

## Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica

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Number 40

*The Configuration of Feminist Criticism and  
Theoretical Practices in Hispanic Literary  
Studies*

Article 13

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1994

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#### Citas recomendadas

Castillo, Debra A. (Otoño-Primavera 1994) "Meat Shop Memories: Federico Gamboa's *Santa*," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 40, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss40/13>

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## MEAT SHOP MEMORIES: FEDERICO GAMBOA'S *SANTA*

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**F**ederico Gamboa's 1903 novel, *Santa*, about a turn-of-the century brothel and its star resident, is Mexico's perennial bestseller. Permanently in print both in cheap paperback and in expensive leather-bound editions, it was the first novel chosen for mass-market promotion in supermarkets. It spawned a host of imitations, created a minor tourist industry of readers avid to visit her "birthplace" and her "tomb," inspired popular songs — most famously, Agustín Lara's "Aventurera," "Santa," and "Mujer" — and served as the basis for dramatical skits, burlesques, parodies, and several feature films, including Mexico's first talking picture — a movie that one critic considers so bad that it is "mysteriously lacking in the poetry that time tends to attach to even the worst of films" (Riera qtd in Mora 35). Salvador Elizondo attributes *Santa's* phenomenal success to the "peculiar condition" of Mexican psyches that divides Mexican women into good mothers and bad whores, and drives men in terror from their mothers into the arms of the prostitute (qtd in Mora 35-6). For José Joaquín Blanco, Gamboa's novel is emblematic of many other similar cultural products:

La sociedad y la cultura mexicanas le deben mucho a la prostitución. No sólo la canción, el cine y la novela están hechos en gran medida, explícita y veladamente, a partir de las prostitutas y en trato con ellas" (*Chamacas* 68).

In another of his books, Blanco discusses more fully the demonization, eroticization, and appropriation of such "apetecibles cuerpos de la miseria":

Entre más desamparada, más erótica... Así, dentro de una jerarquía social de grados de victimización, la esposa asume los honorables (abnegaciones,

docilidades, renunciaciones, etcéteera), y las otras víctimas sexuales los deshonrosos (*Función* 72).

The ubiquity of the prostitute in modern Mexican letters and culture, as well as the continuing fascination exercised by works like *Santa*, suggest a fantasmic investment far in excess of the admittedly extensive social phenomenon.

Both Elizondo and Blanco hint at a complicity between the fascination with prostitution and the victimization of women in general. Both signal the doubling of women into virtuous mothers and wicked whores, and both point to the ineluctable and ineradicable link between the two fantasized images of women. For Elizondo, prostitutes reaffirm a masculinity placed into doubt by the monumentally powerful passivity of the self-sacrificing mother-saint; the loose woman, then, serves as a defensive countersite or as a socially-approved outlet for surplus repression. Blanco's text additionally suggests that Mexican men tend to eroticize weakness and victimization, intimating that at some level a mother's presumed abnegation and a prostitute's imagined sexual ferment are equivalent, or at least parallel, erotic structures, and that, furthermore, these erotic structures are perpetuated through literary and cultural markets that find them valuable aesthetic currency for maintaining social hierarchies. In the pages that follow, I will explore the aesthetic exploitation of the image of the prostitute in Gamboa's text, and will investigate the concept of female sexuality operative in that book in relation to a rhetorical/ideological construction of fallenness. I will argue that the novel, while clearly and unmistakably the cultural product of a late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century masculinist aesthetic, can also be read against the grain by the contemporary feminist thinker attentive to destabilizing moments of creative re-genderification in the text.

Like many European novels with which it has often been compared — Zola's *Nana*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* — and the literary representations of prostitutes the author himself evokes in his prologue — Manon Lescaut, Marguerite Gauthier — *Santa/Santa* provides an irresistible combination of vaguely illicit titillation and upstanding moral values, ending with a shocking dramatization of the wages of sin. It is nevertheless, however influenced by European, and particularly French models, clearly a cultural product of the Mexico that came into being in this century with the increasing urbanization following upon Porfirio Díaz' rise to power. This is not, then, the pre-industrial Latin American story of a slave or servant woman raped into sexual servitude by a lecherous landowner/master. The values espoused in *Santa's* countryside stand in strict contradiction to those common among urban peoples.

It is a rural paradise populated with poor-but-honest folk who work the idyllic mother-earth that gives freely to her pure and loving children. The eponymous heroine's story, writes Gamboa, is

la historia vulgar de las muchachas pobres que nacen en el campo y en el campo se crían, entre brisas y flores; ignorantes, castas y fuertes; al cuidado de la tierra, nuestra eterna madre cariñosa; con amistades aladas, de pájaros libres de verdad, y con ilusiones tan puras, dentro de sus duros pechos de zagalas... (35).

Santa's downfall comes at the hands of an outsider, a soldier who seduces her, gets her pregnant, and abandons her to her fate. Upon Santa's fall from grace, she is forced out of the innocent countryside and into the perils of the metropolis where she serves as an emblematic reminder of the fundamentally alienating forces of urban life, and where she struggles to live experienced, unchaste, and weak among corrupted teachers and false friends with no illusions remaining.

