

Renegotiating Colonial Bodies in Historiographic Metafiction: Carmen Boullosa's *Son vacas, somos puercos*, *Llanto: Novelas imposibles*, and *Duerme*

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Contemporary Mexican author Carmen Boullosa's re-visiting of the colonial past of Mexico and the Caribbean allows for new manifestations of historical bodies in fiction that contest their traditional portrayals in historical texts. Instead of providing the *true* story of the past, they remind us of the partial and subjective nature of any story, especially that of *history*. By supplementing (even opposing) history with *historias*,¹ Boullosa refocuses the look toward the past onto the narrative presentation of that past. The theoretical framework for this paper takes root in Hayden White's reading of historical writing as narrative prose discourse and Michel de Certeau's concept of historical writing as dialogue with the ghosts of the past, along with postmodern theories of the body that explore its relationship to identity.²

The three Boullosa novels considered here—*Son vacas, somos puercos*, *Llanto: Novelas imposibles*, and *Duerme*—each present testimonies by marginalized characters whose stories are noticeably absent from historical narratives of the time. Their problematic relationship with their own bodies reflects their struggle to establish their own personal identity within the Latin American colonies. Together, this trilogy of novels (published in 1991, 1992, and 1994, respectively) resuscitates certain historical figures only to problematize their existence and the possibility of finding historical truth in narrative.

The physical body has a special role in the creation and recreation of historical and fictitious narrative. Theories of the body as an entity marked and constructed by social context are of particular use when studying Boullosa's work. Grosz writes, "... the stability of the unified body image, even in the so-called normal subject, is always precarious. It cannot be simply taken for granted as an accomplished fact, for it must be continually renewed ..." (43-44). This view of the unfixed and "renewable" body image is one likewise addressed in Butler's theory of gender as constructed through performative acts. Butler

¹ In Spanish, *historia* can mean *history* or *story*, a lovely ambiguity that lends itself to Boullosa's playful manipulation of the past.

² Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz both have elaborated theories of the body that are particularly helpful to our exploration of the body image in Boullosa's work.

posits the body as an active site for the manipulation and reconfiguration of traditional notions regarding gender, stipulating that identity is not fixed, but rather represented through a series of performative and bodily acts. The repetitive nature of these “performances” allows for a subversive repetition or breaking of traditional representations (Butler 402).³ The consensus among contemporary gender theorists is that “if the body itself is not a determinate given, then the political and social structures that take it as such are equally open to transformation” (Price and Shildrick 7-8). This questioning of political and social structures is particularly important in postmodern novels set in the colonial period, a time of political/social turmoil and transition.

Boullosa’s novels lend themselves to new historicist interpretations, as new historicism is an approach that reads the traces of the past as a textuality that embeds itself in the texts (literary and historical) of the present. *New* historicism is in contrast with *old* historicism as proposed by Hegel, who had an idealist sense of history as a fluid, developing, and evolving “totality” (Rice and Waugh 252). This fluidity has been challenged by new historicists, who prefer to recognize the multiple (and often contradictory) *histories* that recognize difference rather than impose a false unity or sameness. New historicism also recognizes how both literature and criticism are shaped by their social contexts.

Recent theories of history and fiction call attention to both as linguistic constructs that are subject to conventional narrative forms and complex relationships to other texts.⁴ The questioning of both history and fiction as literary constructs has led to the manifestation of “historiographic metafiction” in postmodern literature. Issues such as narrative form, intertextuality, strategies of representation, and language come to the surface as traditional narratives of both history and literature are questioned or even challenged by new texts that hover between the two disciplines. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon points out that historiographic metafiction engages literature, history, and theory through a “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs ... [in] its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5). The result is a refusal to believe that only history has a claim on truth. If both history and fiction are “discourses, human constructs, signifying systems” (93), then the whole notion of historical truth becomes problematic. It is this preoccupation with historical validity that plagues the literary genius of Carmen Boullosa, who obsessively brings forth the issue of truth as something imperative and yet impossible to apprehend. Truth becomes relative and situational, and not at all the opposite of a lie. As Hutcheon asserts, “[t]he eighteenth-century concern for lies and falsity becomes a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture” (108). In Boullosa’s novels, the idea of truth is further problematized by the splitting of place and culture into places and cultures occupying the same spaces at the same times. Through multiple simultaneous histories that range from variations on a theme to radical

³ Butler has since revised her original theory in subsequent publications, but it is the possibility for subversion planted in her earlier work that offers an interesting approach to Boullosa’s *subversive* literary style, which made its appearance in the same time period (late 1980s, early 1990s).

