

***Novela negra con argentinos* by Luisa Valenzuela: Writing as Freedom**

Diane E. Marting
University of Mississippi

A mí nadie me vende ficción por realidad (políticamente hablando) porque he aprendido a leer y sé dónde empieza la una y termina la otra. Pero también sé que siempre se articula una imbricación, nada es tan realista como aparenta, el ser humano es muy complejo, por suerte, y nuestra capacidad, como bien descubrió Lacan, de acceder a lo real solo se ejerce por la mediación de lo simbólico.

Luisa Valenzuela, " 'Yo soy trampa' " (169)

*Novela negra con argentinos*¹ (1990), finalist for the VI Premio Internacional de Novela de Plaza y Janés, is Luisa Valenzuela's sixth novel. In this postmodern thriller, Valenzuela discusses and exemplifies her idea of "writing with the body" in a way similar to the idea of *l'écriture féminine* as proposed by Hélène Cixous and other French theorists.² "Escribir con el cuerpo" is also the name of a 1993 essay by Valenzuela.³ Valenzuela's concept has changed over time and differs in certain aspects from the French feminists' *écrire le corps*, but she agrees in general with the idea of writing as a liberatory practice advocated by Cixous.⁴ The theme of how to write in freedom occurs throughout many, if not most, of Cixous's works. Especially relevant in this respect is *Le rire de la Méduse* from 1975 and *La venue à l'écriture* from 1976.⁵ In employing French feminist precepts, Valenzuela has made them her own; she proposes the nature of *escribir con el cuerpo* in essays and interviews as a paradoxical knowing-unknowing, a reasoned lack-of-reason, and a refusal to flee the

¹ Hereafter *Novela negra*.

² I want to thank the American Council of Learned Societies for a fellowship in the fall of 1992 that allowed me to attend a semester of Cixous's seminar in Paris.

³ For the purposes of this article, I will use the terms "writing with the body," feminine writing, *escribir con el cuerpo*, *la escritura femenina*, *écrire le corps*, and *l'écriture féminine*, as roughly equivalent, despite the slight differences that exist between them.

⁴ Interviews, essays, and autobiographical items by Cixous have now made it into Valenzuela's Spanish but none had appeared before *Novela negra*. Valenzuela knows French and English well and has lived in France and New York. An example of translations into Spanish is: *Entrevistas a Hélène Cixous: No escribimos sin cuerpo* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2010).

⁵ "The Laugh of the Medusa" was published in English in 1976, just one year after the original publication in French. *La risa de la Medusa* appeared in Spanish in 1995. *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* appeared in 1991. *La llegada a la escritura* appeared in Spanish in 2006.

horror found in the psyche. Sharon Magnarelli calls it “la metáfora peligrosa.” Valenzuela’s connection to Cixous generally has at least three characteristics: 1) its deployment in fiction, since Cixous values fiction in conveying her message, more than either Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva does;⁶ 2) its feminism, because Cixous desires social and philosophical change for women; and 3) its humor and pleasure, since Cixous’s Medusa is laughing and not killing with her deadly countenance.

In this article, I examine Valenzuela’s deployment of freedom of “movement” for its characters in *Novela negra* and how that deployment is related to writing with the body.⁷ My goal here is to explain and describe how the poststructuralist and postmodern practices that Valenzuela places under the wide umbrella of “writing with the body” infuse a modicum of self-determination into a novel that otherwise poses a dark, chaotic metaphor for Argentina in the 1970s and 1980s. In “La venue à l’écriture,” Cixous proposes writing as a death-defying act: “Écrire : pour ne pas laisser la place au mort, pour faire reculer l’oubli, pour ne jamais se laisser surprendre par l’abîme. Pour ne jamais se résigner, se consoler, se retourner dans son lit vers le mur et se rendormir . . .” (11). Valenzuela’s writer-characters need such defiance to keep going during their exile from a violent Argentina.

In order to accomplish an explanation of Valenzuela’s practice, I first review the outlines of Valenzuela’s concept as compared to Cixous, and then I explain how Valenzuela as a critic speaks of writing with the body in *Novela negra*. Next, I move from author intention and description to an analysis of the theme as discussed by the writer-characters, leaving behind extra-textual authorities (Valenzuela’s interviews) and engaging in a brief analysis of characterization. The two writers, Roberta Aguilar and Agustín Palant, female and male, manifest themselves almost like a scientific experiment, one that applies “writing with the body” to the situation of Argentine exiles in New York in the late 1980s. Secondarily, it could be seen as an experiment in gendered “writing with the body.”

As recently as 2017 Valenzuela commented: “[E]n *Novela negra con argentinos* exploro la noción de escribir con el cuerpo,” continuing to assert the importance of the theme for this novel in particular (“Una vida” 82). In general, Valenzuela discusses the concept as a writerly gesture rather than a readerly one, as a technique for writing. Gender flexibility has been fundamental in Valenzuela’s concept of writing with the body, just as it often is essential for understanding her other fiction.

“Writing the body” is writing or acting fully in the moment. Cixous enjoins us: “Écris ! Quoi ? Prends le vent, prends l’écriture, fais corps avec la lettre” (“La venue” 51). This feature of the idea may appear overly abstract or even insignificant, but for writers it is a

⁶ In the process of showing these qualities of the novel, I highlight Cixous’s contributions more than other French theorists to Valenzuela’s conception, but that is not to deny the importance of the others. It is merely to simplify this argument and clarify the influences at work. Indeed, Jacques Lacan may be the most important French influence on Valenzuela.

