

**RESISTANCE HISTORIES:
CONTEMPORARY LITERARY RECONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL HISTORY**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2009

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

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This study identifies and analyzes methods by which contemporary literary works contest officially sanctioned national histories and present alternative national histories. The dissertation uses the term “resistance histories” to refer to literary texts that participate in critiques of traditional modes of historical and literary representations of the nation, while also interrogating the connection between history and story. The resistance histories discussed in the dissertation include novels, poetry, criticism, and hybrid works by: Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldúa, Eavan Boland, Antonio Tabucchi, Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Vincenzo Consolo. While many studies of the connections between literature and national historical identity discuss these issues either in primarily theoretical terms or by focusing on one national (or regional) context, this dissertation incorporates a comparative emphasis, placing diverse texts in conversation with each other to investigate the reasons for their confluence of style despite different national referents. The techniques explored include a rejection of traditional literary realism through the use of alternative generic elements (including magical realism, science fiction, *telenovelas*, comics, and hybrid works that draw on various genres), non-standard national language (foreign languages, dialects, vernaculars, and different registers), and the explicit questioning of historical representation (often equating

narrative and historical representation by focusing on the element of artifice contained in the construction of both types of narration). The dissertation draws on scholarship in areas related to historiography, nationalism, genre, culture, gender, postmodernism, and postcolonialism.

To Maria S. Hanna

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my dissertation committee: Professors Eugenia Paulicelli, Nancy K. Miller, and Giancarlo Lombardi. I owe particular gratitude to my adviser, Professor Eugenia Paulicelli, who has supported me through every part of my graduate education. I have benefited immensely from her wisdom and encouragement. Thanks also to the professors who helped me with this project during its earliest stages (oral exams), especially Peter Carravetta and Ammiel Alcalay. Professor Lyn Di Iorio Sandín was very generous with her help during orals and early stages of the dissertation as well. Special thanks to Professor José David Saldívar at UC Berkeley for his excellent suggestions and encouragement throughout the writing process.

I am grateful for the financial support of the Graduate Center's MAGNET program, whose pre-doctoral fellowship facilitated my studies and dissertation fellowship afforded me the time to complete the dissertation.

Heartfelt thanks to my best readers and editors: Nancy Hanna and George Fragopoulos.

Who controls the past controls the present
And who controls the present controls the future

The battle for the past is for the future
Must be the winners of the memory war
Smash reach out and then grab the flower
At the end of the day we will defeat them for sure

Have you inside your memory the scene of the crime
If you don't have a clue then you're running out of time
Struggle continues while di sun shine
Past and the truth two of them you have to combine
Because books dem a burnt and documents are shredded
Cover-ups are covered up in the name of the law
Presidents and royalty caught red handed
And you won't know about it for fifty years or more

Asian Dub Foundation, "Memory War"

"We are fighting a war against a story, against the history that is being written by Saturn. We believed that silence was our best weapon against the intrusion of Saturn, that our silence would in turn silence Saturn.

"But we have discovered an allergy to lead, and learned that history cannot be fought with sealed lips, that the only way to stop Saturn is through our own voice."

That was the only rallying speech I gave, but not much rallying was needed. After years covered by lead and the imposed quiet under open air, we were ready to speak. We all went outside and said all the things we had always wanted to say, letting the words float. And those who were too timid to use their immediate words wrote down what they would say and then read it aloud. Others simply pulled letters from their back pockets and from underneath mattresses, or read from underlined passages in worn and dog-eared books.

Salvador Plascencia, *The People of Paper*

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INTRODUCTION

The fields of both literary studies and historiography have seen a renewed interest in the connection between historical and literary narrative, particularly in relation to representations of the nation. This scholarship, sometimes considered a branch of postmodernism as it questions the “grand narrative” of modern history,¹ critiques the notion of history as objective science in part by focusing on the narrative construction of historiography. A variety of contemporary literary texts of the past few decades from different national contexts participate in questioning the bases and biases of national history by re-examining moments of national definition and re-definition. They question both the content and form of accepted representations of these moments, and provide alternative constructions that draw on previously unincorporated interpretations. Generally speaking, a nation’s official historical narrative can be understood by examining its textbooks, nationalistic literature and films, monuments, street names, and official holidays. The official history of a nation naturalizes its existence, creates a sense of homogeneity and continuity, and establishes a trajectory of progress. This dissertation focuses on “resistance histories” that instead explore moments of rupture, difference, and equivocal meanings within historical moments upon which constructions of national history are based. These texts thus object to the established national narrative and are

¹In attempting to define the term “postmodernism,” Jean-François Lyotard suggested that postmodernist works critique “grand narratives,” including that of history as progress. See Lyotard’s “Defining the Postmodern.” Also see Linda Hutcheon’s *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) regarding problematization of historical narrative in postmodern literature.

concerned with historical minorities: people and communities whose histories are omitted from or misrepresented in official national historical narratives. Such groups can include women, racial others, foreigners, political dissidents, and the lower classes. Authors who attempt to represent these histories often also seek alternative modes of historical and literary representation. A central argument of my study is that contemporary resistance histories employ innovations in literary form rather than just revising content. Unlike some protest literature which uses representational modes similar to those used in official historical narratives (usually realism), the texts included in this study alter the form and style of representation rather than shifting only the subjects of that representation.

In my chapter on Toni Morrison, for example, I discuss the author's rejection of written records—such as newspapers—that she identifies as participating in the discourse of “scientific racism” of Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Hegel (“Site of Memory” 108). In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison forces readers' attention away from the written records that constitute much of the source material of official United States history, and provides an alternative narration based on recovered and invented memory of enslaved people not found in official histories. Because of the biases that she identifies in the sources of the historical record, Morrison insists on a different type of narration that defies the constructs of traditional histories and literary narratives; I discuss, for example, her use of narrative “circling” and her consistent invocation of countermemory. For Morrison, the content of histories that ignore the lives of enslaved people is wedded to the form of those histories. The goal of this dissertation is to examine some of the major representational modes employed by resistance histories in their contestation of official histories.

Literature has often taken up the subject of history. The two fields of knowledge were intimately linked in Western writing since classical times, including the Hellenic historical tradition that can be traced to Herodotus. Even as late as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “history was still a literary genre” (Gossman *Between History and Literature* 3). Yet particularly since the nineteenth century, the discipline of history has regarded itself as a social science separate from the realm of art.² In this view, history wrote factual reports based on quantifiable evidence, while literature created fictions derived from invention and imagination. Despite this split, literature has continued to take up the charge of historical representation. The literary practice of creating competing representations of history can be traced at least as far back as the origins of the historical novel, whose emergence in Europe and the Americas roughly coincided with the rise of modern nations.³ Some of the literary works that I study draw from the tradition of literature that addresses history, like the historical novels of Walter Scott and Alessandro Manzoni that re-focused the representation of history by, for example, focusing on “middling” characters rather than political heroes. While the texts that I study might draw on this tradition, however, they also often criticize it.⁴

The texts that I describe as “resistance histories” employ innovative literary forms in terms of genres and language, and present alternative historical philosophies, in order to contest official national histories that they view as incomplete or misrepresentative.

This project examines literature that attempts to intervene in both historiographic and

² While I here outline some of the most basic shifts in the field of historical study as they relate to literary study, a detailed analysis of that history is beyond the scope of this dissertation. A particularly useful book in my research on this subject was Lionel Gossman’s *Between History and Literature* (1990).

³ See Lúkacs’s *The Historical Novel* (1937). Lúkacs makes the connection between the rise of modern nations and the rise of the historical novel in nineteenth century Europe. Two much more recent works that give considerable attention to nationalism and the novel in Latin America are Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991) and Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions* (1993).

⁴ See, for example, my discussion of Antonio Tabucchi’s invocation of Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi* (1840).

literary discourse. These texts explicitly question which histories are told, from which perspectives, toward which ends, and by which methods, examining the ways in which literature can offer an alternative mode of historical representation and recognizing the connection between narrative technique and historical knowledge. This twinning of history and story is articulated in most of the texts studied in this dissertation. For example, in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002), the narrator calls her narrative "*puro cuento*" ("nothing but story"), while insisting that this storytelling is the only way by which she can access the histories of the women in the Reyes family, which she then weaves into the history of both the United States and Mexican nations.

I have chosen to discuss contemporary literary representations of national history because the nation is a construct that often organizes modern history and notions of identity. Benedict Anderson notes that "in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as he or she 'has' a gender" (*Imagined Communities* 5). Anderson's statement highlights nationality as a fundamental element of contemporary identity, describing it as akin to gender in this sense. Indeed, despite seemingly continual popular and scholarly discussions about the waning hold of nationalism, nationality continues to maintain a central role in both popular culture and academic studies. Current conceptions of politics and citizenship, for example, are based on nationality. Literary studies are also still often organized around the concept of national literatures and languages. Because of the continued centrality of the organizing concept of the nation, there continues to be a focus on that which nations exclude from their self-definition and thus relegate to the extra-historical. One of the questions I kept in mind while studying these literary works was what these works ultimately make of the nation in both literary and historical terms.

When considering whether these works constituted a rejection or a revision of national history and literature, I came to believe that these texts fall into the latter category. Their critiques of national history, national identity, and national literature do not lead them to reject these concepts altogether; rather, I believe that the works covered in this study seek a refocusing and expansion of national histories via literary forms that will allow the reader to be more aware of the problems inherent in national definitions and to see possibilities for alternative engagements of history.

Precisely because identity rests in part on national affiliation, the authors whose work I discuss seek to situate the histories that they tell *within* national history. For example, in Chapter Five, I discuss the novels of two Chicana writers who grapple with the invisibility of Chican@ identity within discourses of both United States and Mexican national histories. Rather than arguing, for example, that national history is irrelevant, Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo write Chican@s into both United States and Mexican history. They posit an expanded nationality rather than abrogating it. My chapter on Vincenzo Consolo's *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* (1976) provides another example. In his re-writing of the history of the Risorgimento, the peasants serve to represent not only an Italian underclass whose history was not incorporated into mainstream Italian history, but more generally an alternate interpretation of unification as a historical moment of political and economic disenfranchisement. Despite this critique, however, the main character, the intellectual baron of Mandralisca, has one hope for the peasants who rebel at Alcàra Li Fusi: that they will one day acquire the literacy necessary to write their own histories. This critique does not call for rejection so much as for expanded participation. Another important feature of these novels, however, is the explicit knowledge of their

construction and inevitable partiality; none of these authors seek to write a definitive or authoritative version of history, instead making explicit the fragmentary and partial nature of any history. Still, this does not indicate that these writers view the histories they seek to foreground as any less valid as a result; nor do they all judge the histories they contest as necessarily invalid, only incomplete.

Throughout the dissertation, I refer to “official history” as that which the texts I discuss explicitly contest. Of course, the term “official history” is a relatively general one; it is defined differently in the different novels and poetry, as the texts discussed herein reference a wide variety of national contexts. Each text defines the specific history to which it objects. In Toni Morrison’s work, for example, official United States history consists of written records, including newspaper articles, scientific writing, slave narratives, laws, and the political tracts written by the nation’s “founding fathers.” In Antonio Tabucchi’s *Piazza d’Italia* (1975), official Italian history is described in nationalistic children’s schoolbooks, fascist rhetoric as pronounced in the piazza and on the radio, and the priest’s political advocacy from the pulpit. In Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the official history of the Dominican Republic centers entirely on the dictator, Trujillo, as the sole figure of historical import. Eavan Boland’s poetry, meanwhile, portrays official Irish history as the “hero history” commemorated in the form of statues of men who took part in Irish nationalist struggles. In Sandra Cisneros’s novel, official Mexican and U.S. history is the list of wars and male heroes that has become an integral part of the historical knowledge (including popular cultural and general knowledge) of Mexican and United States citizens. In each chapter, I discuss the specific dimensions of “official history” as engaged in each text.

One thing these definitions of official history have in common is the conviction that these histories are shaped by those in power, as described in the popular dictum, “History is written by the victors.” Moreover, the texts examined in the dissertation take the view that official histories often serve to legitimate that power by including the elements of history that suggest that the dominant power structure of a given era is natural, inevitable, and legitimate. Each of the literary works that I examine seeks to contest this representation and to highlight the fact that these understandings of national history are *versions* of history. They emphasize the fact that the official history is only one of various possible representations and interpretations of the facts of the past. They do not negate that history as invalid because it is “only” a version; instead, they decenter it in order to allow for the representation of other interpretations and experiences of that history. These texts posit alternative representations and interpretations of moments of their particular national histories by seeking an engagement with language, literature, and history that in some way constitutes a break with the language and form of official histories.

I use the term “resistance histories” to refer to literary texts that participate in critiques of traditional modes of historical representation while proposing alternatives. With these concepts in mind, the dissertation focuses on the *ways* in which authors create alternative historical representations. The texts I have chosen to group together come from a variety of national contexts, yet they all employ alternative representational methods in order to offer a critique of official histories of the nation. These texts seek to reexamine the nation’s past as a way to transform the reader’s understanding of the present. The texts that I investigate seek to redress historical omissions in order to

reclaim history, “rewriting” the history of the nation in a more inclusive manner and from a more critical perspective.

The term “resistance histories” encompasses several elements of this project. The term indicates the reclamation of histories of resistance; these histories of resistance are often presented as evidence that groups excluded from national narratives were not necessarily passive even if their resistance might have been ignored by subsequent histories. Examples of this tracing of histories of resistance include the footnotes of Junot Díaz’s novel, in which the narrator details the acts of forgotten Dominican dissidents, or Vincenzo Consolo’s invocation of popular Sicilian rebellions against the nascent Italian national government during the Risorgimento. At the same time, the term “resistance histories” references a resistance to history, as these texts resist official histories of the nation that they view as false or partial. “Resistance” is a useful word because it includes both the concept of opposition and that of withstanding. I use the term “history” as an ambivalent one; by etymologically tracing its origins in English, one learns that it contains the same ambiguity that it does in Romance languages (*storia*, *historia*, *histoire*), indicating both fictional accounts and accounts of “real” events. The texts examined in this study also complicate these distinctions.

There are several contemporary critics who propose terminology in order to describe contemporary literature that seeks to revise historical thought. For example, Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” in her book *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). She defines this term as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5). Several elements of Hutcheon’s discussion of

“historiographic metafiction” apply to my study, particularly her assertion that this type of novel contains a “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” (5). However, I share some of David W. Price’s critique of Hutcheon’s terminology, as when he explains,

When Hutcheon writes that postmodernism “confront[s] and contest[s] any modernist discarding *or* recuperating of the past in the name of the future” and continues by asserting that postmodernism conducts a “re-evaluation of and dialogue with the past in the light of the present” (*Poetics* 19), I am tempted to ask, To what end? (*History Made, History Imagined* 11)

Indeed, in this dissertation I seek to explore not just the problematization of history in resistance histories, but also that which these texts propose as alternatives and how they espouse these alternatives.

In *Contesting the Monument: The Anti-Illusionist Historical Novel* (2005), Ruth Glynn rejects the neologisms applied to contemporary Italian novels that deal with history, including Hutcheon’s term, as well as “romanzi pseudo-storici” and “romanzi neo-storici,” because she believes that “they imply that the historical novel is no longer extant” (3). Glynn argues that novels such as Vincenzo Consolo’s *Il sorriso dell’ignoto marinaio* and Leonardo Sciascia’s *Il consiglio d’Egitto* fit the definition of historical novels, though she identifies their difference from earlier historical novels according to historical philosophy. For Glynn, insofar as these contemporary texts continue to use the mixed genre of the historical novel and follow the general rules that she enumerates as elements of the historical novel, they should be included in the genre, though she designates them “anti-illusionist” because they represent official history as an illusion (or construct) and attempt to present alternative histories. Ruth Glynn’s terminology and overall study provided useful background to my study, particularly in her exploration of

the generic elements of the historical novel as well as in her elucidation of the historical philosophies that animate contemporary novels that seek to represent historical moments. However, my study does not focus on whether or not these novels fall into the category of the historical novel, in part because this is not a primary concern of the texts, in addition to the fact that I do include a discussion of poetry in one chapter. Another obvious difference is that I engage with texts from quite different national contexts. Finally, my focus is narrower in the sense that I do not focus on literary representations of history at large, but rather representations of national history, which I believe to be an important preoccupation for a variety of contemporary writers.

In employing alternative methods of storytelling, resistance histories do, however, often contest the literary traditions that they believe are complicit with nationalist imperatives and perpetuate the exclusion of certain experiences from the official national narrative. Doris Sommer describes the literary texts that attempted to provide an idealized fictional metaphor for emerging Latin American nation-states as “foundational fictions” (*Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*). She focuses particular attention on “national romances” of the nineteenth century that presented a neutralization of different intranational factions as stories of heterosexual romantic love that reconciled those factions (*Foundational Fictions*). Sommer further explains that Boom writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes rebelled against the traditions presented by these “national romances,” “rewrit[ing] or un-writ[ing]” such foundational Latin American texts as *Sab*, *Enriquillo*, and *Amalia* (*Foundational* 27). The following chapters of this dissertation focus primarily on the content of the resistance histories discussed, yet they also indicate the literary traditions

with which these texts engage. For example, Eavan Boland writes extensively about the tradition of male Irish nationalist poets, Toni Morrison describes *Beloved* in part as a way to move beyond the representations of enslaved people as presented in slave narratives, and Antonio Tabucchi engages with Manzoni's historical novel *I promessi sposi*.

Moments of particular significance in resistance histories of the nation usually include: pre-national origins (pre-national history, mythology); national formation (unification or independence); and moments of crisis (war, expansion, mass migration). These moments are necessarily particular to each national context. Important historical moments in the texts by Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldúa, Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, and Ana Castillo that examine United States history, include the colonial period, slavery and the Civil War, territorial expansion, the United States-Mexican War, migration, and political and economic interference in Latin America. In the Italian context, this dissertation investigates significant national historical moments as treated in the novels of Antonio Tabucchi and Vincenzo Consolo, including the Risorgimento or unification period, fascism, and the establishment of the Italian Republic. In formerly colonized nations, as this dissertation explores in the works by Eavan Boland, Gloria Anzaldúa, Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, and Ana Castillo, these moments can include conquest or colonization, independence, and decolonization; of course, these moments are important for the colonizing nations as well.

While many studies focusing on the connections between literature and national historical identity discuss these issues either in primarily theoretical terms or by focusing on one national (or regional) context, my approach is distinct. In this dissertation, I incorporate a comparative emphasis, placing diverse texts in conversation with each other

to investigate the reasons for the confluence of style despite their different national referents. For example, the magical realism employed by Gabriel García Márquez in *Cien años de soledad* (1967), in part as a critique of literary and historical realism in the Latin American context, has been adopted and adapted by authors not only in Latin America, but also in Europe, Africa, and Asia. I look at the connections between García Márquez's novel and novels by Junot Díaz (United States-Dominican Republic) and Antonio Tabucchi (Italy). I explore why authors writing about such different nations choose to employ the same strategy for contesting the representations of their respective national histories. I argue that these authors participate in a similar critique of historical representational modes. They view magical realism as a literary mode better able to resist official narratives of national history than traditional realism, which is the mode employed in the historical narratives they challenge. Magical realism has the ability to force the reader to view history from an alternative perspective and question the very foundations of the history normally recognized.

Though I emphasize these connections in my research, I do not attempt to ignore the differences caused by variant national contexts; rather, I also explore the textural differences between the works as they adapt a common literary strategy to different national contexts. It is not my goal to make a one-to-one correlation between such different authors as Junot Díaz and Antonio Tabucchi or Gloria Anzaldúa and Evan Boland, but rather to investigate the reasons for which these different authors might employ similar methods in contesting official histories and promoting alternative historical interpretations.

In addition to exploring the adaptation of similar techniques across national contexts, I also explore their adaptation across the span of approximately three decades. The texts discussed in this dissertation were all published between the 1970s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Each chapter gives considerable attention to the historical context in which the texts were written and published, yet I have not organized the chapters chronologically because I hesitate to imply any sense of a chronological progression within this period; instead, I see continuity in terms of subjects whose articulation differs in response to different historical and national contexts.

In my first chapter, I explore the connection between history and memory in Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *A Mercy* (2008). This chapter's discussion of the invocation of memory in the rhetoric and structure of Morrison's novels echoes across the various novels and poetic works described in the following chapters. Ernest Renan, whose thoughts on the nation greatly influenced later scholars, asserted in an 1882 address:

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality [...] ("What is a nation?" 11)

The resistance histories I discuss in this dissertation, however, challenge Renan's notion that the nation requires oblivion in order to maintain unity. Insisting on remembering does not cause these writers to abandon the concept of the nation; by searching for and writing previously ignored historical experiences into the nation, even if they are violent, they attempt to reclaim national history. Memory organizes the structure of both of the Morrison novels I discuss in this chapter. Morrison critiques the faults and lacks of

Enlightenment-influenced historical philosophy, along with its effects on the historical knowledge regarding slavery in colonial and Civil War-era United States. The invocation of memory provides a thematic bridge to the second chapter, in which I examine two gendered critiques of the national narrative: Gloria Anzaldúa's and Eavan Boland's poetic and critical writing.

Many of the texts I include in the dissertation critique female exclusion from national discourse, but Chapter Two discusses two female poets who explicitly deal with this question in their literary and critical production. In this chapter on Gloria Anzaldúa's hybrid text *Borderlands* (1987) and several of Eavan Boland's poetic and critical texts published in the 1990s, I examine the poets' critique of the omission of female experience in national histories which focus on the "great men" of the past and exclude women or relegate them to supporting roles. In their poetry as well as in their critical work, Anzaldúa and Boland construct alternative histories and poetic languages compatible with their identities within contested geographical spaces—the United States-Mexican "borderlands" and postcolonial Ireland—defined by official histories that negate their female-identified personal and community histories. They do this by employing memory, alternative historical data (including mythical history and recovered histories), and the license to creatively re-imagine previously excluded stories. They recover female creative traditions and the female roles within national (or ethnic national) history; thus, rather than simply inserting women's histories into existing historical models, they eschew a focus on typical primary sources and creatively establish female genealogies. Both Anzaldúa and Boland refocus the historical lens, giving precedence to female spaces and experiences. They often appeal to a more distant pre-national history to give

voice to these spaces, as Anzaldúa does by tracing an indigenous Mexican mythic female ancestry (focusing, for example, on the goddess Coatlicue), or as Boland does in both recovering her own female ancestry and evoking ancient Greek figures (real and mythological) like Sappho, Demeter, and Daphne. Anzaldúa and Boland see creative language as the space within which such reconstructions of history can occur. The creative space becomes one that allows for the exploration of women's histories that authoritative histories have obscured. In focusing the question of the physical shape of the nation as reconfigured in Anzaldúa and Boland, I also engage with theoretical questions regarding the connection between nationalism, history, and geography.

Questions of genre and narrative form inform each of the six chapters, yet in Chapters Three and Four I place primary emphasis on the role of the generic choices of two novels. These two chapters are linked because Antonio Tabucchi's *Piazza d'Italia* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* both break with the conventions of literary and historical realism through the use of generic pastiche that includes magical realism based on the model of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967). Though the two novels reference quite different national histories (Tabucchi's novel explores Italian history, while Díaz's novel discusses national histories of both the Dominican Republic and the United States), the magical realist mode affords both authors one lens through which they call attention to history's circular development and thus reject the notion of linear historical progress, allowing these writers to encircle histories that do not form part of linear, progressive histories. The progressive histories which dominate historical discourse are not only the domain of politically "conservative"

histories; for example, Antonio Tabucchi also critiques the ideas of beneficial historical progress that he detects in Marxism.

As a hybrid mode that integrates the seemingly opposite notions of the magical and the real, magical realism lends itself to the generic pastiche used in both texts. The element of pastiche allows Tabucchi and Díaz to incorporate into their vision of history a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that, again, differs from histories that privilege a singular interpretation of historical events. Magical realism draws attention to the divergent realities of cultures in contact. The non-realistic elements and unfamiliar form of magical realism highlight the artificial nature of historical narrative and force an active engagement from the reader if s/he hopes to understand. In her critical text on magical realism, Wendy Faris explains that this mode requires the reader to “hesitate...between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experience some unsettling doubts” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 7). These unsettling doubts force the reader to look at history afresh and to reconsider its interpretation. By incorporating multiple perspectives and giving voice to various interpretations of single events, magical realism emphasizes collective histories instead of institutionalized ones, emphasizing the lived experiences of communities instead of the heroic actions of individuals. In Chapter Three, I place magical realism in the context of world literature, while in Chapter Four I look at the tradition of viewing magical realism as a mode located within Caribbean historical and literary discourse.

Tabucchi presents key moments in modern Italian history (including the Risorgimento, Fascism, World War II, and the post-war Republic) through the representation of three generations of an anarchist family in a fictional town in Tuscany.

The text focuses on rebellion, resistance to national forces, and figures who are sometimes reluctantly implicated in greater national historical moments. It focuses on the forces behind the creation of the nation as negatively influential in the lives of ordinary citizens who do not accept the narrative being created. The text also focuses on the absurdity and falseness of the rhetoric employed in the national narrative. Tabucchi represents a cyclical history that continues to disenfranchise the same groups of people. Junot Díaz's novel, meanwhile, employs a self-conscious version of magical realism that must also account for subsequent criticisms (such as that offered by McOndo) to the genre in its Latin American iteration. Díaz locates the narrative mode within Caribbean discourse, though he also expands that discourse beyond Hispanophone writers to include Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean writers. Díaz's text also presents magical realism as a point of contact between cultures, looking at the "magic" that occurs in the meeting between First and Third worlds and more specifically in the act of migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States. In Díaz's novel, as in Tabucchi's, magical realism eventually produces a series of competing interpretations, forcing a heightened involvement from the reader in the act of interpretation.

Chapters Five and Six examine the role of language in the presentation of alternative histories. The texts I discuss in these two chapters use alternatives to the standard national language in order to represent histories outside of those accepted as part of the national narrative. I discuss the issue of the connection between language and national identity in two contexts, the U.S. and the Italian, that are particularly fraught. The United States does not have an official language, though the possibility of enacting legislation to ratify English as the official language arises periodically. As a "nation of

immigrants,” the United States has a long history of multilingualism, yet the question regarding the role of other languages continues to spark debate. There are those who continue to advocate the notion of “English Only” in classrooms, voting booths, and other public places. Though U.S. literature is often conceived of as English-language literature, there is indeed a rich history of literature written in other languages, and many important U.S. writers have come from multilingual backgrounds. In Chapter Five, I discuss the incorporation of variations of Spanish and English in novels by two Chicana writers, Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo. I argue that their use of bilingualism acts as an attempt to blur national linguistic and cultural borders, to eventually expand the notion of what constitutes United States and Mexican national identities. Cisneros and Castillo see the incorporation of Spanish into Anglophone U.S. literature as a way of including the experience of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Chican@s into U.S. national history. Both texts represent the United States as a bi-cultural nation as a result of its close connection to Mexico. Ana Castillo’s text invokes the history of Mexican ownership of land that is now the United States’ southwest. In her text, borders are not destined or definite as they are represented in official national history. Rather, these borders are fluid as evidenced by the generations of families who live on the same land for centuries and witness the shifting of borders around them. In addition to representing a fluid physical border, one that changes and does not keep the two sides it separates completely distinct, the other cultural border that proves similarly porous is that of language. Both novels, *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento* and *So Far from God* (1993), incorporate a variety of languages, including English, Spanish, individual and collective language, formal and informal registers, and, in a humorous scene in *So Far from God*,

even the “language” of sheep. These novels focus not only on the expression of various linguistic forms, but also the silences and limits of language. The expression of the fluidity of these borders, both linguistically and thematically represented, shows the fallacy of the concept of the nation as natural. These texts present interpretations meant to provide alternatives to the concept of Manifest Destiny and the militarized border. They argue for the innovation of national language in order to represent transnational identities. Both use forms not indigenous to the U.S. but rather to Spanish speaking countries, and incorporate Spanish language and Spanish grammatical structures in order to accommodate transnational lives and experiences of history that do not fit within the traditional physical or linguistic borders of the nation.

In Italy, the question of language and its relationship to national identity has been particularly resonant because linguistic standardization has at times taken form in the denigration of Italian dialects and minority languages. During the period of national unification, few Italians spoke the standard form of the language, which was based on the Tuscan literary model; in addition, the standard shifted over time, becoming more in line with Italian as spoken in Milano and Torino as a result of the consolidation of those cities as Italy’s commercial and industrial centers. The *questione della lingua* has been discussed in literature from Dante to Pasolini and into the present.⁵ In Chapter Six I discuss the use of non-standard vernacular language in Vincenzo Consolo’s *Il sorriso dell’ignoto marinaio*, and the importance of the use of this language in establishing the presence of vernacular speakers whose experiences of history are omitted from historical accounts. Consolo thus parallels the vernacular speakers’ representation within national

⁵ Over the past couple of decades, the Italian language has begun to face new changes because of the influx of immigrants who bring a wealth of other languages to the peninsula.

history as a deviation with how their language is also deemed a deviation from the national standard. He describes the silencing of the peasants at the point of the creation of the nation-state, which serves as a beginning point for the national historical record. Their exclusion here comes in part from the record-keepers literally not understanding their language. Despite the very different contexts discussed in Chapters Five and Six, the novels described in both chapters emphasize the central role of language in historical representation. Both chapters discuss the attempts of authors to recover and/or reconstruct language as a way to incorporate the experience of its speakers into national history.

Despite concerns about the “ahistoricity” of contemporary culture, popular interest in historical representation is evident in cultural and political concerns. The shape of this discussion varies between and within different media. Television programs in the United States, for instance, appear to reinforce views of history as a branch of scientific inquiry. One example is the PBS show *History Detectives*, in which television viewers submit objects they believe to be of historical significance—anything from a letter to a painting to a shard of metal to a door—to one of the “history detectives” who then scours archives and consults with experts until he or she can verify the origin of that artifact. Another PBS program which deals with the subject of historical recovery is the series *African American Lives*, hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The show has a “theme of searching for lost history” by probing archives as well as conducting DNA tests on famous African Americans in order to attempt to trace their family and genetic roots (*African American Lives* website). Both of these programs seek the recuperation of histories by relying on traditional historical field work, primarily in the shape of

searching through written archives, though they also utilize the element of science (DNA evidence, for example). In this sense, these programs rely on traditional views of history as based on concrete and quantifiable research that is able to yield an ultimate truth.

Contemporary popular films, meanwhile, sometimes treat history in a way that deals more closely with the issues I outline in my discussion of resistance histories. In other words, there are a variety of films that question the modes by which history has been related and posit alternative histories via alternative cinematic representational methods. Every season, there are several movies that explore moments of historical importance. It seems that filmmakers are often looking for new ways of approaching history and different moments of history to approach, from “period pieces” that painstakingly recreate the costumes of a given era to stories from history that can be viewed as allegories of present conditions. One historical subject that continues to inspire Hollywood filmic interpretations is that of World War II and the Holocaust. This subject has also seen a shift in representational modes. In discussing 2008 releases including *Valkyrie* and *The Reader*, one film critic notes that, “What’s remarkable about this year’s releases is the acknowledgment that we no longer need the neat Hollywood ending” (Insdorf “Nazis and the Movies” 58). The critic goes on to explain:

Some might wonder if the Holocaust genre is nearing exhaustion. These movies counter that question by raising so many of their own: How much do we really know about the Holocaust? How much can we bear to know? And what do we do with that knowledge? (Insdorf “Nazis and the Movies” 58)

These questions are tackled by writers of the resistance histories described in the following chapters in relationship to their particular historical foci. The authors discussed in this dissertation thus contribute to the greater contemporary discussion about the construction of historical knowledge and representation. This is particularly relevant

now that technologies have increased the number of means by which knowledge is being produced and disseminated.

These discussions regarding historical interpretation have consequences in current political and legislative arenas. One recent example includes the ongoing debate in United States foreign policy about whether or not to legally recognize the mass killings of Armenians during World War I as genocide. Though this is in part a question of historical interpretation, the decision has political and ethical repercussions. Supporters of legislation to recognize it as genocide see this recognition as an ethical imperative, while detractors include those who believe that such legislation would cause too much damage to the United States' strategic alliance with Turkey. Another recent example of legislation on the subject of historical recognition is Spain's 2007 "Ley de la memoria histórica." The law seeks recognition and reparation (symbolic and remunerative) for those who died during the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. Among the actions required by the law are the removal of monuments and other public markers that exalt the Civil War or the reign of Franco, and the creation of an archive to remember those who died as a result of their resistance to the dictatorship. These legislative issues demonstrate the importance of the language and symbols used to represent history in the national political context. These preoccupations also belie the importance of official sources such as legislatures in shaping the interpretations of events.

In returning to the subject of the ways in which literature challenges official national histories, I would like to note the limitations of this project. Mine is not intended as an exhaustive study; rather, I focus on particular "case studies" as a way to begin an investigation, opening up more questions and possibilities in existing lines of inquiry

regarding the connections between literature, history, historiography, and nationalism. While examining narrative strategies across national contexts, I draw on a range of scholarship written by literary theorists, philosophers, and historians, including Benedict Anderson, Lionel Gossman, Hayden White, Carlo Ginzburg, Joan Wallach Scott, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Pierre Nora. In elucidating some of the points in my study, I have chosen “case studies” from the national and regional contexts on which I have focused my graduate studies and thus are areas in which I have enough linguistic and historical knowledge to meaningfully discuss the texts. The texts discussed in this dissertation present histories of nations in the Americas (the United States, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and the greater Caribbean), and Europe (Italy and Ireland). The languages of these texts include variants of English, Spanish, and Italian. At the same time, many other relevant contexts apply, and as the reader examines my work, I hope that connections to other texts and national contexts with which s/he is acquainted will come to mind. Indeed, this has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my area of inquiry: it seems that most people with whom I discuss the framework of my research are able to bring up texts and situations which relate to the subject, including national literatures with which I am less familiar or indeed ones that I had not previously considered. This seems to reinforce my idea that the type of literary text that I investigate in this study—texts which, again, look with a skeptical glance at the institutionalized history of the nation and propose alternative representational modes—is not isolated to the cases in my study. Rather, the flourishing of resistance histories seems to be a phenomenon that crosses many borders.

CHAPTER ONE

“When the letters are memory we make whole words”: Memory and History in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *A Mercy*

Historians must necessarily speak in generalities and must examine recorded sources: statistics on income earned, books by activists and leaders, dates, etc. . . . They habitually leave out life lived by everyday people. History for them is what great men have done. But artists don’t have any such limitation, and as the truest of historians they are not obligated to. (Morrison “Behind the Making of *The Black Book*” 37)

[...] she decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. (Morrison *A Mercy* 48)

On the cover of the summer 2008 issue of *American Scholar* there is a photograph with black background of a pensive Barack Obama and superimposed on it is the provocative phrase “Black Americans Need a New Story.” These words tease a feature article by Charles Johnson entitled “The End of the Black American Narrative.” Johnson, the author of books including *Middle Passage* (1990), which earned him the National Book Award, discusses the power of narrative to shape experience even, he says, when it no longer reflects reality. He discusses the “very old narrative” about the “black American” experience originating with the history of the first Africans brought to the colonies in the early seventeenth century, calling it a “unique black American narrative, which emphasizes the experience of victimization.” He argues that this narrative “has outlived its usefulness as a tool for interpretation” because of the social, political, and material progress in the decades following the civil rights era. He explains

that despite this progress, there are some writers, scholars, and politicians who are invested in continuing to use this history as a lens through which to understand the present for African Americans.

Johnson acknowledges some persistent problems facing African American communities, yet he also argues that the “old narrative” does not recognize facts that include the quantifiable progress of African Americans in most sectors of American life (he names some of the most well-known successes in politics and business) or the growth of immigrant black populations in the United States that do not trace their origin in the United States to the slave trade. Johnson describes his problem with “the old black American narrative of pervasive victimization” as follows: “It has become ahistorical. For a time it served us well and powerfully [...] but the problem with any story or idea or interpretation is that it can soon fail to fit the facts and becomes an ideology, even kitsch.” For him, this narrative forces not just a model of the past, but also an interpretive code which we are asked to impose on the present and future, “an ideology” that ignores “overwhelming evidence of change.”

Johnson closes his essay with a call for a change in narrative direction:

But if the old black American narrative has outlived its usefulness as a tool of interpretation, then what should we do? The answer, I think, is obvious. In the 21st century, we need new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality, a single phenomenological profile that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned. [...]

Johnson envisions “humble” narratives that avoid claims of “absolute truth” and accept the fact of their individual nature rather than making claims of universality. Johnson’s essay offers some useful and provocative ideas that might serve as a point of departure

for a study of Toni Morrison's novelistic reinterpretations of the past and investment in questions of how narratives shift or reinforce visions of the past while affecting understandings of the present. This is a topic of literary study that coincides with historical and cultural questions that are ever more amplified in popular discourse, particularly in the United States in the "age of Obama." Knopf timed the publication date of *A Mercy* to coincide with Obama's election in November 2008, thus suggesting that in order to grasp what this political shift means in terms of national identity, especially vis-à-vis race, it is equally important to understand the origins of the nation. Published a few months after Johnson's call for an African American narrative shift toward representations of the present and the future, *A Mercy's* late seventeenth century setting delves farther back in American history than any of Morrison's previous novels. Its setting precedes that of *Beloved*, which was published twenty years earlier than *A Mercy* but set in the years preceding and following the Civil War.

Toni Morrison's novelistic and critical engagement of history is not as simplistic as Charles Johnson deems texts that investigate elements of the "old narrative" of slavery or as some of Morrison's critics have suggested.¹ In contrast to Charles Johnson, Morrison does not view the history of slavery as an already known and fully explored entity. While Johnson seems to suggest that African American writers stop writing about the past in general and slavery in particular in order to focus on the "unexplored present," Morrison continues to mine the past in her novels as a response to the present.² Johnson

¹ See Stanley Crouch's 1987 review, "Aunt Medea" in which he famously calls *Beloved* a "blackface holocaust novel" (*Notes of a Hanging Man* 205). Charles Johnson has also been quoted as criticizing Morrison's various awards (see Kevin Nance's "The Spirit and the Strength" 50).

² This chapter focuses on *Beloved* and *A Mercy* in order to look at the ways in which Morrison views the more distant past in relation to United States history. However, it is far from an exhaustive look at Morrison's vision of history in her overall production; all of Morrison's novels confront moments in African American and United States history. Even *Love* (2003), for example, which is set in the present,

makes several very pertinent and useful points, some of which do indeed escape the critical and literary scope of Toni Morrison, but his argument is predicated on a dismissal of part of the past as already known and thus not requiring examination. Morrison's view of the past differs starkly; in reaction to Johnson's essay, Morrison stated, "Slavery can never be exhausted as a narrative. Nor can the Holocaust; nor can the potato famine; nor can war. To say slavery is over is to be ridiculous. There is nothing in those catastrophic events of human life that is exhaustible at all" (qtd. in Nance 52).

Morrison's novels constitute not just an interrogation of the historical subject of slavery, but also an attack on the form in which history has been narrated. This is the point of departure from which she constructs an alternative vision of history. Though the subject of slavery has indeed been mined in many narrative and rhetorical modes, for Morrison there are still elements of that history that have either been forgotten or dismissed from the historical discussion. Her novels investigate these elements of the history of slavery and racial constructions, but they also act as an intervention into the ways in which that history is and has been narrated, both in historical and narrative texts. More specifically, Toni Morrison deconstructs narrative and historiographic models based on ideals which she locates in Enlightenment-era historiography, including notions of scientificity, objectivity, and totality. Morrison thus historicizes the history that portrays Africans and African Americans as objects of study rather than historical participants. After deconstructing this history, Morrison then proffers an alternative narrative model which emphasizes subjective memory and partiality. The main character of *Beloved*, Sethe, and the main character of *A Mercy*, Florens, are characters whose

investigates the period of desegregation and civil rights movements as this history shapes the lives of the novel's protagonists.

memory refutes historical record. The narrative forms employed in the two novels also mimic memory instead of official history. Rather than a linear unfolding of narrative, the novels present plots which unfold through the characters' often non-linear mnemonic recuperation of their own stories.

In *Beloved*, Morrison responds to the discourse regarding race that was already firmly established in the period encompassing the Civil War, while in *A Mercy*, she examines the origins of racial constructions as a way to further denaturalize them. *Beloved* begins *in media res*, dealing with the period of U.S. history encompassing institutionalized slavery and Reconstruction. The text probes the role of slavery in the construction of African American identity and also as an element in the construction of U.S. national identity. Meanwhile, Morrison's most recent novel, *A Mercy*, looks farther back in U.S. history to the pre-national era of American colonies, during which slavery was not yet racialized, in order to examine the nation's formation in relation to the origins of constructions of race, laws, gender, economics, and even freedom. The two texts explore the often ambivalent relationship of individuals to these constructions.