⁴ White’s readings of the classics of nineteenth-century European historical thought prompted him to elaborate a formal theory of historical writing, in which he claims to “treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (ix).

contradictions of previous accounts within the same narration, Boullosa rejects linear narrative (historical or fictional).

The multiple possibilities for representation in both history and literature emphasize the importance of choice and of creative design. Yet the choices are limited. White reveals the restriction of any field of study outside that of genuine science: "... thought remains the captive of the linguistic mode in which it seeks to grasp the outline of objects inhabiting its field of perception" (xi). Thus limited, no one mode can claim authority over the others as more "realistic" in its representation. Hence, says White, our choice of one perspective on history over another is more aesthetic or moral than epistemological. While raised in a discussion of historical narrative, this statement rings true for narratives such as Boullosa's that approach history through fictional plots. Boullosa resolves the tension of multiple possible (sometimes competing) narrations by providing a space for them to co-exist, albeit not always in harmony. One of the effects of pluralizing narrative is that any notion of center is displaced and replaced with off-center accounts that demand consideration. It is a certain democratization of the text, where authority, and thus power, is shared. Yet these accounts undermine their own authority, as they demand attention, insist on their validity, but then throw their own truth into question. The underlying implication is that all truth is provisional and all power or authority is relative. The focus of historiographic metafiction on its own context of enunciation questions the authority of any narrative (historical or fictional).

Boullosa addresses the problematic period of colonial history in Mexico and the Caribbean by countering official History with alternative *historias*. *Duerme* and *Son vacas, somos puercos* are set in colonial Mexico and the Caribbean, respectively, and *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* fluctuates between the Mexico City of the 1980s and that of the era of the Conquest. All three novels reveal a preoccupation with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a formative and crucial historical era. They also reveal an obsessive re-visiting of the past in order to try to capture its truth. This is a futile mission, as the texts recognize, and we find that the novels are more about the obsessive return to the past and the representation of that past than they are about the actual events that transpired and their factual nature. Thus, the focus is on representation and re-presentation of the past. Our knowledge of history is limited by its texts and by our current ideological paradigm that figures how we think about the past. Boullosa's texts, whether addressing personal history or national history, remind us of the presence of the past in our present and question the place it will have in our future.

Boullosa's obsession with history is paralleled by her obsession with the body, and she views both as necessarily fragmented and subject to interpretation. The fragmented physical bodies of her characters are contained within a fragmented narrative structure. In *Son vacas, somos puercos*, the text is split in two by an unnumbered chapter in which the entire narration is thrown into question. In *Duerme*, the protagonist grapples with conflicting views of the conquest, caught between her ambition to dabble in power in the European court and her ties to the indigenous world. At a key point in the novel's progression, the narrator provides us with three simultaneous accounts of what *really* happened. *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* presents various possible histories of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma, but the novel itself consists of fragments of incomplete texts that start and stop abruptly, contradict each other and abandon the narrative task as futile.

Boullosa places at the center of her narration characters that represent groups that traditionally have been forced into the margins of society. While their stories cannot replace official versions of colonial History, they remind us of what has been left out in traditional historical narrative.

