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## THE CONCEPT OF ABJECTION IN *EL INFIERNO*, *LA VIDA DOBLE*, AND *EL DESIERTO*

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In 1993, Luz Arce published her controversial memoir titled *El Infierno*.<sup>1</sup> Arce, initially an Allende supporter who confessed under torture and eventually became a DINA functionary, has been heralded as both a victim of the Pinochet regime and a self-serving traitor who betrayed her leftist colleagues and then sought protection from prosecution by testifying for the Truth Commission in Chile. Extensive research on Arce's testimony has been done by Michael J. Lazzara, who studies her work both in his book *Chile in Transition: The Poetics and Politics of Memory* (2006) and his edited collection: *Luz Arce and Pinochet's Chile: Testimony in the Aftermath of State Violence* (2011). In the Introduction to the second book, Lazzara specifically mentions the concept of abjection as a topic that surfaces in Arce's testimony:

However, despite the "truth" of the documents presented in this book, the exercise of scrutinizing Luz Arce's discourse...can be illuminating insofar as it confronts us directly with the terrible *abjection* to which certain bodies were subjugated under dictatorship. . . . it raises questions about how the dictatorship unmade revolutionary longings by literally unmaking bodies, turning them into *abject*, depoliticized shells devoid of any sense of futurity. . . . Sometimes she [Arce] appears as a corrupt, hardened criminal of DINA/CNI; at other times she appears as a poor, pathetic, *abject* collaborator figure (2-4, my emphases).

Within a few pages, Lazzara employs the terms "abject" or "abjection" to refer both to the tortured victims of the Pinochet government and to Arce

herself. According to Rina Arya in her book on abjection, “abject” has two similar meanings: “Extremely unpleasant and degrading” and “completely without pride and dignity” (3). Similarly, *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* states that abject means: “1) sunk to or existing in a low state or condition. . .2) cast down in spirit; showing hopelessness or resignation; 3) expressing or offered in a humble and often ingratiating spirit,” (n.p.) while abjection is the process by which one is cast into this state. Thus, abject/abjection, in its most general sense, is clearly a theme in Arce’s *El Infierno*.

Two novels written after Arce’s testimony, *El desierto* (2005) by Carlos Franz and *La vida doble* (2010) by Arturo Fontaine, also center on the concept of abjection, albeit in different and more explicit ways. I will argue here that Fontaine’s novel is specifically constructed as a contradiction of or “answer” to Arce’s testimony, in which Fontaine, using Julia Kristeva’s more specialized psychoanalytical concept of abjection, depicts Arce (through his protagonist Lorena) as an abject being because of her act of betrayal. Similarly, *El desierto* also employs Kristeva’s concept of abjection, but takes it in a somewhat different direction, and without alluding to Arce or her testimony.

In *Powers of Horror* (1980),<sup>2</sup> Kristeva defines the concept of abjection as a threat from the outside that encroaches upon a person’s identity, citing as examples waste, dung, and cadavers. Kristeva states:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark, revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire. . .Unflinching, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1).

The self is simultaneously attracted and repelled by the abject which constitutes an assault on his or her identity.

Kristeva’s theory of the abject is quite complex and has been the subject of various analyses. According to Rina Arya in *Abjection and Representation*,

Abjection describes an experience between a subject and a source of abjection. The encounter, the abject source, threatens the subject’s sense of self, but it cannot be objectified...it is not a subject or an object but displays features of both...the non-object impresses on the subject’s stability, causing the subject to become (so that it is part of ourselves) that which we have to reject and expel to protect our boundaries. We are unable to rid ourselves of it completely and it continues to haunt our being. (4)

In addition to Kristeva’s citation of bodily fluids and corpses as examples

of sources of abjection (3), Arya cites anything that reminds us of our animal origins as a source of abjection as well (2).

Two important aspects of Kristeva's theory that make it relevant to the novels at hand are first, the relationship between the abject and the mother's body, and second, the relationship between the abject and morals. In the first instance, Kristeva states that the original manifestation of the abject is the mother's body, which the infant experiences as abject. Arya indicates that

the process of feeding is simultaneously a process of moving towards the breast and suckling and rejecting and withdrawing when satiated. This movement of identification and rejection. . . . constitutes the ambivalence that the mother's breast signifies. . . . Abjection is the process by which the infant separates from the mother. The feelings of revulsion and horror and the action of expelling the mother shatter narcissism and result in feelings of insurmountable horror. . . . Making the infant abject is a necessary step for the infant to be able to establish its own subjectivity. (17).

