

Displaced Identities and Traveling Texts in Luisa Valenzuela's *Black Novel (with Argentines)*

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Luisa Valenzuela's fictional writings confront social, cultural and political structures at the same time that they question the act of writing itself. Similar to the literature written by other Latin American women writers, Diamela Eltit, Sylvia Molloy, Giannina Braschi, and Cristina Peri Rossi, hers is an experimental narrative characterized by fragmentation, linguistic games, a distancing from nostalgia, and an inquiry into the human mind. Valenzuela's travels and sojourns in Paris, Barcelona, the United States and Mexico have marked her work and enriched her narrative. For Valenzuela, travels, displacements and movements are meaningful signs associated with the concept of writing as well as the cultural, psychological and political baggage that her characters carry.

In *Black Novel (with Argentines)*, spatial discourses organize the novel's underlying complex thematic axes (exile, memory and writing) that configure new spaces showing physical, psychological and literary displacements. Roberta and Agustín, two Argentine writers, meet in New York with the intention of writing their own novels; however a series of obstacles prevents them for a time from pursuing this plan. In the analysis of the novel, geographic, psychological, sexual and textual maps are provided in order to understand, from spatial perspectives, the experience of these characters' displacements and comprehend, in a wider reading, both the malleability of human limits and the complexities surrounding the act of writing. In this article I intend to elucidate the real and imaginary, transnational and transcultured displacements of *Black Novel's* characters from the perspective of the travels themselves and from geographic, psychological, sexual and textual deterritorialized spaces.

The term deterritorialization as it relates to the concept of national identity has been studied by the Brazilian critic Renato Ortiz:

The understanding of a deterritorialized world requires a deterritorialized perspective. To fully comprehend it, the analytical approach must free itself from local and national restrictions. It is only in this way that the “world-modernity” flow can be understood. That is why it is no longer sufficient to write as Brazilians, French, Americans, or Germans. Instead of seeing the world “from Latin America,” I propose a reorientation of our gaze. Let’s consider the world in its flow, and then, let’s question our own pertinent realities. (20; my translation)

Ortiz encourages us to shift our focus from a global level to a local level. This refocus inevitably enables us to move both toward and away from a plurality of spaces. That is, Ortiz proposes to challenge the notion of Latin American identity and essence, which is a task that Valenzuela accepts and in fact explores and questions in *Black Novel*.

One of the spatial metaphors that is a useful starting point for the novel’s analysis is that of the “rhizome” as used by the French critics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Pierre Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo* . . . the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance” (25).¹ In *Black Novel*, the physical, sexual and textual deterritorialization of the characters is rhizomatic in the sense that they do not reside in fixed, stable spaces, but rather they spread into a variety of spaces that enable them to understand themselves and the reality around them. Valenzuela’s book itself could be considered a rhizome that seeks to extend itself and become less detailed in order to pursue a self-knowledge that escapes it. Deleuze and Guattari exhort the reader to write in the form of a rhizome: “increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine” (11) but, as they specified earlier, the most important characteristics of a rhizome is “that it always has multiple entryways” (12).² At the narrative level, Valenzuela finds (and loses) a multiplicity of entries and exits to her writing. One example of deterritorialization

in her language appears in the vocabulary regarding the trip that the narrator takes in *Black Novel*. The words "limits," "borders," "edges," "voyage," and "transitions" are defined and redefined throughout the novel. The terms themselves, much like the characters, slip away through real and imaginary urban settings.

From South to North: Voyages of Forgetfulness and Memory

The novel begins when Agustín Palant opens the door and exits an apartment on the Upper West Side of New York City. He has just killed an actress, Edwina Irving, with a .22 caliber pistol which he had bought in Little Italy. The original purpose of the purchase had been to defend himself whenever he escaped to write in an isolated house in the Adirondacks; certainly NOT to kill an unknown woman. Despairing and obsessed by the murder that he just committed, Agustín tries to throw the police off his trail, even though he is not being pursued. Once in the street of New York, his only objective is to take refuge in the subway that carries him away from the scene of the crime and transports him to the safety of his apartment.

Inside a train, underground, Agustín cannot see the boundaries between one neighborhood and another; however, he experiences a different kind of transition. The express train passes through smaller stations without stopping, thus making people and places disappear. Agustín tries to concentrate on his surroundings, but he cannot stop thinking about the crime he has just committed: "he knows he cannot escape from guilt even if he manages to escape justice" (27). On the train car there is only an adolescent who writes his name, Curtis, "on every writable surface" (28); he does it automatically without caring where he stamps his name. A sign that once read "Do Not Lean Against the Door" now says "Do Not Support the Contras" (24). Curtis does not understand nor even care about the meaning; he continues writing "Curtis, Curtis, Curtis" in every corner. He documents his name as he erases the names of other people and printed signs. Agustín tries to decipher the young man's writing; in reality, what he tries to do is discover in the young man's writing a history that belongs to him. He tries in his imagination to come up with a sign of identification that would somehow root him to the present urban reality.