⁷ Magnarelli writes: “Creo que la mayoría de los que conocen la obra de Valenzuela estarían de acuerdo en que la noción de escribir con el cuerpo aparece, de un modo u otro, tanto en casi toda su narrativa como en sus entrevistas y presentaciones en congresos de literatura” (53). In a deeper and more involved analysis than any other critic, Magnarelli has elucidated the role of the body in Valenzuela’s *escribir con el cuerpo* in the Argentine’s works as a continuum with variations. This critic also acknowledges that the idea’s meaning in Valenzuela’s works is not exactly synonymous with *l’écriture féminine* of the French feminists Irigaray, Kristeva, or even Cixous (58). In the present article, I emphasize the similarities with just one novel, *Novela negra*.

very real requirement. Writers must always already be “in the moment” when they are writing, even if they are remembering. Personal, cultural, or social history must appear as a memory in the present for it to be part of the process of writing. In contrast, readers “actualize” the text within their own experience—a creative act—but one that does not lead to communicating the novelty to others in the same way or to the same extent that fiction writers do when they create. For both writers and readers, though, their activity includes the psychological element of the relation to textual representation.

As a non-oppositional writing in the present, *l'écriture féminine* in Cixous and its equivalent in Valenzuela appear inevitably marked by culture. When writing with the body, a writer may be forced to employ gender markers, for example, but gender in her text is neither simple, fixed, nor complete.⁸ The gender binary in Cixous's writings works as a constraint, another psychosocial problem that she (and other writers) has a responsibility to address. For instance, referring to Jacques Derrida, Cixous writes: “C'est qu'il est un homme-qui-écrit. Un homme-qui-écrit n'est pas un homme, c'est un « homme » qui va devant lui-même, va vers le plus loin qui lui-même, s'additionne, se mêle (se coupe)” (“Contes” 47). Never repeating linguistic and social gender markers unreflectively, Cixous wants feminine writing to accomplish something: to envision the new, in a search for solutions to gender dualities (the gender binary), along with other philosophical problems (such as trauma, memory, and the discourse of power).

Susanna Bachmann asserts that this delicate dance of the writerly experience of “writing with the body” is distinct from a simple gestalt of identity characteristics. Male or female, young or old, these qualities affect but do not determine the parameters of the creative process. The idea is the importance of accessing the qualities that deconstruct power, as it is currently understood, so that new ways of understanding reality can take hold: “. . . escribir con el cuerpo . . . equivale en primer lugar a una (re)apropiación de todos las [*sic*] detalles que constituyen la propia identidad. Sólo al tomar en cuenta todos los aspectos que determinan al individuo (su *actual* estado físico y síquico-mental) se puede verdaderamente escribir con el cuerpo” (137; my emphasis). In 2002, while writing about fellow Argentine fiction author Julio Cortázar, Valenzuela asserted: “Soy de la opinión de que se escribe con el cuerpo, que todo el ser está implicado en el acto de la escritura,” male or female (“Julio Cortázar” 26). I would add that in writing with the body “todo el estar,” the situation or condition of the author, is also implicated. In *Novela negra*, both protagonists are writers, but Agustín loses his ability to write because he thinks he has killed. He can no longer go beyond or before himself (“devant lui-même”) to write.

In her interview with Adrián Ferrero, Valenzuela summarizes her idea of “escribir con el cuerpo.” Here again it is an action, not a topic. Valenzuela emphasizes the writer's access to the imaginary in this process, as does Cixous who writes: “. . . j'entre à l'intérieur de moi les yeux fermés, et ça se lit” (“La venue” 63). Most importantly, however, Valenzuela

⁸ Speaking primarily with reference to Irigaray, Magnarelli emphasizes that *l'écriture féminine* indicates “una escritura que resquebraja y cuestiona el status quo, pero no insiste en que haya algo inherente o necesariamente ‘femenino’ en esa escritura, limitado al cuerpo sexuado femenino o al texto firmado por una mujer, inherente a sus fluidos, en oposición a los sólidos masculinos” (60). This is also the opinion of the character Roberta Aguilar since she enjoins Agustín to write with his body.

informs us of her different intention in *Novela negra* regarding writing with the body. At the end, she condenses her comment into a joke:

La idea de escribir con el cuerpo viene de un accionar que percibo a flor de piel o en el secreto magma de las tripas. . . . Es más bien un entregarse, un dejarse llevar por un impulso que tiene su propia corporeidad. Usar el lenguaje cotidiano para explicar esa sensación . . . no es tarea simple. Intenté hacerlo en *Peligrosas palabras*, y antes que eso intenté ponerlo en juego en *Novela negra con argentinos*. Esto último fue un poco como responder al célebre chiste: “¿Eso es un rascacielos? Ay, cómo me gustaría verlo funcionar...” (“Usar el lenguaje” 134)

In other words, Valenzuela felt that her intention in *Novela negra* was to “verlo funcionar,” to watch it work, to set writing with the body in motion and then be a witness to the way it acts: “ponerlo en juego.” Previously, the concept has been difficult for critics to access and evaluate because it is largely a process for authors rather than a textual product. But in *Novela negra* we have the opportunity to see writing with the body in the product—the novel—more clearly because Valenzuela seeks to enhance and make visible its utilization via the writer-characters and their actions.

Even though Valenzuela differs from Cixous in her more recent works,⁹ an important confluence with Cixous in these early years lies in the fact that Valenzuela considers the strategy of writing with the body as closely related to textual levels and meta-textuality; it is double and related to irony in its reliance on multiple possible readings of texts. Verena Andermatt Conley writes about doubleness in Cixous’s ideas of writing and asserts: “She urges work on the signifier *and* parallel work on the signified, a dialogue between literary effects and philosophical (analytical) concepts” (19; emphasis in original). Like Cixous and like Valenzuela’s character Roberta, the Argentine author affirms that she argues for a metalanguage and irony when she writes with her body in order to prevent an excessive immobility of meaning while attempting to access freedom. It is: “. . . todo lo que nos permita movernos más allá de nuestro limitado pensamiento, más allá de las censuras propias y de las ajenas, que suelen ser mucho más letales. Un paso de costado para poder observar la acción al mismo tiempo que se la realiza. Un paso imprescindible para que la visión de una realidad política no se vea contaminada por dogmas o mensajes” (“Escribir” 40). Cixous ends her essay “La venue à l’écriture” by emphasizing the role of *l’écriture* in bringing about a “transformation dans nos inconscients” (69). Such transformations lead to authenticity and the eschewing of received messages, regarding politics, gender, and much else.