In the second instance, Kristeva signals that abjection can also be moral: "It is thus not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. . . . The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (4).

Both *La vida doble* and *El desierto* illustrate Kristeva's concept of the abject and abjection through their protagonists. *La vida doble* is explicitly connected to Arce's *El Infierno*, containing many intertextual references to her testimony. These intertextual references help to construct a dialogue between the two texts on the figure of the traitor who confesses under torture and is epitomized by Arce. According to Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "Two discourses equally and directly oriented toward a referential object within the limits of a single context cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically, regardless of whether they confirm, mutually supplement or (conversely) contradict one another" (188-189). If we view texts on the Chilean dictatorship as a "single context," the relationship between *La vida doble* and *El Infierno* becomes clear. In order to comprehend how Fontaine constructs his protagonist as an abject figure, we must first examine how the novelist structures his novel as a response to Arce's testimony.

In *El Infierno*, Arce emphasizes three aspects of her story: first, its truth value, second, her conversion from traitor to a repentant Christian, and third, her ability to now reclaim her name as a result of her confession. The prologue to the novel, written by her priest, José Luis de Miguel, emphasizes the truth value of Arce's testimony: "¿Cuál es el precio de la verdad? . . . En las páginas que siguen, su autora, Luz Arce, vierte la que ha sido su verdad,

la verdad de su experiencia en el infierno durante...el periodo dictatorial del general Augusto Pinochet" (11). Fontaine's novel also begins with a reference to the truth in form of a question that can hardly be coincidental: "¿Podría yo decirte la verdad? Esa es una pregunta para ti. ¿Me vas a creer o no? A eso solo respondes tú. Lo que yo sí puedo hacer es hablar" (11). By beginning the novel with a reference to truth, Fontaine establishes an immediate connection to Arce's testimony and also questions the truth of *El Infierno*. *La vida doble* goes on to emphasize that the protagonist is telling her story, not to a journalist who plans to write a factual article, but to a novelist who plans to write an invented story, thus emphasizing once again the fictive value of Arce's narration. In "Lo indecible, lo irresrepresentable: Topografías: terror e intertextualidad *El desierto* de Carlos Franz / *La vida doble* de Arturo Fontaine," Alfonso de Toro examines how both of the novels of abjection studied here specifically emphasize the incommunicability of the feelings and experiences of their protagonists, stating that: "Un tercer gran tema es la 'representabilidad' o 'irrepresentabilidad', lo decible o indecible en relación a la tortura física y psíquica . . ." (36). De Toro also notes that intertextuality (including that with Arce's book), helps to transmit and articulate all the central themes of the novels.

A second organizing principle of both *La vida doble* and *El Infierno* is the question of religious belief and conversion. Arce emphasizes her redemption through religious conversion in her testimony: "Conocer a Dios cambió mi vida. . . . Me hizo reflexionar acerca de quien fui, quien soy y naturalmente eso implicaba asumirlo no solo en la dimensión personal, sino también en la colectiva. La tantas veces infiel, la Luz que se sentía miserable comenzó a poder decir sí al Señor." (417). Fontaine sets up his novel in direct contrast, emphasizing that his protagonist does not believe in God or religion:

Mira, si te acercas a la cómoda . . . verás bajo una pequeña estampa de la Virgen de Guadalupe un par de hojas plegadas. ¿Por qué una Virgen de Guadalupe? Me la trajo un cura español . . . Pensó que por ser latinoamericana tenía que ser católica. Le dije que no, que ya no. Pero él insistía. Quería rezar conmigo. Al final, cedí Me dejó esa virgencita de regalo . Para que me ayude a volver a rezar. ¿Crees tú que ayude rezar si uno no cree? (52-53).

The protagonist's failure to believe in God is set in direct counterposition to Arce's religious conversion through which she seeks forgiveness and justification.

