

LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE'S EXPLORATION OF UNCONVENTIONAL BODIES

Elena Rodriguez Mendoza¹

Article Info

Keywords:

Enlightenment,
Biopolitics, Latin
American, Literature,
Economic Liberalism,
National Identity

Abstract

The Enlightenment of the 18th century marked a significant turning point in the role of state governments. Beyond its conventional function of maintaining order within human communities, liberalism expanded its scope by linking economic prosperity to progress and human well-being to productivity. This transformation redefined the "reason of state" as prosperity and progress, prompting nations to extract resources and promote productivity. Notably, life itself emerged as a resource with infinite potential, simultaneously renewable and vulnerable, leading to the emergence of what Foucault termed "the dominance of Biopolitics."

In the context of Latin American nation-building, economic liberalism became a driving force that emphasized productivity, prosperity, and progress as the key components of modern citizenship. This nationalistic fervor was reflected in 19th-century literature through the portrayal of "emblematic couples and heroic figures" in romantic novels, as exemplified by Juan Leon Mera's *Cumandá*. These characters embodied the desired national virtues, with Mera's vivid description highlighting the extraordinary beauty and uniqueness of *Cumandá*, whose pale ivory complexion, silken hair, graceful demeanor, and enigmatic dark eyes symbolized a fusion of sweetness and pride, a Christian heart within a wild spirit.

¹Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, Ecuador

However, the Latin American literary landscape experienced a transformation during the "Latin American boom." This literary movement introduced characters who deviated from the conventional norms of beauty and ambition, challenging the national imperative. These anomalies disrupted the traditional narrative, inviting a deeper exploration of identity, diversity, and societal expectations in the pursuit of progress and modernity.

Introduction

The enlightened 18th century, for the first time, gave state government a purpose that went beyond its traditional disposition of concerting order among human community. Liberalism expanded its domain by paralleling economic prosperity with progress and human wellbeing with productivity. From then on, the "reason of state" has been *prosperity and progress*; as a result, resources are to be extracted and productivity shall thrive.

Among all the resources a nation possesses, life itself offers infinite possibilities; it's the most renewable and –paradoxically- vulnerable and indestructible at the same time.

These are the conditions of possibility that brought about what Foucault named "the dominance of Biopolitics." The economic liberalism that took over Latin American nation-building demanded productivity, prosperity and progress as the path towards modern citizenship. Mirroring these nationalistic efforts, 19th century literature portrayed "emblematic couples and heroic figures" in romantic novels that Doris Summer labeled as "romances fundacionales" like Juan Leon Merás *Cumandá* who embodied the desired national virtues:

Joven de belleza extraordinaria, diferente a las otras hijas del desierto. Predominaba en ella la pálida blancura del marfil, su cabellera sedena y ordinaria, su airoso cuerpo y sus ojos, de color de nube oscura, [...] conjunto de dulzura y arrogancia, corazón de origen cristiano en pecho salvaje (Mera, 36)".

During the Latin American boom, our literature included characters whose anomalies challenged the national imperative of beauty and drive.

Characters like the *imbunche* from Jose Donoso's *El obscenopájaro de la noche* (1970) or the mad screen writer from Mario Vargas Llosa's *La tía Julia y el Escribidor*

(1977) or all the freaks that surface in the travelling shows that cross García Marquez's *Macondo* (1967) or Julio Cortazar's endearing but hopeless *cronopios*, symptomatically appear as part of our demographic landscape. These outrageous characters enact the allegory of the outcast; barred from the national pantheon, the anti-hero denounces marginalization and the constrictive essence of national citizenship. These narratives decry--through the eccentricity or deformity of the body--the discriminatory spirit of standardized national identities.

Some recent novels in Latin America display a new constellation of *strange* bodies that diverge from their ancestors in that they not only reaffirm their peculiarities, but mainly explore their bizarre corporality as proof of its estrangement to self.