Agustín Palant experiences a doubling sensation separating him(self) from himself in the initial scene of *Novela negra* (4). In so doing, he is compelled by his irrational self, because he has a moral self that is disgusted by what he believes he has done (that is, murdered Edwina Irving). He cannot connect his two parts because he only accepts a rational psychology and a rational ethos. As a result, he is manipulated across space and time by his past because he becomes paralyzed and cannot write. The narrator insists on a rational view like the one the character possesses: that Agustín killed not merely in his writing but in reality: “El hombre, Agustín Palant, es argentino, escritor, y acaba de matar a

⁹ Personal communication by email, Luisa Valenzuela, 6 December 2018.

una mujer. En la llamada realidad, no en el escurridizo y ambiguo terreno de la ficción" (3).¹⁰ Agustín's protest that he has killed in reality, echoing the narrator, is a piece of the structure holding apart the two narrative levels of 1) the characters' ability to write and 2) the characters' concerns and actions in all other areas.

On the one hand, the character Roberta experiences "writing with the body" as sex, eroticism, and energy, while her friend Agustín lives it in the form of terror, horror, and emotional pain.¹¹ He runs from the experience. The clearest implementation by Valenzuela of writing with the body in the novel is this explicit contrast of Roberta and Agustín's opinions and actions on this theme. Interestingly, Magnarelli argues that Valenzuela's writing with the body has two forms.¹² First, writing with the body involves bodies as expressive agents, writers who communicate to others within the symbolic order; second, it includes bodies that are marked, "written upon," especially by violence and aggression.¹³ The two writer-protagonists of *Novela negra* exemplify both types, both practices: they use their bodies to "express" ideas as writers and in so doing represent characters of the first type, but because they have been traumatized by the violence of the dictatorship in Argentina, they also embody Magnarelli's second type in which their bodies have been marked upon. It is difficult for writer-characters not to be "written on" (affected by trauma and history) since it provides them with their need to write.

Agustín is portrayed as a body more severely marked by the aggression against civilians in Buenos Aires than Roberta, but she too has suffered in this way. Crime and writing paralysis would be the mixture of the two forms of writing with the body defining Agustín. With most of the novel's other characters (Bill, Ava Taurel), only one of Magnarelli's two types may be seen; they are either those who write with their bodies or those whose bodies are written upon.

In the case of Valenzuela's two writer-characters, writing with the body does not literally mean writing texts as in Cixous. The narrator calls Roberta's jumping on her bed "writing with the body" even though she is not literally writing (8-9). Thus, the freedom Roberta displays, the scope she gives to her utopian moves, lies in her individual psyche and body, and not on this occasion on a page Roberta writes for readers. This extension of *escribir con el cuerpo* to include acts in which nothing is literally written is a divergence from Cixous. But when the French theorist argues that the body a writer inhabits gives her a differential writing, that each individual's body produces a disparate text, on this point Valenzuela and Cixous are agreed. More philosophical and more psychological, in

¹⁰ Regarding the guilt of Agustín, Valenzuela commented: "Honestamente yo creo que sí, que la mató; son sólo dudas que sembré. A mí me parece tan tremendo el hecho de creer que mataste a alguien como el hecho de haberlo matado. Pero Roberta nunca lo cree del todo" ("Yo soy trampa" 164-65). Strictly speaking, of course, thinking you have killed is not "tan tremendo" as actually killing, but since within a novel both possibilities are instances of fiction, killing and writing can be compared.

¹¹ I agree with Magnarelli when she adds the caveat that Valenzuela is not speaking metaphysically but about the particular and that it might be best to use the expression "Escribir con *mi* cuerpo" to affirm that distinction (57-58; emphasis added).

¹² "... nos compele a distinguir entre esos dos 'modos' de escribir con el cuerpo, porque los personajes no sólo escriben (y se escriben) con el cuerpo, sino que se escribe metafóricamente en sus cuerpos; sus cuerpos son inscritos, marcados, con los signos 'gráficos' de la violencia y la agresión" (Magnarelli 56).

¹³ One can compare these two types to Cixous's distinction between her own practice and that of those she lost to the Holocaust: writers and being written upon.

Valenzuela's portrait of the two writer-characters, the theme is an exploration of the causes and consequences of writing on their lives; in Cixous, in contrast, rather than a novel we often find a manifesto or a justification of the importance of writing, which automatically connects with the body.

Putting writing with the body into action in *Novela negra* means—at least in part—that ideas held by these two characters about writing should at first contrast and then develop. Roberta repeats to Agustín her mantra from the beginning of her relationship: “No te preocupés por la novela directamente, escribí con el cuerpo. Es lo único que puede tener cierto viso de verdad” (11). But Agustín does not understand: “No sé qué me querés decir con eso” (11). His progress toward understanding is the thematic trajectory of *Novela negra*.