At the same time that Gamboa sets up an opposition of rural vs. urban, pure vs. corrupted, innocence vs. vile education, he also expounds to his reader upon the fatal flaw in Santa's nature that inevitably leads her to the brothel. Santa is the weed that must be extirpated from the carefully tended garden of her mother earth. Once her seduction by the young army officer is accomplished and Santa's family ejects her from her childhood home, her fall into prostitution is precipitous. Gamboa concludes piously,

por lo pronto que se connaturalizó con su nuevo y degradante estado, es de presumir que en la sangre llevara gérmenes de muy vieja lascivia de algún tatarabuelo que en ella resucitaba con vicios y todo. Rápida fué su aclimatación, con lo que á claras se prueba que la chica no era nacida para lo honrado y derecho... (75)<sup>1</sup>

Santa's fall, thus, is both tragic and inevitable; it is a story of seduction, and of natural propensities. Gamboa wants his readers to see that she belongs to the city, to the French-style brothel with its macabre mother-substitute, Elvira, and not to the innocent home of her self-sacrificing mother and responsible brothers in the countryside.

Yet, as Blanco so acutely notes, at least to some degree the eroticizing of the "cuerpos de miseria" operates across the board — Gamboa's evident seduction by his own prose descriptions of the lushly ripe feminine countryside is a case in point — and not just in the depraved sections of the wicked city. Beautiful flowers and spiritually uplifting birds remind the author naturally of the attractions of hard young breasts. Santa's physical beauty, combined with the challenge of her untouched chastity and her inborn sensuality, make her an obvious target for the depraved lust of the young soldier as well as the presumably compassionate fascination of the voyeur-reader.

Not the least of this novel's titillations is the manner in which Gamboa cannily does not quite make the eroticized identification among all the key images of femininity. Santa shares her humble home in Chimalistac with her saintly mother and her two hard-working, virtuous brothers, and Gamboa tells us that Santa shares a bed with her mother in a simple room with two pictures

for decoration: la Virgen de la Soledad and la Virgen de Guadalupe, doubled portraits of the chaste and pure mother-queen of the heavens, to inspire the prayers of the saintly mother and her innocent daughter. Brothers Esteban and Fabián also have their walls decorated — with “una infinidad de pequeñas estampas de celebridades: bailarinas, cirqueras, bellezas de profesión, toda la galería de retratos con que obsequia á sus compradores la fábrica de cigarrillos” (38). It hardly needs mentioning that such early twentieth-century tobacco product beauties were not celebrated for their beautiful souls or blameless lives, and the brothers’ unforgiving outrage at Santa’s fall may have some connection to their own less-than-chaste contemplation of their interior decorations. Santa, of course, slips from “reina de la casa” (49) to “reina de la entera ciudad corrompida” (123), from aspirant to holy maternity to celebrated professional beauty, until she becomes a fabricated product, a cipher of displaced erotic longings: her clients’, first of all, but also those of her author-sculptor and those of the reading public. In this juxtaposition of paintings, and in the brothers’ wholly typical reaction to Santa’s fall, Gamboa offers a concise representation of the double standard that operates in Mexico’s patriarchal heterosexist model. This model says, briefly, (1) all women are objects, either of veneration or of erotic imagination, and (2) all women are potential prostitutes except one’s own mother. Bataille says it bluntly:

prostitution is the logical consequence of the feminine attitude.... Unless she refuses completely because she is determined to remain chaste, the question is at what price and under what circumstances will she yield. But if the conditions are fulfilled she always offers herself as an object (131).

Of course, in order for this model to work, one’s own mother, like the Virgin Mary, must retain a forever inviolate virginity; the sexualized mother is erotic fair game.

The important of Santa’s transformation moves in two distinct directions. She is re-invented, first, as an aesthetic object, eroticized in the traditional sense as the seductive work of art that becomes *Santa*; secondly, as a de-aestheticized commodity, the eroticized underclass described by Blanco:

La civilización burguesa se excita precisamente con lo que reprime legalmente; sueña con lo que ella misma prohíbe y alimenta su erotismo con los hechos, las imágenes y los actos que previamente demoniza y persigue institucionalmente.... Y es toda una posesión, un acto de apropiación, hacer a, o dejarse hacer por un jodido; nunca hacer con él... El burgués nunca copula con nadie, más que consigo mismo. (*Función* 71, 73)

Blanco’s point is well taken. Whether as an aesthetic object or as a commodity, Santa becomes precisely that demonized and alienated figure of repression that allows her client, her author, and her (male) reader an intimate relationship with

himself. She is, first of all and above all, an object, even to herself. This aestheto-erotic bias reveals not only the heterosexist bias of fantasized/real underworld interactions, but also the limited repertoire of political positionings that define ethics, erotics, and subjectivity as implicitly masculine traits.

*Santa* begins with a dedication to Jesús F. Contreras, "escultor," and a prologue in the supposed voice of the heroine in which she proposes an exchange with the artist: her "clay" — her story — for his molding ability:

Barro fui y barro soy.... Me cuelo en tu taller, con la esperanza de que compadecido de mí me palpés y registres.... Acógeme tú y resucítame ¿qué te cuesta?... ¿No has acogido tanto barro y en él infundido no has alcanzado que lo aplaudan y lo admiren? (np).