In "Los viajes metropolitanos" "The Metropolitan Journeys," re-

ferring to the real and imaginary urban traveling, García Canclini has suggested that the metropolitan traveler should cross urban borders and explore beyond the real city:

[T]he metropolitan journeys cast us beyond the physical city; that is, they take us from a constructed, visible space to what we suppose is behind matter and signs. We are confronted with different and anonymous beings that accompany us in public transportation or live in different parts of our daily surroundings. Thus, it is important to study not only the reality of the journeys but the imaginations that arise in the travelers. (24; my translation)

However, Agustín's effort to cross borders is not an easy task since he is not even sure of the here and now. Besides, the imaginary world that occurs on the train ride is interrupted by the thought of the murder that he committed. When he sees the young man write his own name in an act of self-definition, Agustín wonders about his place in New York; he suspects that the identity of every human being, or in his case every murderer, can invent itself, write itself down and erase itself easily. One person marks his own borders today, and then another comes and erases them, rewrites them, and marks them all over again. Agustín would like to be able to write his name much like the unknown person, but his imagination stops at what obsesses him: "I too have my place, my inscription, he repeats to himself, and finds this hard to believe. What is my place?" (28). He realizes that the subway is an almost invisible, minimal place: "the brief trajectory of a bullet shot almost point-blank, the duration of a shot" (28). Just like the boy that stamped his identity all over the place, even on his body, Agustín fears that his victim's blood has marked him and identifies him as the killer before the authorities and the nameless people on the streets of New York. He raises the collar of his raincoat "trying to blot himself out" (24), to make himself invisible from Curtis and himself. This train ride is for Agustín an awakening to the complications that come with the construction of a spatial identity; he is an unknown Everyman in an urban train. The Argentine identity that he thought marked him before the crime is disappearing to the point that he cannot recognize himself; he finds himself physically and psychologically lost. In a sense, Agustín becomes an abject subject, a stranger to himself.

In *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* Julia Kristeva studies the concept of the abject referring not just to that which is repugnant, disgusting or disposable, but also to the act of killing, of murdering (9). She explains: "Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility" (4). Agustín becomes an abject subject that commits an immoral, disturbing and unexplainable act. The significance of this is that after the crime, Agustín does not ask who he is, but rather where he is: "What place do I have?" According to Kristeva the abject subject does not question his own being but rather his physical location, given that "the space that engrosses the reject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, not *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic" (Kristeva's emphasis, 8). Agustín will later show that his physical space is far from "totalizable" since in order to survive in New York he needs to construct and deconstruct his own geographic, physical, sexual and textual territory. Kristeva has clearly made an analogy between the abject subject and one who is lost, or the one who "is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding" (8). After the murder, Agustín becomes a lost, desperate person, but this instability will help him, alongside his friend Roberta, to save himself from the self-negation brought about by this crime. Both he and his friend get lost in floating, nonexistent, interstitial spaces which permit them to bring back together the fragments of the broken mirror.

Silvia Spitta has pointed out that the psychoanalytical definition of the abject as described by Julia Kristeva is similar to Anzaldúa's definition of those who live in border spaces. According to Anzaldúa, "Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those that cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (*Borderlands/La frontera* 3). For Anzaldúa, the "atravesados" are prohibited inhabitants, transgressors, "aliens" whether these are Chicanos, Indians or Blacks (3). The difference between Kristeva and Anzaldúa, according to Spitta's analysis, is that "whereas Kristeva's list of the abject consists mainly of criminals, rapists, traitors, and liars, Anzaldúa's is restricted to those who undermine cultural, linguistic, racial, sexual, and generic boundaries" (*Between Two Waters* 214). This may suggest that Agustín finds

himself on the border between the abject subject and Anzaldúa's "atravesados." Agustín is an individual who, on the one hand, murders. As he does not respect the law, he is abject; but on the other hand, he feels remorse for not having helped those individuals who were abducted and disappeared by the latest military dictatorship in Argentina, which systematized the disappearance, torture and murder of its citizens.³ Agustín is in an interstitial space between the abject subject and the "atravesado"; in this manner Agustín is in an intermediary space that is difficult to characterize. He cannot remain immobile but rather he must cross multiple boundaries, even though this act terrorizes him.