Morrison's novels thematically represent a distrust of official history, especially written records and documentation, while attempting to reform writing so that it is capable of acting as a vehicle for memory and the re-imagination of the past. In the first epigraph of this chapter, from an essay published in the 1970s, Morrison describes artists as the "truest of historians" because of their ability to discuss the past without being limited to the evidence contained in recorded sources. By this, Morrison does not mean to imply that artists are free to invent history with no regard to fact; rather, she intends that art is capable of recovering truths that have been lost to historical record. Morrison's

two slavery-themed novels explore language and its relationship to historical knowledge that is limited, incomplete, often equivocal, and sometimes unknowable. These novels do not altogether reject writing; rather, there is an ultimate reliance on the liberatory power of literature as a tool for uncovering history's constructs and to thus present alternative histories which rely on memory in order to write previously ignored figures and stories into history. *Beloved* and *A Mercy* incorporate structures that mimic the patterns and functions of memory, including its hesitations, idiosyncratic temporal movement, the interplay of forgetting, the rhythms of music, popular storytelling forms, and plurivocality. These novels not only present a unique structure, but also, on the linguistic level, move away from standard English. Some of these linguistic shifts are attributable to a focus on the historical varieties of vernacular African American English, yet not all. Morrison introduces new phrases and makes the language unfamiliar by using words in unconventional ways, shifting parts of speech, and introducing purposeful gaps.

The second epigraph of my chapter comes from *A Mercy* and refers to Lina, a Native American character, whose memory begins to fail as she tries to recall her childhood with her extinguished tribe. This epigraph recalls the Gloria Anzaldúa quote I use as the epigraph of Chapter Two. Like Anzaldúa, Morrison envisions memory as a central element of her resistance histories. Yet at the same time, again like Anzaldúa, Morrison insists on the use of her "own resources," especially writing and the imaginative process, as a supplement to memory in order to appropriate the past and find "a way to be in the world."

Historicizing Race, Historical Racism

Toni Morrison locates her critique of official United States history within a wider critique of Enlightenment-era historiographic and narrative principles. For Morrison, the Enlightenment lends the notion of scientificity to the racism on which part of the U.S. national narrative was based. Morrison articulates this critique in a talk, “The Site of Memory,” which she gave while she was in the process of writing *Beloved*. In this talk, she discusses slave³ autobiographies as an element of her literary heritage as an African American writer. She draws connections between Enlightenment-influenced historiographic, scientific, and racial discourses in relationship to the shape of slave narratives. She explains, “One has to remember that the climate in which [slave autobiographers] wrote reflected not only the Age of Enlightenment but its twin, born at the same time, the Age of Scientific Racism” (“Site” 108). Morrison explicitly links the shape of slave autobiographical narratives to the discourse of the Enlightenment and its calls for rationality. She cites this relationship, along with the desire for slave autobiographers not just to tell their own life stories but also to change the fact of slavery by appealing to white readers’ sympathies, as reasons for which so many former slaves “pull the narrative up short” in order to avoid telling “the more sordid details of their experience” (“Site” 109). The slave narratives attempt to follow the dictate that they maintain objectivity and as a result, “there was no mention of their interior life” (“Site” 110). Morrison also discusses the reception of slave autobiographies as solely political rather than also literary documents, despite the literary status given to “[t]he writings of

³ While I generally prefer the now commonly used phrase “enslaved person” to the term “slave,” in this chapter I use the latter term. I thought it too confusing to move away from the generally accepted generic terms “slave narratives” and “slave autobiographies,” and thus decided to maintain use of the term throughout the chapter.

church martyrs and confessors” (Morrison “Site” 105-106). She explains this in terms of the “twin” of the Enlightenment—“the Age of Scientific Racism.” Slave autobiographies carry the added burden of proving their authenticity and the capability of blacks to even achieve literacy.

Morrison gives some examples of notable philosophers and statesmen of the period who negate the ability of blacks to engage in higher-order thinking and cultural production: “David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson, to mention only a few, had documented their conclusions that blacks were incapable of intelligence” (“Site” 108). She cites Hegel’s famous statement regarding African history: “Hegel, in 1813, had said that Africans had no ‘history’ and couldn’t write in modern languages” (“Site” 108-109). She also notes the following Thomas Jefferson claim regarding his belief in the absence of black art: “Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration, never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture” (qtd. in Morrison “Site” 108-109). African and African American authors of slave narratives responded to this discourse by using the Enlightenment principles of logic, rationality, and objectivity against those who denied their humanity and intellectual capabilities. Morrison recognizes this limitation, yet also suggests that by responding in a way consistent with this system of logic, their narratives also suffer from lacunae.

Before redressing these losses, though, Morrison attacks the supposed scientificity and objectivity of the philosophers mentioned above. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy describes Morrison’s historical and literary revisions in *Beloved* as indicative of a clash of “cultural systems”:

The desire to return to slavery and to explore it in imaginative writing has offered Morrison and a number of other contemporary black writers a means to restage

confrontations between rational, scientific, and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive outlook of prehistorical, cultureless, and bestial African slaves. (220)

Beloved does indeed stage a conflict between these two systems in juxtaposing the “rationality” of the character of schoolteacher, who reduces the slaves to animal-like objects of study, and Sethe’s “irrationality” in killing her daughter in an attempt to spare her from the system of slavery.

Morrison’s attack on the twisting of reason in the service of justifying racism has predecessors not just in the history of abolitionist writing, but also in the later work of anti-colonial writers. In his 1955 essay *Discourse on Colonialism*, for example, Aimé Césaire denounces popular justifications by colonial apologists: “Europe is unable to justify [colonialism] either before the bar of ‘reason’ or the bar of ‘conscience’” (9). Indeed, throughout the essay, Césaire attacks a whole system of knowledge production in Europe skewed toward the rejection of culture and art in non-European countries. He cites examples from various branches of knowledge, including “—From the historians or novelists of civilization (it’s the same thing)—[...]their false objectivity, their chauvinism, their sly racism, their depraved passion for refusing to acknowledge any merit in the non-white races, especially the black-skinned races [...]” (35).

In addition to her critique of Enlightenment rationality, Morrison sees her task as one of “rip[ping] that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’” in order to shed some light on what concerns her about slavery: the interiority of slaves as subjects (“Site” 110). It is not enough, for Morrison, to attack the principles espoused by scientific racism; instead, she must move beyond this discourse toward a history that admits the subjectivity of Africans and African Americans, and allows for alternative

historiographic and narrative representation. If official histories impose a silence on Africans and African Americans by forcing them into the role of objects of history, and even when they write their own narratives they do not allow themselves to discuss their interiority because it is outside of the realm of the objective and the reasoned, then Morrison sees it as her role as an artist to provide a narrative space for these aspects of African American history as a way to arrive at a better understanding of United States history.

In both *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison draws explicit connections between the physical violence suffered by slaves (using descriptive images that would have found no place in slave narratives of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries) and the discourses and institutions that made this violence acceptable. At the same time, she emphasizes not only the physical violence endured by slaves but also the dehumanization imposed by these discourses. In *Beloved*, the character of schoolteacher is the figure most clearly imbued with the power to scientifically classify the inferiority of the slaves on the Sweet Home plantation. In the novel, he studies the slaves using seemingly scientific principles of observation as a way to prove the inferiority of the black slaves and also as a way to teach his “pupils,” his nephews, about the most fruitful practices for slaveholders. The men engage in studies of the slaves while excluding them from the possibility of participation. When one of the slaves, Sixo, attempts to explain his theft of corn by engaging in the types of “rational” discourse endorsed by schoolteacher, the slave learns this lesson:

“Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.”

Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined. (Morrison *Beloved* 190)

The narrator draws a distinction between “definers” and “the defined,” referring to the distinction between those who are the authors of discourse and those who are its objects. In “The Site of Memory,” Morrison says that an exploration of the harsh realities of the past is “critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic” (110-111). This assertion is key: Morrison here reflects on the fact that knowledge produced regarding “marginalized categories” of people, including African Americans, has often excluded the voices of the objects of that knowledge. In the passage from *Beloved* cited above, there is an intimate connection between schoolteacher’s knowledge production, his power over discourse (“definitions”), and the violence he uses against the slaves. Sixo’s attempt to enter the discussion and use the rationality of slavery to his benefit results in a reminder that he is not meant to benefit from slavery’s logic. The power wielded over slaves includes not only physical violence, but also the control of definitions, language, and logic. Indeed, in Morrison’s novels, these forms of power are irrevocably linked.

In a section of narrative that adopts Sethe’s perspective in free indirect discourse, the reader learns of the various ways in which schoolteacher inspects the slaves, including measuring their body parts, constantly recording his findings in writing. While Sethe is able to at least obliquely describe to Paul D the sexual violence that she undergoes at the hands of schoolteacher’s nephews in the barn before she escapes north, she seems to hesitate longer when describing schoolteacher’s lesson. She finally describes the scene to Beloved:

I never told nobody this. Not your pap, not nobody. I almost told Mrs. Garner, but she was so weak then and getting weaker. This is the first time I'm telling it and I'm telling it to you because it might help explain something to you although I know you don't need me to do it. To tell it or even think over it. You don't have to listen either, if you don't want to. But I couldn't help listening to what I heard that day. He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, "Which one are you doing?" And one of the boys said, "Sethe." That's when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they was doing. Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back. He licked a forefinger a couple of times and turned a few pages. Slow. I was about to turn around and keep on my way to where the muslin was, when I heard him say, "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up." I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly. [...] My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp. (*Beloved* 193)

The description of the lesson is preceded by statements attesting to the fact that Sethe never told anyone about it. It opens with negative phrases that begin with "never" and "not." Even after explaining the desire to engage in telling this experience, the description is still preceded by some equivocation. The verb "to tell" is repeated in various forms, and there are hesitations and disclaimers before Sethe is willing to engage this memory. She releases Beloved from any obligation to listen, which triggers a reflection on Sethe's own accidental listening, her overhearing of the lesson that centers on her as object of study. When Sethe hears her name, she appears unable to move, fixed to the spot as she is fixed on the pupil's page. Though the reader learns later that Sethe does not recognize the word "characteristics," since she later asks Mrs. Garner for its definition, Sethe is nonetheless sharply affected by the words she hears. Her movements become unnatural: she walks backward and her head begins to feel "prickly." She compares the sensation to being pricked by needles. This is the first time that Sethe takes seriously the effects of schoolteacher's studies of the slaves. Her physical reaction of

discomfort seems to emphasize that the writing of the students under the guidance of schoolteacher has real effects on the slaves. The emphasis on the Sethe's head also indicates the fact that the investigations of the slaves imply a mental inferiority; though Sethe might not immediately recognize the word "characteristics," she undoubtedly recognizes the word "animal," which when used in relationship to her name hints at the dehumanization entailed in the knowledge production in which schoolteacher is engaged.

Florens, one of the protagonists in *A Mercy*, is the only character who speaks in first person in that novel. She also relates her physical reaction to the violation of a physical inspection, though she more clearly articulates the "interior" effects of that inspection, something which Sethe in *Beloved* is often unable or unwilling to do.⁴ In her writing on the walls and floor of an abandoned room, Florens describes the inspection she undergoes at the hands of the widow Ealing (whose name ironically is a homonym of the word "healing"). During her journey through rough terrain to find the blacksmith who might be able to cure her mistress's life-threatening illness, Florens comes to the home of the widow Ealing in order to seek shelter. When Florens enters the widow's home, she comes upon a variety of disorienting sights, including the widow's daughter who lies in straw and bleeds from multiple wounds. The widow is equally disoriented by the appearance of Florens because of her dark skin. When Florens appears at her door, the widow "narrows her eyes" and asks if Florens is "of this earth or elsewhere?" (*Mercy* 107). The following day, a group of visitors, including four adults and one child, visits the widow's home; when they see Florens's dark skin, they gasp and wail. In order to

⁴ In one scene, in fact, when Paul D asks her about her feelings by asking, "What about inside?" to which Sethe responds, "I don't go inside" (46). This resistance to describing her interiority and emotion mirrors Morrison's points in "The Site of Memory" about narrative resistances to describing interiority in slave narratives. In the novel, this statement also emphasizes Sethe's desire to forget and to avoid in order to survive.

protect herself, Florens produces the sealed letter that her mistress, Rebekka, provides for her journey. This letter, whose text is reproduced in *A Mercy*, appeases some of the group, yet they still force her to undress and undergo a physical inspection in a storeroom. They search her for signs of evil or the devil, which some of them believe is the significance of her skin color. Florens's description focuses on the distance that is created between her and her inspectors: "Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition" (113). Under their examination, Florens becomes an object, much as Sethe does in schoolteacher's inspections and lesson. The basis of Florens's inspection, however, is not pseudo-scientific as in Sethe's case, but rather religious. The close similarities between this scene and the scene in *Beloved* link the two investigations and thus these two scenes also link the bases of both to superstition and fear rather than scientific fact.

After the inspection scene in *A Mercy*, much as Sethe meets a young white woman, Amy Denver, who helps her on her journey, Florens receives aid from the widow's daughter. Jane helps Florens by giving her eggs directions as the inspectors continue to discuss their findings. When Florens thanks her, Jane thanks Florens, saying "They look at you and forget about me" (114). Here there is the spark of recognition between two characters cast out and viewed with suspicion by the religious community looking for signs of satanic possession. At the same time, there is no sense of solidarity; though Jane does not seem to judge Florens the way that her inspectors do, she is thankful to her mainly for taking on her burden. This glimpse of possible connections

which are unable to develop is a gesture that recurs in greater detail in the discussion of the connections between the women on Jacob's farm later in the novel.

Even after Florens leaves the widow's home, she continues to be stared at by "the eyes that join [her] on [her] journey" (114). At this point in the novel, though, Florens knows what those stares mean: "They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite" (115). Much like in *Beloved*, the inspecting eyes look for a signal of animal nature in Florens. In *A Mercy*, though, Florens, the object of inspection, articulates her internal reaction:

Inside I am shrinking. I climb the streambed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside is small, feathered and toothy. [...] Is this dying mine alone? (115)

Florens becomes "a thing apart," internalizing her objectification and marks of difference. The inspection creates a distance that puts her in the role of animal-like object of discussion. inspection is preceded by the reading of the letter from Rebekka. The document is meant to serve as authentication of Florens's identity. It is invested with authority and has the look of an official document because it is sealed; it provides a date, information about Florens, and indicates Rebekka's title. This authentication of the slave's identity might recall to the reader's mind the prefaces of slave narratives, which almost invariably contained letters written by whites attesting to the identity and veracity of the authors and the narrative content.

The power to inspect signifies the power to enact judgment and control. Florens's description of her inspection at the hands of the widow and her religious consultants finds a similar description in the last chapter, narrated in the voice of Florens's mother. Florens's mother (called "mãe," and never supplied a name), who becomes a slave when her tribe in Angola is engaged in a fight with another tribe, describes the inspection on a slave block in Barbados of the slaves who survived her middle passage voyage. Both acts of inspection force the inspected into the roles of objects to be studied and interpreted. The system of slavery thus deprives slaves of physical as well as interpretive control of their bodies.

In *Beloved*, a major sticking point for Sethe in her memory of schoolteacher is her unknowing complicity in her own dehumanization at his hands. The description of schoolteacher's lesson focuses on the deliberate turning of pages on the pupil's desk as schoolteacher scolds his student, apparently for not arranging his written observations properly. Schoolteacher takes issue not with the dehumanizing content of the pupil's writing, but with its tidiness. Several times in the novel, Sethe reflects on the fact that she makes the ink with which schoolteacher records his observations. Throughout the novel, writing becomes associated with power wielded to gain mastery over the slaves, deny freedom, "scientifically" prove the slaves' inferiority, and defame. Sethe laments her perceived complicity in this process:

He liked the ink I made. It was [Mrs. Garner's] recipe, but he preferred how I mixed it and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about us but we didn't know that right away. We just thought it was his manner to ask us questions. He commenced to carry round a notebook and write down what we said. I still think it was them questions that tore Sixo up. Tore him up for a long time. (Morrison *Beloved* 37)

Later in the novel, when Sethe is relegated to her bed after the disappearance of Beloved, she tells Paul D, “I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink” (Morrison *Beloved* 271). This statement can be read ambiguously; it allows the reader to wonder what “it” refers to. Does this pronoun refer simply to schoolteacher’s writing, or possibly also to the effects of schoolteacher’s writing, which served to justify violence and ownership? However one reads this phrase, Sethe seems to clearly embed power in the form of the written word.

Just as Morrison critiques the “twin” of the Enlightenment—“the Age of Scientific Racism”—in “The Site of Memory,” in *Beloved* she critiques notions of rationality that enable and justify slavery while condemning Sethe’s murder of Beloved and attempted murder of her other children. Indeed, Morrison defines the Enlightenment as “the enlightenment of a few based on the dark oppression of many” (Morrison “Rediscovering Black History” 46). Schoolteacher’s violence is justified by its apparent scientificity, as he does indeed appear to follow scientific methods in his classification of the slaves and experiments in the correct ways to “discipline” them. Moreover, his actions are justified by the law; his attempts to recover his escaped “property”—Sethe’s family—is legally protected and he arrives at 124 Bluestone Road accompanied by a sheriff. Sethe’s actions, however, appear irrational and unnatural. Sethe feels completely justified in attempting to kill her children because she views this action as a way to protect them from a life of enslavement, yet this action causes horror in the white community of Cincinnati. Schoolteacher gives up on his property claim because, although she had been a useful slave, “now she’d gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised

that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education” (Morrison *Beloved* 149). Schoolteacher attributes her newfound “wildness” not to the fact that she was treated like an animal, but rather to the fact that she was “overbeat,” thus spoiling her use much like other animals might no longer be useful after such treatment. This perspective thus gives the idea that slaves can be properly beaten, and in fact need to be beaten in an appropriate manner in order to get the appropriate results from them. The fact of Sethe’s unnatural behavior provides further proof of the inferiority of blacks in the minds of schoolteacher and the sheriff: “All testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (Morrison *Beloved* 151).

Sethe’s seemingly irrational actions, and in particular her lack of remorse, also cause her to be alienated from the black community on the outskirts of Cincinnati where she lives with her mother-in-law Baby Suggs and her surviving children. Despite the powerful role of Baby Suggs in the community as a result of her preaching “the Word,” and her aid of fugitive slaves, the community shuns the family after Sethe murders her young daughter. Since Paul D does not reappear in Sethe’s life until years after the murder and her imprisonment, Stamp Paid feels obligated to tell Paul D about “the Misery,” and he does so by handing Paul D the newspaper article recounting the details of the crime. Since Paul D is illiterate, he examines the drawing that accompanies the article. At first, Paul D refuses to believe that the rendering depicts Sethe because although he is unable to read the article, he knows that the fact of a newspaper article about her can only have a negative meaning:

[...] there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary—something whitepeople would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps. And it must have been hard to find news about Negroes worth the breath catch of a white citizen of Cincinnati. (Morrison *Beloved* 155-156)

This narrative reflection on what constitute “news,” what merits recounting of the lives of blacks in a newspaper meant to be read by whites, again imbues the written word with the power to reaffirm existing power structures and to further ossify the inferior social position of blacks.

This passage emphasizes both that which is recounted in the news and that which is not recounted in the news in order to explore the role of narrative in the institutionalization of power structures. The lack of the mention of killings, whippings, evictions, and rapes of blacks gives testimony to the fact that these are acts taken for granted, made acceptable by the institution of slavery. The inclusion of a sensational crime committed by a black woman, meanwhile, perfectly fits the expression of a greater social narrative that puts blacks on the level of animals, capable of the most inhumane acts. Indeed, when Paul D reacts to Sethe's own account of the murder, he tells her, “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (165). In this scene, Paul D adopts schoolteacher's view of Sethe as bestial. Despite these charges regarding the incomprehensibility of Sethe's actions, A. Timothy Spaulding notes that *Beloved* upends the system of rationality espoused by schoolteacher. In his book *Reforming the Past*, Spaulding explains,

Within the logic of Morrison's text, the system of slavery and the forms of brutality it produced under the rubric of Enlightenment thinking defies explanation in a way that *Beloved's* ghost does not. Even Sethe's murder of the child, itself a product of the slave system, receives extensive, albeit problematic explanation in the novel. (75)

The novel explores the systems and motivations that cause Sethe's decision, presenting slavery as a system of irrationality that enables such seemingly unnatural and irrational actions. Sethe is able to voice her own logic and to make the case for the rationality of the murder of her child within slavery's irrationality.

Memory, Forgetting, and Narrative Form

In "The Site of Memory" Morrison discusses that which is missing from slave autobiographies, focusing on the absence of discussions regarding the interior lives of slaves as individuals. *Beloved*, at least in part, is meant to address the silences of slave narratives by writing about slavery in a novel that focuses on the interior life of a community of former slaves, inspired by a newspaper clipping that Morrison read.⁵ In a sense, Morrison attempts to imagine that which remains unsaid in the newspaper article. This notion of investigating the absences in narrative accounts is a clear theme in *Beloved*, prescribing a method of reading the novel. The reader adopts this interpretive stance when s/he is not given access to the text of the newspaper article published about Sethe. This forces the reader to look beyond the text of the document and to gather information as slowly revealed through the multiperspectival narrative in a continual "circling" of narration that does not mimic the directness of journalistic description. The

⁵ Morrison cites an 1856 article, "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child" included in *The Black Book* in her essay "Rediscovering Black History" (44-45). The 1865 article provides the central plot element of *Beloved*, describing an escaped slave who attempts to kill all of her children in order to prevent them being taken back into slavery.

shape of the narrative as a “circling” and the use of multiple perspectives through free indirect discourse, which makes the attribution of narrative voice more difficult, contradicts the linear, progressive narrative employed by traditional histories and narratives. *A Mercy* also engages in the use of multiple perspectives and a slow revelation of the central plot details, accompanied by the withholding of some information.

Lars Eckstein discusses Morrison’s interaction with the Margaret Garner story at length in a section of one of his chapters on *Beloved*, entitled “Exposition: of writing and not writing back to the Garner case, slave narratives, and the Euro-American literary tradition” (*Re-Membering the Black Atlantic* 187-201). Eckstein notes that the newspaper article regarding Margaret Garner gave Morrison the basic plot elements from which she constructed the novel, and that Morrison has denied further historical research on Garner, despite evidence to the contrary, so that she could be free to invent Sethe (Eckstein 189-190). Eckstein explains this “demonstrative display of lack of interest in the diverse historical accounts” as a way for Morrison to display her “[distrust of] the written documents of slavery” (190). Eckstein goes on to explain that, “Such documents may either be benevolent, such as the writings of white abolitionist[s], or openly racist, such as the tracts of their opponents. In both cases, however, they are inevitably structured and manipulated by power relations reflecting decidedly white interests” (190). Eckstein concludes that Morrison’s only partial acknowledgment of the Garner historical record derives from her desire to question those records and “to position the mnemonic design of *Beloved* in a realm outside the tradition of such writing” (191).

Eckstein's discussion of Morrison's relationship to her written historical source material is important for an understanding of Morrison's activation of memory in her writing. The process is twofold, first questioning the validity of written record by examining its goals and then positing an alternative written record. In *Beloved*, Morrison's treatment of the newspaper article which describes Sethe's crime attests to both of these aims. On the one hand, the narrative addresses the goals of newspaper articles written about African Americans at the time. It reinforces the desire to shift focus away from these records by not giving the reader access to the article. Though the novel alludes to Beloved's untimely death from the beginning, the actual circumstances of the girl's death are not provided until more than halfway through the novel. A reader might even wish to see the text of the article in order to know the details of Beloved's murder, yet this is not allowed, as it is precisely this reliance on written record that the text wishes to negate. The reader can only base her/his interpretation of the events on the explanations given by the characters in the novel rather than relying on "objective" historical record. These formal elements highlight Morrison's search for a structure that more closely mimics the operation of memory rather than the narrative forms of official history.

Another description that emphasizes this interpretive approach of looking beyond official stories occurs in a description of the listening practices of Ella, a character who listens to Sethe's story in order to help her when she arrives in Ohio as an escaped slave with her baby in tow: "Ella wrapped a cloth strip tight around the baby's navel as she listened for the holes—the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind" (92). In order to help the

fugitive slaves, Ella must “listen for the holes,” paying attention to the absences in their stories in order to understand. This form of interpretation, focused on absences, is one in which Morrison engages in her own reading of slave narratives, and *Beloved* can be read as a corrective which attempts to examine those holes, though the limits of the narration of “holes” remain encoded in the text.⁶

In *A Mercy*, meanwhile, two forms of writing are juxtaposed. One is the official documentation of letters, advertisements for slaves and indentured servants, and laws. The other form of writing is Florens’s. The chapters in the novel alternate between chapters told in first person narrative by Florens and chapters told in third person narrative about the lives of the other characters (Jacob, Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow, Willard, and Scully). While in *Beloved* Sethe relies on her ability to orally relate her story in order to counter the report of the newspaper article about her, in *A Mercy*, Florens relates her story through writing. While Rebekka’s letter is unable to fully protect Florens in the widow’s home, writing allows Florens to find a measure of freedom and consciousness, freeing herself from the blacksmith’s rejection of her.

The reader learns toward the end of *A Mercy* that the first person chapters of the novel are meant to represent Florens’s writing etched on the walls and floor of an abandoned room in the Vaarks’ home. Her writing is addressed to the blacksmith, a free black man with whom Florens falls in love while he does some work on the Vaark farm. Though he leaves, Florens is able to reunite with him when she is sent by her mistress to seek his help to heal her when she takes ill. After Florens journeys to reach his home, the smith asks her to stay at his home and to look after a boy that he informally adopted

⁶ In Morrison’s critical work on important texts of the United States literary tradition, she suggests a similar reading to understand the representation of blackness in U.S. literature. See *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993).

while the unnamed smith goes to the Vaark farm to care for Rebekka. The little boy causes Florens great unease as she remembers the fact that her mother offered Florens to Jacob when their Portuguese slavemaster, *Senhor*, wanted to settle his debt to Jacob by giving him one of his slaves. Florens remembers this as the moment in which her mother abandoned her and chose to instead keep and protect Florens's baby brother. The little boy in the smith's home reminds Florens of this favored brother and her growing fear eventually leads her to break his shoulder. When the smith returns, he rejects Florens, casting her out of his home, but first he explains that he cannot accept her because she is a slave. He claims that her slavery is not based on the fact that she is owned by the Vaarks, but rather it is something that she has internalized.⁷ He tells her, "You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind" (141). Florens's etchings serve as a response to the smith's pronouncement of her status as a slave. In it, she explains the causes of her actions, giving a fuller account than the blacksmith allows. She shapes her narrative, inscribing it on her surroundings. She even reflects that if the smith were to be able to read her account (unlikely, since he is illiterate), he would have to "bend down" and "crawl perhaps in a few places" while in other places he must stand in order to access the writing (158). Her writing, therefore, is able to respond to the blacksmith, but also to shape the way in which it is read. While she embarks on the writing process in order to explain herself to the blacksmith, eventually Florens finds power in it for herself: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth,

⁷ The distinction between the fact of enslavement and the internalization of slavery is made in Morrison's 2003 novel, *Love*, as well, though in a much different context. *Love* explores the friendship of two female characters, Heed and Christine, which turns into mutual hatred when Christine's grandfather marries eleven-year-old Heed. At a dinner, Christine taunts Heed and calls her a slave in their "secret" language, "idagay." Christine yells at Heed, "Ou-yidagay a ave-slidagay! E-hidagay ought-bidagay ou-yidagay ith-widagay a ear's-yidagay ent-ridagay an-didagay a andy-cidagay ar-bidagay!" (Morrison *Love* 129) Heed seems more hurt by Christine's verdict than by the fact that her father allowed her marriage as a child to an old man.

my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (161). These sentences contain an articulation of her self-claimed freedom, sharply contrasting with the title “slave.”

Florens’s writing acts as a *mise-en-abîme* of Morrison’s creative process *vis-à-vis* history. Writing in the text is granted the ability to capture memory and to reinterpret lived experience against that which has already been written. At the end of the final chapter narrated by Florens, the character proclaims, “I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me” (161). This statement refers to Florens’s inability to access her mother and find out why her mother decided to choose her brother over her. The final chapter of the novel, immediately following Florens’s, is told in first person narrative from the perspective of Florens’s *mãe*. It is a mysterious chapter because the only other character whose story is told in first person narrative is Florens. There is no hint that Florens’s *mãe* writes the chapter in which she explains that she sent Florens away in order to protect her from Senhor’s sexual abuse. It is possible to read this final chapter as a writing exercise in which Florens recovers or imagines her mother’s voice in order to resolve her “one sadness.”

Though none of the protagonists of *Beloved* are writers like Florens, they are also storytellers who gain strength from their narrative efforts. Baby Suggs, for example, is loved by the community because she preaches in the clearing, delivering “the Word.”⁸ If one reads the final chapter of *A Mercy* as Florens’s recreation of her mother’s story, then Denver’s storytelling is strikingly similar. Denver “feeds” *Beloved* stories of Sethe’s life. The narrator describes the process as follows:

⁸ In fact, her use of “the Word” acts as a type of affirmative use of (oral) language that combats the negation inherent in the written word as represented in the newspaper article and schoolteacher’s lesson plans.

[...] the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. (78)

Denver's recreation of her mother's story is based on "giving blood," infusing details into the "scraps" of information she receives from her mother. Her story is also shaped by its reception. It evokes the idea of a collective storytelling and the creation of a collective history; this is recalled in one of the final scenes in the novel, during which thirty women from the community come to 124 Bluestone Road in order to exercise their collective power and exorcise Beloved. At this point in the novel, the narrative takes up the various threads of their memories of Sethe and her family in order to create one overall picture. These concepts all recall those espoused by Morrison in "The Site of Memory" regarding the appeal to a mixture of memory and fictional invention as a way to access the past.

Beloved and *A Mercy* incorporate data pertaining to official history in markedly different ways. In *Beloved*, wars, laws, and other similar facts that would normally be major topics of historical discourse, are relegated to the background of the narration. For example, when the narrator explains that Stamp Paid calls Sethe's murder of Beloved "the Misery," this term is followed by a parenthetical note: "(which is what he called Sethe's rough response to the Fugitive Bill)" (171). While a great deal of the text explores the murder of Sethe's unnamed baby, along with the effects of this murder on the family, its historical root cause earns only a small mention in parentheses. Nonetheless, the narrator locates Sethe's actions in her personal life in relation to an element of the larger historical context. In this case, it is the effect of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. The biggest historical marker of the period covered in *Beloved*, the Civil

War, is remarked only in the paragraphs that mention Paul D's participation on both sides of the conflict during "the War" for reasons of survival and coercion (267-269).

Official history is mentioned peripherally in *Beloved*, and functions as a reference point, but the most powerful elements of history are the details. They are what stand out in a maelstrom of documentation and macro-data. While facts and lists overwhelm, they do not have the impact that the details available to narrative do. In a section of the novel that adopts Stamp Paid's perspective, the narrator describes the character's ability to withstand the litany of facts regarding violence against former slaves after the Civil War, in contraposition to the sharp reaction he feels at the discovery of a red ribbon attached to the hair of a young black girl he finds floating dead in the river. The difference between the macro- and micro-level of these incidents is clear in the following description:

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. [Stamp Paid] smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. Stank up off the pages of the *North Star*, out of the mouths of witnesses, etched in crooked handwriting in letters delivered by hand. Detailed in documents and petitions full of *whereas* and presented to any legal body who'd read it, it stank. But none of that had worn out his marrow. None of that. It was the ribbon. (Morrison *Beloved* 180)

This passage provides one of the few date markers in the text and serves to anchor the reflection in historical time rather than the time of memory that dominates in the text as it follows the time markers dictated by the lives of the characters. The above description contains a list of numbers and facts regarding violence against African Americans, pointing to the failures of Reconstruction. It also mentions documentation including an abolitionist newspaper, letters, testimony, and petitions containing legal language. Yet

these facts, even cumulatively, do not “wear out” Stamp Paid’s “marrow.” They do not have the crippling effect of the ribbon he finds and the intimate knowledge of the death of one child and the imagination of the causes leading to her death. The power of the image of an otherwise trivial object—a red ribbon—outweighs the accumulation of documents in its ability to evoke the horror of the violence endured by one little girl. This view of memory and imagination as containing a power that can outweigh official documentation is central to Morrison’s discussion of the connection between literary narrative and historical memory.

The importance of the use of imagination in uncovering the “truths” of history elided by official narratives is something that Toni Morrison has noted often in her critical writing. In the first epigraph of my chapter, Morrison calls artists “the truest of historians” for their freedom from the requirement to “examine recorded sources” or stick to the deeds of “great men.” In this construction, Morrison views the requirement to stick to recorded facts as a hindrance to understanding the “truth” of history. In part, this is due to Morrison’s distrust of “recorded sources” and her examination of their non-objective nature. She elaborates on her views on history, memory, and narrative further in “The Site of Memory,” in which she explores the relationship between the “real” and imagination in her own fiction and with specific reference to *Beloved*, stating, “the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (193). The “truth” of the lives of slaves was not allowed by general custom to be discussed in slave autobiographies. The recovery of those stories, according to Morrison,

requires imagination to fill in the gaps created by historiographic silences and the details omitted from testimonies.

Paul Gilroy explains that Morrison's insistence on the recovery of history via an emphasis on memory reflects Morrison's notion of the "connecting tissue" ("Rediscovering Black History" 49) of African American and European-American history:

These imaginative attempts to revisit the slave experience and sift it for resources with which to bolster contemporary political aspirations do not point towards a simple disassociation (Africentric or otherwise) from the West and its distinctive understandings of being, thinking, and thinking about thinking and being. (Gilroy 220)

Gilroy explains that books like *Beloved* seek to move away from histories that view slavery as an aberration to be erased, both by those who seek to present a history of slaveholding nations as one of enlightened progress *as well as* revisionist visions of black identity (still popular in the 1980s when *Beloved* was published) that also present histories of triumphant progress by emphasizing the positive elements of (pre-slavery) African history in black diasporic identity.⁹

Discussing the roles of history and memory in *Beloved*, Gilroy notes the novel's exploration of "the desire to forget the terrors of slavery and the simultaneous impossibility of forgetting" (222). In an interview with Gilroy, Morrison stated of her project, "The struggle to forget which was important in order to survive is fruitless and I

⁹ Gilroy says that even with "the best of these revisionist impulses," "there is a danger that, apart from the archaeology of traditional survivals, slavery becomes a cluster of negative associations that are best left behind" (189). In 1974, Morrison described her view of Afrocentric African American history as follows: "Let me explain what I mean about mysticism and reactionaryism. A few years ago we were called upon to make new myths, to forge a new cosmology to live by; the assumption being either that we had no Afro-American myths, or that if we did they were inferior. So we skipped over some 300 to 2,000 years of lived life to find a myth to our liking, or we made some up. Mostly we made some up" (Morrison "Making" 36). Morrison describes as "propaganda" what she sees as the creation of myths with no basis in reality (Morrison "Making" 36).

wanted to make it fruitless” (qtd. in Gilroy 222). Several characters in *Beloved* equate forgetting with survival, especially Sethe and Paul D. Sethe is often described as “beating back the past,” while the narrator of the novel describes Paul’s hidden memories as a “tobacco tin lodged in his chest” and thus ostensibly inaccessible (73, 113). The clearest articulation of this notion that the details of slavery are marked for oblivion is the end of the novel. The final paragraphs of the novel contain the almost hypnotic refrain, “It was not a story to pass on” with a final variation, “This is not a story to pass on” (275). While the characters wish to forget, the narrative insists on remembering. While *Beloved* is a multivalent figure in the novel, one possible interpretation of her presence is that she is the embodiment of the past that Sethe attempts to forget. *Beloved*, as the grown ghost of the daughter killed by Sethe, serves as a memory aid which forces Sethe to articulate her history and the community to resolve the rupture caused by that history. There are similar memory aids throughout the novel, including the scar on Sethe’s back. Morrison articulates a desire to illuminate not just the gaps of history as recorded documentation, but also the purposeful forgetting that results in those mnemonic gaps.

Pierre Nora explored the connections between history and memory in an essay entitled “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*.”¹⁰ In this essay, Nora suggests that the protection of memory is most forcefully asserted as a tool for the recovery of history when the power of memory is weakest and when it is in danger of being lost to forgetting. He states, “We buttress our identities upon such bastions [of memory], but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them” (Nora 12). For Nora, the exercise of memory as historical recovery (as opposed to what he terms “real memory” which he defines as unselfconscious repetition of activity)

¹⁰ The subtitle of Nora’s essay is strikingly similar to that of Morrison’s essay “The Site of Memory.”

thus indicates a loss or the danger of a loss. The function of the “*lieu de mémoire*,” according to Nora, is “to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial” (19). In this sense, Morrison’s novels function as *lieux de mémoire*, spaces in which the past is insistently remembered. Morrison’s stated goal of recovering memory belies her notion that it is in danger of being lost. She explains her “turn to history” in relation to historical erasures constitutive of U.S. national identity (Gilroy 222). In her interview with Gilroy, she explains, “We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it’s romanticized” (qtd. in Gilroy 222).

Morrison directly takes up this issue of the United States as a nation whose history is defined by the erasure of the histories of its inhabitants in *A Mercy*. The novel examines the construction of race as a replacement for the particularities of the histories of very disparate people as a means of shoring up power and forging national identity. Just as *Beloved* must be read in the context of the politics (including the politics of history) of its time, *A Mercy* responds to shifting conceptions of both racial politics and United States historical discourse at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. In an interview with Tavis Smiley aired on PBS on November 19, 2008, Morrison discusses *A Mercy*, stating, “My book is pre-, not pre-slavery, but pre-racism. [...] Those two things go together: pre- and that other word which I don’t believe so I won’t use it, but after.” Morrison states her desire to search for the origins of the concepts of race as constructed in United States history. Morrison displays her reticence to use the term “post-” in order to avoid invoking the neologism “post-racial” which could imply that

race and racism are part of the past. In this sense, she is responding to current discourses regarding the shifting role of race in United States politics, culture, and society.

Morrison describes her recourse to a “pre-racism” period as the natural counterpart to any discussion of a “post-racial” United States. She suggests the necessity of understanding the role of race as construction in the “lived lives” of the nation’s citizens.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison presents her most racially diverse set of protagonists in an “untamed world” that throws together diverse groups of people who must rely on each other in order to survive (18). The reader glimpses the possibility for the Anglo-Dutch master and mistress of the farm, Native American and African slaves, and English indentured servants to form an alternative family forged by the necessity to work together in order to thrive. All of these characters are orphans in some sense, set apart from their families and places of origin, a trope of United States literature. The novel then investigates how these orphans decide to create bonds. The glimpsed opportunity of natural alliances in the microcosm of the Vaarks’ farm dissolves as the power structures codified by emerging laws insure their mutual isolation. After Jacob Vaark dies, his wife Rebekka seeks refuge in the institution of religion and systems of racial and class hierarchy, rejecting any previous closeness with her slaves and servants. The narrator describes this break:

They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined had become false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone’s guess. [...] Minus bloodlines, [Scully] saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them. (155-156)

Scully, one of the English indentured servants, foresees a future in which their fates seem to irreversibly splinter. The novel explores the origins of this splintering, investigating

the reasons for which seemingly natural alliances (based on class and shared experiences, for example) become untenable.

One of Morrison's early essays entitled "Rediscovering Black History" (1974) reviews a text she edited, *The Black Book*, which gathered and reprinted a wide variety of primary historical sources of African American history. Morrison articulates one of the lessons she takes from her reading of this book:

In spite of this tendency to have one set of rules for black history and another for white history, I was, in completing the editing of *The Black Book*, overwhelmed with the connecting tissue between black and white history. The connection, however, was not a simple one of white oppressor and black victim. (49)

Her vision of United States history as one defined by this "connecting tissue" is evident in *Beloved* and even more clearly articulated in *A Mercy*.¹¹

While *Beloved* forces references to official historical markers such as laws and war into the background, *A Mercy* pays particular attention to the role of emerging laws in the codification of racial constructs. The importance of law in the establishment of systems of order in the "ad hoc territory" of the colonies is established early in the novel (13). The narrative describes the effects of a "people's war" in which "an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured—had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class" (10). These alliances across race and even class are struck down by the creation of "a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in

¹¹ A correlation to Morrison's idea can be found in Annette Gordon-Reed's 2009 Pulitzer Prize-winner in the history category, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. In this book, published just two months before *A Mercy*, Gordon-Reed follows the lives of the various members of the Hemings family, including its most historically well-known member, Sally Hemings. In telling the story of this family, Gordon-Reed also explores the relationship between European- and African-Americans in relationship to not only the history of slavery in the United States, but also the history of the United States' founding. Gordon-Reed's subtitle, "An American Family," when used in relation to the multiracial Hemings family, recalls Morrison's notion of the "connecting tissue" of United States history.

defense of order” (10). These laws pit people against each other on the basis of race and class:

By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease between gentry and laborers, forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry’s profits. (10)

Jacob calls them “lawless laws” (10-11). This reflection on the ways in which laws shape social relationships highlights the constructed nature of race in the United States. The effects of legal constructions are described as elements of a system meant to protect the gentry’s profits by creating racially-defined legal categories and racializing the institution of slavery. The law is shown to shape even personal relationships; the words “law,” “legal,” “lawful,” and “illegal” appear frequently both in Florens’s first-person narrative and the third-person narration of the other characters.

