the nation into a tool for their own prosperity and domination. Since colonization, Mexico's powerful and wealthy have repeatedly constructed the nation as a totalized and unified entity that serves to erase all difference and fails to recognize the distance inherent within the community such that it can be leveraged for the benefit of the elites.

Conclusion

By structuring the novel as a crime narrative in which Josué is tasked with narrating the void of his own murder as well as the crimes that have led to a fractured and malfunctioning Mexico, Fuentes presents a critique of the criminals—the powerful political and economic elites—who have embraced the will to power at the expense of the heterogeneity of the nation. Their ambitions have led them to embrace discourses and policies that attempt to totalize the nation into a unified and coherent entity such that it can be used and manipulated for their own ends. The resultant blindness toward the heterogeneity of the nation has led to subjective and systemic violence for centuries, as well as the abandonment of the nation's most

vulnerable. But Fuentes also acknowledges an alternative to this blindness, which is to gaze into the face of the other, recognizing their radical alterity and distance—as Ezekiel explains to Josué, “la verdad es otra persona, acaso otras personas” (Fuentes 545). That is, he suggests that the potentiality of the nation can be accessed by abandoning the corporeal metaphor of the nation as a body and recognizing the asymmetry of every unique and complex member of the community.

However, despite the fact that Josué is charged with bringing this message to the Mexico, particularly the elites, Ezekiel warns: “Verás rostros duros y corazones tenaces. Verás tu casa rebelde. Tu padre. Tus hermanos. [...] No te escuchan porque no quieren. Háblales aunque no te escuchen” (545). In other words, in accordance with the tendency toward a failure to resolve the crimes in the Latin American *novel negra*, Fuentes recognizes that his proposed “solution” to the crimes of the powerful will (likely) never become a reality. His pessimism may have been reinforced by the political events of 2000 when, for the first time in 71 years Mexico’s ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was defeated, ostensibly promising to bring democratic transformation and renewal to Mexico. As the novel suggests, however, while the specific entities that hold power may be changing (from public to private interests), the basic structure of power in Mexico has not. Interestingly, when considering the notion that change will not come easily, if ever, Ezekiel’s command to Josué maintains and reinforces the prophet-like posture of the writer to the nation that authors like Fuentes and Paz embraced in the mid-twentieth century. Although this more recent prophetic stance has moved away from presenting literature as a single “biblical” truth, it nevertheless still claims a paternalist

authority, which calls into question the ultimate potentiality of the nation.

In fact, this *impotentiality*, or the lack of possibility, is inherent in Agamben's exploration of potentiality. He argues, quoting Aristotle, that "dynamis, potentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own steresis, its own non-Being. [...] To be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity" (Agamben 182). In other words, inherent in the potentiality of the individual and the nation is the absence of power and a lack of possibility, and it is up to Mexico, especially its most powerful, to decide—based on their posture toward the other—that they will reverse centuries of domination and abandonment of the people. As Ezekiel charges Josué with prophesying about "los crímenes de la ciudad" he recognizes that the history that began centuries ago—and the void that *La voluntad y la fortuna* explores—is a "narración incompleta," we have yet to see whether change is ultimately possible.

CHAPTER II

¿Por qué tengo esta cara?

Reconceptualizing pervasive criminality in Fadanelli's *Hotel DF*

Over thirty years after Paco Ignacio Taibo II's first *novela negra* featuring the "dynamic, violent, and intrusive" serial detective Héctor Belascoarán Shayne (Close, *Crime Fiction* 33),¹¹ Guillermo Fadanelli published *Hotel DF* (2010), which, in contrast to Taibo II's novels, functions as a dysfunctional detective tale featuring the nihilist and powerless detective Frank Henestrosa whose dubious abilities in the realm of detective work are to observe and identify crimes that would be evident to almost any observer. Although from its beginnings in the 1970s the Mexican *novela negra* has avoided providing a resolution or justice for the crimes enacted by corrupt institutions and the neoliberal economic system—a common characteristic of the Latin American *novela negra* in general (Adriaensen and Pla 15)—Taibo II's detective figure remains active and dynamic in pursuit of what Glen S. Close terms a "libertarian socialist ideology" in which solidarity and collaboration among the community are the foundations of Shayne's effectiveness and the basis for coexistence in an environment in which "government officials are revealed promoters or agents of the most sinister crimes" (Close, *Crime Fiction* 32, 35). That is, despite the acknowledged futility of the pursuit of justice in the Mexican political,

¹¹ *Días de combate* (1976)

economic, and social context, Taibo II's vigorous detective actively resists "the socially dispersive impact of consumer capitalism" by pursuing solidarity within the urban space through active engagement of his community (*Crime Fiction* 44).

In contrast, Fadanelli's detective protagonist recalls Luis Martín-Cabrera's melancholic detective whose tale is relayed in "depressive narrative mode" while "obsessively fix[ing] the eye on the symptom" of his condition (Martín-Cabrera 121). In *Hotel DF*, the first-person detective narrator specifically directs his account toward an exploration of his own dysfunction—and by implication that of the community around him—by planting the question of its cause in the novel's opening pages: "¿por qué justamente tengo esta [maldita] cara?" and subsequently exploring the nature of this dysfunction and its impacts within the community. As such, the novel is underpinned by the crimes that have led the detective protagonist—and his community—to their present state of melancholy, what Martín-Cabrera identifies as the historical trauma of state violence with impunity and the present-day state of exception that carries the tradition of state violence into the post-dictatorship era. To examine the implications of a long history of state sponsored violence without justice, *Hotel DF* employs the Foucauldian heterotopic space of a hotel to bring together a community of individuals representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and nationalities from around the world. In this way, the narrative allows us to explore the ways in which the fog of melancholy perpetuates a community infused with criminal and otherwise dysfunctional behavior, thus challenging the detective tale's traditional dichotomy of evil criminal and innocent victim by encouraging a more complex vision of urban crime and violence.

This alternative vision of urban crime is made possible through the detective's observations in the heterotopic space of the hotel in which he illuminates a web of interconnectedness that links widely disparate members of the community, including their actions and the effects, with one another while simultaneously maintaining the already present barriers between individuals and classes. This interconnectedness recognizes the intricacies of life within a monstrous urban space like Mexico City and explores the ways in which private dysfunction, like incest and abuse, are in fact public both as a consequence of a corporate history of criminality and violence and through the perpetuation of that culture into the future within the community. In this way, it is disingenuous to ignore the varying degrees of violence that are perpetrated by all members of society through the complex range of interactions with everyone from intimate partners to the community at large, reinforcing a paradoxical distancing interconnectedness. Through this examination of crime and victimization in the Hotel Isabel, we can envision a new taxonomy of criminality in which high profile public crimes such as murder, corruption, and drug trafficking are interlaced with other private, interpersonal crimes that indicate a generalized ubiquity of dysfunctional characteristics, including incest, abuse, and addiction, as well as other actions that reveal a complicity in the city's political, social, economic, and spatial dysfunction.

By convening this small community of individuals in the heterotopic space of the hotel, the narrative also explores the relationship between history and criminality and its impact on the community at large. Cyclical time is emphasized in the space of the hotel through the continuous coming and going of guests that are all

connected through the heterotopia (or as Foucault identifies it, a heterochrony). This eternal connection between the past, present, and ostensibly the future recalls Luis Martín-Cabrera's conception of the non-place¹² and its relationship with the contemporary state of exception. Through his research on the *novelas negras* of Chile, Argentina, and Spain,¹³ he has defined the non-place as the traumatic history of state violence that is "either excluded by the politics of the state or highly flattered by the spectacular logic of the media," but remains an ever-present specter through traces and silences that saturate the present (20). It is the heritage of the repressive dictatorships, which produced the "radical abandonment" of significant portions of the population by the state through the torture, murder, and disappearance of tens of thousands of members of their own community. Such a heritage, devoid of justice for the dead and disappeared, leads to the continuous presence of specters of the past. With the transition to democracy, complete with impunity for the perpetrators of state terror, these states heartily embraced the neoliberal economic approach—as did Mexico in the 1980s—which has engendered the contemporary radical abandonment of certain classes of citizens leading to "a new type of desaparecidos," found in spaces of exclusion, which are "filled with historical characters that have become bare life, obsolete subjects deprived of legal

¹² Not to be confused with Marc Augé's conceptualization of the non-place which refers to transient spaces that allow those that pass through to remain anonymous.

¹³ Although the history of Mexico holds significant differences from those of the Southern Cone and Spain, there are also marked similarities in the role played by the state in violent repression of its population during the PRI's dictatorial hold on state power and its effects on the community, with the Tlatelolco massacre being perhaps one of the most well-known examples, but hardly the only one. Moreover, Mexico has a long history of institutionalized violence, including the genocide of indigenous groups from the colonial period onward.

rights whose life can therefore be extinguished without committing a crime” (106). This contemporary ability of the state to “kill without legal repercussions” is what Martín-Cabrera calls, borrowing from Giorgio Agamben, the state of exception under which each of these governments is operating, allowing us to trace the continuities between the past and present, and between the non-place and the state of exception (84).

Implicit in the idea of this cycle of radical abandonment—both historical and present day—is that there is a tangible divide between those who are nothing more than bare life to be exploited at the hands of the state and those members of the community that enjoy full citizenship. To be clear, this distinction is not a fixed dichotomy but rather a fluid means of understanding that not everyone within the community is subject to the same radical abandonment by the state—there are those with sufficient power, privilege, and wealth to remain within the protective arm of the state. In engaging with the non-place and the state of exception, *Hotel DF* again reinforces the idea that all of the hotel’s visitors are interconnected—those who have suffered at the hands of state violence and those whose privilege situates them on the side of state power. In doing so, the narrative calls for the reader to re-evaluate the role that the non-place and the state of exception play within the nation. While the wealthy and powerful may retire to private enclaves to avoid exposure to the harsh realities of this bare life, they ultimately cannot escape the trauma that infuses the entire community. Rather, the historical and contemporary radical abandonment of a portion of the nation has serious impacts on the entire community, even those who remain aligned with the most powerful actors in the

nation. In this way, *Hotel DF* questions not only the easy division of society into good and bad actors, innocent and criminal behavior, but also the idea that the effects of violence can be avoided and disregarded by those in power, kept at arms length by constructing higher walls and employing more security guards.

By using a melancholic detective figure as narrator and omnipotent observer of the variety of activities taking place in the hotel, *Hotel DF* not only emphasizes the impact that the non-place and its contemporary counterpart, the state of exception, has on the members of the community, it also offers a possibility for healing through “a new relation with the present” (113). Given that the feeling of melancholy represents “a task of mourning without closure” and exists through the continuing presence of traumatic memories, by consciously embracing the melancholy and refusing to elide or forget the trauma of the past, it “can also establish an antagonistic relationship with the state of exception” which seeks to ignore or bury the past (110, 112). That is, given that the melancholy remains grounded in the history of state-sponsored violence while the state itself demonstrates an “incapacity or unwillingness to come to terms with [its] own violent past”—often as seen through the legislation of immunity or inadequate reconciliation commissions—remaining rooted in melancholy is a refusal to forget the role of the state in the radical abandonment of its people (112, 113). Moreover, by not letting go of the truth of past and present trauma, the melancholic detective also signals the possibility for an alternative community that exists outside of the structures of the state and capitalism. While this possibility remains muted in *Hotel DF*, it exists

nonetheless, and offers an imperfect model of this alternative community through the heterotopia of the hotel.

The hotel and the detective

Hotel DF presents a series of characters that, for a brief period, all inhabit or frequent the Hotel Isabel, a nondescript space located in Mexico City's *centro histórico* that most of the city's inhabitants have walked past but few actually remember (Fadanelli 13). The novel's first person omniscient narrator and melancholic detective figure Frank *el Artista* Henestrosa has earned just enough money as a *nota roja* journalist to escape for a few days at the hotel and, while he is there, he comes into contact with various individuals that include other residents of Mexico City, European tourists, and local criminals. Although Henestrosa is not a detective by trade, he functions as a sort of informal detective—reinforced by his career as a journalist—contracted by an old colleague to investigate crimes taking place in the north wing of the hotel. As Close notes, there is a tendency to abandon the careerist private investigator in the Latin American *novela negra* in favor of a more culturally credible protagonist, thus “afford[ing] a more sobering glimpse of a contemporary social worlds” (“Detective Is Dead” 147). One common substitute for the generic figure of the detective, as demonstrated by Colombian author Santiago Gamboa and Chilean author Alberto Fuguet, is the figure of the journalist, which Fuguet describes as “the most hardboiled [person] I know” (“Detective Is Dead” 151). This is particularly true for Henestrosa and his colleague who were *nota roja* journalists, signifying that they reported daily on the most spectacular and

gruesome violence in Mexico, which, in cases of interpersonal violence were likely met with impunity rather than the tidy solutions of provided by the traditional hardboiled detective.

And yet, despite the Mexican hardboiled detective's tendency to "offer[...] his physical body as both a catalyst and a stage for the battle between good and evil" (Braham 66) the novel contains very little action and is overwhelmed by the nihilism, inertia, and melancholy of its characters, functioning as what Charles Baxter calls a dysfunctional narrative. That is, it is a narrative with no antagonist to counterbalance the protagonist, no agency or motivation, no possibility for resolution, and with a story that "spreads over the landscape like a stain" as it searches for the origins of the protagonist's discontent (Baxter 69). Although Baxter's argument is culturally specific to the late twentieth century United States, his observations about this type of narrative are astute and applicable to the context of early twenty-first Mexico City where there is a prevalent sense of powerlessness among the population—specifically related to obscured mechanisms of corporate and social power—which, for Baxter, is what may account for the emergence of the dysfunctional narrative (72).

In *Hotel DF*, this melancholic dysfunction is apparent from the first sentences of Henestrosa's narration, in which he states,

La vida ha sido puerca conmigo [...] [d]urante una buena parte de esa vida he viajado en un lento tren sin ventanas. Ésta y no otra es la sensación. Cuando cumplí 20 años el futuro me tundió con un manazo en la nuca, y me dijo: 'No sonrías, que te espera lo peor.' (Fadanelli 9)

He is the victim of an undefined crime by an imprecise perpetrator—simply *la vida*—and it has produced a pessimistic protagonist who finds himself powerless to

act: he is nothing more than a passenger who is unable to control either the speed or direction of his own destiny, and incapable of seeing or comprehending the world around him. As this beginning portends, *Hotel DF* and other dysfunctional narratives are characterized by a “psychic landscape of trauma and paralysis,” with characters that are overwhelmed by their own isolation and abjectness (Baxter 70). And so, with a nihilistic protagonist and an undefined antagonist, the objective of the dysfunctional narrative becomes the identification of the origin of this discontent, as Henestrosa narrates at the end of the first chapter “sería más apropiado para mi salud explicar las razones por las que he llegado a tener la cara que tengo. ¿Por qué justamente esta maldita cara?” (Fadanelli 12). This question frames his entire narrative as a search to unveil the truth of his condition and, by extension, those around him. When juxtaposed with elements of the detective genre, this narrative is thus positioned as the investigation of an amorphous crime.

Henestrosa’s search for the origins of his nihilism and inertia—for the nature of the crime that has left him in this state—and his observations of the same condition impacting the entire community takes place primarily in the Hotel Isabel, an actual hotel in the historical center of Mexico City. Notably, the hotel is named for the street on which it is located, *Isabel la Católica*, linking Henestrosa’s experience of present day Mexico City with the nation’s violent colonial past by referencing the Spanish conquerors, Fernando and Isabela. And it is precisely its connection with Europe that leads Henestrosa to the Hotel Isabel, through a sense of inferiority, self-loathing, and idealized admiration. As he walks down the *Avenida 5 de Mayo*, he notices Stefan Weimer—a tall blonde German walking conspicuously among his

fellow *chilangos*. As he contemplates the sight of Weimer, he makes a decision:

Es entonces cuando descubro a ese hombre rubio y desgarbado del que hablaba antes, transita muy orondo entre los paisanos, como si su cabellera dorada no lo pusiera en el centro de todas las miradas. Este rubio es su propia estrella de Belén. [...] El extranjero es alemán y su figura me empuja a tomar una decisión: me hospedaré en el Hotel Isabel. Basta ya de darle de comer a la misma puerca, abriré el corral y a ver qué pasa. Europa está a unos pasos sin necesidad de pasaportes, aviones, fronteras y demás ridiculeces. (20)

In this moment, Stefan Weimer is the antithesis of Henestrosa and his compatriots: he is tall, blonde, and sure of himself among a sea of “desgraciados” trying to give off an air of importance (20). By following Weimer, the “estrella de Belén,” Henestrosa sees the possibility for salvation from the mediocrity of Mexico City. The reference to the star that led the three Wise Men to Bethlehem and Jesus in the Nativity Story suggests that for Henestrosa, following Weimer might lead to salvation from the overwhelming dysfunction surrounding him.¹⁴ As he states, “hoy más que nunca necesito rodearme de personas educadas, ecologistas, refinadas, y olvidarme de vivir dentro de un sartén manipulado por el diablo” (20). He draws a clear value distinction between the young, white, European tourists that he expects to find in the hotel and the city in which he lives, suggesting that Mexico City’s inhabitants have limited (if any) autonomy over their lives. Rather, their political, economic, and social systems are manipulated by the devil, a supernaturally powerful entity that has the ability to dominate the lives of those under his control—ostensibly the state

¹⁴ The reference to Belén also concerns Weimar and Henestrosa’s physical movements in relation to the geographical layout of Mexico City. The *Avenida Arcos de Belén / José María Izazaga* is located just a few blocks away from the Hotel Isabel where it intersects with *Calle Isabel la Católica*. As Henestrosa walked south away from the *Avenida 5 de Mayo* toward the Hotel Isabel on *Calle Isabel la Católica*, he would also have been walking toward *Arcos de Belén*.

and neoliberal economic policies that heavily determine the structure and functioning of their community. By comparing life in Mexico City to inhabiting a frying pan, there is the sense of imminent destruction and futility, recalling the axiom “out of the frying pan into the fire” (a saying which also exists in Mexico). In contrast, he imagines that upon entering the Hotel Isabel he will be immersed in a group of educated and refined people who are also ecologically minded (a central issue in Mexico City given the severity of the pollution, water scarcity, and environmental degradation that has characterized the city in recent decades but that began centuries ago). As he follows Weimer in pursuit of this idealized space, the image of him opening the gate of the pigpen and moving away from “la misma puerca” into a new space emphasizes a concrete physical movement out of the space of the city and into the separate cosmopolitan, perhaps utopian, space of the hotel (20).