Son vacas, somos puercos is the tale of a boy who leaves France for the New World, where he spends a turbulent adolescence and young adulthood in the margins of society. Sold into slavery to a cruel owner, Smeeks's only friend is an African medicine man named Negro Miel, who tells the boy of a brotherhood of filibusters who swear loyalty only to each other. On his deathbed, he makes Smeeks swear to keep his memory alive and to obey the Law of the Coast. Years later, Smeeks sits down to write his memoirs. Part One of his text is dedicated to the memory of Negro Miel and Pineau, two men who were both mentors and father figures to him. Part Two narrates his violent life amongst the filibusters, who raped, pillaged, and waged war on the colonies in a ruthless fashion. The two parts of Smeeks's text are split by an enigmatic "Número aparte" placed almost exactly at the midpoint of the novel (64). In this unnumbered two-page chapter, placed entirely within parentheses, Boullosa's narrator effectively deconstructs the representation of Negro Miel that he has so carefully established in the first part of the novel. Twice he emphasizes this contradiction: "Esto desdice la veracidad de la historia, según la voy contando. . . . Esta verdad destruye la veracidad de mi historia, de la que yo he ido contando" (64). Yet recognizing the contradictions, he insists that *both* versions are true, and that he has merely changed his perspective: "Pero no debemos fiarnos de esta apariencia, porque ambas son la misma, sólo que, en lugar de avanzar por su eje horizontal, la he cruzado de pronto hacia arriba, vertical, y he hallado esto. Créanlo. También es cierto Negro Piedra girando en la noria" (64). The possibility and the validity of both versions of Negro Miel make us question how many other possible versions exist. There are an infinite number of possible representations in literature, and the unsettling thought arises that what we know as *History* likewise has an infinite number of versions with varying degrees of validity.

Having temporarily shifted in the narrative point of view, Smeeks re-envisioned the whorehouse he visited, remarking how its beauty and elegance would seem quite different if seen from above it. Distancing oneself "vertically" from the scene allows the detection not only of dead insects in the tops of the curtains, but also reveals a sense of sadness and abandonment. In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Richard Rorty discusses vertical versus horizontal perspectives as reflective of two traditions in philosophy, one beginning with Kant and the other with Hegel's *Phenomenology*:

The first tradition thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally—as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors' reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation... This tradition does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together. (92)

Truth is a problematic term in any field of study, but it becomes especially problematic in a work of fiction loosely based on historical events and figures and further problematized by the act of re-writing history. Boullosa's novel is a rewrite of the memoirs of Alexander Olivier Exquemelin, whose *De Americaensche Zee Roovers* (*The Buccaneers of America*) was published in 1678 and was quickly translated into German, Spanish, English, and French

(Chorba 304). The original text of Exquemelin, considered a historical document, still warrants a critical reading, as does any document that bears witness to a highly polemical historical period. Boullosa's text is a rewrite and recreation of a *true* story that breaks with the traditional narrative flow of colonial literature in order to bring forth concerns that have emerged in postmodern literature. Cynthia M. Tompkins describes *Son vacas, somos puercos* as a "paradigmatic case of historiographic metafiction insofar as Boullosa simultaneously inscribes and subverts Exquemelin's text through condensation, aporias, and the continued shifting of 'Otherness'" (85). The novel gives voice to historically marginalized subjects such as slaves, natives, and women. As Tompkins points out, Boullosa's narrative fluctuates among several subject positions, undermining the notion of the unified subject. In her comparison of *Son vacas, somos puercos* and its "hypotext," Carrie C. Chorba claims that Boullosa replaces the impersonal narrative voice of the original seventeenth century text with "the subjective, self-conscious and intimate first person voice of postmodernity" (306). By offering multiple and contradictory viewpoints, Boullosa questions the reliability of narrative, both literary and historical. If we think of narration along the horizontal axis as parallel to Rorty's description of viewing truth as culminating reinterpretations of past reinterpretations, we see that Boullosa is proposing yet another view of history through a fictional text that constantly establishes ties with historical testimonies of the past. Intertextuality thus becomes a tool for self-validation. By incorporating elements of *reality* confirmed by the authorities of History, the fiction of the novel demands to be considered within its historical context and not merely cast aside as a work of fantasy.

Looking back on his days with the Brothers of the Coast, Smeeks stresses his credibility as he describes how his adventures in the seventeenth-century Caribbean inscribed themselves upon his psyche and his body, recording a personal history in the text of his being, to which he would later turn as a source for his narration. Yet despite his self-proclaimed authority as a narrator, Smeeks admits to the difficulty in narrating events that transpired so long ago: "Para un par de ojos y un par de oídos fijar las imágenes y los sonidos en el orden temporal en que ocurrieron no es tarea fácil, su memoria gusta burlar la tiranía del tiempo" (15). The tension between memory and chronological history is one that underlies any memoir, yet not all authors will acknowledge this hurdle. The fragmentary structure of *Son vacas, somos puercos* is not merely mimesis of memory; Smeeks himself metaphorically embodies memory. He is a reservoir of individual memories. Ella (the transvestite hideaway that later inspires the character of Claire in *Duerme*) is the first person who tries to record her history in Smeeks before his two mentors deposit their own experiences in the boy's memory bank. Boullosa sows the text with doubt with respect to narrative authority, as Smeeks doubts his own senses. He writes from his bodily experience, but in the process of creating his text, he feels that he loses his body to the narration. Smeeks's body becomes fused with the text, as the two become co-dependent.