In New York, Agustín decides to invade other territories, unknown spaces, since "if one doesn't cross borders, can one ever get to the other side?" (*Black Novel* 19). By crossing to the other side Agustín is aware that "On this side or the other, he thought, the filth is the same, but in my country when the military junta was in power the bags might contain the remains of . . . Well, better think of something else" (20). Agustín knows that no matter where he is, whether here or there, the vision of what he lived and what he imagined in his country pursues and torments him. If Agustín ever thought, upon arriving in New York, that he knew himself or knew who he was (an Argentine male, a writer who travels abroad to get to know and make known his novels), then his contact with the city, his crossings over to prohibited places, his contact with the otherworldliness that reminds him of certain situations that he lived, read or told, makes him stagger to the point where he simultaneously constructs and erases the borders that he crosses. The anxiety created by these transitions causes the narrator to ask: "Where was the boundary? How to recognize the dividing line between the written and the lived experience?" (85). Throughout the novel, the characters discover that they do not need to know where the boundary is (perhaps the entire space in which they move is a boundary), since knowing where the boundary lies resolves nothing. To the contrary, these transitions from one place to the next, from one space to the next, do not bring them new knowledge but rather cause them to discover "their own decenteredness" (Lagos "Displaced . . ." 726).

The city dislodges and displaces Roberta and Agustín; it makes them inquire into and rethink a past marked by institutionalized

repression which affected their own generation physically and psychologically. Both the urban and personal transformations urge the narrator to wonder: "Where lies the secret memory of oblivion?" (76). The act of questioning the space inhabited by the "memory of oblivion" here becomes a great enigma. Is it over here or over there? Is its location more important, or the fact that it exists at all? Is this perhaps a question related to the spatiality of a concept as flimsy as memory, which, in reality, should subsist as a large body of individual memories similar to a computer's memory used to create a better function system? This is one of the many questions that could be helpful for resolving the enigma of this text, since the reader soon discovers it is not the murder of an American woman in New York that is in question, but rather the actual existence of both individual and collective memory. Valenzuela writes so as not to get buried in forgetfulness. Memory becomes a concrete element that seeks a place of existence, to define itself and to stay in place. Thus we could say that what torments Agustín is not the murder itself but more concretely his unresolved past. In an interview with Gwendolyn Díaz, Valenzuela says: "Agustín's furtive murder . . . is the answer to resistance, to all that is repressed in Agustín. The interesting thing is to consider to what extent one can control and to what extent one is controlled" (Lagos, María Inés, *La palabra en vilo* 42; my translation). Roberta's question, "Where lies the secret memory of oblivion?" has no one answer. If oblivion "resides" in a given location, that means it has not disappeared but that is present in a certain place. It could be that Roberta and Agustín are deterritorialized, but their memory reterritorializes itself in a desire to anchor and fix itself within certain limits. It could be said that for Roberta and Agustín, New York is now the place where "memory of oblivion" resides and where this oblivion takes on a life of its own and becomes memory. As it becomes memory, it is possible for Agustín and Roberta to talk about the past, redefine themselves, write, recover the words that have been temporarily hidden beneath a veil of daily transformations of the American city.

In *Black Novel* the city is a real and imaginary space. New York City presents itself as a space where its people live in a perturbing present but also as a space where they can begin to think of a past for which they feel responsible as participants, and certainly this is

more disturbing than the city they are in right now. The impotence felt by Agustín over what he was unable to do for those who disappeared before his very eyes in Argentina shows his frustration. In New York he meets Héctor Bravo, an Uruguayan doctor at a party who makes him think about what there was in Agustín's past: "Nothing. Nothing, and that's what's so terrifying, nothing while tenants in my own apartment building in Buenos Aires were being hauled away, with hoods over their heads, and we never saw them again. Nothing, when people came asking for my help and I could do nothing—what do you expect me to have done?—when I didn't even believe them . . ." (208). It is not that there was nothing in his past, but that there was silence, too much indifference. Agustín reflects on what is perhaps the main underlying, hidden thread of the text: "What I need is to know why someone becomes a torturer, a murderer, to know why an upright citizen can one day unawares be transformed into a monster" (143).

From the vantage point of New York, the past that is constructed throughout the narrative is fragmented, as bits and pieces come forward of stories or allusions to the state-sponsored repression that Argentina experienced in the 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's. Agustín mentions a woman, María Inés, about whom he does not want to speak but whom the reader suspects was probably a victim of the repression; Agustín also alludes to the families that were taken away with hoods over their heads and other isolated incidents. In the text, there are no long reflections on specific cases, but rather flashbacks of memory. For example, after Agustín kills Edwina, the New York actress, the Argentinean writer takes refuge in his house, but he lives in fear that the authorities will knock his door down "as he was told happened in his country around the time he left" (33). When Roberta visits her friend Ava Taurel, the owner of a sado-masochist club, she cannot understand how there could be people who let others inflict pain, given that there are other people "who are being tortured and who will be tortured absolutely against their will" (91). On another occasion, Roberta heads toward the Hudson River pier, in order to throw Agustín's murder weapon into the water. When she gets to the river, Roberta thinks about those New Yorkers "who allow themselves to be chained, face up or down, and stay there all night at the mercy or delight of whoever happens by"