A third key element that structures *La vida doble* as a response to *El Infierno* is the question of identity and name. Luz Arce begins and ends her book by emphasizing her loss and eventual recovery of her name: "Me llamo Luz Arce. Me ha costado mucho recuperar este nombre. Existe sobre

mi una suerte de leyenda negra . . . elaborada al tenor de una realidad de horror, humillación y violencia” (15). Similarly, *El Infierno* ends with the words “Ahora puedo decir otra vez mi nombre: es Luz, Luz Arce” (479), suggesting an initial loss of identity through her torture and collaboration with the Pinochet government, and finally a recuperation of her identity through religion and repentance. In contrast, *La vida doble* never reveals the real name of its protagonist. She is referred to by various names that reflect her various identities: Lorena (her name when she escapes to Stockholm), Irene (her communist sympathizer name), la Cubanita (her torturer name). The protagonist tells the novelist who is listening to her story: “Llámame Lorena. No Irene. Yo quiero ser tu Lorena. Nunca sabrás mi nombre real. Vivo aquí en Estocolmo con un nombre ficticio y documentación ficticia” (37).

Lorena’s inability to recover her name and identity are linked to the fact that after her betrayal of her comrades, she is transformed into an abject being, in the sense defined by Kristeva. Interestingly, Lorena’s eventual descent into abjection is prefigured by her rejection of her mother, in a manner that can be seen as a manifestation of Kristeva’s concept of the infant’s rejection of the mother as abject. When Lorena is a child, her parents divorce. This leads to what she herself describes as a split in her personality (similar to the split caused by the threat of abjection in Kristeva’s theory) and to a rejection of her mother:

Mi imposibilidad de coincidir conmigo misma, ¿cuándo habrá comenzado? La distancia de mí misma que sentí siempre, ¿por qué se inició? ¿Y mi rencor? Vuelvo entonces forzosamente al desgarrar por el divorcio de mis padres, mi brusco desdén por mi madre cuando mi padre se fue de la casa, por mi madre que no supo conservarlo. (58).

Lorena blames her mother for her parents’ divorce, even though the father is the one who is unfaithful. Her mother is abject, the object of disdain because she was unable to keep her father happy. This causes a rift between Lorena and her mother, as well as a crack in Lorena’s identity, that anticipates her eventual abjection later on in the novel.

In contrast to Arce’s testimony in which she portrays herself as a victim who was forced to collaborate, Fontaine portrays Lorena as a woman who goes far beyond mere collaboration. Lorena vehemently comes to hate her former comrades, takes an active role as a torturer, and on several occasions in the novel, freely and willingly offers information that compromises her former colleagues in order to gain the affection and approbation of the military men with whom she is having an affair. In direct opposition to Arce’s assertions that “Manuel Contreras ordenó que yo pasara a la categoría de empleado civil femenino a la de civil con categoría de oficial...en esos días ...las tres

sentíamos que la alternativa era ser funcionaria o morir” (197), Lorena is portrayed as having *chosen* to give information and to have revelled in the torture of others. The two cases that stand out the most are when Lorena is anxious to please her lover, Flaco Artaza, who is one of the top agents at DINA. She lets him know that El Hueso, one of head communist organizers, was secretly a smoker. This detail will allow the military to track him down more easily. In the second case, Lorena turns against her friend Rafa, who was initially the person who befriended her and brought her into Allende’s camp. Although once on the mission to trap Rafa she has second thoughts, it is too late, and her former friend is captured.

In contrast, and in answer to Luce Arce’s portrayal of herself as a repentant victim, Lorena is portrayed as an individual who allows the abject to take control of her identity. She is the traitor of whom Kristeva speaks, an individual who gives herself over to complete moral turpitude. Lorena’s portrayal as abject is constructed through various techniques throughout the novel. The first is the use of animal imagery to describe the character as transformed into an animal through her torture. Note the following montage of citations:

El amo logrará ir doblegándose como si llegase a ser un animalito suyo . . . (15)

Eres una cucaracha al que cualquiera tiene derecho a reventar de un pistón. (16)

Se te acaba el tiempo y eres ya casi nada . . . Te han vaciado. Y sin embargo, sobrevives con la tenacidad inútil del insecto aplastado que sigue moviendo sus patitas. (17)

El somier metálico que hiere mi espalda restregada, la mordaza que se roba mis quejidos de animal, de chancho, porque en eso me transforman . . . (27)

Soy un animal que declina aceleradamente reducido a deseos mínimos. (43)

Lorena describes what Lazzara referred to as the “unmaking of bodies,” (and the unmaking of revolutionary identity) which is the first step in Lorena’s process of abjection.

The second step that signals Lorena’s path to total degradation are the sexual activities in which she engages once she becomes a traitor. Lorena’s sexual activities are frequently characterized as base and animalistic. There are three highly detailed sexual encounters that emphasize Lorena’s participation on a purely animalistic level: first, when she attempts to goad a prisoner into having sex with her; second, when she has sex mandated by Flaco Artaza with him and two of his colleagues, and third, when Lorena has sex with two other women.

