

◆ 4

False Parity and the Politics of Amnesia

Joshua Lund
University of Pittsburgh

Dierdra Reber
Emory University

Within Latin Americanism as we know it, heavily inflected by the memory studies associated with the Southern Cone's *guerras sucias* (Dirty Wars), Hernán Vidal is a touchstone figure whose scholarly career is full of landmarks and provocations. A founding member of the *Ideologies and Literature* project in 1976, Vidal was a protagonist in establishing a forum for renovating the field of Hispanic and Lusophone literary studies through materialist critique, thus taking a substantive step beyond sclerotic aesthetic paradigms and toward the dynamic interdisciplinarity that defines broader Latin Americanism today. Beyond Vidal himself, a short list of his collaborators in *Ideologies and Literature* reads like a roll call of essential critical work upon which, in one way or another, we all rely: Jean Franco, David Viñas, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Françoise Perus, Edmond Cros, Sara Castro-Klarén, Francine Masiello, John Beverley, Neil Larsen, René Jara, and on and on all the way to Ariel Dorfman himself.¹ Ideas were certainly in motion within an emergent Latin Americanism, and Vidal, along with his colleagues at Minnesota, was very much at the center of things. It is not insignificant that this disciplinary regeneration happened in the wake of September 11, 1973, when military forces overthrew a democratically-elected government in Chile, sending shockwaves through the international Left and further hardening the already hard Manichaeism of a global Cold War. By the early 1980s the *Ideologies and Literature* project would begin to lose steam, but not Vidal himself. His ensuing work on the relations between humanistic discourse (often, but not always, literature) and human rights is a titanic effort whose implications are yet to be fully appreciated, and whose interventions continue to this day. And he is known for his

Exile, Intellectuals, and the Memory Wars
Hispanic Issues On Line Debates 5 (2012)

willingness to join a good polemic.² When he was invited to participate in a homage to Dorfman's life and work, he lived up to his reputation for frank discussion. The piece that he produced was deemed too problematic for the niceties of a gala recognition and the invitation subsequently withdrawn. It is this essay, under the title "The Residue of Hope after Public Personae Construction," to which we write in response.

As its title suggests, much of the essay walks, and sometimes crosses, the line of *ad hominem* critique: Dorfman's "psychosis," aggravated by a strong dose of survivor's guilt alongside experience with political and personal trauma leave him unable to thoroughly reckon with Chile's modern national history. To defend Dorfman's legacy from these attacks would be to defend Dorfman himself, a task that can be easily accomplished by simply reading his memoir, his ample interviews or his literary works. Things become more intriguing if we understand "Dorfman" not as the individual writer but in the terms that he has apparently styled for himself: the *grand parler*, the one that speaks for the tribe, the voice of a generation, ultimately coterminous with *his generation*. And this generation, of course, includes Vidal. The significance of Vidal's psychoanalysis of Dorfman, then, only emerges when we read it as a form of self-analysis, one that resonates with a collective, and one that redounds to a thesis about collective guilt. In short: to understand Dorfman is to understand the Chilean Left's failures concerning 1973, the bad conscience around its monumentalization and the confusion before its immediate historical unfolding.

It is a complicated argument, but its basic parameters are established along these lines: Vidal proposes that what is remembered, even institutionalized, as a premeditated attack on the innocent (which is to say democratically-elected) Left must instead be understood in the terms of a relational process of war. This requires that the Unidad Popular (UP, the leftist coalition that brought Salvador Allende to power) not be framed as a victim under assault but as a participant in a binary conflict, one whose actions invite analysis in these terms, with and against the more obviously bellicose party, Pinochet's people, the agents of what Vidal bracingly calls the "neoliberal revolution." Faced with such a dynamic, we must turn to the order of war: both *jus in bello* (the justifiability of acts committed within the context of war) and *jus ad bellum* (the justifiability of waging war in the first place). For Vidal, along with everybody, there can be little argument around *jus in bello*: the dictatorship was atrocious, its crimes obvious, well-documented, and universally recognized. Vidal's critique of Dorfman rests on what he perceives as a conflation of these two regimes: Dorfman has dedicated his life's work to condemning the neoliberal revolution on the grounds of *jus ad bellum*—the criminality of the coup in its instantiation—by laying the foundation of his claim on a steady exploration of *jus in bello*. But to contemplate *jus ad bellum* properly, it must be rigorously thought in the binary terms of war; and in these terms, the same law must be applied to

