

◆ Chapter 9

Crime and Crisis in Mexico: Yuri Herrera's *La transmigración de los cuerpos*

Michael Mosier

In his article “Semántica de luminol,” Yuri Herrera comments on the state of insecurity in Mexico by writing it is as if the whole nation were encircled with yellow police tape.¹ The yellow tape around a crime scene—a space that had previously simply been a sidewalk, a bedroom, a bar—becomes re-coded and classified by the law as the scene of a crime. But this re-coding does not promise any justice for the victims. In fact, as he notes, only an incredibly small percentage of homicides result in the perpetrator being brought to justice in Mexico. By putting up the yellow tape, the police signal that a crime has been committed and they have begun an investigation. At the same time, they urge passersby to keep moving: “move along, there’s nothing to see here.” There is a dual acknowledgement and prohibition in that gesture: a crime has been committed but do not pause to take a second look. Herrera emphasizes that the yellow tape not only marks a crime scene; it involves policing the limits of what can be articulated in the public sphere in addition to directing the flow of the population through proper channels. It is indicative of the State’s desire to control the lexicon of violence. Against this official injunction to “move along,” Herrera concludes by affirming the necessity of “stopping to look and daring to speak out” (*detenerse a ver y atreverse a decir*).²

His most recent novel, *La transmigración de los cuerpos*, is an attempt to stop, look, and dare to speak. As the protagonist declares on the last page, “These days we walk past a body on the street, and we have to stop pretending we can’t see it.”³ The book is an intervention into the debate on violence and the breakdown of the State not just in Mexico but in a globalized world. The novel proposes through its use of language a way of speaking back that counters the State and mass media’s attempt to control the lexicon of violence and police the limits of public debate. In this article, I will explore how the novel dialogues with Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject and Jacques Rancière’s

concept of the “orphan letter” to understand more fully its take on our contemporary state of precarity and literature’s role in engaging with our current crises of national sovereignty. Engaging with these two theories will allow us to unpack the novel’s depiction of an abject breakdown in the law that is the product of contemporary crisis, while simultaneously envisioning an exodus out of the horror through new forms of language and community. The novel is a performative attempt at another way of speaking that displays the fissures in official discourses surrounding injustice and impunity. At the same time, it uses a cryptic, elliptical style to reconfigure existing modes of community in an age when the traditional emancipatory forms of politics have been exhausted and no clear model has arrived to take their place.

Yuri Herrera has emerged as one of the most prominent Mexican writers of his generation. His three novels (*Trabajos del reino* from 2003, *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* from 2009, and *La transmigración de los cuerpos* from 2013) revolve around marginal characters that serve as translators, border figures, or points of articulation between societal forces in a turbulent twenty-first-century Mexico. Amidst the chaos of warring criminal gangs, economic crisis, and apocalyptic plagues, the failure of the State to mediate conflict leads to the emergence of characters like Makina in *Señales* and Alfaqueque in *Transmigración*, who must operate on the margins of the law to resolve crises and facilitate communication in the language of the underworld. These are all border characters, even though only one (Makina) is involved in traversing the actual border.⁴ All three novels deal with the themes of art, power relations, and community in an age when the conceptual vocabulary of modernity is no longer capable of grappling with global insecurity and uprootedness. As the reader may surmise from the title, *The Transmigration of Bodies* involves violence, criminal organizations, the movement of corpses, and mourning in a radically biopolitical space resembling a city of the dead. It also involves a crime boss using a female body to send a message and an attempt by others to counter this “writing” with their own communitarian message.

The Roots of Crisis in Mexico

The current crises of narco-violence, economic upheaval, and failed institutions that have assailed Mexico are closely interrelated with global politics and the rise of neoliberalism and are the result of policies going back decades. It is worthwhile to reflect briefly on recent history to remember how Mexico arrived at its current state of precarity. As Jean Franco observes in *Cruel Modernity*, “The fabric of Mexico, the ideologies and practices that had propelled

the nation during the decades following its revolution, are in crisis. A showcase for neoliberal policies pasted onto a corrupt society in which institutions were already compromised and offered collusion rather than resistance to the drug trade, it is now the showcase for disaster” (215). In the 1970s, when the oil-producing countries comprising OPEC became flush with cash due to rising oil prices, these countries put their newly earned petro-dollars in Western banks, which went in search of investment opportunities. Latin America was an obvious choice for the banks to invest their new wealth because Latin American governments desired new loans to finance internal development projects to lead them away from economic dependence on the US and Europe (Bulmer-Thomas 386). However, when oil prices skyrocketed in the late 1970s and early 1980s due to the Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran–Iraq War, the US and other developed nations went into a deep recession. When the US Federal Reserve responded by increasing interest rates to astronomical levels, debt-laden Latin American governments became unable to make their skyrocketing payments. In a span of three years, Latin American debt jumped from \$184 billion to \$314 billion, leading Mexico to declare in 1982 that it was in danger of defaulting on its external public debt (389–91). Declining exports and remittances from abroad, along with governmental mismanagement and corruption, further exacerbated the problem. A new crisis had arrived and with it the death of Import Substitution Industrialization that, for the previous fifty years, had been the goal of populist governments across Latin America to become economically autonomous.