By contrasting the way that the explicit theme of writing with the body functions within the Roberta-Agustín pair, Valenzuela recognizes and thematizes gender. But then she erases the edges between the supposed opposites with masks, cross-dressing, and identity play so that masculine and feminine collapse into each other. In Cixous's English lectures, “Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing” (1993), she argues for a complexity of gender similar to that found in parts of *Novela negra*: “. . . we continue to say man and woman even though it doesn't work. [In today's society,] [w]e are not made to reveal to what extent we are complex. We are not strong enough, not agile enough; only writing is able to do this” (199). In “Theory and the Body: Luisa Valenzuela's *Novela negra con argentinos* as Test Case,” Philip Swanson agrees that in *Novela negra* gender is not simple, binary essentialism: “Whatever the barrier that separates and distinguishes Roberta and Agustín, they in some ways become each other or merge into each other's sexual identities” (99). Swanson also argues that the initial contrast between Roberta and Agustín is resolved: “If the novel does appear to pit a female against a male, and a ‘feminine’ consciousness against a ‘masculine’ one, it also shows gender identity to be constructed and explores its arbitrary nature through the motif of androgyny” (98-99). Although Swanson never defines whether he is using androgyny as a term from Carl Jung (psychoanalysis) or Carolyn Heilbrun (feminist literary analysis), he calls its use a repeating element, a motif, and discusses extensively the hybrid and changing male and female characteristics of the two main characters.¹⁴ His evidence includes among other things an excellent list of examples “where domination, submission and gender power are unstable, shifting, flexible categories”; Swanson gives an even longer list of moments where “non-binary motifs” imply “the porosity of boundaries and divisions” (99). As this critic declares, there are “repeated reference to limits, barriers, frontiers and their breaching” (99).

In Swanson's effort to test Valenzuela (and Cixous) for essentialism, he calls the gender moves in *Novela negra* “androgyny.” But Valenzuela's efforts in this direction are better understood as performance, as gender queer, as a switching back and forth between

¹⁴ As Roberta attempts to understand Agustín, she takes on some of his qualities; as Agustín attempts to hide from the police and to understand himself, he too masquerades as other. However, this appearance of gender “androgyny” is really their being in a relation with each other (a friendship) in which there is mutual influence as well as a denial of essential gender. The clothes he has available to him when he wants to evade the police are her clothes. Additionally, being in exile and being writers gives them commonalities that diminish the contrasts between Roberta and Agustín as woman and man. These actions entangle them in changing and fluid gender positions.

genders without prejudice or preference. Androgyny as a concept does not include the element of performance and/or movement/territoriality vis-à-vis gender. Swanson himself asserts that androgyny contrasts with the constructed nature of gender in Valenzuela's novel in its unstable, non-binary portraits of gender. Androgyny implies a gender wholeness, stability, and unity that neither Roberta nor Agustín possesses.¹⁵ Androgyny, as it has generally been understood, is a psychosocial concept whereas Valenzuela's *escribir con el cuerpo* and Cixous's *l'écriture féminine* are both processes of inscription. One could perhaps see the two characters together as an androgynous characterization, but at which moment in their narrative trajectory? Their paths as gendered characters are oddly unpredictable, even for fiction.

The gender binary entangles everyone with its cultural definitions, labels, and identity markers. The fact that Roberta and Agustín switch gender characteristics makes them newly gendered and cooperating as the novel progresses. In Cixous's essay translated in Spanish as "La joven nacida" ("La jeune née"), in the section "El masculino futuro," she asserts that "no hay *invención* posible, ya sea filosófica o poética, sin que el sujeto inventor no sea abundantemente rico de lo otro, lo diverso" (43; emphasis in original), including all that is associated with the other gender.¹⁶ And since, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan explains in "Jacques Lacan: Feminism and the Problem of Gender Identity," "Sexual identity is not based on biological gender, or any other innate factor, but is learned through the dynamics of identification and language," people acquire characteristics of both genders in their lives (6).¹⁷ Ultimately, the lack of rigid gender identities in Valenzuela's work is a utopian gesture that avoids repeating authoritarian structures in writing and is closely related to the authenticity sought when one writes from one's lived experience.

An important question is whether the same gender complexity happens when Roberta or Agustín are writing with the body. And is it limited to "women" who write, like Roberta? Does Agustín ever come to join Roberta in a celebratory experience of *l'écriture*? Since the novel begins with Roberta already writing with her body, can it be said that Agustín learns to do something similar? How does Valenzuela see it functioning with her male character?

¹⁵ In Joyce Carol Oates's review of Carolyn G. Heilbrun's seminal work on the subject, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* from 1973, the American novelist complains about Heilbrun's use of the term androgyny while praising the critic's passion and sincerity: "We keep returning to that word, and we never really know what it means. Sometimes it means simply sexless, sometimes bisexual; sometimes it means (in the case of the novel) a work in which 'the reader identifies with the male and female characters equally. . .'. Sometimes it means simply a synthesis of Taoist opposites of activity/passivity, Yin/Yang, rationality, intuitions—which no sane person would quarrel with. Who is the admitted enemy of equilibrium in individual and society?" (7).

I believe Swanson is referring to the idea of reader identification with both characters. But such identification is difficult when the male character (supposedly, possibly) murders in the first scene. Such violent characters must earn a reader's identification if it is possible at all.

¹⁶ Swanson also seeks to ridicule the references to magic and witchcraft in Valenzuela's novel and her essays (97, 98). He quotes the narrator's description of Roberta: "Sólo puede quererse de verdad cuando cabalga su propia energía como si fuera un potro. O mejor una escoba. La muy bruja, se dice" (9). Witches and magic, in this context, allude to the power of the unconscious and not to some kind of control of matter through a pact with the devil. Significantly, the reference to witches can be associated with the idea of Medusa, the ultimate witch, in Cixous's essay.

¹⁷ Valenzuela is a life-long reader of Lacan. For an excellent Lacanian analysis of *Novela negra*, see Juanamaria Cordones-Cook's "*Novela negra con argentinos*: The Desire to Know."