Unlike in *Beloved*, the reader of *A Mercy* is given access to key documents that shape the relationships of the various protagonists, including most notably Rebekka’s letter and the advertisements for slaves and indentured servants. One possible explanation for this shift in narration is that Morrison is interested in “filling the gaps” in U.S. national historical memory, and the periods she explores in the two novels contain different lacunae. While the Fugitive Slave Law might be commonly discussed in relation to slavery in the nineteenth century, Morrison notes that the internal consciousness of slaves is a subject that escapes documentation. In contrast, the laws described by the passage cited above in *A Mercy* are less commonly recognized, as is much information about the pre-national context of the colonies in the late seventeenth century. In an interview, Morrison mentions her desire to understand the pre-national

foundations of the United States—beyond the basic information regarding the Puritans—to de-mystify the origins of the nation:

I was trying to get beyond the Puritan, Plymouth Rock stuff, because I didn't believe that, not for one minute. I mean, I believe *that*, but I didn't think it was the whole story. [...] Some of them were adventurers, but most of them were felons. Most of them were prostitutes. Most of them were children. Most of them were just people they didn't want in Great Britain, and they gave them a choice: prison or transportation. (qtd. in Nance 48)

Morrison remarks the loss of the histories and experiences of individuals in the formation of whiteness as well as blackness. The amnesia is required by all members of the nascent United States nation in *A Mercy*. Morrison searches for the origins of this erasure, and explores the histories shed in the process.

While in *Beloved* Morrison focuses on the role of science in ossifying perceptions of black racial identity, in *A Mercy* she examines the construction of whiteness as well. In her interview with Tavis Smiley, she further articulates this idea of the construction of white racial identity; regarding the seventeenth century she says, “When there were Europeans, they weren't white. They were Italian, Portuguese, French.” This notion of the loss inherent in the creation of U.S. national identity and the acquisition of racial identity is described in the stories of many of the characters. Each of the characters' voyages entail a shedding of the past, including Rebekka's voyage from England and Florens's mother's voyage from Angola. In the final chapter of the novel, in which Florens's mother's story is told in first person narrative (perhaps as imagined by Florens), this loss is articulated:

It was [on the slave auction block] I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants. (Morrison *A Mercy* 165)

Florens's *mãe* states here that skin color comes to replace national origin, family, language, and other cultural markers in the "New World." In his theory of "the Black Atlantic," Paul Gilroy posits the idea of transnational black identity as forged by the experience of the slave trade and emblemized by the movement of the middle passage. *Mãe*'s experience indeed fits this idea as slavery inscribes a racial identity onto her. The novel also makes a connection between her experience and that of Rebekka, who also travels in the lower regions of a ship and comes to forge a temporary relationship with the white women, most prostitutes, who travel across the ocean as well. This relationship ends when the voyage ends, however, and each woman encounters a different fate. *A Mercy* looks at the possibilities inherent in the forging of a nascent national identity, especially the opportunities missed. But by pointing to these missed opportunities, Morrison invokes history as it could have been, demonstrating that history could have unfolded differently. She indicates the possibility of different ways of forging national identity, denaturalizing concepts on which United States national identity was founded.

Both *A Mercy* and *Beloved* engage with important periods in the history of the United States, attempting to reveal the power structures that shape human relationships and to describe what is missing. Both novels look skeptically at recorded information on which official history is usually based, while emphasizing the power of narrative to creatively reconstruct history. These narratives underscore the constructed nature of the nation, with an expressed interest in the construction of race as a means through which U.S. national identity is created and articulated. Both novels attempt to "give blood to the scraps" of moments of national historical significance, imbuing those moments with

both possibility and more ambiguous meaning, via a reliance on memory and creative reconstructions as alternate means of accessing the past.

CHAPTER TWO

Remapping Community, Reconstituting History, and Reclaiming Poetry: Feminist Histories in the Work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Eavan Boland

She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. [...] This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. (Anzaldúa 82)

In their poetry and critical writing, Gloria Anzaldúa and Eavan Boland engage in feminist critiques of national histories. They seek to construct alternate histories and poetic languages compatible with their identities within contested geographical spaces—the U.S.-Mexican “borderlands” and postcolonial Ireland—defined by official histories that negate their female-identified histories. Both Anzaldúa and Boland challenge official national histories by emphasizing the importance of memory, recovering women’s histories, invoking pre-national female myths, and assuming the authority to creatively re-imagine excluded identities and stories. Their work attempts to recover not only female national historical involvement, but also female creative traditions, forging both historical and artistic genealogies.

In critiquing nationalism, both poets attempt to imagine alternative spaces and shapes for community, and their rejection of nationalist discourse is given a spatial articulation that re-imagines the space of the nation. Gloria Anzaldúa’s vision of the borderlands as both physical space and metaphor for identity rejects definite national boundaries between the United States and Mexico while at the same time shifting emphasis away from the notion of Aztlán, an alternative national concept privileged by

the Chicano nationalist movement. Eavan Boland's critique of nationalism evolves from a search and desire for nation which as a child she sees as shorthand for belonging, to a shift away from the nation, to an individualized exploration of the spaces ignored by national history. She specifically searches for an appropriate space for herself as an Irish woman poet. In their works, both writers are conscious of their location in colonized or postcolonial spaces. For Anzaldúa, the Rio Grande Valley is a space that is not "postcolonial" but rather one that is still occupied in the sense that it is a space taken over by the United States with an attempt to reject its history as Mexican territory and to thus reject the "Mexicanness" of its inhabitants. Anzaldúa focuses on South Texas's position as the very space whose appropriation by the United States led to the United States-Mexican War and which Mexico eventually ceded to the U.S. under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Eavan Boland, meanwhile, is conscious in her poetry of Ireland as a postcolonial space, focusing attention on terms such as "empire" and "colony," and the effects of these on the development of the Irish republic. This becomes clear in her reflections on her "exile" as a child in London where she saw the status of her native land from the perspective of the country that colonized it. Both poets contend with multiple national, historical, and poetic traditions; Boland deals primarily with British and Irish traditions, while Anzaldúa deals with U.S., Mexican, indigenous, and Chicano traditions.

Examining the poetry and critical prose of Gloria Anzaldúa and Eavan Boland allows for an investigation of some of the issues related to feminist literary responses to nationalist discourse. Examined together, their works bring up some interesting critical, literary, and political convergences as well as some productive divergences. In this

chapter, I focus on Anzaldúa's hybrid critical and poetic work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and several of Boland's 1990s publications including the poetry collections *Outside History* (1990), *In a Time of Violence* (1995) and *The Lost Land* (1998) as well as her book of essays, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1994). Some similarities include the direct correlation between their prose and poetry; the autobiographical nature of their work which leads the poets to questions of larger social import; the attention of the two writers to the recuperation of women's history and the role of literature in historical recovery; a critical look at masculinist national traditions; and a focus on the land with an emphasis on the connection between the land and the self. The two writers even use similar terms in relation to their respective geographies; both use the term "lost land," for example, and the related terms "wound" and "scar" are central to their descriptions.

At the same time, there are some pointed differences between the two writers' work, especially in their subject positions in relation to politics, class, and sexuality. Anzaldúa and Boland were contemporaries (Anzaldúa passed away in 2004) from very different backgrounds and with disparate career and life trajectories. Gloria Anzaldúa was born in 1942 in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas to a farm-working family of Mexican descent; her father died when she was fourteen years old. She left the Valley as an adult to study and teach while continuing her creative work, including in the Northeastern United States and in Santa Cruz, California. Anzaldúa was an openly lesbian writer, and her identification as queer is important to her analysis in *Borderlands*. Eavan Boland was born in 1944 in Dublin, Ireland to a father who was a diplomat and a mother who was a visual artist. Boland lived in England for several years during her

childhood but returned to Dublin to attend university. She married a novelist and moved to a Dublin suburb where she continued to write poetry while raising her two daughters. She has taught in Dublin and several universities in the United States, and now divides her time between Stanford University and her home in Dublin. Boland has stated that she considers herself a feminist, but she has not been involved in political action.¹

Anzaldúa's work, meanwhile, is avowedly political. Along with Cherríe Moraga, Anzaldúa edited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, the first major anthology of work by feminists of color responding to a strain of United States feminism that did not address their experiences. These differences in subject position between the two writers become evident in the different implementation of their critiques of language and the different shapes they envision for their imagined communities.

Despite their different subject positions, the writing of both Anzaldúa and Boland sees their female identities as fundamental to their literary and critical expression. In particular, they see the exclusion of women from historical dialogue as a problem requiring them to write in order to include themselves in traditions that otherwise reject them as poets. Nationalistic histories and the poetic tradition are problematic for both Anzaldúa and Boland because they explicitly nullify the space of women as autonomous subjects, let alone poets able to shape their own representations and literary significances. Within these systems, the spaces of the individual female self and the poetic female self become reduced to marginalia.

¹ In an interview by Elizabeth Schmidt published on www.poets.org, the website of the American Academy of Poets, and volume 32 of *American Poet* (spring 2007), Boland states: "I'm a feminist. I'm not a feminist poet. I've said somewhere else that I think feminism has real power and authority as an ethic, but none at all as an aesthetic. My poetry begins for me where certainty ends. I think the imagination is an ambiguous and untidy place, and its frontiers are not accessible to the logic of feminism for that reason. [...] Where feminism has influenced and anchored my view of things is in the making of a critique. And it's one of the things I'm most uneasy about, looking back: that so much women's poetry pre-existed that critique. I think it needs a critique. Feminism is certainly a part of a book like *Object Lessons*."

Remapping Community, Reconstituting History

Feminist critiques of history have often focused on reversing the invisibility of women's history while investigating the discursive construction of their historical absence.² In a chapter on the importance of "the politics of location" for feminism, Caren Kaplan quotes Adrienne Rich's assertion that "A place on the map is also a place in history" (143). Indeed, Anzaldúa and Boland envision geographies that function to negate the primacy of the nation in the constitution of identity because that map has excluded women's histories. In Anzaldúa, the spatial metaphor of the borderlands rejects the notion of identity altogether insofar as that notion can be construed to represent stasis and a unitary and exclusionary definition of the self. For Anzaldúa, the borderlands are a space for a community based on common goals rather than common identities. In this space, history is also given a new, hybrid form in the text's incorporation of myth, poetry, autobiography, and theory. In Boland's work, meanwhile, there is not one dominant spatial articulation, but rather a series of related gestures that emphasize different views of the nation, from focusing on the natural landscape, to remapping the city by exploring the spaces inhabited by women and de-emphasizing monuments to male achievement, to explorations of the spatial constructions of "colony" and "empire." While she doesn't present a new overarching geographical construct similar to Anzaldúa's borderlands, Boland's work does consistently articulate and critique the constructed nature of the geography of the nation.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa uses the physical space of the U.S.-Mexico national border as a metaphor for other boundaries created by

² Joan W. Scott provides a useful historical overview of feminist historiography in Part I ("Toward a Feminist History") of her text *Gender and the Politics of History*, which includes two chapters: "Women's History" and "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis."

identity markers that presuppose binaries or strict categorizations, including gender, sexuality, class, and race. Those who live in the borderlands, in her configuration, are those who cannot or refuse to fit neatly into defined categories; they are those who fall between and thus are left outside of accepted definitions. Anzaldúa describes this space as follows:

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of the two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (3)

For Anzaldúa, the liminal space of the borderlands calls into question the very notion of identities defined by refutation. The borderlands for her are “in a constant state of transition.” This is a space that is mutable rather than fixed, like the identities of the borderland-dwellers. She represents transgression as a process; in-betweenness is marked by movement (“cross[ing] over,” “pass[ing] over,” “go[ing] through”) that contradicts the “normal” which exists as static identity within “confines.” This concept of identity created through movement makes categorization difficult; it introduces the possibility of “both/neither” identities (as opposed to “either/or” binaries). The “troublesome” subject positioning presented by Anzaldúa in the figure of the “atravesados” rejects being defined, situated, or fixed, instead highlighting identity as a process. Mary Pat Brady notes in her book that “atravesados” is a slang term for homosexuals (*Extinct Lands* 83) and Anzaldúa indeed privileges homosexuality as the

subject positioning which offers perhaps the greatest challenge to binary definitions of gender, sexuality, citizenship, normalcy, and race.

Anzaldúa's description of the border as "una herida abierta," an open wound that bleeds without being able to form a scab (and thus heal), positions the borderlands as a space in which the self is fluid and overflows boundaries. Anzaldúa explores this connection between the land and "la conciencia de la mestiza" in the first poetic sequence of *Borderlands*:

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders. (3)

She again equates the body with the land in the phrase "skin of the earth." The natural world is shown to be seamless; thus the physical borders erected by nations and the intangible borders between identities are presented as unnatural, encapsulated in the image of physical trauma, and incapable of containing peoples and subjectivities. She argues against the exclusion of those whose identities, like hers, lie outside of the identities defined by "unnatural boundar[ies]" by drawing attention to the construction of identity and working to posit alternative historical and subject constructions. Yet this rejection of boundaries follows the stanza that appropriates the border as the home of the speaker. Also, Anzaldúa's description of the border shifts from its description as a "thin edge" to an expanded vision of the space as a presumably thicker "land" that encompasses areas on both sides of that line.

Anzaldúa's vision of the border acts as a "politics of location" described by Caren Kaplan as follows:

Questions of location are most useful [...] when they are used to deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term "gender." Location is not useful when it is constructed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be reestablished and reaffirmed. We have seen that discourses of location can be used to naturalize boundaries and margins under the guise of celebration, nostalgia, or inappropriate assumptions of sameness. A politics of location is also problematic when it is deployed as an agent of appropriation, constructing similarity through equalizations when material histories indicate inequities. (187)

Anzaldúa historicizes the conditions leading to her borderland identity and insists on the recognition of historical inequities. As in Kaplan's description, in her prose and poetry Anzaldúa explicitly rejects the notion of natural boundaries.

Anzaldúa picks up the spatial metaphor of the borderlands in relation to the self in the poem "To live in the Borderlands means you," which is replete with metaphors equating geographical constructs and the social roles of individual borderlands-dwellers, as in the following stanza:

In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where the enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back; (194)

and the final stanza:

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads. (195)

Anzaldúa indicates urgency by interpolating the reader ("you") and using images and language denoting violence. She also makes this "you" plural by referring to a

multiplicity of positions and scenarios faced by borderland inhabitants. In the extended metaphor of the stanza beginning “In the Borderlands,” the speaker compares the “you,” who is presumably a person in the borderlands, to a battleground; she thus presents identity, rather than the physical landscape, as that which is ultimately affected by border disputes. The border threatens not only to alienate the self, making her/him both a stranger at home, but also to annihilate the self that is “wounded,” “lost in action,” and “dead,” though also “fighting back” as a way to attempt an escape from that fate. Survival requires a move away from this field of borders that require defense, to the disavowal of “fronteras” and a move towards the idea of “a crossroads,” allowing for the intersection of experiences and identities rather than strict differentiations.

Mary Pat Brady discusses the role of spatial articulations in Chicana literature, including *Borderlands*, in her book *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Brady argues that Chicana literature is particularly concerned with the “production of space” (a term coined by Henri Lefebvre) because of its social implications:

Chicana literature offers an important theoretic of space, one that, like many critical space studies, implicates the production of space in the everyday, in the social, but that unlike many space theories suggests the relevance of aesthetics, of “the literary mode of knowing” for understanding the intermeshing of the spatial and the social. And Chicana literature argues for and examines the relevance of race, gender, and sexuality—as well as class—to the making of space. (6)

Brady asserts that the texts she includes in her study “[offer] not just alternative cartographies (or countercartographies—spatial narratives challenging those that have gained a normative or taken-for-granted status) but entirely different conceptualizations of spatiality altogether” (6).

Reconceptualizing her space by accentuating concepts like crossroads and bridges in a land of borders allows Gloria Anzaldúa to also revisit history. If history occurs in time, it also occurs in space. Anzaldúa's geography of borderlands serves as the setting for her investigation of the histories of lives lived across borders. The first chapter of *Borderlands* begins with a collage of sources—the lyrics of a song by Los Tigres del Norte, a historical text, and her poetry—which are succeeded by prose that incorporates testimony, autobiography, historical texts, and the work of other poets and songwriters. After a description of her concept of the “borderlands,” Anzaldúa moves on to a history of the Southwest, and its relationship to Mexico and the United States, covering an impressive range of history that she condenses in less than ten pages of text. She begins with “the original peopling of the Americas” tens of thousands of years B.C., then describes the presence of the Cochise and the Aztecs, the Cortesian conquest of Mexico, and the birth of the mestizos in the Americas (4). She then shifts attention to the period of modern nations and describes the nineteenth century movement of “Anglos” into Texas, the Alamo, the United States-Mexican War, the Mexican economic crisis, and periods of mass migration by “*mexicanos del otro lado*” to the U.S. (10). Ties between individuals and national disputes over the land are evident in Anzaldúa's phrasing in statements such as, “The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land” (7). By describing the “birth” of the current national border, she again suggests that it is not natural and does not exist from time immemorial, but is instead a construction. She also seems to describe a dual loss in this phrase, with 100,000 people effectively left without

national protection. They are annexed, appropriated like the land, and conquered rather than integrated.

After locating her history within the context of national struggle and muddled borders that forms the basis of Chican@ history, Anzaldúa moves on to the subjects that command the greatest amount of attention in the text, including the role of sexuality and the ways in which homosexuality threatens conceptions of nation and culture, as well as the connection between gender, sexuality, and artistic creativity. Anzaldúa does not simplistically valorize Chican@ culture (or any other); instead, she asserts her right to cast off all elements of it when necessary or expedient. She describes her lesbian identity as a “choice” which puts her at odds with Chican@ culture:

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality. Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent). It is an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. [...] It is a path to knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality. (19)

Anzaldúa views her lesbian identity as one that intersects with a variety of other identities, preventing her from fitting neatly into one, but allowing her to “mitigate duality” and also to “know” the “history of oppression” of Chican@s. Mary Pat Brady makes a similar point about the value of fitting within two seemingly exclusive identities. Brady mentions an anthology entitled *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mother Warned Us About* and discusses the implications of its title:

this merger of two antihegemonic labels—*Chicana* and *lesbian*—that serve as signatures of distinct critiques of contemporary U.S. politics of citizenship also suggests the exclusions operating within each critique, or perhaps more specifically, suggests the abundance of experience overflowing rigid categories. (100)

This assertion is useful for understanding Anzaldúa's cultural critique; her position as a Chicana and a lesbian allows her to be critical of the "intimate terrorism" faced in the borderlands. She explains: "I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture" (21). Anzaldúa's multiple positions and locations allow her the autonomy to critique the limits and exclusions of each.

Eavan Boland also uses a discussion of space as a way to enter into discussions of history. However, she uses different spatial terms than Anzaldúa to articulate historical exclusions, as her point of departure is the national space rather than the creation of an alternative space. To borrow Mary Pat Brady's term, Boland effects a "countercartography" as opposed to a new geographical space; it is a re-articulation of the nation rather than a rejection of it. Boland describes her deep desire for her nation of origin, Ireland, when she moved to England as a child. From the location of England and the perspective of childhood, Boland valorizes Irish nationalism. In a chapter in *Object Lessons* entitled "In Search of a Nation," Boland explains, "I saw [the idea of a nation] through the glass of exile, by which the glamour of ownership was greatly magnified. But I was too young to understand the part of a nation which would come to challenge and exclude me as a woman and an artist: its sexual drama" (62-63). In this phrase, the adjective "sexual" refers to sex rather than sexuality. Boland explains that her sex excludes her from both a place in the history of Ireland and the realm of Irish poetry.

In both her poetry and her prose, Boland refers to her desire for a nation as a way to valorize her disparaged native land and its history of "defeat" (*Object Lessons* 130). In the poem "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is Not My Own," the poet reflects on her formal schooling in England and the absence of her own country in discussions of

history, along with the subsequent desire to assert herself within a history that does not reflect her experience. The poet ruminates on the map hanging in the front of the classroom in London, 1952, as the teacher discusses the greatness of the Roman Empire:

Suddenly
I wanted
to stand in front of it.
I wanted to trace over
and over the weave of my own country.
To read out names
I was close to forgetting.
Wicklow. Kilruddery. Dublin. (*In a Time of Violence* 40)

As an Irish child in an English school, her national history becomes invisible as the map presents a different geographic point of reference: “Empire.” She calls Ireland “my own country” in an attempt to claim ownership of the land. The young girl in the poem wishes to map herself onto a geography which ignores her existence in much the same way that Boland’s poetry seeks to place the female figure back within the realm of history. The word “trace” evokes not just the image of a girl who wants to draw the outline of her country from memory, but also the idea of a desire to locate an origin. The connection between geography, language, history, and naming is key to an understanding of the poet’s position.

Yet Boland notes that as an adult she comes to see women’s exclusion from historical and literary discourse. She describes her alienation from figures of national history in *The Lost Land*, in which the figure of “the patriot” or “hero” remains inaccessible to her experience. The statues in the poems “Heroic” and “Whose?” present figures that she cannot emulate; they are male national heroes who are the actors of national history and far removed from the female experience of that history. In the sonnet entitled “Heroic,” the first line heralds the topic of her exploration: “Sex and

history. And skin and bone” (*The Lost Land* 50). The living flesh (skin and bone) of the speaker contrasts with the figure of national history she encounters on her walk in the rain:

The patriot was made of drenched stone.
His lips were still speaking. The gun
he held has just killed someone. (50)

The patriot is immobile, made of stone that contrasts with the speaker’s flesh, he is the one who speaks and acts. The patriot’s speeches and actions (in this case violent) are the stuff of which national history is made. Boland’s use of the sonnet, which contrasts with her usual use of free verse, signals an engagement with convention. The speaker of the poem sees that this is not the case for her own identity: “I looked up. And looked at him again. / He stared past me without recognition” (50).

In another poem, “Unheroic,” the poet contrasts her own experience of her country with “*Ireland hero history*” (*The Lost Land* 24). The title of this poem, “Unheroic,” contrasts her ordinary experiences at a summer job with “hero history,” which presumably consists of the actions attributed to the hero statue in the poem “Heroic.” The title of the short final poem of *The Lost Land*, “Whose?” implicitly asks to whom the “beautiful land”—i.e. the Irish nation—belongs. The poem focuses on the lack of power that the poet has over her landscape; her effects are instead limited to the page:

Beautiful land the patriot said
and rinsed it with his blood. And the sun rose.
And the river burned. The earth leaned
towards him: Shadows grew long. Ran red.

Beautiful land I whispered. But the roads
stayed put. Stars froze over the suburb.
Shadows iced up. Nothing moved.
Except my hand across the page. And these words. (58)

In this poem, the patriot “says,” while the speaker “whispers.” The patriot’s speech causes the earth to shift to his vision while the speaker’s whisper does not reshape the natural landscape. Instead, the only movement occurs in her “hand across the page. And these words.” Thus Boland privileges her writing as the only site in which her revisions of history can occur. The poet cannot comfortably shape the national landscape or its history; rather, she only takes authority over the spaces in which women’s history occurs.

Boland contrasts a vision of the public space of the city as constructed by a map of statues that represent “heroes” and “patriots” with her focuses on private space and the spaces that are important to women’s history and not “hero history.” One example of this exploration of alternative historical spaces in relation to the city occurs in Eavan Boland’s description of Dublin in the essay “Lava Cameo” in *Object Lessons*. In this chapter, Boland presents an appropriation of Dublin from the perspective of her grandmother’s life experiences, emphasizing the spaces essential to that history. In this essay, Boland contrasts these elements of her grandmother’s history that are apparently irrelevant to Irish national and literary history though the two are intertwined for Boland. Boland traces the history of her grandmother and reflects on her imagination’s role in the creation of that history. She begins the chapter with a description of the landscape. The first sentences read:

In the early days of October in the year 1909, a woman entered a Dublin hospital, near the center of the city. The building is still there. If you approach from the south, with the Dublin hills behind you, and look down a tunnel of grace made by the houses of Fitzwillian and Merrion squares, your view will end abruptly in this: the National Maternity Hospital, red brick and out of character, blocking the vista.
(3)

In considering the paths that the woman of the first sentence (who the reader learns a page later is her grandmother) navigates, Boland names the streets and rivers of Dublin,

linking the unnamed woman to the city. The poet concludes: “It is not a long drive. But whatever she was that morning, it is lost. Whatever that journey yielded—the child with a hoop who never existed, the woman with a red hat I am now inventing—they were her last glimpses of the outside world” (4). This paragraph highlights the power of invention in the reconstruction of the dead woman’s history and the role of the poet in creating the details that give it its power.

Boland continues her investigation of the link between historical narrative and narrative invention in the subsequent paragraph. She expounds:

This is the way we make the past. This is the way I will make it here. Listening for hooves. Glimpsing the red hat which was never there in the first place. Giving eyesight and evidence to a woman we never knew and cannot now recover. And for all our violations, the past waits for us (5)

Some historical facts may be unrecoverable, but the imaginative evocation of details that may or may not have “really” been, like red hats or the sounds of hooves, allows Boland access to the past.³ She chooses to access the life of a woman whose life is not one that would otherwise be remembered. The next paragraph zooms out and away from the story of Boland’s grandmother, settling on the situation of the nation and its literature. She mentions Joyce, Yeats, and political upheaval in relation to surging Irish nationalism, describing Dublin as a “place on the edge” (7). Yet this is only a nod to literary and political history, quickly dismissed—“How much did she care?” asks Boland regarding her grandmother’s possible relationship to this political background—by a return to the story of her grandmother whose life does not seem to have much to do with these occurrences (7). Boland backgrounds these traditionally historically important events,

³ This insistence on the importance and resonance of imagined details recalls the discussion of the red ribbon in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. See Chapter One.

foregrounding instead the experience of the past of a woman who died in childbirth at age thirty-one.

The “Lava Cameo” essay takes its title from a poem included in the collection *In a Time of Violence*. In the poem “Lava Cameo” Boland imagines a story about her grandmother based on the lava cameo brooch as an artifact that allows Boland to speculate regarding her ancestor’s history. She imagines a “story” about her grandmother, but then explains:

except that it is not a story
more a rumour or a folk memory,
something thrown out once in a random conversation;
a hint merely. (46)

She explores the role of her imagination in recovering things that she cannot get from rumors or hints, like the details of her grandmother’s dress, or how she wore the lava cameo. She reflects on this creative exercise:

there is a way of making free with the past,
a pastiche of what is
real and what is
not, which can only be
justified if you think of it

not as sculpture but syntax:

a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers
the inner secret of it: (*In a Time of Violence* 46-47)

Boland asserts the notion that the reinterpretation of history through language can allow for the discovery of its “inner secret.” For her, “making free with the past” requires that it be seen “not as sculpture but syntax.” This notion recalls the image of the statue that figures in her poems published in *The Lost Land* four years after *In a Time of Violence*. National history appears static to Boland; those statues do not “see her,” nor can she

affect them. She can only have any agency in “syntax,” or the power of language in the creation of history.

This grafting of women’s experiences onto a space that would ignore it is an explicit part of Anzaldúa’s project in *Borderlands* as well; it is a move that requires the assumption of authority. Like Boland, Anzaldúa attempts the poetic recovery of the lives of forgotten women. For example, in the poem “*sus plumas el viento*,” dedicated to her mother, Anzaldúa voices the silence of Pepita, a fruit picker who suffers at the hands of her overseer:

She vows to get out
of the numbing chill
the 110 degree heat.
If the wind would give her feathers for fingers
she would string words and images together. (118)

Anzaldúa traces the stories and histories of women commonly denied the ability to represent themselves; Pepita would “string words and images together” if she could but instead she is an object of history rather than its subject.

Both Anzaldúa and Boland make explicit recourse to the tool of living memory in juxtaposition to written history, but Boland also notes the limitations of memory. Reliance on memory is fragile because there is always the possibility of forgetting. Boland attempts to uncover the histories of her female ancestors by researching relics, yet she recognizes the limitations of such an enterprise. In “The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me,” in which the poet attempts to imagine the history of the black fan she inherits and what it might have meant for her mother, she acknowledges:

The past is an empty café terrace.
An airless dusk before thunder.
A man running.
And no way now to know what happened then—

none at all—unless, of course, you improvise. (*Outside History* 19)

For Boland, the idea of a “past” that is not “history” means there is “no way to know what happened then” and it requires improvisation in order to encode it in writing, chronicle its ephemera. In “What We Lost,” Boland explores the loss of female folk history. This poem further elucidates the limits of memory:

In the winter air, unheard, unshared,
the moment happens, hangs fire, leads nowhere.
The light will fail and the room darken,
the child fall asleep and the story be forgotten. (*Outside History* 49)

Memory, then, can be powerful, but it is also vulnerable to the disruption of forgetting. The individual moment is easily lost in the haze of forgetting as a result of the passage of time.

Rather than using memory to stand in and replace the lost histories of women, Anzaldúa and Boland use imagination to create alternative histories. In the epigraph that I chose to open this essay, Gloria Anzaldúa states that the *mestiza* she envisions embraces the useful while disregarding the “lies” of history, particularly those perpetuated against women. And instead of allowing the salvaged truths to remain unaltered, she “reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths.” In this construction, the process of rewriting history is not only a recovery of the past, but also a shaping of the present through “new myths.” In line with Boland’s concept of “improvisation,” Anzaldúa emphasizes the role of the poet as one of creative effort and production instead of scientific historical research.

Anzaldúa selectively recovers eclipsed feminine histories throughout *Borderlands* in order to provide models that will allow for the construction of an identity in the present that will allow her space to exist. In examining the indigenous past, she bypasses the

Aztec history privileged by the Chicano nationalist movement for its emphasis on the male warrior spirit. She describes this move in the following way:

My family, like most Chicanos, did not practice Roman Catholicism but a folk Catholicism with many pagan elements. *La Virgen de Guadalupe*'s Indian name is *Coatlalopeuh*. She is the central deity connecting us to our Indian ancestry.

Coatlalopeuh is descended from, or is an aspect of, earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses. The earliest is *Coatllicue*, or "Serpent Skirt." She had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet. As creator goddess, she was mother of the celestial deities, and of *Huitzipochtli* and his sister, *Coyolxauhqui*, She With Golden Bells, Goddess of the Moon, who was decapitated by her brother. Another aspect of *Coatllicue* is *Tonantsi*. The Totonacs, tired of the Aztec human sacrifices to the male god, *Huitzilopochtli*, renewed their reverence for *Tonantsi* who preferred the sacrifice of birds and small animals.

The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. (27)

The writer explores a history of interrelated female deities and locates in Coatlicue, the demonized half of the Coatlicue/Tonantsi binary deity in the Mesoamerican tradition, the appropriate myth to voice her projections for a consciousness that will allow for alternate forms of female community and engagement. Like Chicano nationalists, Anzaldúa seeks to recover the history of indigenous cultures that ruled in Mexico before the Conquest. However, Anzaldúa does not simply embrace Aztec culture uncritically. Instead, she notes the differences between Aztecs and other indigenous peoples (in this case the Totonacs) and critiques "male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture." Anzaldúa still asserts the indigenous element of Chican@ history, though she privileges an alternative tradition of deities. Anzaldúa embraces established female goddesses pre-dating Aztec hegemony, at the same time paying attention to internal dissension, viewing the Totonac worship of Coatlicue as a form of resistance to Aztec bellicosity. Significantly, Anzaldúa describes

Coatlícue as a “creator goddess,” indicating the deity’s power as a model for the figure of the writer. Anzaldúa reinterprets Coatlicue as a female creative ancestor.

Like Gloria Anzaldúa, Eavan Boland also invokes female mythological figures, though she draws primarily from Greek mythology. She refers to these figures because, just as for Anzaldúa, modern nationalist history obscures female roles; thus, Boland reaches toward a previous time when women were construed as actors instead of the objects that she sees them become in Irish nationalistic poetry. In “The Pomegranate,” Boland calls upon the myth of Demeter and Persephone. She explains the myth’s ability to encompass her experiences as both mother and daughter: “And the best thing about the legend is / I can enter it anywhere” (*In a Time of Violence* 26). While she describes the exclusion of female-identified stories and conventions that dominate the Irish tradition, she looks to myth because it allows her to enter and see her own story reflected. In *Object Lessons*, Boland laments the loneliness of speaking from within this absence: “I wanted a story. I wanted to read or hear the narrative of someone else—a woman and a poet—who had gone here, and been there” (xvi). In the absence of a female poetic genealogy, however, she invokes the stories of female creativity often based in myth. It is noteworthy that Boland draws connections to Greek mythology rather than to Irish mythology.

Sonia Saldívar-Hull describes Gloria Anzaldúa’s engagement with indigenous history in the following way: “Anzaldúa’s reclamation of Aztec deities and traditions begins a reformulation of Aztlán from a male nation-state to a feminist site of resistance” (60-61). Anzaldúa bypasses Western mythology, but she also refuses to accept the established hegemony of Aztec mythology, instead seeing within it the possibilities for a

new consciousness located in recovery and revision of women's history and women's social and political roles. As Saldívar-Hull notes, Anzaldúa's evocation of Mesoamerican mythology is not simply nostalgic or idealistic, but rather a means of changing the direction of Chicana@ ethnic politics so that it can include space for women and for feminist political goals. This evocation allows Anzaldúa to reiterate the role of women in mythological history and also uses that as a way to begin to call for a new social and political consciousness in the figure of the "new *mestiza*" which acts as the seed for an escape from exclusionary identity politics that work through binary oppositions. Anzaldúa does not reject the concept of Aztlán; indeed, she refers to Aztlán in the opening chapter of *Borderlands*, "The homeland, Aztlán/*El otro México*." Yet she seeks a reformation of it, moving away from its alignment with conceptions of national identity toward a more flexible definition of selfhood and community.

Saldívar-Hull's comments bring up the question of the shape of community; she asserts that Anzaldúa seeks a shift away from the predominance of the concept of the nation-state, towards "a feminist site of resistance." This is a key element of Anzaldúa's critique of Chicano nationalism: that it recreates the exclusionary methods of identity formation employed by nation-states. Ethnic nationalism, then, replaces one nation with another, while Anzaldúa instead interrogates the very foundations of national identity. This is a difficult task, though, as the nation-state is the concept on which the foundation of society rests for many basic issues such as citizenship and legal rights. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss the predominance of the national model of community in Chicano nationalism:

In cases of diasporic populations, too, the nation seems at times to be the only concept available under which to imagine the community of a subaltern group—

as, for example, the [sic] Aztlán is imagined as the geographical homeland of “la Raza,” the spiritual Latino nation in North America. It may be true, as Benedict Anderson says, that a nation should be understood as an imagined community—but here we should recognize that *the nation becomes the only way to imagine community!* Every imagination of a community becomes overcoded as a nation, and hence our conception of community is impoverished. Just as in the context of the dominant countries, here too the multiplicity and singularity of the multitude are negated in the straitjacket of the identity and homogeneity of the people. Once again, the unifying power of the subaltern nation is a double-edged sword, at once progressive and reactionary. (107)

Anzaldúa attempts a rejection of both models of nationalism instead of supplanting one for the other, as both reject multiplicity. She rejects oppositional politics and imagines a space that functions as an altogether different model: a community based on common goals, experiences, and histories rather than the commonalities designated by national identities. Rather than excluding possible members based on difference, Anzaldúa offers an attempt to recognize and accommodate difference.

In relation to questions of nationalism, some comparisons between Anzaldúa and Boland prove useful. Boland critiques Irish nationalism, though primarily in its relationship to Irish poetic tradition. However, Boland displays a much different relationship to the idea of the nation. While Anzaldúa explicitly maintains her right to challenge, or even reject, any identity when necessary, including disavowing national identity, Boland explains in the *Object Lessons* chapter entitled “Outside History” her desire to create poetry able to reform poetic representations of women in the nation. In the chapter, Boland discusses her discomfort with national historical and poetic traditions, yet insists that she cannot extricate the nation from any understanding of herself as woman and artist. She explains,

I have written this to probe the virulence and necessity of the idea of a nation. Not on its own and not in a vacuum, but as it intersects with a specific poetic inheritance and as that inheritance, in turn, cut across me as woman and poet. [...]

I believe these intersections, if I can observe them at all properly here, reveal something about poetry, about nationalism, about the difficulties for a woman poet within a constraining national tradition. (125-126)

A key word in this discussion is “intersection.” It calls to mind the concept of Anzaldúa’s borderlands as the space of intersecting differences which uncovers the workings of institutional identities and their exclusions. In contrast to Anzaldúa, however, Boland insists on the “necessity” of the nation despite her description of its “virulence” which ascribes a decidedly negative valence to the term.

Boland explores the betrayal of women’s lives and voices in Irish nationalist poetry, and explains that she blames Irish poets, rather than Irish nationalism, for this fact (*Object Lessons* 136-137). Moreover, the poet explains her split from “feminist poets” who reject the idea of the nation. She situates her refusal to abandon the idea of the nation as follows:

It is easy, and intellectually seductive, for a woman artist to walk away from the idea of a nation. There has been, and there must continue to be, a great deal of debate about the energies and myths women writers should bring with them into a new age. “Start again” has been the cry of some of the best feminist poets. “Wipe the slate clean, start afresh.” It is a cry with force and justice behind it. And it is a potent idea: to begin in a new world, clearing the desert as it were, making it blossom, even making the rain.

In any new dispensation the idea of a nation must seem an expendable construct. After all, it has never admitted women. Its flags and songs and battle cries, even its poetry, as I’ve suggested, make use of feminine imagery. But that is all. The true voice and vision of women are routinely excluded.

Then why did I not walk away? Simply because I was not free to. For all my quarrels with the concept, and no doubt partly because of them, I needed to find and repossess that idea at some level of repose. [...] I knew the idea was flawed. But if it was flawed, it was also one of the vital human constructs of a place in which, like Leopold Bloom, I was born. (*Object Lessons* 145-146)

Here Boland reflects on the role of tradition and the national past, using the terms “energies and myths,” in the world of women writers. She writes that she can understand the appeal of “begin[ning] in a new world” by dispensing with the concept of the nation,

even listing some of the major representational problems of the nation as a result of its exclusion of women. Yet she follows these assertions with an idea that she articulates in various ways in *Object Lessons*: “I was not free to [walk away].” Boland insists on the nation as a constitutive element of her identity despite its flaws and, as she is “not free” to completely discard it, seeks to “repossess” it.

In the *Object Lessons* chapter entitled “Outside History,” Boland addresses the absences in Irish poetry’s representations of the nation. She rejects the aim of nationalist poetry to recover the past and to reshape it into one of victories, and insists that the defeats of the Irish past are just as important to explore. In those moments, Boland finds another intersection, between “[t]he truths of womanhood and the defeats of a nation” (148). She does not “accept the nation as it appeared in Irish poetry,” finding instead an “emblematic relation between [her] own feminine experience and a national past” (148). Thus, Boland seeks a way to redefine the Irish nationalist past and to find a confluence between its defeats and a history of women’s defeats. She retains the right to subvert the past as it has been presented in Irish poetry, and to shift its content and arc. Yet one limitation of Boland’s argument is that despite her willingness to question its bases, she does not allow herself to ponder possibilities that lie beyond the nation in the constitution of identity. She explains her hesitation to envision “a new world,” but she does not push herself to examine *why* she maintains the nation as so central an element of her identity.

There is another intersection here between Boland and Anzaldúa. While Anzaldúa does indeed articulate her freedom to reject all nationalisms, she nonetheless begins her narrative with a recounting of the history important to Chicano nationalism, and asserts the central role of being “raza” in her identity. She seeks to reform some of

the basic elements of Chicano nationalist history, specifically in her reorganization of indigenous historical emphases and creation myths, yet this move is also a reformation of a national history rather than a rejection.

Reclaiming Poetry

Both Gloria Anzaldúa and Eavan Boland explicitly reflect on their poetics and the formal elements of their work in relation to historical and poetic tradition. Both writers see as an imperative the writing of spaces for themselves and the creation of a female tradition within or against existing poetic traditions. Yet the forms and language employed by the two poets differ greatly; indeed, language is the place where the differences between the two poets far outnumber their similarities. Both contend with tradition but respond linguistically in very different ways. Boland's critique comes in the rhetoric and content of her images and representations of women, while Anzaldúa enacts her critique through the structures of language as well. Anzaldúa's work is more radically disruptive in linguistic and formal terms.

For Gloria Anzaldúa, finding a space for her experience requires the carving of a new language; it is the ability to switch between languages, registers, and codes which she sees as affording a truer expression of her identity than a falsely unitary language. She crosses generic, formal, and linguistic borders and her use of language expresses many of the ideas regarding identity theorized in *Borderlands*. Beth Berila puts it succinctly in her essay entitled "Reading National Identities: The Radical Disruptions of *Borderlands/La Frontera*":

Anzaldúa links aesthetics, politics, nation, and identity by moving between forms, languages, and themes, building a hybrid narrative that progresses through

disjunctures. As the narrative shifts from prose to poetry, Castilian Spanish to English to Nahuatl, folklore to “official” historical accounts, it performs the complex identity that Anzaldúa claims for herself and the shifting borders this identity entails. (Berila 122)

Indeed, the movement between languages and forms is critical to Anzaldúa’s theories regarding fluid identities. Those linguistic shifts invoke shifting perspectives and shifting identities.

The title of *Borderlands* and the titles of the chapters show the ways in which the use of both Spanish and English is not an act of translation, but rather complementation. For example, the title of the first chapter, “The Homeland, Aztlán / *El otro México*,” provides two different geographical and historical references in relation to the United States Southwest. The first half of the title refers to the shape of the land of the Aztecs, who moved from their location in Aztlán (in the contemporary Southwestern United States) to Tenochtitlán (which later became Mexico City), while the second half of the title refers to the Southwest in national terms as a part of Mexico, though she later explains that Southwesterners’ self-reference as “Mexican” connotes a racial identification rather than a national one. In a similar gesture, the sub-section title “*El destierro* / The Lost Land” refers to two different perspectives of a historical moment, in this case addressing the outcome of the U.S.-Mexican War. The first part of the title, “exile,” refers to the perspective of the inhabitants of the land won by the United States, while the second half of this title refers to the Mexican perspective of loss.