Santa, at the pinnacle of her success as Mexico City's premier sexual object, was applauded and admired; the prologue anticipates the further transformation of the sexual object into an aesthetic one, so that she (or her creator) can continue to enjoy a success now measured in aesthetic rather than economic terms. One of the aspects that I find extremely interesting in this fictional exchange between the artist and his model is that both "Santa" and "F.G." share an understanding of the woman's role — in life as in art — as that of commodified spectacle. Thus, while "Santa" may make a plea for the artist to uncover her human heart, she uses the same language as that employed by the customers and the police who abused her body ("palpar" and "registrar") — she is asking him to "feel her up" and "shake her down." Likewise, the uncovering of her heart takes the form of shaping and covering the artist's mold with her substance, the "barro pestilente y miserable que ensucia, rueda, lo pisotean y se deshace" (128). Thus, on the one hand Santa's plea resonates with pathos while on the other it reminds us of the vocabulary of oppression. Her savior is her present client and ultimate pimp, shaping her now-disembodied clay for the equally displaced and disembodied delectation of her new public. Furthermore, the author/artist, "F.G.," can separate himself from his aesthetic property — the sculpture that wins him applause, the bestselling novel — Santa, the woman and the artist's clay, has no recourse but to bring herself to market. She is the commodity, and not the producer of a separable eroto-artistic object.

The artist's response to the prostitute is, finally, as Blanco intimates, to appropriate her for a self-conscious manipulation of aesthetic categories, whereas the woman's capacity extends no further than the attenuated agency that permits her to say "take me, I'm yours." And yet, while Santa's voice fades into the background except for rare conversational exchanges in the body of the novel, it is her voice opening the text that grants authority to the writer and, in traditional narrative fashion, establishes the spurious authenticity of the pseudo-biography. The novel, *Santa*, then offers a bi-partite body: the prostitute's posthumous last testament and her biographer/artist's creative resuscitation. She speaks to him; he speaks of her. As Amanda Anderson says in another

context, "The distortions involved in depicted encounters with prostitutes, and in the rhetoric of fallenness more broadly conceived, derive precisely from the abstract out of any potentially dialogical relation to the other" (117). She is; he imagines. Her immoral ugliness becomes his moral tale; her falseness, his aesthetic truth. Her filth is transmogrified in his art. There is, however, no dialogue with her, but only the continuity between artist and creation.

Yet there is an implicit dialogue established by the novel. *Santa/Santa* is the conduit by which "F.G." establishes a dialogue, not with the prostitute, but with his readers/himself, in what José Joaquín Blanco, following Gore Vidal, would call an onanist relation to society that brings together the polity with property, propriety, power, politics, and aesthetic norms (see *Función* 73). The appropriation of Santa as an artistic property, and the reshaping of her tale in accords with his sense of aesthetic requirements and the demands of propriety, force the author to choose a path of discreet titillation that reads in a definitely dated manner to contemporary readers. For instance, Gamboa never allowed the vile word for Santa's profession to pass onto his pristine pages. I quote Margo Glantz:

Esta popularidad [de la novela] es tan ambigua, como la caracterización de Santa, de quien dice su autor: "Santa no era mujer, no; era una..." Y con estos puntos suspensivos calla la palabra "nefanda", haciendo de la prostituta un ser equívoco; ni mujer ni palabra pronunciada, la puta como animal marginado, aunque público; femenino, aunque negado a la feminidad, terrestre apenas: un cuerpo solamente. (42)

Curiously, the most insistent quality of this unique corporeal non-woman, this immoral animal, her physicality, is the most elusive as well. For while Santa "comercia con sus partes 'pudendas,'... esas partes pudendas permanecen intocadas por el lenguaje narrativo" (43). Gamboa fragments his sentences and fragments the body of Santa in one and the same equivocal gesture. The peek-a-boo flirtations of the text both generate and mediate repressed eroticism.

At the same time, for the modern feminist reader, Gamboa's teasing ellipses, his punctilious equivocations, his turning away from dialogue with the other, keep the space open for what we might call the feminine "equivoice" (the word comes from Cixous) that counters the oppressive "equivocations" of patriarchal discourse. For while the artistic agency of the novel belongs to the male, the objects created in the novel, both male and female, exhibit similar characteristics of being overpowered and made passive by a system over which they have lost control. The commodification of women through prostitution is, as we shall see later, only one of the forms of modern human commodification, to which the other great social institutions — notably schools and factories — contribute equally. In such society, the aesthetic impulse itself is reconstituted as a feminine "equivoice." Rita Felski writes:

in the social imaginary, the aesthetic became increasingly feminized in relation to the 'objectivity' and 'rationality' of a scientific worldview. Both art and women could be seen as decorative, functionless, linked to the world of appearance and illusion and divorced from the work ethic and the reality principle (1098).

Thus, while one reading of *Santa* would see the novel as an example of the working out of a worldview shaped by commodity aesthetics, another reading would argue for the insurgence of the equivocal in the interstices and ellipses of the text, an equivocal that blurs accepted valences of authenticity and value.

In this respect, then, Gamboa operates out of a carefully defined and circumscribed marginality that decries the moral emptiness of the scientific worldview and propounds the superiority of an aesthetic reshaping of reality. And, in fact, he works against the grain of his own dominant discourse in order to establish his equivocal. Gamboa chooses as his protagonist one of the most equivocal figures in society, a frequent symbol of inauthenticity and moral corruption, and plays even more with the interstices of truth and falsity by having the prostitute give her authenticating imprimatur to the still non-existent work posthumously. It is partly this concern with the play of authenticity and inauthenticity that distances the modern writer from his Victorian counterpart, Gamboa from the nineteenth-century European novelists with whom he is often compared. Lionel Trilling describes one eminent Victorian, in his book, *Sincerity and Authenticity*:

We cannot but be touched by [F.W.H.] Myer's little scene [his conversation with novelist George Eliot on God, duty, and immortality], and perhaps the more because we will not fail to perceive the inauthenticity in which it issues: the very hollowness of the affirmation attests to the need it was intended to satisfy. We of our time do not share that need of the Victorians. We are not under the necessity of discovering in the order of the universe, in the ineluctable duty it silently lays upon us, the validation of such personal coherence and purposiveness as we claim for ourselves. We do not ask those questions which would suggest that the validation is indeed there, needing only to be discovered; to us they seem merely factitious. (118)