And yet, Henestrosa is aware of his own delusions about this idealization of Europe admitting, “[n]o soy tan idiota como para pensar que todos los europeos son tal y como los he descrito, pero me conviene pensar así, ¿me conviene!” (20). He clings to a utopian vision of an ordered, confident European community inside the Hotel Isabel as a futile hope of escape from the dysfunction of Mexico City where he could escape the memories of the non-place and the current state of exception. Indeed, the hotel does not offer the escape that Henestrosa seeks—his excitement is loaded with irony. He relates that,

[d]entro de mi cabeza suceden miseriosos acontecimientos, las imágenes se desplazan sin muletas a velocidades desquiciadas y nada puede estar tan podrido en mi vida si a unas cuadas existe un hotel como el Isabel. Invadiré Europa sin subirme a un avión [...] Por el solo hecho de imaginarme

compartiendo las escaleras, el comedor con una de esas jóvenes blancas que vienen a México a tomar vacaciones, mis testículos se inflaman como croquetas de maíz (20–21)

Although the sudden animation of Henestrosa's thoughts reveals excitement and hope, there is also a sense of discomfort as his brain seems to go haywire, strange things are happening in his mind and his thoughts flying about at "velocidades desquiciadas" all while he becomes sexually aroused at the thought of the young white women that have taken up residence at the Hotel Isabel. Moreover, the suggestion that the mere presence of a group of Europeans in the Hotel Isabel is sufficient to counteract what Henestrosa has described as an entire life of disappointment and dysfunction is too hyperbolic to be believed ("nada puede estar tan podrido en mi vida si a unas cuadras existe un hotel como el Isabel" (20)). The irony of this passage is underlined when Henestrosa enters the Hotel behind Weimer and admits that he knows nothing about Germany or Germans and could not distinguish one European from another. He is reacting to nothing more than an image and an idea: the image of a tall blonde German—who he imagines to be physically and culturally superior to the Mexican masses—and the idea that he may have the opportunity to escape to an "other space," one that contradicts the space of the city that surrounds it. As such, there is a paradoxical nature to the space within the Hotel Isabel, one that is simultaneously utopian and painfully real.

In fact, it is immediately apparent that Weimer is not the ideal that Henestrosa had envisioned—he embodies the history of colonialism as a European who approaches Mexico City from the standpoint of consumption and resource extraction. He has come to buy cheap cocaine, find a Mexican woman to take back

with him, and experience from a safe emotional distance the degradation of Mexico City (25). Reflecting a similar failure of an ideal, Weimer's last name evokes the Weimar Republic, a peaceful and progressive time in Germany's history that was ultimately destroyed by Nazism. Henestrosa admits that his faith in Weimer was ridiculous: "[e]s absurdo de mi parte dar por sentado que el rubio Weimer es un talismán que me traerá fortuna" (26). When he unexpectedly encounters *el Boomerang* Riaño and the members of a criminal gang in the hotel, he ultimately recognizes that what he would find in the Hotel Isabel was not measurably different from what he would find in the Mexico City (26). In fact, before the Hotel Isabel is even introduced by name, Henestrosa tells us that it is a "lugar común," a common space or commonplace, nearly indistinguishable from other sites across the city. Later in the novel, Henestrosa considers that he would have had the same experience if he had chosen a different hotel to stay in (81). These connections to any number of other *lugares comunes* in the city suggest a reflective relationship between the hotel and the broader space of the city. Specifically, if we consider the idea of *lo común* as that which is in common or shared we can begin to see the commonplace space of the hotel as a microcosm of Mexico City more broadly.

Hotel Isabel as heterotopia

As a space that is separate from the rest of the city, the Hotel Isabel shares several characteristics with Michel Foucault's notion of a heterotopia, a space that serves as a "kind of effectively enacted utopia in which [...] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and

inverted” (Foucault 24). That is, heterotopic spaces like the hotel serve the unique function of reflecting, subverting, and commenting on the space around it. According to Foucault, the heterotopia can be identified as such in that it is a closed space, apart from the public space of the city and isolated from the outside but accessible by those who perform certain entrance rituals. In the case of the Hotel Isabel, it is essential for the individual entering to comply with certain social, cultural, and economic requirements that echo the requirements of full citizenship in the nation—they must have sufficient money to cover the cost of their stay and occupy an acceptable social position. When Henestrosa enters the Hotel Isabel, he is acutely aware of the areas where he meets and falls short of these expectations, noting as he enters that “[e]l recepcionista no me ve con buenos ojos” (Fadanelli 39) and he suspects that he is being evaluated based on his appearance, making his entry into the hotel precarious. Because he occupies an insecure social position, he puts forth a concerted performance to demonstrate that he belongs in the hotel, and—in response to the receptionist informing him about the hotel’s free continental breakfast—he makes sure that the receptionist knows that he has enough money pay for his own (42). On the other hand, a member of the Mexican elite has a different experience when he is checking into the hotel: Gabriel Sandler enters the space of the hotel feeling superior and secure, and challenging the receptionist when he is told to fill out a registration card—“Y si no quiero registarme...”—clearly not feeling that he must prove his worthiness of belonging (78). In contrast with the working class Henestrosa, there is no question that Sandler belongs and that the requirements for entry into the space are nothing more than a nuisance to him.

There are also other characters that come and go from the hotel without participating in the ritual evaluation of social and economic acceptability at the reception desk, including *el Boomerang* Riaño, Miguel Llorante, and the crew of *maleantes* that includes *el Nairobi*. Despite their easy entry, there are requirements for these visitors: they either must have the economic means to consume something at the bar/restaurant or they must be recognized by the staff as a member of the criminal gang operating out of the north wing, obviously skirting the official entry requirements. In turn, there are also social and economic groups that Henestrosa, internalizing social convention, believes should not be admitted into their space. For example, observing a group of lottery ticket *vendedores ambulantes*¹⁵ that has entered the restaurant, Henestrosa asks himself “¿Qué carajos hacen aquí?” (197). In sum, there are people who struggle to be recognized, people who are recognized no matter what, people who are not recognized as anything other than a nuisance and belong more appropriately on the streets—“hasta en las cañerías,” (197)—and people who come and go, occupying a liminal space and moving in and out of legitimate society according to a distinct set of rituals. In this way, the rituals for entry into the Hotel Isabel reflect those of citizenship in broader Mexican society.

The heterotopia is also characterized by the presence within itself of “all the other real sites” that exist in the culture beyond, even if they are incompatible or contradictory (Foucault 24). Foucault provides the example of the garden, which, in its original conception, was designed as a microcosm of the world, incorporating within itself the four corners of the earth (25). In much the same way, through the

¹⁵ In Mexico (and Latin America) lottery ticket vendors are part of the lumpen proletariat and would typically not be welcome in upper-class establishments.

Hotel Isabel, we can see the juxtaposition of Mexico City spaces that rarely, if ever, come into contact with one another. The residents and visitors in the hotel represent and are viscerally linked to spaces of the city, and they embody these spaces within the Hotel Isabel in the same way that vegetation and other garden structures represented the four corners of the world in the ancient garden. Through the spaces of the hotel, particularly the bar/restaurant and the guest rooms, we see the simultaneous presence and connection of distinct social and economic classes as well as of local inhabitants and foreigners. As in Foucault's garden, the integration of these distinct individuals from across Mexico City within the hotel allows the Hotel Isabel to function as a microcosm of the city. And yet, by fabricating a space in which these incompatible sites are integrated, the heterotopia also simultaneously contradicts the space of the city by bringing together disparate inhabitants that would normally rarely interact or even come into contact with one another. Therefore, the heterotopia of the hotel replicates the distance between groups and individuals in the city while also, freed from the barriers that preclude a clear vision of the community, makes explicit the web of interconnectedness that blankets it. It reveals points of connection, commonalities, and shared circumstances of life in Mexico City while also emphasizing the physical and sociological distance that characterizes the quotidian life of its inhabitants.

Lugar Común: Connection and distance

As previously mentioned, one of Henestrosa's first references to the Hotel Isabel was as a *lugar común* which denotes the space as something commonplace,

indistinguishable from many other places in the city, a cliché. However, the phrase also signals that which is held in common and foregrounds the networks and connections that are established in the Hotel Isabel among individuals from very different spaces. As such, in describing the hotel as a *lugar común*, Henestrosa is simultaneously recognizing the very real distances that are present in this space as well as the connections that are continuously emphasized through the examination of interactions between hotel guests and visitors alike. In particular, the bar/restaurant area functions as a “public space” within the hotel where individuals embodying widely different spaces of Mexico City and beyond—from the elite neighborhoods of las Lomas de Chapultepec, to Tepito the *barrio bravo*, to foreign nations—come into contact with one another.

Outside of the hotel, there are clear social, political, and economic divisions between communities from different areas of the city that rarely interact with one another, and the interactions that do occur are fraught with violence, representing clear social and economic hierarchies. In one instance, a group of boys working for the kingpin of the drug cartel operating out of the Hotel Isabel, *La Señora*, having grown up in “la vecindades ruinosas aldeañas a Tepito” with a future of only fear and death in front of them, decide to kidnap a member of the upper class that they find in the *colonia* Condesa, one of the city’s wealthier neighborhoods (Fadanelli 137). They find themselves uncomfortable with their closeness to their victim and not just because it is their first kidnapping, but because they represent two distinct, segregated spaces of the city. They have no idea how to interact with “uno que no es como ellos,” so they scrutinize him “como se observa a un espécimen dentro de un

frasco de botella” (137), and ask him questions revealing “la curiosidad animal, el morbo” that they feel toward their victim, unable to breach the distance between them (138). Ultimately, when they realize that the police are after them and they will likely die, they release their captive (because they like him) and decide to fight the police, a battle that they inevitably lose (137). In releasing their victim, the group of boys gestures to the utopic vision of interconnectedness that is visible within the Hotel Isabel. In reality the wealthy captive would have likely been killed. At the same time, we can see the state of exception at work in their fate as there is a clear hierarchy between the boys and their captive, and the sympathetic youth from Tepito, pronounced “pendejos animales” by the police, knew from the beginning that their fate would be to “morir acribillados” (139, 137), whereas their wealthy victim, because of his economic privilege, escapes unscathed. And yet, in this case (as in many others) the suspension of laws regarding these boys is the norm, rather than the exception: they are nothing more than bare life that have been radically abandoned by the state and its institutions, and the authorities can kill them with impunity. By merging, within the *lugar común*, the realities of the state of exception and full citizens that have no need to acknowledge such realities, *Hotel DF* recognizes the interconnectedness of the community and allows for a more profound exploration of the impact the state of exception has on all of its members: on the young kidnapers, their wealthy captive, and the community at large. Moreover, the fact that there was an ever-so-brief connection between the two groups, enough for the *tepiteños* to decide to let their captive go, suggests that it is within a *lugar común* where there may be a glimpse of hope for an alternative

community in which the interconnectedness of the nation could be recognized while, as Fuentes proposes in *La voluntad y la fortuna*, difference could be met with the generous gaze that recognizes the other's unique potentiality rather than insisting on uniformity.

The merging of these groups in the *lugar común* is evident as Henestrosa narrates the arrival of each new visitor to the Hotel Isabel. From the world of the elite, Gabriel Sandler and his cousin (and lover) Sofía Sandler each enter the hotel separately. They live in spaces that are completely divorced from other more humble spaces in the city: Gabriel's family lives in las Lomas de Chapultepec, one of Mexico City's wealthiest neighborhoods, a space which is acknowledged to be "miles de pasos, físicos y simbólicos" from the Hotel Isabel (64) and Sofía's house, also situated among the city's most affluent spaces, is separated from the world around by "alto muros [...] [que] la protegen de las miradas ociosas y criminales" (111). In these private enclaves the wealthy physically separate their space from the potentially invasive or criminal gaze of outsiders. The result is a secluded and sheltered existence such that both suffer from an existential ennui—the effects of their lifestyle—what Henestrosa describes in Gabriel as "el cansancio mental, el aburrimiento metafísico, el sopor [...] y el odio [que] se convertirá en vacío" (64). Sofía experiences the same thing, expressing to her mother that she cannot be bothered to chew her food so she only drinks coffee while her mother wonders whether she might be suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome (86). Ultimately, when they decide to venture into the *Centro*, neither have any real awareness of the city that surrounds them. For instance, Sofía asks her driver whether he knows how

to get there (she, of course, does not) (111), and Gabriel finds himself completely amazed by the “mundo nuevo” that he encounters in the *Centro*. The city is not like he imagined,

sino otra que respira bajo una coraza de armadillo. Embarga al chico una sensación emocionante, ser un extranjero en su tierra, sí, estar en oriente sin haber dado más que unos pocos pasos, la orfandad repentina que nutrirá su siguiente gran obra: es un afortunado, sin duda. (66–67)

For Gabriel, this “mundo real” (77) seems so foreign that, even out from behind the protective walls of his neighborhood, he continues to feel distanced from the world around him. He maintains this distance, approaching the community that he encounters as an orientalist and taking advantage of its peculiarities to inspire his artistic pursuits. To this end, he hopes that his room “lucirá sucia como una letrina” so that he can exploit its baseness (77). However, what becomes painfully clear as they enter the Hotel Isabel and—through Henestrosa’s narration—we begin to observe their intimate and public behavior, the assumption that they can remain apart and untouched by the crime, violence, and dysfunction introduced by the state of exception and the non-place by remaining isolated is false and naïve. They are not immune to its effects: they too are implicated in the web of dysfunction and violence, and experience its traumatic consequences.

The other city that Gabriel observes on his way to the hotel, “que respira bajo una coraza de armadillo,” the city of Henestrosa and *el Boomerang* Riaño, of mediocrity and crime, of people that have become hardened and suspicious living with the non-place and under the state of exception—is also present within the *lugar común*. This other city has erected a shield around itself for protection from

potential threats and has adopted a defensive posture against the outside world, much like the Sandler's "altos muros" in response to their long history of exposure to state sponsored violence and the present day state of exception. As *el Boomerang* Riaño observes to Henestrosa, the criminality of the state has led to such a culture of dysfunction and violence, it has infiltrated even relationships among neighbors:

No es una mala idea vivir en un hotel. Para empezar, no le ves la cara a los mismos pinches vecinos de siempre. Les cortarían el cuello a todos. [...] Ahora tus asesinos duermen en el departamento de al lado. Tengo un vecino que cada vez que me encuentra en las escaleras baja la cabeza y, nunca le he visto los ojos. El día en que se los vea es que ya me encajó una navaja en el vientre. (178)

Here, Riaño signals the distance between the individuals who ostensibly would share a connection given that they inhabit the same social and economic sphere. As Riaño describes, not only does he not know his neighbors—he has never looked them in the eyes—he assumes that the minute he does open himself to them, they will harm him. In such a culture of dysfunction and mistrust, healthy and productive relationships seem nearly impossible. And it is from this world that Henestrosa and Riaño, and Roberto Davison (a struggling actor) and his wife Gloria Manson enter the Hotel Isabel, bringing their culture of dysfunction with them.

In addition to the local inhabitants that have come to the Hotel Isabel to escape everyday life, a group of foreigners have taken up residence in the hotel and also interact with visitors and hotel guests in the bar/restaurant, signaling the role of global capital and influence in the neoliberal era. This juxtaposition of locals and foreigners in the hotel is emphasized by the very structure of the space. As Miguel Llorante explains to Henestrosa, the bar was original to the space and has typically been a destination for locals (although during the narrative foreigners like Stefan

Weimer can be found in the bar as well), while the hotel constructed around it attracts primarily foreigners:

Buena decisión venir a este bar, vamos, le han construido un hotel alrededor, un lujo sensacional para un bar tan humilde, sí, el hotel es una añadidura, vienen personas de otros países pero, ¿usted cree que vienen a tomarse una copa en el bar del hotel?, no, qué va, prefieren las cantinas [...] no van a venir a este bar deslavado cuando todos sus coterráneos esperan su llegada para que les cuenten los pormenores de *la cantina*. (46)

As Llorante describes, the hotel bar is a space that by its nature is authentically Mexican, yet it does not attract the foreign tourists that visit the city because it does not hold the cultural caché of the stereotypically traditional *cantinas*. In other words, foreigners visit Mexico City to have a specific type of tourist experience—one that they can brag about to the people at home—while remaining detached from any real experience of the city. As Henestrosa observes, the foreigners “no han viajado a esta ciudad a sufrir, sino a vivir aventuras y a ser más felices y sabios que antes. Por lo tanto sus sentidos se orientan hacia el placer y restan atención a la fealdad que supura desde lo subterráneo” (254). For this reason, when Henestrosa feels overwhelmed by the violence of the city he decides to act like a foreigner who can “deambular distraído” through the streets (80). Therefore, there is a clear distinction between the local inhabitants and the foreign tourists, and this juxtaposition of the two spaces of the Hotel Isabel highlights the distance between the way that each population experiences the city. While the foreigners occupy the privileged position of exploiting the city for their own pleasure but remain distant from its harsh reality, the city’s inhabitants suffer the deleterious effects of the city.