The centrality of Anzaldúa’s reflections on language is evident from the very outset of her work, as evidenced by the title of her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which insists from the outset on multiple languages. In the section of the chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” she describes Chicano Spanish in the following way: “Chicano Spanish

is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish. But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. [...] Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language” (55). She further asserts, “Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicanos’ need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. [...] And because we are complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages” (55). For Anzaldúa, the link between language and identity is fundamental. She refuses to raze the complexity of her language just as she refuses to deny the complexity of her identity. Anzaldúa refers to the attempts to deny the linguistic rights of Chicanos as “linguistic terrorism.” This is a concept that finds resonance in the histories of other colonized spaces in which foreign languages were imposed upon colonized peoples whose mother tongues, along with the histories that these languages carried, were prohibited. Anzaldúa rejects the notion of Chicano Spanish’s “impurity,” insisting on its status as “natural” and thus as a language that has inscribed within it a mode of expression that can communicate the experience of Chican@s. Linguistic affirmation, then, is akin to self-affirmation:

Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my language will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (59)

Anzaldúa enacts this linguistic freedom in her work, incorporating English, Spanish, Spanglish, Nahuatl, and Chican@ vernacular in both the theoretical first half of the work as well as the poetry of the second half of the book.

At the same time, Gloria Anzaldúa performs within a mode that allows for freedom of form. *Borderlands* utilizes forms that work within the conventions of literary prose, political theory, autobiography, essay, poetry, history, and manifesto. This constant shifting indicates the work's formal distinction in relation to stories that wish to enclose identity, to fit it into categories rather than providing a space that allows for the fluidity that Anzaldúa envisions for the *mestiza*. Anzaldúa envisions a different role for poetry based on performance:

My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture thinks of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. (67)

In contrast to what she sees as a Western artistic aesthetic that views narratives as dead and thus immobile, Anzaldúa voices the desire that her work include "the presences of persons" and enable the performance of a different form of identity. As opposed to the "Western" model, Anzaldúa seeks words that are incarnations and that can affect her readers who become active participants in the performance of the text.

Boland also rebels against the constraints of poetic tradition as fixed space. She echoes this desire to create poetry and prose that provides mobility and asserts the life of poetry against the fixed nature of traditional art. She shifts between genres as well as thematic topographies. Most noticeably, she rejects the grandiose spaces that she sees as integral to masculine poetry in favor of the smaller spaces that contain women's experiences. She rejects the tradition of male-dominated art because she recognizes its denial of female subjectivity. In several of her poems she explores the spaces of women frozen in time and space by male artists such as Chardin and Degas. In "What Language

Did,” Boland describes the possibility for language to conscript experience. The poet hears a voice in the air speaking for the women caught in the net of such poetry:

*This is what language did to us. Here
is the wound, the silence, the wretchedness
of tides and hillsides and stars where*

*we languish in a grammar of sighs
in the high-minded search for euphony,
in the midnight rhetoric of poesie.*

*We cannot sweat here. Our skin is icy.
We cannot breed here. Our wombs are empty.
Help us escape youth and beauty.*

*Write us out of the poem. Make us human
in cadences of change and mortal pain
and words we can grow old and die in. (In a Time of Violence 64-65; italicization
in the original)*

Women as artistic subject matter rather than as artistic agents cannot “live” through poetry, according to Boland; this problem is similar to that Anzaldúa expresses when she calls for performative work. In this poem, Boland points to the rigor mortis that such artistic practice can effect. The female figures who speak to Boland are empty; trapped within constructs of “youth and beauty” as subjects of the poetry, their empty wombs emphasize their inability to create. Thus, Boland finds herself in the space of these women, fixed through convention into a static space wherein she cannot create unless she writes herself out of the poem.

Yet despite her break in thematic content, the language of Boland’s poetry does not radically depart from that of her male poetic predecessors. In the essay “A Fragment of Exile” she describes the differences between her own language and that of the environment in her English school. She describes one day using the colloquial Irish term “Amn’t” in front of her teacher and explains, “The inevitable happened. One day my

tongue betrayed me out of dream and counterfeit into cold truth” (*Object Lessons* 46). Her language in poetry, however, does not “betray” her in a similar way. Her use of English does not stray from the standard British English that she could not maintain in the episode described by the poem above. Indeed, Boland asserts that Irish language is essentially lost to the Irish. Instead of effecting formal linguistic difference as a mark of distinction in her work, Boland effects thematic difference to mark her break with male-dominated tradition. She alludes to this difference in her poetry and more specifically enunciates this difference in her critical work which, like Anzaldúa’s, also shifts between genres, encompassing autobiography, creative prose, and literary criticism.

Boland describes her journey through her study of canonical poetry along with her attempts to find herself reflected in it. She asserts that, “Nothing I saw in the tradition [...] encouraged me to follow my body with my mind and take myself to a place where they could heal in language: in new poems, in radical explorations. On the contrary. There was a deep suspicion of the ordinary life” (*Object Lessons* 110). Her female body, then, distances her from the poetic tradition; it causes her to experience life in a way not discussed by the male poets she encounters. In comparing herself to others in the Irish literary milieu, she writes,

I talked less about the past than other poets. The figures from it, in their Victorian coats and turned-up silk collars, were too whole and too male. Their lives, at least according to the legends which had survived them, never seemed to have broken apart in the small and ordinary ways mine did. (*Object Lessons* 107-108)

She describes the problem of what she terms the “wholeness” of the poetic tradition which disallows an experience, like her own, that resides in the quotidian and does not force structure onto those experiences that indicate breaks with the linear progression and smoothness valorized by the canonical view of poetic history. It is a past that denies her

female identity, her very presence, in favor of male tradition and the seemingly unquestioned male right to poetic history.

Boland sees the necessity to ground her work elsewhere because convention flattens experience, making it palatable by annulling its incongruities. She asks,

Was there really no name for my life in poetry? [...] And if not, why not? War poetry. Nature poetry. Love poetry. Pastoral poetry. The comic epic. The tragic lyric. Surely there were names enough there for any and every life. Even if the name of my experience, of what I felt and saw, was not specifically entered there, then why not represent my life as one which those conventions, those traditions could name and therefore I walked between the whitebeams on my way to call the children home on a summer evening, I was all too aware of how a nuance here and a shadow there could turn me into a woman already recognized by and therefore recognizable to poetic convention. (*Object Lessons* 23)

The problem with naming and fitting her experience to convention in order to make it recognizable, is that this would occlude the truth. Her space is “between” traditions and thus necessitates the creation of an alternative to the standards that would deny the naming of that experience and prescribe misnaming in order to avoid disrupting established structures.

Despite the disavowal of the strategy of fitting their lives into ill-fitting pre-existing modes of expression, both writers reject a politics grounded solely in oppositional tactics. Anzaldúa states that, “it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed” (78). She explains that, “At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once” (78). Instead of viewing their differences as cause for lamentation, Anzaldúa and Boland construe their spaces as ones of creative possibility. Anzaldúa envisions this as

“a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” that allows for a healing of the imposed chasms between groups and identities (79). Boland provides an image similar to that of Anzaldúa’s disparate shores. Boland writes about her own poetic process in relation to female poetic absence: “I know now that I began writing in a country where the word *woman* and the word *poet* were almost magnetically opposed. [...] In a certain sense, I found my poetic voice by shouting across the distance” (*Object Lessons* xi). It is the necessity of communicating across the distance of difference that Boland sees as an animating force in her poetics. These gaps generate spaces of poetic freedom.

Both poets assert the power of complexity over the simplification seemingly required by the traditions and conventions that would otherwise exclude them. They insist on this complexity as a source of new meaning. Anzaldúa, for example, says, “I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meaning” (80-81). She takes the multiple parts of her identity and reorders them into a whole that does not simplify but rather allows for the examination and production of meaning. AnaLouise Keating describes the effect of this type of stance on readers, stating that, “By rejecting the need for unitary identities and exclusive, single-issue alliances, [Anzaldúa] challenges her readers—no matter how they identify—to reexamine and expand their own personal and social locations” (*Women Reading* 3). Thus Anzaldúa, like Boland, incarnates a process and a methodology by which her work acts to dismantle those rigid structures that would reject its validity along with the validity of her selfhood and experiences. Despite this stance, Anzaldúa’s work is not simply oppositional, but rather optimistic and forward looking. She constructs for

her readers and for herself as writer a theoretical space of opened possibilities in which they can project alternatives instead of remaining locked in a duality with those who would keep them concerned with lacks than allow for the imagining of alternatives.

In an essay on Indian women writers entitled “Fracturing the Iconic Feminine,” Meena Alexander also explores the freedom of this creative space for women whose identities straddle various binaries and whose creative production does not fit easily within existing literary traditions. Alexander writes,

The predicament of women writers confronting the strictures of an unjust power, whether close to home, indeed making up part and parcel of the inner shelters of domesticity—I am thinking now of the hierarchical ordering of a patriarchal family and the demands of a culturally constructed masculinity—or facing the corrosive demands of a colonial power, makes visible for us a double bondage through which female creativity must work its way. A double peril that incites the woman’s imagination to realms of almost inconceivable freedom. (*Shock of Arrival* 169)

This “inconceivable freedom” is what both Boland and Anzaldúa encounter when they probe the spaces of a creative production that cannot take the past for granted. It is a creativity that is cognizant of its freedom as hard-won and thus important to inscribe in the writing itself.

In *Object Lessons*, Eavan Boland notes that within a generation or so women in Ireland went from being the “objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them” (126). Despite the differences in their positions, the works of both Eavan Boland and Gloria Anzaldúa are both invested in deciphering the role of women who have become authors, of discovering a language that will accommodate their presence, understanding their relation to tradition and history, and ultimately creating alternative modes of engagement necessitated by the exclusions of these “new” authors from previous conceptions of art and the past. For both, it is important that they creatively reformulate that tradition or

create new traditions rather than seeking ways to modulate their work in order to seamlessly step into line with the conventions of tradition. To follow a metaphor explored earlier in the essay, Boland and Anzaldúa forge histories and languages with which to express these histories as a way of imposing their own geographies onto maps that had rendered their experiences invisible. They do this with a constant insistence on the power of the creative work to enact these changes.

CHAPTER THREE

“Cien años de participación”: Magical Realism and Italian History in Antonio Tabucchi’s *Piazza d’Italia*

Cosa vuoi che me ne importi dell’Italia, con questo ghiaccio. Ho chiesto ai compagni se a loro gliene importa e tutti la pensano come me. Il capitano mi ha diffidato di sovversione. (Tabucchi *Piazza d’Italia* 62)

In Antonio Tabucchi’s 1975 novel *Piazza d’Italia. Favola popolare in tre tempi, un epilogo e un’appendice*,¹ one of the protagonists fights for Italy during World War I. In a letter to his beloved, he describes the harsh physical conditions he suffers in the trenches. “Cosa vuoi che me ne importi dell’Italia, con questo ghiaccio,” he asks, explaining that his fellow soldiers feel the same way. This questioning of the power of nationalism is typical in the novel. *Piazza d’Italia* surveys important moments of Italian national history as experienced by a family of rebels who often oppose the forces of the nation. Tabucchi’s novel begins with an epilogue and travels backward and forward in time in order to relate one hundred years of Italian history, from the Risorgimento through the two world wars to the establishment of the Italian republic, compressed into a narrative of one hundred fifty pages. The family and their friends in the fictional Tuscan town of Borgo are skeptical of the representation of national history as one of progress, instead noting the many negative reverberations of that national history in the lives of the protagonists of the novel. The narrative structure of the text mirrors this skepticism,

¹ The original 1975 edition of the novel did not include the subtitle *Favola popolare in tre tempi, un epilogo e un’appendice*. In his “Nota alla seconda edizione,” in the 1993 edition, Tabucchi notes, “[Ripubblico il libro] tale e quale come era, ripristinando il primitivo sottotitolo, al quale fu preferita la dizione ‘romanzo’” (7).

veering away from a traditional representation of historical progress to one of fragmentation, repetition, and time shifts.

Tabucchi employs a variety of methods to re-structure historical representation. One prominent structural method in the novel is the use of magical realism, which allows for the representation of a cyclical, rather than linear or progressive, history. The text also draws on microhistorical methods as translated to literature in order to fill in some of the gaps of official historical narratives. By adopting these narrative and historiographic methods, Antonio Tabucchi's first novel presents a resistance history of the Italian nation. *Piazza d'Italia* re-structures history, providing alternative visions of the effects of historical "progress" and different methods of representing history; re-casts history, focusing the narrative on the lives of rebellious characters that would not normally be considered important historical figures; and re-stages history, emphasizing alternative spaces in this reconstruction of national history.

Restructuring History: Magical Realism in *Piazza d'Italia*

In the 1990s, a Spanish interviewer noted the similarities between Tabucchi's first novel and Gabriel García Márquez's work, stating "En estas primeras novelas se aprecia un cierto influjo de García Márquez. Ambas son sagas familiares cuyos protagonistas comparten, además de los mismos nombres, la vocación de rebeldes y un destino atroz" (Gumpert 141). Antonio Tabucchi responded "Sí, quizá, pero se trata en todo caso de un mero influjo superficial, porque en realidad los de García Márquez son cien años de soledad, mientras que yo hablo de cien años de participación" (Gumpert 141). Despite this dismissal of García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967) as only a superficial

influence and, Tabucchi appears to suggest, also less politically engaged, the mode of magical realism constitutes an important element of Tabucchi's representation of a resistance history of the Italian nation in *Piazza d'Italia*. Magical realism influences *Piazza d'Italia*'s narrative structure as well as its representations of characters, space, and historical movement.

Tabucchi's response to the interviewer's question belies one of the structural confluences of *Piazza d'Italia* and *Cien años de soledad*: the novels' temporal span. Both novels present a one hundred year period of history in the lives of a family in a fictional town. They tell stories with predetermined endings, whose narratives begin at the chronological end of the accounts related. Their stories also share explicit and implicit questioning of historiographic methods by altering the representation of historical progress, indeed questioning the very notion of progress, as reflected in the narrative structure of the novels. Both emphasize the cyclical and repetitive nature of historical time, deconstructing official national historical narratives of linear progress. At the same time as Antonio Tabucchi uses some of the structural elements of García Márquez's novel, he also expands on the sources of his magical realism by drawing on traditions particular to the Italian context.

Though magical realism is a notoriously difficult term to define, Wendy Faris describes five basic characteristics of magical realist fiction in *Ordinary Enchantments*, her book on magical realism in world literature:

First, the text contains an "irreducible element" of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (7)

This definition is useful in discussing Tabucchi's novel and the ways in which it adopts magical realism. The most conspicuous way in which *Piazza d'Italia* fits Faris's definition is in its challenge to "received ideas about time, space, and identity."

Temporal movement in the novel can often be disorienting for the reader because of the novel's structure and the names of the characters. The novel begins with the ostensible chronological end of the story of Garibaldi's family in the epilogue. The "Primo Tempo" begins with a very short chapter that flashes back to the death of Garibaldi's father (the first Garibaldi). The second chapter constitutes another flashback as it presents the story of Plinio, Garibaldi's grandfather (the first Garibaldi's father). The narrative then proceeds forward in time, though there are various flashbacks and flashforwards, the latter primarily in the form of Zelmira's prophecies.

Not only is the representation of chronology upended and presented in fragments, but the characters themselves comment on the strangeness of the passage of time in Borgo. Already on the second page of the novel, the reader is alerted to this unusual temporal movement by the assertion that "nella famiglia di Garibaldi il tempo era sempre corso su fili speciali" (12). The novel displays a consistent preoccupation with time and shows that the time lived by the characters in the novel often does not conform to traditional concepts of temporality, especially historical time. There are explicit references to the subject of time throughout the text. The subtitle of the novel alludes to the question of time in its phrase "tre tempi." The "Primo Tempo" begins with a chapter called "*C'era ancora un po' di tempo.*" Several characters also explicitly reference the unusual nature of time in Borgo. In one instance, the town's priest Don Milvio reflects:

Guardando i cani randagi che si rincorrevano sul sagrato pensò che gli anni a Borgo dovevano essere di molti mesi in meno del normale. Gli pareva l'inverno passato, quando aveva inventato la macchina idraulica dell'uguaglianza e in una risorsa disperata si era affacciato alla finestra per chiamare Garibaldo. Invece erano passati quasi quarant'anni, all'uguaglianza era seguito un perfezionamento d'appendice, la giustizia, e un altro uomo era morto di violenza e sopraffazione, ammazzato a bastonate. (93)

Don Milvio imagines that the years in Borgo must be shorter, containing fewer months than “normal,” because of the repetition of acts, including violent acts like the murder that he recalls. Don Milvio's thoughts display one of the effects of the shift in temporality in *Piazza d'Italia*: the repetition of events produces a vision of cyclical history. There are many gestures that are repeated through the text such as letter writing, rock throwing, and writing in the ashes of the home's hearth. There are also repeated destinies. For example, the men in Garibaldo's family all die at the age of thirty and have problems with their feet. They all travel in some form or other while the women all remain in Borgo. If the men are often described in stances of resistance or defiance, the women are often portrayed in stances of waiting and enduring. These repetitions propose the notion of constant return instead of movement forward.

Early in the novel, Esterina notices her adolescent son Volturno's propensity for responding to questions asked the day before and “remembering” things that have yet to happen. This fact does not worry her until Volturno claims to remember his twin brother Quarto's death in Africa despite the fact that Quarto has never left their small Tuscan town and is in fact still alive at this point in the novel. Esterina's concern drives her to consult Zelmira, Borgo's *strega* who is known for her horoscopes and prophecies. Zelmira declares of Volturno “È poeta” and she diagnoses him with “il Mal del Tempo” (26). Zelmira's declaration connects “poetry” and Volturno's temporal malady. In its

immediate context, this malady refers to Volturno's confusion of time. Yet in the greater context of the novel, this "Mal del Tempo" affects many of the characters as well as the events and narrative structure of the novel.

Tabucchi's representation of time in *Piazza d'Italia*, along with its characters' experiences of that time, have several elements in common with Gabriel García Márquez's incredibly popular and emblematic magical realist novel *Cien años de soledad*.² Many of these are clear even in a superficial reading. For example, the openings of the two novels signal some of these similarities in terms of temporality, style, and imagery. Tabucchi's novel begins with the following sentence: "Quando Garibaldo, quel giorno da chiodi, si beccò la pallottola in fronte (un forellino capocchioso, nemmeno un foruncolo), mentre stramazza nel bacinò della piazza, proprio davanti allo Splendor, volle avere l'ultima parola" (11). García Márquez's 1967 novel, meanwhile, begins with this sentence: "Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo" (9). Both first sentences present the figure of a man facing a gun, though Aureliano Buendía is a colonel who does not end up being shot during the episode recounted on the first page of the novel, while Garibaldo's name is not prefaced by any title and the first sentence explains that he is shot. Nonetheless, both men face guns in public arenas—Garibaldo in the piazza in front of a line of *carabinieri* and Buendía in front of a firing squad. From this starting point, both novels move backward in time toward earlier periods of the histories in the families of their respective

² Perhaps the earliest piece of Italian scholarship on *Cien años de soledad* is Cesare Segre's 1969 essay called "Il tempo curvo di García Márquez." Not surprisingly, the essay focuses on García Márquez's representation of temporality in the novel. One of the few Italian critics to note the similarities between *Piazza d'Italia* and *Cien años de soledad* is Claudio Pezzin in his 2000 book on Antonio Tabucchi, which also cites Segre's essay (14).

protagonists. Both novels present their one hundred year histories in compressed form—though Tabucchi’s novel is much more compressed than García Márquez’s, with approximately one-third the number of pages related in extremely brief chapters. Both novels relate the stories of male characters whose names repeat over the years in ways that can at times confuse the reader. The male characters in both novels inherit not only their names, but also a propensity for violent deaths.

Beyond the obvious similarities lies a more compelling connection: the incorporation of magical realist generic elements in Tabucchi’s engagement with history. The representation of history through magical realist representation is not merely an aesthetic element, but upends the very basis of historiography by questioning its reliance on traditional concepts of time. In an essay called “The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms,” Amaryll Chanady examines the question of temporality in some of the most important Latin American magical realist texts. Chanady says of Alejo Carpentier’s famous magical realist novel:

Carpentier’s rearrangement of the “normal” chronology in *The Kingdom of this World* involves more than poetic license and structural experimentation. It challenges the dominant historiographical paradigm based on empiricism, and replaces it with one that does not correspond to what is traditionally regarded as truth, but which produces meaning in what Carpentier considers a far more effective way. It is not merely a question of fictionalizing history by adapting “facts” to the [fictional] plot, extrapolating and supplying invented characters and situations, as is the case in most historical novels. Carpentier creates a different chronology whose structure illustrates one of the dominant themes of the novel, eternal return and the cyclical notion of time of “primitive” mentalities. Chronological historiographical “reality” is only one of the infinite number of truths, and maybe not even the most effective one. (138)

Tabucchi's project is similar in several ways to Carpentier's as outlined by Chanady. *Piazza d'Italia* rejects the notion of historical movement as linear progress.³ The concept of linear progress is one that is often present in official national narratives. It is this faith in progress, for example, that might have led Benedetto Croce to claim that fascism was merely an ellipsis in Italian history; to suggest otherwise would mean that Italian national history is not one of continual progress.

Instead of a history driven by a constant movement forward, *Piazza d'Italia* presents a history of returns and repetitions. Fascism is hardly an ellipsis in this account of history; instead, it is the logical consequence for a society in which there is always an imbalance of power, and the marginalized protagonists are always on the losing side. The figure of Mussolini in the novel has the same valence as the figure of the king or of democracy, as is made clear in the piazza's monument. Progress in *Piazza d'Italia* exists only on a superficial level. The priest who succeeds Don Milvio and vociferously supports the Democrazia Cristiana party from his pulpit refers to "progresso" as that which allows the protagonists to buy scooters and eat meat on weekdays, but it does not allow for the betterment of their social conditions (129). The material progress of the town of Borgo does not prevent the characters from fulfilling the pessimistic prophecies of Zelmira and constantly reliving past failures.

Despite this rejection of progress as narrated by ruling governmental figures, Tabucchi's novel does not provide a simple alternative panacea. Instead, the novel

³ This loss of faith in beneficial historical progress is also an important element in postmodern theory. In his essay attempting a definition of postmodernism, Lyotard explains, "One can note a sort of decay in the confidence placed by the two last centuries in the idea of progress. This idea of progress as possible, probable or necessary was rooted in the certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge and liberty would be profitable to mankind as a whole" (1613). He cites Auschwitz as one example for the erosion of confidence in historical progress following World War II.

transfers to the reader the onus of creating an alternative. Despite the circular nature of Tabucchi's novel, the ending of the novel provides an interpretive question that can only be answered by the reader. The openness of the text to interpretation links it to other magical realist novels. According to Faris, magical realism "registers a discourse of plurality, of disagreement" (144). Discussing another magical realist novel, Faris asserts that the novel

[...] extends narrative hands to its readers, inviting them to weave their own interpretations out of the loose ends of story that remain untied [...]. That kind of unfinished, nonexclusive discourse, in conjunction with the contiguous worlds of the past, of literature, of dreams and imagination that course through the text, models a fruitful exchange of stories and worlds, a nontotalitarian kind of discourse. (Faris 142)

Magical realism often uses this tactic of positing different possibilities, requiring the intervention of the reader to create meaning in order to resist dominant discourses that rely on univocality and in so doing preclude other possible interpretations. Magical realism instead welcomes divergent literary forms as a way to reproduce the plurality of experiences and interpretations of a given reality.

The opening of the text to the reader's input is evident at the end of *Piazza d'Italia*. The appendix, which unlike the epilogue is placed in the "normal" place at the physical end of the novel, provides an interpretive challenge to the reader; titled "*Il segreto della Zelmira*," it describes the *strega*'s final words. The narrator explains that Zelmira's death occurs "oltre la fine di questa storia" (149). This description adds another temporal disjunction to the novel. While the overarching narrative is presented in the form of one big circle, with the ending referring back to the beginning, the appendix provides an opening in the circle by discussing a point in history that occurs *after* the end. The actions presented in the appendix also force the reader into the role of interpreter if

s/he is to make sense of Zelmira's final words. The fact that Zelmira is still alive at the end of the novel is surprising in itself; considering the chronology of the novel, she must be extremely old by this point in the novel, as she was consulted by several generations of Garibaldi's family and appears to have outlived most of them. At the end of her days, Zelmira finally decides to reveal the secret truth that Don Milvio told her before retreating to the hills in order to live a life of silence and solitude. With failing breath, Zelmira manages to say, "Don Milvio mi disse che l'uguaglianza non si ottiene con le macchine idrauliche" (150). This comment recalls the first Garibaldi's attempt to redistribute food to Borgo's starving families by using Don Milvio's invention of the "macchina idraulica dell'uguaglianza." The next generation's Garibaldi, however, loses faith in the ability of this type of political action to bring about equality, much as Plinio lost his faith in the forces of national unification to bring about meaningful social change. Garibaldi's affiliation with the Communists derives primarily from his sense of duty to his friend Gavure, with whom he has many political discussions. Yet he remains skeptical of the ideals behind the political movement. When he offers to take the place of his deceased friend, Gavure, in distributing dissident literature, Garibaldi describes his position in pragmatic terms: "E ora spiegami cosa devo fare, e non mi parlare di politica, che io coi padroni ce l'ho per famiglia, più che per idea" (96). Garibaldi's skepticism is shared by the text, as its circular structure challenges Marxist ideas of progress at the same time as it negates liberal nationalist ideas of historical progress.

The focus of the epilogue on last words recalls the beginning of the text which reproduces Garibaldi's final words. It also harkens back to the first Garibaldi's death in his attempts to execute Don Milvio's plan of creating a way to distribute grain equally to

the residents of Borgo. At the same time, Zelmira's final words present a puzzle for the reader, which Brizio-Skov describes as a "rebus" because they require the reader to wonder how equality can be obtained if the machine envisioned by Don Milvio cannot accomplish this goal (52). Zelmira's statement seems to suggest that a simple model of redistribution cannot bring equality. Yet no other answer is provided to this question by the novel. Zelmira's revelation of Don Milvio's statement is an open ending that requires interpretation. Those words could be construed negatively (equality is unattainable) or positively (equality is attainable, though in a way not attempted by the protagonists whose efforts at resistance appear to fail in changing their social structure). Either way, the narrative does not answer this question but leaves it to the reader to find a workable response to the interpretive challenge. This narrative open ending supports a vision of history that is open to reinterpretation and requires participation.

In the essay cited earlier, Chanady rejects the "naive essentialist argument to the supposed marvelous reality of the [American] continent or ascribed to the unidirectional flow of metropolitan influence" (141). Instead, Chanady suggests that magical realism also derives from European sources, particularly surrealism in which important Latin American magical realists like Carpentier participated in France. This is important to keep in mind for an investigation of a European magical realist text. Notable, of course, is the fact the term "magical realism" was used in Europe by German art critic Franz Roh and Italian author Massimo Bontempelli decades before Carpentier discussed the idea of "lo real maravilloso americano" in Latin America.⁴ Chanady's interpretation of the genre shifts attention away from regional specificity, toward larger questions of narrative and

⁴ On the subject of European magical realism in the first decades of the twentieth century, see Irene Guenther's "Magical Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic."

historiographic representation.⁵ Wendy Faris echoes this move away from a focus on Latin America in her discussion of magical realism as an element of world literature. Faris suggests that magical realism is so popular in various national literatures because “it has provided the literary ground for significant cultural work; within its texts, marginal voices, submerged traditions, and emergent literatures have developed and created masterpieces” (1). While Tabucchi’s work draws on established (rather than emergent) literatures, it does in fact attempt to recover “marginalized voices” and “submerged traditions” of a people and place apparently lost to official history.

In examining the relationship between *Piazza d’Italia* and the magical realist genre, it is important to return to the first two elements on Wendy Faris’s descriptive list. They are the two elements that comprise the term “magical realism.” Like the historical novel, magical realism is a hybrid genre; both genres unite the seemingly opposing forms contained in their names. Magical realism differs from fantastic literature in that the realistic and magical elements of the narrative are presented as harmonious elements of a unified narrative; the “magical” elements are not meant to incite fright or disbelief.

Chanady describes the use of magical realism in Miguel Angel Asturias as follows:

Unlike the traditional fantastic narrative [...] in which the supernatural is portrayed as unacceptable and threatening to the world of reason, magical realism in Asturias juxtaposes two worldviews without establishing a hierarchy between them, thus relativizing the dominant Western rational paradigm. (Chanady 141)

As Wendy Faris notes, there is a sense in magical realist texts that the narrative occurs within the “phenomenal world.” The narrative does not unfold in an alternate universe or in a dream. Rather, the magical elements are introduced into the “real world” and

⁵ For a competing vision of magical realism, see my chapter on Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In Díaz’s novel, the narrator views magical realism as a Latin American and, more specifically, Caribbean, form of historical and narrative representation.

presented as realistic; there is no narrative comment to suggest that the point of contact between the two worldviews should be interpreted as frightening or doubtful.

Doubt arises on the part of the reader who, while immersed in a realistic depiction of the world of the text that is similar to the world outside the text, suddenly encounters a moment that does not appear to conform to external reality. Wendy Faris describes this moment of hesitation as central to magical realism. She explains that “magical things ‘really’ do happen” (8), but:

before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts. The question of belief is central here, this hesitation frequently stemming from the implicit clash of cultural systems within the narrative, which moves toward belief in extrasensory phenomena but narrates from the post-Enlightenment perspective and in the realistic mode that traditionally exclude them. (17)

Both Faris and Chanady point to one of the most important elements of magical realism as hybrid genre: through the imbrication of worldviews, it attempts to interrogate the privileging of certain forms of narration and historiography over others. Modern historiography has often discounted or simply ignored representations of experience that cannot be verified through acceptable forms of “evidence.” Carlo Ginzburg points to this problem in describing the difficulty encountered by microhistorians attempting to reconstruct the lives of people for whom written accounts and records played a minimal role, leaving few of the written traces that normally form the basis of historical research and writing. (*Il formaggio e i vermi* XI).

Piazza d’Italia does not contain as many “magical” occurrences as texts like *Cien años de soledad* (indeed, this would be a difficult feat considering its much more abbreviated length), yet there are still several such moments in the novel. One example

includes the transformation of Esperia. After her son Garibaldo leaves for Argentina, each of her fingers lights up with “fiammelle celesti” (75). At the onset of this transformation, in typical magical realist fashion, Esperia does not appear to be concerned by the situation. Eventually the blue light spreads and she becomes “tutta celeste, non per fuoco, ma per una chiarezza interna, come quella dei luccioloni senza le ali” (76). When Esperia goes to Zelmira to discuss this change, Zelmira speculates that Esperia is becoming a saint. Yet Esperia decides to hold off on drawing conclusions, saying, “Con tutte queste cose moderne che hanno scoperto ora dell’elettricità. E poi magari è soltanto la nostalgia del mare” (76). Esperia instantly adjusts to the change: “Alle fiammelle ci si era abituata subito, le facevano compagnia. Si accendevano la sera e luccicavano tranquille, senza bruciare le lenzuola. Parevano le meduse fosforescenti della sua spiaggia nelle notti d’agosto” (76). The idea of a woman who turns a phosphorescent blue every night does not conform to the reality that readers will bring to their reading of *Piazza d’Italia*. Yet in the text, this magic “really” happens. It is not easily explained away by the guesses forwarded by Esperia or Zelmira: sainthood, electricity, or nostalgia. The narrator presents this “magic” as fact and the narration does not present doubts as to the reality of this occurrence. This moment also has strong resonance with García Márquez-style magical realism, as the magic that makes Esperia blue brings her comfort when all of the men in her life are gone, and she is thus a figure imbued with solitude.

There are other magical moments, such as the flight of Borgo’s windows, which occurs twice in the novel, both times as a warning against impending trouble. Another example is the representation of heredity. Despite the fact that Volturmo died in Africa,

the narrator states quite clearly that Esperia gives birth to his child as a result of thinking about him so much (43). Much of the magic in the novel is related to the passage of time. Immediately following the birth of her son, long before her transformation into the “donna celeste,” Esperia undergoes a transformation that involves the passage of time that is unusual, and could be described as magical. The narrator explains, “Poi, subito dopo, diventò sterile. Invecchiò da un giorno all’altro, senza drammi e rossori, si fece piccina, si chiuse in un guscio di nero” (43). The description of this change as an instantaneous occurrence again does not conform to the reader’s sense of “normal” time, yet it is presented as real fact rather than as exaggeration. The narrator provides a similar description of the growth of childhood friends Garibaldo and Gavure: “Quell’anno fu un’estate così lunga che a settembre erano già adulti” (58). This description is not realistic; it can be read as a hyperbole indicating a narrative time shift or a magical realistic flourish that resembles the world of fairy tale or fable.

The element of fable is also important in *Piazza d’Italia*, and the Italian fable tradition converges with the magical real in the novel. The two genres are closely connected and in fact overlap throughout the text. The subtitle of the novel points to this influence on Tabucchi’s text, labeling it a “favola popolare.” This phrase points to the *favola* as an organizing structure for the novel while modifying it with the term *popolare* and thus associating it with folk tradition and the masses. Another similarity between the Italian fable tradition and magical realism emerge in reading Italo Calvino’s thoughts on the history of the fable in Italy. In his introduction to the 1962 collection *Fiabe italiane*, Calvino notes the uniqueness of Italian fables in comparison to the much more widely known German fables. According to Calvino, this singularity derives from the Italian

fable's reliance on realistic settings instead of a more fantastic fable world. Calvino's connection here between the world of the fable and the phenomenal world recalls the central element of Wendy Faris's definition of magical realism.

Historical Actors and the Stages of Historical Action

Piazza d'Italia opens with an epilogue that in one and a half pages addresses many of the key elements of the novel's exploration of Italian national history in its representation of protagonists, location, and temporality. The epilogue begins with an act of violence: a character named Garibaldo is shot in the head in a piazza. As he falls to the ground, he utters "Abbasso il re!" which very few in the piazza's crowd hear (11). The omniscient narrator explains that as the stone Garibaldo held in his hand falls, in his moribund haze Garibaldo realizes that the bullet did not come from the royal guard since Italy is no longer ruled by a monarch but is now a constitutional republic. The fact that the novel begins with an epilogue highlights the alteration of linear temporality. The confusion of temporality is heightened when the reader encounters a character named Garibaldo, whose name is a rough equivalent of the historical figure Giuseppe Garibaldi, and then the reader learns that the epilogue is in fact not set in Garibaldi's nineteenth century, but rather in the post-World War II Italian Republic.

The name of the protagonist, Garibaldo, evokes the history of Italian unification during the Risorgimento, but Garibaldo does not represent a unifying figure. The epilogue is titled "*S'è sciolto il fiocco.*" This title indicates an undoing, which is evident in the fragmentation of both the narrative structure and the content of the text. The narrator compares the untying of a black bow to the scattering of the crowd following

Garibaldi's fatal shooting. Additionally, Garibaldi is presented in a stance of resistance. He carries a stone which he does not succeed in throwing before being shot, showing his powerlessness when facing the firepower of "tutti quei caschi in fila" that represent the reigning institutionalized power of his era. This position of resistance is further emphasized by Garibaldi's confused words. Garibaldi's final utterance places him squarely in opposition to authority figures.

Garibaldi's confusion regarding the identity of figures of authority points to the continuity of power; indeed, the protagonists' refer to the Tuscan grand duke, the king of Italy, Mussolini, and Democracy, as various incarnations of "padroni" (17, 88, 96, 122, 144). That language rhetorically nullifies the differences between heads of regional and national governments and the governing principle of democracy, presenting them all as figures that necessarily oppose the interests of Garibaldi, who through the novel becomes a representative *contadino*. Moreover, the protagonists make no distinction between governmental figures and wealthy non-governmental figures, describing them only abstractly, as "signori" and "stronzi che stanno in panciolla" who benefit from government actions that cost the lives of peasants (20, 28).

This interchangeability of power is presented in one of the focal points of the piazza: the monument. The monument initially comprises a statue of the grand duke of Tuscany. When that monument is replaced following Giuseppe Garibaldi's expedition, it contains a statue of Garibaldi that is shown to hand a baby girl representing Italy to the king. Yet that king is replaced over the years by statues of Mussolini and a personification of Democracy. These figures remain inanimate statues, figuring little in the daily lives of the protagonists. The novel does not focus on the lives of those in

power, but rather on the lives of non-powerful protagonists as they navigate the shifts implemented by those governmental changes. Moreover, the monument's mutability points to the mutability and plasticity of history. National history is consistently reshaped in order to legitimate the ruling national order.

The other protagonist introduced in the epilogue is Asmara, Garibaldi's long-time romantic partner. Her name, like Garibaldi's, has strong historical resonance. It is a toponym referring to the capital of Eritrea, recalling Italian late nineteenth century and early twentieth century African colonial conquests.⁶ In her first textual appearance, Asmara runs to the piazza toward Garibaldi. The narrator describes her as "scalza, vestita di un incredibile grembiule con due enormi fragole ricamate sulle tasche" (12). Her physical appearance, like Garibaldi's, is marked by its contrast to the row of helmets that metonymically refers to the forces of social control. Her movement also marks her difference; she runs towards Garibaldi in contrast to the crowd that disperses and moves away from Garibaldi, as well as the policemen or soldiers who stand still as forces of order. Her body, in Foucauldian terms, is not "disciplined." She runs barefoot, denoting her status as a *contadina* who lives on the land and is not tied to a metropolitan center despite Borgo's increasing modernization. Her clothing is not a product of modern industrial production but rather of popular female craft. Her apron associates her with the space of the home and the traditional role of women in the home. Yet the reader learns

⁶ The rhetorical role of Africa for fascism is further elucidated in the description of Melchiorre's writing. Melchiorre, an ambivalent fascist, writes serialized short stories about a character named Italo Ferro, a name with a clear reference to nationalism and strength. The narrator describes one of Melchiorre's short stories, which has clear racist and colonialist rhetorical force behind it: "ora stava scrivendo un terzo episodio di Italo alle prese con una tribù di negri piccoli e lascivi che andavano a rapire ragazze bianche sulla costa per sacrificarle ai loro idoli di pietra" (81).

through the rest of the novel that Asmara in many situations bucks the constrictions imposed by traditional gender roles.

Asmara articulates her resistance to traditional gender roles when she is not allowed to pursue her dream of becoming a horsewoman on the *maremma* and she is instead taught to embroider. This prohibition sparks her disdain for the dismissiveness that accompanies notions of male superiority. She does not allow Garibaldo to wield power over her. She is the one who makes decisions regarding the progress of their relationship, refusing to marry him for decades and continuing to live on her own in her home even after they do marry. When Garibaldo dismisses one of her ideas regarding political organization because he believes that, as a woman, she could not possibly know about wider political issues, Asmara dismisses him from her home with the same statement she uses to describe men who would reject her agency: “Ti credi bravo perché pisci al muro” (88). Despite Garibaldo’s inability to conceive of Asmara as politically engaged, she in fact participates in Partisan activities during World War II and Garibaldo learns much later that she was a distributor of anti-fascist newspapers during the Mussolini regime.

Asmara is not the only character whose name is a toponym. At birth, the Garibaldo that the reader meets in the epilogue is named Volturmo after his uncle (and father);⁷ when his apparent physical father, the original Garibaldo dies, the second Volturmo inherits his name. The original Garibaldo and Volturmo are two sons of Plinio and Esterina. Esterina gives birth twice, first to two male twins named Quarto and

⁷ When Volturmo dies during his military activities in Africa, Esperia (Volturmo’s first love) marries Volturmo’s younger brother, Garibaldo. She gives birth to a son long after Volturmo’s death, yet the narrator describes Garibaldo’s (né Volturmo) paternity as follows: “[Esperia aveva] pensato a Volturmo così intensamente che a febbraio ebbe un figlio da lui dopo tanto tempo che era morto. Aveva lo stesso viso candido e i capelli di fiamma e gli occhi bianchi e lontani, pieni di parole segrete” (43).

Volturmo by Plinio in commemoration of place-names that refer to the beginning and end points of Garibaldi's "Mille" expedition. The second birth results in another set of twins, one male and one female, named Garibaldo and Anita in clear reference to the "eroe dei due mondi" and his wife. These historically resonant first names are the only names provided as most of the characters are not given surnames in the novel. Only one character—Gavure—is given a last name in the text. Gastone Vuretti is called Gavure because his stuttering produces this sound when he attempts to pronounce his full name. Gavure's name should aurally recall to the reader Cavour (Camillo Benso, count of Cavour), another important Risorgimento figure. Descriptions of Gavure's physical appearance—whose most conspicuous aspect is his hunched back—and political inclinations, however, might cause the reader to notice Gavure's resemblance to Antonio Gramsci.⁸

The attribution of historically significant names to the novel's characters that represent figures largely ignored by official history has the effect of reducing the focus on the original Garibaldi and Volturmo while valorizing the experiences of the Garibaldos and Volturnos of the novel. This shift changes the value of those names, allowing the burden of official history to be lifted and shifted. There are twins and descendants whose names repeat; the men are not singular figures, but rather characters who inherit characteristics and activities, exchanging names and identities. For this reason,

⁸ In her essay on *Piazza d'Italia*, Norma Bouchard notes the importance of Gramscian political and historical thought in the novel. She suggests that the novel "follows a Gramscian model of historiography" that sees the Risorgimento as a "failed revolution" (176). She explains that "the novel selectively activates the symbolic capital associated with the name of Garibaldi as an icon of revolutionary and political activism, while at the same time highlighting how the ideals and aspirations of the Garibaldian tradition have been consistently betrayed" (178-179).