The result, as Trilling would tell us, is a kind of moral appeal for an authentic stance, which stance varies positionally, as it is created through a cultural assent that does not necessarily involve either credence or commitment on the part of the authenticating body. What moral weight, then, and what social responsibility accrues to the validation of the authentic and the usable as criteria over the purely (purely?) aesthetic? And what is the cost? Here Trilling is instructive once again. He reminds us of the violence explicit in the etymology of the word "authentic": "**Authenteo**: to have full power over; also to commit a murder. **Authentes**: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide" (131). Authenticity, individual or communal, carries



with it a certain tainted charge of an inherent, if repressed, violence.

Thus Santa, in her very inauthenticity, in the elliptic unreadability of her profession, in the violence done her, serves as a marker for other reprehensible social practices that deny representability and authenticity to other social subject/objects. Alongside the image of a loving earth, bringing forth her gifts to her grateful children, Gamboa offers the counterimage of a violent rape. “¿Querfais América?” asks one of his characters, “pues ¡hala! a los campos, ahí en la tierra que há menester de fatigas y sudores, de hombres que la violen y la fecunden; preñadla de trabajo y ella os parirá cosechas y cosechas que carezcan de fin” (191). Only a few pages later, the narrator describes Santa, found under the covers in the early morning, as the embodiment of just such a sensual, rapable landscape:

su anca soberbia señalándose á modo de montaña principal,... las negras crenchas rebeldes, cayendo por sábanas y espaldas, como encrespada catarata; en seguida, un hombro, redondo, como montaña menos alta; luego la anca, enhiesta y convexa, formando grutas enanas con los pliegues... por final, la cordillera humana y deliciosa... (208)

The interchangeability of women and landscape as metaphors for each other suggests not only an aesthetic project, but also an economic and social dynamic based on the passivity of women/land and their accessibility to domination and exploitation. The novel universalizes the gaze, implicitly male, as the exploiting agent and value-constructing subject with reference to both objects of sensual and economic appropriation; importantly, however, in universalizing the male gaze, Gamboa also disembodies the male, leaving in the text only empty landscapes, unpopulated by men.

A parallel fragmentation of aesthetics and ethics occurs in Gamboa's description of the neighborhood school. Gamboa suggestively places the school next to the brothel — “también tiene, frente por frente del jardín que oculta los prostíbulos, una escuela municipal, para niños” (4) — and while he ostensibly sets up a contrast between them, the very juxtaposition of the two hints that the courses of study followed in the two institutions are less dissimilar than they may appear at first glance. Thus, the madame of the brothel in which Santa finds refuge begins her orientation to the life of a prostitute with a “un catecismo completo; un manual perfeccionado y truhanesco de la prostituta moderna y de casa elegante.” The narrator underlines the similarity of this orientation to a class lecture: “Sus recomendaciones, mandatos y consejos, casi no resultaban inmorales de puro desnudos; antes los envolvía en una llaneza y una naturalidad tales que, al escucharla, tomaríasela más bien por austera institutriz inglesa” (18). Gamboa is, of course, playing upon the popular tradition that employs the word “pupilas” for the inmates of a brothel, but the specific comparison of the horrible Elvira to an English governess underlines the connection already established by the proximity of the elementary school

and the brothel in the opening pages of the novel.

In the larger context of the neighborhood, the school and the brothel are but two of a series of similarly described buildings, all of which have the goal of fragmenting and mechanizing human beings. Santa's arrival at the door of the brothel is accompanied by a rhythmic sequence of dehumanizing sounds, abstracted from their human producers:

Del taller de los monumentos sepulcrales, de las cobrerías italianas y de "La Giralda" salían, alternados, los golpes de cincel contra mármol y contra el granito; los martillazos acompasados en el cobre de cazos y peroles; y el eco del hacha de los carniceros que unas veces caía encima de animales muertos, y encima de la piedra de tajo, otras.... Los transeúntes... cerníanse fragmentos errabundos de voces infantiles, repasando el silabario con monótono sonsonete:

— B-a, ba; b-e, bc; b-i; bi; b-o, bo... (5)

The chisels, hammers, axes, and monotone voices mark off the time of industrialized production. Santa's arrival at the brothel door coincides exactly with the noon bell, releasing children and factory workers into the streets, sending her into her new profession. Once inside the brothel, her own minimal instruction complete, she too will become integrated into the mechanized rhythms of the neighborhood, into the dehumanization already evident in the fragmentation of bodies into implements of work, of voices into isolated nonsense syllables. Their monotonous repetition of exactly duplicable actions will become for her the monotonous repetition of confusingly equivalent bodies. The brothel, then, is an emblematic presence, but not an isolated one, and the perversion reigning there extends to other institutions and other levels of society traditionally considered remote from its contamination. Gamboa explores the interplay between the ceaseless functioning of mechanical forces and the concrete solidity of the institutions that house them. Such attention to the machine requires as well examination of the individual inextricably knit into the infernal functioning; in Foucault's words, "it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces as bodies" (*Discipline* 217). Santa, the school children, and the factory workers are, perforce, carefully fabricated in and by their respective institutional compulsions as the endless hammerings, chiselings, disembodied syllables, and pseudo-erotic couplings fabricate the society in which they are compelled to live.