In the first episode, Lorena describes possible sex with the prisoner as a cannibalistic encounter in which she eats his flesh, as animals prey on

other animals:

A partir de cierto momento el que está ahí . . . no es para ti un hombre. Sus gemidos molestan y dan rabia y crecen las ganas de castigarlo más. . . . He dado el salto sordo de la bestia feroz sobre toda alegría, para estrangularla. . . . Unas horas más tarde el carcelero me dejó pasar a su celda. . . . Me imaginé la carne bajo la piel y pensé que debía ser rico comérsela. En otros tiempos, cuando éramos antropófagos, me habría comido esa carne a mordiscos. . . . Escúpeme, por favor, méame la cara. Y él no me hizo nada. Fóllame, le dije. Tienes miedo, le dije. . . . Tienes miedo a que yo te guste y se te vaya a la mierda tu celo revolucionario, le dije. . . . Le di una patada en la boca. (170-173).

Similarly, Lorena has a sexual encounter with Flaco Artaza and two of his colleagues with whom he orders her to have sex. The foursome is described in animalistic terms. Indeed, one of the three men is named Conejo (Rabbit) and we are told that he approaches Lorena with:

dientes de *conejo* detrás de una sonrisa que tiembla. Rozo sus pechos con mis pezones, me agacho, le abro el cinturón y lenta, muy lentamente le voy bajando el cierre. . . . Miro al Flaco, a Jerónimo, sus ojos afiebrados, su boca entreabierta, Los tengo me dijo. . . . Saco la lengua, la estiro, la siento vibrar en el aire como *vibora*. . . . Y entonces, obedeciendo al Flaco, que me lo ordena . . . me tiendo, lánguida, en el sofá de felpa negra. . . . Y él me lo ordena y me someto, que sí. que lo haga. . . . y yo quiero . . . complacerlo hasta que no quede nada de mi salvo *un borrón*. . . . Me sometí y me encontré haciéndolo y, te lo juro, me gustó. (my emphases, 164).

Lorena emphasizes her submissive, degraded position throughout the encounter. She repeats several times that she “obeys” or “submits” to Flaco’s orders, but that she enjoys it. One of the participants is described as a rabbit, while the action of Lorena’s tongue is that of a snake, degrading the encounter to something bestial. Despite Lorena’s insistence that she enjoys the encounter, we are told that the experience destroys her identity and all that is left is “un borrón” (a stain). Hence, the threat to identity caused by the process of abjection is operated on Lorena who becomes abject through the sexual foursome.

Finally, under the influence of amphetamines, Lorena has sex with two other women, an encounter in which she also describes her actions as bestial:

las tres abrazándonos . . . Hasta que volvieron los besos y un amor lento . . . Energizada por anfetaminas . . . Yo podía soportarlo todo, abrazarlo todo, aceptarlo todo, desearlo todo y *la piel de mi alma de bestia omnívora* que suprimimos se fascinaba, se arrojaba al vértigo. . . . Todo está permitido. Porque somos bárbaros disfrazados, eso somos . . . somos animales carnívoros

mal disfrazados y sin inocencia. . . . *El infierno* es un espejo del que no puedes apartar la vista. (205, my emphases)

Lorena makes direct allusion to the abject when she speaks of the “omnivorous beast that we suppress.” Moreover, the reference to “el infierno” in this passage seems more than coincidental, referring us back to the title of Arce’s book as well as Arce’s historical role in torture and thus associating her with what is morally abject.

A third way in which *La vida doble* represents Lorena as a morally abject being is through her illness. We are told that Lorena is dying of cancer. According to Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*, cancer has traditionally been seen and represented as an abject illness. Sontag states:

Punitive notions of disease have a long history. . . . Ostensibly, the illness is the culprit. But it is also the cancer patient who is made culpable . . . and conventions of treating cancer as no mere disease but a demonic envoy make cancer not just a lethal disease but a shameful one. . . . In the last two centuries, the diseases most often used as metaphors for evil were syphilis, TB and cancer . . . . Cancer was never viewed other than a scourge; it was, metaphorically, the barbarian within. . . . In cancer, non-intelligent (“primitive” “embryonic,” “atavistic”) cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the non-you. Immunologists class the body’s cancer cells as “nonself.” (57-67).

