Disturbing Beauty:
Poetry, Performance, and Utopia
in Ferreira Gullar, Miguel Piñero, and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez

By

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INTRODUCTION

ABJECT UTOPIAS

This dissertation is fundamentally about social margins. How they are constructed, and which bodies and spaces are placed outside of them. It is also about the sublime and utopian possibilities that may be found outside of social boundaries, and how such possibilities might be brought in to create a new social order. In the chapters that follow, I will argue that the poems and plays of Ferreira Gullar (Brazil, 1930-2016), Miguel Piñero (Puerto Rico/New York, 1946-1988), and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez (Cuba, 1950-) engage in political imagination through aesthetic practice—that the strange, haunting, and disturbing beauty that pervades the work of these writers serves to point out an unthinkable political possibility that lies beyond the margins, and that this beauty gestures toward the radical outside as a site of hope and promise.

The primary theoretical framework that I will adopt in order to discuss the dynamics of social exclusion and the possibility of their re-imagination is that of abjection. First elaborated by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1980),[1] the theory of abjection has been taken up by a multitude of philosophers, sociologists, and literary and cultural critics, and applied in a variety of contexts. Kristeva originally developed the theory of abjection to explain a psychic force that she saw as unaccounted for in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and which she believed to be foundational in the formation of the human subject and the societies that s/he inhabits. The theory has since been applied in a more explicitly political fashion—as a theory of social exclusion and oppression through which certain subjects and spaces are identified by dominant

[1] *Powers of Horror* was originally published in French. The English translation was published in 1982.

social groups as threatening, repulsive, or grotesque, and are thus relegated to the social margins. As such, this dissertation enters into dialogue with a large corpus of critical works that examine abjection as a form of oppression and that attempt to think through the conditions and possibilities of emancipation from the position of social abject. I enter into this conversation from an inter-American perspective, examining the historical reality of abjection and its aesthetic re-imagination in Brazil, New York, and Cuba in the late twentieth century.

Before staking out the exact place of this dissertation within the ongoing critical conversation on the nature of abjection and the possibility of its subversion, a closer examination of the theory of abjection and a definition of its key terms is necessary. When I use the terms "abjection" or "abject," I am referring to a psychic phenomenon of *excluding threatening otherness* that functions on both an individual and a sociocultural level. At the level of the individual subject, abjection is the first step in the process of self/other distinction through which the subject is formed. Kristeva theorizes that in the pre-Oedipal stage before the subject is fully formed, the infant exists in a dyadic relationship with the mother, in which the infant is not yet fully a subject, nor is the mother (for the infant) yet fully an object.[2] Rather, the boundary between self and other is ambiguous, and the self is not fully distinguishable from the other. Thus, in the infant-mother dyad, abjection is the rejection of the maternal body that allows the infant to separate from the otherness that threatens to engulf it: "[a]bjection preserves what existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (*Powers* 10). Whereas the maternal body is the first "object" to be met with abjection by the not-yet-formed subject—in other words,

[2] In object relations theory, an offshoot of psychoanalytic theory, the subject is equivalent to the self or to the ego, and its objects are the things that the subject enters into relationship with, be they inanimate objects or other subjects. As such, a subject's relationship with an object may also be described as an inter-subjective relationship in other theoretical contexts.

the first body to be designated abject—the abject in essence is "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," (*Powers* 4) that which shows us the fragility of our borders, and which disturbs "identity, system, order" (*Powers* 4). Said in a different way, the abject is that which calls into question the integrity of our boundaries as subjects, and which threatens us with a seemingly intolerable heterogeneity.

The fear of a threatening otherness that confounds and transgresses boundaries is also what drives abjection on a social level. Here, abjection refers to a process of cultural formation in which societies, nations, and otherwise dominant groups define themselves through the exclusion of a stigmatized other that is rendered grotesque and horrifying within the dominant social discourse. While Kristeva identifies a number of ways in which certain subjects are marked as abject and socially excluded, Judith Butler (*Bodies that Matter*, 1993) is perhaps the first theorist to rigorously engage with the idea of abjection as a form of systematic oppression. She defines the abject on the social level as, "those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (*Bodies* 3). For Butler, full subjectivity is granted only to those who belong to dominant social groups, the boundaries of which are formed by denying the status of subject—even, indeed, the status of human—to those who do not adhere to certain constructed social norms: "[i]n this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (*Bodies* 3). Butler argues that social norms, and the social boundaries that delineate what types of subjectivities are permissible and, indeed, "livable" within the social sphere, are "reiterated and reiterable," (*Bodies* 22) which is to say, socially

constructed (not essential or absolute) and ultimately malleable. Thus, the socially abject is met with continual repudiation and exclusion in order to protect the integrity of arbitrarily constructed social boundaries, and to preserve society from an abject otherness that threatens to dismantle them.

I draw heavily on both Butler and Kristeva to elaborate how abjection functions socially as a force of oppression, and how the poems and plays of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez go about imagining utopian alternatives to social abjection. One may reasonably ask at this point if it is possible to do away with abjection entirely—whether or not the formation of society or the subject is even possible without abjection. Whereas it is possible that abjection on the level of the subject—as a psychic component of the early stages of subject formation that allows for distinction between self and other—is a necessary and even a positive phenomenon, I follow Butler in proposing that the process of social abjection, by which certain subjects and the spaces they inhabit are designated abject for the purpose of forming social boundaries, is an oppressive force that may be transformed. I find in the work of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez the imagination of this transformation.

For the sake of clarity, to differentiate between abjection at the level of society versus level of the subject, I use the term *social abjection*[3] to refer to abjection as a force of social

[3] I borrow the term "social abjection" from Imogen Tyler, who, to my knowledge, was the first to use the term in her book *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (2013). However, my use of the term differs to some extent from Tyler's, who identifies Kristeva's conception of abjection as blind to the asymmetrical dynamics of power and hegemony that exist between dominant and marginalized groups, and who thus turns to other theorists (Butler, Anne McClintock, and Gaytri Spivak, among others) for the theoretical language in which to ground her theory of social abjection. While I find that Tyler's critique of Kristeva is largely justified, I also find that Kristeva's work neverthless has value, both in theorizing social abjection and articulating the manner in which art can offer a contestatory discourse (I will discuss this further in chapter one). Thus, in contrast to Tyler, I endeavor to find

exclusion, and the term *social abject* to identify the members of marginalized groups that are the recipients of this exclusion. In the broadest theoretical sense, social abjection may take a multitude of forms, and may stigmatize and exclude subjects based on a variety of factors that have been deemed threatening to the dominant social order, including race, class, political ideology, sexual orientation, gender identity, (post)colonial status, and mental and physical disability, although this list is certainly not exhaustive.[4] The specific cases of social abjection that I examine in this dissertation are varied: ranging from capitalist exploitation in Brazil and the repression of political dissidents during the military dictatorship (1964-1985); the intersecting forces of racism, classism, colonialism, and homophobia as they affect the Puerto Rican community in New York in the 1960s through the 1980s; and the manner in which state revolutionary ideology and the forces of neoliberal tourism converge to construct the impoverished neighborhood of Centro Habana as a socially abject space in Cuba in the 1990s.

I follow both Butler and Kristeva in arguing that society may be altered in positive ways by bringing the excluded abject into the social sphere. While both theorists understand the mechanics and the results of this alteration in different ways, the principle of transforming society through integrating that which exists beyond the social margin remains consistent.[5]

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common ground between Butler's and Kristeva's thinking on abjection, and to look at what both theorists can contribute to a discussion regarding the political force of abject aesthetics.

[4] See David Sibley's *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (1995) for wide-ranging theoretical analysis of how social exclusion follows the logic of abjection in a variety of contexts. In chapter two in particular, he shows how various forms of social difference (in particular he refers to black subjects, queer subjects, women, communists, Gypsies, and Jews) are viewed by the dominant culture as defiling impurities, which are associated with disease, animality, and blackness.

[5] Kristeva's belief in large-scale social transformation perhaps reaches its peak in one of her earliest works, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). Her subsequent works shy away from a commitment to radical politics, and her analysis of Céline's writing in *Powers of Horror* seems to preclude the possibility of a positive politics arising from the abject altogether. However,

Similarly, Butler and Kristeva both generally understand society and marginality in psychoanalytic terms, which is to say, both conceive of social structure and boundaries in terms of Jacques Lacan's concept of the Symbolic. In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic is "the order of signification, the social realm" (*Reading* 10). It is the social field in which cultural Law is instantiated and reified in language, and the cultural realm into which the subject enters when s/he is fully formed. Butler and Kristeva locate the abject outside of the Symbolic, which implies that it is thus unintelligible, unsignifiable, and beyond comprehension from the dominant social perspective. Finally, both theorize that the Symbolic may be altered through the integration of that which lies beyond its boundaries, through giving Symbolic *form* to the abject.

In this dissertation, I examine the integration of the abject in the Symbolic from an aesthetic perspective. In other words, I explore the way in which poetry and performance go about giving Symbolic form to the abject, and how these aesthetic acts of symbolization imagine utopian alternatives to social abjection. While the scope of this dissertation is limited to the artistic genres of poetry and drama, I do not mean to imply that they are the only genres in which abject aesthetics acquire political force. Rather, I chose these genres because they are particularly useful for investigating both the performative and aesthetic dimensions of symbolizing the abject, as I will discuss in greater detail below, and in chapter one.

Fundamentally, I argue that Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez find a unique type of beauty within the abject, which points toward the radical outside as a site of sublime promise. I follow Kristeva and other theorists of the sublime in locating both the abject and the sublime beyond the margins of the Symbolic, and I argue that the two are not wholly differentiable or distinguishable from one another—that within the abject lies the seed of sublime, utopian possibility. Thus, I

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through reading Kristeva with Butler in chapter one, I argue that a positive possibility for the abject is visible in Kristeva's writing, even if this is an avenue that she herself did not pursue.

contend that Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez in their work all look toward the exorbitant outside with hope—that the utopian possibilities that exist in this exterior space may be brought into the Symbolic and realized. However—here following Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno in their theorizing of utopia, as well as Alexander Nehamas' theory of the promise of beauty—I leave open the possibility that the promise offered by the sublime and unsettling beauty of abject art may in fact be a false one, that the seed of utopia within the abject is one that may never bear fruit. As such, I suggest that the political project of dismantling social abjection, of transforming the Symbolic through incorporating the abject, is one that is fundamentally based in Bloch's sense of hope, in which the possibilities of fulfillment and disappointment live side by side. Thus, I maintain that the literary works studied in this dissertation display a hope—a longing multivalent hope—that bringing the abject into the Symbolic and reversing the exclusion of social abjection may be capable of altering the Symbolic in productive, previously unthinkable ways.

Since Butler's publication of *Bodies* in 1993, a number of scholars have engaged with the theory of abjection, exploring how abjection generates and maintains oppressive social structures. Others have examined the dissident political valences of the socially abject, suggesting that alternative modes of sociality arise from the space of the abject. David Sibley argues in *Geographies of Exclusion* (1995) that dominant groups, in Western societies at least, tend to view social difference (in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) as a type of threatening contaminant, and thus exclude difference in an attempt to preserve more or less homogeneous social spaces. In essence, he argues that physical space in Western cities and suburbs (those of Great Britain are his most common reference point) is organized via a logic of abjection, which determines who is allowed to populate which spaces, which areas belong to the dominant group,

and which are the liminal zones that provoke fear and anxiety. Anthologies edited by Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox, and by William Cohen and Ryan Johnson, follow similar lines of thought, examining how dirt and filth function as metaphors for threatening otherness, and how the exclusion of dirt and filth organize space and enact oppression.[6] Anne McClintock proposes, in general terms, that the production and domination of abject bodies and spaces is the driving force that propels colonialism and modern imperialism, and she sees abjection as a useful framework in these contexts for studying subjugation based on race, gender, and sexuality.[7]

While the studies mentioned above focus primarily (although certainly not entirely) on how abjection structures oppression, others look at the types of political power that are nascent in the abject and the challenges that the abject poses to systems of abjection. The bulk of these examine the ways in these political alternatives are imagined in the artistic production of minoritarian groups in the United States, and tend to explore social abjection based on sexuality and gender, or on race.

Queer theory, at least since Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), has often explicitly or implicitly invoked the social abjection of queerness and sought to form a contestatory politics from the position of abject queerness. Aside from Butler, Daniel Halperin in *What do Gay Men Want?* (2007) most explicitly engages with abjection and queerness, envisioning the politics of the abject in a queer context as a sort of anti-politics that refuses

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[6] See Campkin and Cox (eds.), *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination* (2007), and Cohen and Johnson (eds.), *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (2005).

[7] See *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), esp. pp. 71-74. McClintock also sees the study of abjection as a way to bring psychoanalysis, despite its ahistorical tendencies, into contact with material history. She calls the product of this interaction a "*situated psychoanalysis*—a culturally contextualized psychoanalysis that is simultaneously a psychoanalytically informed history" (72). The creation of a historically situated psychoanalytic inquiry is also my aim in this dissertation, and McClintock's work is important for demonstrating how psychoanalysis may be historicized on both theoretical and practical grounds.

political normativity, similar to Bersani's and Leo Edelman's concepts of queer anti-relationality.[8]

Regarding abjection and race in the United States, Karen Shimakawa explores the abjection of Asian American subjects in the US cultural imaginary, and the manner in which Asian American drama engages in subversive strategies to challenge the abjection of Asian Americans as a form of (white, male) American national identity formation.[9] Additionally, in the disciplines of African American and Latinx literature, various scholars identify the embrace of an abject social position with a politics that offers radical alternatives to a normative identity politics that seeks to attain power through establishing a reified, socially accepted identity. These scholars see the abject as breaking hegemonic identity formation in such a way that allows for the elaboration of alternative social relations. Darieck Scott, in *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010), finds within an embrace of abjection an alternative form of black power, which "theorizes *from*, not against, the special intimacy of blackness with abjection, humiliation, defeat," (259) and he argues that "affirming this form of black power keeps its subjects from be (re)subjectified to an identity politics that, in its penchant for strong ego formations, ultimately serves white, masculinist, retrogressive nationalist and heteronormative regimes" (259). Thus, Scott locates liberatory power in the abject destruction of identity, "at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and compromised, without defensible boundary" (9). Leticia Alvarado follows a similar path in *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (2018), arguing that "Latino abject performances reveal abjection not as a source for empowerment fueled by a desire

[8] See Bersani, *Homos* (1995), and Edelman, *No Future* (2004).
[9] See *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (2002).

for normative inclusion but as a resource geared toward an ungraspable alternative social organization, a not-yet-here illuminated by the aesthetic" (11).

Finally, within Puerto Rican literary criticism, some scholars identify colonialism as a form of abjection, and analyze the way in which abjection—its negotiation, elaboration, and resistance—is a recurrent preoccupation in Puerto Rican literature. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé notes a disruptive and potentially productive political force in the negotiation of abjection in queer Puerto Rican writing,[10] and Benigno Trigo finds the sublimation of colonial abjection to be a restorative force in twentieth and twenty-first century Puerto Rican literature.[11] I engage critically with the work of both of these scholars in chapter two.

This bibliographic survey of scholarship on the politics of abjection is certainly not exhaustive, but is intended to be illustrative of the various critical approaches to elaborating social abjection and its re-imagination. This dissertation enters into dialogue with much of this bibliography, in order establish the parameters of social abjection in the specific historical contexts that I study, and to articulate the political alternatives posed by the socially abject. The substance of the following chapters probably shares most in common with Alvarado's work, given her attention to the importance of aesthetic practice in unveiling utopian imaginaries. In her reference to the "not-yet-here" that is presented in abject aesthetics, Alvarado follows the work of José Esteban Muñoz and, through him, Bloch, in arguing that abject performance gestures toward a future utopian horizon. While differing from Alvarado regarding the aesthetic

[10] See "'What a tangled web!': Masculinidad, abyección y la fundación de la literatura puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos" and "Towards and Art of Transvestism: Colonialism and Homosexuality in Puerto Rican Literature."
[11] See *Malady and Genius: Self-Sacrifice in Puerto Rican Literature* (2016).

nature of abject art,[12] I too argue that the political vision presented in abject artistic production is utopian in nature. Furthermore, through establishing a common aesthetics and a common political orientation in abject artistic practice across languages, cultures, and artistic genres, I hope to display the ways in which abject art goes about gesturing toward utopia across the Americas.

In chapter one, "Disturbing Beauty: Aesthetics, Performance, and the Promise of Utopia," I take a closer look at the politics of abjection and the ways in which art offers an alternative political imaginary. I begin the chapter with an attempt at reconciling Kristeva's and Butler's theories of abjection, which have often been placed at odds with one another in the critical discussion about abjection. Despite the differences in their work, I find the commonality that, for both, the possibility of transforming the Symbolic hinges on the act of giving form to the abject. For Butler, this act of formalizing occurs via performance; for Kristeva, it happens through sublimation. Subsequently, I consider the question of abject aesthetics and its relationship to the sublime. Aesthetic theory since Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) has generally restricted aesthetic judgment to two basic categories: the beautiful and the sublime. Following a brief foray into the theory of the sublime and its evolution since Kant, I come to the conclusion that the simultaneously awe-inspiring and horrifying nature of the sublime that runs consistently throughout the philosophical writing on the subject implies that the abject and the sublime are enmeshed in one another—that the abject is present in the sublime, and vice versa.

[12] Alvarado finds in abject performance an "aesthetics beyond beauty" (15) and, following the Kantian schema, thus locates the abject aesthetic exclusively in the terrain of the sublime. She argues that the negative affects and the disruption of identitarian narratives that are mobilized in abject performance not only exceed the category of the beautiful, but are a direct challenge to it. I, on the other hand, argue that the sublime and the beautiful are not so easily delineated, and that there is indeed great beauty in the sublime gestures of abject aesthetics.

While most aesthetic theorists argue that the beautiful and the sublime are incommensurate categories, Kristeva follows Friedrich Nietzsche in complicating this distinction, and she ultimately finds great beauty within abject art, despite its grotesque and sublime attributes. This beauty, however, is of a different quality than other forms of aesthetic beauty, and I refer to Francey Russell's concept of "strange new beauty" (137, 148) to describe the aesthetic quality that I find in the work of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez. For Russell, a "strange new beauty" arises in the art and discourse that gives form to that which lies outside of the Symbolic. In symbolizing the abject in their writing, the authors that I study manifest this strange, sublime beauty within their work.

Lastly, having established the presence of this strange beauty in abject art, I turn to the question of this beauty's political valences, and examine the relationship between beauty and utopian promise. In *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (2007), Nehamas proposes that beauty offers a promise of happiness. More broadly, he argues that we are attracted to beautiful objects because they promise in some way to make our lives better. This promise, however, is not a guarantee, and may turn out to be false. He thus consequently argues that aesthetic judgments carry within them an element of "ineliminable risk" (133) that our hopes for the beautiful object may be disappointed. I identify the promise of the strange beauty of abject art as a promise of utopia, and justify this claim by reading Bloch and Adorno's theory of utopia alongside Kant's theory of the sublime. The common trait shared by the utopian and the sublime is that both lie beyond the boundaries of the Symbolic, and thus escape totalizing comprehension. The sublime is assigned different meanings in different social and historical contexts—a paradisiacal afterlife in various religions, the transcendent union with nature in Romanticism, etc. I suggest that in the context of an emancipatory politics that imagines freedom

from the conditions of social abjection, the desire for sublime transformation is none other than a form of utopian longing. In other words, the writing of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez recognizes a sublime and utopian potential within the abject, and seeks to realize this potential within the Symbolic through bringing the abject in. As such, we see that Russell's concept of strange beauty is also profoundly disturbing, in both an aesthetic and a political sense. Aesthetically, this beauty disturbs the category of the beautiful itself, challenging our conceptions of what constitutes beauty by allowing it to coexist alongside and within the grotesque and the sublime. And politically, this beauty engages in a radically disturbing project: that of pointing toward the possibility of utopian transformation, of a total upheaval of oppressive systems of social abjection. Consequently, I re-conceptualize Russell's concept of "strange beauty" in terms of "disturbing beauty," in order to highlight the radically disruptive aesthetic and political nature of abject art. Finally, I consider the risk of beauty identified by Nehamas alongside Bloch's principle of hope, and recognize that utopian promise carries the possibility of both realization and disappointment.

Chapter one serves as the theoretical framework through which I analyze abjection, beauty, and utopian imagining in the subsequent chapters on Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez. I use the concept of "disturbing beauty"—with all of its sublime, abject, and politically transformative valences—that I develop in the chapter to refer to the aesthetic quality that I find in the work of all of these writers. Each writer examines different historical forms of social abjection within their work, and engages in different aesthetic strategies for symbolizing the abject and gesturing toward utopian possibility. As such, in each chapter I use the theoretical approach to utopian politics that seems to me most fitting to describe the politics and aesthetics on display in the work of each writer.

Chapter two, "Abject 'I': *Poema sujo* and the Dirty Voice of Radical Democracy," centers on Gullar's long poem *Poema sujo* [*Dirty Poem*] (1976) and its relationship to social abjection in Brazil. Gullar experienced social abjection in his life in the form of exile and the threat of political violence. He was a Marxist and an avowed critic of Brazil's military dictatorship, and fled Brazil to escape the clandestine kidnapping and torture practices that were a common tool of the military government. He wrote *Poema sujo* over a span of six months in 1975 while in exile in Buenos Aires, Argentina, during a moment in which right-wing military forces were on the rise in Argentina, and political violence against leftist dissidents was a common practice. In *Poema sujo*, he examines social exclusion in Brazil from a variety of perspectives, touching briefly on his own exile status, but focusing primarily on capitalist exploitation of the Brazilian working class, and the marginal position of his hometown, São Luís do Maranhão, in late-capitalist modernity.

As the poem unfolds, the lyric subject undergoes a profound transformation, and this transformation is my primary object of study in chapter two. The trajectory that this transformation follows may be described, in its initial phases, as an ever-intensifying immersion in the abject. The poetic speaker traverses in his memory the socially abject spaces of São Luís: the polluted and trash-filled margins of the city, factories staffed by oppressed workers, and working-class neighborhoods that lack sufficient infrastructure and resources. Gullar's recurrent use of the motifs of dirtiness, rotting, and decay to describe these spaces and the people that occupy them demonstrate the manner in which their social position is one that is beset by abjection. Later, the speaker imagines the entire city of São Luís as an abject space—"minha cidade suja" ["my dirty city"] —that has been thrust to the periphery of modernity. The ever-deepening journey into the abject undertaken by the lyric subject results in the destruction and

rebirth of this subject as a being that remains open to abject otherness rather than excluding it. I refer to Kristeva's concept of the "subject-in-process," which is later developed further by Kelly Oliver in *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (1993), to describe the nature of the lyric subject as he appears in *Poema sujo*'s final sections: as a figure delineated by porous boundaries that, as such, remains open to otherness within and without. I conclude that Gullar provides a utopian vision of a democratized Symbolic in the poem—democratized in the sense that the abject outside is no longer excluded, and that excluded subjectivities become socially viable—and a new type of subjectivity that is not predicated upon abjection.

In chapter three, "Abject Failure and Utopian Longing in the Lower East Side: The Poetry and Performance of Miguel Piñero," I study the varied and intersectional forms of social abjection that affected Piñero—and the diasporic Puerto Rican population in New York as a whole in the late twentieth century—and the way that Piñero's writing addresses these dynamics. I examine the way in which Nuyorican literature responds to social abjection in the United States,[13] which takes the form of racist, classist, and colonialist discourse directed toward Puerto Ricans. I also engage critically with a subset of Puerto Rican literary criticism that finds abjection of the feminine and the queer to be a recurrent theme in Puerto Rican national literature, and a strategy for establishing a national identity in the face of colonial domination. While Nuyorican literature from the 1960s through the 1980s tends to embrace a form of nationalist identity politics, which runs the risk of falling into the trap of repeating abjection in the form of patriarchal heterosexism, I identify a different, more radical type of politics in much of Piñero's work.

[13] The term "Nuyorican literature," in its most general sense, refers to the literary production of Puerto Ricans in New York in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. It is a literature predominantly written in English, although it also includes a multitude of bilingual texts (Spanish and English), and some works that are written entirely in Spanish.

Piñero himself was a member of a working-class Puerto Rican community in New York, a convicted felon, a bisexual, and an addict. In his work, abject spaces—the prison washroom, the subway toilet, and the Nuyorican cultural haven of the Lower East Side—and abject social practices—queer relationships and sex acts, gender non-conformity, criminality, and drug use—acquire a critical function that highlights present dynamics of social oppression, and gestures toward alternative possibility. Reading alongside José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam, as well as Bloch and Adorno, I examine the way in which Piñero's plays and poems look beyond the margins of the Symbolic and into the abject, and find there the promise of a utopia that has not yet arrived, but that could perhaps in the future be realized. However, I also note that the negativity of the abject is never quite transcended in Piñero's writing, and that the possibility of arriving at utopia via the abject remains an open question, and certainly not a guarantee.

In chapter four, "Allegories of Abjection: Mourning in the Revolutionary Marketplace," I explore the relationship between abjection, ruins, and utopia in the poetry of Gutiérrez. The decade of the 1990s in Cuba, the period in which Gutiérrez writes the poems that I study, is commonly known as "the special period." The special period refers to a moment of extreme economic hardship suffered by Cuba after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Certain segments of the Cuban population as well as certain geographic zones within the country felt the effects of poverty during the special period most acutely, and one such area was the Havana neighborhood of Centro Habana, which was (and is) predominantly populated by Afro- and low-income Cubans. In this chapter, I study how race and class anxieties function as forms of social abjection during the special period that work in tandem to construct Centro Habana as a socially abject space. Subsequently, I examine how Gutiérrez's poems carry out an allegorical function, in the

sense described by Walter Benjamin, which reveals Centro Habana to be an abject scene of social ruination that is otherwise occluded by various social discourses.

The primary occluding discourses to which I refer are that of the revolutionary communist government in Cuba and that of the neoliberal touristic marketplace. Both of these discourses seize on the figure of the architectural ruin in Cuba, and assign meaning to it in a manner that suits certain social desires or ideological exigencies. For the revolutionary government, the ruin becomes a symbol of heroic and sacrificial resistance to the forces of capitalism and US imperialism. Following the critical work of José Quiroga and Antonio José Ponte, I argue that this discourse becomes a form of strategic mythologizing that seeks to reconstitute the communist narrative of teleological march toward socialist utopia that begins to fracture during the special period. For the neoliberal tourist, as Esther Whitfield points out, Havana's ruins serve as "readable figures for the decay of Cuba's socialist dreams" (100-1). Here, the ruin becomes a fetishized object of nostalgia, which Svetlana Boym describes as a form of "yearning for a *different time*" (Boym xv; emphasis added).

Both the revolutionary government and the touristic marketplace impose dehistoricizing mythologies upon the Havana ruins, which romanticize an abject scene of suffering and privation. In other words, both discourses take the ruins as symbols upon which to ground their respective mythologies. For Benjamin, allegory works in contrast with the symbol, serving as a means of deconstructing mythology to arrive at an experience of historical reality. After reading Kristeva alongside Benjamin to establish the commonalities between the ruin and the abject, I argue that Gutiérrez's poems work in an allegorical mode to deconstruct the mythology imposed upon the ruins of Havana, and to reveal an abject social reality. Furthermore, I suggest that Gutiérrez's poems engage in the act of mourning social abjection in Cuba, and that there is great beauty in

this aesthetic act. Finally, again following Benjamin, I argue that the beauty of Gutiérrez's allegorical poems points toward utopian promise, in the sense that the deconstructive force of allegory opens up new possibilities for social relations, which exist beyond the threshold of what is currently imaginable.

The following chapters are, in a sense, faced with the same challenge that confronts abject art: namely, the challenge of making legible the illegible, and of giving form to political possibilities that an oppressive social order continually seeks to eradicate. As such, they address a series of difficult questions. What kind of utopian imaginings originate in the abject space on the margins of the Symbolic? What kind of social and political alternatives might arise from these spaces of collapse, psychosis, and death? Is it possible to arrive at utopia through abjection, and if it is, can these utopian possibilities be realized within the Symbolic order? Is the disturbing beauty that these writers locate in the abject the promise of utopia waiting to be realized? Or a beauty that haunts us, always pulling our attention beyond the comprehensible, into the dark space beyond our limits, but never truly able to articulate what it is that we may find there? While these questions may not have definable answers, the poems and plays of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez look to the abject with hope—that its disturbing beauty might someday offer utopia.

CHAPTER 1

DISTURBING BEAUTY:
AESTHETICS, PERFORMANCE, AND THE PROMISE OF UTOPIA

The focus of this chapter is an elaboration of the theory of social abjection and the role that art can play in imagining political alternatives to this form of oppression. I start by examining how the idea of abjection as a form of social exclusion is present in the writing of both Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, and how for both theorists the possibility of an emancipatory transformation of the Symbolic depends upon the act of bringing the abject into the Symbolic, of giving it form.[14] Reading Butler and Kristeva together reveals how Butler's concept of performativity and Kristeva's concept of sublimation both speak to aesthetic strategies for giving the abject Symbolic form. Consequently, I examine the relationship between the abject and the sublime—how the two exist beyond the borders of the Symbolic, and cannot be fully distinguished from one another—and I explore the disturbing beauty that results from symbolizing the abject. Lastly, I suggest that this disturbing beauty, which is the unique aesthetic quality of abject art, marks the radical outside as a site of promise—that abject art looks beyond the margin and finds there the promise of utopia

My primary point of departure for considering the dynamics of abjection on a social level, and the function of aesthetic practice in resisting and reimagining these dynamics, will be

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[14] Kelly Oliver defines the Symbolic order (with a capital "s") as "the order of signification, the social realm" (*Reading* 10). It is the social field in which cultural Law is instantiated and reified in language. Oliver argues that the Symbolic has the same function in both Kristevan and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, although Kristeva finds different orders of signification present within the Symbolic (whereas Lacan does not). Kristeva's modified conception of the Symbolic will be discussed in greater detail below.

Kristeva's work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Ultimately, I will use the work of other theorists, such as Butler and Kelly Oliver, to augment Kristeva's theory, and to demonstrate more explicitly the political forces of oppression that are enacted within the dynamics of abjection, as well as the ways in which these dynamics may be resisted. After identifying the way in which the concept of social abjection as an oppressive force is present in the thinking of both Kristeva and Butler, I will show how Butler's idea that the exclusionary forces of the Symbolic may be altered due to the social performance of abject identities may also be thought of in terms of the Kristevan semiotic and the sublimation of abjection through art.[15] While restricting the scope of my study to lyric poetry and drama, I argue that performance and aesthetics intersect in abject poetry and performance, in order to realize a disturbing beauty that points toward utopian possibility.

Kristeva defines the abject as that which is excluded in the formation of the subject and its objects. The abject is a banished presence—a banishment characterized by revulsion and loathing, which reveals the kinship of the abject with the grotesque—that lies outside of the constructed borders of the subject and that, were it to transgress these boundaries, would threaten to destabilize the subject, perhaps to the point of annihilating it: "The abject has only one quality

[15] Kristeva develops her theory of the semiotic in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (published in French in 1974, in English in 1984). She describes the semiotic as an order of signification that exists prior to the subject's entry into the Symbolic, before the subject has access to signifying language proper. As such, the semiotic is an expression of drive before signification, an anarchic composite of rhythm, tone, and music. The semiotic is associated with the abject, in that both harken back to a pre-subjective experience of blurred boundaries and undifferentiation. However, Kristeva is clear that semiotic signification does not cease upon entry into the Symbolic, and that it remains an inalienable part of the signifying process for the fully formed subject. In short, the semiotic is the radically other of the Symbolic—that which transgresses and perturbs its boundaries, and which can never be fully symbolized or integrated within it. Any Symbolic representation of the abject must rely on semiotic signification. It is through its simultaneously interior and exterior relationship to the Symbolic that the semiotic attains revolutionary political value, as I will later show, in that it brings radical alterity into the Symbolic order.

of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning [...], what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (*Powers* 1-2). In the initial process of subject formation, this jettisoned object is the maternal body, which the not-yet-formed subject must separate from in order to enter into the dynamics of primary narcissism, and eventually undergo the entrance into the Symbolic order that fully forms the subject as a speaking being.[16] Abjection is the first step by which a self/other distinction may be established, but it remains a highly ambiguous moment along the journey of subject formation, in which regression back into undifferentiation, and consequent annihilation of the individual, remains an ever-present threat.

Kristeva also asserts that the abject confounds not only the identity, order, and borders of the individual subject, but also that of the entire Symbolic order, as she identifies the exclusionary mechanism of abjection as the force that generates human culture, and allows for its separation from the animal: "[t]he abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territory of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism" (*Powers* 12-13). In asserting that the borders of human culture are established through the abjection of the animal, Kristeva illustrates that marking the animal as abject ("not I," "not human," "not culture") is the necessary motion that allows the category of human to be founded. However, the boundaries that delineate this category are tenuous, and thus also represent a continual threat of regression and dissolution. Thus, what is at stake in abjection, for the subject and for the social/cultural body, is protection from a form otherness that threatens

[16] See Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, chapters 2-4, for a detailed discussion of the various stages of subject formation according to Kristeva.

to render the self/other distinction impossible. Yet, as we shall see, Kristeva, Butler, and Oliver all emphasize the possibility of remaining open to radical otherness, whether it exists within the subject or outside of it. All three also note the political and ethical implications of this openness.

The majority of Kristeva's thought on social abjection is dedicated to the way in which the dynamics of subject formation are repeated and ritualized on a social level, in order to establish both the boundaries of the Symbolic order, and the boundaries of the subject within the Symbolic field. Whereas Kristeva only touches tangentially on the idea of abjection as a form of social oppression in *Powers of Horror*,[17] following her account of how abjection structures society within the history of religions allows us to elucidate how abjection functions in various sociohistorical contexts, before turning to the way in which it operates as a form of oppression and marginalization in modernity.

Within the logic of religions, Kristeva contends that abjection serves the purpose of setting up various types of social categories:

> In a number of primitive societies religious rites are purification rites whose function is to separate this or that social, sexual, or age group from another one, by means of prohibiting a filthy, defiling element. It is as if dividing lines were built up between society and a certain nature, as well as within the social aggregate, on the basis of the simple logic of *excluding filth*, which, promoted to the ritual level of *defilement*, founded the "self and clean" of each social group, if not of each subject. (*Powers* 65)

[17] Kristeva comes closer to this idea in *Strangers to Ourselves*, arguing that xenophobia on both the individual and social levels stems from a psychic fear of the subject's inability to entirely separate from the internal otherness that haunts and plagues it. However, she never articulates the idea of abjection as a form of oppression and social control with the specificity that Butler (*Bodies*) or Tyler (*Revolting*) does.

The way in which Kristeva intentionally conflates "self and clean" in the passage above illustrates the way in which cleanliness serves as a metaphor for a secure and stable self. The subject is "clean" if it is not "contaminated" through infiltration by otherness—through regression to a state in which self cannot be distinguished from other—and the religious purification rite becomes the mechanism through which the subject cleanses itself of threatening otherness and establishes its stable boundaries.

More than just a practice of individual subjects or specific social groups, Kristeva defines abjection as the psychic force that sets up the entire Symbolic order: "Defilement is what is jettisoned from the '*symbolic system*.' It is what escapes social rationality, that logical order upon which a social aggregate is based, which then becomes differentiated from a temporary agglomeration of individuals and, in short, constitutes a *classification system* or a *structure*" (*Powers* 65). Here, "social rationality" is defined in contrast with that which has been designated as socially abject. In other words, the logic of what is intelligible, of what is possible, within the Symbolic is predicated upon the exclusion of the unintelligible, defiling presence that is banished from the social sphere, and which is consequently relegated to the realm of the anti-social, the threat to the social, the taboo, and even the psychotic.

While Kristeva argues that, "abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to the various 'symbolic systems,'" she identifies four basic categories in which abjection is performed: defilement, food, taboo, and sin (*Powers* 68). She analyzes a myriad of examples from various social and religious contexts, ranging from the Hindu caste system, the figure of Oedipus in Classical Greece, and a multitude of prohibitions and rituals from the Jewish and Christian traditions. Among the codings of abjection that relate to defilement and purification rites, Kristeva notes two basic types, excremental (bodily waste in all forms, decay,

infection, disease, etc.) and menstrual (i.e. all that is associated with women). The objects of excrement are rendered abject due to their symbolic representation of fragile, porous borders and the inevitable disintegration of all bodies, subjective or social. They "stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (*Powers* 71). Menstrual fluid, on the other hand, represents sexual difference, and the feminine power that patriarchal cultures associate with maternity, with the threat to the ego represented by the mother-infant dyad, and with the dissolution of culture into nature. Within patriarchy, the "other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (*Powers* 70). In both cases, defilement and its symbolization of brittle boundaries represents not only the frailty of the human subject, but also "the frailty of the symbolic order itself" (*Powers* 69).

Both excremental and menstrual defilement as described by Kristeva suggest the ways in which abjection can work as a form of social oppression. Menstrual stigma follows from abjection of a feminine presence that represents a threat to identity and to patriarchal culture. The stigma against excrement engenders abjection of those who come into contact with human waste—as occurs in the Hindu caste system—as well as of those who carry some real or imagined disease, as seen in the abjection of lepers in the Old Testament (*Powers* 101). Kristeva identifies various other rituals of abjection within Judaism, in which certain foods are identified with the animal, the feminine, and violation of God's Symbolic law (*Powers* 95-9), and hence become taboo, and in which the purification rites that are required after childbirth (including circumcision) ritualistically perform the act of separating from feminine impurity and moving into the masculine sphere of the Law (*Powers* 99-101).

With the advent of Christianity, Kristeva observes an evolution in the religious logic of abjection, in which the abject is no longer located externally in defiling or transgressive objects, and ritualistically excluded. Rather, the abject resides within the speaking being itself, in the "sins of the flesh." Here, the sin of the flesh represents the radical otherness that continues to exist within the subject after its entry into the Symbolic—the abject residue from which we can never fully separate. Thus, within the Christian formation of Symbolic order, the subject is recognized as heterogeneous—both flesh and spirit, pure and impure, nature and culture, subject of the Law and deviation from it. In other words, Kristeva conceives of Christianity as a system in which the abject can be reconciled with the subject, and she sees the Eucharist as the ritual that repeatedly enacts this reconciliation:

> The *division* within the Christian consciousness finds in that fantasy, of which the Eucharist is the catharsis, its material anchorage and logical node. Body and spirit, nature and speech, divine nourishment, the Body of Christ, assuming the guise of a natural food (bread) signifies me both as divided (flesh and spirit) and infinitely lapsing. I am divided and lapsing with respect to my ideal, Christ, whose introjection by means of numerous communions sanctifies me while reminding me of my incompletion. (*Powers* 118-19)

The heterogeneous ideal of the body of Christ is the figure through which the body of man, defiled by sin, becomes the instantiation of perfect adherence to God's Symbolic law. Through death and resurrection, the body of Christ becomes wholly spirit. Thus, when Christ's body is metaphorically consumed in the act of communion, this act becomes the ritualistic pursuit of a fantasy in which the threatening otherness of the abject may be fully absorbed within the Symbolic: "a final raising into spirituality of a nevertheless inexorable carnal remainder"

(*Powers* 120). Kristeva identifies the ritual of the Eucharist as a form of sublimation,[18] along with the practice of confession, in which the act of speech also becomes capable of unifying the heterogeneous elements of being, and presenting them before God in an act of divine reconciliation and communion, conceived of as "atonement" and "forgiveness" (*Powers* 120-32). Kristeva also identifies the act of sublimating the abject as a source of "jouissance and beauty," (*Powers* 123) (more on *jouissance* later) and this insight will be important to our understanding of the relationship between politics and aesthetics in bringing the abject into Symbolic form.

However, Kristeva also notes that the sublimation of abjection achieved in communion and confession is not the only way in which Christianity negotiates abjection. Along with the love and forgiveness of sin that these practices promise, one must also note the practice of judgment and condemnation that pervades the history of Church, and is observed in its most extreme form in the institution of the Inquisition. The concept that the appropriate response to sin is retribution, rather than reconciliation and forgiveness, marks the sinner as a social abject that must be punished, and repeats the oppressive function of abjection:

> Based in large part on the idea of *retribution*, [this] notion of sin doubtless leads one to adopt a behavior and speech of conformity, obedience, and self-control under the ruthless gaze of the Other—Justice, Good, or the Golden Mean. Basis of asceticism at the same time as it is coiled in judgment, sin guides one along the straitest [sic] paths of superego

[18] I follow Beardsworth, in *Julia Kristeva*, and Russell, in "Strange New Beauty," in arguing that Kristeva departs from a Freudian conception of sublimation as the repression and/or redirection of drives. Both Beardsworth and Russell contend that the quintessential element of Kristevan sublimation is the incorporation of the semiotic dimension of language in Symbolic form. The various forms of sublimation of the abject, mentioned here in the case of Christianity, follow exactly this dynamic, in that that which is prior to and exists outside the Symbolic—the semiotic, the abject—is given Symbolic form.

> spirituality. It holds the keys that open the doors to Morality and Knowledge, and at the same time those of the Inquisition. (*Powers* 122).