Some live inhabited by an unspecified entity within, like Ana in Guadalupe Nettel's novel *El Huésped* (2006); others share (or are?) a body with an *other* that is mother/daughter like in Diamela Eltit's *Impuesto a la carne* (2010) or the avant-garde Pablo Palacio in *La doble y únicamujer* (1933); while others occupy their body frames as vehicle of intensity, such as in Álvaro Enrígue's *Vidas Perpendiculares* (2008). The characters exposed in these narratives seem to express life with no decipherable boundaries; or in its place, are the object of unrestricted research, unbinding constrictions within, lifting levees and fleeing limits like in *La Carne de René* (1998) by Virgilio Piñeira or *Wakolda* (2011) by Lucía Puenzo. Their bodies are exposed to, as well as a means of, contagion and alteration. They all seem to device their *differancei* into agency. Beyond resistance or flight, these outlandish –out of the land, self-exiled- bodies redefine their world by erasing past and imposing new symbolic references. These indecipherable figures in our recent literature move in re-signified territories, displacing borders and deranging humanistic profiles. It is not by chance that the most influential philosophers of the 20th century (Foucault and Deleuze) in their last articles both addressed the invasive branching of biopower mechanisms that point science and technology as regulators of human life.

This paper wants to close read the latest narrative of Álvaro Enrígue (México) Diamela Eltit (Chile), Lucía Puenzo (Argentina) and Guadalupe Nettel (México), attending to the prominent warped bodies of their protagonists that assert their own eccentricity as means of agency and power.

Vidasperpendiculares a protocol of the flowing intensity that traverses life; the narration stages the problematic coupling of body and selfhood. It implies self is an ever flowing intensity while identity is just a clumsy functional attempt in time. Jerónimo, the bugged eyed, unwanted son of Eusebio Rodríguez and Mercedes Loera recognizes panic, when at the age of three his uncle pays the family a visit. The young Jerónimo, mirrored in his uncle's eyes, realizes he's been the passionate vessel of an ongoing tragedy:

Así, un día tocó la puerta de los padres de Jerónimo. Estaba cayendo una de esas fervorosas tormentas de verano que lo barnizan todo con la luz de sus relámpagos constantes. Iba, como ya se dijo, con el cuello de la gabardina alzado, el pelo a rape, los ojos de un verde crudo. Jerónimo, que estaba jugando cerca de la puerta en el momento en que sonaron los toquidos, dejó lo que estaba haciendo por la doble curiosidad que le generaba la expectativa de los días anteriores y el aguacero monumental. Una de las criadas abrió y el hombre dio un paso adentro de la casa, empapado. Su frente fue iluminada por la luz del recibidor y su espalda por un rayo. Al ver los ojos verdes dentro de una piel curtida, Jerónimo recordó, de golpe y presa de un terror absoluto, su aparición anterior. (Enrígue, 2008, p.35)

These flashbacks in time spotlight the intensity of the passion that runs through the body that supports it, and by doing so, appears as carcass. What is relevant –not that it means anything– but due to the impact with which it strikes us, the way intense light does– is passion itself. Passion staged in the oedipal drama that endlessly returns; the perpetual cycle of love, hate and reparation extenuates itself into comedy by overuse.

Contamos hasta tres y salimos hechos una tromba de la habitación. Octavio nos estaba esperando en el pasillo, la cabeza de pelo revueltísimo recargada en la pared. Me miró desencajado. Lo arrollé sin pensarlo y cuando lo vi en el suelo me senté a horcajadas sobre su pecho. Le tapé la boca con las dos manos. Me mordió, le di una cachetada y le metí una de sus propias pantuflas entre los dientes. Al escuchar los ruidos sordos de la refriega, Miguelito, que ya iba rumbo a la puerta, se volvió para patearle un muslo con rigor de futbolista. Debe haber notado mi mirada de desconcierto frente aquel gesto de insubordinación, porque me dijo, con una mueca que pedía comprensión: Nos quitó a mamá. No puedo negar que sentí un placer infinito al ver otra vez la marca del miedo en la cara de mi padre, (Enrigue, 2008, p.231).

This passion migrates thru an array of bodies until the outburst of its discontent needs to be. The economy of desire demands the taming of intensities into a subservient position, and this degradation demands a narrative to process its' demean: Alas Oedipus! Enrigue offers a smart final twist by untangling the Freudian imperative.

VidasPerpendiculares also transmigrates through several fundamental books, following Borges' assertion that all books are one and the same, or the endless conversation among all of them. *Vidasperpendiculares* obviously paraphrases Plutarch's *Parallel lives*. The Roman thinker coupled lives so as to mirror the moral character of those he portrayed, leaving political conundrums or historical background as mere "decorations" for his settings. Along these lines, but in a perpendicular platform,

Enrigue couples lives and waits in the intersections where their collision is unavoidable. Is the blast of their intensity our contemporary version of Plutarch's' moral character?