Gamboa reinforces this analogy throughout the text, and many of the most successful passages of the novel capture in the repetition of the prose a sense of the dulling repetition operative in the lives of these city dwellers. The laundry's noon steam whistle punctuates the text, signaling moments in which all the school and factory rhythms will be interrupted and the bodies will spill out onto

the streets; some of the bodies will also find their way to Elvira's brothel, where the bawdy house pupils take over the shiftwork.

Los serios, y los viciosos, de bracero, enderezaban sus pasos... á las vinaterías y cantinas baratas, á los figones; los serios, á sus distantes hogares humildes: serios y viciosos, lentos, fatigados, fatigados del día, de la semana y del mes, fatigados de los años y fatigados de su vida (153).

The cumulative effect of this passage lies in the narrator's repetition of "serios y viciosos," the insistence upon their state of fatigue, the ticking off of their lives in exhausting, and exhaustingly similar, days, nights, and years. It is lulling, monotonous, terrifying. In another section of the novel, Gamboa uses a more graphic, but analogous, metaphor of industrialization's effect on human beings when he says of the tobacco factory that it lulls the workers to sleep "á modo de gigantesco vampiro, les chupa la libertad y la salud" (51).

Of all the various representations of modern mechanized production, however, it is the meat shop that becomes the most persistently repeated metaphor for the brothel, and the butchered animal, the foreshadow of Santa's fate. It is, furthermore, in Gamboa's repeated evocation of the meat shop that his aesthetic aims begin to merge with the novel's implicit and explicit ideological agendas. The brothel is the central metaphor of female consumption, but other industrial-age institutions also function in a similar manner. The workers devolve into "bestias humanas" consumed by the factory, the "monstruo insaciable y cruel, devoradora de obreros" (52). The equation established between human beings and meat for consumption is the most insistent metaphor in the book, and the self is not only commodified, but commodified for cannibalistic consumption in very specific ways. In her seminal article on Gamboa's novel, Margo Glantz analyzes this juxtaposition with admirable clarity and concision:

El pudor con que Gamboa destaza el cuerpo de Santa para venderlo en el prostíbulo por donde desfila toda la ciudad concupiscente, acaba por convertirse en la esencia del libro y definir una mecánica del poder. Sólo cortándola en pedazos la carne de reses puede ser vendida, aunque antes se la exhiba en grandes garfios que se ostentan por su belleza y sanidad. Cuando la carne se corta, el cuerpo se fragmenta y el de Santa deja de ser cuerpo humano desde el momento mismo en que Santa la ha reducido a una negación, a un epíteto sugerido por puntos suspendidos a una frase que elude la "palabra nefanda" o a una fragmentación de descripción que destaza el discurso. Santa no es mujer, es un cuerpo destazado. (45)

Santa is stripped bare and stripped apart by the author's originating negation. This negativity, then, generates the meat metaphor operative in the rest of the text. She becomes the piece of meat, stripped to the bone by her hungry predators. To this admirable analysis, I would add only that the dissection of

Santa begins, not with the negation of her womanly essence ("no era mujer, no; era una..."), but much earlier in the text, in the prologue to the novel proper, with Santa's plea to the artist to take up and reshape her clay. The identification, then, is at least triple: body/meat/work of art. Gamboa in this manner merges the aesthetic aims of the artist with the mundane task of a butcher and with the perverse exploitative efforts of the madame, the work of art with a hunk of trimmed meat or a trained prostitute, the artist's workshop with the butcher's meat market or the elegant brothel, the reading public with the hungry consumer or the prostitute's client. At each step, the overlaying images comment upon each other, suggesting pointed critiques of aesthetic criteria, social forms, ideological positions, and economic realities. Once again, the blurring of these categories forms part of the larger critique of those contemporary authenticating structures that have been increasingly reformulated (as the artist might say) by the devouring (as the butcher might say) logic of commodity aesthetics.

The progressive dehumanization of the workers puts the prostitute ever more in demand. Because she becomes for them nothing more than a fragmented body, a piece of meat, she restores the bodies to her clients in the same way that the artist restores her body to its imminent textuality. The workers dream of freedom and humanity that have been sucked away by factory life; they carry this emptiness into the brothel where they pay to impose their freedom against another's body. As José Joaquín Blanco says in another context, the sexual encounter can be read as the expansion of an attenuated body over another body that is symbolically, at least, more fully endowed with flesh. Furthermore, sexual violence can be interpreted as an "asalto a la **propiedad** del cuerpo ajeno" (*Chamacas* 125), where the double meaning of "propiedad" as "property" and as "propriety" is very much to the point. The author/audience as well partakes in this carnal festival on another level; disembodied by the text, the reader/artistic/author takes on reality in the act of devouring the body/flesh/text of *Santa*/Santa. Blanco continues,

La tradicional fascinación de los burgueses (que son 'menos cuerpo', pues realizan su personalidad sobre todo en extensiones materiales o simbólicas de propiedad, familia, capital, Estado, comercio, religión, etcétera) por los cuerpos de miseria, reside en que, en efecto, estos cuerpos son la Gran Interpretación Carnal sin mediaciones (*Chamacas* 126)

What Blanco does not say, but which is perhaps implied in his text, is that any disembodied gaze, any construction of the prostitute as devourable object of consumption, will complete the unmediated carnal interpretation only in an illusory sense. The fetishization of the "cuerpo de miseria" and its consumption as pure object, only and ultimately reinforces the consumer's abstraction. The objectification, after all, occurs in metaphor and in an observing subject's interpretation and not in a mutually constructed compact about reality, or even representation.