Could writing organize his violence and make it understandable? Speaking of the dead of the Holocaust, according to Cixous: "J'écris et tu n'es pas mort. Si j'écris l'autre est sauf" ("La venue" 13). For most of Valenzuela's novel, Agustín feels that his existence has stopped and he cannot move forward in life or writing. Would writing with his body about Argentina allow his life to continue?

Agustín sees "writing with the body" not as creating a new freedom from reality, but as an action (killing) that his body has taken without his will. While escaping the scene of his crime, he feels that Roberta would say that the murder he committed was his way to write with the body: "... como en las peores novelas del género, sintiéndose metido en una de esas novelas que bien le hubiera gustado escribir pero no de esa manera, no con el cuerpo como diría Roberta" (7). For Agustín, at least at first, "writing with the body" means the revulsion of living and doing those things about which he would like to write, like the violence he witnessed in Argentina. He prefers rationality and the inability to write about those crimes to his gesture that has meant the death of Edwina Irving. The action and narration of the novel suggest that his inability or refusal to allow his unconscious desires to enter his writing has allowed them to leap into his conscious world instead. Roberta counsels Agustín to write with his body, not his mind alone, in order to transcend his creative and emotional impasse, but he cannot. He engages in action irrationally, unconsciously, inexplicably, and impelled by his unconscious, instead of writing on the page. Devastated by the tortures and disappearances in Buenos Aires, Agustín is blocked and unable to write his novel. He cannot bring himself to write and does not want to inspire Roberta to write either.¹⁸

It is the Uruguayan Héctor Bravo's ambiguous past and ability to listen without judgment that allows Agustín to confess.¹⁹ As a Tupamaro²⁰ and a doctor who may have been involved in torture in the past (195), Bravo like Agustín is entangled in the Argentine trauma of the 1970s and 1980s whereas Roberta has been living longer in New York than either man. Although in New York, Bravo fulfills Agustín's requirements of distance and entanglement. Agustín's release from torment only comes when he stops running and confesses freely to Bravo: "... va largando su historia. ... [L]a deja correr como agüita de manantial, pura en el sentido de no contaminada ni por la censura interna ni por la autocompasión, el terror o la tristeza" (200). The irrational, inexplicable energy resulting from Agustín's reversal of self-censorship seems to be *his* expressive form of writing with *his* body: orally rather than written and to a stranger who could understand him rather than alone. By finally telling his story to the right person, Agustín manages to begin to understand why he might have killed Edwina Irving, if he did indeed kill her.

¹⁸ Agustín thinks he functions as a muse for Roberta. He resents and denies it: "Hecho pulpa, atrapado entre dos tapas de un libro de Roberta, así se siente a veces, como si él fuera el iniciador de toda escritura, como si ella no hubiera escrito y publicado mucho antes de conocerlo, como si la literatura naciera instigada por él y no como debiera ser, naciendo de él, de su propia pluma. De su propia mano" (22-23).

¹⁹ Valenzuela commented in an interview: "El único en la novela que cree en el asesinato y lo ayuda a Agustín a aceptarse es Héctor Bravo, porque su trabajo es ése, precisamente" (" 'Yo soy trampa' " 164-65).

²⁰ The Tupamaros (full name: *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Tupamaro*) were an armed Uruguayan group during the late 1960s and 1970s. Many went into exile during the greatest repression by the military government.

Hence, Valenzuela's concept of "writing with the body" is more than a simple contrast of gender-fluid characters who debate the idea. Through Agustín's probable crime, Valenzuela establishes that the consequences of not writing with the body, of rejecting *l'écriture*, may be horrific. This action of writing with the body is a means through which Roberta finds happiness and Agustín learns to speak what he could not write. And the interrelationship with themes and realities of exile, identity, and literary writing is robust. The associations between writing with the body, gender, and trauma are also perplexing and surprising. For instance, Agustín is entangled with Roberta—his movements toward and then away from her are propelled by what he has done and by what he has suffered. Roberta tries to help him, but over time, she wanders farther and farther from him until they no longer seem very linked at all. The relations of their friendship to the ethical and political context are difficult to ascertain if not mysterious. Additionally, the police never pursue Agustín, and Roberta never discovers why Agustín may have killed. So why does Agustín think he has killed? Why is there no body and no police investigation?

While not as radical in her rejection of the literary as Cixous, Valenzuela's writing here does not follow traditional rules for the novel or crime genre.²¹ Valenzuela is more literary than her French counterpart because she is playing with the *novela negra* as a literary subgenre. The novel ends with the throwaway riposte from Bill to Roberta: "Ustedes los novelistas argentinos" (233), emphasizing as a predominant theme two intertwined writers in a certain group of creative writers. Still, Valenzuela's *Novela negra* is riddled with textuality, games, jokes, and a metawriting that points to the *énonciation* as well as the *énoncé*, both process and product.

Returning to Agustín, then, Cixous and French feminism in general argue that the masculine subject needs to incorporate the feminine because phallogocentrism hurts both men and women. It is important for understanding *Novela negra* to recognize that gender in the novel is scattered and chaotic rather than aligned with biological characteristics. As Richard stresses, this new textuality does not value stable characterization or consistent and logical transitions in space and time (39-40). The sought-after result of movement and gesture is either a path to the new and/or the fraying of old boundaries. Sometimes the irrationality and messiness of identity in the new writing lead to cooperation and to identification with a mixed community. Entanglement usefully expresses this idea of interrelationship and mobility. Agustín lets his hair grow long, shaves his beard, and wears a dress in a desertion from masculinity supposedly caused by the need to evade the police.