Trade liberalization policies began in Mexico in the 1980s as the government conceded to austerity measures to regain access to external financing. This process accelerated in the 1990s with the Salinas de Gortari administration signing NAFTA into law in 1994 and fully embracing the neoliberal model favored by Washington (otherwise known as the Washington Consensus). Mexico became more dependent on the United States than ever, with 80 percent of its exports destined for its northern neighbor by 2009 (Angeles Villarreal 2). After 1994—a pivotal year that saw the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, currency devaluation, and the assassination of PRI candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio—heavily subsidized US corn flooded the Mexican market, displacing small farmers throughout Mexico and forcing two million *campesinos* to emigrate to cities or to the US in search of work (Carlsen). *Maquiladoras*, or assembly plants, sprang up along the border, uprooting traditional patterns of life as they absorbed wage laborers abandoning the countryside in droves. In many instances, these internal migrants were recruited into organized criminal networks, fueling the drug wars that have ravaged the nation since Felipe Calderón sent out the military to fight the drug cartels, leading to more than 200,000 deaths and disappearances (Agren). One side effect of the so-called

transition to democracy in 2000 was an increase in drug violence. Prior to 2000, the cartels only had to negotiate with one political party. When the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) took over the presidency, political power fragmented and became decentralized. This, in turn, created a power vacuum and the cartels quickly took advantage. Journalist Alfredo Corchado observes that, “The cartels were ready to prey on the delicate fledgling institutions that were now exposed in the new democracy. Criminal files disappeared, investigators were killed and witnesses vanished, with near-total impunity for those responsible. Almost overnight, the so-called rule of law fell to Mexico’s modern-day conquerors: the drug cartels” (8). On the heels of Calderón’s decision to launch a war against the cartels, the global economy experienced a massive crash, which originated with the United States’s subprime mortgage crisis and caused Mexico’s GDP to contract 6.6 percent in 2009, making it the sharpest decline of any Latin American economy during the Great Recession (Angeles Villarreal 1). Despite its heady promises, the neoliberal reform that swept through Mexico beginning in the 1980s destabilized traditional social, political, and economic networks without replacing them with alternatives that would lift the masses out of poverty and strengthen existing institutions.

One of the cities that has become emblematic of the drastic changes unleashed by the contradictory forces of globalization since the early 1990s is Ciudad Juárez. Although the urban setting of *La transmigración de los cuerpos* is not explicit, it bears a strong resemblance to Ciudad Juárez, a city with which the author is very familiar.⁵ As the city boomed from a border backwater to a center of industry, it began to make headlines for the murder and disappearance of scores of young women. As chronicled exhaustively by the journalist Sergio González Rodríguez in his 2002 book *Huesos en el desierto*, the number of serial murders displaying sexual violence between 1993 and the book’s publication was around one hundred (11). A Mexico-based non-profit—Citizens Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice—named Juárez the most dangerous city in the world in 2010 (Swenson). Juárez was less an aberration, where the norms and values of modernity have been violently excluded, than a symptom of the dark underside of neoliberal globalization. As Patrick Dove writes in a chapter on Roberto Bolaño’s posthumous novel *2666*,

Juárez is a symptom of the violent contradictions that accompany globalization, putting on display the inability of modernization to resolve the social problems associated with a long history of inequality in Latin America. This locale attests to how destruction, dissociation, and precarity, more than just unintended and correctable side effects of modernization, have become integral elements in the restructuring and accumulation

that mark the shift from Fordism and national capitalism to post-Fordism and globalization. (225)

Increasing flows of transnational capital, sudden economic growth, rising inequality, deregulation of the economy, and massive population shifts contributed to a crisis in national sovereignty. These conditions allowed for the rapid growth of drug cartels in what some estimate to be a \$30-billion-per-year market fueled by US consumer demand. The cartels operate according to bourgeois principles of wealth accumulation in their most unfettered form (Gareth Williams 153–55).

As warring criminal gangs fight for control over markets and *plazas* (turf), women's bodies emerge as the ground upon which the cartels signify their power and control. Sergio González Rodríguez observes in *The Femicide Machine* that the bodies of the victims bear messages in the form of marks and mutilation: "Systematic actions against women bear the signs of a campaign: They smack of turf war, of the land's rape and subjugation. These acts imply a strategic reterritorialization, as real as it is symbolic, that includes capital property (contractors, shopping centers, industrial parks, basic services) and the possession of public space through ubiquitous occupation" (13). As the State retreats from its traditional role as guarantor of the social pact and, at times, actively collaborates and competes with the criminal gangs, new forms of regional sovereignty assert themselves, using sexual violence as one method to secure control, establish shared complicity, and communicate with rivals. In her article "La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez," Rita Laura Segato affirms that "Si el acto violento es entendido como mensaje y los crímenes se perciben orquestados en claro estilo responsorial, nos encontramos con una escena donde los actos de violencia se comportan como una lengua capaz de funcionar eficazmente para los entendidos" (45) (If the violent act is understood as a message and the crimes are perceived to be orchestrated in a responsorial way, we find ourselves before a scene where the acts of violence behave as a language capable of functioning effectively for those in the know). She concludes that the *feminicidios* "no son crímenes comunes de género sino crímenes corporativos y, más específicamente, son crímenes de Segundo Estado, del Estado paralelo. Se asemejan más, por su fenomenología, a los rituales que cimientan la unidad de sociedades secretas y regímenes totalitarios" (50–51) (are not common gender crimes but corporate crimes and, more specifically, crimes of a Second State, of a parallel State. They resemble more closely, in their phenomenology, rituals that solidify the unity of secret societies and totalitarian regimes). Within this crisis of national sovereignty and proliferation of shifting regional "parallel states," this macabre system of signification written on bodies becomes an important

communicator of antagonism and/or alliances (69). I will discuss below how this dynamic plays out in the novel.