Whereas Christianity offers the possibility that sin and its forgiveness form a pathway to a heterogeneous subject that can incorporate the abject within the Symbolic (manifested more clearly for Kristeva in the mystical forms of Christianity, rather than its orthodox forms), the common reality of Christian practice is rather different: "[t]he whole black history of the Church shows that condemnation, the fiercest of censorship, and punishment are nonetheless the common reality of this practice" (*Powers* 131).

Kristeva's purpose in her examination of the history of religions is more psychosocial than political in nature; she is more interested in tracing the ways in which abjection is negotiated throughout the history of religions (in rites, ritual, and speech) and into secular modernity (in literature) than she is in engaging with the various ways in which abjection becomes a force of marginalization and oppression. Nevertheless, her analysis reveals a multitude of ways in which abjection functions as an oppressive social force, through which certain bodies are marked as outside of culture, in violation of Symbolic Law, and subject to exclusion from the realm of the social. Those that come in contact with waste, those that are deemed agents of disease, and above all women, are frequently marked as social abjects within Kristeva's history of religions. Her identification of the Inquisition as an institution of abjection also highlights the way in which the victims of inquisitorial practice are also marked as abject, victims which would include Jews, Muslims, and queer subjects, among a host of others.

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Judith Butler applies the theory of abjection in a more overtly political way. She conceives of abjection not only as a force of social control, but also as an operation that determines what types of identities or subjectivities

are possible within the realm of the Symbolic. Butler argues that the socialization of subjects as they enter into the Symbolic is dependent upon the marking of certain subjectivities as abject, and as unviable within the realm of the social: “The exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the *constitutive outside* to the domain of the subject” (*Bodies* 3; emphasis added). The exclusion of abject bodies, practices, and spaces reifies the Symbolic in opposition to its excluded and constitutive outside, normalizes what forms of subjectivity are socially permissible, and identifies all things marked as abject as prohibited:

> The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which —and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. (*Bodies* 3)

Butler primarily applies her conception of abjection to the construction and performance of gender and sexuality—the way in which the male-female binary and the heteronormative system are constructed and perpetuated, and the way in which queer subjects are rendered abject. Nevertheless, her general characterization of the abject as the constitutive other—that which is separated from in order to be and which continually threatens the borders of the Symbolic—suggests a social dynamic that engages in exclusion with the purpose of self-definition in virtually any dimension of the social order: race, class, religion, immigrant status, age, ability, political orientation, etc.

Furthermore, Butler argues that what is at stake in social abjection is not only the regulatory maintenance of the various social laws within the Symbolic, but also the possibility of disrupting and remolding the Symbolic system in less oppressive ways. She reevaluates the "threat and destruction" of the social abject, so that it functions not "as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" (*Bodies* 3). The abject viewed in this way allows for, "an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical re-articulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all" (*Bodies* 23). This rewriting of the social law hinges upon bringing the abject subjects, spaces, and practices back into the realm of the Symbolic by means of the social performance of these foreclosed possibilities, so that they may become sites of possible identification within the Symbolic, rather than a constitutive outside that must be rejected.[19] In other words, Butler theorizes that abject performance renders porous the exclusionary borders of the Symbolic, and gestures toward the possibility of a social order in which the production of abject bodies and spaces is no longer possible.

Certainly, there are differences between the ways in which Kristeva approaches abjection in *Powers* and the way in which Butler does so in *Bodies*. Whereas both acknowledge the social function of abjection, Butler is interested in dismantling abjection and politicizing the abject to transform the Symbolic, while Kristeva largely abstains from value judgments about the social

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[19] It is important to note that Butler is not advocating that abject subjectivities become the new loci of stable, regulated identities, which in turn establish their boundaries through exclusion; such identity formation would be a repetition of abjection and the formation of a new constitutive outside. Rather, she envisions an existence in which these subjects "become recognized without fixing that recognition in yet another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion" (*Bodies* 21). She thus imagines a social order defined by subjective and Symbolic fluidity, in which "collective disidentifications" (*Bodies* 4) are as important as mobilizing identity categories, if not more so.

effects of abjection, cataloguing the effects of the psychosocial force rather than imagining its transformation. Kristeva also does not display an interest in disrupting the male-female gender binary, nor does she explicitly address the possibility of divorcing sex from gender in *Powers*. These positions have resulted in charges of essentialism and heterosexism against Kristeva, from Butler and from various other scholars,[20] although other critics claim that such interpretations spring from misreadings of Kristeva.[21] Furthermore, when Kristeva does enter into direct political theorization of the ethics of interacting with the othered and abject of the body politic,[22] her treatment of Islam, and particularly her criticism of the practice of wearing the hijab, have been interpreted as a xenophobic abjection that undercuts her larger ethical project.[23]

Despite Kristeva's differences with Butler and the various critiques of the problematic political implications of Kristeva's work, I find significant commonalities between the two theorists' approaches to abjection. Both identify various ways in which social abjection designates certain subjects, practices, and spaces as abject, and both show (either explicitly or implicitly) how abjection engenders social exclusion and oppression. Furthermore, both catalogue the way in which the social abject threatens the Symbolic order, imperiling the borders that separate the social from the anti-social, the legible from the illegible, and that delineate regulated identities that are acceptable for adaptation in the social sphere. Lastly, both demonstrate the way in which *giving form* to the abject is a manner of bringing the abject into the

[20] See esp. *Gender Trouble*, and the chapter titled "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva."
[21] Oliver argues that "in her best moments, especially in her late work, Kristeva is careful to distinguish the feminine from woman and both of these from maternity. She suggests that the maternal operates as a function that, in principle, can be performed by both men and women" (*Reading* 7). For an evaluation of the critical dialogue related to Kristeva's relationship with essentialism and heterosexism, see Oliver's *Reading Kristeva*.
[22] See *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Nations Without Nationalism*.
[23] See Ahmed (chapter six, "In the Name of Love"), Tyler (chapter one "Social Abjection"), and Almond (Chapter seven, "Kristeva and Islam's Time").

Symbolic. For Butler, performance is the form through which the abject enters the Symbolic; for Kristeva, it is through sublimation. Sublimation of the abject for Kristeva takes many *forms*, including religious ritual and the discourse of confession, as we have seen in Christianity, but also those of literature, and visual and plastic arts, as we will explore in more detail later. It is also true that many forms of sublimation that Kristeva points out have an indisputably performative element.[24] Reading Kristeva and Butler together reveals the implicit connection between the performative and the aesthetic, and allows us to flesh out their collaborative role in manifesting the abject's political force.

Moreover, reading Kristeva with Butler provides an expanded picture of the politics of the abject. Butler's thesis that social codes can be transformed through the practice of abject performance maintains the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic that is adopted by Kristeva, while also insisting on its alterability. Butler sees the Symbolic not as a "quasi-permanent structure," but as a, "temporalized regulation of signification," that is, "reiterated and reiterable" (*Bodies* 22). Although Butler frequently critiques the way in which psychoanalytic theory, and Kristeva specifically, has often presented heterosexuality and gender binaries as social imperatives, and sometimes pathologized their deviations, Kristeva's understanding of the semiotic as an ever-present aspect of signification that shapes and re-shapes the Symbolic implies a vision of social transformation that is similar to Butler's.

Before delving further into how the semiotic functions in Kristevan theory, it is necessary to explore the nuanced evolution of Lacan's conception of the Symbolic that takes place in Kristeva's thinking. Oliver summarizes this distinction quite well:

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[24] The acts of taking communion and giving confession are clearly performative. Among the arts, Culler has emphasized the performative nature of lyric poetry, and both Davies (*Art as Performance*, 2004) and Hantelmann (*How to Do Things with Art: The Meaning of Art's Performativity*, 2010) have studied the performativity of art in full generality.

> "[p]art of the problem with Kristeva's symbolic is that although it is read as something equivalent to Lacan's Symbolic it is not always. Whereas Lacan uses the Symbolic to refer to the Symbolic order, Kristeva uses the symbolic in two senses to refer not only to the Symbolic order but also to a specifically symbolic element within the Symbolic order that she opposes to the semiotic element" (*Reading* 9-10).

Thus, distinguishing between the Symbolic (with the capital "S") and the symbolic (with the lower case "s") is important when reading Kristeva; the Symbolic order is "the order of signification, the social realm," which is "composed of both semiotic and symbolic elements" (*Reading* 10). The semiotic dimension of language, first theorized by Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), comes into being prior to the subject's entry into and formation in the Symbolic, but also continues within the Symbolic in dialectic opposition to the symbolic, which Oliver defines as "the element of signification that structures the possibility of taking a position or making a judgment. It is the element of stasis within the Symbolic, whereas the semiotic is the element of rejection" (*Reading* 10). In other words, the semiotic exists beyond culture in addition to moving within it; it is the pre-Symbolic expression of drives that continues after the subject's entry into the Symbolic. The dichotomy between semiotic and symbolic elements of language forms a dialectic in which the semiotic functions as a negative, opposing force to cultural inertia and enacts alteration, providing a theory for "why revolutions within the Symbolic order are possible" (*Reading* 10).

Aside from concerns related to essentialism and heterosexism, one of Butler's primary criticisms of Kristeva is that her conception of the semiotic lacks the power to revolutionize the Symbolic. She argues that the semiotic remains in a subservient hierarchical relationship to the Symbolic, and, consequently, that the practice of bringing semiotic signification into the

Symbolic, as occurs in the act of sublimation in religion and in art, lacks the capacity to truly alter anything: “the poetic-maternal practices of displacing paternal law always remain tenuously tethered to that law. Hence, a full-scale refusal of the Symbolic is impossible, and a discourse of ‘emancipation,’ for Kristeva, is out of the question” (*Gender* 109). As shown above, Oliver diligently works to debunk this claim as a misreading of Kristeva, asserting that semiotic articulation does open up certain emancipatory possibilities within the Symbolic. However, Oliver is clear to note that what is offered in Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic is not a complete destruction of the Symbolic order, to be replaced with a social field that is pure semiosis. Rather, it is a transformation of the Symbolic through the dialectic of semiotic-symbolic signification. In this sense, Butler is right that a “full-scale refusal of the Symbolic is impossible” in semiotic revolution, a point that I will return to in a moment. However, as Oliver shows, the impossibility of full-scale refusal does not imply the impossibility of emancipatory discourse. The important point here is that, in *Bodies*, Butler follows the same line of thinking. In other words, what is accomplished by the politicization of the abject through its social performance is alteration of the Symbolic through a disruptive integration of an abject presence into the Symbolic field. Similarly, for Kristeva, the recuperation of the semiotic in art, discourse, and ritual stages an encounter with radical otherness that threatens the stability of the Symbolic, and is capable of engendering its modification.

Hence, Butler’s and Kristeva’s theories of abjection not only identify how abjection may function as an exclusionary, marginalizing force on a social level, they also demonstrate the ways in which the abject can politically alter the Symbolic. Both theorists also show how this political alteration occurs through the act of giving Symbolic *form* to the abject, of *incorporating* the radically other of the abject within the Symbolic, through sublimation and aesthetics

(Kristeva) or through performance (Butler). But clearly performance, whether intended as a work of art or simply as a way of living as a subject in the world, has an aesthetic component, just as clearly literary, visual, and plastic arts may have performative elements. While topics such as the aesthetic aspects of the performance of gender and sexuality in everyday life, or the aesthetics of the sublimation of abjection in spoken discourse or social ritual lie outside the scope of this dissertation, I would like to emphasize that aesthetics and performance cannot be divorced from one another when discussing the politics of the abject in works of art. Similarly, providing a universal theory for the relationship between aesthetics and performativity in all artistic genres is beyond the capacity of this study. However, it is now well established that the signifying logic of lyric poetry and drama depends as much on performance as it does on aesthetics. As such, these genres serve as useful test cases for examining the overlap between performance and aesthetics, and how the two work in tandem to realize the political power of the socially abject. While the mutual dependence of the performative and the aesthetic in works of theater would seem to be self-evident, Jonathan Culler is particularly helpful in working through the theoretical aspect of this problematic in terms of lyric poetry.

In *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), Culler identifies lyric poetry as essentially a type of literary performance. More specifically, he turns to the trope of *epideixis*, a rhetorical figure identified by Aristotle as “the rhetoric of praise or blame,” (Culler 3) whose purpose is to make value judgments about the world, and to persuade the listener to assent to those judgments. Culler distills this concept to its essence, defining it as, “discourse conceived as an act, aiming to persuade, to move, to innovate” (130). As such, he argues that lyric poems are not creations of fiction that function by logic of mimetic reference to an invented world, but rather that they are rhetorical performances that seek to have real efficacy in the world by virtue of their impact on

their readers. He follows Derrida in "Che cos'è la poesia" in arguing that the purpose behind the performance of a poem is to make itself memorable, and that by instantiating itself through reading or through spoken performance, a poem may achieve its "consummate success": "to become a commonplace, to enter the language and the social imaginary, to help give us a world to inhabit" (131). He concludes that the performative aspects of the lyric that make a poem memorable and grant it efficacy are its "ritualistic aspects," primarily, "rhythm […], sound patterns, […] and lyric address" (131).

Both Butler's hypothesis of change through performance and Kristeva's and Oliver's theories of reform through the semiotic are given a conduit for efficacy in the world through Culler's concept of poetry as performance. Following Butler, we may conceive of abject poems as abject performances that bring foreclosed spaces and subjects into the Symbolic realm. The representation of abject spaces and subjects in poems gives the reader, to use Culler's term, a new *commonplace* to inhabit. This commonplace may be conceived of as an excluded zone at the borders of the Symbolic, as an instantiation of excluded otherness that is given Symbolic form through poetic performance. Following Kristeva, we may conceive of the rhythm and sound patterning that are key "ritualistic aspects" of poetic performance for Culler as forms of semiotic expression, defined by Oliver as "the rhythm, intonation, and echolalias of the mother-child symbiosis" (*Reading* 34). In short, the performative and the semiotic are intertwined in Culler's description of poetic performance.

Having established that the Kristevan semiotic is a part of poetic performance, we may turn to the question of aesthetics, and of beauty. To summarize, for both Kristeva and Butler, the alteration of the Symbolic is enacted by looking beyond social boundaries into the abject, and then bringing the radical outside into Symbolic form. In both cases, there is an aesthetic element

to this political process. Whether the abject is embodied through performance, or given form in discourse, literature, visual, or plastic arts, the radically excluded is given aesthetic form. But what kind of aesthetics are we talking about here? Given that the abject, and the threat of its “contaminating” otherness, is seen as grotesque and revolting by the social body seeking to secure its borders and maintain a homogeneous “purity,” it stands to reason that within abject aesthetics we are not dealing with traditional forms of aesthetic beauty. So are the abject arts ugly, beautiful, something else? Kristeva’s reflections on the link between the abject and the sublime help to clarify this point.

Kristeva writes that, “[t]he abject is lined with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being,” (*Powers* 11) and argues that the aesthetic practice of sublimation reveals this connection. She remarks that, like the abject, “the sublime has no object,” (*Powers* 12) which is to say that both the sublime and the abject are outside of the boundaries of the Symbolic, where subject-object differentiation is impossible. Thus, Kristeva makes it clear that the journey to the border of the Symbolic, and the attempt to give form to that which lies outside, has two divergent, but interrelated, aspects, opening at once to the overwhelming infinite of the sublime, and to the horrifying abyss of the abject.

A long philosophical history on the nature of the sublime lends credence to the link between the abject and the sublime that Kristeva asserts in *Powers*, but does not elaborate in great detail. In an anthology of contemporary writing on the sublime, Simon Morley describes the etymology of the word “sublime” as follows: “it comes from the Latin *sublimis* (elevated; lofty; sublime) derived from the preposition *sub*, here meaning ‘up to’, and, some sources state *limen*, the threshold, surround or lintel of a doorway, while others refer to *limes*, a boundary or limit” (14). All theorists of the sublime, to varying degrees, seem to accept that the sublime

experience is fundamentally an encounter with that which is beyond the limits of our comprehension—something that is unknowable, unnamable, and unrepresentable. Of the key figures in the historical development of contemporary theory on the sublime that Morley names,[25] Immanuel Kant seems to go furthest in defining the sublime as "a negative experience of *limits*" (Morley 16). Kristeva follows Kant in her thinking on the sublime, insofar as she locates both the sublime and the abject outside of the limits of understanding and totalizing signification, which is to say, outside of the boundaries of the Symbolic. She also echoes Edmund Burke in observing that the abject and the sublime are bound up in one another, in that a key element of the sublime experience for Burke is the terror at the threat of annihilation proposed by the immensity and overwhelming force of the sublime object.[26]

Where Kristeva differs from most of the theorists on the sublime since the Enlightenment is in her understanding of the place of the sublime in aesthetics. For Kristeva frequently identifies the experience of the sublime and the abject in aesthetics as *beautiful*—when talking about literature as "the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that

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[25] Morley identifies Longinus (*On the Sublime*, 1st century CE), Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757), Immanuel Kant (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 1790), Friedrich Schiller (*On the Sublime*, 1801), G.W.F. Hegel (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 1827), Arthur Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1819), and Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872) as the most influential thinkers for theories of the sublime developed in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

[26] See Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Kristeva never provides, at least in *Powers of Horror*, a theoretically rigorous distinction between the abject and the sublime, saying only that they are not quite the same, but are fundamentally related. I'm not sure that a rigorous distinction between the two categories is necessary or possible, given that Burke and others (Nietzsche, Lyotard) locate within the sublime terror and grandeur in equal measure. Furthermore, Kristeva frequently locates sublime moments in her analysis of the abject writing of Céline in *Powers*. What is important for the current study is the interrelationship between the abject and the sublime, that the two categories are not fully distinguishable nor separable from one another. As we shall see, the latency of the sublime within the abject will be key for understanding the utopian possibility that lies latent in abject aesthetics.

overwhelms us," (*Powers* 210) or when discussing the beauty and *jouissance* of sublimating the abject in mystical Christendom (*Powers* 123, 127, 131), to name but two examples. The points of overlap between the beautiful and the sublime that Kristeva notes conflict with the rigorous distinction between these two categories that aesthetics has largely maintained since Burke until the present, with few exceptions.

The philosophical consensus regarding the divergence between the beautiful and the sublime begins to solidify after Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), which addresses the nature of aesthetic judgment as it relates to both the beautiful and the sublime. Regarding beauty, Kant establishes his principle that aesthetic judgments of beauty are disinterested (I will revisit this claim later) and that "beauty in art also involves the expression of 'rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation', and so on, the expression of such rational ideas through artistic means constituting what he [Kant] calls 'aesthetic ideas'" (Guyer xxxii). The sublime, in contrast, does not evoke a disinterested reaction, nor does it convey any sort of graspable idea. Rather, the sublime demarcates the limits of human reason.

While Kant argues that the sublime is found in nature, and not in art,[27] Jean-François Lyotard makes the case that the avant-garde realizes a sublime aesthetic, in that it provides a negative representation of the unrepresentable.[28] For Lyotard, the sublime aesthetic is distinguished from that of the beautiful in its aspiration toward the unrepresentable, in that

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[27] "Kant also insists that works of art are incapable of achieving the kind of vastness that is one source of the Burkean sublime, and instead analyses [sic] the feeling of the sublime as a response to nature rather than art" (Guyer xxxii).

[28] "The art-object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unpresentable" (Lyotard 36). This representation of the unrepresentable is understood as a negative representation, insofar as this form of representation highlights its own formal limits, thus signaling through its own representative inadequacy that which lies beyond its form.

beauty communicates aesthetic ideas that are knowable and incites pleasure of a non-threatening and easily palatable variety. Jacques Derrida also follows Kant in confining the beautiful and the sublime to incommensurate categories; he argues that the beautiful has a definable form, whereas the sublime does not:

> One can hardly speak of an *opposition* between the beautiful and the sublime [in Kant's *Critique*]. An opposition could only arise between two determinate objects, having their contours, their edges, their finitude. But if the difference between the beautiful and the sublime does not amount to an opposition, it is precisely because the presence of a limit is what gives form to the beautiful. The sublime is to be found, for its part, in an 'object without form' and the 'without-limit' is 'represented' in it or on occasion of it, and yet gives the totality of the without-limit to be *thought*. ("Parergon" 41)

Thus, for Derrida, the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is again a question of encountering the limit of the comprehensible, and that which is without limit that lies beyond. Whether one approaches this limit from the direction of Kant—who argues that the sublime is experienced subjectively through the negativity of our inadequate attempts to give form to it—or from the direction of G.W.F. Hegel—who contends that the sublime must be thought objectively, as that which destroys form—the destination is the same: a border beyond which lies "an excess […], a surplus, a superabundance" ("Parergon" 43).[29] According to Derrida, this border marks

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[29] Derrida's account of the sublime experience also lends credence to the link that Kristeva asserts between the abject and the sublime. He describes the experience of the sublime as "a violent incommensurability" and "an emotion which […] can be compared to a shock, to a tremor or shaking due to the rapid alternation, or even to the simultaneity of an attraction and a repulsion. Attraction and repulsion of the *same object*. Double bind. There is an excess here, a surplus, a superabundance which opens an abyss. The imagination is afraid of losing itself in the abyss, and we step back. The abyss […] would be the privileged representation of the sublime" ("Parergon" 43).

the limits of form and the boundary between the beautiful and the sublime: "[a] line between the finite and the infinite [and] the proper place of the sublime and the interruption of symbolic beauty" (46).

Nietzsche, however, does not see the limit between the sublime and the beautiful as one that is so clearly demarcated, and Kristeva follows him along this path. Rather, he contends that the sublime does enter into aesthetic form through the force of what he calls a "Dionysian" drive. Nietzsche sets up a dialectical opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian drives, where the Apollonian serves as an analytic, ordering principle, related to the individuation of man and his separation from nature, and the Dionysian represents dissolution, terror, ecstasy, and the convergence of man with nature and animality.[30] Paul Guyer associates the Apollonian with the beautiful and the Dionysian with the sublime, while noting that Nietzsche asserts their confluence in artistic form: "Nietzsche also holds that the deepest art—the tragedy of Aeschylus and Sophocles and its modern heir, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagnerian opera—combines rather than separates the Apollonian and the Dionysian, thus the beautiful and the sublime" (xxxiv).

The similarities between the Dionysian/Apollonian contrast in Nietzsche and the semiotic/symbolic dialectic in Kristeva seem readily apparent, and Oliver rigorously analyzes the work of both theorists to confirm that they are indeed thinking along extraordinarily similar lines.[31] The consequence of Nietzsche's and Kristeva's thinking for aesthetic theory is that, in contrast with Kant—and, following him, Lyotard and Derrida—the sublime and the beautiful cannot be entirely severed from one another, and distributed into separate categories. Rather, Nietzsche and Kristeva assert that the sublime not only works its way into artistic form, but also that there is something stunningly *beautiful* about such aesthetic creations.

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[30] See *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).
[31] See "Revolutionary Horror: Nietzsche and Kristeva on the Politics of Poetry."

As we have discussed, the way that the radically other of the semiotic and the abject enters into Symbolic form in Kristevan theory is through sublimation. Francey Russell defines Kristeva's concept of sublimation in exactly these terms: "sublimation involves, to use Kristevan terminology […], the symbolic registration of the semiotic at the level of symbolic *form*" (137). In other words, sublimation entails bringing the radically outside of the abject and the semiotic, forms of "radical alterity" for Russell, into the Symbolic, whether through art of any genre, through discourse (confession, the analysand's speech), or through performance (social, religious, or aesthetic). For Kristeva, all of these forms of sublimation entail *jouissance* and beauty.

Jouissance is a tricky term to define, given that it relates directly to the violent experience of pleasure and pain that arises from approaching the borders of the Symbolic, and the unthinkable excess that lies beyond. Literally meaning "enjoyment" or "pleasure" in French, the term acquires a much more complex meaning when Lacan employs it in his extensive revision of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.[32] Bruce Fink describes Lacan's conception of *jouissance* as, "a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination" (xii). For Lacan, the experience of *jouissance* derives from an encounter with the Real, which is all that escapes symbolization within the Symbolic.[33][34] For Kristeva, the Real is not a mute presence that is entirely unsignifiable. Rather, as we have seen, the extra-Symbolic realm according to her is populated by bodily drive and affect, which is expressed within the Symbolic by the semiotic mode of signification. Thus, for

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[32] Hence the utility of maintaining the French terminology, whose specificity and complexity can be lost if translated directly into the English "enjoyment."

[33] See Fink, p. 92.

[34] For at least some followers of Lacan (namely, Phillip Shaw and Slavoj Žižek) the experience of pleasure and pain, awe and terror, that runs throughout all of the disparate theories of the sublime may be explained in Lacanian terms as the *jouissance* of encountering the Real. This conception lends support to the theory that the sublime is that which exists outside the Symbolic, and thus can never be absolutely grasped or comprehensively signified.

Kristeva, the experience of *jouissance* (in at least one context) is a function of sublimation, when the unsignifiable that lies outside the Symbolic may enter into Symbolic form through incorporating the semiotic within the Symbolic via sublimation.

In *Powers*, Kristeva sees the experience of *jouissance* engendered by sublimating the abject, of giving form to the radical outside, as immensely beautiful in aesthetic terms. The sublimation of abjection begets the beauty of Christian art,[35] as well as the sublime and horrifying beauty of Céline's writing.[36] Although Russell does not enter into aesthetic analysis of specific works of art in her study of Kristevan sublimation, she does emphasize this sublimation's fundamentally aesthetic quality, identifying it as a "strange new beauty" (137, 148).[37] She writes that, "Kristevan sublimation works to attest to the radical alterity of the semiotic and register the impact of this alterity through the transformation of the symbolic order; as evidenced in the analysand's speech or in works of art, sublimation works to *present the unrepresentable in the very texture that represents*" (137; emphasis added). Said in a different way, the "strange new beauty" to which Russell refers is a presentation of the unrepresentable

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[35] See *Powers* pp. 122-32.

[36] See *Powers*, chapters 6-10, for Kristeva's aesthetic analysis of Céline's work.

[37] Russell borrows this phrase from Nietzsche's second essay in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche uses this terminology as he discusses the relationship between art and "bad conscience," and the manner in which art illuminates a pathway toward transcending bad conscience and establishing a new ontology: "This secret self-ravishment, this artist's cruelty, this delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material and in burning a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a No unto it, this uncanny, dreadfully joyous labor of a soul at odds with itself that makes itself suffer out of joy in making suffer—eventually this entire *active* 'bad conscience'—you will have guessed it—as the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena, also brought to light an abundance of *strange new beauty* and affirmation, and perhaps beauty itself" (*Genealogy* 88; emphasis added). While the particulars of the nature of bad conscience and its overcoming lie outside the scope of this dissertation, it is salient to note here that Nietzsche finds a painful and unnerving beauty in the art that presents a pathway toward new social and ontological possibility in which humans are liberated from the suffering of bad conscience. In other words, Nietzsche makes a connection here between a specific type of beauty and social revolution.

that occurs in Kristeva's theory of sublimation; it is the incorporation of the radically other—the abject, and the semiotic signification that expresses it—in Symbolic form.

At this point we may establish a working theory of abject aesthetics. Abject art (I would like to suggest of any genre, but confirmation of this point would require greater theoretical elaboration) brings the radically outside of the abject into Symbolic form. The abject and the sublime are inextricably linked in that both are encountered beyond the limits of the Symbolic, and thus cannot be conceptually grasped nor symbolized in any totalizing or comprehensive kind of way. Perhaps it is best to think of the abject and the sublime as two dimensions of the same experience—crossing the borders of the Symbolic may represent the realization of unthinkable, infinite possibility, or the utter annihilation of the self. In bringing the radically other into artistic form, abject art engages in an act that Russell eloquently describes as presenting "the unrepresentable in the very texture that represents" (137). As such, abject art highlights the porosity of artistic form, and blurs the boundaries between the sublime and the beautiful. Rejecting the strict division of the sublime and the beautiful as incommensurate aesthetic categories, Kristeva follows Nietzsche in showing how the abject and the sublime may enter into form, and point toward what lies outside of the Symbolic. The result is a strange new beauty, a sublime, alluring, vexing, and disturbing beauty, which comes from beyond the margins to alter the Symbolic in productive ways. In the genres of lyric poetry and drama, which are the focus of this dissertation, these abject works of art are at once aesthetic and performative, and so the analysis of the following chapters will examine both of these aspects in addressing how the poems and performances go about manifesting their strange beauty, with all of its political promise.

But in what way is this strange beauty "disturbing," as I have claimed? Clearly it is disturbing in an aesthetic sense, as it confounds aesthetic categories, and represents an opening of artistic form to the unrepresentable: the abject and the sublime. What remains to be seen is the relationship of this beauty to a promising form of political disturbance. The work of Alexander Nehamas is helpful in addressing this question. Through his revision of Kantian aesthetics, Nehamas shows how our judgments of beauty are always interested, in that they offer us a promise of some kind (of happiness, of making our lives better, etc.), illusory and equivocal though this promise may be.

In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant asserts that judgments about beauty must be made without interest on the part of s/he who judges. He defines this particular, disinterested faculty of aesthetic judgment as "taste": "[t]aste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction *without any interest*. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*" (96). According to Kant, the disinterested judgment of the beautiful must be contrasted with two types of "interested" judgments, regarding things that we find "agreeable," on the one hand, and "good," on the other. The "agreeable" is defined as that which provides sensorial pleasure, in Kant's words, "[t]he agreeable is that which pleases the senses in sensation" (91). Here, the pleasurable aspect of the agreeable is necessarily of interest to the observer—who is the receptor of the pleasure that the observed object confers—and this sensorial pleasure is distinguished from the disinterested satisfaction that judgment of the beautiful provides. The other interested judgment, of the "good," is an evaluation based not on pleasure, but on reason, and refers to both utilitarian pursuits, "the useful," (94) as well as to "the morally good," which "is good absolutely and in all respects [and] which carries the highest interest" (94). While the type of interest that governs judgment differs in both instances—

pleasure, in the instance of the agreeable, and reason (which implicitly includes morality according to Kant), in that of the good—the judgments are united by their interested nature, which contrasts with the disinterested aesthetic judgment of taste.

In *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (2007), Alexander Nehamas thoroughly rejects the Kantian vision of aesthetic judgment, opting instead for a theory that, borrowing from both Platonic and Nietzschean philosophy, places desire (in other words, both erotic and ethical interest) at the center of aesthetic evaluation. Up to a certain point, he follows Plato's argument that beauty engages the observer and draws him/her into a pursuit of a higher good. While Nehamas ultimately rejects the idea of an implicit connection between the beautiful and the moral—here, following Nietzsche's rejection of any morality based on transcendental idealism—he does agree that aesthetic beauty has concrete value in our lives, in that our interest in that beauty, which is fleshed out and articulated in the act of interpretation, can change our manner of being in the world in ways that we deem worthwhile. However, Nehamas also acknowledges that the "worth" of that which aesthetic beauty drives us to discover about ourselves and the world is always evolving in the act of interpretation, and is subject to continual reevaluation with the passage of time and change of circumstance. Thus, any judgment about the value of an aesthetic experience is always subjective, relative, and forever incomplete. Beauty does not offer the attainment of happiness through virtue as Plato would have us believe, but rather a promise, an ever-evolving potential for happiness, with no guarantee of realization.

Nehamas argues that beauty is what attracts viewers, readers, listeners, etc. to works of art, and that it is the desire to better know and understand this beauty that drives the effort of interpretation, which in turn alters the viewer's perspective on his own life, or the world. He

writes that “[l]ike beautiful people, beautiful works spark the urgent need to approach, the same pressing feeling that they have more to offer, the same burning desire to understand what that is” (73). For Nehamas, beauty is not limited to surface appearances, nor is it necessarily readily perceptible, as it is for Kant. Rather, “the burning desire to understand” that follows the initial flash of attraction is what fuels the act of interpretation, which, in turn, begins to reveal the value of the beautiful object or, in our case, the beautiful abject. In other words, following Plato, Nehamas sees beauty as the indicator of some sort of value in which we, as interpreters, have an interest. Furthermore, he argues that the aesthetic judgment (finding something beautiful) is an invitation to others to share in our judgment, to also find value in the thing that we find beautiful. In this way, judgments of beauty are capable of developing community around shared sets of values: “[b]eautiful things don’t stand aloof, on their own, but direct our attention and our desire to everything else we must learn and acquire in order to understand and possess them […]. Far from being selfish or solipsistic, the desire beauty provokes is essentially social: it literally does create a new society, for it needs to be communicated to others and shared in their company” (76-7). This social concept of building community through aesthetic judgment is important because Nehamas, again differing from Kant, does not believe that aesthetic judgments are universal, but that a judgment of beauty invites other individuals to interpret the work and either assent to the judgment (and join the community) or dissent (and reject membership).

However, Nehamas does not think that the value that we *believe* to find in the beauty of an object or a person will turn out to be founded, or will necessarily ever be realized. This nuanced argument bears repetition in its entirety:

> Plato believed that the problem was not with beauty, but with what people wrongly take beauty to be: true beauty, he was convinced, is inextricably linked with moral goodness. I

> find it impossible to think what such beauty could be and so, though I expect that something I find beautiful will make my life somehow better if it becomes a part of it, I also know that I may be wrong and that even if I am right, it may do little for its moral quality. Whether my expectation was correct will depend on whether interacting with the beautiful object proves to have been worthwhile. But what is worthwhile and what not, what valuable and harmful, is known only in the course of time, in retrospect, and since interpretation remains unfinished as long as beauty continues to cast its spell, it is impossible to tell to what and to whom it will lead. Beauty's relation to morality is always in question. (127)

Hence, Nehamas concludes that, "I don't believe that the pursuit of beauty leads necessarily to virtue and happiness, and for that reason I find in it an element of ineliminable risk," (133) this risk being that the presence of beauty offers only the promise of happiness, and never its Platonic consummation.

What is the promise of the disturbing beauty offered by the literature that I study in this dissertation? What is the value that they offer, at least to me? Simon Morley writes something that seems to me strikingly profound regarding the sublime that is pertinent to answering this question. He writes that, "[u]ltimately, the sublime is an experience looking for a context" (21). In other words, the experience of encountering the limits of the Symbolic, and the unsignifiable that lies beyond, is given different meanings depending on the context of this encounter. In mystical Christianity, Kristeva shows that incorporating the abject in speech and in art is conceived of as divine forgiveness or God's love. In Romanticism, the sublime experience is frequently made to refer to a transcendence of the corporality of the subject, which makes possible a unification with the eternity of nature. In a contemporary secular context, I would like

to suggest that the sublime experience is given meaning as the possibility of utopia. In other words, the promise of the sublime beauty of abject art is none other than the promise of utopia.[38]

The relationship between the sublime and the utopian is made clear in a conversation between Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch on the nature of utopia ("Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," 1964). Like Kant's sublime, Adorno and Bloch arrive at the conclusion that utopia lies

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[38] In arguing that abject art offers itself as a site of utopian promise, I must acknowledge that I am departing substantially from the direction that Kristeva takes in the majority of her aesthetic analysis of the writing of abjection in *Powers*. Her primary object of study in the book is the writing of Céline, who was a vicious anti-Semite and Nazi collaborator in occupied France. In her analysis of Céline, Kristeva shows how the sublimation of the abject in Céline's writing maintains a radical openness to the heterogeneity of the semiotic, which has a destabilizing effect on the Symbolic. However, there is nothing utopian about the altered Symbolic for Céline. Rather, Kristeva finds in his work dissolution into nihilism, a revelation of Symbolic apocalypse: "black mysticism of transcendental collapse […] where any ideology, thesis, interpretation, mania, collectivity, threat, or hope become drowned" (*Powers* 206). Furthermore, Kristeva suggests that Céline's Nazism derives from the nihilistic void left by his surrender to abjection, that the utter destruction of the Other symbolized in his writing leaves a Symbolic vacuum that he fills with fascism and hatred for the Jews. His Nazism is, "an internal necessity […] an inherent counterweight […] a massive need for identity […] a *delirium* that literally prevents one from going mad, for it postpones the senseless abyss" (*Powers* 136-7). In other words, Céline was able to accomplish in his novels—a heterogeneous and destabilized symbolic language that accepts the fragility of its borders and opens itself to otherness—what he was unable to do in his life, and the political effect of this failure was the apotheosis of social abjection. However, although Céline is the only writer that Kristeva examines in great detail in *Powers*, he is not the only one that she identifies as a writer of abjection. She also references Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Comté de Lautréamont, Antonin Artaud, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Jorge Luis Borges in chapter one, and Charles Baudlaire, Georges Bataille, and Jean-Paul Sarte in the last chapter of *Powers*. Especially within the work of Dostoyevsky (*Powers* 18-20), Joyce (*Powers* 22-23), and Artaud (*Powers* 25-26), Kristeva finds something redemptive or regenerative in the writing of abjection. As such, Kristeva suggests, either explicitly or implicitly, at least three possible results following the literary journey into the abject: 1) a renewal, and perhaps reform, of the Symbolic due to the return of repressed semiotic content, 2) an abandonment to nihilism in which no meaning or value can be found, 3) or a return to the Symbolic that repeats abjection in its most oppressive form: fascism and genocide. I see this dissertation as following the first track, which is least attended to by Kristeva in *Powers*. As such, I see this project as fleshing out an aesthetic and political possibility for the writing of abjection that Kristeva implies in *Powers*, but leaves largely unexplored.

beyond a certain threshold, and cannot be represented in its totality. For Adorno and Bloch, this threshold is death:

> Adorno: To be sure, I believe that without the notion of an unfettered life, freed from death, the idea of utopia, the idea of *the* utopia, *cannot* even be thought at all. On the other hand, there was something you [Bloch] alluded to about death that I would say was very correct. There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the elimination of death; this is inherent in the very thought. […] Whenever this is not included, where the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia. And it seems to me that this has very heavy consequences for the theory of knowledge about utopia—if I may put it crassly: One may not cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner. Every attempt to describe or portray utopia in a positive manner, i.e., it will be like this, would be an attempt to avoid the antinomy of death and to speak about the elimination of death as if death did not exist. That is perhaps the most profound reason, the metaphysical reason, why one can actually talk about utopia only in a negative way. (10)

Adorno also makes reference to the Old Testament commandment "thou shalt not make a graven image," (11) arguing that "[t]his was also the defense [sic] that was actually intended against the cheap utopia, the false utopia, *the* utopia that can be bought" (11).

Lyotard notes the same reference to the commandment in Kant's writing on the sublime: "At the edge of the break, infinity, or the absoluteness of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation. He cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity" (34). If we accept that the sublime is

an experience looking for a context, we may suggest that in a modern, secular context of oppression via abjection, the salvation that lies beyond the border of the representable is utopia. It is the possibility that by bringing the socially abject into the Symbolic, by rendering porous the boundary of the exclusionary margin, that the Symbolic may be altered such that the oppression of social abjection will cease. Adorno and Bloch find that the kernel of the utopian consciousness is the intuition that *something is missing* from the present that, if it could just be grasped, would realize utopia. Abject art poses the possibility that this missing piece is the exorbitant outside, the abject sublime, and seeks its integration via aesthetic practice. Following Adorno, Bloch, and Kant, the total vision of what this utopia would look like cannot be fully cast into a picture, but would entail the possibility of being with radical otherness rather than excluding it, of allowing a heterogeneous social body in which otherness is no longer a threat. The abject art that I study looks to excluded spaces and bodies and finds within them a strange and disturbing beauty that indicates the possibility of a society without abjection, which is not yet here, which still lies beyond our grasp, but which with enough persistence might be realized.

However, Nehamas reminds us that the promise of beauty is not a guarantee, and that it is entirely possible that we will come to find our belief in the promise of a given beautiful object, person, or abject to be misplaced. Bloch recognizes the same pitfall in utopian longing, which is why he finds the fundamental principle that is operative in utopian desire to be that of hope, which carries within it all the risk of disappointment:

> Hope is not confidence. If it could not be disappointed, it would not be hope. That is part of it. Otherwise, it would be cast in a picture. It would let itself be bargained down. It would capitulate and say, that is what I had hoped for. Thus, hope is critical and can be disappointed. However, hope still nails a flag on the mast, even in decline, in that the

decline is not accepted, even when this decline is still very strong. Hope is not confidence. Hope is surrounded by dangers, and it is the consciousness of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible. (16-7)

Is it ultimately possible to traverse the boundaries of the Symbolic, to bring back in the sublime object that is utopia? Lacan and those that follow him say no. Philip Shaw, in his reading of the sublime in Lacan's work, argues that pursuit of the sublime object is really the pursuit of a lost object that lies outside of the Symbolic, the attainment of which would mark the end of signification and death.[39] Slavoj Žižek, through a Lacanian reading of Hegel, argues that nothing exists beyond the field of the Symbolic, that all that may be found there is pure, radical negativity. While Žižek encounters within the writings of Kant a belief in a positive sublime—a positive force that can only be represented negatively due to the inadequacy of our language and our reason—he finds that "Hegel's position is, in contrast, that there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality, beyond the field of representation" (232). Following Hegel, Žižek asserts that the sublime object represents nothing positive (God, eternity, nature, utopia, etc.), but is rather a "signifier of lack" (237)—an idea that fills the space of a void of radical negativity. Finally, Morley puts the question very succinctly: "to what extent is the sublime ultimately about embracing the death drive?" (18).