both sides. Drawing on the Catholic juridical tradition, Vidal summarizes the essential questions of *jus ad bellum* as follows: “initiating warfare is just if it possesses a right intention; if it is declared by a proper authority; if these authorities fully assume the ethical and moral responsibility for the suffering, death, and destruction inevitably brought about by warfare; if the social order emerging after war will be reasonably better than that prior to the conflict; if armed conflict is the last political resort; if it has a reasonable chance of success” (“Ariel” 20). Especially on this last count, in Vidal’s reading, the UP’s ascendance to revolutionary power cannot pass the *jus ad bellum* test: it was doomed to failure, that is, it was highly unlikely to succeed. What Vidal seems to suggest is that a serious exploration of *jus ad bellum*, in the historical context framed by the mobilization of forces that would culminate in Allende’s election and brief presidency, can provide an antidote to a politics of consensus that has ultimately skipped the step of proper historical reckoning and asked Chileans to live together peacefully in the context of a society based on lies. It might, just might, lay the groundwork for psycho-historical catharsis and, ultimately, closure.

It is certainly a suggestive turn and it wouldn’t be Vidal if there weren’t considerable openings for debate. Most centrally, the argument seems to falter at its immediate premise around *jus ad bellum*: that the Left was somehow a party to war crimes because it either could not see, or refused to deal seriously with, a future that held imminent collapse. Vidal, although he backtracks from this point rather quickly, suggests that the UP—on advice from the Soviets, no less—should have refused electoral power and thus saved the country from a dirty war. Are there historical examples of a democratic coalition, within a political context comparable to the early-1970s Chilean Left, abdicating executive power? We do not know of any.³ Moreover, while it is a cliché to speak of war as politics by other means, is it reasonable to speak of political organization as war by other means? We do this every day—campaigns, war rooms, battle plans, etc.—but the relation between the metaphorical and the conceptual here is anything but clear. What does it mean to confuse political organization with “war”? What does it mean to replace “political action” with “armed conflict”? And even if we accept the homology, what does it mean to reduce the standard of *jus ad bellum* to the question of objective national “success,” that is, in the profoundly complex climate of the high Cold War, the ability to see the future? What does it mean to place this standard over and above the questions of property loss and flagrant disregard for human life—“suffering, death and destruction”—that were the hallmarks of the neoliberal revolution *within* the context of *jus ad bellum*? Vidal does not attempt to work out these problems here.

For all its objectionability, Vidal’s essay nevertheless confronts us with some key problems worth pursuing. He diagnoses Dorfman—the generation—as trapped by a romantic nihilism (the faith in the necessity of

lost causes) and productively contrasts this to a human rights discourse that is most effective when animated by a Machiavellian realism (the certainty that politics can intervene in the protection of life). Dorfman's generation could only get as far as denouncing the atrocities of the Right, and even limited to those terms it has done the work of putting us on the path to the retelling of history, to the recognition of the dark forces of censorship. But this project has done little to slow down the terrifying velocity of its conversion into the anodyne comforts of self-censorship, the politics of consensus, leading to a state of affairs in which trauma, mourning, reconciliation and historical accounts have moved from the necessarily critical posture of works like *La muerte y la doncella* (1992) to the hegemonic status of what Verónica Garibotto calls a "memory paradigm." This fight over memory seems to have reached a stalemate, still wearing the deep scars of the Cold War. The gulf between camps in a struggle that became defined by victimized and victimizers is such that conversation becomes impossible, nuanced critique a dream, passable only through a politics of consensus, a history of lies and silences. Thus cultural politics reduce to an acrimonious fight over monuments and memory texts, an obsession with memory that becomes an obsession about specific memories. Vidal wants to lean against this historical momentum by thinking broadly about the Allende years in the terms of armed conflict; Dorfman, in Vidal's reading, limits things to the narrow span of the coup and its wake. This psychosis-inspiring trauma is where Dorfman lives, and he and his generation are frozen right there.