In *Santa*, abstract/aestheticized hunger is sidetracked in the ellipses of the text; the carnal interpretation — the unmediated encounter of body with body — increasingly metaphorizes itself in the meat shop metaphor. Hunger, then, is never satiated, and in the novel leads only to greater, and to more perverse hungers. The male population of the city “se precipitaba sobre la carne sana de las ramerías de refresco, que, igual á manadas de reses, vienen de todas partes á abastecer los prostíbulos, los mataderos insaciables” (350-1); the women are “ganado sumiso” (280). As Elvira reminds her new pupil, while the clients demand that “hemos de quererlos como apetecen” while the prostitutes “sabemos muy distinto, picamos, en ocasiones hasta envenenamos, y ellas [las esposas] no, ellas saben igual todos los días” (19). Santa, like her fellow prostitutes, consumes, and is consumed by passion (146): “un enfermero que la miraba, la miraba como con ganas de comérsela” (14); another client “ardía en deseos de morder aquella fruta tan en sazón” (54); still another says, “si... no te como á muchos bocados para saborearte á mis anchas... [mañana] te voy á devorar” (207). A young man “mostraba afilados colmillos y un apetito insaciable. Cómo mordía ¡canijo! cómo mordía y cómo devoraba... a lo natural, con glotonería de diez y seis años, deliciosamente!” (310) Hipólito, the blind lover, kisses Santa “con glotonería de can hambreado que hurta carne exquisita” (347). Santa’s predisposition to prostitution impels her to participate in her own self-consumption: “más que sensual apetito, parecía una ansia de estrujar, destruir y enfermar esa carne sabrosa y picante que no se rehusaba ni defendía” (73). As Elvira knows well, time “en cortísimo tiempo devoraría aquella hermosura y aquella carne joven” (6), and as she begins her fall, Santa is no longer “manjar de dioses” (147). Thus, Gamboa establishes the relation between food and sex at key moments throughout his text, and hints that this cultural equation derives from the encroachment of consumer capitalism, that sucks life from factory workers, that fragments the voices of children in schools, and that turns human relationships into metaphorically cannibalistic carnal exchanges. In this manner, as carnal desires become identified with food pornography, so too the production of meatstuffs and the consumption of food becomes fraught with hints of taboo. Not only is the brothel a butcher shop, where the madame dresses the meat for her clients’ tastes, where nothing is left too long on the hook, and where spoiled meat is thrown out, but at the same time, the meat shop becomes sexually charged, so that the joints hanging in the back rooms of the slaughterhouse, buzzing with flies, offer a comment on the neighboring establishment. This reciprocity of concupiscence reproduces itself at every level.

The murder trial that Gamboa reproduces in this novel provides the reader specific food for thought on his/her own role as cannibal-voyeur in relation to this text. Gamboa first describes the circumstances surrounding the murder in the brothel, and the murder itself, in precise and minute detail (252-259) for the delectation of his readers. He then follows with a repetition of the story, this time

for the consumption of judge, jurors, and a deliciously scandalized public. As the narrator tells us, "el delito era de los que por derecho propio despiertan en las hipocresías sociales afán inmoderado de conocerlos aun en sus detalles más repugnantes y asquerosos" (262), displacing in this manner concupiscent desires onto the hypocritical members of the listening audience and discreetly bypassing reference to identical passions aroused in the reading public, who has savored this twice-told tale, directly first, and then mediated by the reaction of the jury. The narrator clarifies the connection between the story and meat, food and sex, hypocrisy and perverse consumption, when Santa takes the stand: "Habituada Santa á despertar apetitos, y aun á provocarlos, nada hizo en esta vez, ni siquiera realzar sus encantos, que más de uno de los que la devoraban tenía saboreados" (277). In repeating the story of the murder in the brothel twice, Gamboa emphasizes that this incident, more than any other, represents an overdetermined moment in the novel. With this incident, both aesthetic and erotic realms involve specular excess, for not only is there an implicit parallel between the butcher shop and the brothel, but with the murder literal as well as metaphorical butchery takes place. By his own hand, the murderer becomes the agent of making (of a corpse) and unmaking (of a human being); the prostitute in court stands in the privileged position of the knower (of the truth) and the knower of the bodies (both men were regulars in the brothel). Importantly, the acts that create both these figures — murder, prostitution — tremble on the edge of the unspeakable, and the perpetrators become inseparable from the act that makes them. The nonsignifyingness of the two transgressors of the accepted moral code increases their fascination; they are what they do, and their knowledge is acquired through violence. And in Gamboa's book, where unspeakable acts are often cut out of the text in a kind of literary butchery, these figures' most crucial signifying gesture is made unreadable (or at least illegible) as well. Santa's testimony, thus, has no legal weight. The court disregards her words and focuses only on the scandal of her transgressive bodily presence in a legal setting.