The existence of a positive sublime or a positive utopia cannot be known, at least not until it is realized. Thomas More was the first to write about utopia in the modern sense[40] and it was he who coined the term, which derives from the Greek words *ou*, meaning "no" or "not," and *topos*, meaning "place." Rather than a "not place," a radical negativity, the writers that I

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[39] See Shaw, esp. pp. 54-5.
[40] See *Utopia*.

study seem to follow Bloch and Adorno in thinking of utopia as a "not yet place," a something missing that lies outside of the Symbolic, but which could be brought in and realized within it. The disturbing beauty of their poems and plays offers hope, as well as an element of "ineliminable risk" (Nehamas 133). Hope that the incorporation of the abject may lead to the utopian alteration of the Symbolic, and risk that such transformation is impossible.

In summary, the aesthetic act of giving form to the abject offers a promise of utopia, equivocal though it may be. The poems and plays of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez dramatize the incorporation of the abject within the Symbolic, and envision a world of sublime possibility in which otherness is not met with revulsion, in which society is not constructed on the basis of the abjection of marginal groups. The disturbing beauty of their writing, which finds beauty among the grotesque, the repulsive, among death itself, points to utopia within the abject abyss. The beauty that I find in the analysis that follows suggests the *promise* of new possibility. Furthermore, my aesthetic judgment offers an invitation of solidarity (to my readers, I suppose, or to anyone who wishes to engage in a conversation about abject aesthetics) to recognize the value of this political project, and to form a community that looks hopefully toward the abject outside as a source of utopian possibility. Thus, not only through the act of reading or listening, but through the act of interpretation that is this dissertation, do the poetic performances of abjection work toward altering the Symbolic, toward dismantling the forces of social abjection.

CHAPTER 2

ABJECT "I": *POEMA SUJO* AND THE DIRTY VOICE OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY

"buscando
em mim mesmo a fonte de uma alegria
ainda que suja e secreta"

-*Poema sujo*, Ferreira Gullar

Ferreira Gullar describes the writing of *Poema sujo* [Dirty Poem] (1976) as a final aesthetic act composed on the brink of death.[41] A member of the Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCB) since shortly after the 1964 coup d'état that brought the Brazilian military dictatorship into power (Gullar, Interview with Ariel Jiménez 97),[42] Gullar went into hiding in 1970, and into exile in 1971. After passing through the Soviet Union, Chile, and Peru, he arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina on July 1, 1974, the day on which Argentine President Juan Domingo Perón

[41] *Poema sujo* is a book-length poem, which spans eighty-two pages in the 2016 Companhia das Letras edition cited in this chapter. Gullar wrote *Poema sujo* between May and October of 1975 while in exile in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Not long after the poem's completion, Gullar gave a reading of the poem to Brazilian poet Vinícius de Moraes and Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal in Buenos Aires. De Moraes returned to Brazil with a recording of Gullar's reading, and shared it in Brazilian literary circles. Gullar's editor, Ênio Silveira, insisted upon the poem's immediate publication upon hearing the recording. *Poema sujo* was consequently published in Brazil in 1976, while Gullar was still in exile. According to Gullar, the poem's resonance among Brazilian artists and activists facilitated his safe return to Brazil in 1977 (see Gullar, "Interview." *Blog da Companhia*).

[42] The Brazilian dictatorship lasted from 1964-1985, beginning when the military deposed President João Goulart, and ending in 1985 when José Sarney assumed the presidency. The dictatorship's repressive tactics included widespread censorship, and the torture and murder of political dissidents. For a comprehensive study of this period of Brazilian history, see Skidmore's *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-85*.

died and his wife, Isabel Martínez de Perón, took power.[43] In his foreword to the 2016 edition of the poem, Gullar describes the mounting hopelessness that characterized his exile in Buenos Aires, and the seeming impossibility of escaping the right-wing forces on the rise in Argentina after Perón's death:

> Com o passaporte vencido, não poderia sair do país, a não ser para o Paraguai ou a Bolívia, dominados por ditaduras ferozes como a nossa [a brasileira]. Enquanto isso, a cada manhã, novos cadáveres eram encontrados próximo ao aeroporto de Ezeiza, alguns deles destroçados a dinamite. Sabia-se que agentes da ditadura brasileira tinham permissão para entrar no país e capturar exilados políticos. Sentia-me dentro de um cerco que se fechava. ("A história" 23)

In this moment of utmost abjection, when the fragile border separating the subject from its annihilation is at its most precarious, *Poema sujo* is born: "[d]ecidi, então, escrever um poema que fosse o meu testemunho final, antes que me calassem para sempre" (Gullar, "A história" 23).

In the moment of exile in which Gullar writes *Poema sujo*, the forces of social abjection that beset him are at their most oppressive.[44] They seek to push the abject subject not only beyond the boundaries of the social sphere, but over the boundary between life and death. In a sense, Gullar's life following the beginning of the Brazilian dictatorship follows the trajectory of continual movement deeper into abjection. As he goes into hiding in Brazil in 1970, the government's search for communist dissidents literally drives him out of the public sphere, and

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[43] For an in-depth account of Gullar's activities in exile, see the extended interview *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with/ en conversación con Ariel Jiménez*, esp. pp. 96-120, as well as Gullar's memoir, *Rabo de foguete: Os anos de exílio*.

[44] Social abjection refers to the stigmatization and social exclusion of marginal subjects, based on a variety of factors that have been deemed threatening to the social order within the dominant culture, including race, class, political ideology, sexual orientation, gender identity, or (post)colonial status, although this list is certainly not exhaustive. Refer to chapter one for a more rigorous theoretical explication of the term.

into marginal, clandestine spaces where his safety might be protected. The move into exile pushes him beyond the boundaries of the Symbolic construct of Nation.[45] The murder of the socialist Chilean President Salvador Allende (killed in 1973) and the rise of the right-wing dictator General Augusto Pinochet while Gullar is residing in Chile again forces flight and border crossing. Finally, the situation faced by Gullar in Argentina suggests that the only border left to cross is that of death.

So what is the nature of Gullar's aesthetic final testament, this epitaph intended to mark the disappearance of the abolished subject? In the chapter that follows, I will argue that the trajectory of the poetic speaker in *Poema sujo* parallels that of the poet himself. In other words, the lyric "I" of *Poema sujo* performs a journey into the abject similar to that experienced by Gullar in his actual life, a journey to potential annihilation. However, rather than destruction, what the poetic speaker will find at the end of this journey is sublime rebirth—a new form of being in the world which, instead of excluding the abject, maintains an openness to it, and which in turn demonstrates a radically democratic ontology that calls into question all social and subjective barriers, and all forces of abjection.[46]

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[45] I use the term Symbolic (with the capital "s") here, and throughout this chapter, in the psychoanalytic sense, in order to refer to the field of culture and society in which social norms are established and in which subjectivities are formed and regulated. The nation-state is a Symbolic construct in the sense that it is a social body regulated by explicit and implicit sets of cultural Laws, and is delimited by carefully constructed borders. Social abjection is an attempt to expel abject bodies and spaces from the Symbolic field, and exile may be considered a quite literal manifestation of this phenomenon, in which in the abject subject is expelled to a space beyond the borders of the nation.

[46] While in this chapter I wish to establish a link between the social abjection that Gullar experienced in his life and the journey into the abject undertaken by the poetic speaker in *Poema sujo*, I want to make clear that I am not arguing that the author Ferreira Gullar and the poetic speaker are one and the same. In other words, I am not arguing that the poem should be read autobiographically. This may seem to be a tenuous distinction to make, but, according to Jonathan Culler, the ambiguous relationship that exists between the poet and the poetic subject is a defining trait of the genre of the lyric. In *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler argues against the flaws

As the title of the poem suggests, *Poema sujo* is rife with abject presences, making recurrent references to bodily excrement, putrefaction, waste, and decay, and giving repeated explicit descriptions of sexual encounters and practices. As such, the poem performs the incorporation of the abject into the Symbolic field of the poem, into poetic language itself. This incorporation takes place within the context of the dramatic arc of the poem, in which the poetic speaker retreats further and further back into his memory in order to memorialize his childhood and the nature of quotidian life in his hometown, São Luís do Maranhão.[47] The poem thus

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that he sees in two predominant ways of evaluating the poetic speaker—as either the voice of the poet expressing his/her personal experience, or as the speech act of a fictional persona, i.e. the imitation of a dramatic monologue. In contrast, Culler follows a Hegelian tradition, taken up and modified by Käte Hamburger, that the lyric "I" is neither the poet him or herself, nor an entirely fictional subject reflecting on a fictional world created in the poem (which would perhaps reduce the lyric to a subgenre of fiction), but a construct that lies somewhere in the middle. In essence, according to Hamburger, the relationship between the poet and the lyric "I" is completely indeterminable; no *a priori* reason can be given to equate the experience conveyed in a lyric poem with that of either the poet or a fictional character. Hamburger sustains this position of indeterminacy by arguing that the lyric subject is essentially a grammatical construct—"the subject of articulated experience, something like the purely positional or functional grammatical subject of a sentence" (Culler 107)—while also asserting that the objective of the lyric is to make true statements about the world (true, at least, from the perspective of the poetic speaker). In other words, rather than determining the speaker to be totally fictional, and thus one who makes fictional statements about a fictional world, Hamburger opts for an indeterminate status of the lyric "I," which allows this speaker to retain the capacity for engaging in true speech acts. Culler summarizes this position, saying, "there is a crucial difference between treating the lyric as projecting a fictional world, with a fictional speaker-persona, and maintaining that the lyric makes real statements about this world, even though the relation of these statements to the experience of the author is indeterminate" (107). I follow Culler in this chapter, and in all chapters of this dissertation, in arguing that the poems that I study seek to make true statements about the world, while maintaining an indeterminable relationship between the authors of the poems and their respective poetic speakers. In the case of Gullar, I am arguing that the socially abject position in which Gullar finds himself during exile allows him to envision the utopian politics that he dramatizes in the poem through the experience of his poetic speaker, to which he bears an indeterminate relationship. This utopian vision thus functions as a true statement about the world, a statement of realizable possibility, that posits an egalitarian solution to the problem of social abjection.

[47] I use masculine pronouns to refer to the poetic speaker in *Poema sujo*, due to the various moments in which this speaker associates himself with the consciousness of "José Ribamar Ferreira" (which is Gullar's birth name) and with that of Ferreira Gullar (39).

performs the function of recuperating the abject rather than excluding it, of presenting a subject whose life is continuously permeated by abject presences. The phenomenon of social abjection is also explicitly addressed in the poem, as the oppression of the working class residents of São Luís is identified as a form of abjection that relegates them to the margins of the city, and associates them with the abject imagery that populates the poem. Later, the speaker identifies the entire city of São Luís as abject, in other words, as a liminal space that is largely excluded by the teleological narratives of progress in Modernity, and thus relegated to the margins of Brazilian society.[48]

What begins as the integration of the abject into the poem and into the consciousness of the poetic speaker later becomes a complete immersion in the abject, as the lyric "I" surrenders himself fully to the "cidade suja" that surrounds him. This surrender, this forfeiture of the self, occurs as the poetic speaker describes being poisoned by the city (a form of contamination or defilement), and later explodes in feces, urine, and pus, becoming fully disarticulated, and

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[48] The social abjection that Gullar observes and critiques in *Poema sujo* largely follows the Marxist rubric of class struggle. In other words, the social abjects identified in the poem are generally the members of an oppressed working class and of a peripheral society in the Northeast of Brazil ("O Nordeste," as it is known in Brazil) that finds itself ever more marginalized with the advancement of late capitalism. Certainly, other forms of social abjection exist in Brazil, which are not addressed in *Poema sujo*. Three that immediately come to mind are racism, misogyny and homophobia. Regarding race, Gullar has a problematic history. In 2011, he writes an opinion piece for *Folha de São Paulo*, titled "Preconceito cultural," ["Cultural Prejudice"]. In a multi-step argument saturated with racial stereotypes, Gullar argues that literature is an art form that was never present in African culture, that literature came to exist in Brazil as a result of purely European influences, and that, therefore, it makes no sense to talk about a "literatura negra" [black literature] movement in Brazil. His arguments demonstrate blindness toward racial oppression in Brazil, and largely follow the idealized tenets of "democracia racial," [racial democracy] as first articulated by Gilberto Freyre in his foundational work *Casa-grande e senzala* (1933). In future work on Gullar, I will read Gullar's racism, as expressed in "Preconceito cultural," alongside the utopian politics of *Poema sujo*, in order to show how his blindness toward systemic racism in Brazil is in direct contradiction with the radical democratic politics of *Poema sujo*. Furthermore, I will argue that the figure of the subject-in-process as dramatized in *Poema sujo* provides a theoretical model for moving out of racial democracy and into radical democracy.

dissolving into his abject surroundings. However, this subjective annihilation is not final, and the poetic speaker recomposes himself in the form of a heterogeneous mixture, in which the radically other of the abject coexists alongside and within the subject. The effect of attaining this heterogeneous balance is that the capacity to fully distinguish self from other is denied to the subject, and that the unavoidably porous nature of subjective and social boundaries is made manifest. The reality of this new, destabilized subject is observed in the final section of *Poema sujo*, in which the lyric "I," for the first time until that point in the poem, disappears, leaving no singular subject of enunciation, but rather a heterogeneous mixture self and other, in which the poetic speaker and the abject city (along with everything in it) become inextricably intertwined.

My contention is that the destabilized subject birthed by the poetic speaker's journey into the abject displays the same properties as those of the abject subject theorized by Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, as well as those of the "subject-in-process" identified by Oliver as a central tenet of Kristevan theory. The lyric "I" of *Poema sujo* identifies himself as abject, a subject "contaminated" by his immersion in the abject city. The speaker performs the act of recuperating and then occupying the abject space, traversing the margins of the Symbolic to enter into its unintelligible and constitutive other. Furthermore, the lyric subject then returns, literally, into the Symbolic field of the poem and, metaphorically, into the Symbolic field of society as a subject that maintains an openness to the abject otherness found both within and without its own borders. This subject is, in other words, a "subject-in-process," which, "learn[s] to live within the flexible, always precarious borders of [its] subjectivity in order to learn to live within the flexible, always precarious borders of human society" (*Reading* 13). This is a subject that, "unravel[s] the double-bind between completely inhabiting the Symbolic—and thereby taking up a rigid unified subject position—and refusing the Symbolic—and thereby inhabiting psychosis" (*Reading* 13).

The lyric "I" of *Poema sujo* performs the embrace of the abject on both the social and subjective levels—within society and within the subject itself. Following Butler's theory of the political force of the abject, the poetic speaker democratizes the social sphere by opening the Symbolic to its foreclosed abject outside, and yet does so without forming another reified, rigid identity, subject to the same oppressive logic of identification by exclusion. Finally, *Poema sujo* demonstrates that the journey beyond the margins of the social into the abject can bring not only the horror of nihilistic collapse, but also the sublime beauty and utopian possibility of subjective regeneration, the *jouissance* that springs from embracing the heterogeneity that is ever present in the subject. And it is this disturbing beauty that marks the abject as a site of political promise.

2.1 The Evolution of Ferreira Gullar: Dialectics and Aesthetics

Before turning to *Poema sujo*, it is perhaps useful to locate Gullar's anachronistic place in Brazilian literary history, as well as *Poema sujo*'s unique place within Gullar's poetic oeuvre. The poet was born in 1930 and died in 2016, publishing his first book of poetry in 1949 (*Um pouco acima do chão*) and his last in 2010 (*Em alguma parte alguma*). In over sixty years of literary production, he published over nine collections of poetry,[49] various plays and works of fiction,[50] autobiographical works,[51] and extensive literary and art criticism.[52] Both the poetics

[49] The most well-known of these collections, apart from the already mentioned *Um pouco acima do chão* (1949) and *Em alguma parte alguma* (2010), include *A luta corporal* (1954), *O vil metal* (1960), *Dentro da noite veloz* (1975), *Poema sujo* (1976), *Na vertigem do dia* (1980), *Barulhos* (1987), and *Muitas vozes* (1999). Gullar also wrote various *romances de cordel*, a popular form of Brazilian narrative poetry, and experimented extensively within the concrete and neoconcrete movements, creating poems that entered into the terrain of visual and installation art.

[50] Gullar was one of the founders of the theater group Grupo Opinião in 1964, whose plays became a popular vector for articulating leftist resistance among artists during the dictatorship. He co-wrote the plays *Se correr o bicho pega, se ficar o bicho come* (premiered 1966) and *A saída, onde fica a saída?* (premiered 1967) with the group (see Paranhos for a study of Gullar's importance to the Grupo Opinião, and the importance of the theater group in general as an

and aesthetics[53] of Gullar's poetry undergo drastic transformations in the various stages of his writing, as his theoretical and political approach to understanding the relationship between poetry and the world changes. João Luís Lafetá and Alcides Villaça argue, in differing ways, that the underlying principle that gives coherence to Gullar's diverse poetic production is a dialectical oscillation between the subjective and objective dimensions of lyric poetry.[54] I observe the same pattern in Gullar's work, while coming to different conclusions about the way in which this dialectical tension is resolved, and the political implications of this resolution.

Um pouco acima do chão, written when Gullar is only nineteen, emulates a Parnassian aesthetic, and bears little relation to the rest of his work.[55] *A luta corporal* (1954) is the first

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artistic institution of political resistance during the dictatorship). He also wrote the play *Um rubi no umbigo*, which premiered in 1979 upon his return from exile. His fiction works include *Gamação* (1996), *Cidades inventadas* (1997), and *Resmungos* (2007).

[51] These works include the aforementioned *Rabo de foguete: Os anos de exílio* (2010) and *Autobiografia poética e outros textos* (2015), which includes Gullar's autobiographical reflection on the production of his poetry, two interviews with the poet, and several of Gullar's essays.

[52] Gullar wrote various essays and books of literary theory and criticism throughout his life. His "Manifesto neoconcreto" (1959) and "Teoria do não-objeto" (1959) were of seminal importance to both the theory and the practice of the Neoconcrete art movement (see Rodrigues da Silva for a study of Gullar's theoretical and artistic contributions to neoconcrete poetry). His most widely known books of criticism were *Cultura posta em questão* (1965) and *Vanguarda e subdesenvolvimento* (1969), which (broadly) examine the relationship between aesthetics, poetics, and politics, and espouse a largely Marxist perspective regarding the author's responsibility for political engagement in his/her work (see Lafetá pp. 170-85 for a critical evaluation of both of these works).

[53] My understanding of the relationship between poetics and aesthetics here is the same as that of Peter Brooks, as stated in "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?": "poetics, as the study of the systems of meaning-production, offers the best initial approach to the aesthetic, that which allows the reader, critic, or student to understand before judging and before making a premature ideological intervention" (522). In other words, poetics is the system of meaning making that makes interpretation, and thus aesthetic judgment, possible. This conception implies that the poetics of a text must be understood before attending to its aesthetic, and all of the political implications that this aesthetic may imply.

[54] See "Traduzir-se" and "A luz e seus avessos," respectively.

[55] "Ao escrever, quando adolescente, os poemas do seu primeiro livro, *Um pouco acima do chão* [...] o poeta, que ainda não havia tomado contato com o modernismo, conhecia apenas a poesia tradicional – 'parnasiana' segundo ele mesmo" (Cicero 10).

critically acclaimed work that Gullar produces. This collection represents an important break with the aestheticizing, formalist tendencies of the poets of the Generation of ’45 [Geração de 45], who were Gullar’s contemporaries at the time of *A luta corporal*’s publication.[56] Charles A. Perrone identifies the work of the Generation of ’45 as effectively a form of “neo-Parnassianism,” (18) which is a reaction against the experimentalism of the poetry of Brazilian Modernism’s first two phases:

> [The] poets known collectively as the Generation of ’45 rejected free verse and colloquialism in favor of a return to loftier themes, refined language, precious metaphors, and classical vehicles (ode, sonnet). Among their objections to modern lyric in its local manifestations […] were the loss of rhythm (i.e. metrification), the sterility of the machine […], the natural limits of the joke-poem, and the excessive concern with folklore. […] Thematically, this antipopulist group, convinced of its own serious mission, focused on psychic states, philosophical doubt, problems of being, hermetic symbols, and temporality. (18)

While Lafetá notes a certain level of conservative formalism in *A luta corporal*, he also observes a return to Modernist iconoclasm. Lafetá writes that after the collection’s opening poems, “Sete

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[56] The Generation of ’45 is also known as the Third Phase of Modernism in Brazil, the prior two phases being associated with the Generation of ’22 (First Phase) and the Generation of ’30 (Second Phase). While Brazilian Modernism is a literary movement with contributions of immense importance in prose as well as poetry, for the purposes of relevance to this chapter, I will focus on its poetic aspects and their relationship to Gullar’s work. The First Phase of Modernism is characterized by iconoclastic avant-gardism, generally aimed at the appropriation and re-synthesis of European avant-garde models (as elaborated in Oswald de Andrade’s “Manifesto antropófago”) in order to articulate an authentic national Brazilian identity. The poetry of Modernism’s second phase is less experimental and more lyrical, but still “does participate, in a broad sense, in the move away from canonical Lusitanian domination, the intellectual decentralization, the national introspection, and the resolve to participate in national life that characterized *modernismo*” (Perrone 17). See the first chapter of Perrone’s *Seven Faces: Brazilian Poetry Since Modernism* for a summary of the major shifts that occur in Brazilian poetry during Modernism’s three phases.

poemas portugueses" (which are written in the Neo-Parnassian style), "Gullar parece ter rompido suas relações com a geração de 45" (133). The rest of *A luta corporal* demonstrates a dedication to exploring the concrete materiality of objects in the world, reflecting on the distance between the lyric subject and his objective surroundings, and the impotence of the poetic word when confronted with this gap. The collection's final poem, "Roçzeiral," is a violent destruction of language: "feito de grunhidos, de sons sem sentido, ele é um desmantelamento raivoso da linguagem. De certo modo ele é o poema – na medida em que leva ao limite extremo a concepção da literatura como expressão: puro grito primitivo, que recusa enfeites, falsidades, ideologias" (Lafetá 152).

The avant-garde interrogation of the poetic word and the lyric subject continues in the poems that would later be published in *O vil metal* (1960). However, at the same time, Gullar also began his foray into a different sort of experimental poetry known as concrete poetry [Concretismo]. The concrete poetry movement began in 1952, with the formation of the Noigandres group by São Paulo poets Décio Pignatari, Augusto de Campos, and Haroldo de Campos. Concrete poetry is motivated by various theoretical and aesthetic preoccupations, but one of its central, organizing tenets is the re-evaluation of the poetic form, such that poems function as objects in themselves, rather subjective evaluations of an external world through an ambiguous and equivocal system of referential language. To put these ideas into practice, concrete poets abandoned versification altogether, using spatial arrangement of words and individual phonemes on the page in order to deconstruct syntax and semantics, and to release the potential of the visual and sonic elements of the poem as a form of non-verbal communication.[57]

[57] Décio Pignatari and Augusto and Haroldo de Campos expound on these concepts in their manifesto for the concrete poetry movement, "Plano-piloto para poesia concreta" (1958). They describe the concrete poem as: "ideograma: apelo à comunicação não-verbal. o poema concreta

Gullar distanced himself from concrete poetry within a few years, rejecting the movement's fixation on the objectivity of poems and its devaluation of subjective experience. By 1959, he had created his own splinter movement, and penned the "Neoconcrete Manifesto" [Manifesto neoconcreto].[58]

Gullar makes an abrupt exit from the avant-garde poetry scene in the early 1960s, as he begins to associate with the Centro Popular de Cultura (CPC), which was a group of leftist artists and intellectuals interested in promoting revolutionary art.[59] In this phase, Gullar writes predominantly populist poetry in the form of the *romance de cordel*,[60] which tells stories of class oppression, and is aimed at awakening class-consciousness in working-class and agrarian Brazilians.

After the military coup in 1964, Gullar leaves behind the didactic poetry of orthodox Marxism, as he writes the poems that would be published in *Dentro da noite veloz* in 1975.

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comunica a sua própria estrutura: estrutura conteúdo. o poema concreto é um objeto em e por si mesmo, não um intérprete de objetos exteriores e/ou sensações mais ou menos subjetivas. [...] o poema concreto, usando o sistema fonético (dígitos) e uma sintaxe analógica, cria uma área linguística específica – 'verbivocovisual' – que participa das vantagens da comunicação não-verbal, sem abdicar das virtualidades da palavra."

[58] Both the "Manifesto neoconcreto" and Gullar's essay "Teoria do não-objeto" elaborate the poet's understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of neoconcrete poetry, which attempts to dissolve the boundaries between subjective and objective experience, and create collectivist encounters through art. Important works of Gullar's during this period include the series *Livro-Poema*, *Poemas Espaciais*, and *Poema Enterrado* (see Rodrigues da Silva for an analysis of these works). The porosity of the subject/object boundary that neoconcrete poetry seeks to evoke is similar in kind to the porous boundaries of the subject-in-process that are made manifest in the last section of *Poema sujo*. This similarity suggests that the question of boundaries between subjects and the larger world is a problem that preoccupies Gullar throughout his life, which he attempts to resolve through different poetic and aesthetic means throughout his career.

[59] Gullar was president of the CPC from 1963 until the group was disbanded in 1964 by the military government after the coup d'état.

[60] The *romance de cordel* is a poetic form that originated in Portugal, and traditionally was used to give literary form to oral histories and folkloric stories. The genre became especially entrenched in the northeast of Brazil during the 19th and 20th centuries, where it is considered a popular culture literary form dedicated to representing social reality and, frequently, to exploring issues of political relevance (especially those affecting life in the Northeast).

Regarding *Dentro da noite veloz*, Lafetá writes, "[a]s composições dessa época […] têm como principal caraterística a procura de equilíbrio entre a expressão dos sentimentos subjetivos e a comunicação da visão do mundo" (199). In other words, Gullar returns in these poems to the tension between the individual and the collective. However, rather than surrendering before a perceived chasm that alienates the self from the other, Gullar's lyric subject articulates points of contact between subjective and communal experience:

> Os acontecimentos exteriores – tais como a guerra do Vietnã, em "Por você por mim", ou a morte do Che [Guevara], em "Dentro da noite veloz" – são apresentados da perspectiva interior do poeta, tingidos pela sua afetividade. Gullar parece reconhecer assim, ao menos na prática poética, que tematizar as experiências do "eu" não implica, obrigatoriamente, cair no solipsismo subjetivista. (Lafetá 207)

This movement toward subjective and collective blending reaches its apex in *Poema sujo*, as the lyric subject immerses himself in the abject, to be rebirthed as a destabilized subject-in-process.

2.2 *Poema sujo*: Criticism

Villaça argues that the dialectical interaction between intimate experience of the lyric voice and the objective reality of the world is dramatized in Gullar's poetry by the continual play of antitheses that populate his poems. He argues that *Poema sujo* is a synthesis of this dialectic that allows for a harmonious coexistence between the individual and society: "[t]udo se aplica agora numa incansável e bem lograda tentativa de tecer os fios que unem o retrato do indivíduo ao retrato social" (292).

Lafetá finds within *Poema sujo* a similar synthesis of a dialectical movement between subjective and objective experience, but goes a step further, saying that this synthesis allows the individual and the collective to conjoin in the expression of national identity:

> [A] procura de si mesmo (que é o primeiro nível do texto) se dá dentro de uma realidade cultural (os hábitos de vida em São Luís do Maranhão) e acaba por nos oferecer a imagem de pelo menos uma parcela da sociedade brasileira. Ou seja: a *identidade pessoal* revela-se como uma *identidade cultural*, inserida dentro de uma mais ampla *identidade nacional*. (207)

Otto Maria Carpeaux also identifies *Poema sujo* as an expression of national identity, writing, "*Poema sujo* mereceria ser chamado 'Poema nacional', porque encarna todas as experiências, vitórias, derrotas e esperanças da vida do homem brasileiro. É o Brasil mesmo, em versos 'sujos' e, portanto, sinceros" (qtd. in Cicero 9). Lafetá argues that Carpeaux's comments are somewhat hyperbolic, but that nevertheless, "não há como negar que ao menos um extenso segmento da vida nacional está representado neste poema de tanto êxito" (208). In essence, Lafetá contends that *Poema sujo*'s representational capacity is what makes it an expression of national identity, that there is an element of Brazilian society represented in the poem that rarely appears elsewhere in Brazilian poetry. And what, exactly, is this unique representational impulse? Lafetá describes it as such: "a [...] necessidade de expor o real em sua *abjeção* e mau gosto" (211; emphasis added). Thus, what makes *Poema sujo* an expression of national identity is its incorporation of the abject into the representation of Brazilian life—its attention to the "dirty" underbelly, the constitutive outside, that is normally excluded when imagining and representing the nation.

In other words, Gullar democratizes the Symbolic construct of nation through integrating its abjects. However, Lafetá does not elaborate the political implications of this act. He does not, for example, discuss how incorporating the abject in the poem restructures the relationship between the lyric subject and its objects, nor does he examine how the inclusion of an abject other might alter the concepts of national or collective identity. The following analysis of *Poema sujo* will address these points.

2.3 *Poema sujo*: Analysis

Poema sujo is divided into ten untitled sections of varying length. The poem is almost entirely a work of free verse; no consistent stanza structure or versification exists within the text, and various passages have no line breaks at all, thus leaving the terrain of verse to enter into that of prose poetry. Stanzas of verse and prose are divided by page breaks, but the tension between prose and verse as well as the chaotic spatial organization of the text on the page leads to continuous variation of stanza length and shape.[61]

One organizing element does exist within the text. As Silveira Lobo Sternberg has noted,[62] the work does follow a sort of dramatic arc, which plays out over the poem's various

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[61] Even the use of the word "stanza" in the context of *Poema sujo* is problematic, not only for the reasons already mentioned, but also due to the fact the transition from one page to another can often make it difficult to tell whether or not a new stanza has begun on the following page. Recourse to different editions of the poem has not always resolved this confusion, and has furthermore revealed slight differences regarding page breaks between editions (see Works Cited for editions referenced in the writing of this chapter). Despite these problems, I have decided to continue to use the word stanza to talk about the groupings of text between page breaks in the poem, for the simple reason that, to my knowledge, no better word exists in the language of literary criticism for talking about these textual units. All citations in Portuguese come from the 2016 Companhia das Letras edition of the text, so any perceived inaccuracies regarding stanza breaks can hopefully be resolved by recourse to this edition.

[62] Silveira Lobo Sternberg defines the dramatic structure of the poem as a, "transformation in the consciousness of the poet," (138) which allows his memories to enter into a larger network of

sections. The arc is that of a transformation of the lyric subject that comes about as a result of the recuperation of the abject. This integration of the abject takes place in the speaker's memory, as he returns to various scenes of his childhood in São Luís do Maranhão in order to imagine the city as a heterogeneous Symbolic construct that is permeated by abject presences. The speaker focuses exclusively on minor histories—on childhood experiences, on the daily life and routine of his father, and in general on quotidian existence within the city as he remembers it. This emphasis on the quotidian is coupled with a fixation on the abject as it appears in the city: rats, roaches, sewer grates, mud flats, slaughterhouses, and a ubiquitous sense of rot. In other words, in his memorial work, the lyric subject seeks to enact an all-encompassing recovery of life experience within the city—not one that draws a narrative out of individual and isolated points of perceived importance, but one that incorporates the forgotten and excluded elements of history, the banal as well as the abject. In accordance with Kristeva's theory, the speaker's continual return to the abject also opens up the subject to the experience of the sublime, and engenders a mixture of quotidian, sublime, and abject presences that make up a heterogeneous mass of lived experience. This process of aesthetic accretion, which traverses the boundaries of the Symbolic, also crosses the boundaries of the lyric subject, gradually moving beyond the history of an individual, to take on the form of a history of the entire city. As such, the lyric "I" performs not only the incorporation of the abject into his own consciousness, into his own subjective history,

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social relations, and thus become part of the fabric of a collective history. He describes this movement as a transition from "singularity and isolation to solidarity," (138) and while I agree that a shift from an individual to a more collectivist experience does take place in the poem, I do not describe this transformation in terms of a transmutation of memory into History, as does Silveira Lobo Sternberg. Rather, I define the movement in terms of a democratization of the Symbolic through incorporation of the abject. Thus, while Silveira Lobo Sternberg locates the dramatic center of the poem, the key moment of transition, in the train trip that ends the poem's second section, I find the climax in section six, with the dissolution of the lyric voice into the abject city.

but into the history of the city as well. Thus, the city's social abjects—the abandoned and rusting infrastructure, the mud flats where the working-class families lived, the sewer system that flows into the dirty river—are all integrated into the Symbolic order of the city, which itself begins to take on an abject quality as an excluded body left to waste and rot by the capitalist progress of Modernity. The dramatic catharsis of the poem comes as the speaker immerses himself and explodes in the abject city. The denouement arrives in the form of the subject's re-composition as a subject-in-process, as a being radically open to the abject and all forms of otherness.

2.3.1 The Poetics of Abjection

Tito Damazo writes extensively about the poetics of *Poema sujo* in his book *Ferreira Gullar: uma poética do sujo*, arguing that the "dirtiness" of the poem is observed in its subversion of the norms of the lyric—i.e. the way in which these subversions "contaminate" the genre. He gives a schematic explanation of the *poética do sujo* in the following passage:

> Sujo, uma vez que composto de versos heterogêneos, estrofes heterogêneas; sujo em razão da confluência e combinação de estilos diversos e divergentes, desde o estilo clássico e tradicional ao modernista com seus múltiplos desdobramentos, inclusive as resultantes das experimentações de vanguardas, como o Concretismo, por exemplo. Sujo porque impregnado, do começo ao fim, de intensa subjetividade norteando uma concepção poemática calcada na reminiscência. Suja a linguagem, descendo muitas vezes ao nível do chulo. Sujo, porque lírico fortemente maculado de épico e de dramático. Também sujo, por fim, porque rememora uma vida cuja realidade social fora bastante turva. (87)

One sees from this passage that dirtiness in *Poema sujo*, for Damazo, has much to do with heterogeneity: with the mixing of lyrical forms from the most classical to the most experimental, with the fusion of the lyric with the genres of drama and epic, and with the conjoining of elevated language with the quotidian and the vulgar. Along with these formal elements, he also argues that the dirtiness of the poem can be found in its content, in that the oppressive social reality represented by Gullar is a "contexto social perversamente sujo" (88).[63]

Damazo's evaluation of Gullar's poetics in *Poema sujo* addresses the manner in which heterogeneity is thematized in the poem on the level of both form and content, although Damazo admits that he touches only briefly on the social element of dirtiness in the poem.[64] Applying the theoretical framework of abjection to *Poema sujo* allows us to go a step further—to explore how

[63] The one point that I reject in Damazo's evaluation of the *poética do sujo* is that which appears in the line "sujo porque impregnado, do começo ao fim, de intensa subjetividade norteando uma concepção poemática calcada na reminiscência" from the passage cited above. This sentence references a concept explored at length (and with greater clarity) at other points in Damazo's book. He argues that the distance between subject and object maintained in the poem (in that the lyric subject remembers his childhood while evaluating it from a critical distance) is a form of dirtiness, in that there is no fusion of subject and object in the poem, which is a trait that is proper to the lyric. In establishing the premise that the lyric is predicated upon subject-object fusion, he cites Anatol Rosenfeld, who states that in the lyric, "[p]revalecerá a fusão da alma que canta com o mundo, não havendo distância entre sujeito e objeto" (qtd. in Damazo 23). Because, according to Damazo, no such fusion takes place in *Poema sujo*, he reasons that one observes an instance of lyric subversion, or dirtiness: "[d]aí a fatura desse primeiro nível do sujo. O eu poemático revive liricamente uma existência sem, contudo, deixar de perscrutá-lo agora, quando pode mirá-la e nela mirar-se" (23). I reject Damazo's point here on two grounds. First, the premise does not seem to be supported by the literary history of the lyric. Both the Baroque poems upon which Benjamin founds his theory of allegory and a vast quantity avant-garde poems of the twentieth century, to name but two examples, take as their very theme the distance between the lyric subject and the world. It is hard to imagine an argument justifying the exclusion of these poems from the genre of the lyric. Furthermore, I take issue, as would Villaça and Lafetá, with the claim that a neat subject-object binary is preserved as the poetic speaker in *Poema sujo* evaluates the world through his memory. The mixing of subject and object that occurs in the poem's first, sixth, and last sections is enough to dispute this claim.

[64] "Logo, muitos são os sujos deste poema, como se procurou observar ao longo desta análise. Devemos ressaltar que certamente nela não se esgotaram as possibilidades do sujo. E mesmo algum deles foi tão-somente objeto de breves referências, caso específico do fundo temático-social pressuposto no ponto de vista assumido pelo poeta" (Damazo 88).

Gullar's embrace of heterogeneity in his poetics creates an aesthetic effect with radical political implications in the social sphere. The mixing of forms in the poem demonstrates the manner in which Gullar opens the genre of the lyric (its "clean and proper" body, to use Kristeva's terms) to various forms of threatening otherness, thus challenging the boundaries that constitute it as a separate literary category. Similarly, Gullar's use of enjambment, along with the poem's chaotic spacing, dramatizes the disarticulation of the lyric subject as he comes into contact with the abject figures that populate the poem. Furthermore, aesthetically, Gullar shows us how this abject disarticulation, in both form and content, opens to a sublime and disturbing beauty. The poem's first section displays all of these poetic and aesthetic elements, and lays the groundwork for interpreting their political implications.

The poem starts as a sort of nonsensical lullaby, a rhythmic stream-of-consciousness unfolding that arrives, at the end of the stanza, at the gaping pore of the anus:

turvo turvo

a turva

mão do sopro

contra o muro

escuro

menos menos

menos que escuro

menos que mole e duro menos que fosso e muro: menos que furo

mais que escuro:

claro

como água? como pluma? claro mais que claro claro: coisa alguma

e tudo

(ou quase)

um bicho que o universo fabrica e vem sonhando desde as entranhas

azul

era o gato

azul

era o galo

azul

o cavalo

azul

teu cu (*Poema* 31-2)

[muddled muddled

the muddled

hand of the wind

against the wall

dull

less less

less than dull

less than supple and stable less than a well and a wall: less than a hole

dull

more than dull

bright

like water? like a feather? bright more than bright right: nothing at all

and all

(or nearly all)

a creature sired by the universe has been dreaming from its belly

blue

the cat

blue

the cock

blue

the colt

blue

your bung] (Guyer 11)[65]

The nonsense of these wistful lullaby verses communicates nothing in particular, and certainly resists any efforts at totalizing interpretation. The verses may be read as pure genotext in the Kristevan sense,[66] which is to say that they articulate a transitory border state between semiotic disorder and Symbolic formation,[67] in which subjects and objects are not clearly defined and the possibility of articulating a univocal message from addresser to addressee is foreclosed. It is

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[65] All English translations of *Poema sujo* come from Leland Guyer's 1990 translation.

[66] In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva uses the terms "genotext" and "phenotext" to describe the two poles of the signifying process by which language comes to have meaning. She defines the genotext as the ephemeral and non-signifying elements of language through which the semiotic enters into the Symbolic. The phenotext is dimension of language that serves to communicate, and in which the regulatory structures of the Symbolic are made manifest and perpetuated. A more detailed description is given in *Revolution*, pp. 86-89.

[67] Kristeva describes the semiotic as an order of signification that exists prior to the subject's entry into the Symbolic, before the subject has access to signifying language proper. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she theorizes that the semiotic has the revolutionary capacity to alter Symbolic relations. Refer to chapter one for an extended discussion of the semiotic and its political power.

unclear what noun the masculine adjectives (turvo, escuro, mole, duro, claro) refer to, as the only possible referent is the feminine "mão do sopro." No distinct subject of articulation (a lyric "I") has yet been identified, the discourse has no designated addressee, and the referentiality of the signifiers is ambiguous. The rhythmic, anarchic confusion of semiotic signification coalesces to some degree in the vague, animalistic figure of the "bicho" that is birthed from the guts (entranhas) of the universe. The corporeal language used to describe the birth of the mysterious animal is tinged with a sense of abjection, and that sense is magnified in the repetitive, almost incantatory, sequence that follows. Gullar alternates "azul" with various objects (gato, galo, cavalo), the last of which is "teu cu," the literal gap in the border of the subject from which the abject is expelled.