Sontag’s characterization of cancer illustrates how Lorena’s illness can be seen as a manifestation of her abjection and moral culpability. Sontag’s description of how cancer cells are seen to invade an individual as a “non-self” trying to impinge on the self, is very similar to the way in which Kristeva describes how the abject attempts to invade and impinge upon the self and one’s identity.

A final sign of Lorena’s abject status in Fontaine’s *La vida doble* is found in her relationship with Roberto. Once in Stockholm, Lorena finds love with Roberto, but constantly tests his love because she does not feel worthy of it. She considers herself an abject traitor, and therefore undeserving of his affection:

Someto a pruebas al que me ama porque no le quiero creer su amor...Una noche maldita, de pura rabia, antes de que se meta en la cama, doy vuelta el vaso de agua en el lado de Roberto. Cuando siente la humedad fría se enfurece. Lo he obligado a dormir en el sofá. Desde entonces las peleas se repiten cada vez con mayor frecuencia...Y lo logro: Roberto, la única persona que tengo se cansa y me abandona. Soy otra vez lo que soy. (254)

Lorena drives Roberto away because she recognizes her own abjection

and does not feel that she merits the love of another human being. She indicates that others went through the same torture that she suffered without becoming traitors and that:

Me he tendido en el fango. Me he secado al aire del crimen . . . ¿No odio todo lo noble? . . . Y hubo mujeres que pasaron por el mismo lugar de espanto que yo . . . Hoy viven con la dignidad de las rocas porque fueron de una pieza. . . yo bebo el caliz de mi propia abyección. . . Pero sobreviví, sobreviví hecha un gusano. . . Hecha mierda. . . todavía viva aquí en Estocolmo. (257-258)

Fontaine's emphasis on Lorena's abjection in the novel constitutes a direct answer to Arce's attempts at self-justification through her testimony *El Infierno*. Lorena specifically indicates that she is not able to ask for forgiveness, in contrast to Arce, whose Christian repentance suggests that perhaps she should be forgiven. Lorena states: "Me pregunto por qué estoy aquí. . . ¿Estoy tratando de ser perdonada? ¿Y quién podría perdonarme? . . . lo que hice no tiene justificación. . . ¿Se pide perdón, entonces por lo injustificable? . . . Estaría pidiendo un regalo. Porque el perdón es eso, un regalo. (296). This connection between *La vida doble* and *El Infierno* has also been noted by the various critics who have analyzed Fontaine's novel. For example, Viviana Plotnik emphasizes how Lorena stands in direct contrast to Arce because she never repents for what she did throughout the novel, which "podría interpretarse como una crítica autorial a Arce" (89), since Arce "enuncia su discurso como una confesión cristiana" (89). Similarly, Ksenjija Bilbija, who analyzes *La vida doble* from the perspective of neoliberal philosophy, indicates the parallels between the novel and Arce's testimony: "Mientras que las historias de Arce y Lorena coinciden en muchos puntos, el personaje de Fontaine también contiene algunos de los caracteres que Arce . . . siempre negó pero que sus críticos no han dejado de resaltar . . . el interrogatorio y la tortura de excompañeras (302). However, none of the previous work on *La vida doble* illustrates how abjection is important in connecting the novel to Arce's text.

Many subtle connections between *La vida doble* and *El Infierno* reinforce how Fontaine constructs his novel in a relationship of contradiction to Arce's work. These connections include a reference to Príncipe de Gales (which in *La vida doble* is the communist leader El Hueso's code name, while in Arce's testimony, it is the street on which Manuel Contreras lived); several allusions to Dante's Inferno in *La vida doble* (152, 157), which alludes to Arce's title *El Infierno*; the parallels established between el Flaco Artaza in *La vida doble* and Arce's lover Rolf Wenderoth, including each setting up his lover in an apartment, rejecting divorce of their spouses, and so forth; and each protagonist's participation in the work of Chile's Truth Commission. These

parallels create a dialogue between *La vida doble* and *El Infierno*.