But Vidal is frozen too. In attacking the memory obsession whose terms are defined by 1973, he also participates in it, that is, participates in an argument that his own analysis suggests has very little possibility of closure: he attacks the object of the memory, but not its nature. The problem with the memory obsession is its implicit memorialization of a defeated bourgeois Left, and this much Vidal can perceive. But he does not pursue a point that he suggests only offhandedly in his reading of Dorfman, one that we believe is more essentially critical to the question of memory now: the possibility that this defeated bourgeois Left only arrived at a romantic solidarity with its stated object of liberation, the poor. Within the context of this settling of historical accounts, it is too easy to forget to "remember" the ongoing violence, the ambient violence, that has afflicted the *urbanizaciones* (peripheral slums) and the *campo* (countryside) not only during the massacres, the disappearances, the stadium torture, the neoliberal revolution, but also and tenaciously right through its aftermath known as "democratization."⁴ In other words, complicity and bad conscience are reduced to questions of political affiliations and practices, while social class—the origin of the struggle in the first place—and, more bluntly, survival, are subsumed within a generation's nostalgia for a vigorous Marxist-Leninism shattered by postmodern neoliberalism and its attendant

end of history. In other words, this freezing of perspective seems symptomatic of the scholarly Latin Americanist Left and its limited ability to pass through stale binaries.

How can we widen the circle of memory beyond a self-sustaining neurosis among the dominant political legacies of bourgeois national politics and scholarship? How can we advance a language of memory and trauma that might pose the question anew, and beyond complicity, of how to live with memory now, and what it means to remember the violence of the immediate? Let us take a first step back and consider the status of revolutionary violence today. The emergent sign of post-Cold War analysis of the old politics of ideological teleology is that every telos was misguided in taking up arms; everyone was wrong because everyone was violent. Violence has become qualitative rather than quantitative, its dominant quality that of being mistaken. Gone are the unapologetic glorifications of armed combat that animated the third and final segment of Pino Solanas and Octavio Getino's *La hora de los hornos* (1968), with its open attempt to convert the civilian population into so many armed combatants against the bourgeois state, inspiring spectators to take to the streets in confrontation with the police after its screening at an Italian film festival (Falicov 38). Outside of defense departments, security headquarters, and the Chávez administration (whose discursive parameters seem to resonate from a bygone era), there is no longer any ideology that is worth so much more than another that it may justify violence as a legitimate means to even the most utopian end.⁵ Consider the recent representation of Ernesto Guevara himself: a dreamy medical student (Gael García Bernal, no less) whose loving empathy leads him to want to heal *nuestra* América (Walter Salles' *Diarios de motocicleta*, 2004). The greatest violence that this "Che" commits is hurling a rock against the side of a neocolonial pick-up truck. The Bolivian catastrophe, much less the seizure of the Cuban state, never makes the scene. El Chivo, the beaten ex-revolutionary of *Amores perros* (2000), finishes the thought as a moving confession to his daughter abandoned for the lost cause: "Quería componer el mundo para después compartirlo contigo. Te habrás dado cuenta de que fracasé" (I wanted to improve the world in order to share it with you. You will have realized that I failed).

Like the real Che and the fictional Chivo, Dorfman has lived the world-historical life of having participated directly in a revolutionary political project. In resonance with Salles' Che as the young doctor in love—under ancient oath to "do no harm"—and González Iñárritu's ex-revolutionary as domestic healer, Vidal calls Dorfman a "shaman"—also a kind of healer, but a problematic one:

In his role as shaman of Chilean culture there is a coincidence in Dorfman's inability to recognize, pose and assume responsibility for armed conflict in Chile, and the bad conscience of democratic

governments to silence it. *Death and the Maiden* suggests the difference lies in the psychosis and histrionics Dorfman knew since childhood. Experienced in the ploys of bad conscience, he could see through that of the new democratic governments, but not his own. If we accept this is indeed the political core of Dorfman's literature, he was burdening himself with a superhuman load. In my experience, no one who has delved in matters of human rights in such depth fails to pay a grievous price. There is great generosity in this. ("Ariel" 21)

Wracked by "bad conscience" and thus able to see it clearly in others, Dorfman's internal contradictions, in Vidal's analysis, force him to bear a "superhuman load" to which he must persistently blind himself. Though it is perhaps not his express intention to do so, Vidal thus effectively forecloses any possibility of open and unreserved solidarity with Dorfman's dedication to the cause of postdictatorial human rights on the grounds that this cause is necessarily posited on the lie of his political generation's innocence. To be sure, Vidal appears to conceive of this lie as a noble one; it is thus that he murmurs, as a coda, the characterization of Dorfman's commitment to human rights—understood as an implicit extension of his revolutionary past—as an act of "great generosity," this final upswing constitutive of the "residue of hope" to which Vidal's title alludes.