Smeeks also depends upon the reader, who validates his narration. Feeling that he is an incomplete text, Smeeks finds security in the reader's presence, which allows the act of narration to take place. An awareness of a witness, a listener, a reader, or an interlocutor (in other words, an awareness of the *Other*) allows Smeeks to explore alternative routes in his narration. He can change perspectives, hand off narration to another (as in the cases of

Negro Miel's memories and Nau's narration of his own death), or throw the whole veracity of his story into question in order to call our attention to the narrative process. Thus, the plot takes a backseat to the creative process of storytelling. Boullosa will not allow us to be passive readers of a story about pirates; rather, she demands that we question her narrator and his story, and correspondingly, history.

Both here as well as in Boullosa's first two novels (*Mejor desaparece* and *Antes*), which narrate an adolescent past from the future through retrospective reflection, we are conscious of the deliberate selection process involved in narrating the past. Some memories are chosen, others are suppressed, and others are invented or re-worked. Thus, the narration proceeds. This selection process is a metaphor for the act of writing itself, both creative and historical. In *The Writing of History*, Certeau claims that intelligibility is only attained through a process of selection between "what can be understood and what must be forgotten" (4). He warns, however, that "whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant—shards created by the selection of materials, remainders left aside by an explication—comes back, despite everything, on the edges of a discourse or in its rifts and crannies. . . . Therein they symbolize a return of the repressed . . ." (4). This "return of the repressed" that Certeau sees as a "uniquely Western trait" (4) is partially responsible for the fragmentary nature of Boullosa's texts. The multiple voices in her novels challenge and contest narrations that attempt to gloss over the "shards" that threaten the formation of a narrative dependent upon their exclusion.⁵

A secondary character in *Son vacas, somos puercos* becomes the protagonist of Boullosa's later novel, *Duerme*. Claire is a former French prostitute who cross-dresses as a pirate and sets out for the New World. She undergoes several transformations of body and of identity while searching for her place within the stratified colonial society. Claire disguises herself as a French filibuster, as a Spanish count, and as an indigenous woman, adopting with each disguise the corresponding pronouns for her new identity. On the verge of death, she receives a transfusion from an indigenous woman who substitutes Claire's European blood with the pure waters of a Mexican lake, untouched by Europeans. This new blood makes Claire immortal, but only within Mexico City, for if she attempts to leave, she will fall into a deep sleep.

Claire's adventure in colonial Mexico is one experienced through a series of masks and disguises. When dressed as a woman, she resents the social limitations imposed upon her, and when forced to disguise herself as an indigenous woman, she feels doubly marginalized and oppressed. The woman who attends to her treats Claire differently when she is disguised as a Spanish gentleman: "Verme vestida de mujer india la hace creerme un ser sin ninguna importancia. Si volviera a mi traje de varón blanco me hablaría con respeto, sería mi fiel criada, daría por mí su vida" (76). Claire rejects her own feminine body as a definition of her identity and establishes herself as a metamorphosing being that can change not only its appearance, but also its very identity in a society that does not tend to distinguish between the two.

⁵ In *Mejor desaparece*, for example, every attempt to establish a whitewashed front to the Ciarrosa family identity results in the appearance of stains, the reappearance of the detested and filthy *eso*, and the resurgence of certain *truths* that belie the façade that the father erects to supposedly protect the family.