In the following stanza, the liminal opening of "teu cu" becomes a site of deeper entry into the abject, turning into a site of semiotic articulation that also opens to the sublime:

> tua gengiva igual a tua bocetinha que parecia sorrir entre as folhas de
> banana entre os cheiros de flor e bosta de porco aberta como uma boca
> do corpo (não como a tua boca de palavras) como uma entrada para (32)
>
> [your mouth like your little cunt that seemed to smile among the banana
> leaves amid the scent of flowers and pig shit open like a body's mouth
> (unlike your speaking mouth) like an opening to] (13)

The progession of "teu cu," to "tua gengiva," and to "tua bocetinha" draws a loose equality between the three orifices, which then perform the simultaneously enticing and revolting action of smiling amidst the alluring smell of flowers and the noxious odor of pig excrement. The abject imagery of the stream-of-consciousness flow identifies the orifices as a type of corporeal mouth

(uma boca do corpo) that is differentiated from the speaking mouth (tua boca de palavras). In other words, the disembodied speaker (who has not yet been identified as a cohesive subject, as a lyric “I”) recognizes the abject space as a site of articulation (or disarticulation) that does not follow a symbolic logic that would organize language into lexical and semantic units that are interpretable in a more or less univocal way. Rather, the “cu,” the “gengiva,” and the “bocetinha” speak a bodily language of drive and affect that opens into the sublime chaos displayed in the following verses:

> eu não sabias tu
> não sabias
> fazer girar a vida
> com seu montão de estrelas e oceano
> entrando-nos em ti (32)
>
> [I didn’t know you
> didn’t know how
> to make life spin
> with its mass of sea and stars
> entering us in you] (13)

Here, for the first time in the poem, the speaker identifies as an “I,” although only in the context of subjective confusion, in which the boundaries between “I,” “we,” and “you” are blurred. The enjambment between the verses “eu não sabia tu/ não sabias” creates a moment of confusion in the act of reading, as the grammatical subject “tu” appears to be functioning a-grammatically as a direct object of the phrase “eu não sabia,” before passing to the next verse reveals “sabias” to be

the predicate of the subject "tu." Returning to the preceding prose (non-versified) passage and connecting it with these verses allows for the formation of a narrative: the cu/gengiva/bocetinha is "uma boca do corpo" that is also, "uma entrada para/ eu não sabia tu/ não sabias." In other words, the abject mouth opens to something, although neither "you" nor "I" can articulate what.

However, this narrative falls apart as the next verses are added to the sequence:

> […] uma entrada para
>
> eu não sabia tu
>
> não sabias
>
> fazer girar a vida
>
> com seu montão de estrelas e oceano
>
> entrando-nos em ti (32)
>
> [[…] an opening to
>
> I didn't know you
>
> didn't know how
>
> to make life spin
>
> with its mass of sea and stars
>
> entering us in you] (13)

The verses "eu não sabia tu/ não sabias" may either be read as the object of the preposition "para" in "uma entrada para," or as the subject and predicate of a new utterance, of which "fazer girar vida" is a noun clause that functions grammatically as a direct object. Thus, the verses may be read as "uma entrada para/ eu não sabia tu/ não sabias," or as "eu não sabia tu/ não sabias/ fazer girar a vida," but reading all four verses together creates a grammatical indeterminacy for the

middle verses, which engenders an irresolvable ambivalence in meaning. The grammatical aporia regarding how to semantically evaluate the not knowing (não saber) of "eu" and "tu" in the utterance mirrors the inter-subjective confusion created by the enjambment in the verses. This confusion intensifies in the following two verses—"com seu montão de estrelas e oceano/ entrando-nos em ti"—in which the enigmatic spinning of life opens to a sublime mass of sea and stars, and to further confusion of subjective boundaries. The collective "nos" of the last verse is undefined—(Is it a group consisting of the stars and the ocean along with the lyric "I"? Or a sublime and infinite set of all things imaginable in creation? Or a more modest collection of undefined subjects? Or something else?)—and all things contained within it flow into the equally amorphous "ti."

All of the key components of *Poema sujo*'s poetics, the abject aesthetic, and the political promise that it reveals are on display in the poem's opening verses cited thus far. A journey into the abject hinges on a semiotic mode of signifying that articulates sublime renewal coming from the blurred boundaries at the margins of the subject, and at the margins of the Symbolic.

The theme of the recovery of the quotidian surfaces in the third stanza in the form of an unidentified woman whose name is lost to the speaker amidst a disorienting whirl of fragmentary experience:

> perdeu-se na confusão de tanta noite e tanto dia
>
> perdeu-se na profusão das coisas acontecidas
>
> constelações de alfabeto
>
> noites escritas a giz
>
> pastilhas de aniversário
>
> domingos de futebol

enterros corsos comícios

roleta bilhar baralho (32)

[it vanished in the confusion of so many nights

it vanished in the profusion of things and their ways

alphabet constellations

nights written in chalk

birthday candies

soccer Sundays

burials rallies parades

roulette billiards card games] (14-15)

Yet in the following stanza, the speaker intimates that the loss of a name, of a stable identity, is perhaps unimportant in comparison with the heterogeneous mix of quotidian and abject essences that he seeks to recover:

mas que importa um nome

debaixo deste teto de telhas encardidas vigas à mostra entre cadeiras

e mesa entre uma cristaleira e um armário diante de garfos e facas e

pratos de louças que se quebraram já

um prato de louça ordinária não dura tanto

e as facas se perdem e os garfos

se perdem pela vida caem

pelas falhas do assoalho e vão viver com ratos

e baratas ou enferrujam no quintal esquecidos entre os pés de erva cidreira

e as grossas orelhas de hortelã (33)

[and what does a name matter

beneath this roof of dirty tiles open beams amid

chairs and a table between a china cabinet and a cupboard before

knives and forks and broken plates

a plate of simple fired clay does not endure

and the knives are lost and the forks

are lost in their lifetime they fall

through cracks between the floorboards and mingle with

rats and roaches or rust in the backyard forgotten among the ginger grass

and the thick mint leaves] (15)

In these verses, the commonplace and homely scene of the family dining room is not self-contained as a discrete unit; its boundaries are themselves porous as the speaker follows the discarded forks and knives into the abject foundations of the house, populated by rats and roaches, and then out into the yard into the tranquil, natural scene of ginger grass and mint. The archetypal Symbolic center of the home, the abject, and nature are intricately interwoven within the verses; the abject cannot be separated from either and all three coalesce within the consciousness of the lyric "I."

The mixing of the abject and the quotidian soon begins to take on sublime proportions, as Gullar writes:

Não sei de que tecido é feito minha carne e essa vertigem

que me arrasta por avenidas e vaginas entre cheiros de gás

e mijo a me consumir como um facho-corpo sem chama,

ou dentro de um ônibus

ou no bojo de um Boeing 707 acima do Atlântico

acima do arco-íris (34)

[I don't know the fabric of my flesh and this dizziness

that drags me along avenues and vaginas among smells of gas

and piss consuming me like a flameless torch body,

or into a bus

or into the belly of a Boeing 707 above the Atlantic

above the rainbow] (17)

The vertigo of lived experience is comprised of the prosaic events of passing through nameless avenues and city buses, of the abject presences of vaginas, gas, and urine, and of the truly awe-striking: flying above a rainbow over the ocean.

The convergence of the sublime and the abject in the speaker's unremarkable memories is made clearer as the stanza continues, and the speaker addresses an undefined collective:

voais comigo

sobre continentes e mares

e também rastejais comigo

pelos túneis das noites clandestinas

sob o céu constelado do país

entre fulgor e lepra

debaixo de lençóis de lama e de terror

vos esgueirais comigo, mesas velhas,

armários obsoletos gavetas perfumadas de passado (34)

[you fly with me

over continents and seas

and you crawl with me too

through the tunnels of clandestine nights

beneath the nation's starry sky

among the splendor and leprosy

between the sheets of mud and dread

you slip away with me, old tables,

obsolete cupboards perfumed drawers of the past] (19)

The sublime height of flying above continents and seas exists alongside the abject low of furtive crawling through tunnels at night. Abject and sublime intermingle as the act of crawling under the "céu constelado" of the "noites clandestinas" is also described as a journey into "lepra/ debaixo de lençóis de lama e de terror" (34). Finally, the revolting and the awesome blend with the prosaic—mesas velhas, armários obseletos, gavetas perfumadas—as the speaker incorporates within his verse that which lies outside of the Symbolic, as well as that which is overlooked or forgotten within it. After outlining this heterogeneous mixture that challenges the boundaries of the Symbolic, opening its borders to that which lies beyond it and seeking to recover what is ignored inside it, the lyric "I" ends the stanza with the repetition of the radical question: "[e] depois de tanto/ que importa um nome?" (34). Such a question seems to suggest that the symbolic function of a word—the phenotext in language that serves a referential communicative

capacity,[68] and that displays and reinforces the regulatory norms of the Symbolic—is of less interest to the speaker than language that goes beyond the Symbolic, carrying a semiotic charge that penetrates its boundaries, and opens it to change.

The speaker's recognition of the semiotic value of his poetry is made explicit in a stanza that arrives later in the section.[69] After providing further fragmentary memories of his childhood, he states that in those childhood moments, "a poesia não existia ainda," (36) and gives an outline of the basic elements that comprise his current poetics:

Plantas, Bichos. Cheiros. Roupas.

Olhos. Braços. Seios. Bocas.

Vidraça verde, jasmim.

Bicicleta no domingo.

Papagaios de papel.

Retreta na praça.

Luto.

Homem morto no mercado

sangue nos legumes.

Mundo sem voz, coisa opaca. (36)

[Flora. Fauna. Odors. Dresses.

Eyeballs. Members. Bosoms. Faces.

Green glass, jasmine.

Bicycling on Sunday.

[68] See note 26 for a definition of "phenotext."
[69] The speaker identifies himself as a poet at various moments in the poem.

Paper kites.

Bandstand concerts in the plaza.

Mourning.

Cadaver in the marketplace

human blood on the vegetables.

Voiceless world, opaque thing] (23-5).

The abject (homem morto no mercado/ sangue humano nos legumes) is interspersed among quotidian objects and activities, and the voicelessness and opacity of the world suggest an extra-symbolic element of existence that the poet seeks to capture. In the following verses, the lyric subject speaks more explicitly to the essence of his poetics, in addition to, to some degree, situating his work within Brazilian literary history:

Nem Bilac nem Raimundo. Tuba de alto clangor, lira singela?

Nem tuba nem lira grega. Soube depois: fala humana, voz de

gente, barulho escuro do corpo, intercortado de relâmpagos (37)

[Neither Bilac nor Raimundo. Blatant tuba, simple lyre?

Neither tuba nor Grecian lyre. I learned later: human speech,

people's voices, dark sounds of the body, punctuated by lightning] (25)

The names Bilac and Raimundo refer to the poets Olavo Bilac (1865-1918) and Raimundo Correia (1859-1911), both of whom are known for their participation in the Parnassian aesthetic movement in Brazil at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.[70] Pablo del Barco notes in his Spanish translation of the poem that the phrase, "tuba de alto clangor, lira singela," is

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[70] See note in Guyer's translation, p. 197.

a verse in Bilac's poem "A língua portuguesa,"[71] which is a sonnet dedicated to glorifying the wild and untamed beauty of the Portuguese language. Whereas Bilac, in typical Parnassian style, manifests a cultured, high-art aesthetic beauty in his poem, as indicated by the association of his poetic language with the orchestral music of the tuba and the origins of Western poetry in the classical figure of the Grecian lyre, Gullar rejects this association, and finds the genesis of his poetics in the quotidian—"fala humana, voz de/ gente"—and in the corporeal, pre-Symbolic signification of the semiotic—"barulho escuro do corpo"—which opens to flashes of the sublime—"intercortado de relâmpagos" (37). Kristeva uses the same language to describe the experience of *jouissance* that results from the explosive return of the abject into the Symbolic. She describes the return of the abject as a "flash of lightning […] a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth. […] Jouissance in short" (*Powers* 8-9). Such is Gullar's poetics in *Poema sujo*: an incorporation of the abject into language that reveals a sublime beauty, which marks the abject as a site of utopian possibility.[72]

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[71] See p. 207. Del Barco mistakenly says that the line is the first verse in Bilac's sonnet; it is actually the sixth.

[72] See Bines and Bartolo for an alternative interpretation of the recurring motif of lighting in the poem. Whereas I associate lightning with *jouissance* and the return of the abject, Bines and Bartolo read the motif as an instance of Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectic image, a dialectic unification of past and present that breaks with chronological history in order to create a simultaneous experience of disconnected temporalities. Bines and Bartolo argue that the dialectic image in *Poema sujo* achieves the recovery of a forgotten past, which is able to then alter the present in productive, and even revolutionary ways: "[o] poema resultante desse processo memorativo é uma imagem que, ao lampejar no presente, pode reconfigurar as possibilidades do futuro" (341). I think that Biles and Bartolo and I are thinking along similar lines in tying the image of lightning to the recovery of something lost or excluded that, in turn, may create a palpable political effect in the present. Whereas for Biles and Bartolo, that which is recovered is purely historical (the memories of the poet), I argue that the recovery is also psycho-social in nature, which is to say that the recovery is not only of memory, but of abject presences that can alter the Symbolic in utopian ways.

2.3.2 Vozes perdidas na lama

The aesthetic dynamic of locating sublime beauty within the abject takes on an explicitly political function for the first time in the final verses of the section, as the lyric "I" reflects on his mortality, contemplating the pulse of his beating heart: "pulsando há 45 anos/ […] debaixo da pele, da carne/ combatente clandestino aliado da classe operária/ meu coração de menino" (41) [beating now for 45 years/ […] under my skin, my flesh/ clandestine combatant on the side of the working class/ my child's heart] (35-7). The emphasis that this clandestine ally of the working class places on the political effect of recuperating the abject intensifies in the second and third sections, which address the specific theme of recovering the "vozes perdidas na lama" (42) [voices lost in the mud] (39) in the marginal spaces of São Luís.

In the third section, the theme of introducing heterogeneity into the Symbolic through recuperating the abject and the quotidian in the speaker's memory is paralleled with a meditation on the heterogeneous nature of time. The speaker repeats the refrain "muitos dias há num dia só" (51) ["there are many days in one"] (63), or some variation of it, throughout the section, calling attention to the heterogeneity that is created in historical remembering as minor histories are integrated into a composite and complex History. The many days within a day correspond to the many interconnected experiences of a given day that coexist within that time period, all of which are, in the words of the lyric voice, "enlaçados como anéis de fumaça" (55) [linked like smoke rings] (71). The metaphor of smoke rings suggests that "fronteiras impalpáveis" (53) ["impalpable edges"] (69) comprise the unstable borders of the days within a day, and the speaker also asserts that each day has its own core, or central point of orbit—"[o] cerne de cada um desses muitos dias" (53) ["the core of each of those many days"] (67). The simultaneous insistence on the interconnectedness and the irreducible individuality of each subset of a day

implies that no day can be reduced to a homogeneous version of Day. The recuperation of the lost days within a day, the recovery of history within History, parallels the lyric subject's attempt to imagine a fluid Symbolic in which nothing is excluded, which incorporates its abjects.

The theme of social abjection comes to the fore as the poetic speaker reflects on the equally heterogeneous nature of the night:

Numa noite há muitas noites
mais de modo diferente
de como há dias
no dia
(especialmente nos bairros
onde a luz é pouca) (56)

[In a single night there are many night
but different
from how there are days
in one day
(especially in the neighborhoods
where there is so little light)] (75)

The speaker later expands upon the reference in the final two verses to the neighborhoods of São Luís that are lacking in basic infrastructure. After describing the way in which electricity creates a certain experience of night within more central areas of the city—"põe a funcionar os cinemas/ aciona/ os programas de rádio" (57) ["sets to work the movie houses/ activates/ radio shows"] (77)—he comments on the lack of electricity as well as the lack of running water in the marginal,

working-class neighborhood of Baixinha. Whereas the lights of the city later give way to the jubilant return of morning—"em todas as torneiras da cidade/ a manhã está prestes a jorrar" (60) ["in all of the city's faucets/ morning is set to gush"] (85)—lack of light and lack of water produces a different experience:

> nas palafitas da Baixinha, à margem
>
> da estrada de ferro,
>
> onde não há água encanada:
>
> ali
>
> o clarão contido sob a noite
>
> não é
>
> como na cidade
>
> o punho fechado dentro dos canos:
>
> é o punho
>
> da vida
>
> fechada dentro da lama (60)

> [in the Baixinha mud flat slums, along
>
> the railroad,
>
> where they have no running water
>
> there
>
> the gleam contained beneath the night
>
> is not
>
> like in the city

water’s fist clenched within the pipes:

it is life’s

fist

clenched within the mud] (87)

The speaker here draws a contrast between, on the one hand, the vibrant image of life gushing forth from the faucets in the more affluent areas of the city and, on the other, the stagnation of life mired in the mud in Baixinha. The manner in which the lyric voice relates the night in Baixinha to the dirty, primeval image of the mud creates a certain abject association that he expands upon in the following verses:

Mas o que mais distancia

essa noite da Baixinha

das outras

é o cheiro: melhor dizendo

o mau cheiro

que ela tem como certos animais

na sua carne de lodo (61)

[But what distinguishes

this Baixinha night most

from the others

is the smell: rather

the foul odor

that it shares with the muddy flesh

of certain animals] (89)

Here, the night in Baixinha is rendered entirely abject: the stinking presence of an animal with muddy flesh. The primary boundary that must be established in order to demarcate the limits of human society is the one between human and animal, and the dehumanization of the Baixinha night speaks to the neighborhood's status as a socially abject space.

The lyric "I" further attests to the abjection of Baixinha as he refers to the passage of time there not as an action of flowing, but of rotting:

e daí pode dizer-se

que a noite na Baixinha

não passa, não

transcorre:

apodrece (61)

[and for this reason you can say

that the Baixinha night

doesn't pass, doesn't

flow:

it rots] (89)

The putrefaction of time in the abject spaces of the city is a motif that is also repeated elsewhere, as the speaker notes how the rotting day of the slaughterhouse overwhelms the day of the dwellers of the "palafitas": "e na carniça/ junto do Matadouro/ que fede/ o dia (um dia) apodrece/ envolvendo o dia/ dos moradores das palafitas" (54) ["next to the stinking/ Slaughterhouse/ the day (a day) rots/ surrounding the day/ of mud flat slum dwellers"] (71). Continuing with his

meditation on the nature of the rotting Baixinha night, the lyric subject identifies various levels of abjection at work within the neighborhood. On one hand, he describes the "noite sub-humana," (62) identified with the contaminated defilement of the mud on which the palafitas are built; on the other, he observes the "noite/ suburbana (sem água/ encanada)" (62) ["the suburban/ night (without running/ water)"] (91). In other words, he identifies a more archaic, universal abject presence (the mud) and notices how the marginal social space of the working class neighborhood has been identified with this abject presence, thus marking it as socially abject.

The lyric "I" describes this night within a night in a stanza comprised of a progressive series of similes. The night is "como a língua na boca" (62) ["as a tongue in the mouth"] (93) (perhaps the semiotic tongue in the "boca do corpo" introduced in the poem's opening pages), "como uma coisa suja/ (uma culpa)/ dentro de uma pessoa" (62) ["as some dirty thing/ (a sense of guilt)/ within a person"] (93), and "como uma gaveta de lama/ dentro de um armário de lama" (62-3) ["a drawer of mud/ in a dresser of mud"] (93). This last image especially, of the drawer of mud in a dresser of mud, gives a sense of abjection that permeates Baixinha, besetting it from within and without. The irreversible decomposition and the stagnant rot that typifies the Baixinha night is encapsulated in the final image of the stanza—a rotting beauty abandoned in the swamp to decompose: "assim/ talvez fosse a noite na Baixinha/ princesa negra e coroada/ apodrecendo nos mangues" (63) ["and so/ perhaps the Baixinha night was a/ crowned black princess/ rotting in the mangroves"] (95).

However, the speaker does not limit the motif of rotting to the neighborhood of Baixinha. He shows how the decay identified with this space also permeates the people that live there and, additionally, transcends the neighborhood to infiltrate the entire city:

Mas para bem definir essa noite

da Baixinha

não se deve separá-la

da gente que vive ali

[…]

nem separá-la da fábrica

de fios e pano riscado

(de que os homens fazem calças)

onde aquela gente trabalha (63)

[But to define this Baixinha night

better

we shouldn't separate it

from those who live there

[…]

nor should we separate it from the

thread and striped cloth factory

(with which men make pants)

where those people work] (95)

These verses not only state that the abject, rotting night of Baixinha can't be separated from the working-class people that live there, but also that the products that the people make at the factories cannot be separated from their abjection either. The products themselves, as well as the means of production that generates them, are laced with the abject:

nem do salário mínimo

que aquela gente recebe

nem separar a fábrica

de lama da fábrica

de fios

nem o fio

do bafio

envenenado na lama

    que de feder tantos anos

    já é parte daquele gente

        (como

    o cheiro de um bicho pode ser parte

    de outro bicho) (63)

[nor from those people who don't make

even the minimum wage,

nor should we separate the mud

factory from the thread

factory

nor the thread

from the stinking air

poisoned by the mud

    which from stinking for so many years

    is now part of those people

(as

the scent of an animal can be part

of another animal)] (95-7)

The abject Baixinha night cannot be separated from the exploitative minimum wage paid to the workers who live in Baixinha, nor can the production of thread at the factory be separated from the mechanics of social abjection, appearing here in the form of worker exploitation under an oppressive capitalist system. The production of mud, which is to say, the perpetuation of abjection, cannot be separated from the thread produced, nor can said thread be separated from the "bafio" of the workers described in the stanza, who are mired in an abject position they cannot escape, to the extent that, "nenhum deles consegue/ lembrar flor alguma que não tenha/ aquele azedo de lama" (64) ["none of them can/ recall any flower that doesn't have/ that muddy sourness"] (97).

The speaker further explores the manner in which the abject overruns the boundaries of Baixinha and begins to infiltrate the fabric of the social structure of the city. In the stanzas that follow, as he meditates on the various forms of rotting that are found throughout São Luís, beyond the tenuous borders of Baixinha, he writes that:

Resta ainda acrescentar

— para se entender essa noite

proletária —

que um rio não apodrece do mesmo modo

que uma pera[73]

[73] The mention of "uma pera" [a pear] here is a reference to another poem of Gullar's "As pêras," from *A luta corporal* (1954), which is a meditation on time, rotting, and mortality. Here, Gullar offers an earlier reflection on the heterogeneous nature of time and the unique possibilities of

[…] porque nenhuma coisa apodrece

como outra (64)

[It remains to say

— to understand this

proletarian night —

that a river doesn't rot as

a pear does

[…] because nothing rots

like something else] (97)

In other words, the lyric voice asserts that in order to understand the proletarian rotting ("essa noite proletária"), one must understand the other forms of rotting that pervade the city space. He compares the rotting of the river and the pear with that of a banana, with that of a hand of bananas fermenting in a barrel (presumably to be sold as wine or vinegar), and, finally, with that of the leg of a woman who died in the town during the speaker's childhood, and whose body was found in a state of decomposition. This focus on rotting, interspersed with descriptions of various spaces in the city and memories of the lyric subject's experiences there, creates an image of the city that is diffuse with various forms of putrefaction. This imagination of the social space paints

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fulfillment offered by the abject. He presents rotting and decomposition as displaying a type of ontology in their own right—the pears "se consomem/ no seu doirado/ sossego" [consume themselves/ in their golden/ tranquility] and "gastam-se no/ fulgor de estarem prontas/ para nada" [empty themselves in/ the brilliance of being ready/ for nothingness] (*Toda poesia* 18) (my translations). The glimmer of beauty and possibility in the abject was already present in the aesthetic practice of Gullar before his exile and political persecution, although clearly this theme was retaken, amplified, and explored in much greater detail in *Poema sujo*.

the abject as a ubiquitous presence that can never be fully dispelled: the expelled outside that is always present at the social margins, threatening to push itself in.

Finally, the lyric voice turns his attention to the rotting of the Rio Anil, which borders the east and north sides of the city center before emptying into the Baía de São Marcos. He finds within the rotting river a history of social abjection which stretches from colonialism to late capitalism: "[a]ssim apodrece o Anil/ ao leste de nossa cidade/ que foi fundada pelos franceses em 1612/ e que já o encontraram apodrecendo" (67) ["[t]hat's the way the Anil rots/ to the east of our city/ which the French founded in 1612/ and which they found already rotting"] (107). The rotting discovered by the colonizers speaks to the reality of colonialism as a form of social abjection, under which indigenous populations are generally viewed as sub-human heretics, to be used as chattel or slaves. However, the speaker affirms that the abjection of colonialism is different from the capitalist abjection that he observes in present-day São Luís, noting that the stench of the rotting river in this context is unique:

> […] um cheiro
> que nada tinha
> do óleo dos navios que entram agora
> quase diariamente no porto
> nem das fezes que a cidade
> vaza em seu corpo de peixes
> nem da miséria dos homens
> escravos de outros
> que ali vivem agora
> feito caranguejos (67-8)

[[…] a smell

that had no relation

to the oil of the ships that now enter

the port almost daily

nor to the sewage that the city

empties into its body of fishes

nor to the misery of men

slaves to others

who now live there

like crabs] (107)

The odor of the river now comes from the pollution of commerce, from the waste created by humans, and from the humans that are created as waste, marked as abject by an oppressive society, and relegated to the social margin.

2.3.3 Modernity Passing By

Sections four and five of the poem are less dedicated to the recuperation of the abject, and more explicitly interested in recounting small vignettes from the lives of the city-dwellers, including that of the speaker's father, Newton Ferreira. However, one important motif related to social abjection does appear in the fifth section, and is repeated later in the sixth: that of the airplane passing over the city, indifferent to its minor histories, to its stigmatized abjects, to its heterogeneous mixture of life and death, of rot and regrowth. As he describes the life of his father, and of the indeterminate boundaries that allow for his life to bleed into the complex

system that is the city, and vice versa, he notes that someone passing over the city by plane would be oblivious to everything he is recounting:

> […] nossa pequena cidade
>
> a qual
>
> alguém que venha de avião dos EUA
>
> poderá ver
>
> postada na desembocadura suja de dois rios
>
> lá embaixo
>
> e como se para sempre. Mas
>
> e o quintal da Rua das Cajazeiras? O tanque
>
> do Caga-Osso? a Fonte do Obispo? a quitanda
>
> de Newton Ferreira?
>
> Nada disso verá
>
> de tão alto
>
> aquele hipotético passageiro da Braniff.[74] (78-9)

> [[…] our small city
>
> that
>
> someone arriving from the USA by plane
>
> can see
>
> between the dirty mouths of two rivers
>
> down below

[74] Pablo del Barco notes that "Braniff" is a, "[c]ompañía de transporte aereo norteamericana que existió hasta la década de los 80" (209).

looking like forever. But

the lot on Cajazeiras Street? The Caga-Osso

cistern? the Bishop's Fountain? Newton Ferreira's

grocery store?

That hypothetical passenger

flying so high on Braniff

cannot see a thing of this.] (135)

The airplane here functions as a symbol of technological and industrial development—modern advancement that is based on capitalist models of material attainment and accrual of wealth. The fact that the hypothetical plane in the verses comes from the United States—which is the global center of capitalist and imperialist hegemony—further links the symbol of the plane with an oppressive capitalist order. The invisibility, or perhaps illegibility, of the city from above suggests the gradual exclusion of small, marginal towns in the Brazilian Northeast from the global capitalist order as it transitions from Modernity to Postmodernity, the gradual transformation of rural spaces into dead zones, outside of culture, that come to be seen with increasing disgust.

2.3.4 Falling Apart in the Abject Sublime

The first five sections of the poem reveal the way in which the poetic speaker, through his aesthetic act of memorializing, imagines a Symbolic order that is radically open to the abject. He envisions an order of social relations in which the abject is no longer the constitutive outside of society, but a ubiquitous presence that permeates it. He also shows how certain social groups, namely, the marginalized working class within the town, are rendered abject within the Symbolic

order, while also showing how these marginalized bodies and spaces cannot be effectively excluded from the town's social structure, that no social borders are impervious to the abject presence that haunts all elements of the social order. Finally, he implies a certain abjection of the entire town of São Luís, in both its existence as a historical site of colonial domination, and as a peripheral figure in the power dynamics of global capitalist development.

In the poem's first section, the speaker reveals the experience of the sublime that is made possible in the recuperation of the abject, and how this sublime experience is imbued with regenerative properties. The theme of sublime renewal is largely absent in sections two through five, but returns forcefully in the climactic sixth section, as the abject permeation of the social space that is described in the prior sections leads the speaker to imagine the entire town as abject, and to envision his own sublime decomposition within this space.

The fundamental trope that organizes the structure of section six is that of apostrophe. The words of the lyric "I" are largely addressed to the city itself, which is referred to alternately as "minha cidade verde," "minha úmida cidade," (83) and, most importantly, "minha cidade suja" (85). The city is also frequently addressed with second person singular pronouns (teu, tua, te, ti, etc.). Regarding apostrophic address, Culler writes:

> The fundamental characteristic of lyric, I am arguing, is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable *performance of an event in the lyric present*, in the special "now," of lyric articulation. The bold wager of poetic apostrophe is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the "now" in which, for readers, a poetic event can continually occur. Fiction is about what happened next; lyric is about what happens now. (226; my emphasis)

Returning to Culler's concept of poetry as performance, which he defines as "discourse conceived as an act, aiming to persuade, to move, to innovate," (130) apostrophe may be understood as a ritualistic element of poetic performance by which a poem speaks to its own efficacy in the world, and enacts something in the now of lyric address. Culler notes that, "[a] primary force of apostrophe is to constitute the addressee as another subject, with which the visionary poet can hope to have a relationship, harmonious or antagonistic; apostrophe treats that bringing together of subject and object as an act of will, something accomplished poetically in the act of address" (223). By dramatizing a relationship with the city, as if the city were a subject in itself, responsive to the desires and supplication of other subjects, the speaker in *Poema sujo* suggests that his speech acts are capable of evoking a change or a transformation in the relationship between himself and his surroundings. In other words, the "performance of an event in the lyric present" in the case of *Poema sujo* is that of establishing a relationship between the lyric subject and an abject other, the "cidade suja." Apostrophe allows the lyric subject to constitute a dialogical interaction between subject and abject, and to perform for the reader what happens when the abject is integrated into the Symbolic, rather than expelled. Consequently, the poetic speaker also performs the dissolution of the dialectic between subject and abject staged in the apostrophic address, showing how the "eu" of the speaker and the "tu" of the city become enmeshed in one another, which creates a sublime experience of disarticulated subjectivity. Thus, apostrophe in *Poema sujo* enacts the union not of subject and object, but subject and abject, and unveils for the reader the sublime beauty, the utopian possibility, that arises from this fusion. The poem performs a new way of being in the world, stages this vision for the reader, and invites him or her to enact it in the world for him or herself.

The first stanza of section six begins with the verse "[a]h, minha cidade verde," (83) ["[o]h, my green city"] (145) and provides a panoramic description of the beauty of the city at its borders as it meets the sea. The interjection "ah" that precedes the apostrophe—and which is repeated later in the stanza: "ah sombra rumorejante/ que arrasto por outras ruas" (83) ["oh rustling shadows/ that I drag through other streets"] (145)—carries an affective charge of nostalgia and affection, which is similarly transmitted in the loving descriptions of the windblown town that populate the stanza's remaining verses. The intermingling of the lyric "I" and the city begins in the second stanza, which is also laden with an antithetical and disorienting interplay between light and dark that seems in some way to be an inevitable effect of the subject's merging with the city:

Desce profundo o relâmpago
de tuas águas em meu corpo,
desce tão profundo e tão amplo
e eu me pareço pouco
pra tantas mortes e vidas
que se desdobram
no escuro das claridades (83-4)

[Lightning from your waters penetrates
my body deeply,
penetrates so deeply and completely
and it seems that I'm so small
for so many lives and deaths

that unfold

in the darkness of clarity] (145)

The motif of lighting returns in this stanza, as the act of merging with the abject city implies the brilliant flash of *jouissance* generated by the incorporation of the semiotic into the Symbolic. The waters of the city penetrate the lyric subject, transgressing his boundaries, and opening to the collective experience of the "tantas mortes e vidas" that are incorporated in his memorialistic aesthetic act. The "escuro das claridades" speaks to the incomprehensible experience of the flash *jouissance*, and the overwhelming brightness, the regenerative possibility, that is inexplicably birthed from the abject. The speaker extrapolates the theme of rebirth from darkness as the stanza continues, in which the "tantas mortes e vidas" unfold not only in the "escuro das claridades," but also:

na minha nuca

no meu cotovelo, na minha arcada dentária

no túmulo da minha boca

palco de ressurreições

inesperadas

[…]

de trevas que não sei

se são tuas se são minhas

mas nalgum ponto do corpo (do teu? do meu

corpo?)

lampeja

o jasmim

ainda que sujo da pouca alegria reinante

naquela rua vazia

cheia de sombras e folhas (84)

[in the nape of my neck

in my elbow, in the roof of my mouth

in the tomb of my mouth

stage of unexpected

resurrections

[…]

of darkness maybe yours maybe mine

I no longer know

but in some part of the body (of your body? of

mine?)

the jasmine

glitters

although dirty from the scarce surrounding joy

in that empty street

full of leaves and shadows] (145-7)

Life and death intertwine in the body of the speaker—in the elbow, in the neck—and in the roof of the mouth. This bodily imagery again remits to the opposition between the symbolic "boca de palavras" and the semiotic "boca do corpo," which is described here as a tomb of a mouth that simultaneously exists as a staging ground for unexpected resurrections ("palco de ressurreições").

Death and resurrection mix outside of the Symbolic in the abject darkness ("trevas"), in which subjective unbinding ("do teu? do meu/ corpo?) may be witnessed only under the light of the faint glimmer of the "jasmim sujo."

The abject nature of the darkness is made more explicit in the following stanzas, as the speaker imagines himself being carried away by the city's waste water—"[d]esabam as águas servidas/ me arrastam por teus esgotos" (84) ["[w]aste water rushes down/ funneling me […]/ through your sewers"] (147)—which leads to further confusion—"[m]e levanto em teus espelhos/ me vejo em rostos antigos/ te vejo em meus tantos rostos/ tidos perdidos/ partidos" (84) ["I rise up in your mirrors/ I see myself in ancient faces/ I see you in my many faces/ possessed lost fractured] (147). The ultimate purpose of this abject journey seems to be that of "buscando/ em mim mesmo a fonte de uma alegria/ ainda que suja e secreta" (85) ["seeking/ within me the source of some joy/ however filthy and furtive"] (149). This goal is achieved as the speaker directly addresses "minha cidade suja" (85) and its "tanta gente humilhada" (86) ["legions of degraded people"] (151), and immerses himself entirely in the "abismo dos cheiros" (87) ["abyss of smells"] (153) of the city's waste water. The result is the ecstatic explosion and abject demolition of the subject.

This cathartic unraveling commences with the following verses:

> e rolo eu
>
> agora
>
> no abismo dos cheiros
>
> que se desatam na minha
>
> carne na tua, cidade
>
> que me envenenas de ti (87)

[and now

I flow

into the abyss of smells

that burst in my

flesh in yours, city

you poison me with you] (155)

The unbinding in the abyss of smells is dramatized here, as in the first section of the poem, in the form of the text itself through Gullar's use of enjambment. The breaking of the line between "minha" and "carne" creates a sense of disembodiment as the connection between the possessive adjective and its referent is severed (the "abismo de cheiros" bursts in my… what?). The continuation of the sentence in the next verse clarifies that the bursting of the abyss of smells happens in the flesh of both the speaker and the city, and breaking this explanation over two verses creates a literal rupture in the boundary between self and other (my flesh and yours) at the same time that the speaker recounts the common experience of unbinding that is happening for both the "I" and the city. Similarly, the speaker addresses the city directly ("na tua, cidade"), implicitly drawing attention to the distance that must exist between self and other in order for inter-subjective dialogue to be possible, at the same time that he describes his contamination and penetration by the city, as it enters and poisons him.

The speaker delves further into the themes of unbinding, penetration, and contamination as the stanza continues, as the voyage into abject darkness ends in an explosion in excrement:

que me arrastas pela treva

que atordoas de jasmim

que de saliva me molhas me atochas

num cu

                    rijo me fazes

delirar me sujas

de merda e explodo o meu sonho

em merda. (87)

[you drag me through the darkness

you stun me with jasmine

you cover me with juice and thrust me

into a tightened

                    asshole you make

me delirious you smear me

with shit and my dream blows up

in shit] (155)

The city drags the speaker into absolute darkness, wets him with bodily fluids, and stuffs him into a tightened sphincter. The experience is one of delirium and havoc, and Gullar's enjambment again formally embodies this point, as the line breaks repeatedly separate subjects and verbs from their objects, and create a chaos of fragmented semantic units that then explode in feces, along with the subject and his delirious dream. In the following verse, the speaker states, "[s]obre os jardins da cidade/ urino pus" (87) ["[o]n the city gardens I piss pus"] (155), and both the urination of pus over the city and the act of fecal explosion convey an image of a pulverized

subject flung outwards in particles of bodily waste over the dirty city, thus dramatizing the destruction of the subject in the abject.

The disarticulation of the subject in the prior verses sets the stage for the sublime experience of unbinding that is portrayed in the verses that follow:

Me extravio
na Rua da Estrela, escorrego
no Beco do Precipício.
Me lavo no Ribeirão.
Mijo na Fonte do Bispo.
Na Rua do Sol me cego,
na Rua da Paz me revolto
na do Comércio me nego
mas na das Hortas floresço;
na dos Prazeres soluço
na da Palma me conheço
na do Alecrim me perfumo
na da Saúde adoeço
na do Desterro me encontro
na da Alegria me perco
Na da Rua do Carmo berro
na Rua Direita erro
e na da Aurora adormeço (87-8)

[I wander

on Estrela street, I slide

down Precipício Lane.

In the Ribeirão Fountain I take a bath,

and in the Bishop's I take a piss.

I lose my sight on Sol Street,

and on Paz Street I revolt

I spurn myself on Comércio

but on Hortas I blossom;

on Prazeres I sob

and on Palma I meet myself

on Alecrim I smell good

on Saúde I feel sick

on Desterro I run into me

on Alegria I get lost

on Carmo Street I bellow

on Direita Street I stagger

and on Aurora Street I fall asleep][75] (155-7)

A glance at a map of São Luís reveals that all of the streets and fountains listed in the stanza are actual locations within the city. Thus, one may conceive of the anaphoric verses as listing the

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[75] In the notes to his translation, Guyer writes: "[i]t is useful to note that the street names left untranslated on these pages (Estrela, Precipício, Sol, Paz, Comércio, Hortas, Prazeres, Palma, Alecrim, Saúde, Desterro, Alegria, Carmo, Direita, and Aurora) are, respectively, Star, Precipice, Sun, Peace, Commerce, Garden, Pleasures, Palm, Rosemary, Health, Exile, Joy, Carmelite, Straight, and Dawn" (199).

different sites of the city toward which the lyric subject is flung after his explosion, and the verbs describe the wide range of extreme, and sometimes contradictory, actions and emotions that the atomized particles of the subject perform and experience in these different places. The frequently allegorical names of the city's spaces contribute to the anarchic sense of mixed and opposing experiences denoted in the verses, as the verbs often have an antithetical relationship with the place with which they are associated. The speaker is blinded by sunlight, revolts in peace, sobs in pleasure, sickens in health, discovers himself in exile, and sleeps at dawn. These antitheses parallel the fundamental union of opposition that is the essence of *jouissance*: the bringing together of the semiotic and the symbolic, and in the case of *Poema sujo*, the incorporation of the abject into symbolic language. The verses "na do Desterro me encontro" and "na da Alegria me perco" are especially telling; the lyric "I" discovers this new sublime, disarticulated version of himself only through entry into the exiled space of the abject, and loses himself in the literally unspeakable joy that comes from straying in this terrain.

However, ecstatic dispersion outwards into the abject is arrested as the speaker describes his re-composition:

> Mas vem junho e me apunhala
> vem julho me dilacera
> setembro expõe meus despojos
> pelos postes da cidade
> (me recomponho mais tarde,
> costuro as partes, mas os intestinos
> nunca mais funcionarão direito) (88)

[But June arrives and stabs me

July arrives and tears me

September displays my mortal remains

on the city's posts

(I gather myself together later,

sew the pieces up, but my bowels

will never come together right again)] (157)

The dismembered subject, whose abject pieces are strewn about the city, is restructured in order to once again form a cohesive unit. However, the last two verses—the stitching together of the heterogeneous pieces, and the altered functioning of the innards—suggest that the re-formed subject is not the same as the one that existed prior to its dissolution in the abject.

2.3.5 Re-Composition

Sections seven, eight, and nine (all much shorter than the preceding sections) return to the speaker's memories of the heterogeneous city space, but from a slightly different perspective. First-person singular pronouns of all types (subject, direct and indirect objects, objects of prepositions, possessives, etc.) are entirely absent; the "I" of enunciation is almost entirely erased from the scene he describes, acting as more of a third-person omniscient presence than an individual lyric voice that attests to its unique place in the world and its relationship with the things around it. Returning to Culler, the performance here is not that of a subject addressing an object, and thus willing that relationship into being. Rather, we have a subject that has moved beyond its limits, to the point that it observes the entire Symbolic field simultaneously, without occupying any particular place within it, thus maintaining a nebulous, indefinable relationship

with the objects that surround it. The only first-person pronoun that appears in the three sections is a plural one—the implicit subject "nós" of the verb "ríamos" in section nine—and the plurality of this subject serves to reinforce the collectivity and inter-relationship that is staged by the erasure of the lyric "I."