In thus framing Dorfman's work in relation to his lived experience, Vidal seems to pander to a larger cultural shift, one that has moved away from the moral evaluation of political projects and toward the moral evaluation of political behaviors. The origins of all of this are not clear. Is it a sign of the discursive strength of the neoconservative politics that seeks to procure a warrior's amnesty with the "it takes two" argument and that seductively magnifies the violence of the militant Left to make it somehow—astonishingly, unbelievably—comparable to that of the dictatorial Right? Or is it a function of a larger affective turn that has accompanied the universal triumph of liberal democracy, ushering in an epistemological model in which the social other must be produced through love rather than hate in a system that no longer works toward conquest on a plane of transcendence (as it did during the Cold War), but now works toward totalizing inclusion on a plane of immanence?⁶ It's hard to tell. Whether causality is to be found in the one, the other, or something else, it seems to us worth asking: what happens to the very possibility of politics when the question of the relative morality of political position becomes eclipsed by the scrutiny of manifest political action? There is no easy answer. On the one hand, the historical analysis and call to accountability imposed upon both ideological sides of the Cold War is a project that serious critical work demands. On the other hand, its high-pitched volume seems to have drawn our contemporary gaze away from the very *raison d'être* of the revolutionary generation—that is, from politics themselves. Vidal's reading

of Dorfman resides here. It is one instantiation of an infinitely drawn-out endgame of placing Cold War ideologies on trial for their respective crimes against humanity.

If the hemisphere's big political shooting wars have died down, the daily violence of high capitalism that bookends Cold War hostilities has not; it was there before and it continues unabated. One form of Latin American cultural production that productively reflects this continuity is cinema. Of particular interest is the bridge that the renovated industry of the past decade—especially the so-called “nuevo cine argentino” (e.g., Alonso, Carri, Martel, Rejtman, Stagnaro and Caetano, Trapero)—suggestively makes with the Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano of the 1960s (e.g., Birri, Favio, García Espinosa, Gutiérrez Alea, Littín, Pereira dos Santos, Rocha, Sanjinés, Solanas and Getino) in resuming with tenacity and increasing intensity the latter's denunciatory exposition of daily violence and its relation to asymmetries of social and cultural power.

If we approach the question of memory in broad brush strokes as a pan-American cultural problematic with a variant even more properly common to the Southern Cone—for all the important differences between national dictatorial histories—then we are able to read the cinematography of this new generation of filmmakers, as well as their still-active New Latin American Cinema counterparts, as a body of work that has shaken off the frost of Cold War culpability and begun to take on the problem of a newly corrosive ambient violence that stands as the great sign of democratization's failures. In *Memoria del saqueo* (2004), Solanas gives one of the clearest retrospective reflections on the relationship between the era of revolutionary Left and the neoliberal present. Speaking in voiceover about the “violencia cotidiana” that he and Getino had denounced nearly forty years earlier as ample justification for revolutionary politics and guerrilla warfare, Solanas says they never dreamed that this violence would escalate to the seemingly impossible proportions that it had reached in the neoliberal years. Solanas offers up *Memoria del saqueo* as a blunt documentary denunciation of this aggravation of capitalist violence during the Menem years in Argentina—high times for democratization—as the result of the systematic plunder of national resources through privatization, resulting in an unprecedented precarity of labor, radical indigence, and death by starvation.

While Solanas' critique is trenchant, even bombastic, perhaps the more psychologically profound portrait of ambient violence today is to be found in work such as Lucrecia Martel's meditative and unsettling film *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008). At the center of this quiet masterpiece is the persistence of class-based domination inflected by ethnicity in provincial Argentina, where bourgeois *criollo* privilege coexists in a vertical—if not dehumanizing—relationship with indigenous subalternity. Martel spins the deceptively simple plot of her film around the central fact of a car accident that sets into relief the question of middle-class accountability for its fatal violence toward