The Detective in the Necropolis

La transmigración de los cuerpos opens on a nameless city suffering from an unnamed epidemic. People are dying of an unknown illness and are advised by the government to wear masks or stay inside. The masks, or “tapabocas,” are symbolic of the government and criminal organizations’ desire for people to cover their mouths and stay silent, while the fear keeping people indoors is indicative of their control over circulation through public spaces. The protagonist—known only as Alfaqueque—is drawn outside after receiving a call from a local crime boss, Delfin, whose son has been taken by a rival family. We learn that Alfaqueque is a type of fixer in the courts, and Delfin wants him to make an exchange of prisoners because he has kidnapped the daughter of the other crime family. Things get more complicated when we learn that both captives have actually died, so the protagonist’s task becomes an exchange of corpses. Alfaqueque manages this task, thus averting bloodshed between the two rival families and enabling them to bury and mourn their dead.

The opening lines introduce the idea of a curse or drought upon the land and contrast it with the metaphor of thirst as awakening and potential redemption: “Lo despertó una sed lépera, se levantó y fue a servirse agua pero el garrafón estaba seco y del grifo escurría nomás un hilo de aire mojado” (9) (A scurvy thirst awoke him and he got up to get a glass of water, but the tap was dry and all that trickled out was a thin stream of dank air). We begin with the protagonist’s literal awakening and rising. His thirst is specifically described as “lépera,” which indicates a lower-class individual or social outcast. This will mark him from the outset as a potential member of the part that has no part, making a political claim, in Rancière’s terminology, to which I will return below. The lack of water to satisfy his thirst indicates that the conditions are not available to satisfy his demand. Additionally, the crime family that recruits the protagonist to track down their missing son is the Fonseca clan. “Fonseca” comes from the Latin for “dry well,” further indicating that this family’s cruelty and criminal enterprise is associated with the drought or curse upon the land. At one point, even the water in a fountain appears “tiesa” (47) (dead). The “hilo” (thread) of wet air holds out the future possibility of satiating thirst and weaving together the clues in this crime novel, which is itself a performative re-weaving of the damaged social fabric.⁶

The narrator then proceeds to inform us that the protagonist suspects it will be a horrible day: “No podía saber que ya era, desde hacía horas,

verdaderamente horrible, mucho más que el infiernito íntimo que se había procurado a tragos” (9) (He had no way of knowing that it already was, had been for hours, truly awful, much more awful than the private little inferno he’s built himself on booze). Despite the elliptical nature of the narration, the narrator foreshadows knowledge of what is to befall the protagonist. Another act of foreshadowing alludes to Dante’s *Inferno*, a quest through the underworld that parallels the protagonist’s own undertaking the city of the dead. In fact, the last words of the novel, “Abrió la puerta de la Casota, y salió a mirar las estrellas otra vez” (134) (And he opened the Big House door and went out to look at the stars once again), echo the last line of the *Inferno* as the poet and his guide Virgil emerge from Hell: “And we walked out once more beneath the stars” (287).⁷ For Dante, the stars symbolize hope.⁸ In Herrera’s text, they also seem to hold out the possibility of hope, as Alfaqueque figuratively emerges from the underworld, albeit temporarily, and the novel concludes with his promise to rescue his student–neighbor from a jail cell where he has been left beaten.

The plague calls to mind the curse upon the land from *Oedipus Rex* and the protagonist’s quest to resolve the crime positions him as a detective–hero who must reestablish order and serve as a guide. One can read the novel as an oblique meditation on the nature of this “curse,” as the violent lawlessness afflicting the *polis* in the age of late capitalism and what sort of justice is or is not available in these unstable circumstances. The Redeemer, as the protagonist is called in the English translation, calls to mind a hardboiled detective in the vein of Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe. In this context, however, the possibility of adequately resolving the crime and bringing a guilty party to justice is removed, as the detective operates in a lawless world run by the criminal underworld and the corrupt State. In Chandler and other hardboiled US fiction from the 1930s and 1940s, corruption and crime abound, but they tend to be endemic to humanity as a whole, rather than symptomatic of a specific political regime. Since the 1970s, the “género negro” has been popular in Latin America, where it tends to serve as a critique of a particular socio-political situation. As Persephone Braham notes, “Unlike traditional detective fiction in English, the majority of detective fiction in Spanish is *comprometido*, or socially committed. . . . [T]he very marginality of detective literature has allowed it to evolve into a tool of social criticism in a climate where the official press is unwilling or unable to perform this function” (x). She goes on to observe that “[i]f the detective novel was of little relevance to Latin Americans before 1968, Latin American writers have adopted the genre in the years since then precisely because it permits a critical scrutiny of their social institutions in the light of modern liberal principles and their late-twentieth century manifestations in the ideological narratives of neoliberalism and

globalization” (xv). Similarly, as Mempo Giardinelli argues, “Es evidente que uno de los caracteres diferenciales más claros del género, entre los norteamericanos y latinoamericanos, radica en que éstos casi siempre le ponen a sus argumentos un poco de sal y pimienta políticas” (256) (It is evident that one of the clearest differences between the North American and Latin American genres is that the latter almost always season their plots with politics). Herrera’s novel is not *comprometido*, in the traditional sense, but it does entail a linguistic intervention into the state of justice and violence in today’s world and into the way mainstream debates around these issues tend to be framed.