Colonial society is thus shown to be a game of appearances, superficiality, and disguise. The Spanish colonial government does everything possible to uphold the binary system of identification in the colony in order to keep power in the hands of the Europeans. The poet Pedro de Ocejo returns from the Royal Court complaining bitterly: “Se ha dicho en Palacio que todo aquello que distinga al indio del español debe permitirse, y que en cambio el escándalo de las indias con guantes y vestidos castellanos debiera impedirse . . .” (78). Here the scandal is not that the “Indian” women begin to speak, think, or express themselves as Europeans, but rather that they *dress* as Europeans, something that is absolutely unacceptable in a society that bases status recognition on physical appearance and presentation. The power hierarchy of colonial society is based upon difference. It is the identification and subsequent subjugation of the inferior *Other* (the *savage*, the *slave*, the female, etc.) that keeps the colonizer in control. Keeping the power structure intact is crucial in a land where Indians outnumber Spaniards ten to one.

Unable to find a comfortable place within the hierarchy of colonial society, Claire grows restless when forced to occupy any one role for an extended amount of time. At times, Claire seems a hybrid character, a “metaphorical *mestizo*” as Boulosa herself has described her (“Interview” 148). At other times, she is more a chameleon, changing her physical appearance to better blend into her environment, and attempting to change her personal identity with each disguise. Claire continually assumes new identities only to call them into question along with the power structure that holds them in place. She also transgresses traditional boundaries of race, class, and social standing, attempting to synthesize different identities in order to find a good fit. Yet each new disguise presents its own complication, and it is Claire’s questioning of social roles that enables her to grow as a citizen of the “New World.”

Claire is an allegory of Mexico, as both are entities characterized by *desdoblamientos* and contradictions. As Ute Seydel points out, Claire’s body is denaturalized, problematized, and re-signified. Her transformation goes beyond the masking in Golden Age drama or the transvestism of women like la monja Alférez. Claire is a morphing being who is constantly the *Other*. In her body, different traditions, memories, languages, classes, genders, and races converge. Reading Claire as allegorical of Mexican identity, it is important to point out that Claire’s wounds, while they do not bleed, do not heal either.⁶ While not directly invoking traditional images of *mexicanidad*, we have seen that Boulosa does acknowledge them through certain wordplay. Claire hides behind a mask that makes her feel real (evoking Octavio Paz’s “Máscaras mexicanas”). She is betrayed by her Indian guide, translator, and mother figure (echoing the figure of La Malinche), and in an act of subversion, the same Indian woman refers to herself as Juana and then Inés, bringing to mind the subversion of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (a woman who, like Claire, had to struggle for self expression in colonial Mexico). These multiple historical, literary, and linguistic referents converge in Claire, as her body becomes the meeting place for diversity and plurality, anachronism, contradiction, and parody.

Chapter Three of *Duerme* confronts us with three simultaneous histories. The three versions of the same encounter serve as examples of the arbitrariness of narrating History. We can imagine how the same event narrated by three different witnesses could seem

⁶ See Anna Reid for further discussion of the open wound as an allegory of the Mexican nation.

three different events. In this case, the same event is narrated three times by the *same* witness. Claire insists in the validity of her three stories: "Aunque parezca inverosímil artificio, me ocurren en el mismo lugar y momento tres diversos sucesos. Pero no es artificio, es la verdad" (51). These three simultaneous histories take place on the shore of where the city ends and the lake begins. The first version tells of a white emissary who comes and gives something to the Indian woman. In the second version, the white emissary is revealed to be the Count Urquiza, whose identity Claire had previously "borrowed." He throws a bag of coins to the Indian woman and then notices Claire, who he then rapes. In the third version, an Indian commands the water of the lake to come forth, which it does, slowly, and it is nightfall when the party returns home. There is no mention of the Count, the rape, or any other event other than the approaching waters. It is a history that completely excludes the European element and focuses on the seemingly magical relationship between the Indian and nature. Together, these three versions reveal the intersections of culture, gender, race, and class in colonial society. Separate, they reveal the incompleteness of any narrative that excludes any one of the aforementioned elements. Claire's insistence that all three incidences are true and occur simultaneously forces the reader to abandon linear, chronological thinking in order to accept the possibility of multiple histories that occupy the same space in time. This is just one example of how Claire, as a character and as a narrator, breaks with traditional modes of representation.