the social other. The window of opportunity for exploring this question is represented as a period of literal memory loss in the form of the amnesic shock that the protagonist—a well-off, fair-skinned, dyed-blond professional dentist (María Onetto)—experiences when her car runs over two objects on a country road. The opening scene of the film has shown an *indio* boy and his dog near the same curve in the road, yet in the moment of the accident our vision is confined to the driver's profile; it is only as her car moves away from the scene that the camera looks back. We see what appears to be the bloodied corpse of a dog, but in frustration of our natural impulse to look closer in order to achieve better focus, the camera only carries us further away toward the blur of visual—and factual—uncertainty. (The boy's body is discovered, much later, in a drainage ditch that we know to have been adjacent to the road from the visual information in the first sequence of the film and later buttressed by narrative references to it). This gaze that can't quite see the dog, and that methodically refuses to see the boy's body, is the gaze of the class that the "headless woman" represents. Her nickname, Vero, signals in its ironic application that, as a category, truth is captive both practically and epistemologically to the social powers that be. This gaze frustrates knowledge, truth, and, therefore, justice, by restricting what it will and won't see. What makes the film painful to watch is the confinement of the camera to this profoundly violent social vision.

As Vero traverses her hazy amnesia, we surmise that the members of her social circle, the core group of which is represented as a symbolically incestuous tribe of male cousins—the descendants of Dorfman's authoritative masculine figure that asserts the composition of history—begin to carry out a silent and systematic erasure of evidence from official records. Gradually regaining her memory in fits and starts, Vero retraces her steps to find that there is no evidentiary trail of her connection to the accident. Vero's car disappears, taken to a distant city for repairs; Vero's x-rays disappear from the clinic she visited immediately following the accident, along with the notes from her treatment and her inscription as a patient; Vero's night away from home disappears from the registry of the hotel where she stayed. Once Vero realizes that there is no longer any evidence of her culpability, and therefore no requirement of moral compunction, she finally sheds the last somatic signs of her shock (the shortness of breath, patina of sweat, difficulty swallowing, and a general sensory dissociation from her surroundings that ensued from the accident) and, it seems, definitively exits her amnesia as she gracefully and smilingly rejoins her social circle by attending a party celebrating the opening of a new swimming pool. The final shot shows Vero laughing and mingling through the screen of a semi-transparent room divider that encircles the partygoers, defining them as a fenced community, a community protected by its ability to self-protect through the manipulation of institutional archives that is homologous with an erasure of personal memory. As this closing scene approaches the final

credits, literal smoke and mirrors force it to blur in and out of focus, signaling the permanence of this amnesia and the inability to visually access this nucleus of power from the outside—privilege is defined somatically as a manner of seeing; the members of that elite are circumscribed by this shared form of vision.

Returning to Vidal, the question of human rights violations, and the possibility of politics, Martel's treatment of memory is of particular interest. Where there is social injustice, she suggests—the ambient violence that Solanas documents—there is amnesia that is literal and somatic, and which sets in motion the invisible hands of memory erasure on an institutional level. Could this be read as indirect commentary about the *guerra sucia* and the way in which human rights were violated and those violations were then made to disappear? Possibly; one could certainly make a case for this reading by inferring the intention of extended analogy. But then again, the object of erasure is an accident, the political opposite—ambient, not active—of the brutal reasons of state that underwrite the Southern Cone dirty wars. We maintain that what Martel is examining more immediately are the mechanisms by which the social elite—even all the while that it reveals its own fissures—consolidates its power through the vertical dynamics of a radical othering of the socially subaltern, to the point of mortal dehumanization. This class-based dehumanization—“social genocide,” as Solanas' film posits in its conceptually translated English-language title—is so somatically grounded as to be virtually imperceptible: a car accident, one of thousands, and its physical aftermath. This representation of hegemony as a foundationally visceral apparatus posits an immanence of ambient violence: there is not only no escape in social terms; there is no escape in somatic terms, either. In this vision of contemporary culture, individual bodies and body politic alike lie entrapped in their own internalized circumstance of the violence engendered by and sustaining of its socio-economic hierarchies. How, Martel's film impels us to ask—if we are brave enough—do we denaturalize a form of violent social hegemony when its management occurs at the level of affective and physiological process? How do we develop a politics of contestation toward that with which our own bodies have become—voluntarily or involuntarily—naturalized? Martel makes our gaze, as moviegoers, synonymous with that of the bourgeois protagonist: in homologous relation to the somatic experience of ambient violence, this is the critical impact of the film. As spectators, are we part of the apparatus of social privilege that works to deny subjectivity to the poor with a shroud of invisibility that is the discursive analog of taking life, or perhaps more precisely, letting die?⁷

Is the haziness of our own role in the ambient violence of our democratic present the same blindness that Vidal decries in Dorfman? If we accept Vidal's analysis of the generational blindness of the revolutionary Left, then does Martel decry an analogous blindness in the generation of

post-dictatorial liberal democracy? The revolutionary Left is blind to its own violence in its championing of the ideal of a classless utopia; democratic liberalism is blind to its own perpetuation of class-based violence that invisibly supports an asymmetrical power structure. Are these two blindnesses, and the violences that they sanction by omission, one?