In Herrera’s novel, there is an unsettling relation between language, literature, and politics rather than an indictment of the current political situation. In *Transmigration*, agents of the State are almost wholly absent, with the brief exception of a military checkpoint that harasses motorists—again, regulating the flow of bodies through the space of the city. In contrast to classical or hardboiled detective fiction, where the detective’s standard task is to uncover or unmask, here the aim for the detective is to guide, redeem, and mediate. Against the traditional idea that the truth of the crime is hidden and needs to be exposed, here there is really nothing to be uncovered or unmasked. One of the missing children, Romeo, died after getting hit by a car, and the other, la Muñe (Baby Girl), died of the epidemic. The presence of the military checkpoint highlights how Mexico increasingly operates under a state of emergency, or exception. As Gareth Williams has elaborated in *The Mexican Exception*—drawing on Giorgio Agamben—the state of exception that used to define the sovereign’s authority (as in Carl Schmitt) has become more and more the norm, highlighting the retreat of traditional nation-state sovereignty in our globalized, neoliberal world.⁹ This retreat leaves a void behind, demonstrating the exhaustion of the potential for national sovereignty to effectively administer the negotiation of collective wills and successfully uphold the social pact that has been the dream of Western political modernity since the time of the French Revolution.¹⁰

Returning to Herrera’s article on the crime scene from the opening paragraph, here everything is ostensibly visible. This is a world where criminality is out in the open. The task of the writer becomes “detenerse a ver y atreverse a decir” (stopping to look and daring to speak)—not uncovering and exposing the criminal but rearticulating a set of problems to re-appropriate shared symbolic space in the absence of traditional grounding principles that used to promise stability and shared meaning. As such, the novel represents a subversive use of the detective genre to the extent that the possibility of justice is absent, and the detective’s role is to help reconfigure the shared field of meaning. The criminal elements and the State’s legal institutions have become conflated to the point where it is meaningless to seek a traditional distinction between

legal and illegal violence. As soon as the protagonist opens the front door of his house at the beginning of the novel, he senses that something is off. He knows he is not dreaming, because his dreams are dull, everyday affairs. The third-person narrator also remarks that it is as if the protagonist had fallen asleep in an elevator and awoken on a floor he didn't even know existed. This is a world out of joint, a dreamlike world full of death in which the conceptual vocabulary of modernity and the nation-state is no longer adequate to understand what is occurring. As such, this world out of joint becomes a twisted reflection of our own disjointed world.

Corpses, Coyotes, and the Abject Breakdown of the Law

The proliferation of corpses, blood, and disjointedness indicate that we are confronted with the abject. According to Julia Kristeva, literature is a privileged space to purify the abject through catharsis (17). And abjection does permeate this novel. The abject is that which provokes such profound revulsion that it takes us out of ourselves and, for Kristeva, is best represented by the corpse, or that which we must push aside to live (3). The abject is neither subject nor object, and, as such, an encounter with the abject breaks down borders, or distinctions between self and other, and draws us towards a place where meaning collapses. She goes on to write that “any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject” (4). It provokes ambiguity, confusion, the feeling of a world that has short-circuited. For Kristeva, the abject is the product of a primal separation, a separation between infant and mother and between the human and animal worlds. An encounter with the abject situates us in an animal-like state of being (12–13). This helps explain the many references to animals and de-humanization in the novel, like the Dolphin and El Ñándertal, Alfaqueque's violent associate. Furthermore, Alfaqueque is accompanied in many moments by a black dog, whose presence is never fully explained but who joined him when something inside him broke. When the Redeemer first started out as an attorney, the Dolphin came into the courthouse with some hit men to drag a bloodied man out of a cell. Alfaqueque protested this violation of the law but ultimately let the men drag the victim out: “Y en ese preciso instante fue que sintió por primera vez la presencia del perro negro, que ya nunca se iría” (108) (And that was the precise instant when he first felt the presence of the black dog, who would never again leave him) It is precisely in this moment of a complete breakdown in the legal apparatus, or “the fragility of the law” that condemns a bloodied man to be murdered, that the black dog joins the protagonist. It is a reversion to an animal state caused by the abject breakdown of the law and a corresponding

breakdown in the symbolic order. It also calls to mind Agamben's distinction between People (bearing political existence) and people (bare life), in which the idea of a coherent and unified national People is an impossibility, always fractured by the "people." According to Agamben, the poor or marginalized classes constantly need to be cleansed, purged, or assimilated into the People as a pure, whole, fully human political body. Here, the animalization laid bare by the breakdown of the law highlights the biopolitical rupture that will never allow for the existence of an undivided People and will, as such, always produce bare life (178).

The author's previous novel, *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (Signs Preceding the End of the World), is also an allegorical account of a journey through the underworld involving a dog. Yet the main myth in that novel is not the Christian Inferno but the Aztec land of the dead, Mictlán. In the Aztec conception of the afterlife, a dog accompanies the recently deceased through the nine stages of Mictlán (in *Señales*, the dog is represented by Chuchó, the coyote). The black dog is associated with the abject breakdown of the law, but it also helps Alfaqueque as a guide through this contemporary inferno. As Alfaqueque navigates the underworld, he also serves as a guide for others to escape it by literally moving their bodies from one place to another.

Returning to the idea of the abject, for Kristeva, what provokes extreme nausea is contact with the film that forms over milk. Writes Kristeva, "When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk . . . I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach" (2–3). In almost dream-like fashion, the narrator of *Transmigración* at one point tells us that the protagonist has seen many strange puddles around town, "cubiertos por membranas blancuzcas" (20) (covered in whitish membranes). In the opening pages, he steps out of his door and sees a terrifying sight: a swarm of mosquitos over a vomit-like puddle that he recognizes as blood at the base of a tree. Later, he sees a black film covering a puddle (20). This dream-like succession of filthy, film-covered puddles recalls the revolting image of Kristeva's description of the abject, as well as the metaphorical drought. What appears at first glance to be a puddle reveals itself to be something much more disturbing.