When Claire disguises herself as a French nobleman loyal to Spain, the Spanish Viceroy is willing to accept her cross-dressing, but he becomes uneasy and turns on her when he realizes that Claire is viewed as powerful by his Indian foes. The Viceroy forbids any written record of Claire's mysterious lack of blood as well as any mention of her battle with the Indians that witnessed her lack of blood. Claire is effectively banned from history. The Viceroy apparently believes that if there is no written record of what happened, it did not happen; a dangerous vision of history. The Viceroy's mandate reveals the power of the written word, especially in recording historical truth. It is the Viceroy's position in colonial society that allows him to dictate what will be recorded for posterity. His power allows him to silence the voice of the disadvantaged Other in order to maintain the semblance of a fluid and coherent history of the colony, undisturbed by conflicting or contradictory versions of the events at hand. This censure reminds the reader of the silences present in colonial history, and of the gaps in colonial texts.

Duerme incorporates various literary genres, and like other Boulosa texts, has multiple narrators. Claire is forced to flee Mexico with her poet friend Pedro de Ocejo, yet the Mexican waters in her veins cause her to fall into a deep sleep upon leaving the city. When Claire sleeps, the poet Pedro de Ocejo picks up the narration, converting it into a type of fairy tale. The novel's final chapter, quaintly titled "El desenlace de Claire que duerme bella en el bosque cercano al Potosí," is a fantasy projection of Pedro's. We find Claire awakening and expressing an uncharacteristic passion for the now aged Pedro. The fantasy is revealed when the pair stop to converse with a robust Mexican peasant woman whose skin is white as a lily except for her colored cheeks. Pedro realizes his mistake and corrects himself:

¡Ay, perdón! Se me ha colado una historia que no va a aquí, porque los que trabajan las tierras no son robustos sino muertos de hambre que andan como delgados hilos que vuela el

aire, ni son blancos, que sólo los indios tocan la tierra y las minas que enriquecen a los españoles y a los criollos. (141)

This intrusion of colonial reality in Pedro's pastoral fantasy is a rude awakening for both him and the reader, as both realize that he has been carried away by his imagination. The only written history of Claire within the framework of the novel, then, is that of the poet whose vision of her is tainted by his passion for her and his desire to portray her as both the rescued damsel in distress as well as the great warrior-liberator of Mexico.

Pedro's misguided attempt to portray Claire's complex nature causes him to resort to traditional literary types as models for her representation. The self-contradictions of his story reveal the inadequacy of such models in representing a character as complex as Claire. It is Pedro who puts an end to Claire's (hi)story (which is really *his* story) by giving a fairy-tale ending to the "sleeping beauty" that is quite unsatisfactory for a reader accustomed to a different Claire.

The challenge of faithful representation is one also found in *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* (1992), a text consisting of layer upon layer of fragmented narration. There are nineteen sections numbered with Roman numerals. These sections are further divided into sections, some titled and some not, which are narrated by different narrators (most of whom are anonymous). The first section presents us with the appearance of Moctezuma in Mexico City's Parque Hundido on the thirteenth of August, 1989. He is formed by an ancient wind that surges up through an anthill in the park, but the women who accompany him are unable to take physical form and are dispersed in dust particles that sweep through the city. The wind deposits handfuls of dust at the feet of struggling writers, who attempt to pen their own novels based on Moctezuma. There are a total of nine novelistic fragments, all abandoned as futile attempts to represent an important historical figure long lost to the modern world. Interspersed with the nineteen sections and the nine fragments of novels are narrations by other voices and the testimonies of three women who find Moctezuma in the park and take him home with them. The text is also peppered with passages from historical codices and records kept by Spanish explorers, conquerors, chroniclers, and missionaries.

Shifts in the narrative perspective allow us access to Moctezuma's thoughts and memories, as well as access to the thoughts of those who discovered him. His awakening in the twentieth century is physically painful and mentally overwhelming. Yet he is curious about his new environment, and establishes a relationship with Laura, one of the three women who found him, and who takes the reincarnated ruler under her wing and cares for him as if he were a precious child. Laura is lonely and disillusioned with the world, and it seems that the Aztec ruler has been sent to her to fill a void in her life. Likewise, he relies on her to guide him through his one day spent in the sprawling modern city that has replaced his kingdom. At the end of the day, the two go to bed and disappear during sexual intercourse, dissolving into the air in an act that alleviates a certain pain of existence that both had experienced.