Tabucchi's text is not an "antistoria," but rather an alternative history.⁹ It does not represent a rejection of the notion of tracing threads of past experiences, but rather questions the choices made by historians in terms of the historical threads that they choose to follow.

Tabucchi's choice of protagonists, along with the decision to place figures of national power in the abstract background of the novel, signifies a shift in the focus of historical discourse. Tabucchi has asserted that his novel is an attempt to tell Italian history,¹⁰ and his novel effects a shift from traditional national historiography which focuses on the most powerful historical actors, such as kings, generals, and presidents. Instead, the protagonists of *Piazza d'Italia* are cinnamon cutters, the unemployed, poachers, a remarkably beautiful nun, wives, mothers, prophets, a priest who preaches Christian socialism, a hunchback, storytellers, anarchists, communists, and a cowardly fascist. Theirs represent stories that would probably not be treated in official accounts of national history.

Not only do these characters not figure in official histories, but many of them actively resist the forces of history that move to marginalize them. For example, Plinio hurls his amputated foot at the Vatican in a defiant gesture against the pope on his way back home from his service to Garibaldi. Plinio later dies back home during his poaching activities, which he carries out in defiance of game keepers in order to provide for his

⁹ The back cover of the 2001 edition of the 1993 republication describes the novel as an "antistoria": "In queste pagine, l'autore tratteggia con humour e delicata malinconia un mondo contadino, arcaico, ormai scomparso, e ricostruisce con fantasiose trovate un'antistoria d'Italia dalla parte dei perdenti, una fiaba popolare pervasa dal senso, arcano ma non oscuro, della fragilità della vita."

¹⁰ In an interview with Anna Botta, which was conducted in Italian but translated to English by Botta for publication, Antonio Tabucchi states, "I wrote *Piazza d'Italia* twenty years ago, when I was happy and unknown. I meant to write a short history of the last hundred years in Italy, in tragicomic style. Today it seems to me that tragicomedy is very much the current state of affairs in Italy, and this is the reason I had the idea of republishing my first novel" (Botta 440).

family. Plinio's son Garibaldo shoots off his pinky toe in order to avoid being sent to fight in Africa. Later, he is killed while leading Borgo's townspeople to raid the granary so that they can feed their starving families. The next Garibaldo, the character that the reader meets in the epilogue, loses several toes while fighting in the trenches during World War I. He goes on to fight with the Partisans in the Resistance movement during the Second World War. He dies in the piazza after the war while speaking out against the ruling order of the Democrazia Cristiana political party and heckling the *carabinieri* that watch him. Thus, the heroes of *Piazza d'Italia* are characters like Garibaldo and Asmara rather than the figures of Garibaldi, King Vittorio Emanuele II, or Benito Mussolini.

In her book on Antonio Tabucchi, Flavia Brizio-Skov ties Tabucchi's shift in historical focus in *Piazza d'Italia* to trends in historiography of the 1960s and 1970s, especially microhistory because of its focus on the lives of individuals with minimal social and political capital. Brizio-Skov describes the shift in the historical research as follows:

Da quando la Storia non è più fatta di "re e battaglie," la nuova storia parte dalla base della piramide sociale e, attraverso donne, bambini, criminali, emarginati, minoranze etniche o religiose, e il loro interagire con le leggi, il potere, le classi del clero o della nobiltà, ricostruisce tutta una società. Naturalmente, partire dalla base della piramide comporta dei problemi, poiché esistono pochi "resti" e quelli che esistono sono sporadici o confusi. Spesso dunque il microstorico si ritrova a cercare nei documenti quello che il testo rivela senza volere, il non-detto. (31)

Like microhistorians, Tabucchi focuses on the quotidian as well as the major events in the lives of people at the "base of the social pyramid" as a way to better understand the greater social picture of a given historical period.

Georg Lukács noted in his 1937 work *The Historical Novel* that the heroes of the nineteenth century historical novels of Walter Scott are not the exceptional figures of

Romantic literature, but rather “middling” characters that do not side passionately with any element of the political crises of their time.¹¹ Greatly influenced by Scott, Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi* (1840), which is often considered the first Italian novel as well as the prototypical Italian historical novel, portrays protagonists that learn to avoid politics and rely on their Catholic faith rather than working politically to change the iniquities that keep the lovers apart in the novel. Regarding the politics of Manzoni’s novel, Italo Calvino said,

Non per niente *I promessi sposi* è il nostro libro *politico* più letto, che ha dato forma alla vita politica italiana secondo tutti i partiti [...]. Ma anche libro *antipolitico* per eccellenza, che parte dalla convinzione che la politica non può cambiare nulla, né con le leggi che pretendono di mettere un freno al potere di fatto, né con l’affermazione d’una forza collettiva da parte degli esclusi. (“*I promessi sposi: il romanzo dei rapporti di forza*” 274)

At the harmonious end of *I promessi sposi*, Renzo explains the lessons he learns over the course of his adventures: “Ho imparato [...] a non mettermi ne’ tumulti: ho imparato a non predicare in piazza [...]” (540). While Tabucchi no doubt draws on Manzoni and the tradition of the historical novel, his choice of characters signals a distinct political departure from a text like Manzoni’s. Rather than choosing “middling” characters as protagonists, he focuses on marginalized figures who nonetheless struggle to participate and to impact their political circumstances, even if they continue to lose. Tabucchi’s characters do not follow the model of Manzoni’s that learn to not speak in the piazza; rather, Tabucchi’s protagonists continue to register their dissent in this public space. Tabucchi’s characters also differ from those in other post-war novels that focus on marginalized figures in that Tabucchi presents a genealogy of characters who engage in resistance to the forces of the nation during major historical moments including the

¹¹ See Lukács’s *The Historical Novel*.

creation of governments, colonial expansion, and war. Despite the fact that the novel's characters continue to lose their battles, they refuse passivity and insist on continuing their inherited struggle for justice.

The location of the action of the novel is equally as important as the choice of characters. Just as *Piazza d'Italia* focuses on characters representing people who are normally not the subject of historiographic representations of the nation, the novel also examines alternative settings of historical action. The history presented is not set in metropolitan centers, national capitals, or battlegrounds. Instead, the novel is set in Borgo, and the narrative remains focused on this town throughout. Any action that takes place outside Borgo happens, to borrow a cinematic term, "off camera"; those moments are referenced or described rather than represented directly by the narrator. Several of the male characters, for example, travel abroad—to Paris, New York, Buenos Aires—but those moments are only briefly described in accounts given by the characters in letters or after their physical return to Borgo. The narration does not move with these male characters to these foreign settings.

Borgo is a fictional town set in Tabucchi's native region of Tuscany. Borgo might bring to mind Macondo, the setting at the heart of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*. Like Borgo, Macondo is a fictional town that is the primary setting for a family saga. Macondo is set in an anonymous Latin American nation, though it is based on García Márquez's hometown of Aracataca, Colombia. Both towns are meant to act as representative places in order to help illuminate issues facing the larger regions and nations discussed in the two novels. This fact is especially clear in Tabucchi's case, as the name of the town "Borgo" is generic; it is a term simply meaning "town" or "village."

The implication, then, is that what happens in this specific town is representative of the history that has occurred in other similar towns in Italy. The fact that Borgo is meant to be a representative Italian town is also elucidated in the title of Tabucchi's novel. Though the piazza referred to in the text is the piazza of Borgo, the title refers to the piazza of the nation.¹² As noted above, the piazza is the space that represents official national history in the symbolism of its monument. This choice of language that associates Borgo's piazza with the nation by extension associates the town itself with the nation. Despite the town's specificity in terms of its regional location, it is a town that represents the history lost in the construction of the nation. There are, after all, no historians in Borgo; the stories that the protagonists pass on are all part of an oral culture rather than a written one. This fact ties it to a greater peasant culture whose history is increasingly lost to historians yet still retains importance for cultural and social historians attempting to understand the past.

Decades after he wrote *Il formaggio e i vermi* (published in 1976, one year after *Piazza d'Italia*), famed microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg described the popularity of the book across translations into dozens of languages around the world. In part, he attributed to the book's setting its ability to address concerns across cultures. *Il formaggio e i vermi* is a recreation of the life of a miller named Menocchio who lived in Montereale, a small village in Friuli, in the 1500s. Menocchio's religious ideas and worldview brought him to the attention of the Inquisition, and Ginzburg's work seeks to recreate Menocchio's

¹² Brizio-Skov notes, "Il titolo avrebbe potuto essere *Piazza di Borgo*, invece è *Piazza d'Italia*. La piazza, infatti, è il luogo di collisione e confluenza di due Storie parallele, quella ufficiale e quella non ufficiale, luogo di scontro e di incontro, luogo dove un'intera comunità si riunisce da sempre per sentire le deliberazioni di chi comanda. Dai comizi di Mussolini a quelli della Democrazia Cristiana, la piazza è uno spazio reale e metaforico, fulcro di un mondo circoscritto, Borgo, e specchi dei cambiamenti storici di un'intera nazione, l'Italia" (21).

world. Ginzburg explained the popularity of the book while accepting an award in the town of Montereale: “Montereale è più facilmente comunicabile a un pubblico peruviano o giapponese di una vicenda di storia italiana” (Ginzburg “Ma tu di dove sei?” 156).

Ginzburg sees sixteenth century Montereale as a place that is more easily “communicable” to foreign audiences than accounts of official Italian national history despite its small specificity because it is a place that draws on oral culture and village life. In his novel, Antonio Tabucchi also draws on this concept as a way of presenting the local culture of Borgo as a representative Italian town. Borgo is a town that seems removed from the larger national life, but nonetheless affected by its changes.

Throughout the novel, Borgo attains a certain universality, representing social structures excluded from accounts of the emerging nation.

One focus of life in Borgo is the space of the piazza. It is the public space in which Garibaldi’s resistance to national government is staged in opposition to the presence of the ever-adapting monument. Yet the piazza is not so clearly coded as the site of the spectacle of overwhelming power. There are other elements of the piazza besides the monument. One of these is the movie theater, Splendore (later Splendor). The cinema is a place of unstable significance. When it opens, it shows *Cabiria*, a movie associated with fascist re-readings under Mussolini. The movie is preceded by fascist propaganda in the form of a now-famous Mussolini speech that begins with the phrase “Combattenti di terra, di mare!” (98). Yet this site is also later used for a “comizio popolare sui problemi della fabbrica,” an event held by the communists (122). Another element of the piazza is Gavure’s newspaper stand; during fascism, Gavure sells officially sanctioned newspapers and reading material, while also using it as a hub from

which to distribute subversive, anti-fascist literature. Anti-government forces thus also use the public space in order to disseminate their ideas, though often covertly.

The piazza is only one geographical element of the town and the novel's narrative. Another important site in the novel is the family home. It is in the home that the greater historical dramas play out in the lives of the protagonists. The lives of the women—Esterina, Esperia, and Asmara—unfold almost exclusively in this space. It is also here that the men communicate their political ideas. Brizio-Skov notes that most institutions are depicted as unstable in the novel, while the family remains the only stable force: “La famiglia rimane l'unico nucleo su cui possono contare. E per famiglia si intendono le donne che ne fanno parte, spose e madri coraggiose che vengono private, chi prima chi dopo, del marito, che da sole lottano, allevano i figli, aiutano gli amici, salvano i compaesani” (Brizio-Skov 47). By extension, the home is the only space that offers refuge from the privations of national history.

Tabucchi's focus on local culture in *Piazza d'Italia* has political relevance. As has been noted by many critics, Tabucchi has embraced the idea of *impegno* in his literary and journalistic work.¹³ Some critics see Tabucchi's earliest work, including *Piazza d'Italia*, as relatively anomalous for its regional flavor in both setting and language.¹⁴ This is because much of his later, better known work is often set outside of Italy, including in France and Portugal. Yet Tabucchi does not appear to make much distinction in terms of those settings in relationship to his political commitment. In an article, he addresses these concerns:

¹³ See Jennifer Burns's *Fragments of Impegno* (2001), Elizabeth Wren-Owens's *Postmodern Ethics* (2007), Joseph Francese's *Socially Symbolic Acts* (2006), and Brizio-Skov.

¹⁴ Brizio-Skov provides an excellent discussion of the use of Tuscan language in *Piazza d'Italia*. She describes the language of the narrator as “un linguaggio colorito, rustico, spigliato, tipico della tradizione orale” (Brizio-Skov 38).

Il mio impegno consiste nell'indagare la realtà con occhi altrui. Spesso la critica un po' snob di certi giornali mi ha attribuito una presunta iperletterarietà troppo cosmopolita. E perché no: anche dal mio paesello natale, quando ci sto, mi piace occuparmi del mondo, perché il mondo mi riguarda. Lo stesso valeva per Leonardo Sciascia, che della Sicilia è riuscito a fare un paradigma letterario: poteva essere letto benissimo come uno scrittore regionalista, ma è riuscito a elevare il suo paese a una metafora universale. Il suo impegno consisteva in questo. (Tabucchi *L'oca al passo* 131)

Tabucchi's assertion here regarding Sciascia's use of his small town as a "metafora universale" echoes Carlo Ginzburg's discussion of Montereale. Tabucchi forwards the notion that a focus on the local can have resonance for a wider context. Indeed, readers and critics noted the resonance of his 1994 novel *Sostiene Pereira* for Italy under Berlusconi despite the fact that it is set in 1930s Portugal. This is common in historical fiction, which often indirectly comments on the contemporary context through its exploration of the past.

Tabucchi's shifts in characters and settings for his account of history is a strategy that has become ever more prevalent in historiography beginning in the 1970s, though microhistorians and "metahistorians" (like Hayden White) drew in part on the work of earlier schools such as Annales and Marxist historiography.¹⁵ The mark of these historiographic shifts is evident in other Italian novels of the postwar period, including Elsa Morante's very popular novel *La Storia*, published just two years before *Piazza d'Italia*, and which examines World War II by focusing on characters with the lowest social capital. While Tabucchi's novel has the same spirit of a desire to shift the protagonists of history, he does not use the literary realism that is the dominant mode of Morante's *La Storia*. Tabucchi's novel draws on various non-realist genres, including elements of magical realism. This allows Tabucchi to counter not just the content of

¹⁵ For basic discussions of these connections, see Iggers.

conventional Italian national history, but rather to provide alternative content through an alternative narrative form.

CHAPTER FOUR

Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. [...] Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. (Walcott "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" 69)

Junot Díaz's 2007 novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, creates a resistance history of the Dominican Republic by invoking a multiplicity of narrative modes and genres. By employing genres like magical realism and "nerd" genres that include comics and science fiction, Díaz develops a historiography that shifts both the narrative structure and subject of history, allowing for a representation of national history that is cognizant of its various, sometimes dissonant elements. The primary narrator of the novel, Yunior, presents Dominican history in this way in order to resist the conformity and univocality insisted upon by the national power structure best personified in the figure of the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. This dictatorial version of history perhaps speaks most loudly through the silence it imposes on large swaths of the population in both public and private life. Yunior struggles with the silences that pervade both the history of Oscar de León's family and that of the Dominican Republic, stories which are consistently intertwined in the text. Yunior continues to experiment with the best way to accomplish his task, adopting several narrative frames and examining the story from multiple perspectives. It is this very multiplicity that becomes the cornerstone

of Yuniór's narrative and historiographic stance, allowing him to document and reconstruct a history that is otherwise unrecoverable because of its official nullification.

The result is a pastiche of genres and narrative techniques which provide multiple ways of understanding the story. Some of these frames include the superhero comic, science fiction, magical realism, and more conventional historical discourse. Magical realism provides an important element of the story; indeed, the characters who are the most skeptical of the magical elements of their own histories are the ones who least grasp the trajectories of these histories. The dialectic between skepticism and belief is clear in the narrator's voice. However, unlike the McOndo backlash against magical realism, Yuniór maintains the validity of this worldview which he identifies with Caribbean discourse,¹ often incorporating a touch of humor into his use of magical realism. For example, at one point, when describing the *fukú* (or curse) that he claims provides one way of understanding the tragedy that befalls Oscar, Yuniór describes the history of the *fukú* itself. After a description that contains supernatural flourishes, Yuniór steps outside of this narration and addresses the doubt that might arise in the reader's mind. He proclaims, "It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these 'superstitions.' In fact, it's better than fine—it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, *fukú* believes in you" (5).

The magical elements in the story can be read as both metaphorical and real. They retain validity and importance, but not preeminence, as they provide only one of various fitting frames that shape Yuniór's—and, in turn, the reader's—understanding of the history recounted. The overall history requires a variety of frames in coexistence.

¹ See the chapter immediately preceding this one, on Antonio Tabucchi's *Piazza d'Italia*, for a discussion of the theory and practice of magical realism in world literature.

The plasticity of this form allows Yuni6r to arrive at a history that he sees as more truthful than the accounts that purport authoritative control over the past because of the latter's omissions. Conventional histories are unable to explain Oscar's story satisfactorily, as they are unable to reveal a full portrait of the Dominican nation. Yet Yuni6r maintains his freedom from the onus of telling the definitive, authoritative version of Oscar's history, and Dominican history. This freedom derives in part from the inaccessibility of so much of that history because of the purposeful lack of documentation. These silences become construed as a freedom that allows Yuni6r to fill in the gaps in a more creative way; he does quite a bit of more traditional research, reading a variety of primary sources and conducting interviews, yet he still gives himself license to imaginatively recreate elements of the story that are otherwise inaccessible. At the same time, he includes the reader in this process of reconstruction; there is much that is explicitly left up to the reader's interpretation. This is another strategic move on the narrator's part; it reveals the construction of historical accounts, and transfers that recognition to the reader.

Battling Historiographies

Central to the story is a historiographic battle: a struggle over who controls the narration of history, including what is told and the way in which it is told. Yuni6r specifically criticizes a historiographic strategy that he views as tied to the Trujillo dictatorship, which constituted the officially endorsed version of Dominican history for a large part of the twentieth century. Yuni6r's historiography acts as an intervention against this official historiography as an imaginative reconstruction that can only take

place in the literary realm, since traditional histories rely on what can be considered objective fact supported by evidence deemed acceptable.

In the novel, silence is elemental to the historiography sponsored by the Trujillo regime because it is this silence that naturalizes the status quo and thus closes the possibility of change. It is a historiography characterized by silences, denials, and the violent repression of voices that might contradict the official narrative of heroic nationalism and the continuity of progress. The very form of the text being shaped by Yuniors is meant to counteract a history of glorious nationalism embraced by the regime and personified in the figure of a heroic, all-powerful, hyper-masculine dictator.

The differences between the two historiographic models—the dictatorship's and Yuniors—are stark. Yuniors develops a model that is meant to act as a direct counterpoint to the national history as presented by the regime. First, Yuniors presents a narrative voice that contrasts sharply with that of the Trujillan model. In contrast to a univocal voice of nationalistic rhetoric, Yuniors's voice is self-reflexive, conscious of other possibilities, and eager to represent other perspectives. Next, he presents a different cast of historical actors. Whereas the regime's history has room for only one protagonist—Trujillo—, Yuniors's story focuses on an entire family's lived experiences of history, which in turn allows Yuniors to focus on a larger cast of supporting characters. The story of the family might not at first glance seem very "historical"; major emphasis is placed on the love lives of the various characters as that which appears to propel their stories. Yet these seemingly private matters that traditionally lie outside of the realm of history in fact tie in to the public life of the nation, which in turn shapes their lives. Abelard, Belicia's father, is imprisoned before Belicia is born, tortured, and eventually

killed for not allowing Trujillo to “have” one of his teenaged daughters. Belicia’s romantic relationship with “the Gangster” leads to her brutal and almost fatal beating in the cane fields, as she later finds out that he is married to Trujillo’s sister. This beating spurs Belicia to migrate to New Jersey. Finally, Oscar’s love affair with a prostitute whose boyfriend is a captain in the *Policía Nacional* leads him to the same canefields where his mother was beaten, though his trip results in death. A ruling principle of Yunior’s historical trajectory is that of love, while a ruling principle of the Trujillan model is that of violence.

In addition to these representations of the characters’ lived experiences of history, Yunior includes footnotes that are a bit more traditionally historical. These notes relate the stories of dissenters whose voices were also drowned out by the regime. So while Trujillan history is only concerned with the powerful, Yunior’s history includes the stories of those who resist despite their lack of power. Yunior’s history emphasizes outsiders and freaks, but also intellectuals and writers, instead of the Trujillan cast of thugs. Another important difference in narrative focus is evident in the fact that various family members get generous representation in the text. Alternating chapters shift focus between the family members’ stories, from Oscar to his mother Belicia to his sister Lola to Belicia’s father Abelard.

Yet another historiographic break occurs in the narrative position vis-à-vis the Dominican Republic. The position of the Trujillan regime is strictly nationalistic, from within the “Plátano Curtain” imposed by the dictatorship, while Yunior’s perspective is shaped by his diasporic position. He, like Oscar and Lola, ostensibly grows up in New Jersey, and he writes in an American English that belies the deep influence of U.S.

popular culture. This position affords him the ability to see outside the confines of the nation, beyond the “Plátano Curtain.” In constructing his alternate history, he draws heavily on pan-Caribbean concepts of history, narrative, and thought.

Yunior thus stages a narrative resistance in his recounting of history. He refuses to allow the elements of history deemed irrelevant to the national story to be subsumed, instead rescuing them from oblivion and tracing an alternative trajectory and understanding of history from the fragments he collects and imagines. Yunior asserts the power of imagination as a disruptive force against the violence—both physical and representative—of the regime. Yunior’s story explicitly explores the need to criticize accepted histories, to reconceptualize history, and to break the cycle of tyranny by reinserting memory against historical forgetting. He alludes to the fact that he has interviewed many of the surviving family members in researching Oscar’s story and Dominican history. Still, Yunior never provides one single definitive answer or way to understand the story, in this way interjecting the possibility of alternative experiences and rejecting history that claims a definitive interpretation.

The haziness of the historical model of which Trujillo is an heir becomes an explicit element of Yunior’s narration from the very outset. The introduction that precedes the first chapter of the text frames the story to be related as one of equivocal origin. This first of several narrative frames begins with the description of the history of a curse, suggesting an ancient, almost mythical, beginning to the condition of Dominicans in general and the Cabral-de León family in particular. The novel begins:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú—

generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. (1)

The opening of the narrative begins with an elusive phrase: “They say...”. There is the injection of doubt from the beginning of the first sentence. The origins are mysterious, but an assertion follows:

No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be the *fukú*’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not. (1-2)

Again there is the use of a distancing tactic: the passive-voiced phrase “it is believed,” followed by re-inclusion of the as-yet-unknown narrator in the pronoun of the phrase “we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not.” There is the simultaneous distancing of historical perspective and approximation of a more narrative perspective.

The narrator emphasizes the very real power of the *fukú* as historical force:

But the *fukú* ain’t just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents’ day the *fukú* was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in. Everybody knew somebody who’d been eaten by a *fukú*, just like everybody knew somebody who worked up in the Palacio. It was in the air, you could say, though, like all the most important things on the Island, not something folks really talked about. But in those elder days, *fukú* had it good; it even had a hypeman of sorts, a high priest, you could say. Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina.¹ (2; superscripted reference number in the original)

The narrator notes the hesitation of the populace to discuss this historical force out of fear, and this fear is then transferred to the persona of Trujillo. Reference to Trujillo comes early in the text. He is associated with the *fukú*, fingered as its heir and also as a representative of the historical power of force articulated in the novel.

Much of the exploration of official Dominican national history in the novel centers on the figure of the dictator. The first footnote, which stretches across two pages

of text, begins on page 2 as follows: “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality.” The footnote goes on to describe several idiosyncratic elements of Trujillo’s biography. This footnote is indicative of several key elements of the story. First, there is the prefacing of historical “facts” of Dominican history with the opening assertion that this history is not well known. Second, there is the assumption that the “mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” would necessarily include a discussion of Trujillo. The “you” invokes the reader’s complicity in the historical ignorance surrounding Dominican history; as the novel is written in English and relies heavily on U.S. popular cultural tropes, the reader might presume that this “you” is a U.S. reader. This is important since the narrator goes on to describe the heavy influence of the United States in twentieth century Dominican history, including the U.S. occupation of the Caribbean nation, and its involvement in Dominican politics during the Trujillo dictatorship. This first footnote makes reference to historical facts such as the dates of the Trujillo regime, but then it goes on to recount elements of Trujillo’s biography that are usually not considered historically important, such as a list of the derogatory nicknames employed by Dominicans against him or a discussion of his sexual appetite.² This is indicative of a third element of Yuniors’ historiographic vision: emphasizing the quotidian and lived experiences over what are traditionally considered historical events, providing a popular view to counter the official view.

² The focus on Trujillo’s hyper-masculine sexuality recalls Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), another Latin@ novel that draws on the *novela de la dictadura* tradition. In this novel by the Cuban-American writer, one of the main characters fantasizes about having sex with Fidel Castro. Both García’s and Díaz’s novels attempt to deflate the power of the figure of the dictator.

The fact that Trujillo becomes identified with the Dominican nation is clear in the text. Yunior describes him as:

a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself (Pico Duarte became Pico Trujillo, and Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the first and oldest city in the New World, became Ciudad Trujillo); [...] for expecting, no *insisting* on absolute veneration from his pueblo (tellingly, the national slogan was “Dios y Trujillo” [...]) and for his almost *supernatural* abilities. (2-3; original emphases)

The first striking element of this description is that, very early in the text, Yunior insists on the almost unbelievable nature of the historical reality of the Dominican Republic, which I discuss further in the section that follows on the novel’s use of magical realism. This quote also further explains the way in which Trujillo made of himself the representative of the Dominican nation. The fact that Trujillo renames landmarks and even the capital city after himself shows that he sets out to occupy the physical space of the island as well as its imaginary space. This naming power, as in literature, is a creative power that allows for the claiming of space. In the mention of the slogan “Dios y Trujillo,” there is a linguistic pairing of God and the dictator. Trujillo becomes the equivalent of a god in the national imaginary. The final section of the above-cited quote also reminds the reader of the fact that Trujillo will be cast in this story as a more-than-human figure, though the story construes him as such not in the positive way that the dictator might have liked, but rather as a force that is supernaturally connected with evil.

The narrator goes on to enumerate Trujillo’s “outstanding accomplishments,” including the genocide of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans and “the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state” (3). Trujillo’s creation of the modern Dominican nation works via destruction and exclusion. Indeed, the choice of the term

“forge” carries a double valence, indicating that the “modern state” is a creation while also suggesting a sense of illegitimacy, that the “modern state” is actually a forgery, a counterfeit. Yunió describes Trujillo’s intentions, explaining that Trujillo “aspired to become an architect of history, and through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial, inflicted a true border on the countries [Haiti and the Dominican Republic], a border that exists beyond maps, that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people” (225). This vision of Trujillo as “architect of history” emphasizes the notion that history is malleable and expresses Trujillo’s desire for singular control and power over it. Yunió points not to a glorious national past, but rather a nation that is “forged” through oppressive violence. Scholars from Ernest Renan to Benedict Anderson have noted that the creation of a national identity often involves the strategic “forgetting” of moments of violence that accompany national creation as well as the active exclusion of those deemed to be outsiders. Yunió’s historiography subverts this configuration of the nation by refusing to forget that violence, insisting instead on narrating it as a way to exorcise its detrimental power over not only the de Leóns and Cabrals, but the nation as well. Yunió’s historiographic method emphasizes the power of imagination and popular conceptions of the nation, yet he also brings attention to the very real violence that accompanies the creation of the nation. In the case of the Dominican Republic, the founding is bathed in blood as Yunió notes that it is completed through the reinforcement of the border that abuts the Haitian half of the island, along with the genocide of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans within the borders of the nation.

Yunió’s attempts to lift the “Plátano Curtain” are complicated by the fact that this enforced silence is so automatic a response that it becomes an internalized principle

in the lives of individuals. This is evidenced in the description of the insistent “amnesia” of Oscar’s mother, Belicia Cabral. There is quite a bit of history that Belicia attempts to forget. There is the family history of which she is only vaguely aware: that of the murders of her parents and older sisters before she was old enough to even know them. Then there are the elements of Belicia’s history that she simply does not wish to remember, opting instead for an idealized version of her past that suits her pride. The most conspicuous element of her violent past is evident in the grotesque scar on her back from a burn she suffered at the hands of a family who “adopted” Belicia as a small child to work as a slave on their farm. Yunion describes the scar as a “bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha” (257). This description likens her back to the landscape of war and the scars of the survivors of the Atomic bomb dropped on Japan during World War II. The scar that Belicia suffers as a victim of child abuse is also tangentially tied to larger national violence, reminding the reader that Belicia suffers this fate because she lost her family at the hands of the dictatorial regime.³

The other violent event to which Belicia never alludes around her children is that of a nearly fatal beating in the cane fields at the hands of government officials. The narrator describes her silence as follows:

It seems that [...] that entire chapter of her life got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul. It says a lot about Beli that for *forty years* she never leaked word one about that period of her life: not to her madre, not to her friends, not to her lovers, not to the Gangster, not to her

³ The disfigurement of Belicia’s back provides a connection to the character of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The scar on Sethe’s back comes from the lashes she receives just prior to escaping Sweet Home. Like Belicia’s scar, Sethe’s is described using various other images, including a chokecherry tree. Both matriarchal figures struggle with the idea of remembering their traumatic pasts. Both are spurred by near-fatal beatings to escape: Sethe to Ohio and Belicia to New Jersey. Both women also seek to spare their children from knowledge of their traumatic pasts that nonetheless haunt their lives despite the women’s intentions.

husband. And certainly not to her beloved children, Lola and Oscar. *Forty years*. [...]

In fact, I believe that, barring a couple of key moments, Beli never thought about that life again. Embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination. Embraced the power of the Untilles. And from it forged herself anew. (258-9)

Again, Yunió brings this condition of forgetfulness back to a greater Caribbean context, using the negative prefix –un to dub the islands the “Untilles.” Forgetting is a seductive prospect when memory seems only to recall pain, but this is consistently shown to be a very dangerous choice. This point is made most explicitly when neither Belicia nor her adoptive mother, La Inca, addresses the past even as they observe Oscar repeating Belicia’s mistakes and heading towards death. Yunió describes what seems to be an important pronouncement by Oscar’s sister after her brother has died: “Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country. On one of our last nights as novios she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (324). On the one hand this statement shows Lola’s explicit rejection and distancing from the past and more specifically her mother’s native country, yet this sentiment is belied by the use of the word “we,” which includes Lola, making her complicit in this internalization. Yunió’s above-quoted description of Belicia links her to Trujillo in using the term “forged” to describe Belicia’s recreation of herself via a negation of her past; the verb “forge” is precisely the one that Yunió uses to describe Trujillo’s creation of the nation and its history. It is this internalization of the Trujillan historiography that Yunió battles throughout the text by positing an alternative based on memory and inclusion.

One of the ways Yunió attempts this is by giving myriad examples of voices and experiences silenced by the regime, including the murder of scholars and activists; the destruction of writings; and the censorship and self-censorship that permeate all aspects

of the quotidian such as in schools and even in idle speech. In order to battle these silences, he first acknowledges them in several ways. There are recurrent references to lost books throughout the text. Oscar is a creative writer, mainly of science fiction, and he writes extensively in his journals. Yet his most important work, the one that he was composing in his final days in the Dominican Republic, is lost in the mail. Two generations earlier, Oscar's grandfather Abelard, who was a doctor and "amateur ethnographer" had every shred of paper in his house completely disappear at the hands of the regime after his imprisonment (213). These are only two of the many references to lost texts. Yunió often employs the use of ellipses and blanks in order to structurally emphasize the gaps in historical knowledge.

One element of the historiographic pastiche Yunió activates in order to counter this silence is the recourse to lesser-known historical facts, which are often included in footnotes modeled after those of Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992).⁴ Yunió references the histories of activists and dissenters who attempted to combat Trujillo's method during the dictatorship. Yunió does this to show that despite the lack of resistance on the part of Belicia Cabral or her father Abelard before her, Trujillo was not all-powerful and that resistance was—and remains—a possibility. He explains:

⁴ Junot Díaz has acknowledged his use of Chamoiseau's *Texaco* as a model for his footnotes, including during the question-and-answer period following a talk at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in March 2008. Though I am not aware of any acknowledgment to this effect, some of the structural elements of the text, including the footnotes, bear resemblance to Sandra Cisneros's 2003 novel *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento*. Both texts show a thematic interest in questions of historiography, particularly in relation to the nation and diaspora, though Cisneros's novel explores the Mexican American context. Both texts question conceptions of the nation, emphasizing popular culture and resistance figures over officially sanctioned national history. They both look to popular culture models to structure their novels: comics in the case of Díaz and *telenovelas* in the case of Cisneros. Both of these models are generally considered to be gender-specific: superhero comics are usually aimed at male audiences, while the telenovela is a genre aimed at female audiences. In another connection, during a teleconference interview on October 20, 2008 (hosted by the Las Comadres organization), Díaz said that *Oscar Wao* stemmed from "a really good *telenovela* kind of plot."

Trujillo was certainly formidable, and the regime was like a Caribbean Mordor in many ways, but there were plenty of people who despised El Jefe, who communicated in less-than-veiled ways their contempt, who *resisted*. But Abelard was simply not one of them. Homeboy wasn't like his Mexican colleagues who were always keeping up with what was happening elsewhere in the world, who believed that change was possible. He didn't dream of revolution, didn't care that Trotsky had lived and died not ten blocks from his student pension in Coyoacán; wanted only to tend to his wealthy, ailing patients and afterward return to his study without worrying about being shot in the head or thrown to the sharks. (226)

Yunior emphasizes not just the possibility of resistance, but also the importance of resistance. Indeed, he often refers to his narration as an attempt to become a part of a tradition of resistance.

In his historical footnotes, Yunior tells the histories of resistance figures such as Jesús de Galíndez, a Basque scholar and diplomat, whose research and doctoral thesis on Trujillo may have caused his kidnapping and murder, and the death of the leftist journalist Orlando Martínez under the Balaguer regime, which was an extension of the Trujillo government. He also tells of figures of resistance from a distant past. One of these includes the figure after whom the original Cabral home is named: Hatüey. In a footnote, Yunior notes that Hatüey was “the Taino Ho Chi Minh” (212). Bartolomé de las Casas recounts Hatüey's resistance of the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century, chronicling that Hatüey remained defiant through his murder, refusing to be baptized as he was burned at the stake. The other early sixteenth century historical figure of resistance that Yunior describes, also in a footnote, is Anacaona, “One of the Founding Mothers of the New World and the most beautiful Indian in the world” (244). Yunior explains that Anacaona, Taino queen of Xaraguá in contemporary Haiti, was hanged by the Spanish because “she tried to resist” the Spanish invaders of the island of Hispaniola (244). He also notes that a “common story” about Anacaona states that she could have

prevented this hanging had she agreed to marry a Spaniard “who was obsessed with her,” making the connection between Anacaona’s position and that of Abelard’s daughter in the hands of Trujillo and emphasizing the fact of her defiance even as she faced death (244).⁵ Along with the feats of Yuniór’s imagination, he presents more traditionally historical references in order to ground his story in fact. Imagination is meant to fill in the gaps and to get to the truth that lies beyond the uneven documented stories.

It is important to consider the position of the narrator in order to understand the goal of Yuniór’s historiographic methods. Yuniór is in many ways a mysterious narrator; the reader is not aware that he is the narrator until well into the novel and his name is not referenced until pages 169 (“Yuni”) and 178 (“Yuniór”). The reader also learns that “Yuniór” is a nickname; his given name remains undisclosed. Once Yuniór reveals his presence, however, the reader is not allowed to forget his role in the narrative. The intrusion of ambivalent statements serves as a reminder of the subjectivity underlying the history being narrated. In a footnote on page 132, before the reader even knows the narrator’s name, the reader becomes aware of the constructed nature of the story and the limitations of its narrator. After describing a romantic getaway taken by Belicia and her lover in the city of Samaná, the narrator provides the following footnote:

In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in

⁵ Anacaona was also a poet; she is said to have created *areítos*, a musical form of the Taínos which “was complex in its structure, used drums and sometimes flutes and seashell trumpets, could last for days, and entailed collective singing and dancing by masses of people” (Sublette *Cuba and Its Music* 63). Ned Sublette also mentions an *areíto* conducted by Hatíey during his visit to Cuba to warn the Taínos about the arrival of the Spaniards (*Cuba and Its Music* 63). Though the *areítos* did not survive, some historians believe that Taínos used the form in part as a way to orally transmit their history. Yuniór might locate in these two figures not just elements of resistance, but also figures who transmit their histories via artistic means. While Díaz’s novel does not reference the *areíto*, this musical form is sometimes referenced in popular culture, including in music by Dominican Juan Luis Guerra (1999 album *Areíto*, which includes lyrics in Arawak) and in the reference to the “*areíto* de Anacaona” in Cheo Feliciano’s salsa song “Anacaona.”

Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, “GhettoNerd at the End of the World”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me!) (132)

In this footnote, the narrator first brings the reader’s attention to the fact that there is an element of artifice. He has imagined the setting, and perhaps even the entire trip taken by Belicia. This might cause the reader to question what else the narrator might have imagined. The reader learns that the story is subject to change and editing. In the next part of this paragraph, the narrator also asserts his power to rewrite the story as he sees fit in order to best present the overall reality he seeks to put forth. He notes the necessity of historically inaccurate details like the anachronistic reference to “the perrito,” justifying them for aesthetic reasons, recalling to the reader’s mind the idea that history is a construction and, like storytelling, requires narrative choices.

Yunior makes clear that his version of history is not authoritative, though in so doing he does not reject its validity. Moreover, as the narrator-historian, he consistently shows that he is not infallible, nor does he hope to convince the reader of this. Not only does Yunior admit to his limitations, but he also often highlights them. In looking for a way to understand the reasons for Oscar’s death in the Dominican Republic, Yunior admits that he cannot posit a definitive answer:

So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you’ll have to decide for yourself. What is certain is that nothing’s certain. We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn’t leave a paper trail—they didn’t share their German contemporaries’ lust for documentation. And it’s not like the fukú itself would leave a memoir or anything. The remaining Cabrals ain’t much help, either; on all matters related to Abelard’s imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there but nothing more.

Which is to say that if you're looking for a full story, I don't have it. (243)

Neither the narrator nor the narrative is meant to be taken as unquestionable or monolithic, though they reveal elements of truth, especially in showing the uncertainties and ambivalences of history. Again, he emphasizes the role of the reader as the interpreter of history.

Considering Yuniór's own admission of the power he holds as narrator, it is useful to consider his motivation for telling this story. Yuniór seems to feel a deep need to recuperate a family history despite the fact that it is not his own. He retains a certain distance from this story even though he is eventually drawn into it at several points, as Lola's sometimes lover and Oscar's sometimes friend. One example of this uncertainty is evident in Lola's narration. Lola is the only character, besides Yuniór, who speaks in first-person narrative. Yet the reader cannot be completely certain of what this narration means. Is this really Lola speaking? If so, how? Is she collaborating in the writing of the text, or is Yuniór recording her thoughts? Who is Lola's narrative audience? Is Yuniór simply reconstructing Lola's voice, writing her voice himself, as a way to regain a connection to her? If this last possibility is the case, does Yuniór in a small way fall into the Trujillan model of narrative, as characters including Oscar (and perhaps Lola) are not allowed to speak for themselves? Indeed, Oscar's surviving texts remain stored in Yuniór's refrigerators, unavailable to the reader. Yet it seems that Yuniór encourages the reader's questioning of his motives. The questions that the reader might ask belie the open-endedness that is central to the reader's conception of Yuniór as narrator. The reader consistently recognizes his limitations, just as he explicitly acknowledges the same.

Despite his participation as a character in the story, Yuniór retains, primarily, the roles of storyteller and historian. Indeed, these two roles seem intimately related in the text. History in this novel can only be presented through literature, as there is no way to know all the “facts” behind the experiences lived by its participants. And the novel implicitly wonders if this fictional representation is not more truthful than the official history in light of all that the latter excludes.

Magical Realism and Caribbean Discourse in Diaspora

The story related by Yuniór contains echoes of magical realist texts of the Boom years, most notably Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad*. Some examples of magical realist elements in Díaz’s novel include the representation of the *fukú* as engine of historical development from the Conquest to the present, the supernatural power of women like La Inca who can save her daughter’s life through prayer, and the guardian mongoose that magically appears when Belicia and Oscar are in danger. History is cyclical in *Oscar Wao* as in *Cien años de soledad*; successive generations of Oscar’s family, each ignorant of the history of its ancestors, seem doomed to re-live the violence and evil wrought by the family’s curse. Each new generation seems to inevitably suffer the “solitude” that García Márquez explores, sharing the same pessimistic, and perhaps even fatalistic, perspective. Yet Yuniór’s narrative of the lives of Oscar and his family necessarily departs from the traditional conception of magical realism because he tells it from the perspective of diaspora decades after the original boom in magical realist production. Although Oscar seems to accept “old-school” ways of understanding the engine of history, Yuniór retains a critical skepticism. Yuniór’s retelling of what he

sometimes calls a “fukú story” combines these more traditional elements and alternative ways of understanding that history. He thus provides a bridge between Macondo and McOndo.⁶

The magical elements, which are presented as native to the Caribbean, are interwoven with narrative elements of United States popular culture. This mixing of Caribbean and U.S. references is clear already in the two epigraphs of the novel. The first comes from the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby comic, *Fantastic Four*, which provides one of the frames of the novel. The epigraph reads: “of what import are brief, nameless lives...to **Galactus??**” (emphasis in the original). This epigraph hints at the role of comics, which figure prominently in the novel. It also points to the relevance of the comic genre to the story, as it questions the element of “brief, nameless lives” in relationship to Galactus, a god-like figure in *Fantastic Four* whose considerable power is alluded to in his name. The question of the relationship between the “nameless lives” of figures traditionally not considered in histories of the nation, and their relationship to power and the powerful, is central to the novel. The epigraph has ominous overtones, suggesting a high stakes battle.