Abjection is also the central theme of another important novel based on the Pinochet dictatorship, *El desierto* (2005) by Carlos Franz. The protagonist Laura Larco was the judge in the town of Pampa Hundida during Allende's government. She becomes a victim of the Pinochet dictatorship when she challenges the local military authorities who have set up a concentration camp for political prisoners in the town. Laura agrees to hide an escaped prisoner but reveals his whereabouts under torture and then rape by Major Cáceres. Laura then enters into a "pact" with Cáceres in which he claims to free a prisoner for every time she returns to his house and submits to a sexual encounter with him in which sex becomes an act of gratefulness for ceasing her torture. Her relationship with Cáceres, one of submission and humiliation, makes her feel abject, although she rationalizes it as a way of achieving justice for the prisoners, only to eventually learn that Cáceres has lied to her and has not actually been freeing the prisoners. Laura, pregnant and suffering from Stockholm syndrome, returns repeatedly, before she eventually runs away and begins a new life in Germany with her daughter. The novel alternates chapters of third-person narration (into which an unknown "we," later identified with the voice of Mario, is occasionally interjected in parentheses) with the first-person narration of Laura in a letter to her daughter, in which she attempts to answer the question of where she was while the dictatorship was doing horrible things in Chile.

The novel *El desierto* develops the concept of abjection in four ways: First, through Laura's rejection of her mother as abject; second, through parallels established between Laura and Cáceres' horse; third, through Laura's explicit comments that show her view of herself as a traitor to justice, and fourth, through the philosophical and legalistic dichotomy that the novel establishes between Apollonian and Dionysian principles.

In an interesting parallel with the character Lorena in *La vida doble*, *El desierto's* Laura also rejects her mother, enacting Kristeva's principle of the child's rejection of the mother as abject. We are told that her mother left when she was a baby, and that her father never spoke about the mother. One day, when Laura is fourteen, she finds her mother's papers and belongings, and manages to reconstruct her mother's story as a passionate actress trapped in an unhappy marriage with her father. From that day forward, Laura becomes unhappy and rejects her mother:

Porque desde ese verano nunca he vuelto a ser feliz. Supe que tenía una madre solo para saber que la odiaba por habernos abandonado . . . fue el tardío odio hacia esa madre que no conocí y que nos abandonó, el odio a la sospechada imaginación dramática, a la intuida pasión romántica . . . que fueron . . . en la raíz de mi decisión de estudiar algo que estuviera lo más lejano de lo posible a

esa escuela de pasiones que es el teatro. Y lo más lejano que se me ocurrió fue el derecho. (106-108).

Laura rejects her mother's passion and emotion associated with the theater as something undesirable, converting it into something abject. Laura will spend a good part of her life valuing the rational and objective as a result of her qualification of emotion and feelings as abject. Moreover, Laura identifies the divorce of her parents and early rejection of her mother as the ultimate source of her later state of abjection: ¿Qué era eso que coceaba y bufaba en mi interior, Claudia? De donde me venía eso que, a falta de mejor nombre, he llamado, por ahora, una "culpabilidad abyecta"... La respuesta... debería ir a buscarla muy lejos en mi memoria, a mi infancia" (102).

The second way in which Franz establishes a connection between Laura and abjection is through the parallels developed between Laura and Cáceres' horse. We have already seen how association with animals and animal behavior constitutes a form of abjection in Kristeva's theory. Thus, Laura's equation with a horse in the novel emphasizes the abjection in which she is submersed in *El desierto*. When Laura first sees Cáceres' horse, he is inside a small metal trailer, kicking and spitting to get out. Laura emphasizes how Cáceres simultaneously threatens and comforts his horse, who is thirsty and submerged in feces within this confining space:

Costaba imaginar al animal... que venía en esa caja de metal plateado, no le hubieran dado agua ni le habían limpiado el habitáculo—que hedía a diez metros a la redonda... El mayor consolaba a su caballo... con el chasquido de la lengua y al mismo tiempo...lo amenaza con el restallido de la fusta. (50-51).

Laura first compares herself to the horse when she is angry over free press abuse by the government and wishes to take up the issue with Cáceres. She states "algo bufaba y pateaba en mí como el caballo queriendo ir tras su amo y crucé la plaza" (53). This connection is repeated several times: "empecé a saberlo desde el amanecer del golpe militar, cuando presentí que, desde ese momento, algo inexpresado y abyecto me acusaría... presentí al animal encerrado en el remolque plateado, la bestia que pateaba y bufaba... como mi memoria o otra cosa dentro de mí misma" (109). However, Laura's connection to the horse goes far beyond these initial comments. Her relationship with Cáceres in which he tortures her and then has sex with her as a "reward" parallels the actions of punishing with the whip and then calming the horse with comforting noises:

Y yo, desesperada. Por que... Para que me lo agradezcas cuando me detenga. Y luego volvió a azotarme una dos, diez veces. Hasta un momento preciso en

el que los dos supimos que el ya no necesitaba disciplinarme más, porque ya no necesitaba darme ningún orden. Yo era su orden, su voluntad ...habíamos creado entre los dos algo que estaba vivo . . . mi abyecto agradecimiento de que el dolor se hubiera interrumpido y la esperanza animal de que esa magnanimidad durara. . . sin necesidad de una orden explícita...me desnudé... yo creí oír el caballo que relinchaba desde su establo (o tal vez había sido yo). . . . En algún momento abrí los ojos y me encontré montada sobre él...Y creí que cabalgaba de noche a golpe tendida en la oscuridad ...y me pareció oír el purasangre relincharse desde su establo. (264).