Through the juxtaposition of different narrations, truncated novels, and contradictory historical records, we see the impossibility of capturing and representing the *true* Moctezuma of the past. The seventh fragment of novel is the one that most seems to resemble Boullosa's own attempt, especially since she refers to the title of the text we are

reading: *Llanto*. She is preoccupied with the validity of her representation, but at the same time wonders why, since she is writing fiction: “(Me pregunto, ¿por qué me preocupa tanto mentir? ¿Qué, un novelista no es aquel que miente? ¿Qué, no será que aquello de lo que yo he desertado es de la novela? ¿Ahora qué soy, si ya no soy novelista?)” (97). One disillusioned narrator sits on a park bench watching people, vendors, and cars. She begins to cry: “No sé de qué lloro. Todo fue mentira. Pero no puedo desprenderme de la imagen del hombre recostado cerca de mí, en el pasto del parque, vestido como un Tlatoani antes de la caída de la gran Tenochtitlan, y sin dejar de llorar pienso en la novela que yo hubiera querido escribir sobre este encuentro, la novela que las musas me decidieron imposible” (120). The irony, of course, is that, out of the conglomeration of ‘impossible novels,’ surges the text of *Llanto: Novelas imposibles*, indicating that the only possibility for a novel that attempts to portray the *real* Moctezuma is a text which admits multiple interpretations, testimonies, and representations, and which ultimately sends him back to his own world in recognition that, sadly, he does not have a place in ours.

Llanto: Novelas imposibles is perhaps the text that best exemplifies Boullosa’s postmodern historiographic metafiction, with its multiple narrators, fragmented perspective, and constant re-telling and re-envisioning of the same events, forever lost as facts and only hypothetically and creatively recovered through fiction. The text is characterized by a constant awareness of the body—either in its absence or in its overwhelming presence. The wind that sweeps through the city depositing inspiration at the feet of the writers carries the ashes, memories, and testimonies of the Indian women that accompany the Aztec ruler in the moment of his rebirth. He is able to take physical form; they are not. The testimonies of the bodiless women are distorted by the cultural interpretation and translation of the twentieth-century writers. The bodiless Indian women are doomed to be misrepresented, as they cannot speak for themselves. The various writers that attempt to tell Moctezuma’s story must abandon their projects, as they are lacking the tools they need in order to write. These tools go beyond mere historical fact or creative genius. The twentieth-century writers of Mexico City are lacking the social and cultural referent of the man they wish to make their protagonist. His worldview, ideology, and culture are lost and can only be the subject of conjecture and postulation.

The text tells us that Moctezuma is fixed in his physical form—for the moment—by the weeping (“el llanto”). No one mourns the loss of the anonymous Indian women; yet perhaps together, their voices could provide a more complete portrayal of the Tlatoani than that provided by history. The testimonies of Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo are problematic in their representations of Moctezuma and his people, written with a political agenda and from a decisively Catholic, European, and male perspective. The alternative versions of history found in the codices provide accounts that contradict such totalizing narratives of the Conquest, yet these indigenous texts have still been passed through a European filter, through linguistic and cultural translation. This history then, is that told through the perspective of the Other, a view culturally distanced by a different language, history, religion, and ideology from the people it purports to represent. The postmodern criticism of history seeks not to reject such narrations, but rather to situate them within their context as human constructs, and thus open them to the same analysis and critique that we apply to any human construct, including literature.

The various historical and creative accounts of Moctezuma's death reveal an inconsistency in the historical records. Moctezuma's reappearance in an age in which history is constantly questioned and challenged offers a tantalizing possibility of finding out what *really* happened from the man himself. Yet, shortly after his rebirth, Moctezuma, like the timeless phoenix, is reduced again to ash, leaving our questions unanswered. We are left not with the *true* Moctezuma or the *real* Moctezuma, but rather a multitude of interpretations, hypotheses, and creative representations of those who wish to remember him. As one narrator concludes, "[s]e puede decir que Moctezuma es lo que a uno le dé la gana: de todos modos no será como sería de cierto ..." (91). Another novelist struggles with a text that refuses to accept the insertion of the Aztec ruler: "La Novela ríe de la voluntad del escritor ..." (113). When the writer attempts to proceed, the novel resists: "Ella niega firmemente con la cabeza ..." (113). This personification of the novel posits it as a living entity, parented by a writer whose authority is challenged by its rebellious offspring, the postmodern literary text.