Although the abject can be purified through art, getting rid of it, Kristeva tells us, is out of the question: "One can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity," through representation and repetition (28). There is a sort of cathartic climax when Alfaqueque is savagely beaten by the boyfriend of his new love interest. After this act—during which he becomes another disturbing, leaky body—he returns the damaged corpses to their rightful families for burial and mourning. Mourning is, after all, an attempt to recognize and come to terms with loss and to establish a

clear boundary between the living and the dead so the dead don't return to overwhelm the world of the living. Instead of seeing corpses as numbers to be counted or simply not seeing them—passing by the crime scene, as it were, with “nothing to see here”—the novel unflinchingly focuses on the tragedy of two deceased individuals and, in a sense, mourns their passing. Correspondingly, it also mourns the breakdown of the modern State.¹¹

It is worthwhile at this point to comment on the protagonist's unusual name, because it points to what kind of “detective” he is and to his role. “Alfaqueque” is an Arabic word that does indeed translate to “redeemer,” and it refers to individuals in Medieval Spain whose job it was to cross a frontier, from Christian to Muslim territory, to negotiate the release of a captive held by the other side. Alfaqueque is thus a figure of mediation and redemption who leads people out of captivity. When we also take into account that there is a plague in the city that the government claims is spread by a mosquito—specifically “un mosquito *egipcio*”—we recognize an allusion to Moses leading the Israelites out of their Egyptian captivity as God unleashed a series of plagues. Alfaqueque is also a figure of orphanhood (as is Oedipus)—throughout the novel, there is never a single reference to his family, and his neighbor comments that no one ever visits him. This isolation also presents the image of a detective who is a kind of seer of what others cannot or will not see. Whereas Moses is the bringer of the Law, Alfaqueque works in the courts but on the margins of the law, as state-administered justice is entirely absent from the novel. He mediates conflict unofficially through a redemptive “law” in the absence of official justice (the Law). Additionally, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word “transmigration” in Old French (circa 1300) signifies “exile” or “diaspora” and originally referred to the removal of those Jews in Babylonian captivity. The “transmigration of bodies,” therefore, is about more than moving bodies and the exchange of prisoners; it is about rescuing and repositioning bodies (living and dead) and reconfiguring shared spaces to alleviate suffering through a symbolic communal exodus out of horror.

Tellingly, Herrera has used references to Arabic words in previous works. In his previous novel *Señales*, the border-crossing protagonist is named “Makina,” which is Arabic for “strong” or “powerful.” In this age of the Global War on Terror, Arabic speakers have become emblematic figures for bare life. Herrera uses another neologism in that novel for “to leave”: *jarchar*. According to the author, he coined that term in reference to the *jarchas*, which are the final lines of an Arabic lyric poem called a moaxaja and typically were words of love or goodbye spoken by a young woman (Bady). What is interesting about these poems is that they can be found going back a thousand years in what is now Spain. The *jarchas* were typically written in Mozárabe, which

was a proto-Spanish Romance dialect written with Arabic letters. According to Juan Luis Alborg, this makes the *jarchas* the oldest known case of written poetry in a proto-Romance language (92). In other words, Spanish literature is born of a hybrid genre, in the borderlands, and combines Arabic and Romance languages, high art and popular song. This is a fascinating reference to another complicated border situation—the Al-Andalus of a thousand years ago, where shifting frontiers and cultural intermixture produced the Spanish language as a hybrid with Arabic. In this way, Herrera highlights the beauty that can come out of a messy border condition while also calling attention to the idea that languages, artistic movements, and identities are all hybrid formations. The fact that he makes *jarchar* mean “to leave” is also indicative of the transformative process exemplified here by Makina’s “transmigration” from Mexico to the US and the process of change she undergoes through her journey, which is akin to death and rebirth and calls to mind a spiritual transmigration, as well. The novel is also written in an open, hybrid, borderland style that mirrors its subject matter.

Jacques Rancière and the Wandering of the Orphan Letter

To return to the idea of Alfaqueque as orphaned Moses/Redeemer, let’s turn to Jacques Rancière’s idea of the orphan letter. According to Rancière, the aesthetic regime of art is a mode of aesthetics that has been in existence since the French Revolution and is associated with the breakdown of old hierarchies, both social and artistic. The aesthetic regime of art supplants the representative regime of art that privileged certain hierarchical forms of genre and address. For example, in the Aristotelean concept of art, kings should speak like kings, commoners like commoners, and certain genres are meant for specific audiences. The shift from a representative regime to an aesthetic one occurred around 1800, which marks the rise of republican forms of government and the birth of “literature” as an institution, as opposed to the *belles lettres* (Rancière, “The Politics of Literature” 161). The rise of the aesthetic regime of art witnessed the collapse of privileged correspondences between particular genres and audiences and between ways of speaking particular to certain types of people. This corresponds to a style of writing separated from the paternal logos, “planted by a master as a seed in the soul of a disciple, where it could grow and live” (157). The orphan letter is a reference to Plato; it is the pesky letter that Plato feared because it disrupted social hierarchies. It is the letter that “went its way, without a father to guide it. It was the letter that spoke to anybody, without knowing to whom it had to speak, and to whom it had not” (157).¹²