The exact nature of inter-subjective relations after the cathartic explosion of section six becomes the central focus of the poem's last section. This section contains no first-person pronouns, singular or plural, and all of the verses reflect on the impossibility of maintaining fixed boundaries between things. The first stanza reads:

> O homem está na cidade
> como uma coisa está em outra
> e a cidade está no homem
> que está em outra cidade (102)
>
> [Man is in a city
> as an object is in another
> and the city is in a man
> who is in another city] (193)

In these verses, man and city are simultaneously inside one another, in the same way that, according to the disembodied speaker, any thing can be in another. A city can even be in a man that is in another city, which suggests that many layers of imbricated connections between subjects and objects are possible. However, the nature of the intermingling here is different than that which was observed in prior sections of the poem, and this difference is noted most clearly in the form of the verses. The continual enjambment that was the hallmark of the prior sections

spoke to the rupturing of subjective boundaries that is brought about by the return of the abject. Enjambment dramatizes the dissolution of the subject—the anarchic unbinding that explodes the subject and disperses it. In this section, we observe re-composition, in which subjective boundaries exist, and yet are fluid. They are present, yet remain radically open to all forms of otherness, within and without. Rather than dramatizing the rupture of boundaries, this section emulates their porosity and fluidity, as one verse flows seamlessly into the next, without the confusion and parsing together of split semantic units enacted by enjambed lines.

The complex layers of otherness that reside within the self, and within which the self resides, are further explored in a later stanza:

> a cidade está no homem
> quase como a árvore voa
> no pássaro que a deixa (103)
>
> [a city is in a man
> almost as a tree flies
> in the bird that drops it] (195)

The seeming opposites of staying (the verb "estar" here indicates location, i.e. the willful act of occupying and staying put in a space) and flying are equated as the verses reveal that the city stays with a man in the same way that a tree stays with a bird—which is to say, flies with it, as the bird leaves that tree. Thus, the disparate acts of staying, flying, and leaving are all identified with one another, as are city and tree, and man and bird, respectively. Nevertheless, who is inside of what—whether the tree/bird metaphor describes the interiority of man, or vice versa—is

impossible to say, and this impossibility of segregating inside from outside is exactly the point of the new, sublimely ordered subjectivity.

The poem ends with a final insistence on some level of order within the new fluid relation to otherness that is performed within the final section. Again, these verses do not insist that no subjective boundaries exist, but merely that they are elastic and permeable. Whereas the self is always populated with otherness, the self never becomes wholly other, and distinction between the two, however blurry and tenuous, is always maintained:

> cada coisa está em outra
> de sua própria maneira
> e de maneira distinta
> de como está em si mesma
>
> a cidade não está no homem
> do mesmo modo que em suas
> quitandas praças e ruas (103)
>
> [everything is in another
> in its own
> and different way
> of being in itself
>
> a city is not in a man
> the way it is in these

plazas streets and trees] (195)

While each thing exists within another, no thing exists in another in the same way, and the presence of a thing in another is always different from the presence of the thing in itself. In other words, the subject is always grounded in itself, despite the otherness that exists within and without, and despite the fact that the subject is also an other that exists within other subjects and objects. Thus, while the city clearly exists within the subject, and vice versa, both also clearly exist within themselves—interpenetrated by one another, but irreducible to a singular, homogeneous essence.

The poetic speaker in the poem's final section is a subject transformed—still a lyric subject, but no longer a lyric "I." The speaker is consciously both self and other, a heterogeneous fluidity that is both singular and collective, and that maintains a radical openness to the entire Symbolic field. This new ontological status comes about as a result of the incorporation of the abject in the poem, on both subjective and social levels. In the progression through the poem's various sections, the speaker describes how he, individually, is permeated by various abject presences, and also how diverse types of social abjects exist within the urban space, and are relegated to its margins. He identifies internal and external abjects, shows how these abjects transgress the boundaries of the subject and the Symbolic, and performs the sublime and horrifying effect of unbinding that the recuperation of the abject engenders. However, in the last section, all abject presences have disappeared—the grotesque has given way to the beautiful, and the motifs of rotting, decomposition, and death are no longer present. The abject disappears here because, within the democratized Symbolic that has thrown open its borders to the abject, there is no such thing as a defiling presence, no constitutive other against which to define oneself. All

that remains is the sublime beauty of the radically open subject in a Symbolic utopia that is literally boundless, that can have no fixed margins.

2.4 Subject-in-process

The sublime subject, open to the otherness within and without, that arises from abject demolition in *Poema sujo* performs the tenets theorized in the Kristevan concept of the "subject-in-process." Oliver writes that, "Kristeva's claim that alterity is within the subject undermines any notion of a unified subject," (13) and that the subject-in-process is one, "whose constant companions are alterity, negation, and difference" (14). The subject that is infused with difference provides a model for coexistence in society in which difference does not proffer "the threat of annihilation" (*Reading* 12). After posing the question, "[w]hy are certain characteristics or persons excluded from society?" (*Reading* 12), Oliver writes that Kristeva is concerned with, "the limits of identity, the limits of discourse, the limits of the social. The limits interest her because at the limit, subjects enter the social or they are excluded as other" (12). The permeable limits of the subject-in-process provide a model for being with others in which others are not excluded as abject on either a subjective or a social level. The porous boundaries of the subject-in-process allow it to be always renewed by the radically other that resides within it—the semiotic presence from which it draws its *jouissance*. In this way, the experience of *jouissance* attains ethical and political significance, and Oliver recognizes this truth as she writes, "[t]he subject-in-process not only requires a new ethics, but also a new sociality. Ethics and sociality are one and the same. For Kristeva, both are founded on an embrace and articulation of jouissance" (185).

Poema sujo performs a journey to the limits of the subject and the social. The abject is brought into the subject and the socially abject is brought into the Symbolic, and this incorporation of the abject, this radical openness to otherness, creates a politicized experience of *jouissance*. The *jouissance* of the poem brings about a utopian vision of the Symbolic, a radically democratic space in which pervious borders allow for the inclusion of all and the exclusion of none. In this utopian space, the social has no definable limit, and thus cannot sufficiently exclude to the extent necessary in order to form a constitutive other. Thus, reading Kristeva alongside Butler, one may say that *Poema sujo* demonstrates the political force of incorporating the abject and democratizing the Symbolic, and imagines how the ethical imperative of politicizing the abject restructures both the subject and the Symbolic in revolutionary ways.

From his abject position at the social limit, Gullar imagines a revolutionized Symbolic order, in which certain subjects are not driven to the margins, to extra-Symbolic spaces of decay and death. The journey of his lyric "I" performs the transformation of the subject and the Symbolic, bringing into being in his poem a new social order in which the abject ceases to exist as such, and in which the ambivalent mixture of beauty and horror that defines it is transmuted into the pure beauty of destabilized being with others. In this way, the abject space opens to utopian imagining, and the sublime potential of the abject is given a coherent political orientation.

CHAPTER 3

ABJECT FAILURE AND UTOPIAN LONGING IN THE LOWER EAST SIDE: THE POETRY AND PERFORMANCE OF MIGUEL PIÑERO

> Omar: Thinking of joining the ranks?
> Cruising the tearooms?
>
> -Miguel Piñero, *Short Eyes*

> Irving: You're a bitch, Richard.
> Richard: Yeah.
> Irving: I love you.
>
> -Miguel Piñero, *Irving*

In a manner quite similar to Ferreira Gullar, Miguel Piñero also composes his last will and testament in poetic form. In "A Lower East Side Poem," Piñero's poetic speaker asks that, after his death, his ashes be scattered among the "hustlers and suckers" and "faggots and freaks" ("A Lower East Side Poem" 7) in the streets of his home, the neighborhood of the Lower East Side in New York City. The Lower East Side is a setting to which Piñero often returns in his poems and plays, and one which he frequently characterizes as an abject scene, typified by crime, drug addiction, poverty, neocolonial and capitalist exploitation, homophobia, misogyny, and sexual and racial violence. And yet, within this abject zone, Piñero's poetic speakers and the characters of his plays sporadically happen upon some subtle beauty—some glimmer of social alternative to suffering and violence, some regenerative possibility springing forth from abjection. After his death, the disturbing beauty that Piñero locates in the "concrete tomb" ("A Lower East Side Poem" 8) of the Lower East Side leaps forth from the page to be realized in the world, as a

collective of artists associated with the Nuyorican Poets Café perform the directive of Piñero's poem, reciting poems and giving testimonials in a "garbage-strewn lot" next to the Café ("The Sidewalk of High Art" 6), and then processing out into the streets of the Lower East Side to scatter his ashes.

It is easy to dismiss Piñero's life as an abject failure. The poet and playwright, who was born in Puerto Rico in 1946 and moved to the Lower East Side with his family in 1950, was incarcerated at Riker's Island at age eighteen in 1964, where he became addicted to heroin (Bernstein 134). He remained actively addicted to drugs for the majority of his adult life, and spent extended time in prison. He wrote his first play, *Short Eyes*, in 1972 in a playwriting workshop while incarcerated for armed robbery at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York ("Miguel Piñero" *Historical Dictionary* 235-6). He died in 1988 at forty-one of cirrhosis of the liver. In short, he was an immensely talented writer who never left a life of crime and drug addiction, who never transcended the scenes of suffering, oppression, and violence that are the focus of his literary works, or altered them on any grand scale. And yet, the moralizing evaluation of Piñero's life as failure—equivalent to the paternalistic maxim of "why won't he just live up to his potential?"—is firmly grounded in a neoliberal matrix of heteronormative and capitalist ideologies. These ideologies engender deterministic judgments about failure and success according to their own ideological precepts, and fundamentally measure both in terms of capitalist production and heterosexual reproduction. Indeed, Piñero is a subject who refuses to "live up to his potential" as determined by dominant logics of success, and who, by enacting this refusal, provides a glimpse of another sort of potential, a radically outside and socially illegible one, that speaks to new ways of living and being in society. His work gestures toward the

productive possibility and utopian longing that can arise from those marginal zones of the Symbolic that are socially marked as abject.[76]

My intention in this chapter is, of course, not to dismiss Piñero as an abject failure, but rather to recuperate him as such, in order to see what sort of radical politics are made possible by finding beauty and political promise in the abject. As my use of the language of failure and utopia suggests, I will follow the lead of Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz—*The Queer Art of Failure* and *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, respectively—in order to articulate the type of politics that arises out of the abject in Piñero's work. Additionally, I will engage in dialogue with a particular tradition of Puerto Rican literary criticism that identifies a recurring preoccupation with abjection as a fundamental, and even generative, element within Puerto Rican literature. These critics also recognize an empowering or restorative effect of giving form to the abject for Puerto Rican authors, and I will continue in this vein, with the caveat that I find within Piñero's work a distinctly queer component to the politics of his aesthetics. Through locating Piñero's literary corpus within the camp of queer artistic production, I will argue that his plays and poems engage in doing the work of "queer failing" and of "cruising utopia"—which is to say, the work of imagining an unrealized order of social relations, and of gesturing, to use Ernst Bloch's term, toward the "not-yet-here." Ultimately, I will argue that Piñero's gesture toward utopia is fundamentally one of ambivalence, and that the complete transmutation of abject horror into sublime beauty that takes place in the Gullar's *Poema sujo* is

[76] Again, I use the term "Symbolic" here in the Lacanian and Kristevan sense. In the abstract, the Symbolic refers to the entire field of social relations and social laws that are organized and codified in language. See chapter 1 for an extended theoretical discussion of the Symbolic in Lacanian and Kristevan theory. In the concrete historical context examined in this chapter, the Symbolic refers to a set of capitalist, neocolonial, and racist ideologies existent in the cultural imaginary of the United States in the 1960s through the 1980s, which render Puerto Ricans in New York, and the spaces that they inhabit, abject.

not quite accomplished in Piñero's work. Rather, one finds beauty and suffering, love and violence, in equal measure, which speaks to both a radical utopian potential within the abject space of the Lower East Side, and to the possibility that this potential may never be realized, that this utopian possibility may remain an illusory promise. Following Nehamas, who argues in *Only a Promise of Happiness* that beauty in art indicates some form of promise to the reader/observer, the coexistence of beauty and ugliness in Piñero's abject aesthetic frames the political promise of the abject as an open question, fueled by hope for a utopian future that is continually challenged by present disappointment.

3.1 Quandaries of Identity and Politics: Nationalism and Beyond

A proper understanding of the politics of the abject in Piñero's work, and how this politics differs from that of other Puerto Rican writers in New York who were his contemporaries, requires some historical contextualization. The Puerto Rican authors in New York in the 1960s through the 1980s who wrote predominantly in English are commonly referred to as "Nuyorican" writers, and William Luis defines this term in the following way:

> "Puerto Rican literature in the United States can be divided into two categories. The first is composed by island writers who visited but did not stay in the United States and is written in Spanish and published abroad. The second, which is more recent, is written by Puerto Ricans either born or raised in the United States. Because most of these writers lived in New York City during the 1960s and 1970s, they identified themselves with the city and called themselves Puerto Rican New Yorkers or Nuyoricans, an identity that gave meaning to their artistic and literary expressions." (17)

The diasporic movement of Puerto Ricans to New York, which creates the conditions in the 1960s and 70s for a Nuyorican literary movement, begins with the implementation of Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico in the 1940s. Operation Bootstrap was a series of economic policies enacted in Puerto Rico that were meant to move the island away from a primarily agricultural, sugar-producing economy toward a more industrialized model. The result was a movement of Puerto Ricans away from rural areas of the island toward newly created manufacturing jobs in urban or urbanizing areas. However, the creation of industrial jobs was not sufficient to keep up with the loss of agricultural ones, and this lack of employment opportunities led to a mass migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States, primarily to New York City.[77]

The Nuyorican literary movement begins to coalesce in the late 1960s and early 1970s around the project of expressing the experience of post-Operation Bootstrap Puerto Ricans in New York. Whereas various important works were produced by Puerto Rican authors living in the United States before this time period—such as Bernardo Vega's *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (published in 1977, but written in 1947) and Jesús Colón's *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches* (1961), as well as the poetic production of William Carlos Williams and various poems by Julia de Burgos—the late 60s and 70s saw a boom of literary production centered around a specifically New York Puerto Rican experience.[78] Miguel Algarín gives his own description of this experience in his preface to the landmark *Nuyorican Poetry: An*

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[77] For a detailed explanation of the process of industrialization in Puerto Rico and its relationship to emigration to the United States, see Scarano, *Puerto Rico: Cinco siglos de historia*, esp. the subsection "Explosión urbana y emigración," pp. 749-64. See also Ayala y Bernabé's *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898*.

[78] A seminal work of the Nuyorican literary movement that requires recognition is Piri Thomas' semi-autobiographical novel, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). As a novelist, Thomas was not particularly integrated within the literary hub of the Nuyorican Poets Café, nor with the poetic and theatrical aspects of Nuyorican literature that are the focus of this chapter.

Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings (1975), which he co-edited with Piñero.[79] He describes it as a precarious one, perched between willful submission to economic exploitation and a choice to live outside the Law:

> For the poor New York Puerto Rican there are three survival possibilities. The first is to labor for money and exist in eternal debt. The second is to refuse to trade hours for dollars and to live by your will and "hustle." The third possibility is to create alternative behavior habits. ("Introduction: Nuyorican Language" 9)

Algarín later describes this third possibility of creating "alternative behavior habits" as a form of "juggling" between the first two alternatives, which consists of directing the outlaw activity of "hustling" toward the formation of a largely self-governed community capable of existing in an adjacent relationship (albeit an uneasy one) alongside the dominant, oppressive society. He uses the example of two Puerto Rican street cliques (The Renegades of Harlem and the Dynamite Brothers) from different neighborhoods that come together to rehabilitate abandoned buildings, so that they may be re-appropriated for community use. Engaging in the appropriation and rehabilitation of these buildings without the necessary permits is technically illegal and, as Algarín recounts in the essay, the effort requires the creation of an unofficial alliance with the local fire department. These types of actions represent the exact sort of blending between acting

[79] In an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández, Algarín states that the word "nuyorican" came into being as a result of an experience shared by both Algarín and Piñero while visiting in Puerto Rico before the publication of *Nuyorican Poetry*. While in the airport, Algarín heard the word "newyorican" being used to refer to him and Piñero, but did not understand its meaning. On further reflection, he made the association: "*new-yo-rican*, that is, New York and Puerto Rican. They were looking down on us, as if we were nothing. We were Puerto Ricans talking in English, and that to them was contemptuous" ("Miguel Algarín" 40). Later, Algarín proposed the title of *Newyorican Poetry* to Piñero, as a way of appropriating the pejorative term and granting it new signification. Piñero responded by saying, "[b]ut I am not new anything, I am not *neo*, that is an intellectualism," ("Miguel Algarín" 40) which led them to eventually settle on the term "nuyorican."

inside and outside of the Law that, according to Algarín, has the potential to create real social and political alternatives for Puerto Ricans in New York. Ultimately, he sees this form of hybrid, outlaw self-governance as an empowering form of nationalism grounded in Nuyorican identity:

> A clique (a New York street clique) is a group of people who offer each other safety. Safety in numbers is nationalism. Nationalism is mutual protection. The clique can be small or large. Large nationalist cliques (ITT, Dupont, Chase Manhattan Bank) protect and define their laws. A small nationalist clique is any city gang that is geographically located in a particular neighborhood or city block and protects its laws. The purpose for wearing colors, designing a flag, or having an anthem is to develop an identity. ("Introduction: Nuyorican Language" 13-14)

Finally, Algarín sees Nuyorican language as an expression of this Puerto Rican nationalist identity: "[t]he experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican" ("Introduction: Nuyorican Language" 15). He asserts that the poems contained in *Nuyorican Poetry* are written in this language, and that they not only work under a common nationalistic logic of political empowerment, but that they also adopt a common poetics, which arises organically from the multicultural Nuyorican experience. This poetics is marked by a rhythm that, "is always *bomba*,"[80] and a vocabulary that, "is English and Spanish mixed into a new language" ("Introduction: Nuyorican Language" 15-16).

[80] Bomba is a form of Puerto Rican popular music originally created among slave communities on the island. For a concise, technical description of the musical style, see "Los estilos musicales folklóricos" in the Works Cited section. In *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, Juan Flores follows Algarín in emphasizing the importance of bomba to the cultural identity of Puerto Ricans in the United States, as his use of bomba in the title allows the genre to function as a metonym for all folkloric Puerto Rican culture that enters into a process of transformation and hybridization in the United States.

Thus, Algarín's central understanding of Nuyorican poetry is that it is an authentic manifestation of the marginal Nuyorican experience in the United States, and that both the nationalist political demands and the syncretic multicultural identity of this group are woven into the fabric of the poems. Luis makes a similar argument in *Dance with Two Cultures*,[81] as he associates the advent of Nuyorican literature with the Young Lords Party, a revolutionary Puerto Rican nationalist organization whose political aims included Puerto Rican independence, an end to American hegemony in the Global South, and the establishment of a socialist society.[82] Additionally, various Nuyorican poets, such as Pedro Pietri and Felipe Luciano, were active members of the Young Lords during the 1970s. The Nuyorican Poets Café, founded by Algarín and Piñero in 1973, becomes both an important performance space and a central, organizing institution for the Nuyorican literary movement.[83] The Café remains an important Nuyorican cultural center in the 1980s, although the explicit connection to a uniquely Nuyorican identity and Puerto Rican nationalist program begins to shift.[84] After a brief closure around the time of Piñero's death, the Café reopens in 1989 with a more diverse, multicultural makeup, which includes pan-Latino, African American, Asian American, as well as Anglo American poets

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[81] This point is discussed at length in chapter 2, "Puerto Rican American Poetry," beginning on p. 43.
[82] A list of the Young Lords Party's political goals is presented in the "Young Lords Party 13-Point Program and Platform," published (in its final, revised form) in 1970 in the group's newspaper *Palante*.
[83] In "The Sidewalk of High Art," an introduction to the second anthology of Nuyorican poetry, published in 1994, Algarín provides a definition of the term "Nuyorican," in which he speaks of the Café as if it were a sovereign state, which served as a cultural home for Puerto Ricans in New York. Speaking of Nuyoricans, he says: "[t]hey were a stateless people (like most U.S. poets) until the Café became their homeland" (5).
[84] Although the Nuyorican Poets Café is a definitively Nuyorican cultural institution in the 1970s and 80s, it is also frequented by non-Puerto Rican poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Ntozake Shange, and Amiri Baraka during this time period, which demonstrates some level of solidarity between the Nuyorican aesthetic and political program and other concurrent literary and political movements in New York.

("Counter/public Address" 42-3). At this point, the Café becomes less identified with Nuyorican history and identity, and more identified with the slam poetry movement, which not only makes the Café a more overtly multicultural space, but one that is for the first time open to mass-market consumption, as slam and spoken word make their way onto HBO and MTV, and are consumed as objects of pop culture.[85]

Whereas Piñero certainly writes some overtly nationalistic poems,[86] the majority of his work has a different political orientation than that which is articulated by Algarín in his introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry*. Although Piñero was affiliated with the Young Lords (Rossini 239), he did not maintain a sustained commitment to overt political activism. His literary work follows the same trajectory—rather than sticking to a defined political program, his writing insists on deviation, on meandering, on straying into the realm of the abject, where structures of ideology fracture and shatter. Rather than juggling between inside and outside, as Algarín advocates, Piñero sticks to the outside. Even while experiencing commercial success for his plays,[87] addiction and crime always seemed to interrupt his full integration into the marketplace. He reportedly used to scalp tickets to *Short Eyes* in order to buy heroin ("Miguel Piñero"

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[85] See Urayoán Noel's "Counter/public Address: Nuyorican Poetries in the Slam Era" for a discussion of how, despite the shift toward multiculturalism and marketability in the 1990s, Puerto Rican poets associated with the Nuyorican Poets Café maintain some level of continuity with the anticolonial identity politics of the 1970s. Noel also gives a summary of the two poles of a critical debate regarding how to classify post-1990 Nuyorican literature. Citing scholars such as Juan Flores, Raphael Dalleo, and Elena Machado Sáez, he sees one pole as consisting of an insistence on the continued anticolonial nature of Nuyorican literature (Flores), and the other as emphasizing a literature founded in pan-Latinidad and market pragmatism (Dalleo and Machado Sáez). Ultimately, Noel situates Nuyorican literature in a shifting middle ground, marked by continuity and rupture with both positions.

[86] See especially "La Cañonera del Mundo" and "Vente conmigo" in *Outlaw: The Collected Works of Miguel Piñero*.

[87] *Short Eyes* in particular was highly successful, earning six Tony Award nominations, winning two Obie Awards, and winning the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play of the 1973-74 season ("Miguel Piñero" *Historical Dictionary* 236).

Encyclopedia of Lesbian), and while he was filming the movie version of *Short Eyes* (1977), for which he wrote the screenplay and in which he acted, he was arrested for armed robbery and arraigned in the same jail in which the crew was filming (Rossini 242).

In addition to resisting an easy integration into capitalist and nationalist political ideologies, Piñero also deviated from heteronormative sexual orthodoxy. Various scholars have documented Piñero's bisexuality, with Lee Bernstein writing that, "[a]lthough Piñero did not define himself as gay and was briefly married to a woman, he did have same-sex encounters throughout his life and lived with painter Martin Wong" (132). In an interview with *The Advocate*, Benjamin Bratt, who played the part of Pinero in the 2002 biopic *Piñero*, said the following regarding Piñero's sexuality:

> He was most certainly a practicing bisexual. But I think he, like many other cons, didn't really play that sexual identity political game. Sex is sex, and even within a prison system, what you are and how you should be labeled depends on whether you're giving or receiving. And many of his friends have told me that if you called him gay to his face or even called him bisexual, he'd probably stab you. And yet it's well documented that that was very much a part of his lifestyle. He was at his core a sensualist—whatever tickled his fancy, whether it was heroin or cocaine or sex with teenage boys or women or drinking booze, whatever turned him in on the moment was just fine by him. (Bratt 42, 45)

Thus, one can observe in Piñero's life both queerness, and the abjection of queerness—the willful abandon to socially abject sexual practices (especially within a heteronormative nationalist context) as well as the violent repudiation of identification with such practices. Certainly, Piñero's relationship with queerness was a conflictive one. Yet his plays—especially

Short Eyes, Paper Toilet, and *Irving*—continually return to this conflict, and hint at the possibility of, instead of disavowing queerness, remaining in this socially abject space, and finding beauty within it. In doing so, they point toward a productive queer politics that could arise from the abject.

3.2 Abject Politics in Puerto Rican Literature

In order to sketch out what this politics might be, it is perhaps best to first delineate my understanding of how the abject functions in Piñero's work, and in twentieth-century Puerto Rican literature in general, from that of other scholars. In various essays, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé locates the negotiation of abjection at the center of Puerto Rican literary production in the twentieth century.[88] Broadly, he argues that colonial domination is a form of abjection, and that Puerto Rican literature responds to this abjection in various ways. On one hand, he notes the continuously failing attempt on the part of certain canonical authors (especially Antonio S. Pedreira and René Marqués) to establish a dominant national literature, which consolidates its phallic power through the abjection of the feminine and the queer. On the other, he brings critical attention to a queerly valenced writing (evidenced by the work of Luis Rafael Sánchez and Manuel Ramos Otero) that refuses the paternal project of forming national identity by means of abjection, and instead willfully occupies a space of abject queerness. He argues that this abject presence is an ineluctable part of both a larger Puerto Rican consciousness and colonial power dynamics, and is imbued with its own subversive power.

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[88] See especially "'What a tangled web!': Masculinidad, abyección y la fundación de la literatura puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos" and "Toward and Art of Transvestism: Colonialism and Homosexuality in Puerto Rican Literature."

Benigno Trigo also finds a restorative effect in the symbolization of the abject in Puerto Rican literature,[89] although in a way that is somewhat different from Cruz-Malavé. Trigo analyzes the scene of self-sacrifice that continually recurs in Puerto Rican literature, arguing that this scene functions as an elaboration of the colonial abjection suffered by Puerto Rican subjects, which creates the capacity for this abjection to be transfigured into what he calls "hyperbolic forgiveness" (*Malady* 6-7) or love. He suggests that the symbolization of the abject by the author and the act of interpretation on the part of the reader parallel the analytic dynamic of speaking and listening, and put in motion the process that allows the malady of social abjection to be transformed into the genius of love. In this way, his work functions as, "an attempt at […] dismantling and elaborating the colonial psyche represented in a repeating scene of Puerto Rican self-sacrifice confident that we can keep putting the community back together again" (*Malady* 10).

The work of both of these scholars demonstrates the way in which abjection may be transmuted into a positive and restorative force in Puerto Rican literature. What I would like to do is to flesh out another way in which the abject can engage in more explicitly political work through serving, in Piñero's work, as a staging ground for utopian imagining. However, in "Toward an Art of Transvestism" and "What a Tangled Web!" Cruz-Malavé reserves the subversive force of abject writing for Luis Rafael Sánchez and Manuel Ramos Otero. In "What a Tangled Web!" he examines the texts produced by Puerto Rican writers in the United States, and draws a clear contrast between Nuyorican literature and the writing of openly gay writers, such as Ramos Otero, who spent substantial time in the United States, but were not identified with the

[89] See *Malady and Genius: Self-Sacrifice in Puerto Rican Literature* (2016).

Nuyorican movement. The similarity and distinction that he draws between these two groups of writers bears further elaboration.

Cruz-Malavé begins the essay with an analysis of Sanchéz's story "¡Jum!" which dramatizes the sacrificial murder of a gay man in a small town. Cruz-Malavé finds within this story the allegorical tale of the construction of Puerto Rican national identity. Here, the abjection of queerness serves as a metaphor for the way in which the colonial subject purges himself—I say "himself" intentionally, because this is, indeed, a phallic fantasy—of the homosexual erotic charge that underlies the relationship between colonizer and colonized, in order to form a virile, patriarchal national identity. Following the schema of colonial relations theorized by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Cruz-Malavé argues that the white fear of colonized and hyper-sexualized black bodies carries within it desire in equal measure, that negrophobia and homosexual desire are inextricably linked to one another: "[e]n el fondo, el hombre blanco que le teme al falo erecto que es el hombre negro en la cultural occidental, argumenta Fanon, también lo desea; así como el hombre blanco que se imagina perseguido por el hombre negro, también lo persigue, lo invoca" ("What a Tangled Web!" 331). Thus, the abjection of homosexuality in "¡Jum!" serves as a strategy by which colonial subjects attempt to escape the homoerotics of colonial power relations, and form a collective identity outside of the colonizer/colonized binary. However, Cruz-Malavé also notes that the action of abjecting the queer is never truly completed, that the constitutive other, to use Butler's term, against which the Symbolic defines itself is always present, lurking at the porous boundaries of the social margins. In a similar way, the figure of the homosexual in "¡Jum!" is also marked as a constitutive presence in the formation of the communal body in the story; as he is ritualistically drowned in the river that runs alongside

the town, his corpse becomes the fragile border that delimits the collective identity, the "contrapunto [a] su identidad" ("What a Tangled Web!" 329).

After elucidating how the abjection of homosexuality becomes a ritual of social purification that structures identity in "¡Jum!" Cruz-Malavé theorizes a different trajectory that abjection could follow. Openly wondering whether the abject could suffer a fate other than the martyrdom of being drowned in the river, he asks:

> ¿Pero tendrá lo abyecto una palabra propia, un ritmo no antitético, una respiración que no sea aprovechable para ese contrapunto? ¿Habrá, es decir, un espacio propio —espacio que no esté en complicidad con la estructura binaria del sacrificio— desde el cual lo abyecto pueda articular su identidad o hacia el cual él la pueda dirigir? ¿O habrá otras vías —vías propias— por medio de las cuales resistir la abyección? Y si pudiera salir del río y desplazarse por canales previstos, recorrer nuevamente la ruta de su crucifixión, ¿lograría él subvertir entonces la estructura que lo repudia y lo absorbe? ¿O caería él nuevamente en las redes imbricadas de la expiación? ("What a Tangled Web!" 329)

In this passage, Cruz-Malavé hypothesizes two possible ways in which the abject could attain political force. The first is by claiming a sort of third space outside of the binary structure of inside/outside, subject/abject, and developing a new social structure that exists radically apart from the original oppressive and exclusive one, and that bears no relation to it. The second is the subversion of this binary through the return of the abject into the Symbolic, a crucifixion in reverse that renounces sacrifice and, like a drowned corpse rising to the surface, returns to perturb, disrupting both the dynamics of colonial subjugation and the fragile boundaries of identity. He then notes that the Puerto Rican literature written in the United States—in other words, outside of the porous borders that demarcate the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico as

nation—tends to itself occupy the position of Sánchez's drowned protagonist, and thus embodies the various possibilities of subversion and resistance that the Puerto Rican literature of the abject may offer: "[g]ran parte de la literatura puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos, tanto la llamada "nuyorican" como la de los escritores homosexuales exiliados de la generación del '70, está escrita desde este destierro, desde ese río de la abyección" ("What a Tangled Web!" 329).

Within this corpus (corpse?) of abject literature, Cruz-Malavé identifies both similarities and differences in the way that the Nuyorican writers and the homosexual Puerto Rican writers in exile approach the dynamics of abjection.[90] While largely rejecting the possibility of a utopic third space in which the social abjects could foment identitarian and political alternatives,[91] he argues that the fundamental similarity between the two groups is that authors from both reveal the aporias and the fragility of heterosexual masculinity and, by metaphorical extension, national identity construction. Yet Cruz-Malavé also argues that this work in the Nuyorican context is fraught with ambivalence and paradox—that these writers generally seek to maintain a brittle heterosexual masculine identity at the same time that they reveal the impossibility of such a project. The homosexual male writers, of whom Ramos Otero is Cruz-Malavé's paradigmatic example, on the other hand, engage in a more parodic, burlesque, and, indeed, radical project of

[90] The opposition between these two categories follows the division that Luis creates in *Dance Between Two Cultures* between Puerto Rican writers who lived most of their lives in Puerto Rico and who write predominantly in Spanish, and those who were born or raised in the US, and who write predominantly in English. The authors that Cruz-Malavé identifies as homosexual writers in exile from the "generación del '70" are Victor Fragoso, Manuel Ramos Otero, Carlos Rodríguez Matos, Alfredo Villanueva Collado, and Alberto Sandoval Sánchez ("What a Tangled Web! 337n5), all of whom emigrate to the United States as adults, and write primarily in Spanish. The Nuyorican writers from the same time period write in a mixture of English and Spanish or, as Algarín would say, in Nuyorican. However, whereas some level of cultural and linguistic dichotomy does exist between the two groups that Cruz-Malavé highlights, a straight/queer binary cannot easily be imposed, as Piñero's fluid sexuality undermines such a distinction.
[91] For a more detailed analysis of the promises and pitfalls of utopian thinking in Nuyorican literature, see Cruz-Malavé's "Teaching Puerto Rican Authors."

inverting the relationship between abject and subject, between colonized and colonizer, and offer a queer deconstruction of the metaphor of the heterosexual male subject as the transcendental subject of national identity.[92]

3.3 *Short Eyes*: Utopian Vision?

I would like to tarry for a minute with Cruz-Malavé's conclusions about Nuyorican literature, especially with his analysis of Piñero's play *Short Eyes*, to show how the scenes of abjection in the work carry within them the seeds of utopian possibility. The play tells the story of the murder of a child molester inside a New York pre-trial detention facility, and the title derives from the prison slang term, "short eyes," used among inmates to refer to pedophiles. A drama that is rich in nuance and interpretive possibility, *Short Eyes* provides a critical look into the possibilities for moral freedom and resistance to oppressive forces of race, class, and sexuality that exist both within the inhumane institution of the American prison system and outside its walls.[93] The play also displays a deep ambivalence toward practices of homosexuality and the possibility of egalitarian race relations, "frequently switch[ing] between violence and intimacy, uncritical homophobia and repudiations of contemporary morality," and sending

[92] Two of Ramos Otero's stories in particular, "Vida ejemplar del esclavo y el señor" and "Loca de la locura," perform this political gesture according to Cruz-Malavé. See "Toward an Art of Transvestism" for a more detailed analysis of "Loca de la locura" and the question of abjection, and "What a Tangled Web!" and "Para virar al macho" for further reading regarding "Vida ejemplar del esclavo y el señor." See Trigo's "El destiempo de la invitación: en torno al último libro de Manuel Ramos Otero" for a reading of Ramos Otero in which forgiveness provides an outlet from abjection in the author's final work, *Invitación al polvo* (1991).
[93] See Hames-García ch. 4, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*.

"similarly mixed messages about racial conflict, both demonstrating the possibility of interracial communities behind bars and articulating racist sentiments" (Bernstein 132).[94]

Cruz-Malavé elucidates the nature of the ambivalence toward homosexuality in the play, explaining it as a function of the dynamics of abjection that are inevitably at play in a carceral environment. The prison is not only the site where the criminal, the violator of the Law, is deposited after his/her excision from the social body, but it is also the place where the social forces that mark certain racialized and colonial bodies as abject are rendered fully visible. In other words, the prison reveals the manner in which the forces of white supremacy and neocolonialism are woven into the fiber of the carceral institution, influencing which bodies are judged as criminal and designated abject. The makeup of the population on the cellblock in *Short Eyes* bears this out: three are Puerto Rican (Juan, Paco, and Julio, a.k.a. "Cupcakes"), three are African American (Ice, El Raheem, and Omar) and one is white (Longshoe), until the later introduction of the pedophile, Clark Davis, who is also white. As a result, the colonial dynamics of desire and repudiation, of homoerotic yearning and abjection, which Cruz-Malavé identifies in "What a Tangled Web!" are very much present in the prison setting of *Short Eyes*. All prisons to some degree function as penal colonies, and prisoners may be thought of as existing in a colonial relationship with their overseers, in which they are often required to perform poorly or unpaid labor for the benefit of the state or private company that has absolute authority over them. Adding another layer to this colonial relationship, the majority of the occupants of American prisons are to some extent postcolonial subjects (or colonial subjects, in the case of Puerto Ricans), who exist as abject bodies in the cultural imaginary of the dominant white, middle-class

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[94] See Fiona Mills' "Seeing Ethnicity" for an analysis of the way in which race and class prejudice negatively affected the critical reception of *Short Eyes* after its opening on Broadway. The negative reviews demonstrate the manner in which abject performance in Piñero's play is met with revulsion by the overwhelmingly white and middle-class class theater critics.

society. They are descendants of slaves brought to the Americas during the colonization of Africa, or migrants and descendants of migrants from various Latin American and Caribbean post-colonies, whose diasporic movement is driven by the asymmetries of power and capital that continue to exist between the United States and the rest of the Americas.

As such, the population of the detention center in *Short Eyes* consists of colonial subjects (many of whom are colonial and postcolonial subjects outside of the prison), who are enmeshed in the homoerotic structure of colonial power relations. The first lines of the play come from a guard who, addressing the inmates to quiet them down before the roll call, tells them, "your soul may belong to God, but your ass is mine" (194). The body of the prisoner—literally, the ass—becomes the feminized, homosexual object of desire and repudiation for the patriarchal authority figure, as the sexual domination implied by "taking the ass"—dominating it, planting a phallic flag within it—implies desire as much as violence. The inmates, in an attempt to escape from the passive position of abject homosexual, repeat the same abjection they have suffered, enacting sexual violence against other prisoners in a precarious effort to reclaim a space of dominant masculinity, thus forming, "una cadena jerárquica, unilateral de abyección" ("What a Tangled Web!" 333).

However, in these moments of homosexual contact between inmates, Cruz-Malavé also notes that the ambivalence between desire and revulsion, the ease with which one can transform into another, threatens to shift the balance of power between active and passive, between colonizer and colonized. While he argues that the demonstration of this reversibility is the central preoccupation of many of Ramos Otero's works, he also notes these moments of devolution in *Short Eyes*. The most memorable moment of this inversion comes between Paco and Cupcakes, who Piñero refers to as a "Puerto Rican pretty boy" in the description of the characters that

precedes the script of the play (*Short Eyes* 193). When Cupcakes is in the shower in Act II, Paco gets in with him and kisses him, offering even to "go both ways" (221) with Cupcakes. At this moment, in the bathroom—which is the site of the most universal form of abjection, the evacuation of bodily waste—the two inmates threaten to transform violent expulsion into pure erotic desire. Paco tells Cupcakes that he is, in fact, in love with him, and lavishes him with amorous and seductive supplications:

> Óyeme, negrito … déjame decirte algo … tú me tiene loco … me desespera … nene, estoy enchulao contigo … Yo quiero ser tuyo y quiero que tú sea mío … ¿Y qué tú quiere que yo haga por ti? […] te quiero y que te adoro … nene […] Tú va a ser mío … mi nene lindo … Cupcakes, que dio bendiga la tierra que tú pise. (220)

However, the moment of queer romance never fully manages to escape the threat of violent abjection, as in response to Cupcakes' resistance, Paco tells him, "[p]ush comes to shove, I'll take you. But I don't wanna do that 'cause I know I'm gonna have to hurt you in the doing" (221). The subtext of the play, as well as suggestive statements by other characters, insinuates that Cupcakes is also attempting to work out a conflictive relationship between homosexual desire and homosexual repudiation. Various inmates besides Paco (Omar, Longshoe, El Raheem, and Ice) express explicit or implicit sexual desire for Cupcakes,[95] and Cupcakes' behavior—doing pushups in front of the other prisoners with his buttocks ostentatiously thrust up into the air—suggests that, to some degree, Cupcakes enjoys being an object of desire. When Omar gives voice to this suspicion—"You's a fine motherfucker, Cupcakes. Like I said, I ain't the smartest guy in the place. But I get the feeling you like being a fine motherfucker" (222)—Cupcakes does not deny it, but instead attempts to deflect Omar's desire toward Clark Davis, the "short eyes":

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[95] See Paco's monologue on p. 231 for the revelation of the shared desire for Cupcakes that exists among the residents of the cellblock.

“Look, look … we’re gonna do it to the white freak” (222). Yet the displacement of desire onto another object (Clark), and its transformation into violence, does not erase or resolve the ambivalence that arises in the shower scene between Paco and Cupcakes, in which the faltering repression of desire on the part of both is expressed in repudiation. For Cupcakes, this takes the form of his weak rejection of Paco’s advances, and for Paco, it is the unrealized threat that his expression of love will turn into the most extreme form of sexual violence: into rape.

In the end, Cupcakes is successful in diverting the erotic interest of the other inmates toward Clark, thus fully transfiguring this latent, collective homosexual desire into violent repudiation, and reestablishing the colonial system of abjection that defines the prison structure. Much like the homosexual protagonist of Sánchez’s “¡Jum!,” Clark is thrust into the position of abject pariah, and cast out of the society in the perverse purification rite of ritual murder. When all of the inmates (except for Juan, who serves as a sort of voice of moral conscience in the play) put into practice their plan to gang rape Clark, he threatens to tell the authorities. The prisoners respond by collectively (again, except for Juan) holding Clark down while Longshoe cuts his throat. If we imagine that the community in “¡Jum!” is a Puerto Rican one (although Sánchez does not explicitly state this), then we can read both “¡Jum!” and *Short Eyes* as allegories of collective colonial identity formation. The colonized communal body, rendered abject through colonial domination, repeats abjection through the violent exclusion of a stigmatized other, in order to purge itself of a perceived homosexual passivity, and establish a heterosexual patriarchal collective identity. If in “¡Jum!” we are presented with a Puerto Rican communal body, in *Short Eyes*, we are shown the members of a penal colony, cut off from society by the walls of a New York correctional facility. Of course, this abjection is always partial and ambivalent, and always threatening to come undone, and manifest as its inverse: queer desire. Ultimately, this is the

political force of negotiating abjection that Cruz-Malavé identifies in the Nuyorican branch of Puerto Rican diasporic literature—it is a writing that attempts to enact a solid construction of heterosexual masculine identity at the same time that it demonstrates the inevitable failure of this endeavor. He sees it as a literature that continually deconstructs itself, and in doing so reveals the fundamental aporia that lies at the heart of the Puerto Rican national literature that seeks to escape colonial abjection by erecting itself as a phallic, patriarchal power. But does the abject do more here than reveal aporia and engage in a negative politics of deconstruction?