(132). Roberta cannot stop thinking about the bodies floating by, stomachs cut open, bodies that she and Agustín knew were thrown into the river by paramilitaries—not the Hudson River in New York, but rather the Río de la Plata, in Buenos Aires, a space well known to the protagonists. New York serves as a launching point for memory; something that they see or hear in New York brings back memories of their South American past. The axes North/South and South/North are crossed at this point, mixed in fleeting and diffused landscapes. This deterritorialization creates a space for writing, but it also submerges them into the impossibility to create. In fact, the protagonists take up the full narrative length of *Black Novel* to live through meetings and separations, connections and missed connections, displacements and permanency, in order to take up writing again, in order to penetrate the unconscious without denial or escape. “To touch land,” that is, to feel grounded again, Roberta and Agustín need to revisit the deterritorialized spaces of the great real and imagined American and Argentinean cities.

Roberta and Agustín are aware that they are self-exiled, that they have arrived in New York in order to write, even though they soon discover that writing between two worlds could be an affront to memory. In reference to the experience of the writer who writes outside of his own country, Rushdie explains:

[T]he past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity . . . the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being “elsewhere.” (12)

Exile consists of the anxiety of living in temporary conditions and different spaces. Nonetheless, for Agustín and Roberta time and space are superimposed and thus they cannot escape from their Argentine past into the New York present. Jorgelina Corbata observed that *Black Novel* is based on a double voyage: “an external voyage” that occurs in New York’s neighborhoods and “an internal voyage that explores the dark areas of the unconscious, with the intent of liberating the repressed and rescuing the forgotten” (177; my trans-

lation).⁴ The most significant part is that these two voyages, as explained by Corbata, are not independent; they are the journey, especially for Agustín, that “takes place in a medium where two spaces and two times coexist since in New York everything around him reminds him of the repression and death he left behind” (177). In *Black Novel* New York is formed in reference to a hybridization of the coordinates of time and space; it is a new territory from which a national reality can be rethought and where questions without answers about identity can be exchanged. New York is also the angle from which writing and memory occur and artistic creativity develops. This new space takes on a celebratory character since the process of deterritorialization and consequently—but not entirely—reterritorialization can help in the psychological reconstruction of the characters in recuperating their artistry. Regarding the richness of the experience of exile, Rushdie notes:

Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. (15)

The experience of the distance and transition from Buenos Aires to New York has permitted Agustín and Roberta to find new angles in order to write and insert themselves in a national reality that is hard to understand. They have had to deterritorialize, metaphorically and in real life, in order to outline new written and personal territories. In a certain way Roberta teaches Agustín what the critic Renato Ortiz proposes: consider the world in its primal fluctuation and then ask pertinent questions about our own realities (20).

Erratic Bodies and Texts

In *Black Novel* Roberta represents the authorized voice that investigates the crime, guides the murderer and shares with Agustín the interior voyage, much as she is responsible for delineating the limits of writing. The first map that Roberta traces suggests a close

connection between rational and corporal borders. Roberta suggests to Agustín that he write with his body, which Agustín is incapable of doing:⁵

Write with the body, I tell you. The secret is *res, non verba*. Restore, renew, re-create. See what I mean? Words lead you by the nose. They practically pull you along, often make you stumble. "Fallen woman" I might be called by one of those philistines so abundant *chez nous*. Sure. We're all whores of language. We work for it, feed it, humble ourselves on its account; we brag about it—and in the end, what? Language demands more. It will always be asking us to give more, to delve deeper . . . That's why I say to write with the body, because the poor little head can't make it on its own to the bottomless bottom. (16–17)

Agustín describes with anguish that in his condition he is unable to write with his body but that in order to do so he must be "crossing boundaries, donning a new skin, acquiring new tastes" (52). Crossing borders signifies for Agustín penetrating into unknown spaces not previously traveled; it means daring to enter unexplored terrains, moving to the different space, an erotic-corporal space. Agustín fears, however, that in crossing corporal and erotic spaces he will become even more unstable. In his intent to write, Agustín fails to cross the border between the psychic and corporal imbalances; he remains in a nonexistent space that does not permit him to overcome his emotional and physical state. In other words, Agustín cannot or does not know how to "write with his body" as Roberta has proposed.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa has studied the relationship between writing, the psychological and the physical: "Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it" (73). Agustín apparently does not want to worsen his psychological turmoil. He prefers to stay on one side of the border. He does not dare to cross dangerous spaces that will make him more unstable. The Chicana critic has also explored the relationship between the physical and the subconscious:

Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write . . . But in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make “sense” of them, and once they have “meaning” they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy. (70)

For Anzaldúa, a “reconstruction” of images takes part in the process of writing; for Roberta, however, writing is “to restore, to renew, to re-create” (11).⁶ In Roberta and Agustín there exists a psychological and physical desire not only to invoke memory to remember and bring to the present time an event of the past, but also to create a new existence, to reintegrate, to restore. “Re-creating” for Roberta indicates a certain physical movement: to shake oneself, to sway, much like an emotional movement, that is, to worry or upset oneself.