Let's return the logic of parity at work in Vidal's invocation of left and right wing violence, a parity that we find discomfiting for its strictly categorical definition that precludes any consideration of scale or morality. It is as though the democratizing principle has come to bear on historical and moral analysis alike to condemn in equal measure the taking of a life. But this portrait of lives taken elides all question of the battle for social justice that motivated the war in which the lives were lost. This kind of parity thus produces a new form of forcibly disappeared history—specifically, the disappearance of its politics of resistance.

This democratizing parity of violence invites further consideration. Two cases, one historical, the other aesthetic: the first, Argentina's Ley de Convertibilidad (Law of Convertibility [1991–2002]) that bound the dollar to the peso in a one-to-one value during the Menem years; the second, a set of handprints on the driver's side window of Vero's car that may or may not belong to two different owners, both boys, one white and affluent, the other poor and brown-skinned. In the first case, the Law of Convertibility made Menem's Argentina and his economic agenda—known, simply, as “el modelo” (the model)—the Latin American poster child for the application of neoliberal dictates dubbed the “Washington Consensus.” But below the surface of this nominal parity lay an inequality of scale whose latent potential for disaster became manifest when the nation finally buckled under the exploitation of this parity in the form of an eleven-year flight of its resources through the privatized dollarization—internationalization—of national ownership. The same International Monetary Fund (IMF) that had once fêted Menem as an economic wunderkind became the object of popular attack once the economic collapse of 2001 revealed that his neoliberal experiment had gutted Argentina, leaving its middle and lower classes devoid of savings and employment. When the IMF conducted a subsequent study of negative opinion of the United States in Argentina—centrally asking “por qué en la Argentina existe más ‘odio’ a Estados Unidos que en el propio Vietnam” (why in Argentina does there exist more ‘hate’ towards the United States than in Vietnam)—the Argentine newspaper *Página/12* covered the story with a title that served as a response: “Uno, dos, muchos Vietnam” (One, Two, Many Vietnams) (Montenegro), provocatively insinuating Che Guevara's last communiqué from the jungle of Bolivia in April 1967, urging all of Latin America to rise up as the next “dos, tres, muchos Vietnam” in violent confrontation with the United States, as the most adequate response to the IMF's naïve study of anti-U.S. Argentine

sentiment. In other words, the truth revealed by collapse of false “democratic” parity was one of neocolonial exploitation.

In this same spirit, Martel’s use of doubling in the form of handprints seems to evoke the logic of parity only to expose its false premise. In the scene before Vero’s accident, we see one of her friends’ children, a little boy of four or five years, playing inside her car, pressing both hands up against the driver’s side window. In the moments immediately following her accident, the sunlight falls on the same window in such a way as to set in relief two handprints. These seem somewhat larger than we would have expected—not insignificantly, on the set they are in fact the handprints of the director herself—and are angled as though the hands that made them were grabbing at the car sideways, all in keeping with the presumed victimization of the considerably older *indio* boy of some twelve years of age.

These parallel sets of handprints are more a message to the spectator than part of the narrative development, for they are not explicitly referenced in the aftermath of the accident. The disjuncture in expected hand size exacerbates the doubt about his death, and begs the nagging question: could his hands really have been so large? We read this message as: the doubt introduced by this identitary doubling is disingenuous; we know that Vero has killed the boy we have earlier seen with his dog by the side of the road. In this sense, the rendering of the only material evidence that the boy has made contact with the car as an uncertain equivalency has the effect of underscoring the principle of false parity. The doubt will allow us to pretend—along with her—that we do not know. We will say that the handprints of a young white boy of privilege are equal to and even interchangeable with those of a poor *indio* of no social rank. It could have been one; it could have been the other. But the reality of this “parity” is that there is no parity whatsoever: the handprints of greater privilege will write the narrative of their own survival, and the reality of the other handprints—death—will disappear into the oblivion occasioned by the impunity of privilege.