Perhaps the most notable example of the privileged foreigner in the novel is Stefan Weimer who has the luxury of reveling in the sordid aspects of Mexico City

while holding the reality at arms length. Stefan declares *el Defe* to be his favorite city saying “amo esta ciudad y por eso puedo decir que está más fea que antes. Creo que es la ciudad más horrible del mundo. ¿Y sabe qué? Eso me gusta” (25). As a visitor, Stefan can glamorize and take pleasure in the ugly and foul aspects of Mexico City for a period of time. This is evident after he ignorantly visits *la Señora’s* lair in Tepito alone in search of cocaine. *La Señora* is baffled by Stefan’s boldness in coming straight to his residence and asking for drugs, asking himself: “¿Dónde se imaginaba estar?” (102). But ultimately, the reality of the city begins to creep into Stefan’s consciousness and shortly after his visit to *la Señora*, Stefan decides to leave Mexico City, because

su amado Distrito Federal comienza a volverse real. Si permaneciera unas semanas más en la ciudad las nubes se dispararían y sus ojos descubrirían la primera mancha. Y después el cáncer y el sufrimiento, la decepción como una sombra detrás de todos los símbolos. Así sucede con el cuerpo humano y es así con el cuerpo de las ciudades, la gravedad afecta piedras y huesos; la sangre y el agua corren buscando una salida.” (265)

As a foreigner, Stefan is only able to remain detached from the dysfunction of Mexico City to a point, the longer he stays, darkness and suffering inevitably overshadow his romanticized vision like a cancer. As Stefan spends time with *el Nairobi*, one of the leaders of the criminal gang operating out of the hotel, and *la Chica Lomelí*, a former convict, he begins to detect glimmers of the violence and trauma of Mexico City’s non-place that he professes to love so much. He is told that the receptionist Pablo Paolo may have killed someone, that the Hotel Isabel may be a “cueva de ladrones” (264), and that living in the city is more dangerous than being in jail (265). As he becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the reality of the city, he takes advantage of his privileged position to find his way out of the darkness,

returning to Germany just in time to avoid being murdered by *el Nairobi* for having visited *la Señora* on his own.

While simultaneously maintaining the real-world barriers between distant inhabitants of wealthy, working-class, and poverty-stricken neighborhoods, as well as foreigners, the Hotel Isabel is also a site where the inherent interconnectedness of all of these individuals from disconnected spaces is revealed. In the bar/restaurant of the Hotel Isabel, strangers freely share tables in the crowded space and develop relationships (e.g. Stefan Weimer and *el Nairobi*, Gabriel Sandler and Gloria Manson, Henestrosa and Laura Gibellini) that continue beyond the space of the dining area into the hotel and the city at large. As Henestrosa observes during one of his visits to the bar/restaurant, the energy of the space mirrors that of the public space in a small town: “El desfile de las sillas y el murmullo de los clientes contagian el ambiente de un humor de pueblo: sólo faltan los pájaros” (197). In this image, the diversity of the hotel’s guests and visitors merges aurally into one voice (*el murmullo*) and physically into one formation (*el desfile*). This interconnection is emphasized throughout the narrative, in one instance Stefan’s laugh infects the rest of the diners, it is “tan elocuente que se contagia a otras mesas, todos celebran las risotadads del rubio” (60). Despite Stefan’s foreignness and the diversity of people inhabiting the Hotel Isabel, his laugh has the ability to connect all of the diners in one action and one emotion. Moreover, the interconnection between all these individuals is not because of anything they themselves have done, it is fundamental to the space of the hotel, as Roberto Davison observes upon entering the dining area:

[d]e pronto lo aborda la sensación de que todas esas personas que hablan animadamente en el comedor no están separadas entre sí por ninguna clase de espacio: el espacio consiste en una respiración de la material, unida por átomos elásticos, sin oquedades, y en ese espacio sin resquicios el hombre joven sentado en la mesa vecina es el mismo Roberto que toma forma en uno de los momentos de dicha respiración. (141)

The connection between the hotel's visitors is an essential characteristic of the physical space, they share the air that they all breathe, the particles enter and exit the bodies of each person in the room. In this way, there is no separation between them and Roberto Davison actually sees Gabriel Sandler ("el hombre joven" sitting next to him) as the embodiment of a younger version of himself, they are connected in their very essence. While on one hand this interconnectedness holds the elusive promise to a shared sense of life and solidarity, there is also the sense of oppression in the connection to another with no space for an individual breath. As such, the interconnectedness simultaneously reveals a future possibility and shared complicity in the present violence and dysfunction.

Indeed, the interconnectedness within the Hotel Isabel reveals the degree to which all members of the community, regardless of class or status, share in the dysfunction and violence of living in a nation where the state of exception rules and the non-place is always present. When the Spanish tourist Laura Gibellini becomes romantically involved with Henestrosa, she finds herself overwhelmed by the sense of emptiness and evil that invades her being, and abandons him the hotel after their first sexual encounter. The following morning, she finds that this connection with Henestrosa has drawn the reality of the city too close to her:

Tiene miedo de provocar a la noche de esta ciudad, continuar la historia y quedar preñada de esta maldad que se respira desde las piedras más profundas de las pirámides sepultadas [...] En su vagina se concentra una

sensación de vacío que asciende a sus axilas y mutila sus brazos. (243)

The experience of connecting intimately to the dysfunction of the city had an invasive effect on her body, with the non-place threatening to invade her most intimate spaces with specters and traces of the violent past that inhabit the city's every structure, even the stones of the urban landscape. In another sexual encounter, Gabriel Sandler (involved with his cousin) and the married Gloria Manson meet in the restaurant and she ends up spending the night in his room all while being observed by her husband. While the two strangers clearly bridged a social, economic, and even generational divide by sleeping together (Manson is 15 years older than Sandler), not only are they betraying their own respective lovers by having an affair, their un-narrated encounter is surrounded by dysfunction and violence. Namely, upon realizing that his wife had slept with Sandler, Roberto Davison imagines "la posibilidad de asesinarla no sin antes golpearla y hacerle confesar sus secretos [...] masticar la carne de sus muslos y, si aún le restan fuerzas, lloriquear un poco y lamer sus huesos" (277). Although he doesn't act on his violent vision, he is replicating the power relationship of the state to its citizens by exploiting the bare life of his own wife. Moreover, during Sandler and Manson's encounter, Sofia is being murdered in Tepito while attempting to buy drugs for her and her cousin. As such, the connections that are made in the Hotel Isabel, while offering the possibility of transcendence, reinforce the shared violence and trauma of the entire community.

Reconceptualizing crime in the *novela negra*

Hotel DF initially appears to incorporate elements of the traditional detective narrative by calling on Henestrosa to follow the classic formula of “crime + clues + deduction = solution” in light of the crimes taking place in the hotel (Braham 86). However, it ultimately deconstructs this formula to reveal its exhaustion in reflecting the complex reality of “crime” in the context of twenty-first century Mexico. The presence of one crime after another permeates the narrative, from the drug-related activities taking place in the north wing of the hotel, to the theft of Laura Gibellini’s purse, the kidnapping of a young man in La Condesa, the assassination of the kidnapers by the police, and the murder of Sofía Sandler and *el Internet* (a member of the hotel gang). Moreover, other less overt but still insidious crimes taking place within the *lugar común* are also central to Henestrosa’s question “¿por qué justamente tengo esta cara?”, including corruption, incest, betrayal, physical abuse, substance abuse, and extreme economic disparities.

Of these crimes, the narrative explicitly only calls for a “solution” to the activities of a gang of criminals operating out of the hotel by—in the tradition of the detective narrative—tasking Henestrosa with uncovering precisely what the nature of the crimes are and who is involved. However, these elements of the traditional detective narrative ultimately function as what Slavoj Žižek calls a false scene—a set of circumstances surrounding a crime, and set in place by the perpetrator, that distract from the pertinent details and must be interpreted in order to fully unravel the crime(s) at the center of the narrative.¹⁶ In *Hotel DF* there is no explicit

¹⁶ For Žižek, the murderer of the classic detective tale carefully contrives the false scene such that its “organic, natural quality is a lure,” distracting from the details that would lead to the correct interpretation of the crime (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 53).

antagonistic agent who appears in the narrative seeking to draw attention away from the truth of the crimes by enacting a false scene, rather it is the generic convention itself that establishes this false scene. From the earliest detective tales of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to the hardboiled fiction of the early 20th century in the United States, and Mexico's iconic *Taibo II*, the detective narrative necessitates a specific crime to be solved—a convention that is not compatible with Mexico's contemporary reality in which dysfunction and criminality are ubiquitous. That is, the fact that this traditional detective structure has been woven into the narrative situates the novel as a crime tale and "the inconspicuous details that stick out, that do not fit into the frame of the surface image" call on the detective figure to look beyond just the crimes of the drug cartel to the totality of what is taking place in the hotel (Zizek, *Looking Awry* 53). His observations reveal that the *maleantes* operating out of the hotel certainly have an impact on the space, but criminality is not just the domain of institutions and delinquent citizens, as the traditional hard-boiled detective tale would have you believe; the crimes of the city are infinitely more complex and entrenched: to varying degrees and with infinitely unique roles in the web of crimes that extends across Mexico City, everyone is affected by the crimes and everyone is implicated.

The specific crime that is presented as the focal point of the narrative is brought to Henestrosa's attention at the beginning of his stay at the Hotel Isabel when he encounters his old colleague, *el Boomerang* Riaño. Riaño assumes that Henestrosa has come to stay at the hotel so that he can write about and, in turn, profit from the criminal activities that are taking place there. In conversations with

Henestrosa, *el Boomerang* constantly alludes to *something mysterious* happening in the hotel (Fadanelli 71, 179) and solicits his help in discovering precisely what it is going on in the dark and enigmatic north wing. Although there is never a definitive moment of revelation as to the nature of the crimes, Henestrosa ultimately deduces that a band of *narcotraficantes* has been stockpiling cash and weapons in the sealed-off second floor, protected by armed guards. In fact, he discovers the truth of the crimes with almost no effort: “Es algo que he descubierto sin esforzarme. Está todo a la vista de la imaginación” (254). He has no need to investigate (and, as will be examined later, no will to do so) given that his own personal experience with crime in Mexico City allows him to easily identify the nature of the criminal activities taking place there. Moreover, these crimes permeate the space where they are carried out such that the hotel is penetrated by a “turbia atmósfera que conforme pasan los días se vuelve más opresiva” (254). The impact of the crimes on the surrounding space and the ubiquity and continuous repetition of such crimes in the city confirm Henestrosa’s intimate knowledge of the illicit activities, “como si [él] no hubiera vivido en medio de esta basura toda [su] vida” (237). Therefore, if the activities of the criminal network that Henestrosa is asked to investigate are so obvious as to be clear to anyone who is familiar with Mexico City, the mystery of their activities cannot be the most important aspect of this *novela negra*. Rather, the presence of the false scene calls for Henestrosa (and the reader) to look beyond these crimes to the broader landscape of Henestrosa’s dysfunction, as well as that of his fellow inhabitants in the Hotel Isabel. As he asked at the beginning of the novel, ¿por qué justamente tengo esta cara? The answer to this question may indeed be the

true mystery to be addressed.

Indeed, by presenting what at first glance appears to be a mystery, but that in reality is nothing of the sort, the narrative draws attention to the understanding of crime that is commonly adopted in detective narratives—committed by hardened criminals, masterminded by a soulless monster who lives concealed in the depths of Tepito (*la Señora*), and carried out in connection with corrupt institutions including a compromised police force (headed by Gaxiola) and the representation of institutional order in the hotel (the night receptionist Samuel)—but that is not compatible with the complex realities of Mexico. In this engineered scenario, the crimes are discrete actions, the perpetrators are always other, and becoming a victim, although not impossible, can be avoided with sufficient (financial) resources and by carefully controlling one's environment. On the other hand, the other dysfunctional individuals and relationships that visit the hotel gesture toward a long history of a city saturated with crimes from the blood of colonization, to environmental devastation, institutional corruption, drug trafficking and violence, social neglect, and economic and spatial dysfunction. Thus, only attending to the crimes of the drug cartel taking place in the hotel will miss something much larger: crimes that have pervaded the city for centuries and which have been renewed and exacerbated by the adoption of neoliberal economic policies.

This visceral familiarity with the web of crimes that constantly blankets the city suggests Žižek's hard-boiled detective who is intimately and existentially involved with the crime that he investigates and, in turn, Martín-Cabrera's melancholic detective. For Žižek, the hard-boiled detective's "very subjective

position” is defined and shaped by the crime, such that the “‘truth’ at which he attempts to arrive is not just a challenge to his reason but concerns him ethically and often painfully” (Zizek, *Looking Awry* 61, 63).¹⁷ Although Henestrosa struggles against this elemental connection to the crimes surrounding him the melancholy that has overcome him, continually repeating to himself the mantra “[n]o dejes que el desorden se instale dentro de ti” (Fadanelli 10, 166, 212), the truth is that based on Mexico’s “specific historical circumstances [...] depression is not a free election, but rather the consequence of the perpetuation of the state of exception” (Martín-Cabrera 110). Moreover, the very fact that he frames his narrative by asking “¿por qué justamente tengo esta cara?” emphasizes the degree to which he is affected by and even implicated in the corrosive criminality of Mexico City.

Despite Henestrosa’s similarities with Martín-Cabrera’s melancholic detective, he does not reveal the same propensity for assertion and action as the detectives examined by Martín-Cabrera. Whereas the melancholic detective acts despite remaining in a space of mourning, Henestrosa—after decades of living in Mexico City—is cowardly, pathetic, and ineffective. Not only does his reaction to the clandestine activities in the hotel reveal the depth of the impact that the crimes have

¹⁷ According to Zizek, one of the distinguishing factors between the hard-boiled detective, who is intimately involved in the crimes that he investigates, and the classical detective, who remains aloof, is the question of whether or not they accept money for their services. By *not* accepting money for his investigation, the hardboiled detective becomes emotionally invested in his work whereas payment for services allows the classical detective to view the task as nothing more than a transaction. In the case of Henestrosa, while Riaño lends him money to stay a few more days in the hotel in exchange for his agreement to report what he observes, his melancholy and dysfunction are present in the novel from the first pages, before he ever steps foot in the Hotel Isabel, suggesting that the presence or absence of a financial transaction has little to do with the degree to which he is “ethically and painfully” connected to the truth of the crimes.

on his being, particularly when compared to the active nature of Martín-Cabrera's melancholic detectives,¹⁸ it also reframes the significance of the crime from a discrete event that reinforces the traditional discourse of corrupt institutions to a much broader and more invasive conceptualization of "crime" in twenty-first century Mexico City. As he considers Riaño's proposition, Henestrosa reflects:

[e]stoy seguro de que el hotel ha sido infectado por criminales. ¿Y qué? Eso carece de importancia. Me haré el desentendido e iré a dar un paseo, es lo que necesito, deambular distraído en el Centro como si fuera yo también un extranjero. [...] Y me pregunto, ¿qué puede suceder en el Hotel Isabel que no sea evidente? ¿Venta de drogas, secuestros? ¿Un prostíbulo clandestino? Se mueren por gritar sus secretos, todos los imbéciles creen guardar un secreto que los hará importantes. Y asunto terminado. Al final opto por hacer lo que hubiera hecho de niño, sentarme en los escalones exteriores del palacio y esperar a que alguien deje caer una cartera. (Fadanelli 80–81)

Henestrosa's response to the proposed investigation of criminal activities in the hotel that he is deeply affected by the crimes have infected the city like a disease and have done for decades. In response to the idea of another criminal network operating out of the hotel, considering the overwhelming reality of crime in Mexico City, Henestrosa resigns himself to his incapacity to respond and becomes completely passive: he sits on the stairs of the *Bellas Artes* museum waiting for something to happen *to* him, and perhaps even observing the crimes as they occur, waiting for someone to drop their wallet and a petty thief to pick it up, or even

¹⁸ Of the detectives Martín-Cabrera analyzes, one reaches for an (im)possible justice by "melancholic identification" with the novel's victim (113); another is identified by his "active pessimism" and his "refusal to abandon the lost object" (that is, the non-place) (116); the third *novela negra* is similar to *Hotel DF* in that it examines an "all pervasive" melancholy, however the novel itself ultimately "obsessively denies the loss of the political community and its affective links" (119). Neither Henestrosa nor *Hotel DF* are as *active* in their pursuit of a "different notion of justice that does not yet have a place" although the circumstances of the heterotopia do provide the glimpse of a possibility for an alternative community (119).

passively committing a crime by picking it up himself. Moreover, to distance himself from his sense of distress, he invokes the foreigner—like Stefan Weimer—who can remain detached with the luxury of experiencing the chaos and disorder of the crime-ridden city as nothing more than an exotic adventure, returning home when reality becomes too intense.