Standing behind these two treacherous figures, both overdetermined and insignificant, is the equally overdetermined and insignificant figure of the author/sculptor. Like the murderer and the prostitute, the artist is also a figure of knowing and making, of unknowing (not telling) and unmaking (at least insofar as he ends the novel with the butchery of his protagonist). Like them, his making and knowing involves the manipulation of bodies — the narrator figures himself as a sculptor who shapes clay into a living artistic creation — rather than the manipulation of abstract thoughts. This authorial handi-work, the physical product of reading and writing, dominates in the trial scene, with its superimposed layers of oral and written testimony, recorded response and hypocritical underpinnings. The written word-sculptor's clay impinges upon the novel in other important moments as well, frequently associated with ellipses — the author's text-butchery. Thus, for example, Santa's degenerate

lover, Rubio “vacío en su querida las hieles que su esposa le vertía” (296), and these insalubrious ejaculations are both oral and physical. At the same time, Rubio confirms the perception established in the insignificance of Santa’s court testimony. He is safe confiding his degeneracies to her because in her hands the weapon of his secrets dissolves into nothingness. She has no legal status, no credibility, no substantiality in the eyes of the state:

No te evanezcas por los secretos que he he confiado, porque te he dicho lo que á nadie debe decirse; no creas que armada de ellos podrías causarme daño... tú no eres peligrosa... ¡quién ha de hacerte caso siendo una...?

At the same time, Santa’s body accepts his poison, and his unspoken word takes on substance as a weapon to wound her:

La palabra horrible, la afrenta, revolteaba por los aires. En los muebles, en las paredes, en las lámparas, en la comida, en todas partes Santa veíala escrita y sin tartamudeos la leía: la maldición, las cuatro letras implacables... (296).

Written and unwritten at the same time, the four implacable letters take on an almost physical presence — and yet they remain unspoken, unwritten, in the body of the novel. Likewise, and at the same time, Santa is nothing but her body, and no-body at all. She is a creation of words, but no words touch the most crucial aspect of her being.

Similar uses of elliptic word-weapons abound in *Santa*. In the first pages of the novel, Santa meets the aging prostitute, Pepa, whose grotesque body signals to the young “semi-virgin” the inevitable decay of her own beauty. Pepa listens to Santa’s story of violation and abandonment and “ocupada en pasarse una esponja por el cuello y las mejillas, Pepa asentía sin formular palabra” (10). She watches dispassionately as Santa breaks down into tears: “Pepa conocía esa historia, habíala leído y releído”; it has been her own story, written in her own body, in the “muertos encantos” that no longer serve to attract any but the most indiscriminating clients. She knows the story as well in the coins that pay for her services, that she has earned “peso á peso y á costa de... una porción de cosas” (11). Pepa’s ellipsis is the narrator’s as well, cutting short the reading/rereading of the story of her life, so similar to the story we are reading. Here, the story Pepa reads, the story we read, contains a significant omission, or the omission of signification.

Santa’s story involves other butchered tales as well. At one point in the novel, the unhappy young woman meditates: “Mi patria, hoy por hoy, es la casa de Elvira, mañana será otra ¿quién lo sabe?... Y yo... yo seré siempre una...” At this point the narrator interrupts: “Y la palabra horrenda, el estigma, la deletreó en la ventanilla de la calandria, hacia afuera, como si escupiese algo que le hiciera daño” (103). The word is not spoken, but written, and Santa’s writing is not reproduced in the text. It is, furthermore, a non-writing that is

accompanied by a physical reaction; the writing is a spitting up, or spitting out, of a poisonous substance. And the "calandria," the caged bird, cannot but evoke the winged freedom of Santa's youthful, innocent life in the country. Santa is nounless, and therefore unsubstantial, but associated metaphorically with a caged bird, with a poisonous word, with unshaped clay. Fallen, false, and unreadable, she yet defines a specific kind of industrialization of violence and dismemberment.

Santa is a disembodied body, a purely abstract evocation of a purely corporeal presence, who exists only in the insubstantial evocation of non-words between the printed words on a page. The prostitute in this novel galvanizes and defines the category "woman," if only as a counter-site, in a similar manner as the brothel, the butcher shop of the soul, defines and categorizes a contested view of culture. Says Michel Foucault, "I am interested in certain [sites] that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. These spaces, as it were, which are linked with all the others, which however contradict all the other sites, are of two main types": utopias, which have no real place, and heterotopias, among which Foucault includes brothels, which are both specific sites and non-places, and which are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (*Of Other Spaces* 24-5). The brothel, then, is not just another space among the various institutionalized spaces of instruction and production; it is also a compendium of the others. Meat shop and school, factory and cemetery, the brothel is a microcosm of society and an index of all that is wrong with the other sites. Schools robotize students, factories consume laborers, farm production rapes the earth, and in the real or figurative cemetery, finally, the meat of human illusions putrefy under a stone epitaph-self.<sup>2</sup>

The prostitute in Gamboa's world is a slippery creature. She is a commodity posing as a person, a fungible body reimagining itself as intangible word, the execrated definition of sex unaccompanied by any account of her sexuality, the locus of an erotic wish that continually unsites itself. She produces no children, and yet continually evokes the erased sign of the saintly mother. "What multiples through her," says Catherine Gallagher in an article on *Daniel Deronda*, "is not a substance but a sign: money. Prostitution, then, like usury, is a metaphor for one of the ancient models of linguistic production: the unnatural multiplication of interchangeable signs." Furthermore, Gamboa's novel associates itself with a form of linguistic procreation that Gallagher would identify with the feminine metaphor: "According to the father metaphor, the author generates real things in the world through language; according to the whore metaphor, language proliferates itself in a process of exchange through the author" (41). It is a silent and unequal exchange — whore's substance for authorial voice — that provides the generating metaphor of the sculptor's task; it is another silent exchange — meat to the butcher's knife — that enables the



bulk of the text. *Santa's* author was prone to comment, in later years, that he lived off of *Santa*,<sup>3</sup> humorously playing with the metaphor of author-pimp, but at the same time implicitly commenting on the superseding of a moral by a commercial economy — of writing, at least.