Rancière relates the dissemination of the orphan letter to the promise or possibility of democracy through what he calls the “democratic chattering of the letter” (163). For Rancière, “democracy” is not a particular political, administrative configuration—what he would associate with “the police”—but rather a disruptive force that has potential to break with the police order’s distribution of bodies in a particular partition of the sensible. Democracy, then, is the mode of appearance of the political, if we understand the latter as a force that breaks with or disrupts the police order. He goes on to say, “Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (*Disagreement*, 30). Literature, then, is “political” in the sense that it involves the distribution of what is visible and sayable in a given place and time. The chattering of the orphan letter resists its “proper” place or role and subsequently can in principle be used by anyone yet without being reducible to anyone’s intentions. I’ll elaborate below on how Alfaqueque embodies the “orphan letter” and on his corresponding potential as a guide out of Mexico’s contemporary crises.

In his essay on Plato’s *Pharmakon*, Derrida writes that the orphan letter wanders around like an errant ghost, like someone “who has lost his rights, an outlaw, a pervert, a bad seed, a vagrant, an adventurer, a bum” (*Dissemination*, 143). This orphan letter is an “errant democrat, wandering like a desire or like a signifier freed from *logos*” (145). Speech as *logos* is a living thing that issues from the father, while writing is the orphaned offspring that speaks to anyone and can be used in the employ of anyone. As such, it is essentially democratic and entails the possibility of redistributing societal configurations and “shifting bodies” from their assigned places. Once the concept of equality gains currency in the political imaginary, any person—even those denied citizenship or barred from the public sphere—has recourse to the word and is potentially able to make a political claim on her own behalf, to demand visibility for what was once unseen, or to make audible as speech what was previously only heard as noise. This marks the potential political irruption of the part that has no part (the poor or other marginalized groups that are not recognized as active political agents) into the police order, or the field of representation. As a disruptive force that calls into question pre-existing orders but that also allows for the ability to say anything, literature is linked to the idea of democracy in the sense of possibility, or the promise of something new.

Alfaqueque, then, as a lonely, wandering wordsmith endowed with linguistic prowess, is a stand in for authorship, for crafting with words. He is the “orphan letter” speaking to everyone, linking disparate groups and holding forth a promise, the promise of a future to come that disrupts the normalized

“lexicon of violence” of the militarized state. The orphan letter as political subject is, according to Rancière, an operator (*Dissensus* 40). Correspondingly, the novel is full of acts of writing directly on bodies.¹³ The novel stresses the importance of where those bodies are located and who controls their movement. The Dolphin—the main crime boss—receives that name after he destroys his nose with an excess of cocaine. He also has trouble breathing after having been shot in the lung. The bitter violence of the crime families is contrasted with Alfaqueque’s budding relationship with his neighbor, La Tres Veces Rubia. Over drinks, she mentions that she always puts a “nose” on the letter u: “La nariz de la u. Cuando está con la cu la u no respira, nomás cuando está lejos de la cu, y ahí no necesita nariz. Pero yo siempre se la pongo” (24) (The nose on a u. When it’s with the q the u doesn’t breathe, only when it’s far from q, and it doesn’t need a nose there. But I always put one on anyway). This contrasts with the Dolphin’s nose and his difficulty breathing and ties in to the idea of thirst and drought as emblematic of the crisis of violent lawlessness and the related crisis of femicide. The sound of his agonized breathing reminds the protagonist of an unnamed dark moment in the past that linked him to the Dolphin as a surrogate bad father (42). At the very end, after Alfaqueque has stood up to the Dolphin and successfully made the exchange of bodies, La Tres Veces Rubia physically marks the two dots onto the Redeemer’s chest: “Y le pulsó una diéresis en el pecho” (132) (And she poked a diéresis into his chest). The vitality of their link allows them to breathe, while the crime families suffocate under their violence.

This ability to breathe is written directly onto the protagonist’s body, in contrast to the writing that the Dolphin seeks to leave on the body of the dead woman in his possession. He tries to leave multiple signs on her body as a message to the rival family. Meanwhile, Alfaqueque calls in his nurse-friend Vicky to “read” the body (“leer el cuerpo”) and verify that the corpse has not been damaged before the exchange. After examining the body, Vicky clarifies, “No se la cogieron, si es lo que preguntas, pero algo le hicieron. Ese pinche Delfín le puso los calzones al revés” (70) (They didn’t fuck her, if that’s what you’re asking, but they did something. That shitbag Dolphin put her underwear on inside out). Alfaqueque treats La Muñe’s body with great tenderness; he irons her sweater and then holds her hand because she looks lonely. The Dolphin makes one last attempt to inscribe a message on her body by breaking into the Redeemer’s apartment, where he has kept the body, but the Redeemer takes a stand and declares, “No se va a poder, Don” (105) (Fraid you can’t do that, Chief). The Dolphin eventually backs down, and the protagonist exclaims, “No va a venir a expoliarme un muerto” (110) (No way am I letting you in to despoil a dead body).¹⁴ In the battle to control the writing on female bodies and signify power and control over territory—which is also an

intervention into the distribution of the sensible—Alfaqueque refuses to allow the crime boss, who is also a stand in for the sovereign, to inscribe his message and exert his dominance. Meanwhile, La Tres Veces Rubia exhibits her own vital writing on the body of the Redeemer, allowing him to breathe and to satisfy his “thirst.” After their first sexual encounter, the Redeemer dreams of a black dog covered in water (33). His connection with La Tres Veces Rubia alleviates his abject animalization, while his status as wandering orphan letter enables him to craft empowering narratives of his own.