Swanson complains of a lack of "solidity" (102) and an "amorphousness" (103) of gender in this novel; the critic finds that the idea of art as a challenge to authority represented in *Novela negra* "is both feeble and indulgent" (103).²² Given Valenzuela's

²¹ Nelly Richard recognized as much when she wrote in 1987 about Cixous's and French feminism's influence on Anglo-American criticism: "Nacida de la emergencia conjunta de una poética del texto (Cixous) y de una reflexión sobre subjetividad, lenguaje e inconsciente (Kristeva, Irigaray), se abre un nuevo campo anglo-americano, que se preocupa más de la escritura propiamente tal en cuanto travesía simbólica y volumen signficante, que de su codificación literaria en géneros como la novela o la poesía" (44-45).

²² It is puzzling that Swanson would question that there can be meaning if gender is shown as performed, but perhaps that is because his article was written before much of this performative theory of gender was available. He writes: "What is really problematical is what this means for identity itself. Is it just a performance, part of a script, a series of roles we play, a fiction, an act?" (100). He seems to argue that identity

extensive discussions of gender and resistance, it is logical to assume that defiance to authority and speaking out about trauma appear in *Novela negra* intentionally and are designed to supplement a writer-character's life with new thought and word pathways, rather than to supplant real-world activism, as Swanson seems to be implying. Swanson also dislikes the idea that male guilt may be perceived as greater than female guilt in *Novela negra* (103). But the difference in guilt between Roberta and Agustín should not be construed as an attack on one gender, since gender, I repeat, is fluid and not fixed in the novel. Nor is Agustín's crime certain.

The heaviness of certain biological characteristics in most works of fiction does not invalidate the fact that those physical properties are evaluated and named by cultures and in languages. The idea of stability in identity disguises humanity's myriad ways of experiencing physical qualities and of valuing them (or not). When Swanson asks, "Are not both the female/'féminine' assertion and/or the non-binary ideal ultimately meaningless if everything is but a construct?" (100), many today would follow Judith Butler et al. and answer no: variation and construction are paths to new freedoms.²³ The non-binary ideal reaches toward utopia by relying on the idea that traditional gender identity is a paradigm that can be changed. The rejection of essentialist binary thinking results in a back-and-forth motion that aims at political and philosophical goals, not by engulfing and incorporating the other, but instead by invigorating and enriching the other within and outside oneself.

Furthermore, *escribir con el cuerpo* is a writing that does not forget history (especially its residue in the present) but which also does not limit itself to lamentation or criticism of injustice, because it is primarily an exploration of possible futures and of ways of healing the wounds of the body and mind. This is the reason that writing with the body—embodied writing—so to speak, traces a path to peace in what it has done for Agustín. Confronting his own history becomes Agustín's way forward. It is a new type of *literatura comprometida*.

Cixous's theories of a liberatory writing, a writer's action in the pursuit of a better world, do coincide with and may have informed Valenzuela's theme, as we have seen. As a corollary, it is clear that it is not Agustín's crime that liberates him, as it would have done in the existentialist literary tradition. As he explains to Roberta Aguilar: "También lo leí a Camus, y Gide, el acto gratuito, todo eso" (39). In existentialism, characters gain a realization of the indifference of the universe. In contrast, Agustín gains his freedom by speaking with Bravo, through a special instance of talk therapy. When he is finally able to "enterrar a sus muertos" (232), he feels better and is freer from guilt. As Roberta explains Agustín's situation to Bill in the end, Agustín had been violent because of the violence he had been traumatized by: "Los muertos que vos matáis [que Agustín mató] son fruto de otros crímenes, ajenos" (232-33). This again is entanglement and ambiguity; the forces affecting those around him caused Agustín to act in unpredictable ways. As Conley reminds readers of Cixous, "The new 'subject,' which as true subject of the unconscious is always on

is more than a performance and a fiction, that it must inhere in the body itself, be materially present, and thus aligned with the biological. And in that gesture of finding gender in the sexual organs rather than culture and language, we have returned to gender and other body characteristics as immutable (except perhaps by surgery).

²³ In Cixous's experimental fictions, she, at times, confounds biological distinctions between men and women, as well as other habits of realist fiction. In this sense, she is more radical than Valenzuela by, at times, writing "texts" rather than a work of a certain genre.

the run, explodes codes and social orders, undoes censorships and repression" (26). During his time with Bravo, Agustín switches from writing paralysis to confession. Agustín is freed by his interactions with Bravo and others who understand his trauma, not by his killing of the actress. He could not write as long as he did not face his terrors, as long as he only vaguely remembered them, brushing against them without reliving them. He needed to communicate, to "write his body" to be free of paralyzing remorse, accepting it fully.

In Valenzuela's interview "Trying to Breathe," she asserts she tries "to deconstruct the discourse of power" (90). Swanson sees merely writing about politics as a flaw (103); without a doubt, this process is very abstract. But it is also profound and forward-looking when it is integral to a person's gestalt. Valenzuela's writing aims at liberation from convention and from the repetitions of history, by employing memory and storytelling but not conscious ideology to do so. *Novela negra* uses metaphors like the disappearance of Edwina Irving's body for the disappearances of bodies in Argentina. Another such metaphor is Agustín's immobility and silence as a stand-in for the lack of recognition of the crimes committed in Argentina, for the pardons initially awarded. Watching the skyscraper in action in *Novela negra* means watching how repressive forces "can make you feel that with this terrible fear nothing can be said anymore" ("Trying" 96). At first Agustín remembers the interrogations and the murders in his homeland, just as he recalls his own killing of Edwina, neither understanding nor accepting either memory.²⁴ Agustín's path is the progressing from not being willing or able to write-with-the-body to accepting that one can only write *from* or *with* one's own body. The body (and the unconscious) has rules that, if ignored, will find a way to escape repressions that are not newfound freedoms but forced repetitions of the past, despite one's best conscious efforts.