The fact that the handprints are not, in fact, the boy’s, is not why they do not become legitimized as forensic evidence of his death. Rather, the prints of Martel’s hands suggest that his handprints were politically impossible in the first place; in the game of comparing, and establishing a relationship of equality between his hands and the younger child of privilege, the older subaltern child was always already bound to lose. For although democracy makes this game of categorically equitable comparison its epistemological bedrock, what *La mujer sin cabeza* shows is that hierarchies of privilege maintain their privilege through the use of asymmetrical violence whitewashed by the falsification of the principle of parity. In other words, the mismatched hand size underscores the definitive and perfect effacement of the boy’s agency: he disappears into death without a trace. Not even in the

moment of its maximum violation can his body assert so much as the slightest proof of the violence that is visited upon it. If the classic metaphorical descriptor of a lack of social agency is to have “no voice,” then here that lack of agency is extended to the boy’s physicality itself: he has “no touch.” This is a somatic rendering of the problem of voice and representation in which Western liberalism speaks for—in place of—those who have no voice, no social agency. Here, Lucrecia Martel makes the print of her hands *for*—in place of—those who have no power of touch, no social agency, no ability to register even in bodily terms the fact of their existence. If Martel holds democratic liberals responsible for systematically perpetuating—as a perpetual act of instantaneous amnesia—the violence of asymmetrical social injustice, then she also suggests that, as a democratizing principle, parity authors ambient violence in that it obfuscates the persistence of a vertiginous power differential under the mask of equality.

Can we drive a wedge in this structural blindness for long enough to contemplate the critique that Martel levies against our democratic generation? The “democratic” generation, her work suggests, is better described as fundamentally neoliberal—and even neocolonial—for trafficking in a discourse of false equality and equity that obscures our perception of everyday violence. If we can see this, then we must surely see the suggestive parallel between Martel’s denunciation of ambient violence and the denunciation of social injustice by Dorfman’s—and Vidal’s—generation.

Indeed, through Martel and others—as today’s representatives of a critical aesthetics—this denunciation of inter-class domination that once gave impulse to dreams of social utopia is finding new voice, returning to beg the revolutionary question of old, and urgently. What will be our formulation of politics from within the immanence of ambient violence that defines our democratic present? If the Chilean Unidad Popular was, in Vidal’s estimation, “predictably doomed to failure” (“Ariel” 20), and therefore should have ceased and desisted in its bellicose activity, *even when that activity was strictly democratic of means*, should we likewise take stock of our circumstance of subjection to biopower and its somatic naturalization of violent hierarchies and, considering ourselves likewise predictably doomed to failure, cease and desist from instigating a revolution from within on the grounds that we would only be provoking, like the UP before us, the retaliatory and potentially devastating response of a Goliath-like counterforce? Martel’s unflinching insight invites us to attempt revolution, precisely from within and only from within. That is, from the very plane of immanence that appears to admit no outside, no locus of contestation, by considering ourselves the bearers of the very Goliath that, if like the revolutionary generation before us we were to make the willful determination to play David, we would therefore seek to contest. We may yet see our way through to defining this contestation, in the words of Mary

Louise Pratt, as “nonharmonious but nonviolent democratic relations” (328), thus cleaving to a cultural imperative of liberal democracy despite the fact of its structural and systematic contradictions.⁸ Regardless of the form this contestation may take, Martel’s work develops a memory politics not for the past, but for the present moment whose structures of power—in which we are all, and even somatically, invested—function through an autonomic forgetfulness of their own everyday violence.