Or are these intricate variations of a common theme, a *baroque* line of flight? Revisited once and again the primal parricide is enacted and Freud steps into the conversation among other *fictional* books like the Christian scriptures or the archeological speculations around the first human settlements on earth. Enrigue seems to conceive selfhood in the fortuitous encounter with its true intensity and leaves the living matter –the body– as a carcass destined to be the support of this encounter.

The main character in Diamela Eltit's *Impuesto a la Carne* is another disturbing body whose dual identity is coupled within, continuously dislocating itself. In a monologue/dialogue the woman (mother-daughter) share and *are* a body, unceasingly decrying the manipulations of a world enclosed in the medical circuit:

Dos mujeres pequeñas que no íbamos a crecer en ningún sentido y cuyos órganos débiles nos convirtieron en una atracción turística para los médicos, uno y otro, un cabildo de médicos, una interminable junta médica, un parlamento médico. Sí, una nación o un país, o una patria médica plagada de controles parciales o totales, un territorio que jamás quiso comprender mi enorme esfuerzo por graficar la hemorragia y la camilla, las convulsiones y especialmente los arañazos que me lanza arteralmente mi madre, ya demasiado afectada (Eltit, 2010, p.30).

Incapacitated to distance themselves from each other, mother/daughter engage in battle and resent the silenced scorn of nurses and doctors who they loathe back, but cannot stay away from. Unable to disengage from doctors, nurses, hospitals, their sphere is one undifferentiated medical body. The functioning of this narrative device can only be approached by dismounting its parts, perceiving the elements that form it and the nature of its connections.

The characters in *Impuesto a la carne* exist in a mirrored container that endlessly replicates itself. Nurses, patients, doctors and medical fans imitate themselves within the bio political grid that demands it. An unsettling power dynamic is in play where vertical hierarchy is revealed as a façade, displaying its unequivocal love demand. That is, an organic desire to be *in* the other.

It is suggested that at the moment of birth, a horrible mishap occurred, whereas the maternal body plunged into the infant body, inhabiting it thereafter, thus staging the essential monstrosity of the mother function. In this indistinctness between mother/daughter; in/out, past/present, limits, individuality and cause/effect frontiers are not only unsettled but wiped out:

Tengo a mi madreórgano adentro dirigiendo una sinfonía nacional dramática y hasta excesivamente monocorde. Mi madre moja con sus lágrimas cada uno de mis órganos que necesitan ser humedecidos por ella. Nos hemos convertido en unas anarcobarrocas totales o finales. Vamos a nacer otra vez o vamos a morir otra vez, quién sabe. Pero nuestras heridas nunca van a cicatrizar en la patria o en el país. En la nación.

Ya es tarde para nosotras. El territorio puso en marcha un operativo para decretar la demolición y la expatriación de nuestros cuerpos. Minas. Minerales. Nuestros huesos cupríferos serán molidos en la infernal máquina chancadora. El polvo cobre del último estadio de nuestros huesos terminará fertilizando el subsuelo de un remoto cementerio chino (Eltit, 2010, p.187).

Yet in another turn of this narration, Eltit insinuates the historical memory of this impossible body. By carrying its own mother, this splintered body is anchored in its sickening, horrific past, from where it cannot dislodge itself or grow. Crimes, rape, torture, disappearances: all the dictatorship's unspeakable cruelty swallowed and silenced inside a body that dares not expulse or vomit its illness.

This “strange body” cannot be surgically removed without threatening its life; it is one with: the patients, the doctors, the victims, the torturers, their fans in fact, with the nation.

In yet another narrative of duplicitous body occupancy, we have Guadalupe Nettel’s novel *El huésped*. From early on, Ana had a distinct perception of a parasite lodged within her body: “Sabía que dentro de mí también vivía una cosa sin forma imaginable que jugaba cuando yo jugaba, comía cuando yo comía, era niña mientras yo lo era (Nettel, 2006, p.13)”. Further on, with puberty the clashing forces that dwell in her body interchange positions and Ana shifts into parasite mode while “the *thing*” seizes the leading identity. Could this invasive force, that bullied its way to the surface, leaving her feebler counterpart in the darkness (she actually loses eyesight), be her true desire?