Throughout the play, the bathroom functions as an important space for negotiating homosexual abjection and its threat of reversibility. After the inmates learn what Clark has been accused of (raping a young girl) they immediately begin to associate him with the abject space of the toilet. When none of the inmates will give him space to stand in the common area, claiming every space as their own and demanding that he move, Cupcakes suggests that he stand by the toilet: "[h]ey, Clark … that spot's not taken … right over there … Yeah, that's right … the whole toilet bowl and you go well together" (212). Shortly thereafter, Longshoe demands that Clark hold his penis while he urinates, and when he refuses, the inmates begin to verbally taunt him, eventually sticking his head in a urine-filled toilet and flushing it. Finally, after Clark is murdered, his body is left in the shower, and the guards (except for one, Mr. Nett, who sanctioned and witnessed the killing) are made to believe that the death was a suicide. The space of the bathroom becomes the final resting place for Clark, acquiring both a literal and metaphorical sense of evacuation and cleansing in the penal colony.

And yet, in keeping with Cruz-Malavé's focus on the dynamic of reversibility, the bathroom also functions as the privileged setting in which violence can become desire. The shower scene between Paco and Cupcakes reveals a moment in which abjection tends on the

verge of love, yet never manages to transcend colonial dynamics of repression and violence. Regardless of the impossibility of abandon to homoerotic desire that is expressed in this scene, Cruz-Malavé shows that the encounter between the two men does have a subversive political force, that it threatens to, "desarticular [la] condena jerárquica de sujeciones que es el sistema carcelario al invertir su dirección" ("What a Tangled Web!" 334). Nevertheless, is it possible that this encounter moves beyond the negative, and gestures toward a positive politics? Is it possible that within the abject scene of the prison bathroom, amidst the threat of rape and murder, that there lies latent an as-of-yet-unrealized potential for an alternative social order? Can we imagine the abject here as enacting a rupture in the Symbolic order of colonial domination, in other words, an abject performance that transgresses the boundaries of the Symbolic, reconfiguring it and opening it to the possibility of Muñoz's queer utopia? And if so, what valences of utopia lie dormant within the toilet?

3.4 Utopia in *The Toilet*

In order to answer these questions, I would like to transition to the work of another author, Amiri Baraka (1934-2014), who expressed an ambivalence to homosexuality that is similar to Piñero's. Baraka, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, was a contemporary of the New York School poets, and an active participant in this literary circle during the late 1950s and early 1960s. He would later renounce this bohemian aesthetic scene to become one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, and embrace black nationalism.[96] However, before this transition away from the New York School scene, it is known that Baraka engaged in homosexual encounters, and that

[96] In the 1970s, Baraka would also frequent the Nuyorican Poets Café, and was present at Piñero's funerary performance.

one of his partners was the poet Frank O'Hara.[97] His play, *The Toilet*, debuted in 1964 in a double billing with another play by O'Hara.[98] The aptly named work deals explicitly with the topic of queer abjection and, in a manner very similar to *Short Eyes*, gestures toward alternative possibility arising out of the abject.

The Toilet tells the story of two high school boys, Jimmy Karolis (who is white) and Ray a.k.a. "Foots" (who is black), who are bullied into fighting one another in a school bathroom. The impetus toward the conflict arises when Foots' friends find a note that Karolis sent to Foots, in which Karolis tells him that he's beautiful and that he wants to give him a blowjob. The subtext of the play to this point, as well as a few intimations from another student named Donald Farrell, who is a friend of Karolis' that is present in the bathroom, suggest that the interest is not one sided, and that a sexual relationship between the two boys has been going on for some time. Foots' friends have already badly beaten Karolis by the time they drag him into the bathroom. The first time that Foots sees Karolis during the action of the play, he is lying bloodied on the bathroom floor, and the stage directions indicate that Foots' reaction is one of "horror and disgust," which he struggles to conceal as he lingers over his body, "threatening to stay too long" (52). Foots initially declines to fight Karolis, claiming that he is already too injured to fight. But in his first lines of the play, Karolis coldly declares that he wants to fight Foots. After insisting various times, demanding that Foots fight him, Karolis reveals that the toilet exists for him and Foots not only as a space of violence, but also as one of desire:

> Karolis: I'll fight you Foots! (*Spits the name.*) I'll fight you. Right here in this same place where you said your name was Ray. (*Screaming. He lunges at Foots and manages to*

[97] See Muñoz, pp. 85-6.
[98] The play was published before Baraka's name change, and thus appears in the Works Cited section under the name LeRoi Jones.

> *grab him in a choke hold.*) Ray, you said your name was. You said Ray. Right here in this filthy toilet. You said Ray. (*He is choking Foots and screaming. Foots struggles and is punching Karolis in the back and the stomach, but he cannot get out of the hold*.) You put your hand on me and said Ray! (60)

Queer desire is repressed into violence and abjection until the very last moment of the play. Karolis chokes Foots into unconsciousness, and Foots' friend, Ora, a ruthless bully who is the chief orchestrator of the fight, pulls Karolis off of Foots, and all of the boys beat Karolis together. Finally, Ora dips a cup of water in the toilet, and throws it in Foots' face, and all of the other boys exit the bathroom. The final action of the play occurs as Foots regains consciousness, walks over to Karolis, and "kneels before the body, weeping and cradling the head in his arms" (62).

In his book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Fred Moten describes *The Toilet* as "a homosexual, interracial seizure," on the part of Baraka, which contains within it both an avowal and a disavowal of homosexuality. He argues that, "Baraka's work, over the course of the early 1960s is, in large part, the struggle to embrace such seizure, to think and renew its political content and force" (169). Moten's articulation of the nature of the "political content and force" of this seizure is too nuanced and complex to be able to do full justice to it in a brief summary, but it generally revolves around a resistance to racialized subjection, a radical cut or break, that is realized in the black avant-garde, especially in jazz music and performance. Moten also emphasizes a definitively homoerotic element in the break that he identifies in the black avant-garde, and while noting that some black performers, such as musician Cecil Taylor, embrace this homoerotic radicality, for Baraka, this embrace remains a struggle. Thus, while on one hand *The Toilet* serves an attempt to hold on to (to seize) this moment of seizure, "Baraka's work is also, at the same time, a massive disavowal of such an

embrace, a disavowal continually given in his desire for a purified racial and sexual self-referentiality" (169). Moten sees this disavowal as a "violent purification" of the productive "frenzy or rapture" that is this moment of seizure (169). The language of violent purification is, of course, the language of abjection, and the end game of this abjection is the establishment of a "black heterosexual maleness," which is "the path that Baraka must always take toward this purification" (Moten 169). In *The Toilet*, as well as in the toilet of *Short Eyes*, the purification of heterosexual masculinity rests upon the ambivalent abjection of queerness. Similarly, Baraka's disavowal of queerness, which happens a few years after the production of *The Toilet* (Muñoz 90), parallels the adoption of a black nationalist ideology, which carries within it an echo of the formation of heterosexual national identity through queer abjection that Cruz-Malavé finds in various Puerto Rican works.

Despite the homophobic violence that pervades *The Toilet*, Muñoz locates within the work a critique of masculinity that constructs itself via abjection, and a gesture toward queer alternatives that could exist in the future. It is important to understand that this queer futurity does not recast the play as a present utopia. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz is clear that he is not interested in re-signifying "the gesture of tenderness as redemptive," nor in "cleansing the violence that saturates every move and utterance of the play" (90). Instead, he sees the final movements of the drama as speaking to what is absent in the violent present, and to an interracial homosexual relationality that could be realized in the future:

> This moment nonetheless tells a story that suggests some kind of futurity, a relational potential worth holding on to. Battered and bruised, shattered by internal and external frenzies of homophobic violence, the combatant lovers nonetheless have this moment of wounded recognition that tells us that this moment in time and in this place, the moment

> of pain-riddled youth, is not all there is, that indeed *something is missing*. The gestural speaks to that which is, to use Bloch's phrase *not-yet-here*. (90; emphasis added)

It is the something that is missing, the yet-to-arrive, toward which utopian thinking gestures for Bloch and, following him, Muñoz. For the function of utopia is double; it enacts a critique of the present while at the same time pointing out alternative possibility. Bloch and Theodor Adorno tease out this dialectical essence of utopia together in a conversation between them that takes place in 1964, later transcribed under the title "Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing." About halfway through the dialogue, Bloch arrives at the conclusion that, "the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers [of the present], we could not even perceive them as barriers" (12). In other words, the function of utopia is simultaneously to demarcate the boundaries of the possible within the current society, and to look beyond those barriers to imagine what might be. Adorno quickly agrees, and elaborates this idea:

> Yes, at any rate, utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of what merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what it should be. Yesterday you quoted Spinoza in the passage, "Verum index sui et falsi" [The true is the sign of itself and the false]. I have varied this a little in the sense of the dialectical principle of the determined negation, and said Falsum—the false thing—index sui et veri" [The false is the sign of itself and the correct]. That means that the true thing determines itself via the false thing, or via that which makes itself falsely known. And insofar as we are not allowed to cast the picture of utopia, insofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to

> be sure, what the false thing is. That is actually the only form in which utopia is given to us at all. (12)

Thus, utopia, by presenting itself in the form of the negative or the false—*not this* form of subjugation*, not that* instance of violence—critiques the present and its limits, while at the same time invoking the something that is missing, that which lies beyond society's grasp. As such, utopia is a double sign, existing as a concrete falsity that points away from the problems of the present toward a ghostly future that can never be articulated in its totality. Rather, it is communicated in the gestural and caught in glimpses—the something still missing toward which humans may continue to strive.

Applying this theoretical perspective to *Short Eyes*, the shower scene between Paco and Cupcakes can also be read as a gesture toward queer utopia—a possibility that is foreclosed by the colonial dynamics of the violent present, but that remains open, latent in unrealized form. Similar to the final moments of *The Toilet*, Paco's expression of love and his willingness to *go both ways* suggest a future possibility for queer relationality that can only appear in the present as an ephemeral vision. This vision is marked as the negation of the violence of homosexual abjection, and of the repudiation of queer desire that subtends the heterosexual nationalist project. The something missing toward which this negation points is an egalitarian queer relationship that renounces subjugation, and in doing so, puts forth an alternative to the social structure of the prison, which is predicated upon a hierarchical chain of abjection. In the end, desire does not persist, and returns to its inverse of repudiation: Cupcakes rejects Paco's advances, Paco threatens him with sexual violence, and both of them re-inscribe themselves within the oppressive structure of the prison by redirecting the abjection that they both suffer toward Clark. Nevertheless, the something missing that arises in the abject space of the prison bathroom

remains as a specter of beauty that haunts the play, an unconsummated future in the process of arriving.

3.5 Abject Performance and Utopian Gesture

This allusion to the potential for queer utopia also manifests in others works by Piñero. The one-act play *Paper Toilet* takes place entirely in a subway restroom, which is cast in the play as an abject space in which social order starts to unravel. The restroom itself is identified as a "tearoom" by one of the men who enters to urinate, which was a slang term used among the urban, gay male community in the 1960s through the 1980s to refer to public bathrooms where men could congregate for homosexual encounters. The play itself is somewhat of a farce, centering on the absurd efforts of a detective (the Vice Cop in the passages below) to maintain social order in a space that is rife with "deviant" behavior. The activities that take place in the restroom represent various threats to social Law: men peep at one another in the urinals, two boys enter to inventory the contents of a stolen purse, and the woman who was the victim of this robbery chases the boys into the bathroom, thus invading a homogeneous male space. The detective attempts to eliminate the social "threat" by patrolling the bathroom undercover, arresting one man who propositions him for sex, as well as the woman who enters into the bathroom to retrieve her purse. While the two thieves are also arrested at the end of the play, the detective is much more preoccupied with the violation of sex and gender norms. He sees clandestine homosexual acts in public spaces and the blurring of gender boundaries as much more acute threats to society than the less subversive criminal act of robbery:

Vice Cop: What will happen to our society if we allow things like this to go unpunished?
What? Tell me what? Men in women's toilets … women in men's toilets …

next thing we know, women will be in men's toilets standing up taking a piss. Can you imagine that, can you? No, but I can. (96-7)

For the detective, the ultimate consequence of not disciplining and punishing such behavior, of relaxing the guard that holds regulatory vigil over the boundaries of normative sexual behavior and gender performance, is a "constant identity crisis" that will bring about social decay:

Vice Cop: What will become of our children, our beautiful boys and girls? They'll be in a constant identity crisis. What will become of your daughter if she walks into a toilet and finds a man putting on a sanitary napkin, what? … Or your son, if he walks into the john and there's this stupid looking broad with one leg up in the air taking a piss? Think about things like that and you'll see the seriousness of it … (97)

After the detective decries that the behavior that he observes in the restroom must be a "communist conspiracy" (98) concocted by a clandestine group of "lousy faggots" (99) and "pinko bulldykes," (99) one of the men who enters the restroom questions his obsession with regulating the toilet. He responds: "[w]hat makes you think that the law ends at the subway toilet doors … in a toilet, even in a toilet the long arm of the law does not rest for one minute" (99).

And yet, although the extravagant measures that the officer takes to save society from sexual and gender deviancy show that the long arm of the Law, indeed, does not rest, the action of the play also demonstrates that the Law's regulatory control of marginal, abject spaces is always partial and equivocal. One of the men who enters the bathroom for sex is able to disguise his intentions from the detective and evade capture, even mocking him as he exits, calling out to him (according to the stage directions) in a "high feminine voice": "[g]ood night, honey … byeee" (99). All deviations from the Law cannot be regulated, and public sex in the tearooms of New

York subways and public parks will continue unimpeded as soon as the figures of the Law are absent. Furthermore, the faltering control that the Law displays over the marginal spaces in which socially abject practices are performed speaks at once to the limits of social control, and to the alternative possibility that lies beyond those boundaries. In this way, *Paper Toilet* engages in a critique of the oppressive present, and points toward something that is missing.

The irony of the play is largely directed toward the detective, who conflates communism, homosexuality, and non-normative gender performance into one giant, anti-normative conspiracy, and who truly believes himself to be preventing social collapse by arresting gay men and women who go into the men's room. The irony deepens when one considers that he's not entirely wrong. He *is* preserving society from an identity crisis, by guarding the borders of those sexual and gender identities that are sanctioned within the Symbolic, and by preventing (however ineffectively) the incursion of those who are marked as abject. Yet, by directing its ridiculing irony toward the detective and his regulatory function, *Paper Toilet* critiques the system of social control via abjection, and simultaneously points toward those possibilities that lie in the abject, in the marginal, in the unregulated. "What would happen to our society?" the detective asks. The answer for him is the conversion of reified identitarian borders into fissured ruins and the drastic alteration of the structure of the Symbolic. And in a deeply ironic gesture toward the utopian, the text of the play suggests that yes, this is exactly what will happen. For the detective, the abject is something missing that must continue to be excluded at all costs. The irony of the play provides an implicit critique of this position, and reframes the something missing that is the socially abject as a source of possibility, asking us to move beyond the borders of the oppressive Law, to see what we might find there.

What would happen to our society? *Paper Toilet* does not provide a positive image of what this utopian alteration might look like. Rather, it largely follows Bloch and Adorno's theorization of the utopian, functioning as a determined negation that critiques the present, and only suggests what is missing. The utopian beauty to which the performance gestures is still an absent one that is yet to arrive. Another of Piñero's one-act plays, *Irving*, is more forceful in its movement toward beauty and toward utopia, giving us a better inkling of what possibilities lie latent in abject queerness. *Irving* derives its title from the name of its protagonist, Irving Horowitz, a young, closeted Jewish man who invites his family over to his apartment so that he can reveal his homosexuality to them. The first to arrive are Irving's sister, Mimi, and her boyfriend, Butch, who is African American. Once Mimi leaves momentarily to smoke a joint, Butch and Irving begin to talk intimately, and reveal to the audience that they are secretly sleeping with each other. The other family members arrive—Irving's parents, his brother, Richard, and his uncle, Al—and the get-together turns into a fiasco. The conversation immediately devolves into self-involved bickering, leaving Irving no space to reveal his secret. The parents seize on Mimi and Butch's relationship, expressing their racist disapproval, and show their disdain for the fetishized zeal that Richard has acquired for Nuyorican culture after moving to the Lower East Side. Al's obsession with money won't allow him to talk about anything else, notwithstanding his abiding resentment toward Irving's father, which stems from a broken business relationship. When Irving finally does reveal to his family that he is gay, his parents oscillate between denial, indignation, and confusion. His uncle responds by saying, "[w]ho the hell cares whether you're a faggot or not?" (156) and suggests that all that truly matters is his material wealth. Irving also ends up outing Butch, and the whole family, except for

Richard, leaves in a vexed state, straddling the conflicted emotions of bewilderment, irritation, and apathy.

The play certainly seems to be critical of the family's reaction to Irving's news—casting a penetrating gaze over their racism, their homophobia, and their capitalistic obsessions that reduces human value to money. The "something missing" that this criticism reveals would seem to be a loving embrace not only of homosexuality, but also of interracial relationships, and of human value outside of capitalist logics. Nevertheless, the last lines of the play between Richard, Butch, and Irving after everyone else has left, provide a glimmer of what a family structure that integrates queerness, rather than repelling it, might look like:

Richard: Well I guess I'll be going.

Butch: Keep going on. Later, baby.

Richard: Good night, Ira [Irving].

Irving: You're a bitch, Richard.

Richard: Yeah.

Irving: I love you. (157)

Until these final lines, the play is laced with abjection, albeit not with the same degree of violent ferocity on display in *Short Eyes*, *The Toilet*, or *Paper Toilet*. Irving's sexuality is illegible to Irving's parents and uncle; they are simply at a loss regarding how to integrate this reality into their social paradigm. Thus, they reject his sexuality, as well as the racial "contamination" (from both African American and Nuyorican cultures) that threatens their family unit. However, despite this race and sexuality-based abjection on the part of the older generation, a certain queering and racial mixing of the family structure does take place in the play. After all, both Irving and Mimi are sleeping with the same African American man, and a

few of Richard's cryptic statements suggest that he too has engaged in homosexual encounters. These familial dynamics represent the transgression of the normative borders that demarcate the heterosexual, "racially pure" familial structure. In other words, the play performs the entry of the abject into the Symbolic, and the alteration of social structure that this entails. The last three lines of the play map out a possible exit from the dynamics of abjection. The transition from "[y]ou're a bitch, Richard" to "I love you" alludes to the possibility of an abject transmutation of repudiation into love, of the ugliness of shame and stigma into beauty. Irving manifests for a fleeting moment the love that is missing throughout the rest of the play, which suggests that from amidst the abject queerness that has penetrated the family structure, an absent love might arise.

Short Eyes, Paper Toilet, and *Irving* all gesture toward queer utopia arising out of the abject. Furthermore, both *Short Eyes* and *Paper Toilet* situate this utopian possibility geographically, firmly within socially abject spaces: the prison bathroom and the subway toilet. However, none of the plays portrays the consummation of the utopian ideal; the possibility remains in the future, as flickering in the present, but still yet to arrive. The lack of arrival, the inability to fully manifest in the present, begs the question as to what extent utopian longing can be put to the service of an actual pragmatic politics that could realize concrete social change. The title of Bloch and Adorno's dialogue, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor A. Adorno on the *Contradictions* of Utopian Longing," (emphasis added) speaks to this problematic, and their conversation does allude in specific moments to the aporias of utopian thinking. Adorno identifies the end goal of utopia as the complete transformation of society in its totality, while stating that the political value of the utopian consciousness is "the capability to imagine the totality as something that could be completely different" (3-4). Nevertheless, both Bloch and Adorno recognize that any positive representation of what that complete

transformation of the social order would look like will inevitably fall short, thus leading them to the conclusion that the true essence of utopia is that of the determined negation—*not this* and *not that* present reality—that points via piecemeal fragments to the larger total transformation.

Thus, according to Bloch, the principle that drives utopian thinking is hope—hope that although a picture of utopia cannot be cast, a continued critique of the present will keep us moving in the process of fragmentary becoming toward that utopian future. Bloch is also careful to note that the nature of hope is found in its precariousness, that "hope is not confidence" (16) and may be disappointed, but that it nevertheless makes possible a social consciousness that things could be otherwise.

Bloch and Adorno discern that utopia is inextricably bound up in negativity, in distance and lack, in its own present failure to be realized. The hope that drives and structures utopian thinking orients us toward a future horizon that can only be seen in partiality, and poses the arrival at this horizon as a question, to which it offers no definitive answer. The abject functions this way in Piñero's work. The abject zones that populate his texts are located at the porous boundaries of the Symbolic, and serve as the negation—the ejected, yet constitutive, other—against which society defines itself. They straddle social limits and suggest other horizons outside of the current boundaries; they dream of what could be different from a position of radical negativity.

Whereas Muñoz spends less time dwelling on the negativity implicit in utopian thinking in *Cruising Utopia*, emphasizing instead the futurity envisioned in queer art, Jack Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, embraces both the positivity and the negativity of the socially abject, and traces how both trajectories are realized aesthetically, sometimes simultaneously. When analyzing the seascapes painted by artist Judie Bamber in 2004, he engages explicitly with

Muñoz's conception of queer futurity, and questions whether or not it is possible to move beyond the boundaries of the social, and realize that "something missing" which lies beyond:

> For [Bamber] the thematics of losing and failure appear within visuality itself as a line or threshold beyond which you cannot see, a horizon that marks the place of the failure of vision and visibility itself. While José E. Muñoz casts queerness as a kind of horizon for political aspiration […], Bamber's horizons remind that possibility and disappointment live side by side. (105)

The link between failure and the abject pervades Halberstam's book. Especially in chapter three—also titled "The Queer Art of Failure"—he identifies a series of subject positions that are generally associated with failure and negativity in dominant social discourse, which include not only queer subjects, but also those that suffer abjection under the rubrics of race, class, and colonial/postcolonial status. He works from an archive produced at the margins of the Symbolic, in order to observe the social critique enacted there, and to explore all of the political valences of this criticism—whether they gesture toward positive social alternative, or whether they remain grounded within the realm of negation and refusal. He describes the histories of failure that are abjected from dominant discourse as, "a hidden history of pessimism, a history moreover that lies quietly beyond every story of success" (88). While he notes that this history can be told in a number of ways, he characterizes his own narration in the following manner:

> I tell it here as a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle. I tell it also as a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming. This is a story of art without markets, of drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, the unremarkable. It

quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being. (88)

Here, Halberstam elegantly captures the polarized trajectories that the art of abjection may follow. It is an art that is as much about illegibility and unbecoming as it is about imagining alternative social configurations, an aesthetic practice that allows hope and disappointment to cohabitate in the same space. Finally, he identifies the political force of this aesthetic practice as transcending the borders of a merely queer politics, and engaging in anticapitalist and anticolonial resistance.

Short Eyes, Paper Toilet, and *Irving* all demonstrate the intersectional politics that Halberstam alludes to, critiquing not only queer abjection, but abjection rooted in race, class and colonialism, while simultaneously suggesting future utopian possibility and its present disappointment. While *Short Eyes* and *Paper Toilet* center on the toilet as a multivalent site of negativity and possibility, Piñero takes another geographically situated abject space as a zone of potential transformation in his collection of poems *La Bodega Sold Dreams* (1980).[99] This space is the Nuyorican cultural haven of the Lower East Side. These poems enter into the terrain of critique and refusal identified by Halberstam, while also engaging in utopian dreaming, imagining how a reconfiguration of the oppressive present might arise out of the Lower East Side. In *La Bodega Sold Dreams* these poles of negative refusal and positive utopia comfortably coexist, and neither is subordinated to the other.

[99] *La Bodega Sold Dreams* is the only complete collection of poetry that Piñero published in his lifetime.

3.6 Dreaming in *La Bodega*

The poem "The Book of Genesis According to San Miguelito" offers a clear picture of utopian possibility lying latent within abjection. Here, Piñero parodies the biblical story of creation, narrating not the creation of paradise and the benevolence of God toward man, but the genesis of pain, suffering, and oppression in the world. He represents God as an addict whose first act on Earth is to create "the ghettos & slums," then to decorate them with "leadbase paint" (9). He then commands "the rivers of garbage & filth/ to flow gracefully through the ghettos," (9) until the third day of creation, in which he goes into withdrawal:

> On the third day
> God's nose was running
> & his jones was coming down and God
> in his all knowing wisdom
> knew he was sick
> he needed a fix
> so God
> created the backyards of the ghettos
> & the alleys of the slums
> in heroin & cocaine (9)

Later, God creates the suffering people, and "from his eminent rectum," (10) he creates capitalism which, according to the poetic speaker, breeds a litany of other social maladies. God's response to his devastated creation shows no remorse or compassion: "and God felt this was extra good/ and God said/ VAYAAAAAAA" (10). The people plead to God for an explanation and he offers nothing, until the seventh day, when just before he abandons them—"he called in

sick/ collected his overtime pay/ a paid vacation included" (11)—he gives them his final message:

> and God told the people
>
> to be
>
> COOL
>
> and the people were cool
>
> and the people kept cool
>
> and the people are cool
>
> and the people stay cool
>
> and God said
>
> Vaya… (11)

This poem bears all the hallmarks of the Symbolic collapse that typifies the abject. The poem is not only anti-religious and anti-capitalist, but declares its anti-hegemonic defiance to a gamut of other oppressive forces (racism, machismo, imperialism, colonialism, etc.) that are assigned to the either malevolent or entirely disinterested God who is responsible for the abject world. Furthermore, the poem asserts that the people can expect no metaphysical recourse; there is no transcendental ideal to which to turn. God says only "vaya"; the people are alone.

The only seed of possible renewal that comes amidst the nihilistic collapse of meaning in the poem arrives right before God makes his final pronouncement, as he notices: "his main man Satan/ planting the learning trees of consciousness/ around his ghetto edens" (11). These trees of consciousness, growing in a wasteland of abjection, point to regeneration coming only out of complete destruction and decay. The beauty of the Edenic paradise within the scene of

oppression indicates unrealized utopian promise, a new *genesis* from within the abject, tentative though this promise may be.

This theme of regeneration, even salvation, coming from the abject is cultivated throughout *La Bodega*.[100] This movement finds its climax in "A Lower East Side Poem," in which the Lower East Side becomes a concrete manifestation of the "ghetto eden" of the perverse Book of Genesis. Here, the poetic speaker, who is identified with the recurring figure of the "junkie Christ" in other poems, in a sense performs his own crucifixion, as he imagines his own death, and the scattering of his ashes in the Lower East Side. However, the result here is very different from the metaphorical crucifixion that takes place in "¡Jum!" Rather than violent death, Piñero finds within the abject a radical utopian possibility. The poem begins as the speaker meditates on his own death:

> Just once before I die
> I want to climb up on a
> tenement sky
> to dream my lungs out till
> I cry
> and scatter my ashes thru
> the Lower East Side (7)

Kristeva refers to death, and the cadaver that is its palpable signifier, as the utmost of abjection. Here, the speaker not only imagines his death, projecting himself into the epitome of the abject; he also expresses his desire for his ashes to be spread outwards into the abject world. The scene of the Lower East Side is set as, "run away child/ police shooting wild…/ mother's futile

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[100] See "Jitterbugging Jesus" and "New York City Hard Time Blues" in *La Bodega Sold Dreams*.

wails…pushers/ making sails…dope wheelers/ & cocaine dealers …smoking pot/ streets are hot & feed off those who bleed to death" (7-8). Nevertheless, the speaker asserts that the abject is the only home that he has known: "I am […]/ a dweller of prison time/ a cancer of Rockefeller's ghettocide/ this concrete tomb is my home" (8). The speaker describes himself as a cancer, as a parasitic disease, and as an inhabitant of prisons and of a profane metropolis that acts as a concrete tomb. Calling himself a prisoner identifies him as a transgressor of the Law, abject and exiled. But the act of equating the figure of the tomb with that of the home identifies the abject space as one of solace and refuge, to which the speaker relates with care, affection, and longing.

However, the living habitation of the abject observed above is later transformed into a mortal dissolution. The speaker no longer resides in the abject; he is dispersed within it, becoming entirely disarticulated:

> I don't wanna be buried in Puerto Rico
> I don't wanna rest in long island cemetery
> I wanna be near the stabbing shooting
> gambling fighting & unnatural dying
> & new birth crying
> so please when I die…
> don't take me far away
> keep me near by
> take my ashes and scatter them thru out
> the Lower East Side… (8)

In these verses, the lyric voice performs the act of dissolving into the abject scene that has been cultivated in the poems. The speaker transcends his own boundaries, as his ashes are spread

outwards into the extra-Symbolic realm of death, in which Kristeva shows us that the abject and the sublime intermingle. The ellipses that pervade the poem, especially those that follow the last verses, dramatize this point as much as the poem's lexical content, as the words of the speaker themselves evanesce, and gesture toward the unspeakable. As such, "A Lower East Side Poem" performs a much more radical utopian gesture than any of the previously discussed plays. Rather than invoking a utopian vision of the transformation of the colonial power dynamics of the prison (*Short Eyes*), the dissolution of the normative boundaries that regulate socially legible sex acts and gender performance (*Paper Toilet*), or the queering of the heteronormative family unit (*Irving*), "A Lower East Side Poem" gestures toward a barely articulable sublime experience that lies beyond the boundaries of the Symbolic, beyond the borders of death.

In his conversation with Bloch, Adorno remarks that without a consciousness of death, a concept of utopia cannot exist:

> To be sure, I believe that without the notion of an unfettered life, freed from death, the idea of utopia, the idea of *the* utopia, *cannot* even be thought at all. […] There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the elimination of death; this is inherent in the very thought. What I mean is the heaviness of death and everything that is connected to it. Wherever this is not included, where the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia. And it seems to me that this has very heavy consequences for the theory of knowledge about utopia—if I may put it crassly: One cannot cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner. Every attempt to describe or portray utopia in a simple way, i.e., it will be like this, would be an attempt to avoid the antinomy of death and to speak about the elimination of death as if death did not exist. (10)

Here, Adorno makes the case that death is a condition for utopia, without which the concept itself becomes impossible. It is the paradigmatic example of the negativity through which, and only through which, utopia can be conceived—the boundary which must be crossed in order to get at that which is missing. The Lower East Side, an abject space at the borders of the Symbolic, is a threshold of social death, of transition between legibility and illegibility, between what is here and what is missing. In Piñero's poem, the Lower East Side becomes the point at which the antinomies of death and utopia coincide. Here, the speaker enacts a vision of his own death, no longer occupying the liminal space of the threshold, but moving into the beyond. And in this extra-Symbolic space, the abject and the sublime comingle, gesturing at once to the horror of annihilation, and to the unthinkable utopian possibility that might be found therein. In "A Lower East Side Poem," death and utopia cannot be parsed out and separated from one another. Rather, the disturbing beauty of utopian possibility and abject suffering coexist, and speak to the promise of utopia that has yet to arrive, and may never come.

The funerary performance that followed Piñero's death demonstrates that the performative politics of "A Lower East Side Poem" transcend the boundaries of the page. To my knowledge, no photos or recordings of the performance exist, but Algarín describes the event in his essay "The Sidewalk of High Art" and in an interview. The ceremony took place in a vacant lot next to the Nuyorican Poets Café. Algarín describes the setting: "[t]he lot was perfect—not manicured, but littered and disheveled and unpretentiously alive. We had cleared only a small circle for the installation [an effigy prepared by artist Arturo Lindsay], leaving the rest in its natural state: broken class, strewn brick, unearthed boilers, and local garbage" ("The Sidewalk of High Art" 6). Poets associated with the Nuyorican literary movement and the Café read poems,

and then threw them into the burning effigy.[101] Like the poetic speaker in "A Lower East Side Poem," the poems read in the performance perform their own sort of ending in ellipsis, as they disperse in smoke in the garbage-filled lot, and into the air of the Lower East Side. This movement of dispersion continues as Algarín leads the group out into the streets to spread Piñero's ashes. Algarín writes that the procession seemed to have a magnetic property, drawing the neighborhood's inhabitants out to bear witness, and to join the collective: "[b]y the time we reached Avenue D the procession was huge. People walking their dogs, going into stores, and standing at bus stops would forget the object of their mission and join us. It was as if they were impelled by a force bigger than themselves" ("The Sidewalk of High Art" 7-8). The tenor of Algarín's description takes on a particularly abject quality as he describes how onlookers interacted with the ashes:

> [T]owards the projects, women, old women would fall to their knees and take the ashes and make the sign of the cross. […] To see the junkies bow their heads and almost bare their freshly wounded vein, you know, to the ashes . . . there is a very famous Puerto Rican singer who's strung out and he was on the street that day, and he broke down and cried. And when I spread some ashes, he threw himself on top of the ashes and wept into the sidewalk. And absolutely nobody disturbed him. ("Interview")

From the burning poems in the garbage-strewn lot, to the women and the junkies crossing themselves and exposing their open sores to the dead poet's ashes, Piñero's memorial ceremony turns into an impromptu abject performance that looks hopefully beyond the margin of death. Algarín writes that "Miky's death was to be a new beginning. From the ashes, life" ("The

[101] Algarín includes among those present at this performance Amiri Baraka, Pedro Pietri, Jose-Angel Figueroa, Nancy Mercado, Eddie Figueroa, Julio Dalmau, Amina Baraka, Louis Reyes, Louis Guzman, Arturo Lindsay, and Jorge Brandon ("The Sidewalk of High Art" 5-6).

Sidewalk of High Art" 8). Although he is specifically referring to the rebirth of the Nuyorican Poets Café, which was closed at the time of Piñero's death, his words remain apropos. Piñero's funerary performance is a performance of dissolution and unbecoming, in which the participants come into literal contact with Piñero's remains. Kristeva writes that "as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (*Powers* 3). In the "true theater" of the ceremony, the participants perform the opposite of abjection. They do not thrust aside the abject in order to live; they open to it, immerse themselves in it, and symbolically enter into the terrain of death. Kristeva shows us that it is at this point of boundary crossing that the abject opens to the sublime, which she describes as "*something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination" (*Powers* 12). Is this sublime *something added* the *something missing* that comes from beyond the boundary of death? The junkies, the women from the projects, and the poets, seem to offer a hopeful yes. Although when the performance is over, nothing has changed in the Lower East Side.

Piñero's poems and plays locate utopian possibility within sites of abject failure. Whether in the prison bathroom, the subway toilet, the broken familial home, or the Lower East Side, Piñero shows how the radical negativity of the socially abject simultaneously criticizes the present and gestures toward alternative possibility. These alternative possibilities are not envisioned as heteronormative nationalist movements, nor as a politics of identity that casts a positive vision of the integration of an excluded group within the Symbolic, which may then be demarcated by regulated and stable boundaries. Rather than advocating for the formation of new national or identitarian bodies within the confines of the Symbolic, Piñero's works opt for

coming apart in the terrain of the radically outside. This *jouissance* of dissolution, the act of coming undone in the abject, and staying there, disarticulated, is a refusal of the Symbolic and the forces of social abjection that mark the poet and the neighborhood as abject. Consequently, his writing engages in a much more radical project: that of refusing social legibility, of finding within the abject a form of social death that, by means of its radical negativity, points toward something missing that lies beyond the porous boundaries of the social, which may perhaps be brought back in to destabilize the Symbolic, and effect its alteration. These utopian gestures not only point toward queer transformations of hegemonic power dynamics, but also toward anticolonial, anticapitalist, and antiracist imaginaries. By revealing the disturbing beauty within the abject—sometimes in glimpses, as in Paco or Irving's declarations of love, sometimes in overwhelming sublime force, as in "A Lower East Side Poem"—Piñero aesthetically marks the utopian promise that undergirds the negativity of the abject, gesturing toward the unfathomable potential of the not-yet-here. Similarly, by highlighting the oppression, violence, and, indeed, death that also mark the abject, he simultaneously emphasizes the postponement of the utopian promise, and the suffering that marks its distance from the present. Thus, the poem performs the full paradox embedded in the contradiction of utopian longing alluded to by Bloch and Adorno: locating death within utopia, and disappointment within hope. Nevertheless, the poems and plays continue to insist on abject failure, on the critique that this failure offers, and on the vague and murky hope that we might someday, with enough persistence, fail our way into utopia.

CHAPTER 4

ALLEGORIES OF ABJECTION:

MOURNING IN THE REVOLUTIONARY MARKETPLACE

> "Where man is drawn to the symbol, allegory emerges
> from the depths of being to intercept the intention,
> and to triumph over it."
>
> -Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

In this chapter, I turn to the poetry of Cuban writer Pedro Juan Gutiérrez (1950-). I argue that his poems are allegorical in nature, and that they engage in a poetic performance of mourning that deconstructs the various forms of mythology that are imposed upon the ruins of Havana by both the revolutionary government and the forces of the neoliberal marketplace during the 1990s. Reading alongside Walter Benjamin and Julia Kristeva, I contend that the ruins of Havana, and particularly those of Centro Habana upon which Gutiérrez fixates, are abject figures. While the poems themselves focus on the ugliness of poverty and decay, the aesthetic act of mourning the abject ruins that is performed in Gutiérrez's poems possesses a disturbing beauty that points toward political promise. Mourning in Gutiérrez's work is a critical act that strips away mythology, restores historicity to the ruins, and gestures toward an emancipatory potential that Benjamin locates in the demythologizing force of allegory.

4.1 Timeless Cuba

Various critics specializing in the cultural production of contemporary Cuba have noted the sense of timelessness that seeps into the Cuban consciousness during the economic challenges of the 1990s that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. The preface to José Quiroga's book *Cuban Palimpsests*, aptly titled "Stuck in Time," recounts the manner in which timelessness becomes a fundamental aspect of the exile experience following the Cuban Revolution, as images of a pre-1959 Cuba become entrenched in exilic memory, and are subject to an unnerving temporal disjunction when the exile returns to Cuba to be confronted with the alien reality of the present. In his introduction, titled "Untimely Cuba," Quiroga notes how a similarly confounding temporal logic establishes itself domestically in the nineties, as an extended period of economic crisis that became known as the "período especial en tiempos de paz," or simply the "special period,"[102] problematized the teleological vision of the revolution as an unflagging march toward utopia. Quiroga elaborates the nature of this historical and ideological quandary:

> The [Cuban] state and its intellectuals developed a clearly delineated national and collective memory that led from a colonial past to a promising future. Articulated first during the 1960s, the memory of historical grievances collectively suffered motivated the population to work towards liberation, equality, and progress. But this narrative came to a halt in the early 1990s, when the only image left of that heroic struggle was the sense of

[102] Esther Whitfield marks the special period as beginning in 1990 and ending in 2005 (2). Fidel Castro introduces the term "período especial en tiempos de paz" in a speech given on January 28, 1990: "[q]ué visión tan grande la de nuestro Partido: qué útiles han sido todas las energías gastadas en estos años, trabajando con esa concepción que parte de la participación de todo el pueblo en esa lucha. Sin embargo, pueden venir otras variantes para las cuales tenemos que prepararnos. Nosotros llamamos a ese período de bloqueo total, período especial en tiempo de guerra; pero ahora tenemos que prepararnos por todos estos problemas, e incluso hacer planes para período especial en tiempos de paz" (Castro).

an expanded present. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc did not produce a time understood exactly as a 'transition,' but a period of uncertainty that still meant to connect past to future while suspending the time between the two. (1)

Blackouts, food shortages, and lack of basic consumer goods and adequate housing characterized this moment of "expanded present" and "suspended time" for many Cubans, driving multitudes to dare crossing the Florida Straits in flimsy rafts to seek refuge in the United States. The static present had become divorced from the promised future and part of the revolutionary regime's strategy for dealing with this problem was to memorialize the revolution's legacy of resistance and sacrifice in the hope of "buying time," (4) to use Quiroga's ironic pun, until the severed ties uniting a teleological coherence of past, present, and future could be restored.

Alongside this ideological crisis, another form of atemporality began to take root—this one engendered by Cuba's guarded entry into the neoliberal global marketplace. The revolutionary government's strategies for responding to the loss of the Soviet subsidies that were the bedrock of the Cuban economy[103] included allowing the US dollar to legally circulate in Cuba,[104] permitting writers to negotiate contracts with foreign publishers independent of state mediation, the formation of a ministry of tourism oriented toward an international consumer market, and the promotion of foreign investment in some sectors of Cuban enterprise.[105]

Idelber Avelar writes extensively on the relationship between history and neoliberal markets in his book *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task*

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[103] According to Esther Whitfield, the Soviet-driven Council for Mutual Economic Assistance accounted for eighty percent of Cuba's foreign trade prior to its disintegration in the early 1990s (3).

[104] Circulation of the dollar was legalized from 1993 to 2004, at which point it was replaced by the *peso cubano convertible*.