Henestrosa is not the only one to be deeply impacted by this melancholic dysfunction and his observations of the Hotel Isabel's other visitors reveal the degree to which the same melancholy has affected everyone and threatens to infect even the foreigners. The breadth and depth of this melancholy widens the scope of the typical "hard" crimes of the detective narrative—murder, corruption, drug trafficking, theft—to include "dysfunctional" crimes that stem from a long history of exposure to the depression and pessimism of the state of exception, replicating the dysfunction on an interpersonal level. Constituent of a landscape of crimes that is no longer clearly delimited, every crime reveals a network of incalculable other criminal acts, past and present. As such, mobilizing the traditional detective structure to identify *the* crime and implicate *the* guilty party is no longer possible, and innumerable individuals and institutions—both current and historical—are complicit in the web of crimes that shrouds the city. *Hotel DF* expands the taxonomy of possible criminals, beyond the legal definition of the term, to include any individual, past or present, inhabitant or foreigner, that is complicit in the city's political, environmental, social, economic, and spatial dysfunction. The severity of a crime and the degree of an individual's culpability can be judged on a spectrum according to the circumstances and the perpetrator's conceptual proximity to a

given crime. However, no longer is the division between the guilty and innocent readily apparent nor can individuals continue to hide behind a veneer of innocence. The false dichotomy of good versus evil, moral versus immoral that is standard in the structure of the detective novel reveals a discourse that does not accurately reflect the complex reality of crime in Mexico. Therefore, we must recognize that the network of those culpable grows infinitely broader as it takes into consideration all those individuals that are affected by and in their turn complicit in the past, present, and—ostensibly—future degradation of Mexico City and its inhabitants.

Indeed, Henestrosa's consideration of crimes in the hotel extends well beyond the criminal activities of *la Señora's* gang. As the first person omniscient narrator—whose ability to report on the private details of the novel's other characters emphasizes the interconnection between the individual and the city at large—Henestrosa reports on the continually shifting and extending circuits of the crime network that are responsible for the infiltration of the hotel. For example, Roberto Davison, the aging and largely unsuccessful actor, is guilty of abusing his wife Gloria Manson who is frequently found with “lánguidos moretones” (279) on her legs from her husband's physical abuse and seems resigned to his emotional and sexual abuse given that she “jamás se negaría a participar en el modesto laboratorio mental que su marido ha construido en su honor [...] sobre todo cuando se encuentra enferma y él decide montarla haciendo a un lado los pequeños obstáculos: altas temperaturas, mareos, vómitos, luxaciones” (277). The cycle of abuse and resignation between this couple is mirrored in the verbally abusive and incestuous relationship between cousins Gabriel and Sofía Sandler, which is also

laced with intensive drug consumption that, through their complicity in the hotel cartel's drug trafficking, results in the murder of Sofía's dealer, as well as her own death in Tepito. Henestrosa himself is so intimately connected with the crime that is a part of his everyday life that he even sees himself as guilty: "Soy dado a creer en mi culpabilidad. Si me presento a la escena donde acaba de suceder un robo de inmediato mis ojos, mi temperamento vacío, todo me señala como un fuerte sospechoso del crimen, pese a que ni siquiera esté enterado de lo que ha pasado" (34). While Henestrosa may not have directly participated in a robbery, he is guilty—as mentioned above—of complicity in a social and economic system that excludes a class of individuals from full participation in the community ("¿Qué carajos hacen aquí?" (197)) Moreover, he admits to participation with *el Boomerang* Riaño in "trabajos sucios," a term that he leaves undefined—"lo que sea que esto signifique"—but that, as part of their work on the *nota roja*, suggests criminal complicity or the type of petty crime that he seems to imagine as he sits on the steps of *Bellas Artes*, waiting for someone to drop their wallet (14).

Hotel Isabel as heterochrony

The "other space" of the heterotopia also functions as a heterochrony that represents a rupture with traditional linear time in favor of "other times" such as the eternal or the ephemeral (Foucault 26). In heterochronies like the museum or library, for example, the past is continually present and time accumulates toward

the eternal.¹⁹ In the Hotel Isabel, time is cyclical as seen through the continuous movement of people through the space, arriving, departing, and arriving again, reflecting what Henestrosa calls the circular time of Mexico City, “un aburrido retorno, un jodido y aburridísimo retorno” (Fadanelli 154). By invoking Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence within the cyclical time of the hotel, this narrative suggests that all events—past, present, and future—are interconnected and, as “each moment is ‘baptized in eternity,’ it brings with it the whole train of past and previous moments” (Shapiro 47). Therefore, history—as a series of continuously interconnected events—is characterized as having “no beginning, middle, [or] end [...] but simply the continuous fabric of becoming” (139). Moreover, the construction of cyclical time is inherent to the melancholic dysfunction of the hotel’s community, “[f]or melancholia is nothing but an infinite process of mourning without origin or finality” (Martín-Cabrera 117). By encapsulating the interconnectedness of the present with the past through the cyclical time of the heterochrony—particularly the heritage and memories of state-sponsored violence—the non-place is heavily represented in the space of the hotel.

One of the many connections between present and past is made evident through the identification of Camila, a member of *la Señora*’s cartel and supposed housekeeper for Hotel Isabel, with the portrait of Isabel la Católica that hangs in the hotel’s reception. Referred to as “Camila la Católica” in this passage, Camila contemplates the image in which “la reina Isabel la Católica se vislumbra tras las

¹⁹ Foucault also describes the festival as a heterotopia associated with the ephemeral in its “most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect” with the site itself being entirely temporary and visitors endlessly coming and going (7).

capas de polvo que cubren la tela de su retrato. Camila planta su mirada en los ojos de Isabel. Suspira, una reina, ¿las reinas también ordenaban muertes?” (Fadanelli 223). These two *reinas* are connected through their gaze and the shared ability to enact violence against subordinates. Through this fusion of past with present, it is clear that the violent legacies of colonialism, such as institutional corruption and complicity (governmental, corporate, and religious), as well as the radical abandonment of huge numbers through murder, forced labor, and the structural exclusion of major classes of the population from full participation in national citizenship, is present and active in the crimes that are taking place in the Hotel Isabel under the direction of *la Señora* and with the complicity and oversight of the police and the institutional authority of the hotel, its acting “government” (in the form of the receptionist and the absent owners).

The connection between the specters of past trauma, the contemporary state of exception, and the dysfunction of the hotel is narratively linked with the space of the hotel by combining a description of Roberto Davison’s abuse of his wife Gloria Manson with the urban renewal taking place just outside the window of their hotel room:

Hasta la habitación llega el estruendo de los taladros que abren en canal la calle Mesones. El gobierno inicia por centésima vez la remodelación del Centro Histórico. Se busca, sobre todo, maquillar la boca del lobo, pulir sus colmillos, aceitar su piel hirsuta. (279)

In service of concealing rather than seeking justice for past violence, construction workers employ their phallic *taladros* to assault the urban landscape—just as Davison uses sexual domination to continually reaffirm his power over Manson—threatening to destroy the structures that have stood witness to centuries of

marginalization and violence at the hands of the state and its representatives and attempting to erase the evidence of such injuries. However, the act of cutting into the city's surface opening belies the impossibility of eliminating such histories of trauma. The specific use of the word "canal" gestures toward the watery history of Mexico City given that Tenochtitlán was originally constructed on a web of canals which were destroyed (and the water drained) over the course of hundreds of years to make way for development and "progress," ultimately leading to the twenty-first century's severe water crisis. As the numerous construction projects in the *centro histórico* that have resulted in the contemporary discovery of structures from the ancient city of Tenochtitlán will attest,²⁰ the traumatic past never disappears but remains present, perhaps veiled or silenced, but always a testament to the non-place and its inhabitants.

The sense of inhabiting a non-place is emphasized in Henestrosa's narrative as he considers the degree to which nation's citizens are "real" or "false," a simple way to denote their relative position and value in society, but a fabricated distinction in that it is made based on the most powerful interests of a corrupt system in which property rights take precedence over human rights (Martín-Cabrera 23). The "false" members of the community, like Henestrosa himself, are those that, as Martín-Cabrera describes, have been "deprived of their most fundamental rights as citizens" at the hands of the state and are vulnerable to the state of exception and its impunity (Fadanelli 225). For Henestrosa, institutional

²⁰ For example, in the 1960s, the construction of the Mexico City metro stop Pino Suárez resulted in the discovery of a small pyramid dedicated to the Aztec god Ehécatl.

corruption and its role in the economic well-being (or lack thereof) of the nation's citizens is central to this question of belonging:

Los criminales son los más aptos para levantar empresas en México porque conocen a fondo la corrupción y los funcionarios los respetan, ellos son los únicos verdaderos ciudadanos de nuestro país. (246)

At the most basic level, those without economic means, like himself, are false citizens—he calls himself *el falso artista Henestrosa* but suggests that “cinco mil pesos en mis bolsillos me han hecho real” (187)—while he considers the wealthy Gabriel Sandler, whose elite family has spent 7 million pesos on his artistic education, to be real. Moreover, he argues that the only way to become or remain real in a nation like Mexico is to be involved in criminal activities and thus increase one's economic value. He views *el Boomerang* Riaño's choice to take up with the cartel working out of the hotel as a legitimate attempt to reclaim a place within the nation, observing that “convertirse en delincuente es un paso real, sustancia y no un mero accidente” (208). However, his observations belie the complexities of delineating the population between good and bad, between real and false in a community that is characterized by the web of interconnectedness that is evidenced in the Hotel Isabel. Moreover, given that this distinction between real and false is artificially constructed, Fadenelli's *novela negra* continues the Latin American tradition of refusing to replicate the ideological fantasy of restoring order to society, while further revealing Mexico's systemic dysfunction by recognizing the degree to which everyone—including those considered “real”—is vulnerable to the non-place based on a state of exception whose ultimate impacts cannot be limited to only one part of the community (Martín-Cabrera 24).

That is, simply having the economic resources to claim “realness” is not sufficient to exempt an individual from the histories of state sponsored violence and the resulting realities of dysfunction and pervasive crime. A prime example of this are the cousins, Gabriel and Sofía Sandler who both live in fortresses in wealthy *colonias* in the city, with high walls designed to keep what Henestrosa calls the “disorder” of the city at a distance from their private space. As children of an influential family—Sofía’s father who has regular conversations with the President of Mexico and is an architect whose profession gives him the power to alter and influence the physical structure of the city and, in turn, the lives of the entire community (Fadanelli 87)—the cousins come from a segment of society that enjoys maximum power and full citizenship in the nation with little concern that their privileged status will be undermined given the proper protections (i.e., living in enclaves, employing armed guards). However, Sofía’s murder and Gabriel’s resulting grief, sense of culpability, and potential madness—he astonishes and disgusts the other guests by bringing a small pig with him to Sofía’s funeral—reveal the degree to which everyone is in fact vulnerable and intimately affected by the non-place of the hotel. Interestingly, the appearance of the pig at the funeral draws a connection with Henestrosa’s initial decision to visit the Hotel Isabel saying: “Basta ya de darle de comer a la misma puerca, abriré el corral y a ver qué pasa” (20). The pig represents the ugly and dysfunctional aspects of the nation that, for a brief moment, Henestrosa hoped to abandon when he took his first steps toward the Hotel Isabel. As the heterotopia of the hotel has revealed the interconnectedness of the entire community we can see that rather than having abandoned “la misma puerca,” that

pig has infiltrated the funeral of a wealthy, elite member of Mexican society. In this way, the novel itself introduces a noisy silence that demonstrates the degree to which the entire community is implicated in and affected by the non-place and the contemporary state of exception.

Therefore, the very notion of the real, cynically understood as occupying a legitimate place within a corrupt system, is no less vulnerable to the impacts of a traumatic history of state violence with impunity: the entire community—whether “real” or “false”—is condemned to inhabit the non-place. As evidence of this, after the death of Sofía and *el Internet*—a name that simultaneously suggests interconnectedness and distance—the cartel abandons the hotel, taking with them the portrait of Isabel la Católica. Henestrosa and Pablo Paolo observe that the painting is missing and are both distressed by its absence:

Era una pintura sin valor artístico, pero sí un rostro que durante décadas hizo las veces de símbolo del hotel, ¡un detalle monárquico!, nadie puede negarle su importancia. (274)

The disappearance of the portrait along with the departure of the remaining guests reinforces the existence of the non-place in which crimes take place at the hands of institutional authority (or parastatal organizations) with no justice, no closure, and no apparent possibility of change. With the disappearance of the guests and the removal of the portrait, Henestrosa reports that “[l]a fisonomía del Hotel Isabel ha cambiado en muy poco tiempo” (274), however the absence of the image of Isabel la Católica, as an iconic symbol of the hotel, leaves its trace in the memories of those who were present in the space as well as its physical imprint, the dark outline of dust that is visible after a portrait is removed from its position after hanging for

decades. And yet, the representative of the institution of the hotel, the hotel manager, when asked about replacing the missing portrait, responds by not recognizing its importance: “A nadie la interesa. Si tuviera valor estaría en la pinacoteca, no en un jodido hotel” (275). In other words, the institutional authority does not acknowledge that crimes have taken place and is not willing to pursue any type of justice to recover the portrait, which functions as a parallel to the cartel’s crimes and the deaths of Sofía Sandler and *el Internet*, not to mention the city’s long history of colonial oppression and the present neoliberal economic system. Through this absence of justice, it becomes clear that the entire community at large is vulnerable to the material impact of the non-place despite their attempts to remain apart. It is the barely perceptible trace of dust on the wall that reminds anyone who enters—“real” or “false”—of the criminal history of the hotel and the stolen portrait, and what remains behind is the non-place and the heterochronies that underlie it.

Given the failure of the hotel manager to recognize the crimes that took place in the hotel and a lack of willingness to bring order to the space thus enacting justice, every indication is that, as the Hotel Isabel awaits its next group of visitors, nothing will have changed. In fact, as Henestrosa observes, nothing of particular importance has taken place in the hotel, “[e]n realidad no ha sucedido nada trascendente dentro del hotel, sólo el tiempo que corre de manera burocrática y va cumpliendo con su rutina que es su guadaña más precisa” (275). And yet, he simultaneously observes that nothing is the same as it was when he arrived. Not only has the portrait been stolen, but the hotel’s appearance has changed. Indeed, the paradox of the eternal recurrence is that while nothing changes, nothing

remains the same: “the phenomenological experience of what is novel and surprising would itself be one of the experiences repeated in eternal recurrence” (Shapiro 78). This principle is evident for the city beyond the walls of the hotel as well, with Henestrosa describing the people he passes on the same streets he has walked all his life, and how they have changed:

Hace más de 30 años paseaba por esta misma calle, 5 de mayo, al lado de mi padre, pero tengo la impresión de que entonces las personas se comportaban de un modo distinto y no lucían este semblante de ovejas recién trasquiladas tan común en el siglo XXI. Los extraños se han hecho hoy mucho más extraños (Fadanelli 19).

The streets are the same, the fact that people are traversing them and going about their lives is the same, and yet there are traces of difference: their countenance has shifted and their strangeness has been amplified, traces of transformation that reveal the non-place. Henestrosa also observes that over time the city’s center has transitioned from the *centro histórico* to the former outskirts of the city in Santa Fe and Cuajimalpa (82). This transition represents a change from the ancient urban economic structure of Tenochtitlán to neoliberalism and the financialization of the economy while moving away from industrial production. It signals an abandonment of the traditional center of Tenochtitlán—and the modern Mexican State’s symbolic identification with it—in favor of the embrace of the global economy.

Within the space of the Hotel Isabel, the cycle of specific individuals who enter and leave are different over time, each representing a distinct space in and relationship with the city and its history, which is itself in a state of constant transformation. The present space of the hotel, while connected with and influenced by the past, is always being affected by and in turn influencing its guests. Indeed,

when Gabriel Sandler first arrives, he observes that the appearance of the hotel had changed since his last visit, with more furniture and ashtrays displayed around its common areas (134). The result is that each recurrence simultaneously carries with it traces of the past as well as the possibility of change, a hope that things may not always remain the same.