By likening Laura to the horse, the animalistic and thus abject nature of her relationship with Cáceres is stressed.

The third way in which Laura is portrayed as abject is in her failure as a judge to enact justice in Pampa Hundida. Laura suffers the guilt she feels for her inadequacy to stand up to the regime as a form of abjection:

Te digo que vi a ese oficial, Claudia y no es suficiente. Sería mejor decir que lo confirmé, que confirmé en una corazonada abyecta, *un presentimiento de abyección (abyección, que viene de humildad)* que había tenido desde que recibí la noticia del golpe militar. . . comencé a saber de que había venido sintiendo desde el mismo día del golpe culpable. (24, my emphasis)

During the military trials that condemn numerous prisoners to death, Laura is present and attempts to devise an argument to contest the unfair proceedings on legal grounds. Just when she thinks she has found the right words, the trials are over and she has failed to speak. This inability to stand up for what is right converts Laura into an abject being. She compares herself to a rat, emphasizing her animalistic and thus abject nature:

Cuando por fin creo haber hallado los argumentos . . . el mazo cae . . . Las sentencias de muerte son dictadas . . . y entonces . . . cometo el acto . . . me siento . . . sentarse cuando había de mantenerse de pie . . . puro miedo . . . un miedo que corría a esconderse como *una rata en el agujero de mi razón*, en el escondite de mis argumentos legales. (151, my emphasis)

The military represents what is abject and threatening to the identity of the self; for Laura, the military men evoke "un cortejo, un desfile de suplicantes coronados de vides . . . una corte de bacanal y de los desafortados ministros de su culto danzando y devorando carne cruda" (264). The representation of the military men is abject because they are associated with animalistic behaviors, such as eating raw meat. Moreover, this description introduces the fourth and final motif of abjection in the novel: that of acting according to Apollonian versus Dionysian principles.

According to *Oxford Online Dictionary*, Dionysian refers to “the sensual, spontaneous, and emotional aspects of human nature,” while Apollonian is defined as “the rational, ordered, self-disciplined aspects of human nature.” When Laura was in law school, her professor and mentor, Professor Velasco, taught the students to act according to Apollonian principles, which Laura did during the early years of her career. Once she moved to Germany, Laura left the law profession and became a philosophy professor. In this capacity, she wrote a celebrated book titled *Moirra*, in which she argued that “Ante el poder sin fondo de Dionisio . . . solo quedaba reconocer y practicar una justicia de lo posible . . . era terrible pactar y era necesario pactar con lo terrible” (282). In other words, the fate of justice (*Moirra*, from *moirai*, the three fates), rests not simply on rational principles, but must take into account the factor of human desire and emotion, which frequently controverts justice: “No es posible hacer justicia sin tener poder y una vez que se tiene poder, este tiende naturalmente a la injusticia” (377). Laura’s theory moves from an idealistic foundation in Apollonian justice to a more practical Dionysian-influenced concept of justice.

The constant tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles permeates the novel and intertwines with the theme of abjection. During Velasco’s course, he refers to the Dionysian students as “instintivos como animales, eran un grupo dionisiaco, una manada trágica olfateando en busca de fiestas” (229). Those same students, once they become Apollonian, are guided by reason and are welcomed to “la edad adulta” (229). As the previous quotation about the military showed, the military men are aligned with Dionysus, only following their pleasure and their passion.