What we accept as historical truth is often incomplete. History has gaps, and Boullosa finds in these gaps a space for creativity. The postmodern text also has gaps. It is often fragmented and open, allowing multiple interpretations while calling into question the subjective bias in all writing, especially that which attempts to establish itself as a historical authority. As Boullosa's narrators constantly emphasize their credibility only to later invalidate it, we are forced to distance ourselves from the storyline and take a critical step backwards in order to look at the text as a conflictive and often contradictory piece of literature that presents more questions than answers. By invoking historical figures and texts, and incorporating them into her own work of fiction, Boullosa reminds us of their literary—and thus fallible—nature.

Phantasmagoric voices echo throughout Carmen Boullosa's novels. These are the voices of the past; these are the voices of the dead. Yet these are not *real* voices, but rather fictitious constructed voices meant to represent bodies that long ago turned to dust. To engage in dialogue with the past is to fracture the monologue of History and give voice to the deceased Other. The fictional nature of these voices makes their enunciation problematic. In *The Writing of History*, Certeau refers to such problematic dialogues with the past. He cites Michelet's introduction to *The History of France*, in which Michelet, too, acknowledges the "strange dialogue" that emanates from empty tombs. Certeau claims that "[t]he dear departed find a haven in the text because they can neither speak nor do harm anymore. These ghosts find access through *writing* on the condition that they remain *forever silent*" (2; emphasis in original).

Any representation of historical figures is an interpretation of the past that is subject to contemporary paradigms of thinking about that past. The original historical document itself most likely reflects subjectivity on the part of its author. Thus the voices echoing from the past are not historical voices at all, but rather voices created in the present and projected into the past. Hence, the echo we hear is that of our own voice. This does not mean that the voice is without historical value or validity, but we must recognize its place of origin. As Certeau observes, "the past is the fiction of the present" (10). The complicated relationship between past, present, fact, and fiction certainly blurs the lines between historiography and historiographic metafiction.

The sense of loss, absence, and silence that Certeau perceives in history is one that Boullosa approaches through fiction. Both history and fiction engage in a search for the silenced Other, who is “the phantasm of historiography, the object that it seeks, honors, and buries” (Certeau 2). This project, according to Certeau, “aims at ‘understanding’ and, through ‘meaning,’ at hiding the alterity of this foreigner; or, in what amounts to the same thing, it aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs” (2). Thus, while unable to resuscitate the dead, we are able to allow them a kind of immortality through the written text, which because of its very nature, can only approximate the real through representation. The gap between the real and its representation is one forged over time but also, as semiotics has pointed out, by language itself.

The lack or ambiguous nature of bodily presence and the shifting of subject positions deny the establishment of traditional dichotomies such as victim/victimizer or active/passive (Ibsen 6). Traditional dichotomies between body and spirit/mind establish boundaries that do not exist in Boullosa’s characters. Her narrators speak from nebulous spaces, sometimes bodiless spaces, and at times, having a body is not enough to have a voice, and vice-versa. The body is the site of a constant re-negotiation of identity. The struggle to represent and to represent adequately and *truthfully* plagues narrators that are unable to reconcile the contradictions found in history, in the world, and in their own psyches. This leads to a fragmented narration that folds back on itself, contradicts itself, and changes direction without warning.

To describe Boullosa as postmodern is to include her within a vast group of writers that share a preoccupation with history and its representation, in and out of literature. What is distinctly unique to Boullosa is her manipulation of bodies—physical bodies and textual bodies—that situate themselves within history, but never quite seem to find a comfortable resting place. Through historiographic metafiction, Boullosa posits the body as text and the text as a body, always fragmented and yet paradoxically complete in its incompleteness. If history is a narrative and fiction is a narrative, and both are human constructs, then perhaps the truth we seek is not the fact of the past but the human mechanisms behind the narratives we have constructed for ourselves. As she engages in dialogue with the ghosts of the past, Boullosa joins historiographers in confronting death, the great preoccupation of the Western world.

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