“In effect, the father’s death opens the reign of violence” (Derrida, 146)

Toward the end of the novel, Alfaqueque visits a friend who is well-connected in the city and hears the origin of the conflict between the FONSECAS and the CASTROS. It turns out that they are not two families but one. The Dolphin and the male head of the Castro family share the same father.¹⁵ He had married the mother of the Castro family but left her to live with the mother of the Fonseca clan. Upon his death, the heirs began fighting over the body, the inheritance, and a house—Las Pericas—that is disputed between the two families, which led to the outbreak of violence. The father, as the suturing point of the social field, leaves fragmentation and violence upon his death, which also leads to the dissemination of the orphan letter. This death of the father also calls to mind the “death” of the PRI, the father of the nation, during the transition to power of the Partido de Acción Nacional and the resulting dissemination of violence that erupted with the proliferation of new drug cartels. The crisis of national sovereignty that ensues leads to a patchwork of regional sovereignties, as various cartels fight for turf and act as miniature states. As Hobbes formulates in *Leviathan*, the sovereign has the right to take life or let live (232–33). The Dolphin certainly acts as a regional sovereign, as when he says of his own son Romeo, “es mi hijo, y si quiero me lo trago” (98) (literally: he’s my son, and if I want I’ll swallow him up). Having been a “madrina” (a type of para-police) for twenty-five years, situating him on the borders of state power, he acts with absolute impunity.

Government agencies have become so integrated into organized crime that it seems impossible to draw traditional distinctions between legal and extralegal violence in Mexico. Patrick Dove explains it this way:

The growing power of drug cartels and human trafficking gangs throughout Mexico and Central America in the first decades of the new millennium

fills a vacuum left when the modern state abandoned its double regulatory role: of relations between the global and the local and between social particularities within national boundaries. As criminal organizations compete with one another and with the state itself for control over territory or plazas (turf), there seems to be little heuristic benefit to categorizing the violence they inflict on one another—and on civilian populations—using modern distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate (or legal and illegal) force. The political logic of sovereignty is in retreat around the world today, nowhere more so than in Mexico. (262)

For Dove, this exhaustion of the fundamental principles of political modernity corresponds to a similar exhaustion of key notions of aesthetic modernity, such as the idea of literature as a transmitter of universal values and privileged space for the cultivation of the modern citizen through disinterested reflection. Here, literature, in its detective-esque political modality, engages the reader with a particular intervention into a political and linguistic situation, calling for “una política de los vínculos,” to paraphrase Segato, that can reconfigure the distribution of the sensible. Dove proposes the term “Interregnum” to name our current time, when these central notions of political and aesthetic modernity are in retreat and yet no new order has come to replace them.

I argue that this vacuum is evident in Herrera’s novels, emerging in the form of an abject disjointedness that threatens to swallow life at every turn. As Alfaqueque sits silently in his room with the corpse of La Muñe, he reflects, “Capos de los capos, los que habían inventado el cero, pensó, le habían dado nombre a aquello y hasta lo habían metido en una fila de números, como si pudiera quedarse ahí, obediente. Pero cada tanto . . . el cero se levantaba y se tragaba todo” (125) (Kings of the kingpins, those who had invented the zero, he thought, had given it a name and even slipped it into a line of numbers, as tho it could stay put, obedient. But once in a while . . . zero rose up and swallowed everything). Likewise, in *Señales*, that abyssal (non)ground that threatens to swallow everything up is symbolized by a sinkhole that nearly takes Makina’s life: “el suelo se abrió bajo sus pies: se tragó al hombre, y con él un auto y un perro, todo el oxígeno a su alrededor y hasta los gritos de los transeúntes” (11) (the earth opened up beneath his feet: it swallowed the man, and with him a car and a dog, all the oxygen around and even the screams of passers-by). In that scene, as in scenes throughout *Transmigration*, even oxygen is scarce, and the screams of passers-by (i.e., victims of this breakdown in order) disappear into the underground realm of the inaudible and invisible. Similarly, in *Transmigration*, when the Redeemer asks Vicky what La Muñe died of, all Vicky can do is vaguely gesture towards the world outside the car

and exclaim, “this shit.” Our conceptual vocabulary fails to name this condition accurately, which Herrera gives the name “plague” through an act of catachresis. During this global breakdown, these *fronterizo* characters wander around and attempt to weave together meaning and community from the ruins brought about by the contradictory forces of globalization, creating links and alleviating suffering in a zone of indistinction between life and death.¹⁶