Primero la irrupción definitiva de la Cosa en mi cuerpo: una vez que me desterrara al sótano donde yo la había tenido hasta entonces, mi existencia quedaría reducida a la de una amiba. Cuando eso ocurriera yo iba a ser su lado oscuro, su vergüenza, su pariente pobre. Los papeles quedarían invertidos bajo la estridente consigna de “quien ríe el último, ríe mejor (Nettel, 2006, p.23).

The *thing* functioning as a *foreign body* combines the violence of the intrusion with the malignancy of its disposition. In its immediacy, Ana’s frail and candid younger brother unable to thrive its invasive manifestation, quietly surrenders into death. The unsettling mood the “thing” creates evokes the claustrophobic terror portrayed in the film *When a Stranger calls* ii.

While Ana knows she is carrying a blind creature inside, she does not foresee that when the “occupation” triumphs and boundaries recede, she too will descend and be one with the creature within. Nettel’s novel displays the construction of worlds, a deleuzean world of the insect, the world of the cockroach ... suggesting that, if we could only give up human judgment, if we could only stop equating those worlds with our human world, not only would those worlds acquire meaning, they could also become efficient and comfortable. The narration purports that social mores such as charity, guilt, and hygiene impede the upper world -those who live in the light- from seeing reality as it is: bodies sustaining life, that’s all. Ana, overpowered by her invader, starts to feel the relaxed placidity that coats surrender.

During her life, she had devised different strategies to control the *thing*, such as becoming familiar with the sightless world. She volunteers to read to the blind and wonders about her true intentions when frequenting a world she truthfully repels.

The narration is deliberately exasperating, stacking unpleasantness, grim, filth, and darkness in the life of this middle class girl, who could very well be in the clarity and comfort of her middle class world. Finally, after so many years of announcing itself, the *thing* takes over:

Mientras yo permanecía sentada en esa escalera sin rumbo, mi mente se fue despejando. Poco a poco, el miedo desapareció en favor de un estado muy distinto. Ya no veía las formas, pero la luz comenzó a volverse más intensa. Había una transparencia inusitada en el aire. Esa

claridad me envolvió por completo, como una lucidez insospechada, la sensación armoniosa de un orden inapelable o quizá la convicción de que conmigo se haría justicia. El mal olor de las cañerías, los empujones de la gente, el ruido, lo ocurrido con el Cacho, incluso la muerte de Marisol, todo lo que me rodeaba era perfecto y no tenía por qué ser de otra forma. Poco importaba entonces dónde elegía vivir, no había afuera ni dentro, libertad o encierro, sólo esa paz imperturbable y nueva.

“Por fin llegas”, dije en voz baja, y por toda respuesta recibí un escalofrío. Durante varios minutos La Cosa y yo escuchamos juntas el murmullo de los metros que iban y venían, uno después de otro, pero siempre iguales, como un mismo tren que regresa sin cesar (Nettel, 2006, p.189).

This culminating resolution is a unique moment of happiness, of the full assertion of the excess of Life which occurs when Ana, overwhelmed by demands she no longer is able to deal with, gives in, and accepts that the object of her desire is the other's (the thing's) demand; thus the immersion into the Void that concludes her battle. Until then, Ana's inability to comprehend the pure quantity of the demands that overflow her, have thrown her into blindness and terror while the thing" was dynamic, it enacted the concentrated overpowering force of the one demand life imposes, the unconditional demand of love: to be *one* with the other.

As the last of this brief group of recent novels, I would like to introduce Wakolda by Lucía Puenzo.

Josef Mengele –the *white angel* from Auschwitz- held human experimentation and was keen on changing the color of his subject's eyes or manipulating twins into interlocked Siamese, was also fascinated by dwarfism. This novel accompanies Josef in his flight from Buenos Aires, upon Eichmann's capture, 1960-1962; thereafter he disappeared in Paraguay until his death in 1975. Mengele, who repeatedly changed names, defiantly used his first name and never changed his physical appearance. According to holocaust survivors (especially child subjects of his experimentation) Josef possessed an eerie capacity to seduce children with tenderness and sweets, while calmly inflicting excruciating pain.