The second epigraph comes from a very different literary source: the second stanza of Derek Walcott’s poem “*The Schooner Flight*.”

*Christ have mercy on all sleeping things!
From that dog rotting down Wrightston Road
to when I was a dog on these streets;
if loving these islands must be my load,*

⁶ Junot Díaz’s engagement with Latin American literature has earned him recognition in Latin American literary and critical circles, which is rare for Anglophone Latin@ writers. This recognition includes being named one of the “Bogotá (39 escritores menos de 39,” as a part of the Hay Festival Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) 2007. The festival’s jurors (three Colombian writers) named the thirty-nine most important Latin American writers under thirty-nine years of age. On the list, Junot Díaz is classified as a Dominican writer and in fact is the only writer from the Dominican Republic who made the list. See the “Bogotá 39” website.

*out of corruption my soul takes wings,
But they had started to poison my soul
with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,
coolie, nigger, Syrian and French Creole,
so I leave it for them and their carnival—
I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road.
I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,
a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes
that they nickname Shabine, the patois for
any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw
when these slums of empire was paradise.
I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. (italicization in the original)*

The Walcott poem presents a speaker who sees himself as a representative figure of the nation, as his biography contains the elements of its entire history. Even his language is particular to this history. This epigraph's tone is expansive, presenting an all-inclusive vision that embraces the disparate elements of Antillean history.

The pairing of these two epigraphs is indicative. Díaz's novel here creates connections between two apparently distinct sources—one from U.S. pop culture and one from Caribbean literary production. This alerts the reader to the fact that the story to follow will draw on a variety of genres, creating a pastiche that attempts to capture the Caribbean diasporic experience. The two epigraphs also address the question of the relationship between the individual and the collective or the nation, with the *Fantastic Four* quote suggesting a natural antipathy between power and lived “ordinary” experiences, while the Walcott poem suggests the intimate relationship between History and the experiences of a nation's citizens.

Throughout the text, magical realism is presented as a Caribbean mode of understanding and representing history. Magical realism in the novel does not act as a

gimmick, but rather as a serious intervention against the trajectory of conventional national history. It affords Yunior the means to connect his story to a Latin American, and specifically Caribbean, discourse regarding literary historical representation. The use of magical realism links Yunior's narrative to the magical realist genre's roots in its conception as a way to account for the reality and history of Latin America, firmly locating the magical realist stories in specific geographical and historical contexts. One small example of this is the representation of the mongoose in the story.

Early in the story, the "golden mongoose" seems like a quirky take-off on the guardian angel trope. The creature appears to Belicia when she is left for dead in the cane fields, to Oscar when he attempts suicide at the New Brunswick train station, and then again around the time of his death. Yunior describes Belicia's encounter with the mongoose as a mysterious one:

And now we arrive at the strangest part of our tale. Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco. [...] But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived? So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. (149)

The mongoose tells Belicia to follow her for the sake of a son and daughter to come. The mongoose then sings, "In an accent she could not place: maybe Venezuelan, maybe Colombian. *Sueño, sueño, sueño, como tú te llamas*" (150; italicization in the original). This episode is presented as an "extreme phenomenon" that is tied to Dominican and Caribbean history. Yunior even ties this "tolerance" of the seemingly supernatural to the survival of Dominicans through difficult historical periods. Yunior's tone shifts between serious and playful. He acknowledges the fact that readers might not automatically

accept the veracity of the story he relates, yet seems to imply that there is a truth to it “no matter the truth.” In other words, there is an importance that overshadows the factual corroboration of the story. The fact that the mongoose speaks in an unidentifiable Spanish accent show that this creature is a Latin American figure of hazy origin, pan-American like Alejo Carpentier’s and Gabriel García Márquez’s vision of the genre of magical realism. The attribution of a Colombian accent might even be a playful nudge to the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez as the world’s most recognized writer of the magical realist genre. Yet at the same time, this signals a departure from traditional magical realist narrative, which naturalizes seemingly magical phenomena. Rather than weaving this magic seamlessly into the narrative as magical realist texts traditionally do, Yuniors calls attention to these moments, initially questioning though later validating them.

Another instructive discussion of the mongoose and its role in the story occurs in a footnote that provides a history of the creature:

Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean. Since its earliest appearance in the written record—675 B.C.E., in a nameless scribe’s letter to Ashurbanipal’s father, Esarhaddon—the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. (151)

The mongoose is recovered not only as a figure whose roots cover some of the same paths of Caribbean ancestry, but also as a resistance figure. The mongoose is an “enemy” to the powerful and a proponent of freedom. The narrator chooses a native figure as the vehicle of some of the “magic” in the story, but he also focuses on its history.⁷

⁷ The use of indigenous figures, histories, cosmogonies, folklore, etc., is an important element of many magical realist texts, featuring prominently in works by authors including Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, and Gabriel García Márquez. One critical work that explores the use of indigenous sources in Gabriel García

This model of magical realism allows Yunió to recover experiences that might not fit within the bounds of traditional European models of realism. Seemingly supernatural forces have *real* effects and power in these stories and histories. This is typical of magical realist texts, which insist on the reality of seemingly magical occurrences. This magical reality happens when two worldviews come into contact. Alejo Carpentier gives the example of the Spanish conquistadores encountering a “New World” that is so different that it appears magical because it does not coincide with European conceptions of reality.⁸ In Díaz’s novel, Yunió emphasizes the idea that the story he tells contains a reality that goes beyond questions of belief in magic. When describing the *fukú* in the introduction, he explains: “Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point. You live as long as I did in the heart of fukú country, you hear these kinds of tales all the time. Everybody in Santo Domingo has a fukú story knocking around in their family” (5). He shifts the focus from the verifiability of these histories to their presence in the stories of the population. Even Abelard, “an amateur ethnographer in the Fernando Ortiz mode,” seems to be a magical realist (213). While he is a doctor who has studied outside of the country and avoids politics at all costs, he also recognizes the “magic” of his reality. Yunió notes that before his death, Abelard was writing “a book in which [he] argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been *true*” (245). This text is another one that is

Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* is Jay Corwin’s *La transposición de fuentes indígenas en Cien años de soledad*.

⁸ “Bernal Díaz, sin sospecharlo, había superado las hazañas de Amadís de Gaula, Belianis de Grecia y Florismarte de Hircania. Había descubierto un mundo de monarcas coronados de plumas de aves verdes, de vegetaciones que se remontaban a los orígenes de la tierra, de manjares jamás probados, de bebidas sacadas del cacto y de la palma, sin darse cuenta aún que, en ese mundo, los acontecimientos que ocupan al hombre suelen cobrar un estilo propio en cuanto a la trayectoria de un mismo acontecer.” (114)

unrecoverable to the narrator-historian, as every bit of documentation owned by Abelard was destroyed by the regime following his imprisonment.

The importance of history to the magical realist project is clear already in Alejo Carpentier's early essay theorizing the emerging genre, "De lo real maravilloso americano," originally published in a newspaper in 1948 and then as an introduction to his novel *El reino de este mundo* in 1949. In discussing the connection between history and representational style, Carpentier asserts: "Arrastra el latinoamericano una herencia de treinta siglos, pero, a pesar de una contemplación de hechos absurdos, a pesar de muchos pecados cometidos, debe reconocerse que *su estilo* se va afirmando a través de *su historia* [...]" ("De lo real maravilloso americano" 114). A similar emphasis on the need for a style to fit the history particular to Latin America is expressed by Gabriel García Márquez in his 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In the speech, entitled "La soledad de América Latina," García Márquez also emphasizes the ability of magical realism to represent reality where conventional forms fail, claiming: "el desafío mayor para nosotros ha sido la insuficiencia de los recursos convencionales para hacer creíble nuestra vida. Este es, amigo, el nudo de nuestra soledad" (8). He further explains: "La interpretación de nuestra realidad con esquemas ajenos sólo contribuye a hacernos cada vez más desconocidos, cada vez menos libres, cada vez más solitarios" (8-9).⁹ In Carpentier's configuration of magical realism, the genre provides a native narrative lens through which to interpret Caribbean reality. David Mikics explains, "magical realism appeals to Caribbean writers because it addresses the weight of historical memory that survives in

⁹ Doris Sommer argues in *Foundational Fictions* that Latin American Boom writers rejected the tradition of "national romances" that drew inspiration from "esquemas ajenos" such as those provided by James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Stendahl's *The Red and the Black*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie* (16-17, 55).

the day to day life of the West Indies” (373). Díaz’s novel takes up the charge of finding forms that can capture a reality that does not fit “esquemas ajenos.” Again, it is for this reason that Yunior frames the story through the use of Caribbean and U.S. popular cultural forms, pointing to these as the most appropriate to represent the reality lived by Oscar and his family as members of the Dominican diaspora.

Through the mixing of Caribbean and U.S. narrative forms, Yunior seeks in part to draw a connection between the histories of the two countries. He specifically hopes to tie the diaspora to the history of the Dominican Republic. He does this formally, through the use of genres native to the two countries, and also thematically. One example is the discussion of diaspora as a part of the “fukú story.” Elements of U.S. national tragedy, like the Kennedy assassination or the war in Vietnam, are cast as payback for U.S. interventions in the Dominican Republic. And Yunior explains that, “My paternal abuelo believes that diaspora was Trujillo’s payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú” (5). The state of diaspora seems to lend itself to magical realist forms as it is by definition an encounter between two different worldviews.

At the same time as he engages magical realist representation and discourse, Yunior takes into account subsequent criticism of magical realism, as represented by the 1990s McOndo movement. Part of the criticism leveled against magical realism by Alberto Fuguet and others was already alluded to in Carpentier’s 1940s essay:

Pero, a fuerza de querer suscitar lo maravilloso a todo trance, los taumaturgos se hacen burócratas. Invocando por medio de formulas consabidas que hacen de ciertas pinturas un monótono baratillo de relojes amelcochados, de maniqués de costurera, de vagos monumentos fálicos, lo maravilloso se queda en paraguas o langosta o máquina de coser, o lo que sea, sobre una mesa de disección, en el interior de un cuarto triste, en un desierto de rocas. Pobreza imaginativa, decía Unamuno, es aprenderse códigos de memoria. (117)

Carpentier's essay warns against formulaic uses of literary genres. He explains that codification of "lo maravilloso" would make it a dissectible object rather than a stylistic mode, effectively quelling its power. Carpentier's warning ties into part of the McOndian complaint against magical realism. Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, the editors of the 1996 *McOndo* anthology, see magical realism as a tool that has been co-opted as a gimmick that does not represent the real, contemporary issues facing Latin America. Their critique is framed by their introduction to *McOndo*, entitled "Presentación del país McOndo," that alludes to the experiences of young South American writers at the Writer's Workshop in Iowa who are criticized for *not* using magical realism. These writers came to view magical realism as an exotified marketing tool in the U.S. publishing world. However, I would argue that this criticism does not recognize magical realism's potential for subversiveness when not used as a gimmick. Some writers (and other artists) might employ magical realism in part as a representative mode that exotifies the Latin American other, but this should not mean that magical realism cannot be used as a means of true intervention. At the same time, there are problems with the works of writers like Fuguet, who present a reality that is still accessible to a relative few, limited to the bourgeoisie and upper classes, and which seek to escape the mantle of being representative.¹⁰

Yunior discusses this McOndian renunciation of literary predecessors as a generational shift, one that seeks to account for the emerging realities of globalization, Americanization, and migration. When Yunior describes the word "zafa," which is supposed to work as a counterspell against *fukú*, he explains, "It used to be more popular

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of McOndo, including the problematic connection between Fuguet's concept of McOndo and neoliberalism, see Diana Palaversich's *De Macondo a McOndo: Senderos de la postmodernidad* (2005).

in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo. There are people, though, like my tío Miguel in the Bronx who still zafa everything. He's old-school like that" (7). Yet despite Yuniór's nod to the skepticism regarding magical realism, he maintains its validity while reinvigorating it, fitting it to the history at hand by superimposing a literary and cultural model native to the United States: comics. Yuniór's imbrication of literary magical realism and comics draws out the connections between the two forms, including concepts of temporality, characterization, and historical vision. Other "nerd" genres—science fiction and fantasy most prominently, which Yuniór sometimes refers to as "genre"—also figure heavily in the text. These forms provide historical and narrative models whose forms lie outside of the power structures Yuniór wishes to resist. In his critical work entitled *Postethnic Narratives*, Frederick Luis Aldama highlights the importance of the choice of genre in "postethnic narratives" that employ what he terms "magicorealism." In his examination of African American and Chican@ texts in conjunction with "postcolonial" British texts, he explains that magical realist novels tend to use narrative techniques that are "at the margins of the institutionally sanctioned critical eye" (33-34). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes use of several genres that are often critically marginalized.

In the case of comics, this critical marginalization has been widely recorded. Only recently have critics begun to look at this form as art. *Oscar Wao* refers to both the superhero genre of comic books along with independent, more realistic comic books. Yuniór mentions several important contemporary comic book artists, including the Hernandez Brothers (Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario). The Hernandez Brothers' comic

production over the past few decades has quite vast and varied.¹¹ Gilbert Hernandez's work includes the Palomar stories, while Jaime's work includes the Maggie and Hopey stories. Both of these have been published in their joint *Love and Rockets* series, which has been quite revolutionary, representing Latin Americans and U.S. Latin@s in roles and stories that are far from stereotypical. In the introduction to one of the *Love and Rockets* collections, *Music for Mechanics*, the brothers articulate the exclusion of comics from critical dialogue and highlight the need for a critical discourse if the form is to grow.

Junot Díaz's text theorizes these genres while employing them. The narrator ruminates on the applications and significance of these genres, linking them to somewhat more critically recognized literary genres. Díaz's novel valorizes the comic genre, associating it with more traditionally literary work as well as historiographic and ethnographic studies. The comic genre becomes interwoven with a line of critical thought that Yunior traces, which includes such important Caribbean writers and scholars as: Derek Walcott, Edouard Glissant,¹² Fernando Ortiz, Gabriel García Márquez, and Aimé Césaire.

The novel continually reinforces the connection between the magical elements of the history connected to the Caribbean cultural context and the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and comics. Oscar is an avid reader of fantasy and sci-fi. He also writes pieces that he hopes might make him the "Dominican Tolkien" (192). Yunior, also an aspiring writer at Rutgers, initially claims not to understand Oscar's literary interests. Through

¹¹ Hernandez Bros. illustrations have also accompanied some of Junot Díaz's short stories published in *The New Yorker*.

¹² Glissant's essays in *Caribbean Discourse* are particularly relevant to the novel's invocations of Caribbean history, language, and identity.

the narrative, though, Yuniór begins to speculate about Oscar's interest in "genre" and even incorporates its language and tropes in his own narration. In one footnote regarding Oscar's love of "genre," Yuniór explains:

Where this outsized love of genre jumped off from no one quite seems to know. It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocated to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (from Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both).¹³ After a transition like that I'm guessing only the most extreme scenarios could have satisfied. (21-22; footnote mine)

"Genre," in the minds of Oscar and eventually Yuniór, is a more flexible narrative form than traditional historical narrative. It allows for the exploration of alternative worlds that don't comply with traditional realism. In this way, it is uniquely capable of addressing the reality of the diasporic subject. The text consistently asserts that "authoritative" history is not an adequate explanation. The heart of the text lies, rather, in the sections that employ fantasy. During a talk at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in March 2008, Junot Díaz noted the relationship between the immigrant experience and the act of reading science fiction; he said that both require the learning of new codes. In this sense, the text's form requires the reader to enter into the position of the immigrant or outsider.

¹³ It is useful to note the slippage between Yuniór in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, who at least resembles the Yuniór who is the narrator in *Drown*, and Oscar. In *Oscar Wao*, it appears that after Belicia leaves the Dominican Republic, she does not return except to visit. If this is the case, then Oscar would have been born in the United States, and not have spent his early years in the Dominican Republic. It is Yuniór who immigrated to the United States as a child, not Oscar. Thus, Yuniór's slip of presenting his own history as Oscar's might indicate the narrator's appropriation of Oscar's story or perhaps the desire to draw a connection between the two. It is not clear whether or not this particular slip is accidental on Yuniór's part. However, throughout the novel, Yuniór's affinities with Oscar become quite evident, though Oscar is more willing to admit to the "nerd" tendencies that Yuniór attempts to mask. Yuniór's appropriation of Oscar's story could also support the reading of *Oscar Wao* as a *Künstlerroman*; the novel tracks the desires of both Oscar and Yuniór to write fiction, as both begin their writing "careers" in "genre" writing (sci-fi and noir, respectively), and the novel can be read as Yuniór's attempt to find a way to narrate the story of his friend in order to find his own writer's voice.

In one exemplary instance, Yuniór comments on the casting of Oscar's suicide attempt at the train station as a type of supernatural or magical realist story. The idea of the *fukú* as the cause of his fall provides one way for Oscar to understand how he could survive his fall from a bridge above the station. Yuniór explains:

Oscar, as you might imagine, found this version of the Fall very attractive. Appealed to the deep structures in his nerd brain. Mysterious books, a supernatural, or perhaps alien, dictator who had installed himself on the first Island of the New World and then cut it off from everything else, who could send a curse to destroy his enemies—that was some New Age Lovecraft shit. (245-246)

Here, Yuniór explicitly teases out some of the connections between “genre” and magical realism. He points first to the structure of the genres that are consonant with the “deep structures of his nerd brain.” The novel's structure in fact derives from the comic genre. The novel is loosely organized around four characters modeled after the Fantastic Four.¹⁴ Yuniór calls himself “the Watcher” several times, referring to the character in *Fantastic Four* who comes to earth to observe the actions of the four protagonists and to help humanity. Yuniór makes the connection between his adopted comic persona and the Caribbean, stating, “it's hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on ‘*la face cachée de la Terre*’ (Earth's hidden face)” (92; parenthetical notes in the original). Yuniór thus makes the connection between the Caribbean experience and the experience of a character who is an outsider; both the comic image and Glissant's image engage ex-centric experiences and hidden histories.

¹⁴ Junot Díaz noted the relationship between the Fantastic Four characters and Yuniór, Oscar, Lola, Belicia, and Abelard during his talk at the Hammer Museum.

Yunior's decision to model the novel after the *Fantastic Four* comic series instead of, for example, *Superman*, emphasizes the focus of his historiography on antiheroes, outsiders, and the forcibly marginalized. Like the character of the Watcher, as described by Yunior, the other characters are also in many ways outsiders. Lola's character is the rough equivalent of the Human Torch in the *Fantastic Four*, as her character is equated with rebelliousness and she is sometimes explicitly connected to fire. Oscar's differences are markedly pronounced throughout the text; he does not fit the mold of the "typical" young male Dominican, as he is a "nerd" with romantic ideas about the world. His difference is not marked only in his attitude, but also in his physical bearing. His obesity marks him as the equivalent to the most physically obvious "freak" of the *Fantastic Four*: Thing. The reader is often reminded of Oscar's physical difference. In one of these instances, Yunior describes Oscar's physique: "[Oscar] examined himself in the mirror. The fat! The miles of stretch marks! The tumescent horribleness of his proportions! He looked straight out of a Daniel Clowes comic book. Or like the fat blackish kid in Beto Hernández's Palomar" (29). Oscar's weight is described in hyperbolic terms ("miles of stretch marks") and explicitly equated with comic book figures.

On a basic level, *The Fantastic Four* is a comic about figures whose differences are marked on their bodies. The bodies of the characters of *Oscar Wao* are also marked by their difference, as is clear with the figure of the mother, Belicia. When she is born to a white doctor and light-skinned black nurse, her dark black skin seems like a bad omen to both her family and the entire community. After she is orphaned, it is her dark skin that makes it easier for her extended family to give her away, which eventually leads to horrible abuse. Her blackness marks her as an outsider, a rejected body, as her blackness

is precisely what Trujillo was attempting to exclude from the nation. Later, it is not her blackness but rather the spectacular sexuality of her adolescent body and her fertility that will lead to the near-fatal beating that causes her to flee to the United States in order to escape her attackers.

Another important dimension of the *Fantastic Four* comic, besides its representation of characters who are outsiders, is that of the ability of outsiders and “freaks” to be heroes. Comics allow Yunior to posit a different trajectory for the family. Instead of a pessimistic, apocalyptic vision, Yunior envisions Oscar as a hero, even though he might be a tragic figure or even a martyr. Oscar’s heroic nature emerges most clearly in the account of his final days. He is a romantic hero in his love for a prostitute in the Dominican Republic despite the fact that his relationship with her presents very real, physical danger for Oscar. The narrator connects Oscar’s quest for Ybón, the prostitute who is Oscar’s love object, with Oscar’s writing: “For twenty-seven days he did two things: he researched-wrote and he chased her” (317).

After Oscar’s death, Yunior at first presents a pessimistic vision of the future of the Cabral-de León family. A few months after Oscar’s death, however, Yunior receives Oscar’s final letter. It contains the “amazing news” that he finally lost his virginity to Ybón. In the letter, Oscar describes his love of the intimacies he and his lover share beyond the physical, explaining, “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335). The letter closes the novel in a way that is the antithesis of the proclamation of Kurtz (“The horror! The horror!”) in

Joseph Conrad's colonial literary classic *The Heart of Darkness*.¹⁵ It also posits an ending that is markedly different from the apocalyptic vision of García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*.

This letter, which is one of several endings proposed by the novel, is perhaps the most important, as it comes at the physical end of the novel. It proposes the possibility of change instead of an "eternal return" (296). This hope is transferred to future generations, though, as Yuniór envisions Lola's daughter, Isis, as the inheritor of the history that he has recovered. When Yuniór runs into the girl, he notices a type of amulet that she wears as protection: "on a string around her neck: three azabaches: the one that Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary. Powerful elder magic. Three barrier shields against the Eye" (329). Lola attempts to shield her daughter from evil by providing her daughter physical reminders of their family history. Memory acts as a sort of talisman for her.

Yet Yuniór insists on the necessity of documentation as a protection against evil forces. He imagines the day when the *fukú* will reach the young girl and she will come to him in search of her history:

[...] when it starts getting late I'll take her down to my basement and open the four refrigerators where I store her brother's books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers—refrigerators the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything.

A light, a desk, a cot—I've prepared it all. (330)

Yuniór thus asserts the importance of writing a historical narrative, of unearthing the past, as a way to protect against the *fukú* that works through silencing and ignorance.

¹⁵ Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien also notes the Conrad echo in the epistolary "The beauty! The beauty!" in the early short story version of *Oscar Wao*, positing that "His last words grant him an intelligibility unexperienced in life" (*Weird English* 228).

Conclusion: Documenting Resistance

Díaz's novel presents an attempt to write a new history of the Dominican Republic. First, it attempts to present a nation *with* a history, filling a historical void. Next, it attempts to present a history that is a part of a greater Caribbean history that can accommodate diaspora and its subjects. Through the use of magical realism, Díaz presents an amplification of Dominican, and United States, historical reality. Through the use of comics, Díaz attempts to inscribe the history of the Dominican diaspora in both national histories. He emphasizes the role of quotidian experiences of national subjects in the national story. Throughout, the narrator highlights the role of language and literature in historiographic production. He also underscores the importance of writing history in new ways with new—or newly combined—forms capable of including experiences usually unexplored in traditional history, all while insisting on the impossibility of telling the *whole* story.

CHAPTER FIVE

Historias: Language and Borders in Sandra Cisneros's Caramelo, or Puro Cuento and Ana Castillo's So Far from God

The vast majority of us were taught to be afraid of a certain type of English [...]. At the same time, we were equally intimidated by the Spanish spoken by people of middle-class or higher economic strata who come from Latin America. For how could a language of those so different experientially from us, speak for those of us here who have long been denied a sense of belonging, a sense of historical ties to this nation, and indeed, to any nation? (Castillo *Massacre of the Dreamers* 167)

Borders prove unstable in Sandra Cisneros's 2002 novel *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento* and Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God*. The borders between the United States and Mexico, English and Spanish, history and fiction, men's and women's identities, and various genres are all presented as fluid boundaries in the two novels. Both works tell alternative histories of the United States and Mexico that can account for Chican@s, emphasizing history as lived by protagonists whose experiences straddle the U.S.-Mexico border, by using language that incorporates a variety of English and Spanish idioms. Both novels are told from the perspective of female narrator-historians who are unreliable at times, foregrounding the notion of historical subjectivity and confusing the distinction between history and story ("historia"). Both novels rely on the reader to "complete" the narratives and make judgments regarding the "truth" approached in these narratives. Celaya "Lala" Reyes, the narrator of *Caramelo*, and the unnamed female narrator of *So Far from God* emphasize cultural and social history and the role of storytelling as a way to access the historical experiences of female characters. The

Chicana identities proposed by the two novels are more open to experiences that cross traditionally drawn divisions between cultures, emphasizing the fluidity of identity. They effectively remap national identities and national languages while also attempting to reconstitute literature and history.

In this way, the work of these two writers participates in a novelistic mode that diverges from the model of nineteenth century novels that reinforce national boundaries and language. In his study of nineteenth century European novels, Franco Moretti describes the special ability of novels to represent the nation-state. In his discussion of historical novels, he notes:

State-building requires streamlining [...]: of physical barriers, and of the many jargons and dialects that are irreversibly reduced to a single national language. And the style of nineteenth-century novels – informal, impersonal, ‘common’ – contributes to this centralization more than any other discourse. In this, too, the novel is truly the symbolic form of the nation-state. (*Atlas of the European Novel* 45)

Moretti’s emphasis on the “streamlining” and “centralization” of both the geography and language of the nation in historical novels provides a useful point of departure for discussing the resistances of the novels by Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros. Rather than “streamlining” language by shaping a “single national language,” Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros multiply language and its sources. In mapping historical novels, Moretti notes that they tend to occur near internal borders of the nation and serve to erase those borders and, by extension, those internal differences (40). The divergences between the two novels discussed in this chapter and those explored in Moretti’s text are instructive. Castillo’s and Cisneros’s novels both serve not to erase internal difference, but rather to magnify these differences. The border that they smudge is not an internal one, but rather the national border itself, historicizing and thus denaturalizing it. These thematic and

aesthetic differences perhaps explain the formal generic differences between these novels and those that comprise Moretti's study. Cisneros and Castillo both present alternate histories in the form of novels, yet these novels break with the form of historical and other traditional novelistic genres by incorporating elements from a variety of distinct genres, both novelistic and from other literary, cultural, and historical sources.

Both *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento* and *So Far from God* emphasize the construction of histories and stories in large part through an investigation of national language. They present Chican@ linguistic difference as an important element of Chican@ U.S. and Mexican historiography. The two novels are written primarily in English, though they incorporate non-standard versions of English and varying amounts of Spanish. This is where the linguistic similarities of the two narratives end, though. In Castillo's novel, the narrator's voice follows grammatical and linguistic patterns that are attributable to Chican@s in the Southwestern United States, with an emphasis on that language's hybridity. The generic and historiographic structures of Castillo's novel mirror this hybridity. In *Caramelo*, meanwhile, there is a heavier infusion of Mexican Spanish (as opposed to Chican@ Spanish). The presence of Spanish language and grammatical structures alongside English language and grammatical structures in the text allows the narrator to examine both the possibilities and limitations of language, and to take a more critical stance toward language as the medium of historical representation.

“That's Spanish!”: Language and Historiography

Perhaps the most important element of the historiographic resistance of both *Caramelo* and *So Far from God* lies in their use of language. Contemporary Chican@

writers and scholars have argued that one of major forces behind the subjugation of Chican@ history is in the subjugation of Chican@ language. Alfred Arteaga explains that

[...]from the congress to the academy to the streets, over and over, incessantly, an unequal struggle goes on in which Anglo America strives to inhibit dialogue, to marginalize Chicanismo, and silence other tongues, and by synecdoche, silence other people. [...] Chicano subjectification is never far from the competition among languages. (12-13)

Both works thematize and implement their theories on Chican@ language throughout the texts. They present language in a way that averts this skewed “competition” among languages, opting instead for a representation that embraces bilingualism and the specific textures of Chican@ literary and spoken language.

The theories of both Cisneros and Castillo derive in part from the influence of Gloria Anzaldúa’s key linguistic theories. In her hybrid work originally published in 1987, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa explains the importance of language for her as a Chicana in the following way:

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers, rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (59)

Anzaldúa’s assertions are pivotal to an understanding of the politics of Chican@ linguistic expression, as she calls ethnic and linguistic identities “twin skin.” Just as

Anzaldúa argues for the hybridity of her experience as a Chicana growing up in the “borderlands,” she also argues for the hybridity of language. She insists on the validity of that language as a validation of her experience. It is important that for Anzaldúa, overcoming the “tradition of silence” involves not just hybridity of language in terms of use of both English and Spanish, but also in terms of her “woman’s voice” and her “poet’s voice.” She insists on the importance of literary (“poetic”) language.

Both Cisneros and Castillo incorporate Anzaldúa’s linguistic and creative theories in their writing, though *Caramelo* and *So Far from God* illustrate the implementation of these theories in different ways. Cisneros’s language is clearly steeped in Spanish linguistic structures, evident particularly in the grammatical structures of *Caramelo*. The novel includes plenty of Spanish language (always in italics, and at times translated though often unglossed), though the more conspicuous presence of Spanish exists in the novel’s usage of an English which adopts Spanish sayings and grammatical structures translated literally. Castillo’s language in *So Far from God*, meanwhile, is more clearly influenced by Chicano Spanish, using a “mestizo” language that is hybridized, including colloquialisms like double negatives that can be attributed as much to Chicano colloquial English speech patterns as to the grammatical structures of Spanish. Part of the difference between the two texts is attributable to their different geographical and experiential locations mentioned earlier. Castillo’s novel is firmly set in one Southwestern town, where the language has become hybridized in part as a result of its borderland location. Cisneros’s novel, on the other hand, travels primarily between Chicago, a city not known for its relationship to Mexico, especially during the period of the 1950 to 1970s covered in the novel, and Mexico City. Thus the discreet nature of the

geographical contexts of English and Spanish is more marked, though the two languages do become linked in the experiences represented in the texts. There are some confluences, however, between the two novels in terms of strategy, especially in their desire to engage in linguistic playfulness.

Ana Castillo has addressed her linguistic and aesthetic theories in part in an essay entitled “Un Tapiz: Poetics of Conscientización,” published in 1994 in a collection of her essays entitled *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. In “Un Tapiz,” the influence of Anzaldúa on Castillo’s thinking is clear, as she begins the piece with a “tapestry” of bits of intertwined text from Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, and Castillo’s own epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Later in the essay, Castillo describes the break in Chican@ poetics as follows:

Ours is a poetics no different than other literary movements throughout the ages. We are looking at what has been handed down to us by previous generations of poets and, in effect, rejecting, reshaping, restructuring, reconstructing that legacy and making language and structure ours, suitable to our moment in history. (165)

Like Anzaldúa, Castillo emphasizes a poetics that “[makes] language and structure ours.” She insists on the importance of appropriating language and structure, and adapting them to the purposes of Chicana literary production. In the epigraph to my chapter, which also comes from Castillo’s essay, she poses the question: “how could a language of those so different experientially from us, speak for those of us here who have long been denied a sense of belonging, a sense of historical ties to this nation, and indeed, to any nation?” (167). This question describes the intimate link, for Chicana writers, between language, nationality, and history. Like other theorists mentioned here, Castillo insists that Chican@s must develop language capable of addressing the experiences of communities

of people whose experiences belie participation in more than one nation and language but have been rejected by both.

Despite the seriousness with which Castillo addresses the issue of language, she also points to the pleasure of the word that arises from the linguistic situation of Chican@s who, because of their experience in more than one language, are more sensitive to the working of language in general. Castillo locates this linguistic playfulness in Mexican tradition:

One Mexican linguistic trait that we are heir to is the irresistibility of playing with language. Word-play for the Mexican Spanish speaker is contagious, a reflection of our sense of irony and humor about life. In the process of word play, of actively transforming one word into another and then another based on the similarity of sounds, we create new meaning or give the original thought a fusion of multiple meanings. (168)

In a comparative study of a variety of works that participate in “bilingual aesthetics,” entitled *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*, Doris Sommer notes the ease with which speakers of more than one language can engage in “bilingual games.” She insists on the richness that bilingualism brings to everyday experiences of language as well as literary texts, in part as a way to argue against U.S. anti-bilingual sentiment. She also discusses the serious disruptive possibilities of “bilingual games,” describing the ability of these games to bring up issues that “irritate the state”¹ (*Bilingual* 71-114).

Playful bilingualism is an element of both *Caramelo* and *So Far from God*. Many of the “bilingual games” in *Caramelo* have to do with questions of translation. In one of these instances, Lala quotes her father’s reaction to the birth of his first and only

¹ In a chapter sub-section called “Alter-nation,” Sommer explains that, “Like the lingua franca that a democracy speaks in multicultural environments, democratic culture takes on meaning from its *convivencia* with particular traditions. It will sing the bilingual blues, because losses of meaning are unavoidable effects of *alternancia* (code switching) where no one speaker masters all the codes. Maybe that is not a pleasing option for everyone. But learning to love it will prepare hearts for a mind to be democratic” (*Bilingual* 113-114).

daughter: “—*¡Otra vieja! Ahora, ¿cómo la voy a cuidar?*” (231). This quote is translated in the chapter endnotes in this way: “Tr. *Another dame! Now how am I going to take care of this one?*” (232). This translation is “translated” in another note that reads: “Tr. of Tr. *How am I going to protect her from men like me?*” (232). The narrator thus humorously deals with one of the problems of translation. The need for a translation of the first basic translation shows the need for cultural contextualization to explicate the expression’s meaning.

One example of a joke that derives from the exploration of language in *So Far from God* occurs toward the end of the novel. Our Lady of Fatima appears to La Loca in order to help her through her imminent death. Despite her metaphysical powers, Loca does not recognize the woman and the narrator describes Loca’s impressions as follows: “This lady looked like a nun. In fact, she was a nun. But she didn’t smell like nothing so Loca was not sure if she was a present nun or a past nun or maybe hasta una future subjunctive nun” (244). In this aside, the narrator uses colloquial speech (including the double negative “she didn’t smell like nothing”) and pokes fun at the connection between time and verb tenses, utilizing a mix of English and Spanish to describe Loca’s theory that the apparition might be “hasta una future subjunctive nun.” In part, the narrator seems to be poking fun at a representational aesthetic that is more overly concerned with grammatical propriety than the power of the story.

Castillo’s novel often humorously thematizes linguistic questions and communicative difficulties. The danger of uncritically embracing conventional language is highlighted in the text when Domingo, the “wayward husband” referred to in the title of the first chapter, has an argument with one of his wife’s *comadres* after Sofia’s

announcement of her plan to run for mayor of Tome, their unincorporated New Mexican town. During this incident, the two get upset at each other; each thinks that the other is trying to undermine Sofia's well-being and they begin to hurl *dichos*, axiomatic sayings, at each other. While the insults begin in a way that is relevant to the issue at hand, the recitation of wisdoms quickly gets off track. The *comadre* begins the argument with the saying "Semos como los frijoles, unos pa' 'riba y otros pa' 'bajo..." We are like beans boiling, some are going up and some are going down" (143). Domingo replies with a dicho that encourages her to "shut her trap" (144). Their back-and-forth takes an irreverent turn, however, when they run out of relevant *dichos*:

[The comadre] was just as quick to the draw. "¡A quien mala fama tiene, ni acompañes ni quieras bien!" He who has a bad reputation, do not accompany or love too dearly.

"¡Cuerpo de tentación y cara de arrepentimiento!" Tempting body and face of regret!

"¡Serás payaso, pero a mi no me entretienes!" You may be a clown, but you don't entertain *me*!

"STOP! Parale right now!" Sofi screamed at both her husband and her campaign manager comadre. "¡Chingao! The way you two are fighting you're gonna end up in bed together!" And that was no dicho, but actually sounded so wise, it stopped Domingo and the comadre in their tracks.

The comadre bit her bottom lip, astounded at Sofi's accusation. And yet, she was the one who started the personal innuendos with the dicho that said that people who have a bad reputation should not be accompanied or loved too well.

Domingo had surprised himself, too, at the way he had gone for the comadre's throat, who until that very hour, he hardly ever noticed and here he was telling her things like she had a tempting body but a regretful face! He looked at Sofi with an expression that was both apologetic and frustrated and left the room. (145)

The problem with convention, as illustrated in the above exchange, is that it leads the characters to say things that they clearly had no intention of saying and might later regret as a result of merely keeping to the specified format. It takes control away from the speaker, investing it instead in a traditional form that can work against the speaker's

intent. The English translations help to show the derailment in meaning. (The Spanish used by the narrator in *So Far from God* is usually not translated as it is part of the hybrid Southwestern Chican@ language used in the novel.)

Castillo's novel investigates both the negative and positive power of language in the character of Sofia's third daughter, Fe. Fe typifies the "sellout" Chicana in the novel. She is a bank teller through the first part of the story and seeks acceptance by the "gabachas" at work. She seems on-track to marry Tom, her male counterpart (the Chicano sellout) in the story until he gets cold feet a few days before the wedding. This rejection inspires the usually extremely proper Fe to scream. Her screaming fit lasts approximately one year and while her asocial younger sister Loca takes care of her, Fe becomes known in town as "La Gritona" in a linguistic nod to the mythical figure of "La Llorona." The failure of her American dream sparks Fe's inability to express herself in words, instead yelling throughout all of her waking hours. The shattering of Fe's dream of a large wedding seems to dislodge the silence that she maintained for so long. She makes a sound that is unintelligible beyond its opposition.

When Fe finally stops screaming, the lasting effect of her year-long fit is the fact that her voice comes in and out of audible range. The text represents this speech as one filled with blanks that signify the inaudible words, alternating with written words that represent the audible words. After Fe's eventual recovery from the break, she becomes reacquainted with a cousin who left New Mexico when she was a child. When Casimiro returns to town, he and Fe fall in love and become engaged. Sofia asks her daughter how it was that she met up with Casimiro again after all of their time apart. Fe responds: "Well, he __ came into __ bank one day __ open __ __ new account and there I was. __

there he was. And ___ rest ___ history...we liv__ happily ___ __ter!” (169). The chapter does not end with this quote, however. Instead, it ends with the following comment by the narrator: “And if ___ that ___ been true” (169). The narrator echoes Fe’s speech pattern here, with the blanks visually representing the various lacks in the situation, with a little reminder of the involved, non-objective role of the narrator. Just as there are holes in Fe’s attempt to utter the clichéd phrase “happily ever after,” there is a lack of practicality to Fe’s optimism and aspiration to the idea. She tries to achieve this narrative at any cost, and this cost is eventually her life when she goes to work for a chemical company in order to support her newfound middle class lifestyle. There is also a lack of clarity in her language; it is her newly acquired linguistic difficulty that eventually gets Fe fired from her comfortable bank job. These communication difficulties mirror the Chicana@ struggle with language and representational methods. The blanks that denote an inability to communicate resemble the representational silence faced by Chicana writers.

This difficulty of communication is also an important part of Fe’s experience with her new husband, Casimiro, as well. Shortly before her wedding, Fe notices something odd: “just outside [Casimiro’s] door she’d hear a soft but distinct ba-aaa sound” (165). Then, “After a few months, there was no doubt that her fiancé had this inbred peculiarity that couldn’t be helped, as I said, after three hundred years of shepherding and a long line of ancestors spending lifetimes of long, cold winters tending their herds” (175). Once Fe notices Casimiro’s propensity for bleating, she decides to forego the lavish wedding that she had envisioned, opting instead for a very “intimate” wedding with just relatives invited in order to avoid the embarrassment of unintended ba-aas during the

ceremony in front of others. This situation refers to modes of communication as “inbred”; though Casimiro has attended college and become an accountant, he communicates like a shepherd unconsciously because this was the communication method utilized by his ancestors. Though Fe tries to suppress the non-mainstream, non-middle class aspects of her identity, her language belies her difference as portrayed in the blank spaces of her speech; the same happens to Casimiro in his unconscious bleating. Casimiro’s bleats indicate his historical ties and communicational inheritance despite his successful acculturation. This can be read as a commentary on the usage of Chican@ Spanish as a means of communication, also inherited yet considered deficient in relation to “regular” English language expression.