Conclusion

In “Semántica de luminol,” Herrera comments that violence has changed the significance of certain words in Mexico—*plaza*, *punte peatonal*, *manta*—while also creating new ones with the prefix “narco”, such as “narco-fosa” and “narco-mina,” both of which signify and normalize horror.¹⁷ In a reference to Jacques Rancière, Herrera states that “lo que es necesario es detenerse a ver, atreverse a decir,” and he goes on to write of the importance of “luchar por la vuelta de la política, entendida como la intervención dentro de lo que es visible y lo que es decible” (fighting for the return of politics, understood as the intervention into what is visible and sayable). Accordingly, the lexicon of violence needs to be contested so it does not become normalized. Herrera is further aware that art cannot unilaterally end violence or change society overnight: “Por supuesto, reformular los problemas no los resuelve automáticamente, pero sí permite repensar sus causas, reenfocar las responsabilidades, e imaginar respuestas distintas. Cuestionar el léxico de los actores de la violencia es también cuestionar el consenso policíaco que legitima el nuevo orden” (“Semántica de luminol”) (Of course, reformulating problems doesn’t automatically resolve them, but it does allow one to rethink their causes, refocus responsibilities, and imagine different answers. Questioning the lexicon of the agents of violence also questions the police consensus that legitimates the new order). By presenting an abject, disjointed world through the eyes of a type of detective, or figure of mediation, and by using an innovative idiom that calls attention to its novelty and enacts other forms of community, Herrera’s text presents a lexicon of redemption that counters the narco-state’s lexicon of terror and performatively charts a path forward out of the wasteland that threatens to engulf Mexico. The detective–guide and wandering orphan letter serves as a link between different community formations that reconfigure the distribution of the sensible and alleviate the disastrous impacts created by the crisis of the abject breakdown of the law. This breakdown opens a space for the disastrous emergence of parallel-states that use—among other techniques—women’s bodies to signify their violent power. It also necessitates the emergence of a new idiom to narrate from the crime scene and speak from the ruins.

Notes

1. “Luminol” is the chemical used in crime scenes to detect blood that is not visible to the naked eye.
2. In the same article, Herrera recalls Rancière’s modification of Althusser’s idea that the law interpellates the subject through the police officer’s call, “Hey, you there!” More accurately, it is the call, “There’s nothing to see here, move along,” that is characteristic of the police order’s control over the distribution of the sensible. That call reminds one of what is visible and what should remain invisible. Rancière develops the idea in “Ten Theses on Politics” by affirming, “It asserts the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation. Politics, by contrast, consists in transforming this space of ‘moving along,’ of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it” (37).
3. All translations from Herrera’s novels are from Lisa Dillman’s translation. The rest of the translations are my own.
4. For analyses of the role of the border condition in the novels of Yuri Herrera, see Lombardo; Uribe; and Calderón Le Joliff.
5. In an interview with Radmila Stefkova and Rodrigo Figueroa, Herrera mentions that, while completing his Master’s degree in El Paso, he “spent a lot of time in Juárez, I have family in Juárez, I did most of my shopping in Juárez and I drank almost all of my drinks in Juárez.” He goes on to note that Juárez was the space he had in mind while creating *Trabajos del reino*.
6. This calls to mind Rita Laura Segato’s call for a new politics in a feminist key whose slogan would be “retejer comunidad a partir de los fragmentos” (27) (re-weaving a community from the fragments).
7. In an interview with José Manuel Suárez Noriega, Herrera confirms that he borrowed the last line from Dante (Cátedra Alfonso Reyes).
8. For Jonathan Gutiérrez Hibler, stars are “el peso vital de la otredad. Son lejanas, su luz se ve solo cuando no hay mucha en la ciudad . . . , estrellas que a veces cuando nosotros las vemos probablemente ya estén muertas y solo las conocemos, si extendemos la metáfora, por su sombra” (52). He also observes that clouds cover the sky until the conflict between the families has been resolved (52).
9. As Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer*, “One of the theses of the present inquiry is that in our age, the state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule” (20).
10. In Patrick Dove’s words, “The subjugation of the political logic of sovereignty to abstract or imperceptible [market] forces that are no longer capable of being regulated by national states leaves a void at the heart of the social today, a gap that has yet to be filled by some new figure or principle that could carry out the explanatory and ordering operations once performed by the logic of political sovereignty” (8).

11. Sayak Valencia diagnoses the form this breakdown takes—especially in border regions—in her book *Capitalismo Gore: Control económico, violencia y narcopoder*. She demonstrates that, in the permanent state of exception that constitutes Mexico today, violence and death become new dominant forms of capital accumulation as narcopower entrenches itself by usurping the State’s monopoly on violence, thus radically transforming biopolitics into necropolitics. Valencia affirms that, in gore capitalism, “the destruction of the body becomes in itself the product or commodity; the only kind of accumulation possible now is through a body count, as death has become the most profitable business in existence” (21). In *Transmigration*, corpses are exchanged as though they were valuable commodities.
12. Plato develops this idea in the *Phaedrus* dialogues (101).
13. In *Ariadne’s Thread*, J. Hillis Miller details how many words for writing etymologically derive from “to cut,” such as write, *escribir*, graph, glyph, sign, inscribe: “In any case, in any writing somewhere there is an act of violence, a blow, a cut, cleaving, or stamping, perhaps even a division between a cause and its effect” (9–10).
14. Many reviews have noted a resonance with *Antigone*.
15. In addition to the Dolphin signifying animalization and destruction caused by drugs, there is another ironic resonance with “dauphin” as the prince hoping to inherit the realm.
16. In their book *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, editors Beth Hinderliter, William Kaizen, Vered Maimon, Jaleh Mansoor, and Seth McCormick work through how contemporary art creates such meaning and community, which they describe in terms of “temporary solidarities constantly renegotiated through disagreement” and which they recognize as the “contingent and nonessential manner of being-together in a community whose coherence is no more than a fiction or a potentiality” (2). They engage with Rancière’s thought on the mutual imbrication of politics and aesthetics to clarify art’s role in reconfiguring the common field of what is visible and sayable (8).
17. Plaza becomes turf, as opposed to public plaza. Puente peatonal, instead of signifying pedestrian bridge, becomes associated with the signs that cartels hang with messages to the authorities or rival gangs, usually accompanied by mutilated corpses. And manta, or blanket, names the preferred medium for writing the signs and hanging them from pedestrian bridges.

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