[105] See the first chapter of Whitfield's *Cuban Currency*, esp. pp. 4-9, for a more detailed description of these economic shifts and the way in which they affected the relationship between Cuban literature and the international literary market.

of Mourning (1999). He argues that it is the essential nature of the market to create a sense of "perpetual present," in which "commodification negates memory because new commodities must always replace previous commodities, send them to the dustbin of history" (2). As each new commodity displaces the old, to be quickly forgotten by the consumer, any sense of historical progression is lost, and the consumer exists in the interminable now of the latest product. The way to resist the atemporal logic of the market, it would seem, is to tarry with the displaced products it seeks to erase, so as to restore a sense of history. Yet even this project must be undertaken with care, because the past also, as Avelar astutely notes, can be commodified and sold within the market, thus submitting itself to the logic of endless substitution and historical erasure.[106]

The commodification of the Cuban past for its consumption in the international marketplace is of central interest to Esther Whitfield in her book *Cuban Currency: The Dollar and Special Period Fiction*. Whitfield charts the various ways in which special period economic reform opens Cuban arts (not only literature, but film, photography, performance, and an array of visual arts) to a global market driven by a voyeuristic desire to bear witness to the previously cloistered reality of Cuban life. This "first-world" gaze which seeks to apprehend the "authentic" experience of a "third-world" other (one which, moreover, represents the last bastion of Cold War-era socialism accessible to the Western consumer) breeds a set of aesthetic codes through which Cuban arts of the special period are widely read/seen and interpreted. However, the "authenticity" of this experience is, for Whitfield and the theorists she draws on, always suspect, a projection of the desires and ideology of the consumer. She argues that the "quest to behold an

[106] While Avelar takes a very different historical context as his object of study, that of postdictatorial states in South America, his reflections on the inception of neoliberalism and its effect on historical consciousness are still applicable to the context of the special period in Cuba, given that the effects of neoliberalism are felt in Cuba for the first time during this moment.

authentic other" (23) enacted by the Western consumer of postcolonial culture (be it a consumer of art or the travelling tourist) is "motivated by longing not only for difference, but for a difference that stands in for innocence, simplicity, and *timelessness*: in short, [the] 'premodern'" (23; emphasis added). This concept of the search for the timeless that drives the consumer to seek the premodern in the postcolony is rooted in the same infantilizing preconception that led Hegel to proclaim that non-Western civilizations (i.e. the entire continent of Africa) find themselves outside of the dialectical process of history, and inscribed within the timeless realm of nature.[107] Jonathan Culler also argues that modernity projects its interrelated desires for authenticity and timelessness onto chosen objects or regions: "one of the characteristics of modernity is the belief that authenticity has been lost and exists only in the past—whose signs we preserve (antiques, restored buildings, imitations of old interiors) or else in other regions or countries" (qtd. in Whitfield 23-4). In short, a primary motor behind the marketing and consumption of postcolonial culture is the insidious and commonly held Western belief that the post-colony exists as a relic of the past, outside of the modern, that one may return to for the nostalgic experience of something lost. In the unique context of Cuba, the idea of postcolonial experience as premodern relic involves not only the exoticized projection of tropical disinhibition and animality, of a return to nature, but also the lost possibility of socialist utopia. These two losses that the Western consumer projects onto Cuba form the fundamental components of the aesthetic code that Whitfield identifies in the art of the special period: the

[107] In *Philosophy of History*, Hegel argues that Africans have not attained the level of self-consciousness necessary to enter into the dialectics of history, that they remain too closely identified with nature: "[I]n Negro life the characteristic point is that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence—as, for example, God, or Law—in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. […] The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state" (93). See Camara, "The Falsity of Hegel's Theses on Africa" for a thorough refutation of Hegel's argument using Hegel's own dialectical theory.

tropical cliché of "carefree people devoted to the joys of music, dancing, rum, and sex" (101) and the architectural ruins as "readable figures for the decay of Cuba's socialist dreams" (100-1). To be clear, I am not saying that Cuban artists adopt this code for commercial purposes, in effect commodifying themselves for the market, but that their works are commonly received and interpreted in this way internationally, due to the manner in which the desires and projections of the readers/observers described above drive the market and influence reception.

Returning to Avelar, the neoliberal market imposes its own sort of atemporality upon the Cuban present of the special period. Whereas Cuba is sold in the market as a fragment of the past, the product is not an actual reflection of Cuban history. Cuba as relic, as ruin, does not bring a historical consciousness to the consumer in the sense advanced by Avelar in his study of postdictatorial fiction nor in that elaborated by Walter Benjamin in his theory of Baroque tragedy, which I will address in greater detail later in this chapter. Rather, nostalgia for the premodern or for the shattered utopia has a profoundly dehistoricizing function: "[a]t first glance nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a *different time*" (Boym xv; emphasis added). This "yearning for a different time" may be interpreted in two ways: as a desire for a time that is different from the current one—an escape from the present—or as a longing for a past that is materially different from the actual history to which this longing supposedly corresponds. As Svetlana Boym points out, more than a desire for historical encounter, nostalgia is "a romance with one's own fantasy" and "a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed" (xiii). The fantasy of authenticity and the nostalgic experience of loss that drive the commerce of special period arts imbue Cuban culture and Cuban ruins with a mythology that imposes itself over a historical reality that is much more nuanced. As the past becomes commodified, it is integrated into the market logic that thrives on substitution—in which one tropical paradise

serves as well as another to satisfy a longing for premodern authenticity—and historical erasure—by which a Western mythology of revolutionary decay takes the place of historical process.

Thus, two forms of atemporality converge upon Cuba during the special period. On one hand, the revolutionary government frames the moment as a sort of interregnum, a timeless deviation from the teleological march toward the promising future, which will one day be resumed. On the other, the commodification of Cuba in the global marketplace feeds a voyeurism and nostalgia that imposes its own sort of timelessness. The forces exerted upon the present of the special period by both the market and the Cuban state are very similar in one aspect. While the market imposes an aesthetic code on Cuba and its art that distorts the reality of both past and present, the Cuban state seeks to restore motility to the present, to pull it out of stasis, by memorializing the past in order to re-establish the possibility of connection between the present and the promised future. Both processes involve an aesthetic interpretation of the present that engages in the act of mythologizing. Quiroga writes:

> Memory in the 1960s was deployed as part of a long narrative leading toward a future, whereas the memorialization of the 1990s celebrated and critiqued the past in order to gain some time in the present. The cohesive memory enacted in the 1960s entailed a clear sense of the future; the act of memorialization speaks to a loss of that image. (4)

Though the loss of the image of the future implies both celebration and strategic critique of the past,[108] I am more interested in the celebratory acts of memorialization, because these acts reveal the aesthetic imposition of revolutionary mythology over the remnants of the past.

[108] The strategic purpose of critique in this context was to distance the government from errors committed by the state the past, in essence demonstrating how the present actors in the regime were so far removed from these missteps that they could not be held responsible: "[i]f debates on

Antonio José Ponte, one of the renowned Cuban authors of the special period who remained in Cuba, is particularly critical of the government's temporal sleight-of-hand. He notes the effort to project the past into the future and condemns the failure of this enterprise:

> Every revolution can be considered a device that combats Time. It begins as a series of dissensions within the temporal, with an irrepressible desire to surpass habits and figures, condemn them to a discontinuous past, wall them up, enclose them. It tries to open up an insuperable gap in Time, and that attack on the fortress of the temporal very soon brings about its own immurement. It ends by making itself into a celebration of the past, a *campaign of self-praising remembrances*. (15; emphasis added)

These self-praising remembrances are acts of memorialization that continually return to the revolution's 1959 victory and the legacy of its protagonists. Yet from the present of the special period, this motion of turning "aberrantly towards the past" (Ponte 15) does not have the effect of establishing a utopian teleology, but of freezing the past within the walled-off present: "[t]hus what is proclaimed as an inexhaustible process of acceleration, an interminable series of metamorphoses, becomes the most hidden form of stagnation" (Ponte 15). This continual return to the curated moments of the past not only denies a full vision of history, but also obscures the present: "[v]ery often one hears it said that the victorious regime of 1959 has succeeded in banishing Time from Cuba (this would be one of the most illustrious of its exiles). But such a statement has the disadvantage of *denying a life history* to millions of its individuals" (Ponte 15; emphasis added). Seeing through the mythology of memorialization, Ponte finds that state-sanctioned acts of curating history do not establish the present as a conduit between the past and the hoped-for future, but renders it a space of rupture, an insurmountable chasm, in which the

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the past illuminated errors, they did so by implicitly positing the past as antediluvian, a past for which none of the people in charge of present-day policies bear responsibility" (Quiroga 5).

experience of daily suffering during the special period is engulfed, becoming invisible: “In Cuba, between yesterday and tomorrow exists the greatest amount of emptiness breathable. Or unbreathable, depending on the asthma” (15).

Yet the revolution continues in its effort to memorialize the past and project the future over the frozen present. Quiroga identifies the return of Che Guevara’s body to Cuba as one of the most important acts of memorialization during the special period. After Guevara’s execution by the Bolivian military in 1967, the whereabouts of his burial site were unknown until 1997, when a team of Argentine, Bolivian, and Cuban excavators identified Guevara’s skeleton at a site in Vallegrande, Bolivia. The remains were sent back to Cuba, where the government constructed a mausoleum in Santa Clara (the site of the decisive victory in the revolutionary war) as a testament to his legacy. Various ceremonial acts accompanied the return of the body—a government proclamation of seven days of mourning, the display of the coffin in the Plaza de la Revolución, and a ceremony involving Guevara’s widow and his children. However, it is the mausoleum that most ambitiously seeks to resurrect the past in order to connect the troubled present with a restorative future. Quiroga writes:

> If the collapse of socialism devalued the Cuban experiment, if it threatened to render it a failed project, burying El Che was a way to give material value to the experiment once again, establishing by way of kinship that the revolution had a right to its cultural property, and that in a universe devoid of material symbols of the revolution, the mausoleum with El Che’s body could accomplish the *symbolic* purpose of inscribing the revolution in *eternity*. (210; emphasis added)

The structure of the mausoleum in relation to Guevara’s skeleton reflects the relationship of mythology to history in the constructed symbol of El Che. The *allegorical* fragment that is the

body itself is entombed, sealed off hermetically from the world by the monument as a *symbol* of the revolution's mission of social justice, egalitarianism, and resistance to imperialism that must project itself unceasingly into the future. The naked ruin of the corpse is cocooned in symbolic mythology, which projects the revolution out of the stagnant, atemporal present and into the promised future.

The concept of the corpse as ruin is one that Benjamin dwells on at length in his theorization of baroque ruins, and the corpse of Che Guevara is not the only "ruin" in Cuba that is entombed in mythology during the special period. In an interview for the documentary *Arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* (2007), Ponte reflects on the architectural ruins of Havana in the nineties, and proposes that they too serve a mythological and ideological purpose. He contends that the revolutionary government appropriates the ruins to justify the continued necessity of the revolution. In essence, he argues that the Havana ruins are not the natural result of history, but are constructions of the revolutionary government, serving as signifiers of a metaphorical imperialist bombardment from the United States that has left the city in ruins. He compares the cityscape of Havana to the English pleasure gardens of the 18th century, in which ruins were built into the terrain in order to create the aesthetic veneer of a historical experience, in other words, to confer a false sense of historicity on the space they populate. For Ponte, the history that the ruins in Havana symbolize within the logic of the revolution has three components: "the threatened U.S. invasion during the 1962 Missile Crisis, so a past war that never materialized; the present and ongoing attack that is the U.S. embargo; and the full-scale war with the imperialist enemy, of proportions unimaginable, that is always imminent" (Whitfield 147). Thus, according to Ponte, the "arte nuevo de hacer ruinas" is the staging of a post-apocalyptic scene following a US invasion that, in reality, never happened. The ruins are manufactured through sustained neglect

of certain areas of the city (especially the neighborhood of Centro Habana) in order to justify the revolutionary discourse of continued resistance to the imperialist invader. Consequently, one sees that the ruins function, ironically, not only as capitalist commodities, but also as symbols in a communist revolutionary discourse that project a historical legacy of resistance and sacrifice into the present, and re-inscribe it in a teleological progression toward the future.

Thus, the experience of Cuban past, present, and future is distorted from within and without, as both the state and the market each impose their own sort of atemporality. In each case, aesthetics play a key role in constructing mythology and mediating the relationship between the present of the special period and Cuba's past and future. On the one hand, the aesthetic code of the revolution takes the ruin (in the form of dilapidated buildings or of the corpse) as a symbol of eternal revolutionary struggle that works against the disillusionment and stagnation of the present, in order to point society once again toward a utopian future. On the other, the aesthetic codes of the market are those described by Whitfield, in which the past is a premodern relic—promising disinhibited tropicalism—or the ruin of a utopian dream. However, some Cuban artists of the nineties produce work that critically engages with the temporal distortions of both the revolution and market capitalism.

One such artist is Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. Much has been written on Gutiérrez's prose work, especially his novels of the "Ciclo Centro Habana."[109] These novels recount the worst of the

[109] Most of Gutiérrez's works of fiction are semi-autobiographical novels that are narrated by the protagonist, named Pedro Juan. Gutiérrez has publicly alluded to the relationship between his own experiences in Cuba and those of Pedro Juan the narrator. Speaking of *Triología sucia de la Habana* (1998), he says: "[e]se Pedro Juan es excesivamente autobiográfico, tanto que no he vuelto a leerlo jamás porque me resulta muy doloroso" ("Animal literario" 37). *El Rey de la Habana* (1999) is the only novel of the Central Havana Cycle that is written in third-person narration and centers on a different protagonist. *Trilogía* is his only work of fiction that strays substantially from the traditional structure of the novel, being comprised of loosely connected episodes that occasionally adopt different narrators.

poverty of the special period, and were circulated to a massive international audience.[110] Critics have taken various approaches to analyzing Gutiérrez's fiction, with many focusing on the way in which his work responds to commodification and market voyeurism, abject aesthetics, and the (im)possibility of utopian politics.[111] In the sections that follow, I will address all of these points raised in Gutiérrez's critical bibliography, while doing so from an understudied perspective—

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[110] Gutiérrez published all of the novels from the Central Havana Cycle between 1998 and 2003. Whitfield summarizes the extent of their international distribution as of the late 2000s: "[b]y mid-2007, *Trilogía sucia de la Habana* had been published in eighteen countries, *El Rey de la Habana* in six, *Animal tropical* in thirteen, *El insaciable hombre araña* in six, and *Carne de perro*, the last of the cycle, in three. Gutiérrez had also published a "prequel" to these five books, *El nido de la serpiente: Memorias del hijo del heladero* […] in Spanish, Brazilian, Italian, and French editions" (181n2).

[111] Whitfield argues that the Gutiérrez's "staged marginality" engages in a subversive function, reflecting the readers' voyeuristic gaze back to them and revealing the exoticized desires and projected fantasies that underpin it (in addition to *Cuban Currency*, see "Autobiografía sucia: The Body Impolitic of *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*"). Francisco Leal similarly focuses on readerly voyeurism, while elaborating the way in which Gutiérrez commodifies abjection in *Trilogía sucia de la Habana*, and in doing so dramatizes the perverse economic transaction by which the novel sells (see "*Trilogía sucia de la Habana* de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez: Mercado, crimen y abyección"). Anke Birkenmaier also addresses the prevalence of the abject in Gutiérrez's fiction, examining the opposition between the abject and the beautiful that is created in *El Rey de la Habana* and the manner in which abjection precludes the possibility of sublime experience or utopian dreaming (see "Más allá del realismo sucio: *El Rey de la Habana* de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez"). Without explicitly appealing to abjection (relying on the work of Mary Douglas rather than that of Kristeva), Guillermina de Ferrari elucidates the "aesthetics of disgust" (38) that she locates within *Trilogía*, assigning to it the function of transgressing the pervious boundary between nature and culture and challenging the social classification systems that are predicated upon the capacity to make this distinction (see "Aesthetics Under Siege: Dirty Realism and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Trilogía sucia de la Habana*"). Odette Casamayor Cisneros examines the relationship between Gutiérrez's novels and architectural and social ruin, arguing that the author firmly rejects the possibility of utopian salvation for Cuba during the special period and seeks, rather, to move forward in whatever way possible without hope of substantial change (see "¿Cómo vivir las ruinas habaneras de los años noventa?: Respuestas disímiles desde la isla en las obras narrativas de Abilio Estéves, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez y Ena Lucía Portela"). Lastly, Sklodowska emphasizes the motif of hunger in Gutiérrez's novels as part of a larger argument that establishes hunger as a metaphor for both the lived experience and the artistic creation of the special period (see *Invento luego resisto: El Período Especial en Cuba como experiencia y metáfora (1990-2015)*.

that of his poetry,[112] which has received very little critical attention.[113] My contention is that the aesthetics of Gutiérrez's poetry, while retaining the characteristic "dirtiness" that earned his fiction the "realismo sucio" moniker, operate somewhat differently than what critics have observed in his fiction.

As both Benjamin and Paul de Man have noted, poetry, at least since the Romantic era, has tended to privilege the construction of symbols over other literary devices or tropes, such as allegory or irony. For both of these theorists, the symbol is linked to a search for organic unity and the transcendence of the limits of human materiality and mortality in order to enter into the realm of the eternal. Benjamin especially identifies the symbol as a mythologizing tool that occludes the temporal nature of the human experience, and its separation from the eternity of nature. He argues that allegory, in contrast, has a profoundly demythologizing function, which allows for an authentically historical experience on the part of the reader/observer. Benjamin conceives of the allegorical sign as a fragment, forever divorced from totality or unity, and finds within the figure of the ruin the paradigmatic manifestation of the trope. For Benjamin, the ruin is a fragmentary remainder that gestures toward something lost, insisting upon the necessarily

[112] To date, Gutiérrez has published eleven collections of poetry, one anthology of his poetic works, and has one unedited collection that remains unpublished. *La realidad rugiendo* (1987) was his first collection of poems to be published, and the publication of his poetry antecedes the publication of his fiction by a number of years.
[113] Rafael Acosta de Arriba's essay ("El retorno al buen salvaje o no esperar nada de la poesía") that introduces Gutiérrez's 2014 poetic anthology (*La línea oscura*) provides a holistic perspective on Gutiérrez's poetic production, finding within it a sustained commitment to existential/metaphysical contemplation and to the shocking and brutal revelation of the reality of human suffering: "[l]a poesía de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez puede leerse como el grito iracundo del insumiso, una conciencia crítica que se ejerce al mostrarnos la fea cara de la realidad y sus implicaciones intelectuales. El lirismo se supedita a la rabia, al desafío de exhibir la vida tal cual es" (26). In "Conjurar el miedo: La escritura poética de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez," Samanta Rodríguez examines the evolution of Gutiérrez's poetics from 1997-2008, and emphasizes the importance of the visual/graphic element that pervades Gutiérrez's poetic oeuvre.

temporal nature of the field of culture, and all human subjects within it, in stark contrast with the eternity of nature.

Gutiérrez's poems reflect on the abject ruins of Centro Habana and on the animality imposed upon its inhabitants both by the market and by the poverty of the special period. But the poems also manifest a ruination that is inherent in their very form. In other words, the poems themselves may also be read as allegorical ruins, which deconstruct the mythology imposed upon the ruins of Havana by the logic of both the revolution and the market. Through this deconstruction, these allegorical poems resist the timelessness of the special period, mourn the loss of revolutionary utopian myths, and restore historicity to the ruins of Havana. Moreover, the performance of mourning through the poem as ruin presents its own sort of disturbing beauty and its own political promise, not of dazzling resurrection or transcendental myth, but of the long, slow work of sorting through ruins, to see what kind of as of yet unimaginable future might be constructed from the rubble.

4.2 Abject Ruins and Centro Habana

The crippling economic effects of the nineties were perhaps most intensely felt in the area of Centro Habana, which serves as the setting for the majority of Gutiérrez's novels and many of his poems. A socially marginal zone as much as a purely impoverished one, Centro Habana is the site at which both the architectural ruin and the social abjection of the special period are most visible.[114] As such, this site serves as the privileged ground upon which the critical work of mourning can be done.

[114] I use the term social abjection to refer to the stigmatization and social exclusion of marginal subjects based on a variety of factors that are considered to bethreatening to the social order by the dominant culture. These factors include, among others, race, class, political ideology, sexual

Whitfield describes Centro Habana as "home to [Havana's] social outcasts" (101). The municipality was constructed toward the end of the nineteenth century, as Havana outgrew the walls that had historically encircled it (Whitfield 102). Population density in the area grew as middle-class residents moved to newer suburbs and freed up space for successive waves of internal migration, after which the area became a congested center of "gaming establishments, brothels, and poor rooming houses" (Whitfield 102). In the post-revolution era, the congestion and decay of the neighborhoods continued, as "development initiatives privileged rural areas for the best part of the 1960s and the Urban Reform Law of 1960 diminished incentives for architectural maintenance" (Whitfield 102). By the 1970s, the neglect of Centro Habana made it all but impossible to "rescue many of Havana's neoclassical homes, most of which by now housed dozens of families, and were structurally neglected" (Whitfield 102). The nineties found "many of Centro Habana's buildings on the verge of collapse and its inhabitants living in poverty" (Whitfield 102). Furthermore, the limited funds that were available for architectural restoration were dedicated to the renovation of the colonial city, which the government quickly identified as a driver of tourism (Whitfield 102).

Centro Habana is historically home to a large Afro-Cuban population, and some scholars have noted a racial stigmatization that accompanies the area's economic decline. Regarding the demographics of Centro Habana, Whitfield writes:

> Following abolition in 1882, numerous freed slaves established residence in low-rent rooming houses, and the flight of many tenants after 1959 vacated living quarters for the poorer and darker-skinned Cubans whom the revolution championed. By the onset of the

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orientation, gender identity, or (post)colonial status. Refer to chapter one for a more detailed description of the term.

special period, Centro Habana's inhabitants, unlike those of the wealthier suburbs to the west, were predominantly Afro-Cuban. (102)

Governmental discourse in Cuba since the revolution has sought to establish, as part of its egalitarian mythos, that racism does not exist in the country. Nevertheless, various Cuba scholars and intellectuals, both inside and outside the country, have pointed out the problematic nature of this declaration. In an academic panel discussion titled "¿Entendemos la marginalidad?" panelist Gisela Arandia argues that there exists within Cuba "una marginalidad muy vinculada al racismo, a la discriminación y al prejuicio racial" (79). She identifies Centro Habana as a space in which economic privation and racial stigma intersect: "[e]s el caso de Centro Habana, con estas viviendas destruidas, en donde se puede comprobar fácilmente que más del 95% de la población es de negros y mulatos" (79-80). As further evidence for systemic racism, Arandia refers to the education system in Cuba, in which white students are more likely to advance to the level of secondary education, and in which "en los últimos años el porcentaje de estudiantes blancos es muy alto, como un 70%, y ha disminuido el de los negros en relación con el período inicial de la Revolución" (80).

In 2013, Roberto Zurbano Torres, the Afro-Cuban editor of Casa de las Américas, published an opinion piece in the New York Times while travelling for academic reasons in the US. The content of the essay, titled "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun," echoes and expands upon the critiques presented by Arandia. Zurbano argues that the legalization of the dollar during the special period created two economies in Cuba: one that trafficked in dollars and was more lucrative, and another which retained use of the Cuban peso and remained under more intense regulatory control by the state. He contends that white Cubans, who were systematically endowed with greater resources as the historical benefactors of colonialism and slavery, were

able to leverage "their resources to enter the new market-driven economy and reap the benefits of a supposedly more open socialism" ("For Blacks"). Such opportunities were not available to the majority of their black counterparts: "[t]he other reality is that of the black plurality, which witnessed the demise of the socialist utopia from the island's least comfortable quarters" ("For Blacks"). In other words, the decriminalization of the dollar authorized a new economic class distinction in Cuba, those who can participate in the dollarized economy and those who can't, which breaks along clear racial lines. Zurbano specifically remarks on the lack of black Cubans in the hospitality sector, arguing that exclusion of Afro-Cubans from these lucrative jobs is rooted in a desire to cater to an expected European negrophobia. Finally, he argues that the government's willful blindness toward racism in Cuba, in addition to the economic policies that have disproportionately benefitted white Cubans, has reinforced and perpetuated its existence: "[t]o question the extent of racial progress was tantamount to a counterrevolutionary act. This made it almost impossible to point out the obvious: that racism was alive and well" ("For Blacks"). Proving the veracity of this proclamation, Zurbano was unceremoniously removed from his prestigious position at Casa de las Américas upon his return to Cuba.[115]

Gutiérrez's depiction of Centro Habana reveals the class and race anxieties that establish the neighborhood as a socially abject zone. Casamayor notes that racism against Afro-Cubans is a recurring theme in *Trilogía*, while also observing that Gutiérrez himself participates in a perverse form of stereotyping, as he identifies sex with black women with his rejection of social norms, and with his frenetic leap into animality and moral abandon.[116] Nevertheless, she argues that his work has documentary value, in that "[s]u mirada desolada y cruel permite denunciar las

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[115] See "El regimen destituye a Roberto Zurbano de su cargo en Casa de las Américas" in *Diario de Cuba.*
[116] See Casamayor, "Negros, marginalidad y ética."

miserables condiciones de vida de los negros marginales en los convulsos 90" ("Negros, marginalidad y ética" 67). When discussing the initial reception of *Trilogía* among Cuban intellectuals, De Ferrari finds that the text is largely rejected, on the grounds that is either too vulgar (not literary enough) or a distortion of reality (37). Referring to the work of Mary Douglas rather than that of Kristeva,[117] she argues that these critics find the dirtiness of the novel threatening precisely because it "contaminates" their conceptions of class and race in Cuba, i.e. that the country is free of economic classes and racial hierarchies. In Kristevan terms, they respond to the reality of 1990s Centro Habana with abjection, banishing the abject zone to the margin, in order to (consciously or unconsciously) defend the structures of class and race that do exist in Cuba, so that they may be preserved. Following Ponte, the only way in which the ruins of Centro Habana do enter into revolutionary mythology are as symbols of resistance to imperialism. Thus, the abject history of the ruins remains cloaked in myth.

4.3 Ruins and Abjection in Benjamin

Abjection and ruin coincide in the space of Centro Habana, and also in Benjamin's theory of allegory. As Benjamin compares the functions of symbol and allegory early in his essay on allegory and the German *Trauerspiel*,[118] he establishes a link between allegory and death:

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[117] Kristeva draws heavily on Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* in her theorization of abjection. In general terms, she takes Douglas' anthropological observations regarding the manner in which preoccupations with filth and defilement allow for the creation of social classification structures, and inscribes them within a psychoanalytic framework, implying that such preoccupations and classification structures are the manifestations of psychic forces, and acts of sublimating the abject.
[118] The *Trauerspiel* is a form of German drama that surfaced during the Baroque period, which is literally translated as "mourning play." (See John Osborne's "Translator's Note" in his translation of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.)

> Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head. (166)

The term *facies hippocratica* refers to the countenance, first described by Hippocrates, that marks the face when death is imminent.[119] Whereas the symbol invokes a unity of form and content that allows the material to unite with the eternal, allegory speaks to the impossibility of such unity, establishing instead a materiality that is rooted in the temporality of history, and subject to inescapable death. As such, allegory strips away illusions of transcendence and reveals the historical predicament of the human subject:

> And although [allegory] lacks all 'symbolic' freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing […]. (166)

In Kristeva's theory of abjection, death and all of the material objects that stand in for it—hair, nails, feces, urine, bodily fluids, severed limbs, corpses, the maternal body—are the ultimate threat that the subject pushes away in order to preserve its fragile boundaries. All signs of putrefaction, decay, and dissolution provoke nausea and repulsion because they make the

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[119] Hippocrates describes this phenomenon as follows: "[If the patient's facial] appearance may be described thus: the nose sharp, the eyes sunken, the temples fallen in, the ears cold and drawn in and their lobes distorted, the skin of the face hard, stretched and dry, and the colour of the face pale or dusky […] and if there is no improvement within the prescribed time, it must be realized that this sign portends death" (*Hippocratic Writings* 170-1).

subject conscious of the violability of his/her own borders, and in a horrifying flash unveil the fate of dissipation into otherness that awaits the human in death.

Not surprisingly, references to putrefaction and decay are recurrent in Benjamin's writing on allegory, and begin to surface as he establishes the link between the allegorical sign and the figure of the ruin:

> The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. (177-8)

Decay and historical consciousness—i.e. consciousness of the subject's temporal predicament—are linked here, as the ruin (set against the backdrop of nature) reveals the chasm that separates the material from the eternal. This reflection on ruin as a sign of material decay and dissolution leads Benjamin to conclude that "[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things," (178) in other words, that allegory and the ruin perform the same quintessential function of awakening the subject to its own historical predicament.

Perhaps the strongest link between the abject and the ruin comes as Benjamin discusses the manner in which the fragmented body serves as an allegorical symbol, a signifying process that arrives at its apotheosis in the figure of the corpse. Considering the antinomies that constitute allegory—culture and nature, body and spirit—and their necessary disruption of the mystified unity of the symbol, Benjamin quotes the following reflection from German philologist Wilhelm Wackernagel: "[t]he whole human body cannot enter a symbolical icon, but it is not inappropriate for part of the body to constitute it" (qtd. in Benjamin 216). In this precept,

Benjamin identifies an underlying logic that accounts for the "cruelty and anguish" (216) that pervades baroque drama. Namely, that the ruined and fragmented body stages the materiality of death and the separation of body and spirit more clearly than any other emblem:

> If martyrdom thus prepares the body of the living person for emblematic purposes, it is not without significance that physical pain as such was ever present for the dramatist to use in the action. […] Since, in fact, the spirit is in itself pure reason, true to itself, and it is physical influences alone which bring it into contact with the world, the torture which it endures was a more immediate basis of violent emotions than so-called tragic conflicts. And if it is in death that the spirit becomes free, in the manner of spirits, it is not until then that the body too comes properly into its own. (217)

The material/spiritual split achieves its greatest depth in the presentation of the corpse:

> For this much is self-evident: the allegorization of the physis can only be carried through in all its vigour in respect of the corpse. And the characters of the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. (217)

Kristeva writes that "refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (*Powers* 3). They show the inevitability of mortality, the body which will inevitably become ruin as the boundaries that protect it lose the ability to withstand their own porosity. As such, "[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection […] it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (*Powers* 4).

Having established the intersection between Kristevan and Benjaminian thinking regarding abjection and ruins, the corpse may be read as an abject ruin that pulverizes mythologies of eternity and grounds the human firmly within the realm of the historical. I would

like to propose here that Centro Habana serves as an allegorical corpse. It is the abject ruin cloaked in the mythological discourse of both the revolution and the market that breaks through its symbolic veneer when subjected to the demystifying force of the allegorical reading. When the abject ruin is covered with symbolism, it cannot be seen, and is once again thrust to the margin and warded off. The socially abject space of Centro Habana is a ruin that penetrates the boundaries of symbolic mythology and tears them asunder. The art that sees these ruins as allegory instead of symbol enables this process of deconstruction, allowing this history of social abjection to be seen and to be mourned.

However, for Benjamin, the ruin as allegory offers more than historical consciousness and an opportunity to mourn. He also points to a salvific aspect of the ruin—that, while remaining inscribed within the temporal, it still points to the eternal that lies beyond the boundary of death. In other words, he highlights a redemptive value within the ruin that is similar to the role played by the abject in the mystical elaborations of Christianity noted by Kristeva. Ultimately, the ruination of the corpse for Benjamin follows the logic of the Passion—the antinomies of body and spirit are irreconcilable and the body must die so that the spirit may be free. As such, Benjamin sees the "pious mortification of the flesh" (222) as an allegorical performance that mutilates the body, edging it toward ruin and, thus, toward the boundary at which body and spirit diverge. Kristeva understands the same practices of abjection of the self as acts of sublimation, which served the purpose in a Christian context of allowing the subject to "purify" its unclean materiality to bring it closer to the realm of the spirit. Mortification of the flesh, as well as more extreme acts such as kissing lepers and sponging their pus-covered sores (*Powers* 127) follow a logic by which "abjection becomes a requisite for a reconciliation, in the mind, between the flesh and the law" (*Powers* 127-8). Again combining Kristeva and Benjamin,

one can treat these acts of purification as allegorical performances that display the antitheses of flesh and spirit that structure the subject, while also putting into practice a continual desire to move away from the corporeal and into the ethereal.

Benjamin adopts the same language of purification when he talks about the allegorical significance of the corpse:

> Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life. It is not only in the loss of limbs, not only in the changes of the aging body, but in all the processes of elimination and *purification* that everything corpse-like falls away from the body piece by piece. It is no accident that precisely nails and hair, which are cut away as dead matter from the living body, continue to grow on the corpse. (218; emphasis added)

The purification of the corpse sets up a reversal by which the ruined body, the abject, becomes the most propitious ground for spiritual conversion: "[t]he bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence" (232). Rather, Benjamin sees in the figures of death (Golgotha, the corpse) "the allegory of resurrection" (232): "[u]ltimately in the death signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed: on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem" (232). Ultimately, this redemption is the work of God according to Benjamin: "[y]ea, when the Highest comes to reap the harvest from the graveyard, then I, a death's head, will be an angel's countenance"[120] (232). The *facies hippocratica* of history is turned into an angel's countenance, showing that the allegorical intention "does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection" (233). In summary, allegory for Benjamin is contrasted with

[120] This quote, which is cited by Benjamin, comes work the Baroque poem *Blumen*, by German poet and playwright Daniel Casper von Lohenstein.

the symbol in that the symbol signifies a mythology of unity between form and essence, while the allegorical presents form and essence as irreconcilable antinomies. The spirit achieves resurrection only as it departs the ruin to unite with God, but within the earthly realm one can only marvel in "ponderación misteriosa," to use Benjamin's term, at the paradox of body and spirit that permeates every aspect of the physical world.

But how does allegory function when religious faith is lost? What is its value when no hope of conversion of the abject into divine restoration is present? I have argued in the previous chapters that the sublime vision presented within abject aesthetics outside of a religious context is utopian in nature. This utopian vision of altered social relations is structured, if one can use the word, by porous boundaries that dissolve the social classification systems that are predicated on and sustained by social abjection. The abject art produced at the margins of the Symbolic deposits in aesthetic form the sublime and unnamable possibilities that may be found at those margins, brings them into the Symbolic through the aesthetic act, and gestures toward how these possibilities might revolutionize the Symbolic order to create utopia.[121] However, in a context such as special period Cuba, in which society confronts itself with the seeming failure of the utopian ideal of the revolution, the concept of utopian salvation must be rethought and reframed. For Benjamin, this rethinking hinges on imagining utopia outside of myth.

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[121] I use the term "Symbolic" here in the psychoanalytic sense developed by Lacan and adopted by Kristeva, in which the Symbolic refers to the system of social relations into which the subject enters through the acquisition of language (see chapter one). This use of the term must be distinguished from reference to the symbol as a mythologizing literary trope as defined by Benjamin.

4.4 Poverty, Emancipation, and the Ruined Road to Utopia

In order to give a clearer picture of the political work performed by the ruin outside of a religious economy, and the relationship of this work to the aesthetic, I turn to an article by Naomi Stead, titled “The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer.” Stead offers a more explicit accounting of the demystifying function of allegory in relation to the symbol, through her comparison of Benjamin’s theory of allegory with Albert Speer’s theory of ruin value. Furthermore, she locates, via Benjamin, an emancipatory power within the ruin that opens society to radical political possibilities.

Speer was an official architect of the Nazi party, in addition to later taking on a role as an armaments minister, and consulted with Hitler personally on various state architectural projects (Stead 51-4). Speer’s vision for Nazi architecture involved constructing edifices and curating the landscape around them such that as the structures decayed over time, they would blend harmoniously into the landscape, granting the ruins a sense of “geological time” (Stead 54) rather than a historical one. In other words, Speer attempts to build “a certain mode of destruction into the construction itself,” (Stead 55) and, in doing so, to create “a bridge of tradition” (Stead 53) that speaks to the eternal nature of the Third Reich.

Speer adopts the ruin as a symbolic conduit for mythology in a way that is similar to that of the Cuban revolutionary government and the global market for Cuban art in the nineties, albeit in very different contexts and in order to communicate very different ideologies. The value of the ruin for Speer is to instill the atemporality of the Nazi program in the viewer, to inscribe it in eternity. The ruin as allegory, as we have seen, does the opposite, and the destruction of the myth of timelessness serves a distinct political purpose that is at odds with the totalitarian nature of the ruin as symbol: “[f]or Benjamin destruction is never an end in itself, it is only ever a process

required to free history from the accretions of traditions and mythology. It is the fragmentary rubble left in the aftermath of destruction" (Stead 58). Benjamin sees the state of living in full consciousness of history stripped from myth as a positive form of poverty that Stead summarizes at the end of her essay:

> The concept of poverty works as a description of the liberated condition of the subject following the act of positive violence, which is the emancipatory potential of the ruin. For Benjamin, violence and destruction are able to 'shatter the continuum of history,' leaving in their wake a fresh and de-mythified field of fragments and detritus. The act of destruction places everything in new juxtapositions, shatters old relationships, and opens history up for examination, making it 'accessible.' For Benjamin, it is through the suddenness and shock of destruction that the subject emerges from the 'dream' of tradition and into modern life in the present. The stripping away of the 'traces' of tradition, the removal of 'aura,' the sudden shock of awakening, all aspire, in Benjamin's conception, to the emancipated state of the 'new poverty,' where illusions are abandoned and the subject is presented to itself in the present. (Stead 62)

The state of emancipatory poverty described above encapsulates the function of allegory outside of the religious economy. When the allegorical no longer points to divine redemption, the only value of the ruin can be a critical one, through which duplicitous myths are revealed as such, leaving the subject free to sift through the rubble left behind, and imagine what else might be constructed from the fragments. One possibility for the unlocked potential of the construction that follows the shattered myth is a utopian one, and I have argued that the dissolution of the subject and of Symbolic Law that is staged in the abject aesthetic opens up a field of sublime and utopian possibility. But to what extent can one speak of utopia among the ruins in special period

Cuba, where the revolutionary promise of utopia appears to have failed? Following Stead and Benjamin, allegory is endowed with the critical value of restoring historicity to the atemporal symbols, embracing the freedom from myth that this historicity offers, and mourning the loss of myth that is embodied in ruin. The key to talking about utopia in the special period lies in the freedom from myth brought about by allegory, which allows for the possibility of separating mythified visions of utopia (that of the revolution) from demythified ones, and Benjamin, again, is helpful in resolving this quandary.

In his book *Utopia from Thomas More to Walter Benjamin* (2017),[122] Miguel Abensour traces the evolution of Benjamin's thought on utopia, and finds that his thinking is oriented around the basic project of "disentangling utopia from myth […] in order to give it back its emancipatory potentialities" (14). Benjamin finds that myth is the inexorable trap that prevents utopia's realization. He identifies two antithetical myths in particular—on the one hand, the pursuit of mystified forms of utopia, and on the other, the stultified belief that history is nothing but eternal repetition, from which nothing new can arise—as fundamental in creating a social order that is defined by ever-recurring catastrophe.[123] Benjamin continually returns to the metaphor of the dream to describe the mystified state in which society exists, and which perpetuates a continual catastrophic state of oppression. He does however recognize that within

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[122] Published originally in French [*L'Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*] in 2000.

[123] Benjamin's concept of utopia is complex and it evolved throughout his life. Abensour contends that Benjamin's continuing dialogue with Theodor Adorno on the subject and his engagement with the writings of Louis Auguste Blanqui, among many others, were key influences that profoundly affected his thinking. Abensour argues that Adorno was useful in illustrating the manner in which the pursuit of an idealized "golden age" of classless society existing in pre-history creates present catastrophe, and that the work of Blanqui was indispensible to Benjamin in his effort to show that the "eternal return" (Blanqui's concept) of the same forms of historical oppression is itself an oppressive dream, from which humanity can awaken to realize social alternatives. See Abensour's chapter on Benjamin for a more thorough elaboration of these concepts.

these dream images, these mythified symbols, there exists a possibility for radical alterity, that within catastrophe lies the potential for utopia. In breaking out of myth, utopia "can create an irruption in history, opening up breaches in it," (Abensour 88) and exit the state of catastrophic repetition for something new. Abensour names Benjamin "the sentry of dreams," as the task he sets out for himself is that of deconstructing the symbols of society's collective dream to create the rupture that would lead out to utopia. In the book's final pages, Abensour establishes the relationship between the sentry of dreams and the allegorist:

> Allegory diverts the archaic images and the myths that nourish them; linked to the "destroyer character," allegory creates a new arc leading from, at one end, the recognition of images from the collective dream, to, at the other, the necessity of exposing those images in order to glean from them, in their ruin, beneath their ashes, the spark capable of opening up an unsuspected pathway. In short, the sentry of dreams is by necessity an allegorist. (108)

Abensour here makes the connection between ruin and utopia. The ruin is the product of a critical demolition process (allegorical in nature) that breaks out of catastrophe and unleashes utopian potential, free of myth.