One of the most marked linguistic differences between Castillo’s *So Far from God* and Sandra Cisneros’s novel *Caramelo* is their different engagement of Spanish language. In his text on postcolonial linguistics, Ismail S. Talib uses Cisneros’s first book *The House on Mango Street*, published in 1984, as an example to illustrate the concept of “interference,” which he says “occurs when one language shows an influence on another, or intrudes on its grammar” including the fact that “patterns are brought over from another language even if one is proficient in English” (143). Talib quotes Cisneros’s reflection on the influence of Spanish on that book: “If you take *Mango Street* and translate it, it’s Spanish. The syntax, the sensibility, the diminutives, the way of looking at inanimate objects – that’s not a child’s voice as is sometimes said. That’s Spanish! I didn’t notice that when I was writing” (Cisneros qtd. in Talib 143). Talib explains Cisneros’s reaction: “One reason why Cisneros was not aware that she was practically writing Spanish with English words, is that her base language, Spanish, had

interfered with her use of English” (143; italicization in the original). Cisneros attributes some of the poetic quality of her writing to its close connection to Spanish. In contrast to the “interference” of Spanish grammatical structures throughout the text, however, there is a dearth of Spanish language in the text. The first Spanish word (“tortilla”) does not appear until page 31 of the 110-page collection of intertwined vignettes. Meanwhile, Spanish meanings and intentions are presented in an English that mimics the Spanish usages. The few Spanish words used in the work are almost invariably glossed as well.

In *Caramelo*, however, Spanish language permeates the novel; Spanish phrases, song lyrics, quotes, chapter titles, and even punctuation marks saturate the work from beginning to end. A range of different Spanishes and Englishes are interwoven throughout the work and language is one of the primary foci of the novel as it traces the experiences of family members on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. experiential and historical divide. Like *So Far from God* but unlike *The House on Mango Street*, the “referential density” of *Caramelo* is extremely high; besides the copious usage of untranslated Spanish, Mexican and Mexican American pop culture references abound throughout.² The title and subtitle of the novel are Spanish, many of the chapter titles are Spanish, plenty of quotes and expressions are Spanish, and many of the experiences related in the novel occur in Spanish. Unlike the Spanish of Castillo’s text, though, the Spanish presented is not a U.S. Spanish but rather a Spanish from “the other side.” This relates in particular to the representation of the language of Lala’s father, as he is not Mexican American, but rather a native of Mexico City who moved to Chicago as an adult.

² The term “referential density” comes from Aldama’s text (32).

The first part of *Caramelo* follows the Reyes family's trek from Chicago to Mexico City. Lala notes the border crossing in terms of language:

As soon as we cross the bridge everything switches to another language. *Toc*, says the light switch in this country, at home it says *click*. *Honk*, say the cars at home, here they say *tán-tán-tán*. The *scrip-scrape-scrip* of high heels across *salttillo* floor tiles. The angry lion growl of the corrugated curtains when the shopkeepers roll them open each morning and the lazy lion roar at night when they pull them shut. The *pic, pic, pic* of somebody's faraway hammer. Church bells over and over, all day, even when it's not o'clock. Roosters. The hollow echo of a dog barking. Bells from skinny horses pulling tourists in a carriage, *clip-clop* on cobblestones and big chunks of horse *caquita* tumbling out of them like shredded wheat. (17)

The experience of border crossing for Lala is one that occurs most noticeably in the linguistic realm. She catalogs the different sounds and the different words associated with the different experiences on both sides of the border. In this description, the border is clearly defined as a linguistic marker; crossing the border entails an immediate linguistic shift.

Many of the meditations on language in *Caramelo*, however, chip away at this idea of a clear linguistic border between English and Spanish. In many of the passages of the novel, the distinction between English and Spanish is unclear, particularly because of the "interference" of Spanish grammar throughout much of the narrator's use of English. There is a plethora of examples in the text, but just one example of the Spanish grammatical formulations that occurs often in the text occurs in phrases like the exclamatory "How ironic is history!" (230). This phrase inverts the grammatically correct English placement of the subject and verb, making the phrase read like a literal English representation of Spanish grammatical form, in which that word order is grammatically correct. The "interference" of Spanish is not only more extensive than in *The House on Mango Street*, but also more clearly intentional. Indeed, the dominance of

Spanish linguistic structures can be arresting for the reader, forcing him/her to pause at certain phrases in an attempt to untangle the languages, perhaps only to eventually surrender.

A useful example of the linguistic meshing of English and Spanish in the narration occurs in a passage portraying an event that causes Lala to reflect on linguistic communication. During their summer in Mexico City, Lala is alone upstairs in her grandmother's house during a family party when the dining room ceiling collapses:

I scramble downstairs to tell everyone, only I don't have the words for what I want to say. Not in English. Not in Spanish.

—The wall has fallen, I keep saying in English.

—What?

—Upstairs. In the big dining room. The wall fell. Come and see.

—What does this kid want? Go see your mother.

—It's that the wall has fallen.

—Later, sweetie, not now, I'm busy.

—The wall in the dining room, it came down like snow.

—How this child loves to be a pest!

—What is it, my queen? Tell me, my heaven.

—*La pared arriba, es que se cayó. Ven, Papá, ven.*

—You go, Zoila. You're the mother.

[...] I tug Mother upstairs, but it's like tugging a punching clown. She tips and wobbles and laughs. Finally, we make it all the way up the stairs.

—Now, this better be good!...Holy Toledo!!!

[...]Mother shouts downstairs.—Everybody, quick! The ceiling's fallen!

¡Se cayó el cielo raso! Father says.

And then it is I learn the words for what I want to say. "Ceiling" and "*cielo.*" *Cielo*—the word Father uses when he calls me "my heaven." The same word the Little Grandfather reaches for when he wants to say the same thing. Only he says it in English. —My sky. (60-61)

Lala describes the confusion arising from a linguistic lacuna. As a child, Lala does not know the English or Spanish word for "ceiling" to explain the problem she faces. Lala repeats the dilemma in imprecise English several times, but gets no results. She even resorts to literary language, using the simile "it came down like snow," which cannot convey her message either. It is not until Lala speaks in Spanish that her mother is finally

moved to examine the situation. However, Lala's Spanish is also imprecise. She does not know the Spanish word for ceiling, instead saying that a wall fell, a translation of her English assertion. The confusion is heightened by a lack of attribution to the quotes; it is sometimes difficult to ascertain who is speaking.

Lala's mother Zoila is able to find the precise word to describe the occurrence, which she relates in English to Lala's father who then translates it to Spanish. When Lala's father speaks the words in Spanish, there is another poetic turn that gives cohesion to the situation, creating connections to other linguistic memories. The translations are multiple and cross from English to Spanish and back. Zoila apparently describes the fallen ceiling in English, which Inocencio then translates, thus teaching Lala the word in both languages at the same time. Lala then mentally translates the first part of the Spanish term for ceiling as "heaven," which she associates with her father's Spanish term of endearment for her. She then explains that her grandfather translates the same Spanish term of endearment to English, though he gives the alternate translation of "cielo": "sky." While here Lala asserts that her father calls her "my heaven" in Spanish, she translates two clearly Spanish terms of endearment a few lines earlier: "—What is it, my queen? Tell me, my heaven." Lala's father's florid Spanish contrasts with her mother's colloquial English peppered with almost antiquated phrases like "Holy Toledo!"

The passage above is an example of the linguistic meditations of the novel and its navigation of bilingual experience. English takes on the qualities of a foreign language; it is made to sound strange and almost unnatural to English-speaking readers. This forces the reader to experience the bilingual speaker's heightened sensitivity to the meanings behind the language, including what language reveals and what it conceals. The novel

critically reformulates both English and Spanish to better address binational Chicana experience, while thematically asserting the role of imagination in the formation of nations. Reminiscing about a song in the “Pilón” chapter, Lala explains her sentiments:

And I don’t know how it is with anyone else, but for me these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn’t exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there. (434)

Migration forces the imagination of a new national formulation, a space “between here and there.” The invention of that in-between country exists in the novel especially in the in-betweenness of the language.

Metanarratives, Metahistories

The narrative framing of these two novels is key. Before the reader enters into the narration of events in *Caramelo*, Cisneros’s novel confronts the reader with several framing tools. First, the reader encounters an epigraph that reads “*Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira.*” The next page contains an English translation of this Spanish phrase: “Tell me a story, even if it’s a lie.” The bilingual epigraph grammatically links storytelling and lying. This issue is further addressed on the following page in a preface entitled “Disclaimer, or I Don’t Want Her, You Can Have Her, She’s too Hocicona for Me.” The preface title follows the structure of the title of the novel, with title and then a subtitle introduced by the word “or,” which is a structure employed several times in chapter titles throughout the novel. This “or” is a convention common to novels predating the twentieth century, indicating a subtitle or alternate title. In the context of the novel, though, this move is also an indication of multiple possibilities, as one of the

significant goals of the novel is that of showing multiple perspectives to investigate the “other side” of official histories and stories.

The disclaimer begins as follows:

The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new.³ I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*.

To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away [...]. (superscripted reference number mine)

This disclaimer provides the reader with a way to understand the text's structure and mission. It addresses the importance of narrative in the process of history; the narrator states that “only the story is remembered and the truth fades away,” indicating that stories—which can include invention, exaggeration, and “healthy lies”—come to stand in for the truth, and perhaps *become* the truth. The narrator alternates between shunning and embracing the possibility of representing truth. The term “nothing but story” is a translation of the Spanish subtitle of the novel: “puro cuento.” This term indicates deception and/or invention, a departure from objective truth, yet it also contains the term “cuento” which means “story,” again linking storytelling and lying. This would seem to undermine the value of storytelling; however, the narrator does not reject storytelling for its inability to remain objective. Instead, she explains, “To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*.” This disclaimer ultimately serves as an assertion of the power of storytelling as the only thing that “is remembered,” thus serving as the basis for historical memory. It also works as a defense for the narrator as

³ This notion of weaving “bits” in order to tell a story is forwarded by Gloria Anzaldúa and Toni Morrison as well. See Chapters One and Two.

the presumed “hocicona,” who tells too much for her family’s taste. As a storyteller, she is relieved of the onus of telling the truth.

The narrator’s role as a storyteller, observer, and keeper of memories is indicated by the preface to Part One of *Caramelo*, “Recuerdo de Acapulco.” The word “recuerdo” in the title reminds the reader of the central importance of memory, previously broached in the disclaimer. The preface contains the narrator’s reflections on a photograph taken during a family vacation in Acapulco years before. Lala is the only family member missing from the portrait as she was “off by [her]self building sand houses” when the picture was taken (4). The narrator reflects: “It’s as if I didn’t exist. It’s as if I’m the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking, — ¿Un recuerdo? A souvenir? A memory?” (4). The narrator imagines herself removed from the family scene in the role of the photographer charged with creating a portrait of the family. The pitch she envisions delivering repeats the word “memory” three times in three languages—Spanish, French (loan-word), and English. The assertion of Lala’s absence from the portrait draws attention to the absences of the photographic representation. It causes the narrator to reflect on what is happening outside of the camera’s visual field just as much as she focuses on the representation provided by the photograph itself.

The narrator challenges the truthfulness of the photographic representation of that moment in the Reyes family’s life. Photography is usually assumed to objectively represent reality, as in the clichéd phrase “The camera doesn’t lie.” Yet the camera does seem to lie in the narrator’s account of the photograph. She describes the family members in the photograph: “The little kids, Lolo and Memo, making devil horns behind

each other's heads; the Awful Grandmother holding them even though she never held them in real life" (3). This sentence seems contradictory; the photograph ostensibly is capturing "real life," yet the narrator claims that the grandmother "never held" the children that she is holding in the photograph. This differentiation between the photograph's reality and "real life" emphasizes the representation of the former as false, staged, and not representative of the truths of the quotidian lives of the characters represented in it. The photograph is the "evidence" that remains of their trip and the narration of the first part of the novel can be read as a corrective intended to fill in the omissions of the photograph. It is similar to the historiographic goals of the novel, with the narrator attempting to present the history that lies outside of official history's field of vision, not relying on traditional forms of evidence.

The tension between fiction (or "lies") and historical reality in *Caramelo* is textually represented in a battle between Lala and "the Awful Grandmother"'s ghost for narrative control of the family's stories and history. Within the text, the two debate the representation of the grandmother's story. They differ in their opinions on which aspects of the story to include, which to exclude, and *how* to tell these stories. This leads the grandmother (whose dialogue is portrayed in bold in the text) and Lala (whose dialogue is in standard font) to reach the following deadlock:

Why did I think I could expect any understanding from you? You have the sensitivity of an ax murderer. You're killing me with this story you're telling. *Me maaataaas.*

Please. Quit the theatrics.

That's what comes from being raised in the United States. *Sin memoria y sin vergüenza.*

You're mistaken. I do too have shame. That's how I know where the stories are.

Don't you have any self-respect? I'm never going to tell you anything again. From here on, you're on your own.

The less you tell me, the more I'll have to imagine. And the more I imagine, the easier it is for me to understand you. Nobody wants to hear your invented happiness. It's your troubles that make a good story. Who wants to hear about a nice person? The more terrible you are, the better your story. You'll see... (205)

Lala and her grandmother negotiate the retelling of the grandmother's story, battling over who should tell the story, how to tell the story, and the implications of telling the story. At one point, the grandmother takes over an entire chapter of the novel. Each narrator critiques the other for telling the story in an inappropriate manner. Lala's grandmother often accuses Lala of lying and telling her story in an unrealistic way. Lala, meanwhile, accuses her grandmother of being overly melodramatic, casting her story as a *telenovela* (soap opera), and relating only the most flattering parts of her life. Lala wrests control from her grandmother nonetheless and again asserts the power of her imagination as a vehicle for understanding the past. She dismisses her grandmother's insistence on objectivity, showing that to be an impossible goal, instead striving for an imaginative recreation that has the power to help her understand her history. She asserts that her imagination is made up of "healthy lies" that function to "fill in the gaps" (188).

The unnamed narrator of Castillo's novel *So Far from God* also makes note of her subjectivity, peeking out from behind her semi-omniscient voice a few times in the text in order to comment on the story. The second to last chapter, for example, is entitled: "La Loca Santa Returns to the World via Albuquerque Before Her Transcendental Departure; and a Few Random Political Remarks from the Highly Opinionated Narrator." This chapter title directly proclaims the narrator's presence, attributing political remarks to her. Another metanarrative comment comes in the title of another chapter: "What Appears to Be a Deviation of Our Story but Wherein, with Some Patience, the Reader

Will Discover That There Is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account.” This title hints at the possibilities of various ways of understanding an “account,” functioning much like the “or” that occurs so frequently in the titles of chapters in Cisneros’s novel.

Narrators directly addressing their subjectivity comprise just one metanarrative technique employed by the two novels. The position of these narrators vis-à-vis the telling of their narratives mirrors those narrators’ positions vis-à-vis the histories with which they engage. Both focus on the subjectivity of historiographies, explicitly challenging official histories of the United States and Mexico through their metahistorical critiques. This critique mirrors similar shifts in historiographic studies, as elucidated by Hayden White who coined the term “metahistory.” In his essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” White draws attention to the similarities of historiography and fictional narratives in their articulation through linguistic and narrative structures. He describes historical narratives as “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (82; italicization in the original). In the essay, White focuses on narrative elements employed by historiography, delineating different types of “emplotment,” which he defines as “the encodation of the facts contained in [a] chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures” (83).

Preoccupation with the “emplotment” of the binational histories discussed in both *Caramelo* and *So Far from God* is evident in the writers’ choice of genre. Both Castillo and Cisneros choose genres that do not conform to the literary realism usually associated with both historical narratives and historical fiction. Both use primary genres that become associated with women’s storytelling and women’s histories in the two novels:

Cisneros focuses primarily on the *telenovela* genre⁴ as translated to text, while Castillo makes extensive use of parody in relation to various literary genres, including magical realism. Yet at the same time, both Cisneros and Castillo produce generically hybrid novels. *Caramelo*, for example, includes the paratextual elements (chapter notes, chronology, etc.) usually associated with historical texts, while using metafictional techniques often associated with postmodern fiction. *So Far from God* also engages with elements of postmodern fiction, emphasizing intertextuality by incorporating narrative elements from early modern novels.⁵

Caramelo's participation in the *telenovela* genre is marked by the incorporation of melodrama to investigate relationships and histories, primarily related to the stories of the female protagonists. Nods to this genre are made throughout the entire work and constitute an organizing principle that resists mainstream literary trends, instead harking to an ostensibly Mexican mode of expression. In one of the opening scenes of the novel, Lala recounts a *telenovela* moment, one that leads her mother to exclaim: "Mexican women are just like the Mexican songs, *locas* for love":

Once Aunty almost tried to kill herself because of Uncle Fat-Face.
—My own husband! What a barbarity! A prostitute's disease from my own husband! Imagine! Ay, get him out of here! I don't ever want to see you again. ¡Lárgate! You disgust me, *me das asco*, you *cochino*! You're not fit to be the father of my children. I'm going to kill myself! Kill

⁴ *So Far from God* was published in 1993, which falls between the publication dates of Cisneros's works *The House and Mango Street* and *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento*. Castillo's play with form seems to have influenced Cisneros's novel. The paperback version of *So Far from God* contains a blurb by Cisneros which includes the following comments: "Goddamn! Ana Castillo has gone and done what I always wanted to do—written a Chicana *telenovela*—a novel roaring down Interstate 25 at one hundred and fifteen miles an hour with an almanac of Chicanoismo [...]. *Dale gas* girl!" *So Far from God*, however, can only marginally be considered a "Chicana *telenovela*" while Cisneros's *Caramelo*, published nine years after Castillo's novel though she had apparently already begun work on the novel by then, explicitly draws on that style.

⁵ Frederick Luis Aldama identifies the style of the chapter titles, for example, as one that "create[s] intertextual bridges with such writers as Cervantes, Fielding, and Swift" (34-35).

myself!!! Which sounds much more dramatic in Spanish. —*¡Me mato!*
¡¡¡Me maaaaaaaatooooo!!! The big kitchen knife, the one Auntie dips in
a glass of water to cut the boy’s birthday cakes, pointed toward her own
sad heart.

Too terrible to watch. Elvis, Aristotle, and Byron had to run for
the neighbors, but by the time the neighbors arrived it was too late. Uncle
Fat-Face sobbing, collapsed in a heap on the floor like a broken lawn
chair, Auntie Licha cradling him like the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus after
he was brought down from the cross, hugging that hiccupping head to her
chest, murmuring in his ear over and over, —*Ya, ya. Ya pasó.* It’s all
over. There, there, there. (11)

Not only does the form follow that of a Mexican melodrama, but the punctuation mirrors
that of Mexican texts, with quotation marks replaced by em dashes. The English
incorporates Spanish phrasing, as in the exclamation “What a barbarity!” which is a
literal translation of the Spanish exclamation “¡Qué barbaridad!” It appears that the
author chooses to use the *telenovela* genre in part as a way to “Mexican-ize” the story,
invoking a storytelling tradition linked to Spanish language and Mexican women—the
latter is evidenced in the stereotype uttered by Zoila, Lala’s mother who was born on the
U.S. side of the border, about Mexican women as “locas for love.” Yet the narrator also
pokes fun at the *telenovela* genre. For example, as a footnote, she describes ways to
make ordinary phrases sound like ones that would be uttered in a *telenovela*, gently
mocking the melodramatic form despite the fact that she finds it apt for conveying
information about her family.

In the scene cited above, described as a reenactment of the *pietà*, the theatrics end
with Lala’s aunt in a position of power over her husband. Uncle Fat-Face is the one
reduced to a sobbing, hiccupping, infantilized “heap.” Throughout the novel, women’s
stories tend to unfold in relationship to love stories and so the choice of the *telenovela*
genre helps to ensure a focus on women’s lives, especially in relation to their personal

and familial relationships. After all, the primary setting for most soap operas is the home, a space traditionally dominated by women but often ignored by historians. Telling the lives of the women in the form of the *telenovela* also demonumentalizes history. It is given shape by a popular genre that is not weighed down with the responsibility of being realistic. It allows for fantasy and exaggeration, two traits that the author embraces.

Magical realism, as employed by Ana Castillo in *So Far from God* also becomes a genre that allows the narrator to focus on the histories of women. Frederick Luis Aldama includes Castillo's novel in his discussion of postcolonial texts that use "magicorealism." Aldama distinguishes between "magicorealism" as ornamental gimmick or "rebellious aesthetic" which questions established literary modes. Aldama includes Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* in this latter category of magical realist works, though it also interacts with several other literary traditions besides that of magical realism.⁶ By engaging with various traditions in a "self-reflexive" and "metacritical" way, Aldama argues that Castillo offers commentary on predominant (and dominating) narrative structures, analyzing both their usefulness as well as their limitations, and creating new methods of narrative engagement (35). The novel begins with a chapter title ("An Account of the First Astonishing Occurrence in the Lives of a Woman Named Sofia and Her Four Fated Daughters; and the Equally Astonishing Return of Her Wayward Husband") that invokes the loquacious style of Cervantes while the plot begins in a way that seems to emerge from a García Márquez novel. Despite these invocations, however, Castillo eventually turns these traditions on their heads, acting as critic rather than mere replicator.

⁶ Though Aldama uses the term "magicorealism," I use the more traditional term "magical realism" when not referring specifically to his concepts.

The main “re-formation” of the magical realist tradition in Castillo’s novel, according to Aldama, is its “engendering” of the form, portraying the magical realist realm within predominantly feminine spaces (Aldama 76-89). Castillo’s novel is female-focused; the main characters are Sofia and her four daughters: Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and Loca. The magical realist frame allows the narrator to reference mythology and folk tales as native elements of “magic” in the text. There are also various magical real rebirths in the novel, from La Loca’s return from the dead to Caridad’s miraculous return to her former beauty after a violent mutilation to Esperanza’s return to Tome as a ghost to Sofia’s metaphorical political rebirth in her collectivization of the community of Tome. Aldama explains that Castillo parodies “masculinist magicorealist novels penned by García Márquez, Rudolfo Anaya, Victor Villaseñor, and so on” in part by populating the novel with women and giving narrative control to a Chicana narrator (86). *So Far from God* thus participates in the magical realist narrative tradition, using it as a powerful non-realist mode, while also critiquing its traditionally masculinist usages. Using magical realism, Castillo traces a female genealogy much like Cisneros does with the *telenovela* genre. She also layers female genealogies; besides the familial genealogy, she also incorporates goddesses, mythical women, and religious figures who stand alongside the powerful women of Sofi’s family as part of a female history. The “real” element of the magical realist genre also allows the book to reference specific moments of “objective” history, including the U.S.-Mexican War, World War II, Pinochet’s coup in Chile, the Vietnam War, and the spread of HIV.

These shifts in narrative voice and genre choices in *Caramelo* and *So Far from God* portend some of the important shifts in national and community histories as

presented in both novels. Lala, the narrator-historian of *Caramelo*, presents national history in a way that demonumentalizes and personalizes it. In so doing, she looks to dismantle or at least uncover the structure of official histories that do not quite tell the whole truth of important historical moments, at least as experienced by her family members. She also attempts to change the “emplotment” and narrative content of national history, highlighting the relation between the two. The novel explores the personal consequences of events of greater national significance. The narrator explores moments of importance to both United States and Mexican history, prodding the memories of her family members and using her imagination to fill in the gaps, thus blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction. Lala continually attempts to find a truth beyond the reported facts of history, and the narration attempts alternative modes of representation in order to combat this official history, using tropes such as those of the *telenovela*, and including elements popular culture in addition to events treated in official histories.

Lala often deconstructs nationalist discourse and brings it into the realm of family history, making national symbols stand for private relationships and experiences. For example, the first chapter is entitled “Verde, Blanco, y Colorado.” This is a reference to the colors of the Mexican flag, yet in the chapter this title refers to the colors of the three cars in the Reyes family caravan racing south from Chicago to Mexico City on a family trip. In this chapter, national signifiers give way to personal experience. The eagle and the serpent are another national symbol representing Mexico, yet Lala again shifts their significance. She explains that “For a long time I thought the eagle and the serpent on the Mexican flag were the United States and Mexico fighting. And then, for an even longer

time afterward, I thought of the eagle and the serpent as the story of Mother and Father” (235). Lala does not address the official symbolism attached to the eagle and the serpent, instead using the symbol first as a way to understand her own binational history and then as a way to understand the relationship between her parents.

National geography is similarly personalized in Lala’s narrative. Her family’s experiences take place on both sides of the border; Lala describes their Chicago neighborhood with the same level of detail that she uses to describe Mexico City. Their movement south across the border is one of the first descriptions of the Reyes family and indicates their binational identity. Not coincidentally, the narrator is named Celaya, a toponym related to an important moment of Mexican national history. Lala (the family’s nickname for Celaya) discusses her name in a chapter called “All Parts from Mexico, Assembled in the U.S.A., or I Am Born.” This chapter title is a playful invocation of the language associated with ever-globalizing industrial production while reminding the reader of the role of both nations in the formation of Lala’s identity. In this chapter, Lala explains that her mother names her, whereas her father named her six older brothers. Lala refers to the town of Celaya as the place “where Pancho Villa met his Waterloo” (231). In the last three sentences of the chapter, Lala describes her father’s soft spot for his only daughter, and hints at the heartache that his doting will cause him as she grows up: “Celaya, a town in Guanajuato where Pancho Villa met his nemesis. Celaya, the seventh child. Celaya, my father’s Waterloo” (232). The historic battle of Celaya is invoked in this chapter, but its significance is simultaneously shifted. Lala describes the battle of Celaya not in relation to its significance for Mexican national history, instead focusing on the significance of this battle for the historical figure of Pancho Villa. She

then uses the fact of Pancho Villa's defeat at Celaya as a way to metaphorically describe the relationship between father and daughter, referring to herself as her father's "Waterloo." This narrative gesture, of referring to moments of official historical importance only to quickly shift back to moments of family importance, occurs frequently in Lala's narration.

Lala also shifts historical discourse by attempting to recover the "truth" of her family members' experiences of moments of national historical significance beyond what is recounted in official historical documents. This process is clear in Lala's investigation and reconstruction of her grandfather's involvement in the Mexican War and her father's United States military service in the mid- to late-1940s. Lala's grandmother often mentions Lala's grandfather's role in the Mexican Revolution. Her grandmother keeps, locked in a bureau, the three ribs her husband had removed as a result of his apparently heroic actions during the Ten Tragic Days, along with a letter from the government thanking him for his service. Yet Lala stumbles upon the truth: her grandfather was no hero. He lost those ribs as a result of his collapse from "susto" while trying to desert his post and running across a chaotic, violence-plagued Mexico City toward his mother's house.

Lala's father also has a letter signed by Harry Truman thanking him for his military service. This is a source of pride for her father. Yet Lala recounts that Inocencio only enlisted as a way to earn legal residency and escape jail after getting into a fight against soccer match attendees who did not properly respect the Mexican national anthem. The fact of his military service does not prevent Inocencio from being questioned by immigration officials; he is forced to prove his legal status by showing

Truman's letter to the men who are not sympathetic to Inocencio's humiliation. Male involvement in history is thus deflated and personalized. Historical moments are less important in their ramifications for the nation than they are in terms of their effects on the personal lives of the individuals in the Reyes family.

The primary focus of the novel is the history of the women, as Lala focuses on recovering her grandmother's story. The revelation of women's history in the novel requires a look beyond those moments central to national history, as women's experiences often lie outside of this narrative frame. This shift in perspective is clear in the gendered conceptions of history displayed by Lala and her boyfriend Ernesto. When they run away from the Reyes' new town of San Antonio, Texas to Mexico City to get married, the couple gets a hotel room overlooking the Zócalo. Ernesto exclaims, "Man, Lala, just think! Everything happened in this square. The Ten Tragic Days, the Night of Sorrows, the hanging, shootings, the pyramids and temples, the stones taken apart to build the mansions of the conquistadores" (383). He thinks back on centuries of history overlapping on the square, from pre-Conquest indigenous history to national history. Meanwhile, Lala states in an internal monologue, "But I'm thinking of the women, the ones who had no choice but to jump from these bell towers not so long ago" (383). Thus while Ernesto thinks about the commonly known parts of history, Lala wonders about its silence. She considers the stories of anonymous women who are lost to historical memory, a memory that she seeks to imaginatively recover throughout the text.

Because Lala collaborates with her grandmother to tell her story, the family matriarch acquires an identity. She is no longer known simply as "the Awful Grandmother," instead acquiring a first name—Soledad—and a history that explains her

development and narrates the experiences that led her to become “awful.” Eventually, Lala’s narrative allows her to reconnect with her grandmother after Soledad’s death, and Soledad’s ghostly spirit gives her advice that guides her.

Despite her resistance to nationalist historical narratives, Lala does not merely deflate moments of national history. She also attempts to insert important moments of U.S. and Mexican cultural and artistic history into national historical discourse. This is most clear in the historical references of the paratextual elements of the novel, including the chapter endnotes and epigraphs, and the chronology located at the end of the book. The novelistic present of *Caramelo* occurs in the second half of the twentieth century, though the family history retold reaches back in time to the turn of the twentieth century and earlier, while the chronology that appears at the end of the book describes events from 1519 through 2002. This chronology covers history that precedes the formation of modern nations, and proceeds to show the history of the shifting borders of the nations of the United States and Mexico. At the same time, the novel includes descriptions of moments and work important to cultural and artistic history, including song lyrics, tales about the lives of actresses and magicians, and descriptions of comic books. The chronology that follows the narrative compactly displays the leveling of political and cultural histories in the variety of its references. For example, an entry for 1963 marks an Elvis Presley movie filmed in Mexico, which is immediately followed by an entry for 1965 which discusses amendments to the United States’ Immigration and Nationality Act. This type of gesture, repeated often throughout the text, destabilizes the primacy of nationality, especially as reflected in political history.

The epigraph of *So Far from God* helps to illuminate the centrality of the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. The infamous quote from Porfirio Díaz, tyrannical former president of Mexico, describes that country as: “So far from God—so near the United States.” Thus, though the story specifically discusses the lives of five women, it is also presented in a way that makes reference to a larger historical context of the relationship between the United States and Mexico, as evidenced by the echoing of Díaz’s quote in the title of the novel.

Doña Felicia, the healer who takes Caridad as an apprentice, is one representative of the lived experiences of this historical connection between the countries. The healer seems to be at least a hundred years old and to have lived through various important historical moments in Mexico and the United States. Her first husband died in Zapata’s army; her second husband tied railroad tracks in the U.S. before the Depression; she became a *bracera* during World War II, then joined the Army as a nurse in order to avoid deportation; as a nurse, she went to Europe where she had an affair with a French soldier who eventually abandoned her to return to his wife; and eventually she returns to the United States to raise her children and live in a tiny New Mexico town as a healer. Doña Felicia’s experience of history entails a long-term memory of lives lived between Mexico and the United States.

As Cisneros does in *Caramelo*, in *So Far from God* Castillo destabilizes the power of the national imaginary in her representation of the novel’s geography. Unlike *Caramelo* though, in which movement of the characters between the two countries is constant, *So Far from God* establishes national fluidity in relation to a stable geographical position for the novel. Many of the main characters in the novel come from families who

have lived in the small town of Tome, New Mexico for generations while nations have shifted around them over time. The community remains stable in the face of unstable national boundaries. This tie to the land is central, especially considering the position of the Southwest in its proximity to the border with Mexico.⁷

When Sofia loses her house as a result of her husband's gambling (she had owned a parcel of land attached to the home before he gambled that away twenty years before), she commiserates with one of her friends:

“I know what you mean, comadre,” empathized la Rita of Belen. “... You know that my great-great-grandparents were the direct grantees of a land grant from King Felipe II, the very land *I* grew up on as a child. Except that what I grew up on was barely enough to plant a little corn, calabasas, chiles, nomás, and graze a few goats and sheep to keep us alive.

“First the gringos took most of our land away when they took over the territory from Mexico—right after Mexico had taken it from Spain and like my vis-abuelo used to say, ‘Ni no’ habiamo dado cuenta,’ it all happened so fast! Then, little by little, my familia had to give it up ‘cause they couldn’t afford it no more, losing business on their churros and cattle. (217)

This account of the history of the land of Tome, New Mexico challenges the notion of Mexicans as immigrants who “invade” the United States in order to benefit from its riches. Instead, it represents a stable community of people whose nations and nationality shift around them.⁸ This reminds readers of the mutability of the border between the two nations, showing it as historically constituted rather than natural. It also attempts to

⁷ For an analysis of the connection between Chican@ colonial history and cultural dialogues, see Alfred Arteaga's “An Other Tongue” in *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*. See Frederick Luis Aldama's *Postethnic Narrative Criticism* for a discussion of the connections between U.S. “ethnic” and British postcolonial novels.

⁸ This assertion of the sovereign presence of Mexicans on land that became part of the United States and the unjust treatment of those inhabitants are two issues discussed by some of the texts of the Arte Publico Press Recovery project under Nicolás Kanellos. One of these includes the 1885 Anglophone novel *The Squatter and the Don* by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton. Adopting the sentimental novel form, Ruiz de Burton's novel inverts the traditional U.S. representations of Mexicans, portraying the Americans as squatters who steal the land of the noble “Don,” the Californio who rightfully owns the land. Ana Castillo wrote an introduction to the 2004 edition of the novel published by The Modern Library.

change the dominant notion in which Chican@s are seen as rootless and outside of history.

The narrator of *So Far from God* connects the long history of the land to the stories of the region:

The land was old and the stories were older. Just like a country changed its name, so did the names of their legends change. Once, La Llorona may have been Matlaciuatl, the goddess of the Mexican who was said to prey upon men like a vampire! Or she might have been Ciuapipiltin, the goddess in flowing robes who stole babies from their cradles [...]. (161)

This assertion of community and stability in juxtaposition to national instability elucidates one of the paradoxes facing theorists of nationalism according to Benedict Anderson. Anderson describes this paradox in *Imagined Communities* as “The objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists” (5). The uncovering of this paradox in *So Far from God* de-naturalizes the institution of the nation as only a recent development, and references to an older history related to mythology and storytelling. It privileges adaptation and syncretism as modes of cultural survival.

From Linguistic to Ethical Questions

Both *Caramelo* and *So Far from God* end with a shift from their incipits which both emphasize the power of storytelling toward questions of “real world” politics and ethics. Castillo’s novel *So Far from God* begins with a chapter that presents a removed story world, discussing issues related to family and magic. Throughout the novel, the characters become ever more politically involved; Esperanza dies while covering the Gulf War as a reporter, Loca stages a boycott and leads a protest, and Sofi runs for mayor

of Tome. These issues which are peppered throughout the novel become the main focus of the last chapter of the novel, which details the governing strategies of the organization of which Sofi becomes president: Mothers of Martyrs and Saints, or the M.O.M.A.S. The narrator posits this group as an alternative type of organization, based on democratic values and gender equality, though its formation emphasizes the role of maternity. The novel closes on a note of positive political formation and the power of community. The protagonists of the novel articulate a politics that is based on the experiences of their local community.

Caramelo, meanwhile, contains several “endings.” There is a chapter that immediately precedes the word “Fin,” which is one ending. Then there is an additional chapter entitled “Pilón,” followed by a 5-page chronology, and finally an ending epigraph, each of which can be seen as alternative ending. The final narrative chapter of the novel is entitled “The Children and Grandchildren of Zoila and Inocencio Reyes Cordially Invite You to Celebrate Thirty Years of Marriage.” It textually represents a multitude of voices, all family members interjecting with unattributed, overlapping comments. In this chapter, during the final conversation of the novel between Lala and her father, Inocencio asks Lala to promise her silence. He tells her:

Only you have heard these stories, daughter, understand? *Sólo tú*. Be dignified, Lala. *Digna*. Don't be talking such things like the barbarians, *mi vida*. To mention them makes our family look like *sinvergüenzas*, understand? You don't want people to think we're shameless, do you? Promise your papa you won't talk about these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise. (429-430)

Lala promises despite the fact that the novel itself works to break this promise. The reader must then attempt to understand why the narrator does this. Part of the reason might lie in the chronology, which ends with a comment not tied to any dated entry: “All

over the world, millions leave their homes and cross borders illegally.” It seems that part of the explanation for Lala’s broken promise is her belief expressed throughout the story that it is important to tell the stories not told in official histories. She sees this as a duty and accepts the consequences. The epigraph that closes the novel, on the unnumbered page following the chronology, reads: “*¡Ya pa’ que te cuento!*”⁹ This exclamatory epigraph suggests the closing of the “cuento,” that the narrator’s job is done, but the colloquial expression can alternately be read as a question: “Why do I tell you?” There is one character in the novel—Lala’s mother Zoila—that undergoes a traditionally understood political “conscientización,” beginning to read works by Studs Terkel, Paulo Freire, Sor Juana, and Malcolm X, and rejecting the Vietnam War. However, in *Caramelo* the major thrust of political questioning seems to reside in the linguistic realm: Who tells stories and histories? Why? For whose benefit? At what cost?

⁹ Unlike the first epigraph, this one is not translated on the following page.

CHAPTER SIX

Reconstructing Vernacular Histories: National Language and Narrative Form in Vincenzo Consolo's *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio*

“Che dici?” chiese il Mandralisca che non capiva quel linguaggio strano. L'uomo non rispose e gli rise un'altra volta. Il Mandralisca s'accorse allora che le spalle, il petto, i fianchi, le braccia di quell'uomo erano solcati da segni neri e viola, la pelle scorticata, il sangue raggrumato [...]. (Consolo *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* 100)

L'ORIGINAU E DAA
LA FAM SANZA FIN

DI

LIBIRTAA (Consolo *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio*
159)

The representation of the history of the Italian Risorgimento in Vincenzo Consolo's 1976 novel *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* hinges on its meditation on language and narrative form. The novel examines the role of language in shaping the nation by establishing order and creating citizens while actively excluding some individuals from participation in shaping and defining the nation. Like the other works discussed in this dissertation, Consolo's novel focuses on the connection between historiographic power and language. The problems between the government formed after Garibaldi's expedition and the peasants who rebel in Alcàra Li Fusi in Sicily arises from the incompatibility of their languages, particularly evident in the ambiguous word usage that leads to the misunderstanding of their distinct motivations and goals. The peasants act on an interpretation of the Risorgimento's goals that recognizes their local problems related to land ownership and class iniquities, which they interpret as an opening to “far

giustizia con le nostre mani dei nemici di qua” (111), rather than acting in accordance with the perspective of the nationalists who see the landing at Marsala as the first step toward the end goal of national unification and independence from foreign rule. The violence of the peasants, then, is deemed unacceptable because it is not compatible with the goal of national formation but rather serves the localized goal of personal “justice.” Thus, the peasants’ participation in the rebellion is sublimated and deemed criminal whereas the violence perpetuated in the name of the nationalist goal is validated as part of the story of the creation of the nation; in this way, the peasants are left outside of this narrative. The novel explains that the loss of the peasants’ experiences in the historical record of the Risorgimento is effected in part through language. The language used in legal and political documents serves the nationalists’ goals and becomes part of the historical record, while the vernacular is forgotten. Consolo seeks to recuperate alternative interpretations of the Risorgimento in part by reconstructing vernacular language in the retelling of the rebellion at Alcàra Li Fusi.

The novel follows the story of a landed intellectual, Enrico Pirajno, the baron of Mandralisca, and his increasing political engagement in the years leading up to 1860. The action of the novel culminates with the rebellion at Alcàra Li Fusi that occurred in May 1860, only days after the landing of the *Mille* at Marsala. When those who took part in the violence face criminal charges, Mandralisca writes a letter in their defense. In his letter, Mandralisca attempts to relate the experiences of the peasants, yet he also articulates his struggle to envision the language and narrative form best capable of representing these experiences. Mandralisca’s struggle with language and form emblemizes the experimentation in the novel with different linguistic and narrative

forms in its own struggle to imagine the voice of those left outside of national history. The text presents a multiplicity of overlapping voices, languages, and forms as the key to its historical interpretive mode which emphasizes the variety of experiences of a given historical moment rather than a single, definitive, valedictory representation of that experience.

Questions of narrative language and form in Consolo's novel can be located within Sicilian literary tradition. This fact is indicated in *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio's* epigraph from Leonardo Sciascia's essay "L'ordine delle somiglianze." In "L'ordine delle somiglianze," Sciascia discusses Sicilian tradition citing the writers Giuffredi, Verga, Antonello, Pirandello, Brancati, and Lampedusa (24). Sciascia discusses the importance of location as follows:

Un critico letterario dei giorni nostri ha dichiarato che non riesce a capire come si possa legare ad un luogo una vita, e l'opera di tutta una vita; per parte nostra non riusciamo a capire come si possa far critica senza aver capito questo inalienabile e inesauribile rapporto, in tutte le sue infinite possibilità di moltiplicarsi e rifrangersi, di assottigliarsi, di mimetizzarsi, di essere rimosso e nascosto. Nessuno è mai riuscito a rompere del tutto questo rapporto, a sradicarsi completamente da questa condizione; e i siciliani meno degli altri. (24-25)

Consolo's work is also firmly located in the history particular to the island. In Consolo's "Nota dell'autore vent'anni dopo," included in the 1997 Mondadori edition of *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio*, Consolo describes the original seed for the novel:

Al primo ordine, appartenevano la conoscenza del luogo, fisico e umano, in cui ero nato e m'ero trovato a vivere – i paesi dei Nèbrodi, di serena natura e di sommessa storia, con rari sopratoni di ribellismi, di rivolte popolari, come quella risorgimentale di Alcàra Li Fusi, tramandata più dal racconto orale che dalla storiografia [...]. (176-177)

Thus, Consolo ties his focus on Sicily to a history that is closer to oral traditions than historiography, signaling a distance between the two. He locates within his place of

origin a “submerged” history that includes popular rebellions. This rebellion provides a certain tension regarding Sicily and its role in the Italian nation. In an essay deconstructing popular perceptions of the South, Gabriella Gribaudo notes that stereotypes regarding the *Mezzogiorno* have often obscured the role of the region in Italian history. Gribaudo notes that the South has often been represented as “outside history” in Italian historical discourse, especially in the transformative periods of the Risorgimento, World War II, and the post-war period (“Images of the South” 87). In contrast to the representation of the South as “outside history” in relation to Italian national history, Consolo’s novel focuses on Sicilian moments of historical significance unrecognized by the general national narrative of the Risorgimento.