Roberta takes the initiative and is the one who incites Agustín to cross borders so that he can unload what is preventing him from writing and can take on that which “purifies” him. Agustín’s instability is so great that he cannot make his own decision; he needs a guide to tell him what to do and where to go. After the crime Roberta suggests that he shave and put on glasses, that he be another person: “You’ll act more freely if you feel different. Like another person . . . You’ll get used to being clean-shaven, to wearing glasses, to looking like someone else in order to find yourself” (48). Locked inside Roberta’s apartment, Agustín starts to slowly change his appearance: he puts on Roberta’s clothes, he curls his hair, and Roberta baptizes him Gus or Magú, whichever he likes. In her friend Bill’s shop, Roberta cuts her hair, dyes it red and dresses like a man. “I came for a sex change,” (72) she says to Bill. Later on, Agustín will dub her “Robbie,” “Bobbie,” or “Bob.” These transgressions and desires to change one’s sex are significant to our analysis because they attest to the fact that sexual and cultural identity are just another construction, much like national identity; but at the same time, these transgressions allow the characters to discover that it is possible to cross geographic and sexual borders in order to get to possible answers to their questions.⁷

In *Black Novel* urban spatiality and the desire to change one’s sex destabilizes any notion of rigid identity. The English theorist Sue

Golding, a gay and feminist political activist, has explored the queer city space. Golding considers any kind of identity to be in constant negotiation, never fixed or static: "Identity, sexual or otherwise, is unstable, shifting, multiplicitous, situational, refractory, hybridizable, always being negotiated and contested, never static or fixed" (qtd. in Soja 113). It is important to note here that for Golding there exists a relationship between the concepts of time and space that destabilize the notion of totality and homogeneity:

We have now before us not only a fluid (and yet discrete) concept of time, but also a dynamic concept of space, a concept, to be even more precise, that debunks any notion of an "eternally infinite" spatiality, while simultaneously refusing its uniqueness as if only geographically "singular," that is to say, "closed," "totalized," "homogeneous" and there-with, always-already, "fixed." We have here, in other words, "space-time," an imaginary, but real, and utterly dynamic fourth dimension. (qtd. in Soja, 113)

Agustín has repeatedly experienced these fluid relationships between time and space. New York has marked him and brought him closer to the thousands of cadavers that are underground, buried in his country (space-time), because he is a murderer like some individual in his country. Roberta wants to be Agustín and wants Agustín to be her: "I am you and you are me" (51). However, they do not succeed in completely exchanging their genders. Limitations emerge that for the moment obligate them to stay within their roles. The narrator says: "it all came down to a matter of testosterone, a threshold she was unable to cross however much she tried to, even by shearing and transfiguring herself" (73). Roberta does not feel "marked" in the same way that Agustín does; he is in search of something deeper while Roberta feels that this is not her objective: "You at least have a right to say it, you went through an ultimate experience, you are justified" (80). Cordones-Cook observes that, contrary to Agustín, Roberta

[w]ith her body is able to record in the text the inexhaustible female imagery with its dynamic stream of phantasmagoric images. *Roberta lets herself be carried away, which allows her body to write its history with inaudible words* . . . Uninhibited, Roberta opens a provocative

communication, bringing to the surface anxieties, fears, and topics which had been excluded, prohibited, and silenced. Unfolding an expansive, creative feminine economy, Roberta frees her internal demons in order to recover her original strength. (“*Novela negra: The Desire to Know*” 746; my emphasis)

Where Agustín stops at the body’s limits, Roberta goes beyond them. She is capable of crossing corporal borders with more confidence to the point that her body participates uninhibitedly in dramatizations of cultural identities. Through theatrical representation, Roberta tries to put herself in Agustín’s place in order to understand what it feels like to be a murderer. While she is in Bill’s shop, Roberta imagines that he could be the victim and she the assassin: “No shooting in the head though—this handsome specimen had to be strangled with her bare hands” (62). Roberta may well be capable of killing, but she does not because her body does not allow her to enter into the dimensions (erotic-scripted-theatrical) from which Agustín escapes. Instead of making love to Edwina, Agustín kills her. However, the theatrical play that Roberta and Bill invent ends up in an erotic and performative rite, in which physical desire and costumes intermingle to the point that Bill and Roberta create their own erotic performance, their own play of passion:

“Les petites botines, les petites botines,” she cooed softly, trying to sound like a character in a Buñuel movie. But getting into the charming boots—which she hoped were her size—was pointless, dressed as she was in a sweater and corduroy pants. No. Following Bill’s example, she stripped, then cast around for something to put on. Quick, the sequined vest she had picked for him, quick a Manila shawl around her waist like a sarong. A Spanish broncobuster. Olé! This is my idea of great! Shouted Bill as he leaped onto the counter . . . [a]nd Roberta, tickled, squealing with laughter, wanting only to lash the floor and make Bill jump, to put a little fear into him, to whack the boards and have him jump to her beat. (64–65)