For Martín-Cabrera, hope for the non-place is in the pursuit of “a political space outside the normative operations of the market and the state [...] [it] requires a radical disidentification with both capitalism and the nation-state” (226). Perhaps the Hotel Isabel offers this space, a space that—as heterotopia—remains paradoxically separate and connected to the state and economic structures such that it allows for an opportunity, however brief, to recognize the interconnectedness of the community and establish relationships across the boundaries that exist in the world outside of the hotel. For example, one of the few things that has a positive impact on Henestrosa in the novel is not the extra money that he has to spend on a hotel stay, but his moment of connection that he experiences with Gabriel. When Henestrosa enters the crowded dining room, Gabriel invites him to sit at his table because there are no other available seats. Although their social and economic distinctions are apparent and Henestrosa is acutely aware that should he behave in the same uninhibited manner as his companion he would be received as “un cínico o un maleante” (Fadanelli 134), they manage to connect at a level beyond these differences. Even though their conversation begins with the characteristic awkwardness of two strangers, they connect through jokes that “rebasan los límites de las clases sociales” (134), and by the time the interaction has concluded,

Henestrosa reflects on his experience and observes: “no me hallo a disgusto a su lado. Me siento más bien que nunca” (136). This interaction does not reflect a utopic moment, Henestrosa is still not completely at ease about his conversation with Gabriel, feeling uncomfortable that he made a joke at the expense of the hotel maid, Flora, with who he identifies more closely than with Gabriel. Moreover, considering the commonly polysemic nature of jokes (and language in general), there is always the possibility that what appears to be an emotional connection could be based on an inherent disconnect in understanding and meaning. And yet, this moment does allow for the possibility of a positive connection between two completely disparate classes within society. This sense of optimism through connection with another is in direct contrast to the predominant culture of Mexico City, as described by Henestrosa, where “nadie extraña a nadie, todos desean la ausencia del otro, su desaparición repentina, se sueltan algunas lágrimas a causa de las pérdidas y después viene la felicidad” (289). This uncharacteristic feeling of contentment at an interpersonal connection is repeated as Henestrosa prepares to go out with Laura Gibellini, he feels as though this connection has the power to make him “real:” “Me han saludado al descubrir que soy más que una sombra, ya está, es la cercanía de Laura, es la inminencia de una cita lo que me ha vuelto a un hombre concreto” (192). Again, we see one of the few moments of optimism, of possibility, in the novel through the social, physical, and emotional connection between different parts of society. In this way, the heterotopia operates outside the dominant logic of the state and capital in that it allows for the hotel’s guests and visitors to transcend their

diverse origins, economic classes, and the general sense of disconnection in Mexico City, and recognize their shared humanity.

Despite the glimpse of possibility that the hotel offers through interpersonal connections, the dominant sense that governs the space of the hotel (and the city) is one of futility and dysfunction. In fact, the novel's conclusion finds Henestrosa again repeating his past by sleeping with Susana Servín, a former girlfriend who he has been actively avoiding throughout the narrative. They drink together in silence at the bar and afterwards—in the final sentences of the novel—return together to Henestrosa's room:

caminamos lentamente hacia mi habitación, como si lo hubiéramos ensayado [...] Abro la puerta y cedo el paso a mi acompañante; es extraño, he bebido lo bastante como para sentirme exaltado, pero me mantengo ecuánime, no he aprendido nada. A mi edad, ¿qué puede aprenderse? Soy un hombre maduro y en el cielo las piedras continuarán ardiendo durante millones de años (289–290)

Henestrosa knows that he is repeating his past—he recognizes the repetition of their walk to his room as if their actions had been rehearsed—and in an almost matter of fact tone, feels a sense of futility for any hope of change. The Henestrosa who proclaimed that he felt “más bien que nunca” after his conversation with Gabriel Sandler is no longer able to express enthusiasm. Despite being accompanied by a former lover, he continues to feel isolated, as if he continues to travel alone in “un lento tren sin ventanas” without the ability to connect with others (9). This is exacerbated by his failed relationship with Laura Gibellini and the solitary bar and hotel—everyone with whom he had connected over the past several days had left.

Conclusion

Luis Martín-Cabrera argues that the melancholic detective “embraces the impossible” and “flies from the past to the present in order to transform privation (the lack of justice in this case) into future possession (the possibility of obtaining justice beyond the tanatopolitics [sic] of the state)” (113). That is, by continuing to mourn the past, the melancholic detective challenges the attempts of the state to conceal or ignore the traumatic effects of state-violence and through this open the possibility for an alternative justice that operates outside the state and the neoliberal order. While to consider Henestrosa’s role in *Hotel DF* one of active resistance may be inferring too much dynamism on the part of this passive and nihilist character, Martín-Cabrera’s conception of the role of the melancholic detective can offer important insights into the novel’s vision of the future. Without the active resistance of Martín-Cabrera’s detective, there is little to move Henestrosa and the community beyond the task of mourning into a posture that advocates for an alternative justice. However, inside the walls of the Hotel Isabel there are small glimpses and tiny openings of possibility for the establishment of an alternative community that function outside the structures of the state and the logic of the market. Within the enclosed space of the heterotopia, Henestrosa’s observation of the entire community’s interconnectedness under the state of exception allows for the utopian aspect of Foucault’s concept to slip through. Within this space, Henestrosa manages to connect—at least partially and temporarily—with other members of the community, resulting in a brief disruption of his melancholy. Through these fleeting encounters across social, economic, and political barriers the

possibility for future justice is revealed, even while the novel is never fully redemptive.

CHAPTER III

Beyond the spectacle: Approaching victims in Christina Rivera-Garza's *La muerte me da*

Femicide, or the murder of women and girls because of their gender and under masculine hierarchies of power, has been a harsh reality in Mexico since the 1990s (Fregoso and Bejarano 1, 5). In the northern border city of Juárez, between 1993 and 2010 over 500 women and girls were murdered and over one thousand disappeared, with one third of the murders, occurring “under similar circumstances: They were held in captivity, raped, sexually tortured, and mutilated, and their bodies were discarded in remote, sparsely populated areas of the city” (6). Moreover, beyond the borders of Juárez, between 1999 and 2005, more than six thousand women and girls were victims of femicide nationally (6). Although men were also victims of violent murders during this period, the principal distinction that is drawn between general violence and the gender-based murders of women are the power hierarchies that are expressed through femicide, in which women are murdered “as a result of their vulnerability as members of a subordinate gender,” and subject to “gender-specific forms of degradation and violation,” through such spectacular displays of misogyny as sexual mutilation and rape (7). Cristina Rivera Garza's *La muerte me da*, published in 2007 but dated as early as 2003, in which an ostensibly female serial killer murders and castrates men and leaves their corpses in

alleyways around the city clearly incorporates this cultural context of systematic, patriarchal violence against women as intertext to call attention to and “castrate” the gendered dynamics of violence and power in twenty-first century Mexico.

In addition to the prevalence of femicide as Rivera Garza conceptualized and wrote her novel, President Felipe Calderón’s “war on drugs” which began in late 2006 and intensified over the subsequent decade coincides with the publication and reception of Rivera Garza’s novel from 2007 onward. The drug war precipitated a dramatic escalation of violence within Mexico and, by 2013, had led to the deaths of more than fifty thousand men, women, and children at the hands of both the cartels and the military (Franco 215). Given the cartels’ similarly spectacular and highly public methods of enacting violence against the community, including the frequent beheadings of men—remarkably similar in nature to castrations—in which heads and bodies are displayed in highly public areas (such as a head placed on a parked car or a body hung from a bridge (227)) with messages that warn of the consequences of defying the authority of the cartels²¹, the reader cannot help but connect the novel with the more recent realities of violence as well.

Both of these manifestations of power are relevant to Rivera Garza’s allegory of violence in Mexico in that they reveal the domination of a patriarchal authority through the inscription of violence on the bodies of the people. That is, femicides and mass beheadings are both “expressive crimes that publicize the ideology and power of rogue groups. While the killing of women confirms grotesque forms of

²¹ Examples of messages documented in Franco’s *Cruel Modernity* are: “Esto es lo que les pasa a las personas que se hacen pasar por Z [Zetas], estafadores, secuestradores y ratas” and “Siguen escarbando y revolviendo el agua, hijos de la chingada madre y verán como le va ir” (227).

masculinity, beheadings are acts of sovereignty in the shadow state of drug cartels” who perform their power through “extreme acts of cruelty—in other words, an extreme cult of masculinity” (225). That is, a political and cultural context of patriarchal authority and its extreme masculinity provide a foundation for these spectacular and horrific acts of violence against the community. For Rita Laura Segato, who primarily studies femicides, there has been an international trend in the past few decades, related to the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, in which the state, parastatal organizations, and organized crime employ sexual violence and “destrucción corporal sin precedentes [...] hasta el último límite” against its female members as a means of control over the entire community through the demoralization of its people and the dissolution of the social fabric (342, 348). In other words, these groups perform masculine power and authority on the bodies of the community’s women and girls, signifying and expressing the “destrucción moral del enemigo” (345). As Jean Franco has demonstrated, the similarities between femicides and mass beheadings perform a homologous function in Mexico such that the bodies of the victims—male or female—become the site upon which patriarchal sovereignty and masculine power is inscribed and reinforced for the community at large. The community, in turn, experiences life in a society in which fear, pain, and trauma are the prevailing realities.

Given that such violence is presently so pervasive, public, and spectacular in Mexico, both Glen Close and Rivera Garza herself have questioned the ethics of writing violence, particularly in terms of replicating [masculine] discourses of power and violence in the context of a devastating reality in which knowledge and

meaning have reached their limits. Rivera Garza examines her role as author in the commercial industry of producing narratives about the reality of Mexico, asking:

In writing and minutely narrating a violent act, do I become complicit, am I killing the victim a second time? Am I continuing the work of the serial killer who, according to some experts, is motivated and obsessed by the possibility of looking inside? Am I contributing to the creation of the spectacle of violence in order to attract readers, to sell books? All this has worried me deeply and it has constituted the greatest obstacle to continuing with the text. I was interested in distancing myself from the glamour which has come to surround the aggressor and from the glamour surrounding the killer's obsession....I wanted, of course, to see the world from the point of view of the victim, which is another way of speaking of violence from the point of view of pain. (qtd. in Close, *Crime Fiction* 55)

In questioning her own role as a writer, Rivera Garza is attuned to the ways in which violence becomes spectacle through the public nature of the acts themselves, spectacularized news coverage, and artistic representations such as Mexico's contemporary *novelas negras* and *narconarrativas* that privilege or exoticize the criminal's perspective. By invoking Debord's idea of the spectacle and, in turn, the role of commodity fetishism in late capitalist societies, Rivera Garza reflects the information society's position toward such violence, which is based on both the total exposure and total consumption of an event. The consequence of this appropriative stance is that unbridled consumption of violence against the other, particularly from the perspective of the pain *inflicted* rather than the pain *experienced* by its victims, leads to the illusion of meaning that would explain or justify such violence²²,

²² Journalist Charles Bowden has observed that the media contributes to a false discourse surrounding the violence: "This is the sweet drug that comes from fantasy. The authorities are real. The police enforce the laws. The courts function" (qtd. in Franco 216).

reinforcing the patriarchal hierarchies of power and knowledge²³ and distancing the spectators from its senseless reality. As Debord argues, the spectacle can only be “[a]pprehended in a *partial* way [while] reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart” (12). That is, spectacular narratives of violence are nothing more than superficial representations that encourage passive contemplation, deadening the community to action and distracting from the real experience of violence. With the spectacularization of violence, “[a]ll that was once directly lived has become mere representation” (12), and the lives and families of the victim-turned-spectacle can never be more than a hollow fodder for superficial consumption and appropriation.

In *La muerte me da*, Rivera Garza signals Mexico’s recent history of violence by establishing her narrative around spectacular acts of sexual and phallic mutilation similar to the femicides of the past twenty-five years and the beheadings of the past decade. And yet, in producing a novel in which male corpses are castrated and left in alleyways around the city she is not advocating a reversal of the power hierarchy in which women turn the tables and begin killing and sexually mutilating men. Instead, the serial castration and murder of the men in the novel should be understood as an allegory in which the phallus—a symbol of power and knowledge—is violently removed from the masculine figures leaving a void, a lack.²⁴ The act of removing the

²³ Debord argues that: “By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise” (19).

²⁴ This symbolic castration of masculinity in Rivera Garza’s novel clearly alludes to Lacan and his theories of castration, paternal authority, and the divided subject. Delving into the details of Lacan’s theory, however, is beyond the scope of this project. Rather, I will be using Žižek and his reading of the detective novel through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine and develop these ideas.

phallus thus calls attention to a “cut” in the traditional authority of patriarchy, which provides the foundation for such spectacular violence, and the impotence of discourses that attempt to provide a coherent narrative that would order a senseless reality.²⁵ Instead, in the novel, the absence of the phallus coincides with a recognition of the impossibility of communication and a failure of [patriarchal] knowledge, thus signaling the senselessness of the sustained systematic violence for the community that experiences it.

In representing a reality that can never be fully communicated, she resists the prevailing literary conventions that provide spectacularized narratives of such violence through a focus on the [typically masculine] perpetrator and his violent acts. Instead, she focuses on the “point of view of the victim” and of pain or trauma. To do this, *La muerte me da* refuses to privilege the perspective of the perpetrator and instead examines the experiences of the victims of violence, which are not limited to just the murder victim but include the trauma suffered by family members, acquaintances, and even the community at large. In doing so, it examines a traumatized city in which individuals experience the distancing effect of pain as described by Elaine Scarry, who, in exploring the inexpressibility of physical pain²⁶,

²⁵ Official discourses of power have argued that women killed in femicides are not “legitimate victims” because they are “public women” (Wright 682), while violence perpetrated by the drug cartels is officially declared to be inter-cartel violence (Ramos).

²⁶ While Scarry’s text is primarily concerned with the nature of physical pain, which she distinguishes from other states of consciousness because it “has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (Scarry 5), I would argue that psychological pain that results from violence, loss, or fear can be categorized in much the same way. While there may be an object or event that

points to its “unsharability” and “resistance to language” arguing that “pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (4). The result is that communication is inadequate and, as revealed in the serial castrations, attempts at knowing the other are destined to failure. To represent this fractured reality, the novel is structured and narrated in fragments, both as a means of recognizing the failure of communication and knowledge and as a reflection of the effects of violence on the community, which have been obscured by the spectacle. In looking past the spectacle and confronting the realities of violence, the novel examines the tensions between the desire for healing intimacy and a distancing fear born of a culture of generalized violence, as well as between the dehumanizing posture of voyeurism and gazing upon the victims with a posture of respect and empathy such that the real experience of violence is not ignored or suppressed.

Patriarchy’s symbolic castration

La muerte me da is a crime novel with a plot that is refracted and explored in different forms and by different characters through each of the novel’s eight sections. The plot itself is uncomplicated, driven by the actions of a serial murderer who leaves her victims castrated in random alleyways of an unnamed city, with each body accompanied by a verse of poetry by Alejandra Pizarnik. The first *Hombre Castrado*, as the victims become known, is discovered by a first person narrator, Christina Rivera Garza, who is a professor of poetry and becomes a consultant to the

precipitates the suffering (just as with physical pain), the psychological pain that results similarly “resists objectification in language.”

detective on the case, specifically regarding Pizarnik's poetry, and is one of a handful suspects. She is also the recipient of a series of notes from the killer none of which give any definitive clues to her identity, and in fact adopt a series of different names associating herself with three distinct artists: Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane, and Lynn Hershman. The female Detective, never given a proper name, becomes obsessed with the case, both in an apparent attempt to discover the identity of the killer—she visits the families of each of the victims to gather clues and considers possible suspects—but perhaps to an even greater degree, she is concerned with the intellectual puzzle presented by the appearance of Pizarnik's verses by the body and the notes left for Rivera Garza. A bit of a misfit in her unit, she has been given an out-of-the-way office in the basement of the building and is assigned the mundane daily crimes to solve along with any complicated cases that higher-ups do not want for themselves. She is accompanied in her investigation by her assistant, Valerio, with whom she has at least one intimate encounter. The only male character to make a sustained appearance in the novel, Valerio is himself terrified of the murder/castrations that are taking place during this period, but finds himself inexplicably attracted to the Detective and he indulges her eccentricities as they investigate the Case of the *Hombres Castrados* together. A third female character and suspect, the *nota roja* journalist, is named only la Periodista and she appears throughout the novel as someone interested in the crimes and Pizarnik's poetry, but for her own personal writing rather than for her newspaper. While she does not play a significant role in the action of the novel, she appears several times in meetings with Rivera Garza and the Detective, and ultimately is suspected to be the

author of a series of poems that are published under the pseudonym Anne-Marie Bianco. Despite this series of characters who are involved in the investigation of these crimes, some of whom are also suspects, there is never any resolution to the enigma, and the novel follows its characters even into old age as they look back at the Era of the *Hombres Castrados* as a time of solitude, insecurity, fear, and obsession.

Despite the simplicity of the plot, the novel itself is quite a difficult read given the variety of perspectives, genres, and remediations that are adopted in its eight sections, all concerning the circumstances surrounding the Case of the *Hombres Castrados*. Of the eight sections, five of them are narrative accounts from the perspective of one of the principal characters described above. Only the first and last narrative accounts are narrated in the first person, the first (“Los hombres castrados”) narrated by the character Cristina Rivera Garza and the last (“No le digas a nadie que estamos aquí”) is narrated by someone who may be Rivera Garza, but that is never confirmed, along with Valerio’s partner in old age, La Mujer de la Gran Sonrisa Iluminada. The three other narrative sections are all narrated by a third person omniscient narrator and focus on the thoughts and experiences of the Detective (“La mente de la detective” and “Grildrig”) and Valerio (“Los verdaderos reportes de Valerio”). Despite the fact that these narratives incorporate fragmented writing, unclear and unexpected transitions between subjects, and even imaginary characters that border on the surreal, such as La Mujer Increíblemente Pequeña—who is, as her name would suggest, a tiny woman who fits in Valerio’s hand—, these narratives encompass the more traditional plot elements of the novel. The other

three sections incorporate three distinct genres into the novel: epistolary writing, academic writing, and poetry. The letters, as mentioned above, are written by the ostensible serial killer who communicates directly with Rivera Garza over a series of twelve personal messages that are incorporated into the novel as the second section (“La viajera con el vaso vacío”). Rivera Garza, in turn, writes her own text, an academic essay regarding Alejandra Pizarnik’s desire and struggle to write prose, that is incorporated as the fourth section of the novel (“El anhelo de la prosa”). The final element of *La muerte me da*’s generic mosaic is a small book of poems that was received from a writer—likely the Periodista de la Nota Roja who adopts the pseudonym Anne-Marie Bianco—and is published with a letter of introduction by the [real life] editor of the Mexican Bonobos publishing house, Santiago Matías. Each of these different sections, perspectives, and even styles, combines to create a dizzying narrative in which only the most basic elements of the plot, that is the Case of the *Hombres Castrados*, can be known for certain.