4.5 Anti-poems and Mourning

Casamayor, in multiple works, argues that Gutiérrez abandons utopia in his novels.[124] Clearly, Gutiérrez abandons the idea of the revolution's teleological march toward utopia; the

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[124] See "¿Cómo vivir las ruinas habaneras de los años noventa?: Respuestas disímiles desde la isla en las obras narrativas de Abilio Estévez, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez y Ena Lucía Portela," "Cubanidades de un fin de siglo, o breve crónica de ciertos intentos narrativos por salvar la cubanidad," and *Utopía, distopía e ingravidez: Reconfiguraciones cosmológicas en la narrativa postsoviética cubana*.

deconstruction of this myth abounds in both his fiction and his poetry, and manifests in both the form and the content of his poems. Yet he vacillates at various points in his poems regarding the possibility of other forms of utopia, ones which could perhaps spring forth out of the catastrophic ruin of the mythologized ones. A key poem for discerning Guttiérrez's poetics of ruin and of mourning is "Material antipoético," published in 2006.[125] The self-declared "anti-poetic" nature of the poem establishes an aesthetic genealogy with the anti-poetry of Nicanor Parra, who is also referenced directly in the text. When tackling the somewhat perplexing task of elaborating the "poetics" of Parra's "anti-poetry," René de Costa observes a commitment in Parra's poems to the incorporation of both language and subject matter that was historically deemed not worthy of the elevated genre of the lyric. While noting that Pablo Neruda, beginning with *Canto general* (1950) and continuing with *Odas elementales* (1954), undertakes a similar project of bringing the colloquial into the realm of the poetic, de Costa argues that Neruda dedicates himself to discovering the hidden poetic element in ordinary things: "se percata de las cosas más ordinarias para descubrir en ellas su belleza, su ignorada dimensión 'poética'" (29). Parra, in contrast, does not seek to find some sort of idealized beauty in his attention to the quotidian or the banal. Instead of seeking the beautiful, he seeks the ugly. De Costa sees this tendency in Parra's poem "Oda a unas palomas" from *Poemas y antipoemas* (1956), in which the experience of observing pigeons in a garden becomes a reflection on ugliness, as the birds begin eating flies, and on the impossibility of finding any ulterior meaning in the natural scene: "Sus estudiados vuelos, sin embargo,/ Hipnotizan a mancos y cojos/ Que creen ver en ellas/ La explicación de este mundo y otro" (Parra 76). De Costa argues that "[u]n "poeta" [Neruda] […] puede idealizar [las palomas];

[125] The poem appears in both *Yo y una lujuriosa negra vieja* and *No tengas miedo, Lulú*, both published in the same year. *No tengas miedo, Lulú* is a selection of published poems from previous works that also includes previously unpublished visual poems, comprised of both written and visual elements.

el antipoeta (Parra) las ve de otro modo, más real: como unos animales asquerosos y sucios" (31). Thus, the antipoet is not the "descubridor, el mago revelador" (de Costa 29) that reveals hidden beauty, as in Neruda's work. Rather:

> El antipoeta [...] es todo menos un visionario; es, por fin, 'el hombre de la calle' a quien le pasan las cosas, es el hombre de hoy y de ayer, el hombre de medio siglo que ve lo 'absurdo', lo 'feo' y lo 'brutal' de todo lo que le rodea—y que es existencialmente incapaz de darle sentido al caos. Hace, por tanto, lo que hacemos todos: encogernos de hombros y seguir adelante" (de Costa 38).

De Costa sees a loss of idealization in Parra's work, a loss of metaphysical narratives that can identify an underlying structure to chaos and give it meaning. This absent structure is replaced by an emphasis on the naked materiality of quotidian experience. Edith Grossman makes similar observations, as she identifies the work of the anti-poet as that of "strip[ping] language of its metaphorical and metaphysical accretions" (54).

I would agree with Grossman with a slight caveat; it is the construct of the *symbol* and its metaphysical accretions that the anti-poet refuses, not metaphor. De Man has shown that removing figurative language—metaphor, allegory, synecdoche, metonymy, etc.—from writing or speech is impossible,[126] and Parra's and Gutiérrez's poetry are still populated by these tropes despite their commitment to rejecting the mythology of the symbol. Their poems strip away symbols to reveal the material ruin beneath them. Additionally, the prosaic language and abject imagery that both poets bring into their poems—Gutiérrez to a much greater extent than Parra—also put into practice the ruination of the norms of elevated poetic diction, thus enacting ruin in the form of the poem as well as in the content.

[126] See "The Epistemology of Metaphor."

"Material antipoético" begins with the lyric subject's description of a scene in Havana:

El panorama de este verano es desolador

abundan las cucarachas

las moscas y guasasas de mierda

la peste a basura podrida

y a fosas derramadas en las calles

los ratones pequeños / dicen

que también hay ratas enormes

Hay avisos / vacunas gratis

contra la leptospirosis (*No tengas miedo* 79)

The scene is one of abject decay, filled with insects, rodents, trash, overflowing sewage, decay and disease. The topic of architectural ruin enters in the verses that follow:

En el Malecón un edificio se ladeó

como la torre de Pisa

y la gente salió huyendo

Ahora unos hombres lo derriban

con mucho cuidado / piedra a piedra

porque puede desplomar y enterrar a los vecinos (*No tengas miedo* 79)

Finally, the speaker describes the scene as an "anti-poetic city":

En fin   el panorama es pavoroso

bajo el sol y el calor

La ciudad antipoética

Nicanor Parra tendría que visitarla

Gente agobiada y de mal humor   Borrachos

sentados en la acera esperando la nada

y los poetas en baja (*No tengas miedo* 79)

The vulgar language of the verses, their prosaic and narrative style, and the seemingly random spacing and backslashes all enact a ruination of elevated, symbolic poetry. The anti-poetic city is one deprived of myth, exposed in its bare materiality.

Whereas de Costa and Grossman find a pervasive irony in Parra's poems, arguing that anti-poetic language parodies poetic diction and the metaphysical aspirations of the symbol, a more allegorical spirit manifests itself in Gutiérrez's work. De Man links allegory and irony in their common function of de-mystifying the symbol and revealing the temporal nature of the subject.[127] He asserts that the two are distinguished, however, by their relationship to the temporal. Whereas irony serves the demystifying function of revealing that man is separate from nature and subject to death, it is a synchronic trope that allows no time for reflection on this knowledge. Allegory, on the other hand, is diachronic and allows for reflection and meditation on this demystification, which de Man calls "an eternal insight into the rocky barrenness of the human predicament" ("Rhetoric" 225). In Benjaminian terms, allegory allows for mourning the rocky barrenness of the ruin.

The verses of "Material antipoético" cited thus far form the poem's first stanza. In the second, Gutiérrez mourns not only the ruin of the city, but also what such ruination implies for the art of poetry. He mourns the loss of the myths that make symbolic poetry possible:

No hay nada hermoso que cantar

una desgracia para los poetas

---

[127] "Allegory and irony are thus linked in their common discovery of a truly temporal predicament" ("Rhetoric" 222).

Todo es mierda

Así es imposible escribir poesía nutritiva

poesía alimenticia

poesía que haga exclamar

a las damas sensibles

¡oh, qué gran poeta   estupendo   es un clásico!

No / nada de eso

La vida antipoética gana terreno

y establece cabezas de playa

en cada corazoncito que logra atrapar (80)

While the first stanza establishes the poem as ruin in both form and content, the second laments the loss of symbolic beauty that the abject scene implies. If in reality "todo es mierda," the raw materiality of waste, the revolting decay that is the sign of a temporal predicament, then there is no room for mythologizing, or for creating poetry of an aesthetic taste that performs in accordance with the cultured norms of the lyric that make a "gran poeta." The reality of special period Cuba asserts itself too viscerally for such mystifications.

Consequently, the poet can do nothing but mourn the redemptive promise of the symbol, in this case, the sea:

Y yo   desgraciadamente

no puedo mirar solo al mar

Al mar salvador   azul

Al eterno   bellísimo   brillante mar. (80)

The eternal, beautiful sea and the exaltation of its blueness contrast with the history of the ruined city "[donde] no hay nada hermoso que cantar." A long literary history of the sea as poetic symbol exists both inside and outside of Hispanic poetry, but certainly one of the most poignant examples comes in Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Diario de un poeta reciéncasado* (1917). In an interview with Ricardo Gullón, Jiménez discusses the manner in which the work documents a spiritual transformation for the poet, which is mediated by poetry.[128] He also describes the manner in which his symbolist poetry is steeped in metaphysical aspirations that depend upon contact with nature, especially the sea, for their realization: "[c]on el *Diario* empieza el simbolismo moderno en la poesía española. Tiene una metafísica que participa de estética, como en Goethe. Y tiene también una ideología manifiesta en la pugna entre el cielo, el amor y el mar" (Gullón 93). Similarly, the association of the color blue with the poetic symbol invokes the legacy of Rubén Darío's *Azul* (1888). Darío says of his use of blue as a symbol that "[e]l azul es para mí el color del ensueño, el color del arte, un color helénico y homérico, color oceánico y fundamental" (qtd. in Salvador 46). In other words, blue is the symbol for the ethereal, mystified nature of art. The poetic speaker in "Material antipoético," when confronted with the abject ruin of the city, mourns the loss of the ability to look only at mystified symbols and their promise of eternity. The poem performs this act of mourning in its content, as the poet laments his loss, and in its form, in the manner in which it stages the ruination of the lyric as an elevated form of art.

"Material antipoético" emphasizes the materiality of Havana's ruins, and their demystified nature, at the same time that it mourns the loss of anti-poetry's capacity for creating symbols. However, the symbol rejected here—the eternal blue sea—is of an abstract nature, with

[128] "Mi renovación empieza cuando el viaje a América y se manifiesta con el *Diario*. El mar me hace revivir, porque es el contacto con lo natural, con los elementos, y gracias a él viene la poesía abstracta" (Gullón 120).

no direct reference to the mythological symbolic impositions of the Cuban revolution or the neoliberal marketplace. Gutiérrez tackles the mythology of the revolution more directly in the poems of *Espléndidos peces plateados* (1996).[129] In this collection, the "splendid, silvery fish" become a metaphor for the chimera of happiness and transcendental salvation that forever escapes the lyric subject. The utopian aspirations of the revolution, and the poetic speaker's disenchantment with them, are evoked directly at various moments in the text. In "Grandes cosas para el futuro," the lyric voice speaks of the interminably delayed nature of the promised future in Cuba: "mi país hacía grandes cosas para el futuro./ Siempre ha sido así. Mi vida entera la he pasado, como todos/ haciendo grandes cosas para el futuro" (42). In "Nuestro hombre en la Habana," the speaker announces, "[c]reo que basta ya de proyectos para el futuro./ La larga utopía se está acabando" (71). He states that "[e]l romántico soñador está blasfemando./ Ahora tropieza con cadáveres en la escalera/ y patea con los negros borrachos" (71).[130] Because the romantic symbol is blasphemy in the context of abject ruin, the symbol of the splendid, silvery fish remains out of reach for the man in Havana, and their distance implies an end to the revolution's utopian dreams:

> Los espléndidos peces plateados juguetean
>
> con las ballenas de agosto,
>
> pero nuestro hombre en La Habana
>
> camina de prisa por Coyoacán, entra en la casa de Trotsky,
>
> donde permanece en el silencio gélido del último instante
>
> y con un temblor ve a Dostoievski llorando

[129] A note at the end of the collection states that the poems were written in Havana and Málaga, Spain between January and June of 1994.

[130] Here arises the stereotyping of Afro-Cubans that Casamayor points out, as Gutiérrez associates blackness with social decadence, with abjection.

en un rincón de la bañera.

Nuestro hombre en La Habana perdido en el laberinto frío

de la catedral de San Basilio, en la Plaza Roja

Ya no hay trincheras para ti. Tras de ti se cierra

el portón de acero.

Los espléndidos peces plateados saltan a tu alrededor.

Anuncian el fin de esta utopía. (72)

Here, the fish represent, with their distance from the ruined city, not the myth of the coming utopia, but the unbridgeable distance that exists between myth and ruin. As such, the city signifies allegorically, and the ruin stands as a testament to temporality, and not to the revolutionary myth that projects the necessity of heroic resistance and teleological fulfillment in utopia.

Mourning the loss of myth in the ruined city is also a central focus in "Señal de peligro." The poem begins with a rejection of natural, symbolic imagery:

Sería hermoso este poema

si fuera un puñado de niebla,

un puñado de almendras.

Uno de esos hermosos poemas bucólicos, lentos, vegetales

atravesados por la fragancia del maíz,

por un chorro de agua, por un jarro de leche fresca.

Pero no es nada de eso.

Este poema no está escrito en el aire

ni en las estrellas ni en la noche. (25)

The poem is not written on the face of ethereal nature, but scratched onto the face of the Havana ruins: "[e]ste poema está arañado en el cemento de la ciudad paralizada" (25). Furthermore, the poem presents itself as a ruin, as a corrosive mass of decay that bleeds into the city: "[e]s corrosivo y se desgasta, se pierde en el ácido. Este poema aulla [sic] ahora mismo,/ se desangra solitario sobre La Habana" (25). And as the poem bleeds, the city falls to pieces in an abject scene of hunger and hopelessness: "[l]a ciudad se cae a pedazos en silencio./ El hambre sobre el asfalto y la grasa," leaving the speaker, "cansado, confundido, con hambre, sin dinero" (25). Finally, the poem is alternately described as a fistful of broken glass that bleeds the speaker of life and, literally, a piece of excrement that ceaselessly disturbs him, that will not allow him to rest:

> Este poema es un puñado de vidrios rotos
>
> que aprieto
>
> y me desangra las manos.
>
> Este poema de mierda me levanta aullando de mi cama.
>
> Me levanta rugiendo, desvelado, sin poder dormir, Dios mío. (25)

In essence, the speaker presents the poem as an abject body, a ruin, that performs an act of demystification. The poem becomes pure material—etchings in the paralyzed city, a fistful of bloody glass, fecal matter—with no hope for recovering the organic totality of the symbol alluded to in the beginning verses. The poem performs allegorical ruination such that the abject remnants of the city are incapable of mythological symbolization—either that of the return of the revolutionary vision of utopia or that of the beautiful nostalgia for the lost utopia—leaving the speaker abandoned by God, and sifting through rubble:

> Deseando que Dios aparezca,

ya sin más remedio. Que aparezca.

Que dé una señal.

Que me lance un cabo

en medio de la tormenta y el naufragio. (26)

Beyond the deconstruction of revolutionary mythology in his poems, Gutiérrez also addresses the way in which ruination becomes a symbol in the neoliberal marketplace, and sets about its allegorical demystification. The poem "Animalitos enjaulados y embarrados de mierda,"[131] captures a moment in which the poetic speaker becomes cognizant of the gap between his own experience of 1990s Havana and that of the Western tourist. The speaker describes passing through the streets of Havana with German writer Günter Grass, who recounts his impression of the city to an interested passerby: "[m]e recuerda Calcuta./ Perdí el habla ante tanta pobreza y miseria. No pude/ escribir en los primeros meses allí" (57). The speaker realizes in this moment that the German tourist sees him as part of a landscape of postcolonial poverty, that he exists in the touristic imaginary as a third-world other. As he sees himself through the (perhaps fictionalized) eyes of Grass, the lyric subject experiences a moment of "double consciousness," similar in concept to W.E.B. Dubois' use of the term, in which his own understanding of his agency and subject position is put into question by the tourist's perspective. The experience is disquieting to the speaker, who leaves the scene and returns to his abject surroundings with a new sense of shame:

Yo también perdí el habla al escucharlo

Salí noqueado

y regresé a mi barrio

---

[131] This poem was originally published in *Fuego contra los herejes* (1998). The version cited here is from *No tengas miedo, Lulú*.

No había ni un poco de ron

para volver en mí

Doy unas vueltas

buscando algo que comer

hago una cola

para dos cucharadas de picadillo de soya

a veces me produce diarrea

pero no hay otra cosa. (*No tengas miedo* 57)

The speaker experiences shame and objectification on an even deeper level as other tourists approach and begin to take pictures of him as he waits in line for food:

Estamos en la cola

y vienen unos tipos con camisetas del UCLA

y cámaras profesionales

Éramos un buen bocado

flacos y desnutridos

Trato de esconder mi rostro

pero el cabrón fotógrafo es bueno

(además tiene película abundante)

y dispara ráfagas (58)

This stanza dramatizes the manner in which the touristic marketplace turns the scene of ruination into a symbol that signifies in accordance with the market's aesthetic codes, as identified by Whitfield. The photographed subjects in the scene of abject poverty serve as "readable figures for the decay of Cuba's socialist dreams" (Whitefield 100-1) and allow the tourists to have an

experience of nostalgic yearning for a lost utopia. However, Boym reminds us that nostalgia is "a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii) more than an act of mourning an actual lost person or object. As such, the speaker as a photographed object becomes an extension of the tourist's fantasy, and the scene of ruination thus functions as a mythologized symbol. By recounting the experience from the speaker's perspective, Gutiérrez restores a lived history of abjection to the scene, allowing it to signify allegorically as material ruin, which is to say, as actual history instead of fantasy. In the final stanza, the speaker mourns not only his own state of abjection, but also his complicity in imposing a mythologized aesthetics over scenes of poverty in other contexts, as he too photographed people in abject sites in Latin America:

> Se me aprieta el culo de vergüenza
> y recuerdo que yo hacía lo mismo
> en las favelas de São Paulo
> en los basureros de Bogotá
> y en los tianguis míseros de Guatemala
> La gente escabullía el rostro
> y yo no entendía por qué. (58)

The speaker's shame ultimately stems from the manner in which he himself becomes a mythologized ruin for the photographer's aesthetic enjoyment, and this experience of shame restores historicity to the scene, and allows it to be mourned.

Clearly a politics of critique and of demystification pervades Gutiérrez's poetry. His presentation of ruin as allegory, and the performance of mourning this loss of transcendental ideals reveals a history of abjection that is otherwise occluded by symbolism. The question remains as to whether this negative gesture can turn into a positive politics, whether something

new can be constructed from ruin. Further, were such a positive politics to exist, it remains unclear as to whether or not it would fit under the rubric of Benjamin's catastrophic utopianism.

Utopia is not entirely abandoned in *Espléndidos peces plateados*. Rather, Gutiérrez seems to propose the possibility of a new version of utopia, arising from ruin and freed from myth. When the poet writes in "Nuestro hombre en La Habana" that the "espléndidos peces plateados […] anuncian el fin de esta utopía," (72) he follows this verse with a proclamation:

> Habrá que inventar otra
>
> El hombre duro
>
> seguirá haciendo escalas porque nada termina definitivamente.
>
> Todo se interrumpe. Y renace. Una y otra vez.
>
> Es la historia de siempre. (72)

The reference to another form of utopia, along with the motifs of interruption and rebirth, recall Benjamin's thoughts with respect to utopia arising from catastrophe. Furthermore, by the end of the collection, the relationship between the speaker and the splendid, silvery fish seems to have transformed. Rather than the ethereal chimera of myth, the fish seem to represent a different vision of futurity, one of possibility arising from ruin. In "El hombre lobo mutante," the final poem of *Espléndidos peces plateados*, Gutiérrez writes:

> Yo dejaba el mundo de los hambrientos.
>
> Entraba en el mundo de los feroces.
>
> Y debía despedirme de los espléndidos peces plateados.
>
> Pero algo podré salvar.
>
> Tal vez hasta puedo rescatar del naufragio
>
> a los espléndidos peces plateados. (81)

For Benjamin, even “in the presence of extreme peril, utopia seemed to him more than ever to be the order of the day” (Abensour 13). For him, the moments of catastrophe, of ruin, do not mark the revelation of utopia as fraud, but, rather, may function as instants of productive rupture, from which one may, “open up and map out new ‘lines of flight’ for utopia, towards a new no-place” (Abensour 15).

The penultimate poem of *Espléndidos peces plateados*, “El asesino,” performs exactly this type of flight toward the unimaginable “u-topos,” or “no place.” The speaker describes a dream in which he is fleeing the scene of a murder that he has committed, which places him face-to-face with the apotheosis of ruin—the corpse. At first finds himself paralyzed, “pero la peste a sangre y a tripas llenas de mierda/ me paraliza” (79), but he soon regains the capacity for movement, for flight. Although he runs from the scene, he recognizes that the effort is futile, that there will be no escape: “[e]l rastro es evidente. Un rastro claro/ para el olfato de los sabuesos./ No tengo dónde meterme” (79). However, if one reads the poem allegorically, then what is really at stake does not seem to be an escape from legal or social punishment, but rather the possibility of escape from abject ruin, from the realm of materiality. There will be no transcending ruination, but in a sense this does not seem to trouble the speaker:

> Pero me di gusto desollando al tipo
>
> y embarrándome de sangre y mierda de sus tripas.
>
> A veces me siento bien así.
>
> Huyendo. Apestando a sangre fresca
>
> y a mierda. Y huyendo. (79)

Perhaps rather than a futile attempt at escape, it would be useful to think of the speaker’s flight as movement, as a shift from paralysis to motion before the ruin. Although the speaker does not

extricate himself from the domain of the abject fragment—he remains covered in blood and feces—these fragments seem to have gained a new motility, of flight outwards toward somewhere different. I read this motility as an instantiation of Benjamin's concept of the emancipated state of "new poverty" in which "illusions are abandoned and the subject is presented to itself in the present" (Stead 62). Thus, the positive politics of Gutiérrez's abject allegories may be described as the freedom of "working through the rubble" (Stead 62) left behind once Havana's ruins are stripped of their symbolism. What sort of future may arise from this emancipatory allegory remains unclear; the speaker may be fleeing toward utopia, or toward no place at all, and perhaps neither he nor the reader will ever be able to tell the difference. Regardless, the crucial element is the capacity for movement among the fragments: "[s]upongo que algún día terminará mi condena/ y no sé qué coño vendrá después" (79).

4.6 Disturbing Beauty and the Uncertain Future

Whereas a politics of Gutiérrez's poems has begun to take shape, the question of the relationship of the politics of the poems to their aesthetic remains unclear. With all of their insistence on abjection and despondency, are these poems beautiful? And is their potential for utopian politics—a promise at least of social value, and perhaps of happiness—expressed in aesthetic form as beauty, as Nehamas would have us believe in *Only a Promise of Happiness*? In his rejection of Kantian aesthetics, Nehamas argues that an aesthetic judgment of beauty on the part of a reader/observer is always interested, in the sense that it offers value in the form of a promise to the reader/observer to make his/her life better. Nevertheless, Nehamas is careful to note that this promise is not a guarantee, that the value that a reader/observer identifies within the beautiful object may prove to be an illusion, and that veracity of this promise can never be fully

put to rest as long as the beautiful object continues as an influencing presence in the reader/observer's life. As such, in the case of Gutiérrez, do his poems offer a disturbing beauty that promises demystified utopia?

The lyric subject in Gutiérrez's poems insists that beauty is absent from the texts, saying in "Material antipoético," "[n]o hay nada hermoso que cantar" (*No tengas miedo* 79), and in "Señal de peligro," "[s]ería hermoso este poema/ si fuera un puñado de niebla," (*Espléndidos* 25) before emphatically asserting that the poem has none of the mystified elements that make for beautiful poetry. Gutiérrez's poetic speaker suggests that the poetry of ruin, in rejecting the symbol, must also reject beauty.

Stead adopts a similar position as she argues that allegory resists the "hegemony of beauty within aesthetics" (4). She maintains that allegory "exceeds aesthetics" and that it is able "to defeat beauty by going 'beyond' it, and breaking out into the phenomenal historical world" (4). While recognizing that both allegory and the symbol mobilize certain kinds of politics, she contends that the force of allegory is "of a de-mythifying, anti-aesthetic type," which is "not only counteraesthetic, but a counter to aesthetics" (4). In essence, she equates both beauty and aesthetics with the symbol and its myth of organic totality, and implies that any work of art that does not participate in this politics of symbolic mythology is not aesthetic, and thus not beautiful.

Benjamin, however, vacillates on this point. While he does at one point state that "[a]llegory declares itself to be beyond beauty" (178), at other moments he explicitly refers to allegory as beautiful. His ambivalence seems to derive from a fundamental equivocation regarding the nature of beauty. He questions whether beauty is a superficial façade that is stripped away by allegory, or if it is something more essential, which remains even amidst material decay. Despite declaring that allegory is beyond beauty, Benjamin argues convincingly

in favor of the latter. Like Nehamas, he finds that the act of critical interpretation is key to unveiling the beauty of a work of art, in this case, of the allegory. He sees criticism as a form of mortification (182) that strips away beautiful and illusory myths of transcendence to reveal "philosophical truth," (182) which may be understood as the materiality of history. Thus, he contrasts the "ephemeral beauty [which] is stripped off" with the "philosophical truth" or "objects of knowledge" (182) that remain in the ruin. Are these objects of knowledge beautiful, perhaps of a different category of beauty than the ephemeral kind? Benjamin tentatively answers in the affirmative: "Beauty, which endures, is an object of knowledge. And if it is questionable whether the beauty which endures does still deserve the name, it is nevertheless certain that there is nothing of beauty which does not contain something that is worthy of knowledge" (182). As such, Benjamin marks the object of philosophical criticism that endures in the ruin as a form of beauty that is worthy of knowledge. And although he questions whether or not "the beauty which endures still deserves the name"—in other words, whether or not this beauty which endures should indeed be called beauty, or something else entirely—he nevertheless resorts to use of the word beauty to describe what he finds in the allegories of the *Trauerspiel*:

> The philosophical understanding of allegory, and especially the dialectical understanding of its extreme form, is the only background against which the image of the *Trauerspiel* stands out in living and – if one may venture to say so – *beautiful* colors. (189; emphasis added)

Finally, describing the form of the *Trauerspiel* in the last lines of the essay, Benjamin writes: "[i]n the spirit of allegory, [the *Trauerspiel*] is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of *beauty* to the very last" (235; emphasis added).

Benjamin, like Nehamas, does not conceive of beauty, or at least of all forms of beauty, as a superficial layer of appearance that bears little relation to the social or political value of a work. Rather, beauty may be both exterior and interior to a work, and must be elaborated in the act of interpretation. This perspective underlies Benjamin's assertions that "[b]eauty has nothing inalienable for the uninitiated" (181) and that "[p]hilosophy must not attempt to deny that it re-awakens the beauty of works" (182). Furthermore, the beauty that Benjamin encounters in the allegorical fragment is an object of knowledge that promises the emancipatory freedom of historical consciousness outside of atemporal mythology. The "promise of happiness," illusory and equivocal though it may be, that Benjamin finds in allegory is the political promise of the ruin, and the opening toward a demystified utopia that might arise out of it. Thus, decay and ruination are neither outside of aesthetics nor beyond beauty. Rather, they form an abject aesthetic that finds beauty both in mourning the loss of myth that is intrinsic to the ruin, in the emancipation that such loss implies.

Perhaps Gutiérrez's poetic speaker is right when he declares that "no hay nada hermoso que cantar" in the anti-poetic city. But I leave open the possibility that the performative act of singing is both beautiful and politically promising—that the beauty of Gutiérrez's poems lies in their performance of mourning, which reveals a history of abject marginality that is masked when the scene of the ruin is co-opted as a symbol by revolutionary ideology and by the neoliberal market. This is not to say that abjection should be glorified, that the suffering of those living in Centro Habana during the special period is irrelevant because the ruins that they inhabit can be read allegorically and enact an emancipatory politics of utopia freed from mythology. Rather, I am saying that abjection in special period Cuba is a historical fact that must not be ignored, and that it is in fact ignored when the ruins of Havana are co-opted as symbols by the

revolution and by the international voyeur. When Gutiérrez, in his poems, reads these ruins allegorically, he performs an act of mourning that elegizes both a loss of faith in the eternal promise of the symbol, and the suffering of living in the ruins. I find beauty—a disturbing one, undoubtedly—in this act of mourning in both its critical aspect and its promise of the possibility of reconstruction. Gutiérrez's poetic mourning enacts a critique of atemporal symbolizing at the same time that it restores historicity to the Havana ruins, reveals the social abjection suffered by the inhabitants of Centro Habana during the special period, and establishes that abjection as historical fact. Ponte writes that the revolution's attempt to "banish time from Cuba" has the effect of "denying a life history to millions of its individuals" (15). Gutiérrez's allegorical poems restore this life history of abjection through removing the symbolic veneer of utopian teleology and touristic nostalgia that cover the scene of ruination, and allow it to stand forth as abject ruin. Following Benjamin, this historical consciousness is also valuable as such, in that opens a new, utopian possibility of working through ruin to discover what other, material alternatives for social relations might be imagined after obscuring myths have been stripped away. This disturbing beauty, this promise of utopia, points toward the possibility that lurks beyond the boundary of what is currently imaginable, and beyond which one cannot know "qué coño vendrá después."

CONCLUSION

MAPPING UTOPIA, INSIDE/OUT

> "A map of the world that does not include utopia
> is not worth even glancing at."
>
> -Oscar Wilde

I have sought, in the preceding chapters, to show how poetry and performance from different parts of the Americas go about imagining utopia through abject aesthetics. In Gullar's *Poema sujo*, utopia arrives in the vision of a society and a subject with porous borders. Social boundaries are rendered porous as the poem's lyric subject traverses the socially abject spaces of São Luís do Maranhão. In the poem's final sections the lyric subject becomes a model for a type of subjectivity in which otherness exists both inside and outside the subject, and is not met with abjection. In Piñero's plays and poems, utopia appears as a future horizon, a threshold to be crossed in the various scenes of abjection that populate his work, beyond which lies unnamable possibility. Finally, in the poetry of Gutiérrez, utopia is presented to us in the abject ruin, in the catastrophe that frees us from myth, and that "open[s] up and map[s] out new 'lines of flight' for utopia, towards a new no-place" (Abensour 15).

I have argued in each chapter that beauty—specifically, the disturbing beauty that is the unique aesthetic quality of abject art—is utopia's ambivalent signifier. This ambivalence is explained by both the "ineliminable risk" (133) of beauty, as described by Nehamas, and by the tentative nature of hope, as characterized by Bloch. Beauty does not guarantee happiness anymore than hope guarantees utopia; our faith in beauty can be misplaced and our hope for

utopia can be disappointed. Regardless, Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez gravitate toward the abject as a site of promise, from which a new sociality might emerge.

There exists a final ambivalence regarding utopia that I would now like to consider. I have proposed that the realization of utopia hinges upon bringing the abject into the Symbolic—that the "radical re-articulation of the symbolic horizon" (*Bodies* 23) to which Butler refers, or the revolution in the Symbolic order invoked by Kristeva, are enacted through a productive disruption of the Symbolic that occurs through incorporating the abject. I would now like to engage more deeply (and hopefully productively) with this claim, to see if it could perhaps be fleshed out further, and to see if there is a final lesson that abject art can reveal about how to *arrive* at utopia, in both a metaphorical and a literal sense.

The visions of utopia that appear in the work of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez display some ambiguity regarding the "location" of utopia. Gullar's lyric subject seems to construct it inside the Symbolic, through bringing the outside in, while Piñero's and Gutiérrez's work seems to locate utopia on the outside, as a horizon toward which we are in motion, to which the abject draws us, but at which we have not yet arrived. Ultimately, where is utopia? Is it something that we can construct in the Symbolic? Or does it only exist beyond its margins? And if the answer is the latter, can we ever actually arrive there? Is utopia a place that we haven't built yet, a far away destination, or no place at all? Our hope for arriving at utopia is perhaps less resilient if we cannot chart a course.

Thinking through abjection as a form of oppression, as well as meditating on the location of utopia, requires recourse to spatial metaphors. For Butler, as we have seen, the socially abject forms the constitutive outside to the Symbolic; it is the excluded outside that exists beyond a constructed social margin that serves the purpose of distinguishing viable from unviable

subjectivities. Hence, there is a Symbolic inside populated by subjects, an abject outside to whose occupants subjectivity is denied, and a border that separates the two. Other scholars have shown how the metaphor of the Symbolic as a geographical space becomes an organizing principle for abjection as oppression in practice. In *Geographies of Exclusion* (1995), Sibley demonstrates the way in which abjection organizes social space, determining which spaces are within the purview of the dominant group(s), which spaces belong to marginal groups (and are thus liminal and threatening), and the manner in which dominant groups patrol the borders of their spaces to keep out "contaminating otherness." In, "Locating Filth," William Cohen explores how filth and waste are both metaphors ("dirty immigrants," "the unwashed masses") and material objects (bodily waste, urban trash), and how metaphors of filth structure urban space ("slums," "ghettos") and enact material oppression. Similarly, if we take utopia as a sublime object, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, the same geographical metaphors apply to locating utopia, insofar as the sublime experience is a "negative experience of *limits*," (Morley 16) which leaves the sublime object beyond the grasp of our understanding or representation, i.e. beyond the borders of the Symbolic, in some sort of vast and external topography.

A survey of a few theoretical considerations of utopia demonstrates a recurring tendency to think utopia spatially. In *Utopia* (1516), More sets his utopian society (called "Utopia" in his treatise) on an island south of the equator. Raphael Hythloday, the Portuguese sailor in the text who has travelled to Utopia and tells its tale, explains that Utopia was not originally an island, but part of a continent, and that Utopia's inhabitants separated their kingdom from the mainland by digging a channel of fifteen miles in length (More). *Utopia* was written not long after the first European encounters with the Americas, so to locate the island of Utopia south of the equator in uncharted seas is to locate utopia on the precarious margin of the knowable. Similarly, cutting

Utopia off from the mainland by means of a channel suggests an externalization of the utopian society—a border between inside and outside, between the present reality of social relations and utopia. Not surprisingly, the channel itself takes on sublime and abject attributes in Hythloday's description: "[a]nd [the] neighbors [the neighboring kingdoms of Utopia], who first laughed at the folly of the undertaking, no sooner saw it brought to perfection than they were struck with *admiration and terror*" (More; emphasis added).

Bloch remarks on the spatialization of utopia in "Something's Missing," noting that after More, utopia is displaced out of space into time: "[w]ith Thomas More, the wishland was still ready, on a distant island, but I am not there. On the other hand, when it is transposed into the future, not only am I not there, but utopia is not with itself. This island does not even exist" (3). As he continues, giving his own conception of utopia, Bloch does not set the categories of space and time in opposition to one another, but reconciles them in a spatiotemporal unity: "[b]ut it [this island] is not something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not *yet* in the sense of a possibility; *that* it could be there if we could only do something for it. Not only if we travel there, but *in that* we travel there the island utopia rises out of the sea of the possible" (3). In Bloch's metaphor, utopia is not just a future possibility, but a future destination. Similarly, in his final comments on hope and disappointment, he maintains the metaphor of the ship at sail, saying that although "hope is critical and can be disappointed […] hope still nails a flag *on the mast*, even in decline" (16-7; emphasis added). Muñoz also follows Bloch in his spatiotemporal situating of utopia even while insisting on the futurity of queer utopianism, describing queerness as an "illumination of a *horizon* of potentiality" (1; emphasis added) and arguing that "queer aesthetics *map* future social relations" (1; emphasis added). Finally, in Abensour's analysis of Benjamin's catastrophic utopianism, arrival at utopia is again spatialized. Abesnour sees the

demythologizing function of allegory in Benjamin's work as opening up "unsuspected pathway[s]" (108) to utopia, and he conceives of the overall project of freeing utopia from myth as an attempt at flight outwards, toward the no-place.

More, Bloch, Muñoz, and Abensour (through Benjamin) all conceive of utopia as a destination, although the nature of this destination is ambiguous. More sets his perfect society on an island in uncharted territory, while the name he chooses for this society calls into question whether or not such a place could ever exist at all. Bloch sees the island as a place that does not yet exist, but could if we did the requisite transformative work (metaphorically, embarked on the necessary voyage) to get there. Muñoz re-appropriates the term "cruising" as a form of queerness in practice that puts us in motion toward a utopian horizon to be arrived at in a different time and place. And Abensour sees in Benjamin's work a flight outwards from myth toward another ambiguous no-place. In each case, utopia is located outwards, beyond a margin or threshold, in a space that cannot really be defined.

For Butler and Kristeva, at least in the works that I study here, any alternative political reality resembling utopia results in a contrary motion—that of bringing the outside in. To be clear, neither Butler nor Kristeva explicitly conceive of the political projects that they elaborate in the works that I engage with here—*Bodies that Matter* for Butler, and *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Powers of Horror* for Kristeva—as utopian. Rather, Butler envisions a transformation of the Symbolic through abject performance and Kristeva imagines Symbolic revolution through the return of the repressed semiotic, which, of course, includes the abject. Nevertheless, I imagine Butler's transformation and Kristeva's revolution as utopian in nature, due to their mutual vision of transforming the social totality through looking to the radical outside in a way that provides a model for social and subjective heterogeneity—a way of being

with otherness without abjection. However, in my reading of both of these theorists, they see radical change as something to be enacted within the Symbolic—that by relaxing our borders against the abject, utopia can be constructed here, in this place. For More, Bloch, Muñoz, and Benjamin, utopia is elsewhere, perhaps in the future, in an ambiguous place or no-place beyond the threshold.

Butler and Kristeva see occupying the outside as an untenable solution. For Butler, it is the "unlivable and uninhabitable zone of social live" (*Bodies* 3), and for Kristeva, a complete exit from the Symbolic is to embrace psychosis and death. For the utopian theorists I have cited, it is the inside, the Symbolic as such, that is untenable, the border of which forms the horizon that must be crossed to arrive elsewhere. What can the abject teach us about this inside/outside dilemma? And what can writers such as Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez teach us with their evocation of utopia in the abject?

Social abjection is all about constructing social boundaries that locate abject subjects and the spaces they inhabit on the outside. This form of oppression leaves these subjects, in a very real way, on the outside looking in: as subject to capitalist and colonialist domination, racial and political violence, misogyny, homophobia, and all of the lack of access to the benefits of pertaining to a dominant group that these various exclusions imply. Yet the nature of the abject is to always challenge these boundaries, to render porous the margin that distinguishes out from in. This property explains the continuous nature of social abjection—a perpetual, anxiety-ridden attempt at a total exclusion that is never complete. One reason that this exclusion remains always unfinished is that the abject threatens from both the outside and the inside. Butler recognizes this when she states that the "abjected outside" of the Symbolic exists also within, "as its own founding repudiation" (3). Kristeva also sees the abject as existing within and without, and takes

sublimation as the manner in which it becomes possible to live with this heterogeneity. Thus, while the attempt to construct the socially abject as a social outside enacts a very real exclusion and a very real oppression, it is a project that is always structurally flawed, and subject to coming undone, as these efforts remain haunted by the continual presence of the abject within.

Abject art in essence symbolizes this dilemma, showing how the abject exists within the Symbolic and without. In other words, through giving form to the abject, abject art demonstrates the porosity of the border of the Symbolic, showing that the abject traverses this margin. Thus, while symbolizing the socially excluded outside, abject art reveals the both the impossibility of total exclusion as well as a solution: a society that recognizes and accepts its porous borders. Abject art demonstrates the manner in which creating a totalizing outside/inside distinction at the social level is impossible.

If the abject exists both outside and inside the Symbolic, then so does the sublime and utopian potential that lies within it. In other words, abject art looks both to the outside and to the inside for utopia. Charting a course to utopia then becomes a question of bidirectional movement—a map turned inside/out—in which crossing the margin to seek utopia is just as fruitful, indeed, the same gesture, as seeking to bring it in from the outside. This may be abject art's most utopian gesture: showing that the potential for utopia lies both within and without, in the "exorbitant outside or inside," (*Powers* 1) to use Kristeva's words, that is the abject. This gesture reveals that the border which marks off the abject scene of oppression—the Brazilian factory of exploited workers, the marginal city of the Nordeste, the prison bathroom, the subway toilet, the Lower East Side of the 1980s, Centro Habana, the ruin itself—is not a fixed boundary, beyond which lies an abyss of social death. Rather, it posits that this border is porous, and is not so much a threshold to be crossed definitively in one direction or another, but rather an ideal for

rendering outside/inside distinction impossible, that allows us to make peace with the abject within and without, and that we may use to structure social relations.

The poetry and performance of Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez perform the work of highlighting the porous border of the Symbolic. Gullar does so through his lyric subject-in-process in *Poema sujo*. Piñero's works do it through their performance of abject failure, which find within the scene of abjection the possibility of queering oppressive norms, and of opening the boundaries of society and of the subject to incorporate otherness. And finally, Gutiérrez's poems take us there by way of the abject ruin, which breaks us out of the recurring catastrophe of abjection, and opens a pathway (in or out?) to a new sociality unencumbered by myth.

Or so we hope. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch writes, "[a]nd even if hope merely rises above the horizon, whereas only knowledge of the Real [sic] shifts it in solid fashion by means of practice, it is still hope alone which allows us to gain the inspiring and consoling understanding of the world to which it leads" (1367). The disturbing beauty of a world turned inside out is what draws me to the work of these writers, in which every act of savage abjection is pregnant with the possibility of utopian reversal. And the possibilities do not stop with Gullar, Piñero, and Gutiérrez. Many more works that find beauty in the abject, across the Americas and beyond, are waiting to be studied—works that find a disturbing beauty in stigmatized queer bodies, in racialized bodies, in abjected female bodies, and in immigrant bodies, perhaps along the porous border that recently looms so larger in the US national consciousness. Such works provide a vision of new a Symbolic topography—an inside/out map. This is a map worth looking at.

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