Novela negra was published just after the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín (1983-89) when an extensive reevaluation of the years of the dictatorship was taking place in Argentina. During those years the report called *Nunca más* was published by the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP). Valenzuela said of this period that: "Y se están armando museos de la memoria, palacios mentales para no olvidar, o mejor dicho para rescatar del olvido a seres y hechos, y también formas mucho más vitales de eso que la dictadura intentó borrar y que el miedo, que recién ahora hemos perdido del todo, nos impedía registrar" ("Yo soy trampa" 183). In *Novela negra* there is a tension regarding how best to accomplish this naming/remembering of the crimes, a tension between "writing"/performing a gesture pointing to the crime (like the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo marching for the disappeared) and "writing"/creating a poetic representation of a memory of the crime, like the statue of Pablo Míguez near the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires.²⁵

The talk therapy, called "un interrogatorio" (195), of Agustín Palant may find its closest parallel in the oral testimonies in the truth commissions held before they were written down in *Nunca más*. The truth commissions were not enough for the nation to heal but they

²⁴ See for example page 4, in which the word "dedos" intrudes into consciousness, or Agustín's comments on "tortura sexual" (151) or the "cuerpos flotando en el río" (139). At Lara's party, "las asociaciones de Agustín se habían disparado hacia comarcas mucho más vastas, barrocas también y cristalinas. Su Río de la Plata, donde a veces reflataban los ahogados" (177). And "NN" (190).

²⁵ Fourteen-year-old Míguez was disappeared. The statue is by Claudia Fontes.

were a start. Perhaps in *Novela negra*, the problematization of denunciation of crimes echoes the Argentine moment in which confessions were achieved but pardons are being handed out instead of the prison sentences that will come later. The intention to punish evildoers in crime novels normally requires a stable platform (belief system) on which to establish what has happened and what has not, such as in social critique or the previous kind of *literatura comprometida*.

As constructs of possibilities for writers, however, these two writer-characters ultimately serve to stake out, or mark down, the location of scars on the body of the Argentine politic that had not disappeared. When Roberta and Agustín move the realm of “writing with the body” away from literal writing and see it as participation in extremes of real life’s death and pleasure, they are stressing a connection between writing and everything else. Writers both observe the world as if it were a palette for writing and live writing as an activity in the world they inhabit. Instigation seems to be the goal here: Roberta’s “writing with the body” is a call to writing as an act that can provoke change for oneself and others by providing an architecture of thought and possibility on which to build a future. It can be a “scrapers of the sky.”

Late in the novel, Roberta’s action is to return to completing a pornographic short story with her new lover Bill. And Agustín finds a way to live in his body after his “interrogation” by a Uruguayan whose role in the violence of the Southern Cone is of unclear morality. Confronting his memories heals Agustín. Roberta was able to write her body in life and on the page before him because she ultimately had less healing to do. These characters “write” (or not) with the body, in that they mark their world and themselves through action. As symbols of Argentina for Argentines, these characters show ways for the society to move on psychologically while at the same time to work to change the society itself: by becoming entangled and being honest.

As a writer herself, Valenzuela writes while living with the dichotomy between her social action—such as that in which she engages with PEN, for instance—and a more muted advocacy for writing and healing, and justice and freedom, in her fiction. Outside her fiction writing, in her anti-censorship work, she is definitely on the side of progressive politics, feminism, and social justice. But in her fiction, Valenzuela refuses to reduce her stories to simple messages. In “Escribir con el cuerpo,” she declares in straightforward terms: “Pienso que debemos seguir escribiendo sobre los horrores para que no se pierda la memoria y vuelva a repetirse la historia” (39). Agustín’s rescue via confession to a non-Argentine who nevertheless understands the traumas from which the country suffers may suggest one possible path forward for Argentina. If so, it would be the path the country has taken—that of patiently revealing the crimes, denouncing them, and punishing those responsible whenever possible. In the novel, Agustín achieves a kind of absolution in a few days, whereas Argentina has been uncovering and punishing the evildoers for decades.

It can be said, then, that Agustín Palant is similar to those Argentinians who still needed to be healed from the ordeal of the dictatorship years. His trauma for not having helped his neighbor and for not speaking out for others back home shows his entanglement with those in proximity to him. This element of the theme of writing with the body in the novel results from the importance of group adherence. One group factor enabling the characters to have this influence on each other is their common nationality in exile. A second commonality is that they are writers. Agustín should not be understood as just any

individual but must be considered as part of a select group whose journey leads him to be able to confess to Héctor Bravo in an “interrogation.” The impact on Agustín is not the predictable reaction one could assume that everyone in his situation would experience. He acts differently from some writers because he is in exile, thinks he has killed, and has been involved with Roberta. But it is one way that writing with the body could work. At the same time, his story can have great figurative power.

In this way, Valenzuela represents Argentina’s history of disappearances in *Novela negra*. Understanding the situation of (possible) murderer Agustín Palant as similar to post-dictatorship Argentina traumatized by disappearances provides a scaffold that unifies many of the meandering themes and episodes in this (un- or anti-detective) crime novel in which knowledge of whether a crime was even committed is problematized. This denial of crimes parallels the cover-ups of the murders, torture, and kidnappings before and during the Dirty War, and with all the psychological effects of not knowing. Agustín is frequently unable to explain himself, but during those times when he is able to respond to Roberta, Agustín argues that when one murders someone in reality, the consequences must be lived. He does not want to be punished for his crime, but he knows that murders—like those back in Argentina—should be. The mirror images of his memories of Argentina projected onto his present in New York give the novel its powerful political images. He is haunted by his past and by Argentina’s past.