The idea of compromise between Dionysus and Apollo, which is thrown into relief through the Concertación government (comprised of both pro and counter Pinochet affiliates), in which Velasco is now a minister, is not seen, however, as something positive in the novel. Velasco is a symbol of the corruption underlying the pact between former members of the military government and the left. Once a proponent of Apollo and reason, Velasco now tries to obscure justice and maintain the status quo because it is in his own interests to keep his current position. He bribes the young lawyer Martínez Roth with a promotion to dissuade him from pursuing a court case in which the town of Pampa Hundida would be prosecuted for using a fake image of the town’s Patron saint, which had been burned in a fire. Martínez Roth planned to use this case as leverage to get the townspeople to testify to the existence of prisoners who had been disappeared by the military. The novel’s somewhat ambiguous ending suggests the possibility that perhaps the Dionysian principle can be employed to enact justice. At the novel’s end, Laura gets her ex-husband to announce on his radio program a new sighting of the Patron saint at the very former site of the concentration camp, where

Major Cáceres is now residing. This occurs during the annual pilgrimage to Pampa Hundida. The pilgrims all rush to the site and Major Cáceres disappears in the crowd. However, it is unclear whether he is trampled by the group (a form of Dionysian justice, since he is finally punished for his crimes through the impassioned act of the crowd), or whether he just disappears during the hubbub:

O bien, puede que . . . cuando la multitud salió en busca de un nuevo milagro y volvió con las manos teñidas por ese sacrificio antiguo . . . La desaparición del "hombre . . ." Mariano Cáceres Latorre o su muerte . . . El Dr. Ordóñez habla de un cuerpo atropellado y luego medio devorado por animales . . . el cuerpo no puede ser identificado con seguridad. . . Hay por supuesto otra versión . . . se confundió con el pueblo festejante. (464-468).

The concept of the masses trampling Cáceres like a herd of wild animals clearly aligns with the idea of the animalistic nature of the abject. Yet here, Laura has instigated this act as potential punishment for the horrific acts committed by Cáceres. Thus, Dionysian principles are put at the service of Apollonian justice.

Although abjection is a central theme in both *La vida doble* and *El desierto*, the abjection of each protagonist and their ultimate portrayal differs greatly. While Lorena is represented as an unrepentant traitor who chooses and wallows in abject behaviors ranging from torture to orgiastic sex, Laura is seen as a highly intellectual and civilized individual who has been swept up in a wave of abjection caused by the military dictatorship. Laura eventually breaks free from her abject relationship with Cáceres and continues to aspire to the achievement of societal justice, despite her recognition of the Dionysian principle as operative in society. Instead of submerging herself in the Dionysian principle, as does Lorena, Laura seeks to harness this principle and put it at the service of Apollonian justice.

The focus on the theme of abjection and particularly the feeling of being abject experienced by both Lorena in *La vida doble* and Laura in *El desierto* can be viewed as part of a tendency within the contemporary Chilean novel of dictatorship to approach the experience of dictatorship from the lens of affect and emotion.<sup>3</sup> This tendency can be observed in numerous other novels, such as Nona Fernández's *La dimensión desconocida* (2016) and Alia Trabucco Zerán's *La resta* (2014). While contemporary affect theory explores how literature can cause what Deleuze defines as "an intensity embodied in autonomic reactions on the surface of the body as it interacts with other entities" (Van Alphen 23) and Tompkins terms a "density of neural firing," (Tompkins 57), other critics, such as Walter Kintsch and Morton Gernsbacher have shown how past experience helps us to create situational models that

aid us as readers in constructing “representations of fictional characters’ emotional states” (Gernsbacher 143). The intensity of the characters’ emotions is often used to create both physiological and emotional reactions in readers, in ways the drive home the central themes of these works.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the theme of abjection in Luz Arce’s *El Infierno*, Carlos Franz’s *El desierto* and Arturo Fontaine’s *La vida doble* appeal to the reader’s emotional intelligence as a way of conveying the atrocities of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.

### NOTES

1 Luce Arce, *El infierno* (Santiago: Tamar Ediciones, 2017). Arce’s text is one of three primary source texts that will be used in this study. The others are Carlos Franz, *El desierto* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2005) and Arturo Fontaine, *La vida doble* (Buenos Aires: Tusquets Ediciones, 2010).

2 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Although Kristeva’s book is the principal theoretical source for this analysis, I will also draw upon the work of Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1984); Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Picador: 1990), as well as some theorists of affect theory, notably, Silvan Tompkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (New York: Springer, 1991) and Ernst Van Alphen, “Affective Operations of Art and Literature,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53-54 (2008): 20-30.

3 For other categorizations of the Chilean novel of dictatorship, see Grínor Rojo, *Las novelas de la dictadura y la postdictadura chilena* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2016).

4 For more information on affect theory, see: Donald R. Wehrs and Thomas Blake, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2017).

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