This erotic dramatization profiles a spatial-feminist reading where the body consists of a personal and textual space. The female body occupies a space of physical and also textual power since it is

capable of creating its own theater with the body. Time and again Roberta will show that “writing with the body” implies crossing borders and locating oneself in liberating spaces, places of change, movements and negotiations. In New York, Roberta’s body is capable of occupying urban spaces with multiple sexualities, eroticisms and desires. Edward Soja discusses the possibilities of expanding space that he calls “Thirdspace”:

Cityspace is no longer just dichotomously gendered or sexed, it is literally and figuratively transgressed with an abundance of sexual possibilities and pleasures, dangers and opportunities, that are always both personal and political and, ultimately, never completely knowable from any singular discursive standpoint. (113)

In *Black Novel* a multiplicity of bodies coexist; some shift about while others remain immobile and still others float between immobility and movement: static bodies, traveling bodies, floating bodies, tortured bodies. Over the days that Roberta and Agustín lock themselves in after the inexplicable crime, both cross imaginary borders; their bodies, though static, mentally expose themselves to the sun and water of other territories: “I am sunbathing on a Caribbean beach, under the coconut palms” (102). However, this imaginary voyage and these voyaging bodies must eventually anchor themselves in a certain place: “Agustín Palant, it’s time we touched land” (108). The mental routes have come to a point of saturation, the limit of escape; they must return in order to get to another place, an unknown space. As Roberta would say, in quoting *Martín Fierro*: “We’ll soon be there, then we’ll know where” (112). It is interesting to note, regarding these displacements, that the traveling body becomes a treacherous weapon. Much as Agustín killed without knowing why, now outside Roberta’s apartment he fears that his own nomadic body will betray him: “I don’t want a foot of mine getting ahead of my body and betraying me. No more betrayals from my body” (112).

Agustín will not confront physical suffering. When the assistant at the sadomasochist club, Baby Jane, tours him through the space of pain, she promises to show him “the stocks where we suspend the men, the torture Wheel, Ava’s cubicle, everything” (138). Agustín

collapses into a chair and says, “I’ve had it” (139). Baby Jane answers: “Don’t say that sweetheart, we’ve just begun. You must have seen plenty of worse things” (139). Agustín only answers: “Exactly” (146). For Agustín, the body appears marked and inscribed with a historical and sociopolitical context. As indicated by Marta Morello-Frosch, during the recent Argentinean military dictatorship “the official discourse uses the metaphor of the sick body in referring to the current political situation; in this way they justified the ‘cleansing’ process by which they fractured bodies and identities” (115; my translation). For Agustín, the body and writing remain buried in an imaginary individual who at a real level has been fractured and brutally assaulted.⁸

It is not until the last part of the novel that Agustín is capable of speaking without secrecy or mental blocks about the murder that he committed. The detectivesque tone with which the novel began has been transformed into a fully theatrical tone. The text has crossed a literary border from a noir space into a theatrical one. In the novel the performative tone is displaced by the detectivesque establishing a relationship between the audience/reader and the actors/characters. For Roberta, as for the author herself, life is a theatrical stage:

I believe that life is pure theatre. Isn’t this the same scene that Freud and Lacan have talked about? In one way or another we are always on stage, we come in and leave the scene. But, it is not that we leave the scene and we are situated in something different, rather we enter another scene. (Cordones-Cook, “Luisa Valenzuela habla . . .” 121; my translation)

In the novel, the stage—that is, the theatrical space—and life itself are converted into a third space, a place of deterritorialization and intemporality in which the characters can move within time and space, challenging the notion of center and margin, in the construction of personal and political identities. In *Black Novel*, the crossing of one performative border into another is represented clearly in the last portion of the novel, when Agustín and Roberta visit their eccentric friend Lara.

In Lara’s loft, Roberta and Agustín feel as if they were trapped in Russian nesting dolls: “We’re smack in the middle of what looks like a replay of a sixties imitation *fin de siècle* decadence” (169). The

decoration of toilet tanks, cardboard dolls, plus a collection of Colombian, Haitian and Mexican artifacts are not as transcendental as Héctor Bravo, whose identifying characteristic is pure deterritorialization. It is known that he was a doctor in Uruguay, but neither the narrator nor the characters offer an explanation of who is Héctor Bravo exactly. Interestingly, Bravo is the only person who is capable of giving Agustín possible answers to the question of why the writer committed murder.⁹

When Agustín confesses that he does not know the reason why he killed Edwina, Bravo explains to him that he himself can give him “a slew of reasons, all clever and equally valid” (207):