Josef sees Lilith for the first time in the road to Bariloche. There are three things about the child's family entourage that draw his attention: the visible Aryan features of the three blond children, the subtle dwarfism in Lilith, who is already 12 but looks 8, and the noticeable pregnancy of the mother who in Josef's expert eye is expecting twins. His trained gaze approaches individuality by detecting error in the systemic, organic order, were the unpredictable, the distinct appears, he finds his subject:

Hubiera sido un espécimen perfecto (rubia, blanca y de ojos claros) de no ser por su altura. Visiblemente pequeña en tamaño para su edad, pero con miembros de medidas normales para ser llamada una enana y demasiado grandes para ser incluida en los parámetros liliputienses, la nena que daba saltos cada vez más veloces frente a sus ojos era un ejemplo que desafiaba

uno de sus campos de investigación predilectos: el enanismo, entendido como expresión ejemplar de lo anormal (Puenzo, 2011, p.12).

The disquieting fascination Josef feels for Lilith is reciprocal. “Love is possible only between accomplices” Josef will say to her. Lilith is a slightly dwarfed *nymphet* in a Nabokov manner. She is in full explosion of her sensual curiosity and needs to explore the extent of her powers: Con un gesto de impúdica procacidad atravesó el umbral de sus labios y apoyó la punta del dedo índice en la ranura de medio milímetro de ancho que el desconocido tenía entre las dos paletas frontales.

-Tiene un agujero entre los dientes (Puenzo, 2011, p.22).

Wakolda puts forward the unrelenting, almost obscene, drive to endure. In extreme conditions, where body, self-worth, freedom, is snatched and tortured, all is endured so life can prevail. Lilith’s mother, Eva sacrifices her, when, perceiving what is at stake, allows Josef’s *treatment on* Lilith, in exchange for the continued care of her new born twins. “Eva ya no se resistía a que le sacara muestras a ella ni a sus hijas (le hubiera vendido el alma a cambio de que no las dejara morir) (Puenzo, 2011, p.174)”. She permits José to administer hormones to Lilith while she looks the other way from the closed doors where Josef practices his experiments with the child. In the same manner his prisoners accepted everything with the naïve hope that they would be spared. In fact, José is the only sovereign character; self-determined by the cyanide pill he always carries in his shirt pocket, he unquestionably exerts his power over the never ending hoppers.

This novel opens up in layers: the first one being the anecdote where José abuses a child and turns her and her family into accomplices; the second is the historical fact that Argentina looked the other way, - when not protected and admired- the fascist war criminals that immigrated after the war. And, finally, the fact that life will wildly assert its desire to succeed. The novel denounces the unbearable drive that renders her creatures into pain, torture and abuse in order to ensure her youngest survive and prevail; the obscenity of life that will not take leave from hope. Not only does it display the historical anecdote of Argentinian fascism, the way it mobilized and used the desire of its subjects so effectively—but also the fascism within, in our minds and in our everyday choices, the fascism that brings us to adulate power, to desire the very thing that controls and exploits us.

Conclusion

Vidasperpendiculares discusses life as a passing by intensity using the body as a carcass. It is the most positive of all these novels; by use of humor and empowerment of the individual, it stages an anti-Oedipus comedy as a way of being in the world, with a Mexican quirky twist. *Impuesto a la carne* and *Wakolda* reveal the objectifying effect of the medical institutionalization of the body as an allegory of the historical horrors inflicted to the social body in the south cone; nevertheless, life will always strive be.

El huésped enacts the distant strangeness of our desires, which we experience as a parasitic occupancy. In conclusion, these novels stage their narrations on the body as the platform where desire, power, time, and passion dispute and tear at each other.

As a corpus, -no pun intended- these novels purge the slightest traces of fascism from the body. They favor assertiveness and multiplicity; difference over standardization, flows and disarrays over consistency and unity; unpredictable mobility over structure. I do not intend to cluster these novels in and bind them in a *trendy* drawer.

By focusing on the problematic body affected by the aesthetic, the politic and the moral, these narratives tackle a matter long overdue in Latin American literature. They enforce an intense and complex conversation over the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body.

Refernces

Eltit, D. (2010). *Impuesto a la carne*. Santiago: Planeta.

Enrique, Á. (2008). *Vidas perpendiculares*. Barcelona: Anagrama.

Mera, J. L. (sin fecha). *Cumandá*. Quito: Clásicos Ariel.

Nettel, G. (2006). *El Huésped*. Barcelona: Anagrama.

Puenzo, L. (2011) *Wakolda*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.