Notes

1. *Ideologies and Literature*’s commitment to methodological innovation extended well beyond Latin Americanism. The inaugural issue features a major essay by Russell Hamilton on Angola, and early issues include archival and essayistic work by Nick Spadaccini, Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, Tony Zahareas, and José Antonio Maravall, among others.
2. *Ideologies and Literature* was itself a provocative endeavor. Beyond that particular context, Vidal (1993) is often cited for producing the opening response in the signature debate around the post-colonial question in Latin America. Today he remains at the forefront of controversial discussions in *Hispanic Issues*, including the aesthetics of human rights (2009) and the role of feminism in contemporary Latin Americanism (2008).
3. We could certainly amass examples of parliamentary coalitions dissolving themselves for any number of political reasons, but we can think of no precedent for the voluntary abdication of popular electoral mandate for executive power.
4. On the idea of “ambient violence,” see Lund and Melgarejo.
5. One could perhaps point to the twenty-first-century glorification of the *montoneros* under the leftist Kirschner presidencies in Argentina, but even this is limited to a discursive, and ultimately abstract, reactivation of a symbol of radical resistance that may use such references for strategic contemporary political branding, but certainly does not reactivate the armed struggle that such militancy supposed.
6. On the relations between affect and liberal democracy, see Reber.
7. Sofía Castaño astutely observes that within the film, whereas the name “Vero” is uttered countless times, there is, in sharp contrast, only a single direct naming of the victim as “Aldo,” with all subsequent references indirect or nameless. This trick of dialogue mimics the violent elision of the *indio*’s body—and life—on the linguistic level as an impossibility of nominalization.
8. Pratt makes this formulation of a “nonharmonious but nonviolent” praxis of democratic contestation in the context of responding to Doris Sommer’s edited volume *Cultural Agency in the Americas*, which serves as an analytical compendium of creative and humanistic interventions into the political sphere to effect social change in North and South America.

Works Cited

Amores perros. Dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu. Perfs. Emilio Echevarría, Gael García Bernal, Goya Toledo. Altavista Films, 2000. Film.

- Castañó, Sofía. "Elefante y *La mujer sin cabeza*: Lo que no queremos ver." *Replicante: Cultura Crítica y Periodismo Digital*. Jan. 2012. Web.
- Diarios de motocicleta*. Dir. Walter Salles. Perfs. Gael García Bernal, Rodrigo de la Serna. FilmFour, 2004. Film.
- Dorfman, Ariel. *La muerte y la doncella*. Buenos Aires: De la Flor, 1992. Print.
- Falicov, Tamara Leah. *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film*. London: Wallflower, 2007. Print.
- Garibotto, Verónica. *Contornos en negativo. Reescrituras posdictatoriales del siglo XIX (Argentina, Chile y Uruguay)*. Diss. University of Pittsburgh, 2008. Print.
- La hora de los hornos: Notas y testimonios sobre el neocolonialismo, la violencia y la liberación*. Dir. Fernando "Pino" Solanas and Octavio Getino. Grupo Cine Liberación, 1968. Film.
- La mujer sin cabeza*. Dir. Lucrecia Martel. Perfs. María Onetto, Claudio Cantero, César Bordón. Aquafilms, 2008. Film.
- Lund, Joshua and María del Pilar Melgarejo. "Afterword. Walking in the Slum: Urban Cultural Production Today." *Latin American Urban Cultural Production*. Ed. David William Foster. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 3.9 (2008): 179–88. Web.
- Memoria del saqueo*. Dir. Fernando "Pino" Solanas. ADR Productions, 2004. Film.
- Montenegro, Maximiliano. "Uno, dos, muchos Vietnam. El Fondo hizo un seminario para estudiar por qué aquí se odia a EE.UU. más que en Vietnam. Concluyeron que es culpa nuestra." *Página/12*. 13 Jun. 2005. Web.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Afterword: A Fax, Two *Moles*, a Consul, and a Judge." *Cultural Agency in the Americas*. Ed. Doris Sommer. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. 326–33. Print.
- Reber, Dierdra. "Headless Capitalism: Affect as Free-Market Episteme." *Differences* 23.1 (2012): 66–100. Print.
- Sommer, Doris, ed. *Cultural Agency in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Print.
- Vidal, Hernán. "An Aesthetic Approach to Issues of Human Rights." *Human Rights and Latin American Cultural Studies*. Ed. Ana Forcinito and Fernando Ordóñez. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 4.1 (2009): 14–43. Web.
- _____. "Ariel Dorfman: The Residue of Hope After Public Persona Construction." *Exile, Intellectuals, and the Memory Wars*. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 5 (Summer 2012): 4–24. Web.
- _____. "The Concept of Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse: A Perspective from Literary Criticism." *Latin American Research Review* 28.3 (1993): 113–19. Print.
- _____. "Debate: Hacia una apertura de los estudios feministas latinoamericanistas en los departamentos y programas de Español y Portugués en los Estados Unidos." *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* (2008): 1–14. Web.
- _____. "Feminismos latinoamericanos y derechos humanos: términos comparativos." *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* (2008): 1–54. Web.
-
- Lund, Joshua and Dierdra Reber. "False Parity and the Politics of Amnesia." *Exile, Intellectuals, and the Memory Wars*. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 5 (Fall 2012): 42–55. Web.
-