According to Consolo, the topic of the historical novel, particularly with a focus on the Risorgimento, is an almost obligatory topic for a Sicilian writer. He notes the link between his novel and the history of novels in this tradition: “È ancora la rilettura della letteratura che investe il Risorgimento, soprattutto siciliana, ch’era sempre critica, antirisorgimentale, che partiva da Verga e, per De Roberto e Pirandello, arrivava allo Sciascia del *Quarantotto*, fino al Lampedusa del *Gattopardo*” (“Nota” 179). And yet Consolo also notes his desire to move beyond these novels stylistically. Regarding *Il sorriso dell’ignoto marinaio*, Consolo states,

[...] per me il suo linguaggio e la sua struttura volevano indicare il superamento, in senso etico, estetico, attraverso mimesi, parodia, fratture, sprezzature, oltranzie imaginative, dei romanzi d’intreccio dispiegati e dominate dall’autore, di tutti i linguaggi logici, illuministici, che, nella loro limpida, serena geometrizzazione, escludevano le “voci” dei margini. (182)¹

¹ This quarrel with Enlightenment ideas of rationality as excluding voices of the margins is a recurrent one in other text discussed in this dissertation; I discuss this issue at length in my chapter on Toni Morrison’s novels.

While Consolo's negative judgment of the Risorgimento is not new, the structure and language he uses to investigate this view is. He indicates that this shift away from the enlightened logic and language is what allows him to criticize the Risorgimento in a way that allows him to attempt the inclusion of the "voci' dei margini." Consolo's linguistic shift is influenced stylistically by literary shifts of the time (including a particular debt to Pier Paolo Pasolini in relation to questions of language) and the politics of '68.² For Consolo, the best way to question the historiography that allows for the exclusion of marginalized voices is through a shift in language and form to accompany that shift in interpretation. This conscious representation of the connection between historical philosophy and linguistic and narrative form concretely links Consolo's text to the other texts explored in this dissertation.

National Language and History

Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio presents a sustained examination of the link between language and power. In the novel, the language of the powerful is the standard, often technical, Italian that is displayed in the various newspaper articles, published memoirs, scholarly work, and legal briefs included in the text. This language is incomprehensible to the peasants whose language is primarily oral, not written and thus not accessible to historians who rely on printed material. The peasants' voice, then, is one that is lost to history because it remains unrecorded. The link between history and political power is echoed by Mandralisca when he writes, "E cos'è stata la Storia sin qui

² Another point of reference of the period which Consolo has rejected is that of Gruppo 63. Consolo criticizes the group's "pseudo-aphasia" for its "eras[ure of] all languages that came from tradition" and use of "an artificial new language that was difficult to use" ("Fireflies" 282). He ties their linguistic practice to that of the Futurists, "the movement of Marinetti that ended up in the arms of Mussolini" ("Fireflies" 282).

[...]? Una scrittura continua di privilegiati” (118). Mandralisca attempts to create a written record of the peasants’ experiences at Alcàra Li Fusi by recovering the words that they write on the walls of the prison in which they are held pending judgment. In a similar way, the novel attempts to recover experiences of the marginalized by recovering marginalized languages (especially dialect) while experimenting with the ways in which this language is represented in the text. In this way, the novel attempts to reconstruct, or at least reconstruct the absence of the missing voices in the history of the Risorgimento. The novel incorporates both traditional official historical sources and the imagined voices of those whose perspectives are not discernible in those official historical sources. The novel integrates into its own hybrid language Sicilian dialect (to which Mandralisca pays considerable attention), Italianized dialect, standard Italian, high and low registers, legal language, scientific language, and historical language. On a formal level, this plurilingualism indicates the shift in historical interpretation indicated by the content of Consolo’s novel.³ In this way, the novel seeks a broader, and ultimately more ambivalent, understanding of Italian history.

The text focuses ample attention on the communication gap that exists between the upper and lower classes of Sicily during the Risorgimento. Their languages, for the most part, remain mutually incomprehensible. One communicative failure due to

³ In a 2001 interview, Consolo laments the loss of the richness of variety in Italian language and states, “Io credo che l’unica speranza sia l’immigrazione che sta avvenendo da noi, che comporterà degli apporti dal basso che arricchiranno la nostra lingua. Ci sono già degli scrittori del Terzo Mondo che incominciano a scrivere in italiano, che portano con sé una memoria linguistica diversa e quindi usano in qualche modo un mistilinguismo, facendo svolgere alla loro lingua quella funzione che avevano una volta i dialetto. [...] ecco, questi sono stati i destini delle lingue, di essere sempre arricchite da nuovi apporti sia dialettali che di altre lingue straniere” (qtd. in Traina 135). The 2006 novel, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio*, by Amara Lakhous, who was born in Algeria and speaks at least four languages, engages an interest plurilingualism influenced in part by Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*. Consolo’s comments also provide a connection to the linguistic experimentation employed by Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros through their inclusion of Spanish language and grammar in their novels.

linguistic incomprehensibility is referenced in the first epigraph of this chapter, from Chapter IV of *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio*, "Val Dènone." At this point in the novel, Mandralisca is visiting another noble and former classmate, Maniforti, in Sant'Agata di Militello during a trip occasioned by his study of Sicilian mollusks. When Mandralisca hears an exclamation in dialect from an unidentified voice in the courtyard, the servants inform him that the voice belongs to a prisoner. Out of curiosity, Mandralisca approaches the prisoner despite his servant's warning that the man is "un diavolo d'inferno, scatenato" (99). When Mandralisca asks the prisoner what he has done, the man responds in dialect explaining that he killed an unowned lamb in the mountains. Because the man responds in Sanfratellano dialect, however, Mandralisca is unable to understand "quel linguaggio strano" (100). Mandralisca wonders what the man said,⁴ but then notices the bruises and blood that cover his body. In contemplating this wounded body, Mandralisca compares him to an "ecceomo" and a sculpture ("un pario luminoso, un alabastro di Gaggini o Laurana"), bathed in "la pioggia d'oro d'un raggio" (100). Feeling pity, Mandralisca asks the man who beat him. The prisoner again responds in Sanfratellano, exclaiming that it was the prince and adding that he wishes all of the rich would be killed. Mandralisca only understands the word for prince and is incensed by this revelation, though he is also made uncomfortable by the prisoner's "disprezzante" smile (101). In order to extricate himself from the situation, Mandralisca attempts to give the prisoner some money. This infuriates the prisoner who begins to rage, again in dialect, against the baron who runs towards the carriage and has the servants drive him on toward Alcàra Li Fusi.

⁴ The reader, meanwhile, is able to decipher the prisoner's language by reading the translations provided in the footnotes.

On a very basic level, the baron is unable to understand the language used by the prisoner; he is forced to instead interpret the appearance of the prisoner, reading his bruises and disdainful stance. Just as the language of the prisoner cannot communicate to Mandralisca, Mandralisca's attempt to give the man money inhibits communication. Mandralisca's gesture is conventional, something he does because he can think of no other response. The prisoner is enraged as he interprets the baron's gesture as an insult. While the novel presents a series of symbols that are ambiguous (including the portrait by Antonello referenced in the title of the novel among other visual symbols), perhaps the most ambiguous symbols presented in the novel are those that occur in language.

Mandralisca's political awakening is spurred in part by his linguistic confrontation with the prisoner. This confrontation occurs as Mandralisca makes his way to Alcàra Li Fusi, where the forty-day uprising by the peasants leads to Mandralisca's political "conversion" (Glynn "Prism" 101). Mandralisca's meeting with the prisoner in Sant'Agata di Militello causes him unease and leads to his reflection on the power of language as a mnemonic object.⁵ While in the carriage, Mandralisca considers the history of the town of San Fratello in the Val Dènone region, meditating specifically on the role of the Lombards in the history of occupations of the area. In free indirect discourse, he provides a quick list of variations of the name "Val Dènone": "*Dimnasc, Demenna, Dèmona, cora demennon*" (102). This leads to the narrative comment: "e chi v'intende chi nell'isola della romanza lingua passata per gole galliche e teutoniche, d'arcaico volgare, vernacolo non guasto interamente?" (102). This comment displays an

⁵ Dombroski notes that this linguistic meditation sparks Mandralisca's memory of the region associated with that language: "Mandralisca's prodigious memory and the delight he takes in enumeration opens a window on the past through which rush the buried shards of past realities" ("Consolo and the Fictions of History" 227).

interest in the ability of an “arcaico volgare” to withstand over time. The language used by the Sanfratellano prisoner represents a linguistic “island” that reveals the region’s history of encounters with other cultures, a history not yet razed by Italian linguistic standardization.⁶ Yet at the same time, this reference to the Sanfratellano dialect as an “island” indicates that it is isolated and removed, yet in this way has survived. Mandralisca’s surprise at the fact of the language’s continued existence testifies to its absence from official discourse.

The linguistic chasm represented by the prisoner’s Sanfratellano dialect highlights the distance between the two characters and makes evident just how little they have in common. If nationalism is built on the concept of common experiences and common histories, then this encounter shows the reality that does not fit nationalist rhetoric. The novel pauses and reflects on the various internal differences and conflicts that the formation of the nation is supposed to overcome, showing the nation to be a construct that razes these differences rhetorically and linguistically, but also by physical and legal force in attempts to sublimate possible ruptures rather than resolving the root issues. This interest in the ability of a vernacular to continue to exist in the face of the forces of linguistic and political nationalization is integral to an understanding of Consolo’s reflections on the politics of language. Mandralisca notes that the Sanfratellano language continues to exist while also noting that its existence is not registered in written records.

Consolo’s interrogation of language and narrative form relates in part to his own vision of artistic political engagement. The question regarding the role of the artist or

⁶ In his essay on *Il sorriso dell’ignoto marinaio*, Leonardo Sciascia notes Consolo’s interest in the languages of Sicily: “Quel che piú attrae Consolo è, di questi paesi, forse l’impasto dialettale, la fonda espressività che è propria alle aree linguistiche ristrette, le lunghe e folte e intricate radici di uno sparuto rameggiare” (“L’ignoto marinaio” 32).

intellectual in times of social change is a central concern of the text. This relates to Consolo's vision of *Il sorriso* as a "romanzo storico-metaforico," with the 1860s serving as a metaphor for the post-'68 period (Consolo "Metrica" 255-6). Thus, the results of Mandralisca's examination of the role of the intellectual in 1860 serve as a metaphor for the role of the intellectual in post-'68 Italy. Through the course of the novel Mandralisca comes to question his role as an intellectual, especially after he is confronted by his friend, the nationalist revolutionary Giovanni Interdonato, regarding the usefulness of his studies of mollusks in an atmosphere of social upheaval.⁷ Ruth Glynn makes the argument that Consolo's novel sees a way beyond the views of one post-'68 intellectual thread which saw the best role for artists as that of speaking for and to the working classes and thus, to a certain extent, denigrating high art (Glynn "Prism"). Consolo's answer is not a retreat from artistic expression, but rather an interest in the capabilities of alternative aesthetics to encompass, or at least address, different possible interpretations of national politics and history. *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* provides a vehicle for Consolo's examination of the recovery of language as a means of the recovery of historical memory unacknowledged by official historical accounts. Through his novel's attention to the different languages that relate to the different experiences of the

⁷ It is noteworthy that Mandralisca's studies prior to the rebellion at Alcàra Li Fusi include not just malacology, but also questions of political power. During a party given by Mandralisca in order to unveil his newly acquired Antonello painting, the baron is angered by the recitation of a poem regarding the construction of the Cathedral at Cefalù by King Ruggero in the twelfth century (25). "Non digeriva, no, quella legenda," explains the narrator, as Mandralisca ponders the various "dritti soprusi abusi angherie e perangherie" suffered by the people of Cefalù at the hands of the bishop (25). In free indirect discourse, Mandralisca notes that the "ignoranti" in attendance at the party have not read the text he wrote, published in 1844, entitled *Sulle prestazioni pretese dalla mensa vescovile di Cefalù* (26). This title demonstrates Mandralisca's interest in the roots of abuses of power by authority figures. His renewed interest in politics as a result of the uprising at Alcàra Li Fusi is made more powerful by his shift in understanding regarding the mechanisms of language in shaping the understanding of both history and the present. It is noteworthy that his 1844 work apparently garners no audience and has little effect, while the written communication with Interdonato, in which Mandralisca reproduces the language of the prisoners, has a more concrete effect in speaking in defense of the accused man.

Risorgimento, Consolo embraces “a pluralization of Risorgimento” (Glynn *Monument* 61) and thus also a pluralization of the understanding of national history.

Consolo locates his exploration of the variety of Italian languages within a well-established Italian literary genealogy interrogating the role of politics in language. In his essays “Per una metrica della memoria” (1996) and “The Disappearance of the Fireflies” (2001), Consolo traces the genealogy of his linguistic reflections to the history of Italian literature from Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*, pausing to focus particular attention on Leopardi and Pasolini. Consolo notes the linguistic fragmentation of Italy and relates it to the nation’s political fragmentation, distinguishing the Italian from the French tradition which was one of Leopardi’s foci. Indeed, in “Per una metrica della memoria,” Consolo goes so far as to say,

[...] la grande ricchezza espressiva della lingua italiana la sacrificherei volentieri per raggiungere quella geometrizzazione che Leopardi rammentava nella lingua francese. Credo che quella geometrizzazione, quel cartesianesimo, quella razionalizzazione, quella perdita di infinito della lingua francese dipenda dal fatto che in Francia s’era creata una società, uno stato, mentre in Italia, fino al tempo di Leopardi, uno stato, una società non si era mai creati, temiamo non si siano creati fino ad oggi. (252)

Consolo thus notes the Italian tradition linking politics and language and situates his work in this context. Consolo laments the lack of a nation-state and a “società” (a Leopardian term) in Italy, connecting the richness of the language to this lack. Consolo explains of *Il sorriso*, “L’ambientazione storica e il ripartire dal luogo della mia memoria mi permetteva di intensificare la mia sperimentazione linguistica” (“Metrica” 255-6). Yet Consolo also laments the losses entailed in the standardization of Italian language. Referencing Pasolini, Consolo describes the new national language as “una sorta di sotto o extra-lingua, di astorica, rigida, incolore *koinè*” that has only continued to deteriorate

since the 1964 publication of Pasolini's "Nuove questioni linguistiche" ("Metrica" 254). From this perspective, Italy does not have a functional state yet it still suffers from a loss of linguistic richness.

Consolo views his linguistic reconstruction as a political act. Language becomes the site of his resistance to the deterioration of Italian language which he sees as contributing to the erasure of historical memory. The Risorgimento, for Consolo, uses ambiguous rhetorical language that hides real ideological and material differences in order to gain consensus. An example that encapsulates this idea quite clearly is the one in which a group of peasants meet with a landowner in order to plan the violent 1860 uprising in Alcàra Li Fusi. Turi Malandro represents the peasants in the conversation with "don" Ignazio Cozzo, a liberal nationalist landowner. They debate whether the opening cry of their rebellion should be "Viva l'Italia!" as proposed by Cozzo or "Giustizia!" as proposed by Malandro (110). Cozzo accepts Malandro's suggestion, dismissing the difference between the two, stating, "Circa quella 'Giustizia,' niente da contraddire. L'Italia o la giustizia sono la stessa cosa: parole. Valgono per quello che nascondono: il segnale" (111). Cozzo assumes that the shout is merely a symbol that "hides" an idea on which they have a consensus, when in fact the different proposals for the linguistic signal are indicative of their ideological differences. Cozzo's dismissiveness of language as empty symbol serves to show their lack of mutual understanding of one another's goals and motivations.⁸ It recalls the scene in the 1972 film *Bronte. Cronaca di un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno raccontato*, in which one of the rebels states, "Noi siciliani

⁸ One of the *scritte*, numbered VII, reports that on the day of the uprising, "il galantomo" yells "VIVA LA TALIA" while the capobanda" yells "VINDITTA VINDITTA GIUSTIZIA" (153). Thus, even though Cozzo accepts the signal proposed by Malandro, he still insists on using his own. The use of the two signals to initiate the rebellion indicates again a difference in interpretation of the aims of their actions.

e voialtri abbiamo sempre detto la stessa cosa ma intendendo cose diverse. Il popolo siciliano intendeva un'altra libertà.” The film’s character Nicola thus voices an opposition to the nationalist interpretation of the term “libertà” by juxtaposing another form of liberty as understood by the rebelling peasants of the Sicilian town of Bronte during the Risorgimento.

This sentiment is echoed again, in *Il sorriso*, in Mandralisca’s letter to Giovanni Interdonato, who by the fall of 1860 had become “Procuratore Generale.” In it, the baron refers to language as a “codice” and also uses the verb “intendere” to discuss the way in which that code is deciphered:

Teniamo per sicuro il nostro codice, del nostro modo d’essere e parlare ch’abbiamo eletto a imperio a tutti quanti: il codice del dritto di proprietà e di possesso, il codice politico dell’acclamata libertà e unità d’Italia, il codice dell’eroismo come quello del condottiero Garibaldi e di tutti i suoi seguaci, il codice della poesia e della scienza, il codice della giustizia o quello d’un’utopia sublime e lontanissima... E dunque noi diciamo Rivoluzione, diciamo Libertà, Eguaglianza, Democrazia, riempiamo d’esse parole fogli, gazzette, libri, lapidi, pandette, costituzioni, noi, che que’ valori abbiamo già conquistati e posseduti, se pure li abbiamo veduti anche distrutti o minacciati dal Tiranno o dall’Imperatore, dall’Austria o dal Borbone. E gli altri, che mai hanno raggiunto i dritti più sacri e elementari, la terra e il pane, la salute e l’amore, la pace, la gioia e l’istruzione, questi dico, e sono la più parte, perché devono intendere quelle parole a modo nostro? Ah, tempo verrà in cui da soli conquisteranno que’ valori, ed essi allora li chiameranno con parole nuove, vere per loro, e giocoforza anche per noi, vere perché i nomi saranno intieramente riempiti dalle cose. (120)

Mandralisca uses the first personal plural in order to indicate the complicity that he and Interdonato share in the ownership of language in juxtaposition to the peasants’ linguistic dispossession. Mandralisca’s assertion that nouns are empty until they can be “riempiti dalle cose” indicates the fact that language is powerful when it can order material reality. Language, then, is operated by those with power, and its ascribed meanings carry class-specific significances. This equivocation over the notion of liberty, one of the terms

mentioned here by Mandralisca, is highlighted in the twelfth (and final) numbered “scritta” of the prison, which ends with a reference to the prisoners’ unending hunger for “libirtaa.” This indicates the notion that, even if liberty is achieved during the Risorgimento in the sense that Italy is no longer ruled by the Bourbons, liberty is not yet been achieved for the peasants who still labor under a system that prevents them from obtaining land or achieving economic opportunity. It is this degradation of language that allows Maniforti to be termed a “patriotta” while the peasants who rebel at Alcàra Li Fusi are destined for historical ignominy.

Consolo’s engagement of various linguistic registers, including a particular interest in dialect as spoken language, recalls some of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s thoughts on language. Considering Pasolini’s influence on Consolo’s conception of “la questione della lingua,” it is important to look at Pasolini’s articulation of his own linguistic theories. A particularly resonant aspect of Pasolini’s philosophy in Consolo is the sense of loss as a result of the razing of linguistic difference in relation to the language of the mass media and consumerism. Pasolini posits poetry in dialect as a valid means of alternative discourse, in some ways attacking the tradition of literature in “lingua.” In “Nuove questioni linguistiche,” Pasolini looks at the origins of the Italian language and questions its validity because of its connection to bourgeois power. He explains that,

[...] *in Italia non esiste una vera e propria lingua italiana nazionale. Cioché, se vogliamo ricercare una qualche unità tra le due figure della dualità (lingua parlata, lingua letteraria), dobbiamo cercarla al di fuori della lingua, nell’interno di quell’individuo storico che è contemporaneamente utente di queste due lingue: che è uno, e storicamente descrivibile in una unitaria totalità di esperienze. Tale individuo quale sede spirituale o coabitazione della dualità, è il borghese o piccolo-borghese italiano [...].* (Pasolini “Nuove questioni linguistiche” 9)

For Pasolini, then, standard Italian represents bourgeois political and social hegemony. In his view, it institutionalizes the bourgeois experience by making this language the standard and thus negating the language of other groups.

As a result of this rejection of “bourgeois” Italian language, Pasolini criticizes writers like Moravia and Calvino for their usage of it in their literary work. He writes about Moravia:

Moravia ha, con l’italiano medio, in fondo, il rapporto più curioso: esso si basa su un equivoco che Moravia spavaldaemente accetta: il disprezzo per la condizione borghese – e la conseguente, spietata, criticache è la tesi di ogni sua opera – insieme con l’accettazione della lingua della borghesia come una lingua normale, come uno strumento neutro, ma venisse “trovato” paradigmaticamente nella storia. (Pasolini “Nuove questioni linguistiche” 13)

Pasolini suggests that if Moravia expects to criticize the bourgeoisie, he must also reject its language. This is precisely the project in much of Pasolini’s work, as well as in his dialect poetry: the desire to find an alternative language. He believed that avant-garde groups must necessarily question the function of art beginning at the linguistic level.

Consolo shares this conviction regarding standardized Italian as a symbol of class-based hegemony. As noted earlier, Consolo sees his linguistic experimentation as the main difference between *Il sorriso dell’ignoto marinaio* and the tradition of Sicilian writers on the subject of the Risorgimento with which the novel engages. Consolo’s language in *Il sorriso* also points to the constructed nature of standard Italian by focusing on the other languages that exist in Italy; if there are several languages that continue to exist in the setting of the novel, then the standard Italian of the time during which Consolo writes must have undergone a historical process that established it as the norm. Moreover, this language becomes the norm through the sublimation of those other languages.

Another important intersection between Consolo's use of language and Pasolini's is their rejection of a utilitarian vision of art as instrument of the proletariat. The form of Pasolini's art could not follow the styles utilized by the neorealists in the postwar era who assumed the ability to apprehend the world and to be able to translate it directly onto the page or the screen. David Ward explains Pasolini's inability to accept this form: "For Pasolini, neorealism told a fairy story which encouraged a falsely optimistic sense of hope about the course of history" (22). The PCI found use in neorealism's portrayal of the life of those with the lowest social capital, whereas the party did not find the same worth in Pasolini's dialect poetry. According to Sam Rohdie, "Neo-realism could be used by the party, whatever else were the intentions or merits of neo-realism. Pasolini, instead, produced a useless language, without content, whose sense was its sound and its structure" (29). Pasolini's political resistance is to be found also in his recourse to high culture; he did not produce accessible, conventional art, and could not accept the work of artists who did so. For him the only revolutionary art was experimental in form and style. Pasolini's positioning outside of established ideological positions requires him as an artist to work against the conventional modes associated with those positions. Pasolini's stylistic and political ideas are difficult if not impossible to fix and his body of work reflects this dynamism. Pasolini's political role, as he saw it, was to question rather than to celebrate. Pasolini came to view his poetry as the linguistic enactment of political subversiveness against established power.

Like Pasolini, Consolo problematizes the ability of intellectuals to directly represent the experiences of the marginalized, emphasizing the power structures that undergird linguistic and narrative representations of history. In *Il sorriso dell'ignoto*

marinaio, Mandralisca emphasizes the fact that so long history is filtered through the writing of scribes like him who ultimately do not have access to the experiences they wish to represent, that history will be incomplete. When Mandralisca presents the words he transcribes from the walls of the prison in Maniforti's castle, he writes to Interdonato that these words contain "le làstime i dolori pene lacrime terrori tossici disperazioni – che ne sappiamo noi, che ne sappiamo? – della gente che qui parla" (145). Implicit in the question "che ne sappiamo noi, che ne sappiamo?" is his sense that despite his reproduction of the prisoners' language, the experiences that give rise to their expression remain inaccessible because of Mandralisca's very different social position. Consolo's novel does not provide an easy solution to this problem. Instead, the novel provides ever-multiplying and ever-complicating views of his object of representation. Ruth Glynn describes this shift aptly:

In accordance with the gradual increase in Mandralisca's political commitment and dedication to finding a new form of historical narration which acknowledges the complexities and contradictions of the world, there is a contiguous shift from a relatively unproblematic, unquestioning, mimetic representation of events to a much more problematic questioning of the construction of all modes of representation. The motifs of representation employed at different stages of the novel provide a barometer of the intellectual protagonist's feeling with regard to political commitment. (*Monument* 63)

At one point in his letter to Interdonato, Mandralisca asserts that the best course for him would be to create a school for the peasants and a museum so that one day, "la storia loro, la storia, la scriveran da sé" (123). Nonetheless, Mandralisca sees the importance of communicating their history, even if in a mediated form. Joseph Farrell explains that in the novel, Consolo "aims to combine a language which reflects a tradition normally dismissed as uncouth or vulgarly dialectal with a distinctively literary idiom" (Farrell "Vincenzo Consolo: Metaphors and False History" 70).

The Politics of Form

Just as *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* presents a palimpsest of voices and linguistic forms in order to understand a moment in the history of the Risorgimento, the novel also introduces a multiplicity of narrative forms. The text integrates various fictional and non-fictional accounts into the nine stylistically different chapters and various interspersed appendixes, including: realistic narration, poetic language, free indirect discourse, letters, scholarly tracts, intertextual references to works of high art, a memoir of one of the *Mille*, a newspaper article, a court ruling, a death certificate, a political tract, and the *scritte* of the political prisoners in Manfredi's castle. The novel also eschews linear plot development by invoking the form of the *chiocciola*. By abandoning a desire to represent history in univocal and linear form, the novel presents an alternative history based on the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same events. Consolo describes his shift toward formal experimentation between the publication of his first novel, *La ferita d'aprile*, in 1963 and *Il Sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* in 1976, as the "frutto" of his encounter of social struggles in Milan starting in 1968 ("Per una metrica della memoria" 255). This social climate of questioning the origins of social strife leads Consolo to question the ways in which narrative writing can address social questions.

Consolo explains that in *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio*, "c'è la messa in crisi del genere del romanzo [...] c'è nella negazione della rotondità della struttura, nello smontaggio dell'intreccio narrativo, nella forte carica simbolica, ancora la polemica della scrittura narrativa nei confronti della società" ("Per una metrica della memoria" 256). Consolo here articulates the link between his problematization of the form of the novel

and his interrogation of the ways in which narrative can engage with social and political questions. This concern is echoed in Mandralisca's "Memoria" of the events at Alcàra Li Fusi, in which he describes,

l'incapacità scopertami a trovare l'avvio, il timbro e il tono, e le parole e la disposizione d'esse per poter trattare quegli avvenimenti, e l'imbarazzo e la vergogna poi che dentro mi crescean a concepire un ordine, una forma, i confini d'un tempo e d'uno spazio, a contenere quell'esplosione, quella fulminea tromba, quel vortice tremendo [...] (125)

Rather than giving up as he grapples with a form with which to represent the story of the rebellion, he insists on the importance of relating the story. The problematization of form does not result in silence but rather in a working through of form and a multiplication of forms as a way to address the concerns of any particular form's shortcomings, while also acknowledging the production of a partial picture.

Rather than providing a single answer or overarching truth, the novel continually presents a variety of perspectives on the historical moments described therein. Consolo also often juxtaposes models of interpretation by introducing alternative representational forms. One of these emerges in the second chapter of the novel, "L'albero delle quattro arance." In this chapter, Interdonato visits Mandralisca and presents with him a terra cotta Kore, an artifact of Greek antiquity. This gift prompts Mandralisca to say, "se io debbo pensare a un'immagine dell'Italia Libera e Unita, è a una statua così che io penso" (58). Interdonato chides Mandralisca, responding, "Eh, troppa bella, barone, troppo perfetta... Anzi, direi, troppo ideale" (58). Almost as a continuation of his response, Interdonato then produces the other piece of art contained in the Kore's crate: the embroidered tablecloth that Catena sends with Interdonato as a gift for her old friend

Annetta, Mandralisca's niece. The "tovaglia stramba, cucita a fantasia e senza disciplina" incites the curiosity of Annetta and the baroness as they attempt to decipher it:

Aveva, sì, tutt'attorno una bordure di sfilato, ma il ricamo al centro era una mescolanza dei punti più disparati: il punto erba si mischiava col punto in croce, questo scivolava nel punto ombra e diradava fino al punto scritto. E i colori! Dalle tinte più tenui e sfumate, si passava d'improvviso ai verdi accesi e ai rossi più sfacciati. Sembrava, quella tovaglia – pensò la baronessa – ricamata da una invasa dalla furia, che con intenzione ha trascurato regole numeri misure e armonia, fino a sembrare forse che la ragione le fosse andata a spasso. (58)

The embroidery causes the women a certain discomfort or confusion. The choice of stitches and colors does not conform to the usual techniques of embroidery, as Catena appears to have broken the "regole numeri misure e armonia." The women believe that they are looking at a very unusual rendering of a tree with four oranges; yet at Interdonato's prodding, they turn the cloth over and discover that it is instead a rendering of the Italian nation. From this perspective, "le quattro arance diventano i vulcani del Regno delle Due Sicilie, il Vesuvio l'Etna Stromboli e Vulcano" (59). Interdonato further explains that, "Ed è da qui, vuole significar queste bocche di fuoco da secoli compresso, e soprattutto dalla Sicilia che ne contiene tre in poco spazio, che sprizzerà la fiamma della rivoluzione che incendierà tutta l'Italia" (59).

This passage is crucial to an understanding of the goals of the novel's narrative form. First, the juxtaposition of the Kore and the embroidery indicates a multiplicity of possible symbols for a unified Italy. The first is an ideal form, deriving from antiquity, that conforms to classical ideas of beauty and unity; it is in a sense a known quantity that does not incite a moment of pause or the impetus for analysis on the part of its audience. The conventional form familiarizes the content and reduces its disruptive possibilities. Rather than discussing the significance of the work, spectators of the works of high art in

the novel make abstract comments regarding the beauty of those works, like an unattributed comment reported in the first chapter, regarding the Antonello painting: “Uh, ah, cazzo, le bellezze!” (20). This contrasts with the position of the women who must participate more directly in the interpretation of the embroidery. The second artistic symbol, the embroidery, expressly breaks artistic “rules” and requires scrutiny and analysis in order to be understood. Catena’s representation of Italy uses a mixture of various seemingly incompatible forms and colors in a way that causes the women to speculate that the creator of the embroidery might have only a tenuous hold on “ragione.” While the frame of Catena’s work, the stitched border, conforms to the expectations of its recipient, the image contained inside that border defies those expectations.

If the reader views the embroidery as a *mise-en-abîme* representing the novel in microcosm, then the cloth’s mixture of styles and forms is indicative. It instructs the reader that s/he is encountering an alternative narration of the nation, one that fits within a recognizable frame—that of the novel—yet whose contents are unconventional. It is a form that embraces a mixture of styles and rejects conformity to an ideal vision of the nation. The embroidery alludes to an explosiveness of the cause of Italian unification that would be diminished if it were to fit neatly into the norms for the craft of stitching; embroidery is a craft which is usually associated with femininity and simplicity while rarely if ever considered a means of political expression.⁹ This recalls Consolo’s assertion that his novel brings into question the form of the novel in relation to the social and political historical circumstances of its creation by introducing a multiplicity of forms into the novelistic structure. While Catena can only communicate her nationalist fervor

⁹ The embroidery as a communicative tool might recall the Greek myth of Philomela, who communicates the violence she suffers at the hands of her brother-in-law, Tereus, to her sister Procne through her weaving.

by breaking with the norms of embroidery, Consolo sees his experimentation with the novelistic form as the best way to communicate a more ambivalent vision of Italian national history. Just as Catena's embroidery breaks with the artistic model associated with "reason," Consolo also attacks rationality and Enlightenment models of historiography.

Interdonato's dismissal of the Kore as Mandralisca's imaginative symbol of a unified Italy sparks Mandralisca's own contemplation of his aesthetics. At the beginning of the novel, Mandralisca aestheticizes the reality that he encounters, in a sense choosing art as a defense that acts as a barrier against that reality. Statues appear several times in the novel. In a scene discussed above, in which Mandralisca encounters the Sanfratellano prisoner on his way to Alcàra Li Fusi, the baron makes sense of the scene by cross-referencing his repertoire of artistic knowledge, comparing the man to statues with which the baron is familiar. Although Mandralisca attempts to relate the prisoner's appearance to that of Renaissance-era works of art, Mandralisca's rumination on the encounter leads to a narrative break in form. The paragraph that contains Mandralisca's meditation breaks with syntactical convention; it contains lists missing commas, ellipses, em dashes, shifts in thought not marked by attendant punctuation, but not a single period (101-102). Mandralisca's encounter with the Sanfratellano prisoner forces him to confront a troubling reality from which he had until that point been buffered by his social position. Since the narration mirrors Mandralisca's perspective, the ability to aesthetically render reality through conventional narration breaks down in the text. From this point forward in the novel, the narration presents a much more fragmented form.

The shift toward a model that can enunciate a variety of perspectives that sometimes contradict each other, rather than a harmonious aesthetic unity, is signaled in the novel's break with linear forms usually associated with the novel. The vocabulary of non-linearity abounds in the novel, thematizing the shift away from the conception of history as ideal and progressive. Words that denote non-linear shapes, almost always in the plural, include: "archi a zig-zag," "cerchi," "ghirigori," "girigogoli," "rabeschi," "svolazzi," "spirali," and "labirinti." The most closely examined non-linear shape presented in the novel, however, is that of the *chiocciola*. The *chiocciola* refers to the snails that form the basis of Mandralisca's primary area of study as well as the geometric shape of their shell on which Mandralisca meditates, and the architectural form—the spiral staircase—that Mandralisca descends in order to recover the writings of the peasant rebel inmates. Mandralisca meditates on the *chiocciola* form in Chapter VIII, "Il carcere." The baron cites a seventeenth century book which describes the *chiocciola* as a difficult form to recreate in art: "la compongono d'una portione di circolo sempre più piccolo, essendo esse non circolo, benché sembrino circolari" (139).

Though the tract cited in Chapter VIII asserts that the *chiocciola* is not strictly circular, the coils do indeed represent a circular motion of turns around the eye of the spiral. This circularity is recreated in the novel through the representation of repetition: the novel continually returns to and reformulates particular language and images as the story evolves. This repetition also highlights the principle of the multiplicity of perspectives that comprise a major representational thread of the text. Many of the repetitions and multiplications of images are clear, as in the various "incarnations" of Antonello's painting. Another example of this textual repetition occurs in the three

poems in different linguistic registers reported in the first chapter of the novel. The first is a thirteenth century Frederick II-era poem that Mandralisca recalls as he travels from Lipari to Cefalù; the second is an excerpt from a popular romance about the thirteenth century miracle experienced by King Ruggero in the twelfth century, recited by Carmine Papa during Mandralisca's unveiling of the Antonello painting; and the final lyric is a vulgar song in dialect sung by revelers in the street during the party for the unveiling. This triplication of sources is repeated again in the three appendixes that close *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio*, again from three very different sources, that describe some of the aftermath of the revolt at Alcàra Li Fusi. This gesture of multiplication of referenced materials indicates the novel's revisiting of various perspectives of single historical events.

This notion of a narrative that circles and returns to particular moments, rather than moving forward in a linear progression, relates *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* to several of the other texts in this dissertation. An examination of the form of the *chiocciola*, especially in relation to its semi-circularity, brings to mind Antonio Tabucchi's *Piazza d'Italia*. Tabucchi presents a historical temporal circularity which is echoed in the form of his novel; the protagonists encounter a history that seems to consistently repeat itself, with a series of images and situations that recall those presented earlier in the history experienced. The non-linearity represented by the two novels' structures indicates that the histories they describe are not completely done, or at least not sufficiently resolved so as to allow the characters to move forward in a linear fashion. While Tabucchi presents history as cyclical, I argue in my chapter on Tabucchi that the appendix of the novel presents an interpretive opening rather than forcing a closing of the

circle that forms the basis of the novel's structure. In this sense, Tabucchi's novelistic structure resembles that of the *chiocciola*, which is almost circular, yet widens out into an opening. In Consolo's novel, the *chiocciola* form has an opening that allows for both entry and exit, as in the spiral shape of the staircase in Maniforti's castle. This artistic and mathematical form allows Mandralisca a gateway, a way to approach the writings of the men imprisoned in Maniforti's castle. At the same time, the aperture allows him a way out of that prison back to the outside world where he can report the recorded writings to an audience. Temporality and history are reconfigured in the forms used by Tabucchi and Consolo. The non-linear representation of the stories reflects both an interrogation of the linear narrative form as well as its application in the narration of history.

Another window onto the representational form offered by the shape of the *chiocciola* emerges from an examination of the spiral staircase in Maniforti's castle-cum-prison. Mandralisca descends the staircase in order to record the coal writings created by the men who were part of the revolt at Alcàra Li Fusi. Most of the writings tell of the individual author's experiences of the rebellion, sometimes discussing motivations and emotions. Each of these *scritte* presents a partial retelling of what happened in Alcàra Li Fusi. The first *scritta* in the center of the spiral design drawn by Mandralisca, numbered I, which corresponds to the farthest depth of the castle, presents a very subjective version of the events as experienced by the author; the writing contains a preponderance of first person singular verb conjugations and personal pronouns. Meanwhile, the final reproduced *scritta*, number XII, which is closest to the open end of the spiral drawn by Mandralisca, attempts to give a broader picture of the rebellion and to give a collective

voice to the rebels, using primarily plural verb conjugations. This represents a widening of the spiral, “zooming out” and away from individual narratives toward a more collective one. Nonetheless, Mandralisca brings into relief the situated nature of any writing on the subject.

Mandralisca admits that despite his good intentions, his representation of the *scritte* is requisitely mediated. It is the baron who conceives of the numbering system which organizes the reproduction of those writings which are transformed from testimony into narration by the act of Mandralisca’s organization; he orders the *scritte* so that the reading process follows an ascent, from the lowest depths of the prison, rather than following the order in which Mandralisca encounters the *scritte* during his descent. Moreover, Mandralisca provides an outsider’s account of the events represented by that prison spiral, as he was not even a first-hand witness to the events of the rebellion at Alcàra Li Fusi. He can only report information regarding the aftermath of the event because during the actual event, he escapes to the countryside in order to avoid the danger that any high-class individual faces on the streets of the town as the peasants unleash their violent revenge. In the end, the *scritte* attempt a representation of the events of the rebellion that is necessarily partial; indeed, all representations are ultimately unable to capture the event as the situated nature of their telling is a focus of Mandralisca’s inquiry into the possibilities of narration to communicate social realities. The spiral, then, is an apt metaphor for a narration that approaches the center point of reality while never being able to fully capture and/or define it. Rather, when the spiral broadens, it is able to provide a broader view of the event while at the same time being further removed from the center. Finally, the spiral form indicates an impossibility of

simple resolution, as the terminal point represented on the *chiocciola* points outward into space, suggesting an infinite continuation and the impossibility of closure.

Another organizational form Consolo employs in *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* that of the metaphor, relates to the form of the *chiocciola* in that it is also an approximative form: it attempts to illuminate the nature of its referent by analogy rather than direct representation. The metaphor, like the *chiocciola*, is a form that emblemizes the representational theories of the novel; the metaphor attempts to present a likeness rather than to assume the possibility of capturing a truth. The very use of metaphor implies a certain distance from the referent as well as the difficulty of its direct definition.

Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio intervenes into historical and literary discourses, calling into question the language and form used by both historical and literary narrative. The novel veers away from narration that is singular, clear, and definitive toward narration that incorporates multiple voices and forms, ambiguities, and metaphor. Consolo reconstructs the richness of language that evades contemporary literary narratives as well as the complicated richness and diversity of history that evade linear historical narratives. Consolo's historical reconstruction requires interpretive involvement on the part of the reader because the novel does not provide a conclusion. The reader is called upon to decipher the metaphors of the novel, in a sense to apply the novel not just to other historical situations, but also to the present. Consolo's novelistic interest in the history of the Risorgimento not just in itself, but also as a subject whose studies might provide a better understanding of history in order to affect the present, links it to Nietzsche's theories on the utility of history. Nietzsche criticized the development of historiography which proliferated during the second half of the nineteenth century

when Nietzsche wrote his “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.”

Nietzsche proffered the following vision of the use of history:

We need history, certainly, but we need it for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it, even though he may look down nobly on our rough and charmless needs and requirements. We need it, that is to say, for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action, let alone for the purpose of extenuating the self-seeking life and the base and cowardly action. (59)

Nietzsche’s emphases on the relationship between historical knowledge and action find clear echoes in Consolo’s novel. As a result of the events related in the novel, Mandralisca is unable to remain an “idler in the garden of knowledge.” He becomes an active, if ambivalent, actor in the history of the Risorgimento. This action is spurred in part by the protagonist’s increasing awareness of the connection between linguistic representation and power. Like its protagonist, the novel focuses its attention on that which is lost in the representations that comprise historical accounts and literary narrative, both in terms of content and form. It seeks to restore to the past a broader vision of history and literary narrative that can be extended, metaphorically, to the present.

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