Gallagher's study of the British nineteenth-century novel focuses on the striking parallels between the images of the prostitute and that of the usurer. Gamboa's novel, deriving from an only-partially overlapping cultural context, foretells an ill-defined area of literature that I call, borrowing the term from José Joaquín Blanco, "la novela de la transa."<sup>4</sup> The "transa" is, as Blanco notes, also a "trenza," weaving together disparate elements of society, with the common ground of a "supervivencia ilusionada" based on the con-artist's confidence in his own cleverness. Unlike the U.S. model of the confidence game, the Mexican "transa" is less focused on the individual doing the manipulating, more on the action as transaction between two individuals, each of whom knows that a "transa" is taking place, each of whom thinks he (it is usually a "he") has the advantage. "Transa" then, eventually involves "autotransa." It is a quintessentially urban phenomenon, and one acutely aware of a sphere of exchange that traces the limits between moral and commercial economies, while playing on the expectations of both.

Gamboa takes as his charge that of defining those characters most traditionally associated with the underworld side of these negotiations. Deeply problematized in the rereading of the body's poetic topography is the role of the reader or viewing public. The audience's gaze upon these public/private spectacles is hypothetically voyeuristic, but the issue becomes more complicated because the circuit of exchange involves a recognition of the audience as voyeur looking upon a primal scene of narcissistic self-contemplation that is, nevertheless, a staged scene, meant to be over looked. *Santa*, after all, from the very first words of the novel, offers herself to the author and to the author's audience as a public object of display. In this archetypal economy, the man (lover, writer, critic, sculptor) reads (seduces/is seduced by, writes, interprets, molds) woman (the mistress, the work of art, the text, the statue).

Finally, as Gamboa admits, "la mujer es por sí sola la naturaleza toda, es la matriz de la vida, y por ello, la matriz de la muerte" (232). In *Santa's* case, the unnatural and unproductive overuse of her "matriz" leads to a "characteristic" illness — uterine cancer (348-9). Her only slight hope of survival involves another butchery, the extirpation of the uterus by hysterectomy. Implicitly as well, such an operation will slice out as well the hysterical proliferation of words, both those spoken, and those repressed under ellipses. *Santa* dies on the operating table, and her faithful friend, Hipólito, takes her mutilated body back to her childhood town of Chimalistac for burial. The text of the novel, likewise deprived of its "matriz," dissolves as well. What is left is this tombstone, this statue, this written epitaph.

But what happens when the reader is female? However much we may read

Gamboa's novel against the grain, exploring the delicate apertures to the equivocal female equivocal, theorizing about the feminization of the text, discussing the social critique that imbues the novel, *Santa* still to some degree "nos transa." The female body, existence, voice are all vicarious; her urges in this "gran interpretación carnal" come to us mediated by the shaping hands/voice of the sculptor/storyteller. What most clearly drops out of this discussion of the extremely sexually-active female is any understanding of her sexuality. What Gamboa does in his novel is to chart the possibilities of an authority that is not entirely patriarchal nor fully authenticable, and to explore the slippages in an economic system that, while ostensibly grounded in a common moral contract, nevertheless foregrounds another, superseding economic structure. Furthermore, while Gamboa's novel does not approach understanding of female sexuality, it offers the first step towards such a discussion in that it raises the issue in a form impossible to marginalize. *Santa*, then, provides an opening for other discussions, conceptualizations in which the question of women's sexuality can be raised in a different way, and texts in which later authors can rethink and revise the manner in which female sexuality will be understood in Mexican culture and represented in Mexican fiction.

## NOTES

1 Gamboa here follows what is the common contemporary understanding of the contributing factors in prostitution. For a fascinating insight into this attitude, see Xorge del Campo. In his book, *La prostitución en México*, del Campo writes: "Médicos, psicólogos y sociólogos coinciden en admitir que existe una categoría de 'jóvenes predispuestas a la prostitución.' Esta tendencia se observa generalmente desde la infancia..." (97). Del Campo notes that statistics show that prostitutes always come from a poor background, and that in interviews will always claim that "ellas han adoptado este oficio empujadas por el hambre, por el desempleo, por la insuficiencia de salarios, etcétera." He warns against accepting the prostitutes' testimony in the face of expert analysis, however: "Nada puede estar más sujeto a dudas que este género de testimonios" (100).

2 Besides the butcher shop, one of the other important industries in the brothel's neighborhood is the production of tombstones, and the reference to stones, especially tombstones, is one of the minor leit motifs of the novel. The Tivoli, for example, is described as having tables "que á modo de lápidas de un cementerio fatídico de almas enfermas y cuerpos pecadores parecen aguardar á que en su superficie graben fugaces epitafios" (111). Later in the text, the narrator informs us that Santa's only recourse is to bury her illusions so as to survive in the inhospitable world of the brothel. The young woman complains to Hipolito: "Si parece que me empujan y me obligan á hacer todo lo que hago, como si yo fuese una piedra.... Luego, también me comparo á una piedra, porque de piedra nos quisiera el público, sin sentimientos ni nada, y de piedra se necesita

ser para el oficio..." (143). Santa's self-recognition as stone becomes her epitaph, her figurative burial stone.

3 See José Emilio Pacheco, 34.

4 The term is hard to translate. Roughly, it means the "con novel." "Transa" is a Mexicanism for a con artist; the word probably derives from "transacción" (transaction) and referred originally to the transactions between hip middle-class urban youth and lower-class drug dealers in the late '60s. See Blanco's suggestive "Elogio de la transa" in *Función*, pp. 65-8, from which the material in this paragraph is paraphrased.

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