The content and form of this novel converge to call into question the possibility of communicating oneself to another through words or actions, indicating the castration of meaning and patriarchal knowledge. The form itself contributes to this destabilization of communication and knowledge, and has a distancing effect on the reader by adopting distinct and even conflicting narrative strategies. For example, by transitioning from a first person narrative, to a series of letters, back to a third person narrative, to academic prose, back to a third person narrative, to a book of poetry, and finally back to a narrative, the reader is confronted with a whirlwind of perspectives and styles making it difficult to

embrace a coherent account of the narrative thus emphasizing a void in comprehension and the incoherence of a community infused with violence. The novel's content mirrors its form through the cryptic personal communications from the killer that complicate—castrate—any insights into her identity as she adopts three distinct personas over the course of her communications and explores philosophical and psychological themes such as distance and intimacy, emptiness and fullness, and violence and fear. Moreover, the series of Pizarnik verses left at each of the crime scenes, along with Rivera Garza's academic treatise on Pizarnik and other references to her work, establish an intertextual link to the Argentine poet's prevalent themes of violence and pain as well as the elusive nature of the self and the other, which is only accessible, and thus meaningful, to those who have read and studied Pizarnik before reading the novel. Similarly, the series of poems by an anonymous author who appears to be referencing the crimes against the *Hombres Castrados*, advertises itself as: "~~UN PEQUEÑO LIBRO DE LÍNEAS ROTAS~~" (Rivera-Garza 302). In other words, not only is it a book of castrated verses impeding the communication of meaning from the outset, the very statement that orients the reader to what she is about to read is crossed out suggesting that even the most basic attempt to identify and communicate the nature of the writing is impotent from the outset. The small book of poetry itself, as promised, is filled with deleted words and verses and, like the sections discussed above, does nothing to elucidate meaning within the poems.

The novel reinforces this fundamental theme of the failure of communication and knowledge, thus distancing the reader from the narrative, by failing to precisely

identify the narrators and the subjects of the narration. Throughout the novel, only two characters are given proper names: Cristina Rivera Garza and Valerio. And yet, even the fact that they are given proper names does not eliminate the doubt that surrounds their presence in the novel, an idea which corresponds with Alejandra Pizarnik's poem "Solo un nombre" in which proper names—which give the illusion of describing their objects more fully—are recognized as mere mediation. For example, Rivera Garza is only identified as the first person narrator at the end of the first section, more than twenty percent of the way through the novel. Moreover, the very fact that she shares a name and profession with the novel's author calls into question her role in the narrative: to what degree is she "real" or fiction, and to what extent her voice reflects that of the author.

Other primary characters such as the Detective and the Periodista de la Nota Roja are identified only by professional descriptors rather than proper names, recalling an allegorical tale and distancing the reader from any knowledge of them as individuals. Other secondary or tertiary characters are only identified by descriptors of their countenance such as Rivera Garza's lover who she calls the *Amante de la Gran Sonrisa Iluminada*, Valerio's partner in old age who he calls alternatively the *Mujer de la Gran Risa* [or *Sonrisa*] *Iluminada*, the lone castrated survivor of the murderer's attack who the Detective calls the *Hombre-Que-Era-Él-A-Veces* which also shifts to the *Hombre-Que-Él-Era-A-Veces*, and an unidentified *Hombre de la Risa Iluminada* who watches a woman sleeping that may or may not be the Detective. Adding to the confusion of these vaguely descriptive and quite similar names is that none of these individuals is ever definitively identified such that it is

clear precisely who they are and what their relationship is to the primary characters and to the narrative itself, although there are clues that can be found in the text to allow the reader to possibly, but not definitively, identify them. For example, the *Hombre-Que-Era-Él-A-Veces* was said to have had a relationship with the *Sospechosa Inicial*—the title given to Rivera Garza given the fact that she was the first to discover the castrated body, she received the anonymous letters from the killer, and she is an expert on Alejandra Pizarnik’s poetry—and who appears to be the person who castrated him. Indeed, Rivera Garza did mention a man who was *Él-a-Veces*, but she seems to have been referring to the first victim rather than her own lover (*el Amante de la Gran Sonrisa Iluminada*). In the following chapter, she has sex with a man that she calls the *Hombre-Que-Era-A-Veces-Él*, whose sex organ disappears (has been castrated) during the sex act, but one of the defining features of this encounter is that he gives her a beard made of his own hair, and she had previously contemplated the first victim that she calls *Él-a-Veces* as a “hermosísimo muchacho delgado de barba hirsuta y masculina” (56), suggesting that this sexual encounter may be a fantasy encounter with the victim and does not in fact reveal that she had a relationship with a man that she called the *Hombre-Que-Era-A-Veces-Él*. Of course, none of this means that she, as the *Sospechosa Inicial*, did not have a relationship with this castrated survivor.

Adding to the difficulty of identifying characters is the sense that there is an instability underlying whatever name has been chosen to mark a character’s presence in the novel. For example, in an early poetic chapter that, rather than written in narrative form, is made up of a list of adjectives, the text says “La

pregunta: ¿eres tú? [...] La respuesta: a veces” (47). In this question and answer exchange, we are presented with the fundamental idea that not only is the failure of language and communication central to the castration of knowledge and intimacy, so is the volatility of the self. This is evident in the repetition of the name of the *Hombre-Que-Era-Él-A-Veces*, built into his identity is a lack of stability, not to mention the fact that his relationship to Rivera Garza is never made clear. Moreover, Valerio says to himself at one point “[m]i nombre no es Valerio” (209), while years later he considers this rejection of his name to have been “incomprensible y absurdo, inútil del todo” (211).

The failure of patriarchal knowledge and authority is linked with castration early in the Detective’s investigation into the murders when she finds a Pizarnik poem that references castration, which piques her interest as a potential clue to the murders. It is particularly apt that it is the Detective that discovers this poem given the patriarchal gender norms of the *novela negra* in which the classic role of the [often male] detective is to make sense of a crime that initially exceeds narration, reestablishing order in society.²⁷ The poem, “En esta noche, en este mundo” is explicitly about the failure of language to ever fully mediate any knowledge that the subject would desire to convey, rendering her impotent to connect with the other, “la lengua natal castra / la lengua es un órgano de conocimiento / del fracaso de todo poema / castrado por su propia lenguaje, / que es el órgano de la re-creación / del re-conocimiento / pero no el de la resurrección” (55). In fact, as Rivera Garza

²⁷ Of course, the Latin American *novela negra* has never followed this generic prescription and *La muerte me da* itself clearly foretells the impossibility of such ordering of the world.

herself contemplates the poem that the Detective discovered (but which she herself is intimately familiar with), she acknowledges language as “todo ausencia”—a void—and recognizes that the project of writing, “no es comunicar sino, todo lo contrario, proteger ese lugar del secreto que se resiste a toda comunicación, a toda transmisión, a todo esfuerzo de traducción” (56). As such, it has the power to create and convey something distinct from the author’s initial intent, but is impotent to resurrect and communicate the original subject. Therefore, the poem’s invocation of castration signals the tension between the patriarchal authority that has been bestowed upon the written word and the impotence of language to actually make sense of and communicate lived reality. In connecting communication of the self with castration the poem invokes the tongue, which in both Spanish (*lengua*) and English, can refer to either the spoken language or the biological organ, itself associated with the phallus given its shape and function. Moreover, both the tongue and the phallus are “órgano[s] de conocimiento” in that they have the power to facilitate knowledge of and intimacy with an other. Consequently, while the written word—in this case the poem, a literary genre associated with an expression of self—is always already castrated such that communication and therefore authoritative knowledge have become impossible, the subject itself is castrated as well, distanced from the other and impotent to truly establish intimacy. This same recognition of the inevitable failure of any attempt to communicate the self to the other is recognized by Rivera Garza—who considers how difficult it is to communicate her desires to others, specifically why she prefers to run through the alleyways of the city to the main streets, stating, “Es difícil explicar lo que uno hace” (17, 20)—and by

the mother of the first castration victim who asks herself, in response to the Detective's questions, "¿Quién era, en realidad, mi hijo?" (120). After his death, his own mother realizes that she never truly knew her own son, there is a distance between the two that becomes painfully apparent at the moment of his castration, in other words, the moment in which patriarchal knowledge and certainty is castrated by the killer's violent act.

The *novela negra* and the void

In calling attention to the castration of authoritative knowledge and communication of the self, *La muerte me da* adopts the *novela negra* genre, an example of patriarchy par excellence given that a majority of its authors and protagonists are male and that the classical detective structure is based on a [typically male] detective who makes sense of and restores order to the world. As previously mentioned, the novel borrows the structure of the crime tale in that it revolves around a series of murders that a detective is assigned to investigate and solve. Moreover, if we consider Žižek's argument that the detective novel begins with a "void, a blank of the unexplained, more properly, of the *unnarrated*" (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 58) and is centered around "the *impossibility of telling a story in a linear, consistent way, of rendering the 'realistic' continuity of events*" (*Looking Awry* 48–49), then Rivera Garza's novel fulfills the genre's most basic requirements. The novel itself is full of voids, beginning with the mystery of who is murdering and castrating men in the town's public spaces, but not limited to that. The reader herself is confronted with a series of voids, including who the characters are—their

names, their history, their relationship to one another—as well as why they think and act the way they do. Further, consistent with the idea of the castration of knowledge and meaning, there are gaps—voids—in the narrative itself, with very little information conveyed directly; fragments that are introduced and not explained; text that contradicts itself, is crossed out, or missing; and distinct sections that complicate the narration of coherent plot or advance the traditional linear narrative. To make sense of the novel, the reader must act as a detective herself to piece together and attempt to make thematic sense of the information that the author has provided. In this way, *La muerte me da* subscribes to Frederic Jameson’s “ideology of form” in which “lo estético, lo temático y lo mítico se fusionan con lo social y lo histórico” (qtd. in Adriaensen and Pla 12). In other words, the “*impossibility of telling a story in a linear, consistent way*” is true not only for the story’s content but the narrative style itself with implications for the novel’s relationship to the social, economic, and political realities of present-day Mexico. Given that by the end of the novel neither the detective nor the reader are “finally able to narrate the whole story in its 'normal' causal chain” (Zizek, *Looking Awry* 58)—the Detective and Valerio never discover the identity of the murderer, the crime is never solved, and the reader is able to make very few claims with certainty about the narrative events of the novel—the dominant trend of the Latin American *novela negra* of breaking with “la expectativa, no tanto de ofrecer una solución al crimen, sino de garantizar el restablecimiento de la justicia” is reinforced and pushed to its limit (Adriaensen and Pla 15). Not only are the crimes and their perpetrator unintelligible, so is the experience of the entire community, all of whom

are secondary victims of the terrifying violence in their city.

However, consistent with the novel's challenge to patriarchal authority, Rivera Garza subverts certain generic standards of the *novela negra* for her own purposes, in much the same way that her Latin American contemporaries have "naturally test[ed] generic boundaries as they try to write stories that reflect their reality" (Braham xiv).²⁸ For example, the sexual mutilation and murder of male victims and the designation of a female detective to investigate breaks with standard conventions of the *novela negra* regarding gender and power. Historically, the hardboiled detective novel has embraced masculine power in what Jopi Nyman argues is an "affirmation of a disrupted masculine social order in various ways which extend from the privileging of a masculine language to a vision of social order based on masculine authority" (Nyman 3). For Nyman, this is manifest in the traditional hardboiled tale through narratives of control over the masculine body such as displays of physical strength and endurance (particularly of pain), sexual virility, and manifestations of masculine power through violence. In this hardboiled world, female characters tend to be sexualized as the femme fatale, a seductress who maintains an ambivalent relationship with power in the sense that she "ruins the lives of men and is at the same time victim of her own lust for enjoyment, obsessed by a desire for power, who endlessly manipulates her partners and is at the same time slave to some third, ambiguous person, sometimes even an impotent or sexually ambivalent man. [...] she cannot be clearly located in the opposition between master and slave" (Zizek, *Looking Awry* 65). While not entirely powerless,

²⁸ Rivera Garza has made it clear that for her, "[l]a escritura en todo caso, es un proceso de producción de lo real" (Herrera 144).

she is nevertheless defined by her positioning towards the men in her life—the femme fatale, or “phallic woman,” internalizes masculinity—and is never further than arms reach from total subordination. The dominance of masculinity and the ambivalent position of femininity is intensified in the contemporary Mexican *novela negra* by authors such as Guillermo Fadanelli and Rogelio Villareal who “slavish[ly] reiterat[e] the most retrograde and misogynist clichés of machismo” by “violating sexual taboos ('necrophilia, incest, sadism, bestiality') almost invariably at the expense of women” (Palaversich qtd. in Close, *Crime Fiction* 54). As Close argues, the tendency in the *novel negra* is that men are the protagonists who act upon and victimize women through, for example, “sex that is either cruel, incestuous, or commercial” (*Crime Fiction* 80). In the case of Fadanelli, although his works attempt to encapsulate the degraded reality of criminality in Mexico,²⁹ novels such as *La otra cara de Rock Hudson*, *Lodo*, and *Clarisa ya tiene un muerto* do little to challenge the literary status quo in which a male first-person narrator acts, often in a degrading or violent manner, upon a woman whose perspective is rarely articulated. Fadanelli’s *Hotel DF* seems a bit more subdued than some of his other works in terms of the prevalence of the degraded treatment of women, however there are still relationships that are defined by the sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of the

²⁹ In *Hotel DF* Fadanelli’s protagonist Frank Henestrosa compares what he considers the romanticization of criminality in novels and films with what he believes should be a more accurate representation of the bare, ugly truth, saying: “no se trata de una novela, sino de una realidad que no deja lugar a dudas, los criminales son hienas, no actores italianos, son roedores, no ancianos románticos respetuosos de códigos inventados por guionistas, escritores y demás. Mal hacen los escritores en hacerlos personajes y crearles un aura de misterio. De los criminales solo deben esperarse vejaciones, gruñidos y violencia, lo otro sería ingrato, exigirles una estética o una causa bella” (Fadanelli 237).

female partner. And although the patriarchy in Fuentes' *La voluntad y la fortuna* is not expressed through raw violence against women, Josué's prophecies replicate the masculine authority of the totalizing novel as well as the detective novel's patriarchal quest for knowledge and order. By rejecting the gendered norms and patriarchal power structure of the contemporary Mexican *novela negra* with a perpetrator that most assume is female and who performs sexual mutilations of male bodies, Rivera Garza subverts current and past generic trends and wrests power from the overwhelmingly male perpetrators of violence against women, not in favor of a strict reversal in the gender power dynamic, but in order to move toward a more complex and empathetic examination of the nature of violence and its impact on the community. In doing so, she reveals the emptiness of patriarchal authority and questions the spectacular narratives that purport to make meaning out of such senseless violence.

Abandoning the perpetrator's perspective

One of the techniques that Rivera Garza employs to castrate the patriarchal voice found in the narration of crimes in the Mexican *novela negra* is to silence the perpetrator. In addition to privileging narrations of male violence against the female body, the *novela negra* also tends to privilege the male perspective and voice. For example, many recent Mexican *novelas negras* are narrated by the protagonist at the center of the tale who is often a criminal and at the very least exerts masculine power over his victims. As Close argues, "we see the hardest boiled fiction of urban violence being written with virtually no mediation between the subjective position

of the narrator/reader and that of the agents of violence in the text” (Close, “Detective Is Dead” 155). These first person narratives provide privileged insights into the exploits, motivations, and reactions of the criminal as they commit spectacular acts of violence, while distancing the reader from the experience of the victim. In contrast, the identity of the murderer in *La muerte me da*—including the gender—is never revealed, although there is a general assumption among all the characters that the killer is a female, and the novel never privileges the perpetrator’s first person narration. Given that the very premise of the novel is the insufficiency of mediations such as writing to convey meaning to an other, the transparency that is suggested in hardboiled language and dirty realism of the typical *novela negra*’s first-person narrative is rendered impotent from the beginning. Moreover, the closest that we come to hearing the voice of the killer is through the series of impenetrable notes she sends to Rivera Garza that also adopt an instability of self such that the writer gives herself a series of different identities, but from the beginning there is no certainty about who she actually is, in fact, in the first note she tells the reader: “Me llamo Joachima Abramovic. Y no sé, en realidad, quién soy” (Rivera-Garza 79), while she later identifies herself as Gina Pane and then Lynn Hershman. Through this process she is always wearing a mask, never revealing her face nor details about the herself as a murderer. This distance from the perspective of the serial killer obscures any possible connection or access that the novel might give into her internal workings, thus obscuring and downplaying them rather than privileging them over the lives and experiences of her victims. At the same time, by adopting the specific identities of these artists, Rivera Garza

draws on the reader's intertextual knowledge (or lack thereof) of each of these performance artists that are particularly concerned with interactions between the individual and the other through their performance art and installations, especially as related to pain, the body, and the voyeuristic gaze. As such, they reinforce the novel's themes of spectacle and voyeurism, intimacy and distance, and power and subordination.