While “writing with the body” can be understood slightly differently in Kristeva, Irigaray, or even Roland Barthes and Lacan, the contribution of Cixous to this evolving category can be seen in Valenzuela’s representation of *escribir el cuerpo* with both a woman and a man. More than Irigaray, Cixous finds certain male writers (Jean Genet, Heinrich von Kleist) to be feminine and thus capable of *l’écriture féminine* (Sellers 143-44).²⁶ Swanson sees *Novela negra* as “written in an equivocal (arguably Cixousian) style” (96). And, indeed, in Cixous’s lectures and manifestos, she urges earning one’s freedom from paralyzing guilt, such as Agustín’s: “Écoute : tu ne dois rien au passé, tu ne dois rien à la loi. *Gagne ta liberté : rends tout, vomis tout, donne tout*” (“La venue” 50-51; emphasis in original). Agustín’s prior activism had been writing, but he could no longer write. Peeling back the layers of his self and accepting his culpability allows him to return to an active life.

Cixous advocates for pleasure in writing, as does Valenzuela’s character Roberta, and as does Barthes. Cixous encourages discovering through and in writing in a process of abdicating planning and law, as does Derrida. In Valenzuela’s project, that of deconstructing the practices of *noir* novels, she (like Cixous) observes an improvisational writing process and produces unpredictable written text. Additionally, her characters Roberta and Agustín display for her readers ways that *l’écriture féminine* could function in the world.

²⁶ “Hélène Cixous’ project can be compared with the work of the twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose writings she frequently refers to in her Paris seminar. Heidegger has argued that the object created by our conceptual system in the West must be freed from its subservient and imprisoned position before man—as subject—can become liberated. Heidegger advocates listening, and a careful and patient attention to the process of ‘being’, as well as the acquisition of a knowledge which does not seek to impose itself on the world” (Sellers 181, note 39).

Works Cited

- Bachmann, Susanna. "El exilio como experiencia vital límite: *Novela negra con argentinos* de Luisa Valenzuela." *Topografías del doble lugar: El exilio literario visto por nueve autoras del Cono Sur*. Zaragoza: Pórtico, 2002. 123-37. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. "Contes de la différence sexuelle." *Lectures de la différence sexuelle*. Proceedings of the Colloquium of the Centre d'Études Féminines de l'Université de Paris VIII, October 1990. Comp. Mara Negrón. Paris: Des femmes, 1994. 31-68. Print.
- . "La joven nacida." *La risa de la Medusa: Ensayos sobre la escritura*. Trans. Ana María Moix and Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz. Barcelona: Anthropos; Madrid: Comunidad de Madrid, Consejería de Educación, Dirección General de la Mujer; San Juan: Univ. de Puerto Rico, 1995. 13-109. Print.
- . "Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing [excerpts]." *The Hélène Cixous Reader*. Ed. Susan Sellers. London: Routledge, 1994. 197-205. Print.
- . "La venue à l'écriture." *Entre l'écriture*. Paris: Des femmes, 1986. 9-69. Print.
- Conley, Verena Andermatt. *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*. Expanded ed. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1991. Print.
- Cordones-Cook, Juanamaria. "Novela negra con argentinos: The Desire to Know." *World Literature Today* 69.4 (1995): 745-50. Print.
- Magnarelli, Sharon. "Luisa Valenzuela: Cuerpos que escriben (metonímicamente hablando) y la metáfora peligrosa." *La palabra en vilo: Narrativa de Luisa Valenzuela*. Ed. Gwendolyn Díaz and María Inés Lagos. Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 1996. 53-77. Print.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. Rev. of *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, by Carolyn G. Heilbrun, and *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, by Nancy Topping Bazin. *New York Times* 15 Apr. 1973: 7. *The New York Times Archives*. Web. 11 Jan. 2020.
- Ragland-Sullivan, Ellie. "Jacques Lacan: Feminism and the Problem of Gender Identity." *Sub-Stance* 11.3.36 (1982): 6-20. Print.
- Richard, Nelly. "De la literatura de mujeres a la textualidad femenina." *Escribir en los bordes: Congreso Internacional de Literatura Femenina Latinoamericana, 1987*. Comp. Carmen Berenguer, Eugenia Brito, Diamela Eltit, Raquel Olea, Eliana Ortega, and Richard. Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 1990. 39-52. Print.
- Sellers, Susan. *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991. Print.
- Swanson, Philip. "Theory and the Body: Luisa Valenzuela's *Novela negra con argentinos* as Test Case." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 35.1 (1999): 95-106. Print.
- Valenzuela, Luisa. "Escribir con el cuerpo." *Alba de América* 11.20-21 (1993): 35-40. Print.
- . "Julio Cortázar más allá de la vigilia." *Julio Cortázar desde tres perspectivas*. Valenzuela, Bella Josef, and Alain Sicard. Guadalajara: Univ. de Guadalajara; Mexico City: UNAM; Mexico City: FCE, 2002. 13-29. Print.
- . *Novela negra con argentinos*. Hanover: Del Norte, 1990. Print.
- . "Trying to Breathe." *The Writer in Politics*. Ed. William H. Gass and Lorin Cuoco. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1996. 85-110. Print.
- . "'Usar el lenguaje es como cabalgar las líneas de fuerza que surcan el universo.' Entrevista a la escritora argentina Luisa Valenzuela." By Adrián Ferrero. *Confluencia* 23.1 (2007): 130-34. Print.

- . "Una vida de novelas." *El vértigo de la escritura: Jornadas Luisa Valenzuela*. Comp. Irene Chikiar Bauer. Buenos Aires: n.p., 2017. 71-84. *Luisa Valenzuela: Sitio oficial de la autora*. Web. 12 Dec. 2018.
- . "'Yo soy trampa' (Conversación de Luisa Valenzuela con Ksenija Bilbija)." *Yo soy trampa: Ensayos sobre la obra de Luisa Valenzuela*. Ed. Ksenija Bilbija. Buenos Aires: Feminaria, 2003. 147-83. Print.