You killed her because you saw in her a mother image you didn't like. An image of all women, of a certain woman in particular, and we're not naming names. You killed her because she made you confront a most unbearable frustration, from way back. Because you wanted to kill in her your own feminine image . . . You killed her because you were fed up with facing feminine demands, or your own . . . what difference does it make after all if you really killed her or dreamed it? It's all the same. The same impunity and the same guilt; tell yourself it was self-defense. It happened without your knowing it, in a third state that won't recur. Possibly it was the necessary step to distance yourself from something unbearable in your past. (208)

Even though Bravo's are not definite explanations, they are different possibilities that could unravel like a ball of string in the next novel that Agustín (or Valenzuela) writes. The explanations given by Bravo are significant not only because of their diversity, but also because Bravo, coming from a country where repression and persecution were institutionalized, may understand the psychological effects of impunity and guilt.

It is suggestive that in a deterritorialized theatrical space, neutral, dismantled of the notion of national identity, Agustín manages to free himself from the psychological burden. It may be that the space is deterritorialized, but Agustín feels the need to reterritorialize himself in front of Bravo and to speak what he silenced for so long. Bravo's loft becomes an indefinite space that can give Agustín

some answers, guide him and let him remove the mask to see himself just as he really is.

Artaud has explained that “the action of theatre . . . is beneficial for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world” (31–32). In fact, in Bravo’s loft Agustín unveils the murder he committed. It is in Bravo’s loft that Agustín removes the mask he was wearing during the entire novel. The narrator explains that Agustín finally is capable of telling his story: “he neither spins nor embroiders it [the story] allowing it to flow like water from a spring, pure in the sense of being uncontaminated by self-censorship, self-pity, fear or sadness” (189). It is worth questioning here whether under the mask that Agustín has worn during the novel lies other masks, which like the Russian nesting dolls will surprise the audience and the reader.

The theatricality at the end of the novel brings the reader back to the border crossings that were studied at the beginning of the novel, to those corporal and literary crossings that took place after the crime. In a way, this theatricality is “noir theatricality.” In the loft, the geographical, literary, sexual, and psychological borders are rearticulated. For Agustín, Bravo’s loft is both a deterritorialized and reterritorialized theatrical space since the loft represents the space of catharsis and narration. In the loft, the Argentine writer can reconstruct, figuratively, the graph where the coordinates of time and space are located. The loft is furthermore a speculative space since as the readers/spectators we do not know to what point Agustín is capable of “burying his dead,” much as Roberta tells him: “The dead you kill are offspring of someone else’s crimes” (220).

In *Black Novel (with Argentines)* the geographic, physical, psychological, sexual and textual displacements are guided by the desire to (re)connect with the written work and thus (re)construct images from a historic past that continues to be silenced. In the novel the participants wish to grasp onto memory and history so that they can make peace with their guilt, neutrality and fear. Valenzuela establishes the ambiguity of human conduct and at the same time questions the malleability of human limits and the impossibility fully to know or explain exactly how the mechanisms of knowledge and human behavior essentially function.

Notes

This article is a translation of an updated and revised version of a chapter that appeared in Spanish in Laura R. Loustau's *Cuerpos errantes: Literatura latina y latinoamericana en Estados Unidos* (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2002)

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Pierre Guattari have developed theories around the term “deterritorialization” and its corollary, “reterritorialization.” The term “deterritorialization” was first used in their first jointly written work: *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), in which they critique the myth of Oedipus, and in which they reinterpret the Marxist struggles against capitalist exploitation. In this text they use the term “deterritorialization” in reference to the dislocations or dispersals of desire in modern capitalist societies (Kaplan 87). The term “reterritorialization” refers to the relocation of peasants into urban and textile-producing areas. These terms reappear in later works by Deleuze and Guattari, especially in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975) and in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari study the literature of this writer, a Czech Jew who lived in Prague and wrote in German. Deleuze and Guattari call this “minor literature.” According to these French critics, the principal characteristic of this literature is that the language is affected by a high coefficient of deterritorialization (16) in the sense that Kafka writes in a language that is not his own. While in *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari refer to dislocations of desire in capitalist societies, in *Kafka* the critics refer to the deterritorialization of language. In their later works the terms “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” do not carry with them associated meanings, but rather social forces. Most important for our analysis is that for Deleuze and Guattari the term “deterritorialization” always refers to foreignness, to the displacement of something or someone while “reterritorialization” is more related to relocation, recuperation, a real or metaphorical reappropriation.