The one access we do have to the internal experience of someone inflicting violence on another is through the Detective herself who at some point in the past shot a man in self-defense in what appears to have been a confrontation with a criminal, although the circumstances are unclear. As narrated, her experience lacks the spectacle of violent acts that are recounted in minute detail or reflect the power dynamics of acts of sexual violation or mutilation. Despite the fact that her reason for killing another was self-defense, it is an experience so traumatic that it haunts her nightmares. Through privileged insight into her dreams, we see her relive the experience of murdering a man—she finds herself being shot at as she crouches behind a truck, and, terrified, she shoots blindly into the darkness, hits her target, and silence follows. In the narration of the Detective's memories and experience of having perpetrated violence against this man—another instance in which we see the traditional roles of male violence against the female body reversed—she is at first dreaming about the experience and we are introduced to these traumatic memories by the narrations of her external behavior. As she dreams of the night that she killed someone, she whines (“Primero está el gemido. Un par de gemidos.”), then she sobs (“Dos o tres balbuceos.”), and sweats (“Una gota de sudor.”), revealing that she is

reliving a stressful if not traumatic moment in her history (101). In the seconds before she is fully awake—we learn from the omnipotent narrator—she recalls that she had been dreaming of the shoot-out with her victim and she is intensely aware of:

El latir del corazón. El latir loco del corazón. Hay ruidos. Y el ruido que se oye es el ruido de las balas, su trayectoria. [...] Éste es el momento: ella se incorpora y, sin ver, sin alcanzar a ver nada, presa del latir acelerado del corazón, toma el revólver entre las dos manos y apunta hacia la noche inmensa. Hacia la noche. Luego todo se calma, súbitamente. Y el ruido del silencio es más voluminoso que el ruido de la violencia. Dice: no se necesita más que apuntar hacia la noche. No lo dice en realidad. Lo balbucea. Esto: no se necesita sino apuntar hacia la noche para matar a un hombre. (101–102)

In this passage we are offered insight into the tension and fear that is involved in experiencing a risk to one's own life and the possibility of taking the life of another. There is no spectacle nor is it an affirmation of the experience of power over another individual, rather this moment suggests that the morally appropriate response to an individual's own confrontation with violence is that of heightened stress, uncertainty, and even grief. The moment in which the Detective kills her aggressor is conspicuously lacking in any show of degradation. She shoots into the darkness, which is a space that provides the illusion of national unity in the opening pages of *La voluntad y la fortuna*, but that in this moment reinforces the immense distance between the self and other. This distance is rooted in violence and pain, given that to kill a man, "no se necesita más que apuntar hacia la noche inmensa." She never sees her victim and the noise of her gun is followed by silence and the darkness of night with no possibility of seeing the corpse, again contrasting with the spectacle of violence in Mexico. Although the invisibility of the corpse could be interpreted as devaluing the victim through anonymity, I would argue that the

significance of this passage is that it reveals an alternative narrative of a perpetrator of violence. After the tension of the fight and the death of her victim, the Detective is confronted by silence and is reminded of the fragility of life. The simultaneous simplicity and gravity of the experience leaves her traumatized, and she can only sob after the experience. Despite the fact that she makes it clear to Valerio that she was exonerated of all charges, she cannot stop reliving the traumatic experience in her dreams, “[é]sas son las imágenes que no la dejan en paz noche tras noche,” and Valerio observes that when she discusses it, it seems like she “está a punto de llorar o de partirse en dos o de deshacerse en mil pedazos. Una bomba de tiempo” (115). As a perpetrator of violence, the Detective finds herself destroyed, castrated—split in two and falling to pieces—and estranged from herself and others. In short, *La muerte me da*'s first-person perspective of enacting violence against the other reveals an alternative approach to writing violence that eschews the spectacular degradation of the violent acts themselves as well as the patriarchal narrative strategies of the media and crime narratives, while in turn revealing the devastating effects that violence has on the community and, in this case, the perpetrator.

Seeing the victims

La muerte me da also approaches the victim differently from the contemporary Mexican *novela negra*. Rather than objectifying him as spectacle, it adopts an empathetic gaze toward both the physical victims as well as the community of victims that are left to cope with a generalized culture of violence. Through the imagined relationship that the character Rivera Garza forms with the

castrated corpse and this relationship's destructive impact on her established connection with the man she calls *el Amante*, we see that she, as a victim of the generalized experience of violence, struggles with a tension between a desire for comfort and intimacy, and a fear of the very same. In turn, as the Detective investigates the murders and must subject the corpses and their families to her intimate gaze, she struggles with her need to examine the victims (and her desire to do so with empathy) while also sensing that by subjecting them to her intense scrutiny she is risking the victims' dignity by subjecting them to a voyeuristic gaze, much like a media spectacle. In both of the women's posture toward the victims, there is a tension between intimacy and distance that results from the experience of trauma and violence.

As previously mentioned, the character Rivera Garza is the first one to discover a castrated corpse in an alleyway and, through continued thoughts about and internal conversations with that corpse, she pursues a peculiar intimacy with the victim. Throughout the novel's first section, she speaks directly to a "tú" that is never explicitly identified and may not even be the same interlocutor in each passage (23–4, 28, 30, 33–37, 40, 42, 57), but there are several passages that suggest that this "tú" is in fact the cadaver. In one of the first instances in which she speaks directly to this other, she has been shown a photograph by the Detective of the verse of Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry—"palabras brutales" according to Rivera Garza (24)—that were written in fingernail polish on the brick wall of the building by the crime scene. As she looks at the photograph, she remembers the installation *Great Deeds Against the Dead* (1994) by the Chapman brothers and subsequently

turns her mind's eye toward the corpse addressing him directly saying, "te vi," thus connecting the artist's work with the victim's corpse (24). In contemplating the installation, she specifically recalls the graphic image of three castrated, dismembered men hanging from a dead tree: "[a]hí donde deberían estar el pene y los testículos se encontraba, en su lugar, la carne mancillada, terrena. La falta en rojo. La castración. Todo eso envuelto en el aroma ácido de la sangre" (23). The installation is a re-creation one of Goya's *Los desastres de la guerra*, "Grande hazaña con muertos" (1810-1812) that, according to the artists themselves is intended to protest the "jouissance of contemplation of expressively rendered scenes of horror" in the original series by Goya (Close, "Antinovela Negra" 406).³⁰ Instead, they present violence as sterile and distant, as something that can remain tidy, falsified, and without connection to the spectator's emotions. As art critic Sylvère Lotringer observes about this work,

[t]here is nothing to identify with here. The wounds are obviously fake. It is their most disquieting feature. The viewer's eye vaguely glides over the smooth bodies, but cannot lock anywhere. The cuts are too neat, the bodies limp and bland. But this is what the Chapmans were aiming at: 'aesthetic inertia', creating an object of 'no cultural value'. The clean chunks of flesh are just following Goya's cues. There is no attempt to provoke fear, disgust or terror (qtd. in "Antinovela Negra" 406).

By repurposing Goya's original works (in both *Great Deeds Against the Dead* and *Insult to Injury*), the Chapmans have castrated his artistic authority in an attempt to

³⁰ More recently, Jake and Dinos Chapman created a new work titled *Insult to Injury* (2003) in which they defaced 80 etchings from Goya's *Los desastres de la guerra* by replacing each of the victim's heads in the prints with drawings of clown and puppy heads with admittedly similar intentions to their installation of *Great Deeds Against the Dead*, Jake says: "He's the artist who represents that kind of expressionistic struggle of the Enlightenment with the ancien régime [...] so it's kind of nice to kick its underbelly. Because he has a predilection for violence under the aegis of a moral framework" (Jones).

distance the spectator from taking pleasure in depictions of war and violence. Indeed, Glen Close argues that this is precisely the strategy that the author Rivera Garza adopts in her novel, “we may conclude that in *La muerte me da* Rivera Garza carries out a defamiliarizing operation comparable to that performed by the Chapmans on Goya’s war imagery” (“Antinovela Negra” 407).

And yet, the Chapmans’ own repurposing of Goya’s work to distance the observer from taking pleasure in the art object does nothing to bridge this distance between the spectacle that inspires passive contemplation and the realities of violence, something that I would argue that Rivera Garza does do in her novel. Their installation allows violence to remain nothing more than a visual experience with no requirement to move past the image toward actively engaging with the reality of the victims. As the character Rivera Garza remembers the installation, she imagines the Detective viewing the exhibit with champagne in hand:

Entonces, me pregunté [...] si la Detective, que seguramente estuvo ahí, en la muy sonada exposición de los hermanos Chapman, habría tomado, con una delicadeza que ahora me resultaba difícil de concebir, la alargada copa de champán mientras discurría, con ese tono cansino de quien lo ha visto ya todo, con esa ufana o precavida indiferencia, sobre lo increíble, lo espantoso y lo increíble que resultaba siempre ver, sin importar si se trataba de Goya o de los hermanos Chapman, de un grabado de una instalación o del hecho real, el cuerpo de un hombre castrado. (27)

In imagining this scene, the spectacular nature of the *Great Deeds Against the Dead* exhibition is evident in the fact that it was a highly discussed event and was clearly something that a certain class of people would have attended, given that the character Rivera Garza assumes that the Detective “seguramente estuvo ahí.” Her memory of the event reveals a contrast between contemplative distance of the spectator—saturated with delicate gestures, the refinement of an “alargada copa de

champán,” and tired indifference—and her confused, traumatic, and very real experience of encountering a castrated corpse in the alley, which she had earlier described in fragments. Her experience of violence was a visceral one as detailed in her own corporeal reactions (trembling, her knees on the pavement, tears) and the lifeless body in front of her (a puddle of blood, twisted limbs, his skin and castrated penis). This contrast between the spectacle and the lived experience of violence recalls Debord’s suggestion that “the more [the spectator] contemplates, the less [s]he lives” (23). In this way, the Chapmans’ attempt to distance the spectator from the pleasure of Goya’s aesthetics is also at odds with the novel’s attempt to narrate the lived experience of violence within the community.

Accordingly, the character Rivera Garza turns her gaze away from the Chapman brothers’ spectacle toward the possibility of an intimate connection despite the violence by directing her attention to the real corpse. As the character Rivera Garza considers this particular installation, she thinks to herself:

Jake y Dinos Chapman habían declarado a la prensa que se concebían como un par de oxímoros escopofiliacos que herían los ojos. Jake y Dinos Chapman aseguraron que eran artistas. Vi otra cosa y, por eso, te vi. Una ciudad siempre es un cementerio. (Rivera-Garza 24)

The character Rivera Garza responds to the brothers’ claims to be artists—whose aim is to eliminate art’s visual pleasure by “wounding the eyes” through their work—by failing to recognize them as such. As she says, “vi otra cosa,” she redirects her gaze away from their spectacle of violence in which presents the destruction of three castrated and dismembered male bodies toward the unmediated, present, and real corpse that she had encountered lying in the street at the beginning of the narration: “Una piel, la piel. Cosa sobre el asfalto. Rodilla. Hombro. Nariz. Algo roto.

Algo desarticulado. Oreja. Pie. Sexo. Cosa roja y abierta. Un contexto. Un punto de ebullición. Algo deshecho” (16). Perhaps central to this description of the corpse is the “contexto:” this body was an individual who had breathed a final breath, who leaves behind family and friends, and whose murder (one among many) reverberates through the city. In this moment she says to herself, “por eso, te vi,” and while she gazes internally on the first corpse that she found, she broadens her perspective to encompass the entire city that is replete with the physical and emotional victims of spectacular acts of violence like those enacted against the *hombres castrados*: “Una ciudad siempre es un cementerio.”

This empathetic and intimate connection with the first of the serial killer’s victims reflects an alternative approach toward relating to the victims that, in the contemporary Mexican *novela negra* tend to be objectified, while also revealing a tension between a posture of empathy and the trauma of opening oneself to the real experience of violence. This is evident in the way in which Rivera Garza relates to the corpse and to her own intimate partner. In her intertwined interactions with the two men, it is clear that the murder and castration of the *hombres castrados* has disrupted the standard rhythm of life, in much the same way that, for Segato, the spectacular and public sexual violence that is enacted against women destabilizes “el orden y previsibilidad de la existencia. Un signo de interrogación planea ahora sobre los códigos y las convenciones que dan estabilidad a las relaciones entre las personas” (Segato 361). The character Rivera Garza finds herself uncomfortable and unsettled leading to a disruption in her already existing intimate relationship with *el Amante* and a futile attempt at intimacy with the castrated corpse. As Rivera Garza

lies naked in bed with her *Amante*, she tells him about a recent meeting with the Detective, and finds herself giggling at the phrase “*hombres castrados*,” a reaction which she interprets as her way of releasing tension and minimizing the seriousness of the situation (Rivera-Garza 34). She recognizes that her reaction is inappropriate, she calls the giggle “escandalosa” and describes the sound, as it comes out of her throat, as “insulso”—it’s not a joyful or playful giggle but one that recognizes that something is out of place, that the usual order has been disrupted. She further emphasizes the destabilized moment by associating the period of the *hombres castrados* with a pervasive wind and dust that enters into everyone’s home, and even into their bodies through every crack, crevasse, and pore:

De esos días iniciales recuerdo, sobre todo, el viento. [...] Se colaba por las rendijas de las ventanas, por debajo de la puerta, por los poros del cuerpo. Sacudía las hojas de los álamos y los cables del teléfono. El mundo se encontraba en ese estado de sobresalto milimétrico que a menudo se describe con el adjetivo «trémulo». Y, con el viento, llegó la polvareda. [...] La polvareda y, por debajo de la polvareda tu aparición. Alguien para hablarle de tú. [...] Los asesinatos se iniciaron en esos tiempos trémulos y cenicientos de febrero [...]. (37).

This image of a wind that permeates everything, that enters from the external public space into all of the intimate places of the city and even into individual bodies within the community, suggests the type of penetrating fear and instability that is directly connected with the beginning of “los asesinatos.” As Segato describes, this type of violence leads to a fundamental instability in the community, accordingly Rivera Garza indicates that everyone (“el mundo”) found themselves in a state of fright, a trembling that is made visual with the shaking and shivering of the poplar leaves and telephone wires. Here reference here to the trembling leaves recalls her reaction the very first moment that she discovered a corpse on the street, in which

she says: “Trémula. Hay hojas trémulas y cuerpos,” a passage that with its lack of clear referents connects the trembling of the tree leaves with her own body (*cuerpo*) as she discovers the castrated corpse (*cuerpo*) on the ground (15). The disturbance that spreads even to the natural world reveals that there is no idealized sphere of nature, even the way things should be is affected, something that is reinforced by the heavy dust kicked up by the wind. A dust storm obscures an individual’s relationship with the city and limits their ability to physically connect with the space and people around them, leading to a loss of a sense of “el orden y la previsibilidad de la existencia” (Segato 361). Rivera Garza’s response to this destabilizing and distancing violence is a simultaneous distancing from her own lover and an attempt to establish a connection with the corpse.

As she lies in bed with *el Amante*, Rivera Garza’s attention is divided between him and the castrated corpse, and we ultimately find that her imagined relationship with the corpse has a distancing effect on her real connection with *el Amante*, revealing the destabilizing impact that the real experience of violence has on those that come into contact with it. As the two lovers lie naked beneath the covers, sharing a moment of intimacy, Rivera Garza tells him about the details of her day, describing her meeting with the detective (repeating “le dije que...”). But as soon as her thoughts turn to the *hombre castrado*, she falls silent and pulls away from him on an emotional level.

Entonces, me acordé de ti, ciertamente. Luego me quedé pensativa y, sin notarlo apenas, guardé silencio. Oía el eco de la amenaza: *pagaré la lluvia, el trueno*. Veía mi mano, tendida sobre su torso, y veía la mano, la otra mano, una mano minúscula, hundida en un abismo de vísceras. *Miedo de la muerte del amor*, escuché ese verso como un susurro muy cerca de mi oído. Un tributo. *Dice que no sabe*. (Rivera-Garza 34–35)

After having told *el Amante* about the Pizarnik poetry left at each crime scene, the first corpse comes to Rivera Garza's mind: "me acordé de ti." As she contemplates the mutilated man, the crime scene, and Pizarnik's verses, she cuts off communication with her *Amante* but begins to connect the corpse with the man lying beside her. She recalls the Pizarnik verse from *Árbol de Diana* left at the crime scene of the second victim, "Quién dejará de hundir la mano en busca del tributo para la pequeña olvidada. El frío pagará. La lluvia pagará. Pagará el trueno" (31-32). Critics have argued that, in her poem, "la pequeña olvidada" refers to Pizarnik herself who, particularly in *Árbol de Diana*, "positions herself in the text as different subjects" (Rossi 133). In the context of the novel, we can suppose that the killer is represented by *la pequeña olvidada* given that she is an anonymous individual who claims various names and says "no sé, en realidad, quién soy," such that she, like Pizarnik, has adopted a fragmented identity (Rivera-Garza 79). There is also a sense that the character Rivera Garza herself could be *la pequeña olvidada*, as she holds her hand over her *Amante's* torso and connects her own hand with the tiny hand of "la pequeña olvidada" that is submerged in "un abismo de vísceras." By holding her hand over the *Amante* and imagining it submerged into his entrails, the character Rivera Garza also links the body of the man lying beside her with the mutilated corpse with whom she has been having an internal conversation. The confusion between subjects and objects, which is reinforced in the use of pronouns and vague descriptors ("veía la mano, la otra mano, una mano minúscula"), functions to mirror the connections within a community mired in a culture of generalized violence such that there is a sense that nobody is fully separate, safe, or innocent. Her *Amante*

could just as well have been the killer's victim, while Rivera Garza herself could have been his killer.³¹ And yet, the vagueness of the subject and object (killer or Rivera Garza? *Amante* or corpse?) as well as the depths of the self that is exposed in the "abismo de vísceras," reinforces a sense of the fragmentation of individual subjectivity and the symbolic castration of knowledge. This inevitable inability to make sense of the world and distance existing between the self and other is in turn exacerbated by a culture of violence that leads to intense fears about experiencing or participating in future acts of violence, fears which, in this scene, impede the intimacy between the character Rivera Garza and her *Amante*. Her silence and her reluctance to continue telling *el Amante* about her experiences is reflective of this fear, which is articulated in the threat in the Pizarnik verses ("*pagará la lluvia, el trueno*") and the recognition of a fear of loss "*Miedo de la muerte del amor.*" However, there is also a sense of longing for a perverse intimacy through the act of the violent submersion of the hand into the depths of the castrated corpse's entrails, a connection with an other that, by virtue of its violent and destructive nature, can never be fulfilled.

This simultaneous desire for and fear of intimacy continues to cycle, as evidenced in the subsequent passage in which Rivera Garza's thoughts return specifically to her *hombre castrado*:

Y entonces te vi; volví a hacerlo. Tan difícil de creer a veces, eso, verte. Y tan natural también. Sin duda uno termina por acostumbrarse a todo. Iba a ponerte un nombre pero, en el último momento, imaginé la sombra que

³¹ This possibility is suggested later in the novel (Chapter 63) when *El Hombre-Que-Era-Él-A-Veces* visits the Detective and describes being castrated but surviving an attack from someone who may be the *Sospechosa Inicial*, another name for the character Rivera Garza.

prodigaba un sauce. No sé si sea posible vivir así, me dijiste desde lejos. (35)

She again addresses him with the familiar “tú” and even considers giving him a name—a further step toward intimacy—but decides against it after envisioning the “sombra que prodigaba un sauce,” that is, after she considers the darkness that results when the beautiful willow blocks out the sun. The negative image of the shadow conveys the potential for loss when deepening an intimate connection with an other, particularly one that, because he is a corpse, can never be satisfied. And yet, perhaps a dead man who exists only in the mind is an ideal, unthreatening other with whom to share intimate thoughts and feelings.

Immediately after these two moments in which Rivera Garza’s thoughts transition from telling her *Amante* about her experiences to considering the murder of the *hombre castrado* and conversing internally with him, her behavior toward *el Amante* changes dramatically. She stops sharing with him the details of her day, her first words are: “Ya *no* le dije a mi Amante que [...]” (my italics) and she continues listing all of the things that she no longer is willing to share with him, “Ni mencioné tampoco [...]” and “Evité decirle [...]” (35). It is not that the information that she withholds from *el Amante* is materially different from the information that she had shared with him before her mind turned to the *hombre castrado*, rather, her own position toward him has changed. She prefers to share those details with the corpse instead, in fact, she whispers things to the *hombre castrado* that she will not tell *el Amante* (36). Although she remembers the intimacy that they shared as *el Amante* “sonr[íe] con esa sonrisa abierta e iluminada que era la causa por la que se encontraba bajo las sábanas, sobre mi cama, a un lado de mi cuerpo” (36), she finds

solace in the *hombre castrado* that she does not find in her *Amante*. She has pulled away from him out of fear, “[m]iedo de la muerte del amor,” while the wink that she imagines the corpse giving her relaxes her and “[le] h[ace] creer que p[uede] seguir viviendo” (35), suggesting a false alternative to real intimacy, that she can survive the generalized violence by distancing herself through the spectacle, through an idealized representation of the violence that, in this case, she herself has created. Later, the novel reveals that her relationship with the *Amante* has broken down completely because of her relationship with another unnamed man, “otro cuerpo,” who is likely the corpse (63). As she talks to her *Amante*, he wears an “expresión de sufrimiento: la ausencia de la risa que alguna vez lo iluminó todo a su paso” and as he lies in bed, he keeps his back to her, “desvaneciéndose” (63, 64). Again, this distance and total failure of intimacy is a symptom of the destruction of society’s social fabric in the face of pervasive and spectacular violence.

As she examines the evidence of the case, the Detective also adopts an intimate stance toward the victims of violence, presenting an empathetic portrait of the castrated corpses as well as those that are affected by their deaths. As she conducts her investigation of the corpses themselves, the omniscient narrator describes the Detective’s thoughts as she carefully considers the entire context surrounding their deaths:

Piensa en esos cadáveres mutilados que ahora no sólo son un caso o un suceso o una noticia alarmante sino también, sino sobre todo, una pérdida. Algo propio. Piensa en sus múltiples manos, sus parientes llorosos, sus fines de semana, sus zapatos. Piensa en el momento último. ¿A dónde iban cuando en realidad se dirigían hacia la muerte? ¿Quién se quedó esperándolos? El grito o el suspiro. Piensa en el ruido con el que le indicaron al mundo que estaban al tanto: esto es el final. ¿Los ojos en blanco? ¿Una maldición o una súplica en la boca? Sabe sus nombres y recuerda sus rostros, pero para poder

trabajar en sus casos necesita llamarlos Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro. Así no le causan vómito. Así los protege. Esto es un velo. Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro. (104)

As she thinks about the four corpses, she specifically turns her attention to each one as an individual loss, “[a]lgo propio,” within the community rather than a part of the anonymous mass of victims of violence as spectacularized by anecdotes, news reports, and, specifically, the *nota roja*, which tend to turn the victim into an object of shock and titillation. Instead, the Detective attempts to reframe this perspective to thinking about each of the victims as an individual, as a loss of a unique creature with a history and plans for a future, a living being with family and friends, and a sentient individual who was likely alert and afraid during their last moments of life. By exploring the victim’s last minutes, wondering about and reliving his possible last movements, thoughts, and sounds, the Detective empathizes with each of the four as individual agents that endured unimaginable violence, in contrast to the contemporary Mexican *novela negra* in which victims are often objects that are acted upon.

Interestingly, however, she also finds that in order to function and do her job appropriately, she must maintain a certain degree of distance from the victims—something that the character Rivera Garza was unable to do. Rather than calling them by their names, she refers to each one as “Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro” (in contrast with Rivera Garza’s pursuit of an imagined intimate relationship with her corpse). And it is not only for her own protection—“[a]sí que no le causan vómito”—but it is also for *their* protection, as a barrier, “un velo,” against the prying eyes of the voyeurs and a voyeur culture that would gaze at them as nothing more than a spectacle of public violence. It is interesting to note that this metaphorical veil

serves both to simultaneously distance the Detective from and acknowledge an intimacy with the corpses. The Detective is so respectful of the victim's dignity that she is concerned that her own investigation of the corpses is comparable to killing them for a second time. As she considers that she will have to investigate their bodies and specifically their wounds in minute detail, she thinks to herself:

husmeará dentro del cuerpo justo como el asesino y, a diferencia del asesino, los matará por segunda vez. [...] Quiere protegerlos de todo, sobre todo de sí misma. Quiere que, ya muertos, los muertos mueran verídicamente. Que descansen en paz, eso quiere, y eso es lo que no les puede dar, piensa. Anónimos y divinos a un tiempo, los muertos. Intactos. Así los quiere. No quiere descorrer el velo necesita descorrer el velo. Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro. (105)

Again, she expresses the idea of wanting to protect them, to honor them and their bodies, not wanting to subject the corpses to further violation and abuse, and yet she knows that in order to learn more about the crime and possibly identify the perpetrator, she has to do just that. She wants to respect their humanity and their bodies in death by allowing their corpses to remain untouched and unseen by anyone that would view or treat the body as an object, in this case as a piece of evidence to be explored and manipulated. For the Detective, such an act of objectification and voyeurism is as violent and morally repugnant as the initial murder.

As part of her investigation, the Detective also visits family members and friends of each of the murdered men, with her first visit to the mother of the first victim. During this visit, she demonstrates empathy for the living victim of the serial killer's violent act. The narration is initially focused on the mother's countenance and gaze, a look full of such unimaginable sorrow that there are no words to

describe or convey the pain.

La mirada de la madre que ha perdido un hijo [...] no es comparable a ninguna otra cosa en el mundo. Esa mirada carece de metáfora, de analogía, de metonimia. En sentido estricto, luego entonces, se trata de una mirada que no existe. (116)

The narrator's conclusion, that the lack of any words or figurative language to express the devastated look of a mother who has lost her son, establishes the weight of the victimization of those beyond the immediate target of violence, as if the victims of violence radiate out in concentric circles from the corpse, including intimate family and friends and even ostensibly unconnected members of the community such as the character Rivera Garza, the Detective, and Valerio. Moreover, within this observation of the mother's sorrow, there is also an implicit criticism of the contemporary *novelas negras*' failure to engage in a meaningful way with the victims the violence that take place in their narratives. That the narrator suggests that the mother's gaze is full of such indescribable pain that, truly unable to be expressed in words, it technically does not exist. An allusion to the failure of mediation to communicate oneself to another, this argument could be borrowed as a justification of the contemporary *novela negra*'s tendency to omit references to the devastating experience of the victim. And yet, simply by pointing to the inaccessibility of language to access the depths of sorrow felt by the mother of one of the murder victims, *La muerte me da* acknowledges the existence of this experience of devastation on the part of victims who have lived through the murder of someone close to them. Moreover, the very presence of such a detailed examination of the impact that the spectacle of such violence has on the mother—the look on her face, her memories of his sense of humor, his gait, his first

professional successes, and even her visual image of his mutilated body “el vientre machacado, abierto, todavía cubierto de sangre fresca. Una boca en realidad. Un orificio brutal” (118, 119)—the novel embraces a unique perspective within a genre that tends to elide the impact of violence on its victims and the community.

The narrator goes on to describe, through the Detective’s reflections on the mother, the severity of the pain that she experiences in the wake of her son’s murder. As the Detective talks to the mother “sin emoción pero con empatía, sin complicidad pero con humana preocupación, con entereza” (117), the narrator describes the small details of the mother’s behavior and countenance that reinforce the tragedy that she is living. She details the mother’s low voice, the way her hands touch each other, the individual tears that fall down her face, and the small wrinkle, each betraying the experience of the living victims of violence. The wrinkle in particular caught the Detective’s attention:

Justo entonces, mientras la mujer se desdobra, la Detective la identifica: la arruga nueva. Es apenas una línea sobre el mentón; una línea que aparece sólo con ciertas frases, las más rotas o parcas. Las menos audibles. La Detective [...] la ve de cerca y no puede evitar reconocerla: es la arruga que nace un día después del anuncio de la muerte. Ella lo sabe bien. Es una arruga que viene, entera y veloz, de la violencia: la violencia de la muerte, la violencia del conocimiento de la muerte. Es la respuesta de la piel. (117)

This wrinkle is miniscule, almost so as to be undetectable, appearing only during expressions of pronounced grief, and directly traceable to the news that her son had been murdered. In this way the violence against her son leaves an indelible physical mark on the mother’s own body, a mark that while subtle, reveals the depth of the physical and emotional toll that the murderer’s violent act has on her. The wrinkle on the mother’s face is also a metaphor for the nearly imperceptible impacts that

such public, spectacular violence has on the victims in the broader community, the instability, fear, the failure of intimate connections with an other, as discussed above in the relationship between Rivera Garza and her *Amante*. Moreover, it is also a fold, something which conceals information and must be carefully examined to discover that which it obscures, and which stands in opposition of the spectacle of violence, which exposes everything, but superficially. And, again, the Detective's close, detailed attention to the physical and emotional state of the *hombre castrado's* mother marks this Detective as distinct from the detectives of the traditional *novela negra* in the depth of attention to detail that she directs not on possible suspects, but on the victims of the killer's crimes.

Conclusion

Cristina Rivera Garza's novel *La muerte me da* is a unique text that adopts the *novela negra*—a genre that in Latin America often both adopts and sits in tension with spectacular narratives of violence that reproduce patriarchal hierarchies of power—to reject the traditional ways that violence has been narrated. Through the novel, she explores an alternative approach to writing violence that, rather than privileging the perpetrator's perspective and objectifying the victim, adopts an empathetic posture toward victims and provides insight into the lived experience of violence. To do this, she undermines the illusion of meaning found in the spectacle and patriarchal authority by castrating the novel's male corpses leaving a void where the phallus existed as a symbol of power and revealing that there is no sense to be made of the violence. And yet, it is clear that the project of writing violence

while respecting and giving voice to its victims is not a simple one. As noted earlier, Rivera Garza has struggled with important questions related to the role of the author in narrating violence: “In writing and minutely narrating a violent act, do I become complicit, am I killing the victim a second time? [...] Am I contributing to the creation of the spectacle of violence in order to attract readers, to sell books?” In *La muerte me da*, she attempts to negotiate this line between narrating violence in a way that is reflective of the experience of contemporary Mexico, but that does not replicate the violence by reinforcing the same patriarchal hierarchies of power that underpin it. Her project mirrors that of the Detective who recognizes, as she contemplates her task of examining the castrated corpses, that she must pull back the protective veil in order to approach the truth, and yet she fears replicating the disinterested and superficial gaze of the voyeur, thus making a spectacle of the victims and the experience of violence. In navigating this tension, Rivera Garza locates the novel’s meaning in its attempt to communicate the incommunicable experience of victim’s of violence, including the fear, pain, and trauma. She looks past a landscape saturated with violence as spectacle to explore the voids, folds, and unnarratable moments that are central to this lived experienced of violence in contemporary Mexico.

CONCLUSION

In accordance with a long tradition of narrating the nation in Mexico, including twentieth century, post-revolutionary attempts at nation building through the projection of an idealized and unified national community, *La voluntad y la fortuna*, *Hotel DF*, and *La muerte me da* each grapple with making sense of the contemporary nation within the context of shifting political, economic, and social conditions. Namely, neoliberal economic policies and increasing drug violence have ushered in a new era of systemic and subjective violence in Mexico such that the historical ideal of national unity has been pushed to its limits, calling into question past narratives of the nation and its future possibilities. In exploring the realities of violence, fear, and insecurity in present-day Mexico through the *novela negra*, each of these novels sets forth a narrative of the nation that explores the interconnectedness and distance that are inherent to its basic structure.

For Fuentes, the ideal of the unified nation that he narrated in early novels like *La región más transparente* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* has been destroyed—as evident through the decapitation of *La voluntad y la fortuna*'s protagonist narrator—and the only possibility for the future of the national community is to recognize the radical heterogeneity of its people. That is, rather than adopting a posture toward the other that subsumes her into itself, the nation must be able to gaze at the other as an asymmetrical individual without expectation

of reciprocity, recognizing her fundamental potentiality as a singular being. Through this posture of generosity toward the other, the novel acknowledges a tentative possibility for the future of nation—one in which difference is acknowledged without condition—something that Fuentes seems uncertain will ever come to pass.

In contrast, Fadanelli's novel narrates distance as an elemental aspect of the contemporary Mexican experience, with economic and social barriers having reached such extremes that the experience of moving from one area of the city to the other or interacting with someone from a different social sphere is tantamount to finding oneself in a different country or culture. In response, his novel calls for the reader to recognize a fundamental level of interconnectedness between the entire national community, not as a utopic vision of idealized national unity, but in recognition of the degree to which the dysfunction in Mexico touches the lives of everyone in the nation. *Hotel DF* does admit an uncertain possibility for redemption from the national dysfunction through individual connections across these social and economic barriers, but, as with Fuentes, this hope is little more than an uncertain possibility for the future.

Rivera Garza's vision of the nation is just as pessimistic as Fuentes and Fadanelli. *La muerte me da* examines the tension between the desire for connection and the distance that, while fundamental to the experience of relating to the other, is also exacerbated by a generalized culture of subjective violence and its attendant spectacle. In this way, the novel both recognizes the existential distance between the self and the other, while also exploring the desire for intimacy and attempts at connecting with the humanity of the other that are challenged by pervasive and

spectacularized violence. Ultimately, even though there are gestures toward the desire for and connection with the other, the novel calls into question any such possibility by narrating a tale and embracing a structure that is insistent on concealing as much knowledge as possible, thus maintaining an unremitting distance between the text and the reader.

While each of these novels sets forth a distinct vision of the viability and structure of the nation, their shared commitment to articulating alternative visions and the concomitant possibilities (or lack thereof) for the nation's future under Mexico's contemporary context of systemic and subjective violence is clear. Moreover, in contrast to past nation-building novels that have overwhelmingly celebrated the unity of the nation, there is a renewed focus on difference and distance as a fundamental element of the nation that cannot be ignored or suppressed. At the same time, while questioning the future potential of the community, there is also a basic inability to abandon the historical concept of nation an entity structured around the interconnectedness of its members. Ultimately, what is clear from each of these novels is their call for a need to recognize the others within the community as singular beings rather than subsume, erase, or objectify their existence.

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