2 Caren Kaplan, who analyzed and critiqued the work of Deleuze and Guattari, observed that: “their model of deterritorialization, like most Euro-American modernist versions of exilic displacement, stresses the freedom of disconnection and the pleasures of interstitial subjectivity. Yet deterritorialization itself cannot escape colonial discourse. The movement

of deterritorialization colonizes, appropriates, even raids other spaces . . .” (89). For Kaplan “Deterritorialization is always reterritorialization, an increase of territory, an imperialization” (89). (See *Questions*, especially the chapter titled “Becoming Nomad” 65–100)

3 See *Argentina: cómo matar la cultura, testimonios: 1976–1981*, based on the persecution of writers and other intellectuals forced to emigrate to other countries during the latest military regime. In *Black Novel* the writer-characters were not exiled because they apparently arrived in New York after the fall of the dictatorship, but the ghosts of repression and exile continue to pursue them. In a conversation that both writers have with a friend, they explain: “we can [return] . . . but I don’t know if return is possible. Things change. Not all roads can be retraced . . . besides, there is an exile from oneself, more inevitable than appears at a glance” (156). In a recent article titled “Exilio tras exilio en Argentina: vivir en los noventa después de la cárcel y el destierro,” Fernando O. Reati analyzes two Argentine novels, *Memoria del río inmóvil* (1999) by Cristina Feijóo and *Mala Junta* (1999) by Mario Paoletti. He explores the sense of alienation that political prisoners or exiled individuals experience in the neoliberal present, “they feel as errant ghosts of a forever lost time” (185; my translation).

4 Many critics have approached Valenzuela’s work from a psychoanalytical point of view. In *The Subversive Psyche* Kantaris explains that “psychoanalysis does in fact have a significant history in Argentina and Uruguay, and its influence in the ‘mainstream’ literature of those countries has been far-reaching” (5). In the chapter titled “Madness, Exile, and the Lacanian Mirage: Cristina Peri Rossi and Luisa Valenzuela” Kantaris analyzes the novel *Cola de Lagartija* (1983) by Valenzuela. Kantaris considers it a novel about “the sexuality of fascism” since it integrates, according to Kantaris, visions of modern psychoanalysis and historical fiction (31). Other examples of a psychoanalytical approach to Valenzuela are “*Novela negra con argentinos: The Desire to Know*” by Juanamaría Cordones-Cook in *World Literature Today* (1995) and “*Novela negra con argentinos, imagos de la guerra sucia*” in *La palabra en vilo: narrativa de Luisa Valenzuela*, (163–76).

5 Julia Kristeva together with Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray propose, although in different ways, that women should “write more fluidly, less con-

trolled, and less dissolvingly than so-called scientific writing” (Magnarelli “Luisa Valenzuela” 58; my translation). For Magnarelli in Valenzuela’s work there are two clear and distinct ways to “write with the body”; the characters that try to write with their body and those bodies that are written on, violated. Supporting the idea of the French feminists about *écriture féminine*, Valenzuela affirms in an interview with Gwendolyn Díaz: “language, before it is expressed, passes through preconscious zones where gender’s own colors are imbued. The famous slippage of the signified beneath the signifier becomes an erotic back-and-forth, and the connotative values which give flavor to the word become quite distinct as they flow from the mouth or the pen, whether of a man or a woman” (Lagos *La palabra en vilo* 28; my translation).

6 In *Novela negra con argentinos*, the original Spanish version, this sentence reads “restaurar, restablecer, revolcarse.” The word “revolcarse” literally means “to wallow.” I prefer the word “wallow” rather than the word “re-create,” as chosen by the translator, Toby Talbot, since it has a more powerful meaning in relation to “writing with the body,” as it is understood by Valenzuela.

7 In *Black Novel*, María Inés Lagos notes that, more definitively than in other texts “Valenzuela suggests that the barriers between the sexes, races and neighborhoods are creations of the mind, cultural partitions, identifying trap[s]” (*La palabra en vilo* 144; my translation).

8 An incident narrated by the Argentine writer and singer María Elena Walsh gives testament to the concept that the individual’s imagination that was submitted to the physical and psychological violence manages only to bring to mind deformed fragments of the body. Walsh explains: “In our democracy’s first months, a publisher offered me a job to direct a children’s encyclopedia where we wanted to precisely recover laic, liberal, universalist tradition. We called on many people . . . I observed that some sketch artists, in spite of their talent and experience, could not draw a human body. It turns out that one had been imprisoned for eight years; another was exiled . . .” They reproduced everything well, *except for the human figure*, which came out somewhat monstrous. There was a personification of disappeared people, an anachronism that obligated them to reproduce people frozen in time, threatened by an outside deterioration, or seen through de-

formed mirrors" (58; my emphasis).

Agustín cannot write with his body. As these artists are incapable of reconstructing their own violated bodies and those of the others, in their roles, they are only capable of producing deformed figures, much as Agustín who can only sketch out ideas without any meaning, scribbles on paper. Agustín's deformed penmanship represents fragments of memory and the bodies that struggle to be written and drawn on the page and in the mind.

9 In *Black Novel* the reader never finds out the real identity of Héctor Bravo. It is curious, however, that in a short story titled "Simetrías," Valenzuela chooses the name Héctor Bravo for a character portraying a torturer.

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