TRANSOCEANIC STUDIES
Ileana Rodriguez, Series Editor
Writing AIDS

(Re)Conceptualizing the Individual and Social Body in Spanish American Literature

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Since 1981, the world has been profoundly impacted by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). On an individual level, HIV and AIDS possess the potential to cause the body’s immune function to become compromised and, as a consequence, may undermine an individual’s control over his or her own body, thus forcing a rethinking of the conceptualization of self, both individually and in interaction with others. In my examination of this reconceptualization of self in the face of AIDS, I argue that the body is a fundamental element of self-identity and, consequently, that the drastic changes wrought by AIDS impact the way the individual sees his or her self. Part of this new self-perception is also expressed in relation to others. The social meanings of the disease as well as the historical tendency to marginalize those who are HIV-positive have resulted in a rethinking of the relation of the individual to society.

This exploration of self and society often takes place in the pages of literary texts, infiltrating narratives with an altered conceptualization of the individual and his or her relation to those around him or her in light of the AIDS epidemic. I illustrate the way AIDS has pervaded the personal and social imaginings of the body by focusing specifically on textual representations found in Spanish American literature in which AIDS has a significant role. The thematic emergence of AIDS as a literary topic in

1. By “significant,” I mean works in which one of the main themes is AIDS, whether ex-
Spanish American literature was rather slow at the outset of the epidemic (1981), but as the virus has become more widespread and impacted more individuals, the topic has slowly begun to appear in more works. Nonetheless, one notes a dearth of literary works from the 1980s, the decade in which AIDS became a reality for most Latin American countries, with many recording their first cases in the middle of the decade. Ironically, the earliest work I uncovered, included in this study, Ricardo Prieto’s drama Pecados mínimos, hails from a nation (Uruguay) that did not record its first case until 1993. In the 1990s through the present, the epidemic has begun to appear in increasing numbers of fictional works from Spanish America, but it still has not received widespread literary or critical attention. For example, in the context of U.S. literature, critics refer to “AIDS literature” and “AIDS narratives” to denote the vast quantity of fictional narratives depicting AIDS. In the Spanish American context, however, no such category exists. My study addresses that void by drawing together a representative corpus of literary texts from various Spanish American countries and diverse literary genres, including novels, short stories, poems, theater, and testimonials, to illuminate not only the ways in which these Spanish American writers have chosen to depict this disease, but also the ways in which the literature will be archived for future generations.

For the protagonists who inhabit the works that I study, the prospect of being a carrier of a potentially fatal virus gives way to fundamental existential questions and necessitates a renegotiation of one’s position in the world given the drastic changes caused by the disease. As a result, various questions inform my examination of AIDS narratives in the Spanish American context: How can the subject negotiate the contradictory reality of living while being inhabited by a deadly virus? How are the protagonists’ actions influenced by the recognition that they carry a potentially deadly weapon within their cells? Consequently, how is the interplay of life, death, and desire played out in interpersonal relationships? Finally, what strategies are employed by the subjects to help them face, and even overcome, the fear of death?

Widening the scope to encompass the collective as well as the personal plane, this work additionally examines the individual’s relation to the world around her- or himself, examining the opposite poles of iso-

3. See Treichler.
4. See Krueger; and Morris.
lated exile versus the creation of community. On the one end, protagonists struggling with myriad personal, familial, and societal taboos must decide how to negotiate their position in the collective space. In some texts, they opt to relinquish community in favor of a cloistered existence. Conversely, others see in AIDS a common ground, one capable of uniting diverse individuals in a collective struggle against the virus that they all share.

Parallel to these central thematic thrusts, this work also examines the role of writing itself—how the disease has impacted the narrative structure and expression, as well as how narrative is altered by the appearance of AIDS itself as a protagonist. One area where this impact is apparent is the vast use of metaphorical language when referring to the virus. In her seminal works on the metaphorical language connected to illnesses such as cancer, tuberculosis, and AIDS, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, cultural critic Susan Sontag affirms that in every era, certain illnesses have special significance and often become mechanisms for the projection of particular values and social dynamics. In the same way that tuberculosis and cancer carried mythological connotations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, so also do HIV and AIDS in current society. Sontag's work highlights the particularly important role a disease may hold in society and illustrates the potential impact of a disease on a society's values, morals, and interpersonal interactions. These “mythological connotations” imbue many of the texts of this study with an additional level of meaning, reflecting pervasive stereotypes and (mis)conceptions that have been intentionally, and often unintentionally, embedded in many works about AIDS, including a large number of those examined here.

In fact, the treatment of AIDS exemplified in these texts often follows a well-documented and unfortunate trend throughout history to stigmatize diseases viewed as mysterious, while morally condemning the individuals who contract them. Sontag's work, in particular, helps to draw this parallel between the current stigmas surrounding HIV/AIDS and those seen in relation to tuberculosis in the nineteenth century and cancer more recently. She explains that “any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious” (6). Consequently, this perception impacts the treatment of those affected and perpetuates stereotypes and stigmas, particularly in the absence of solid information about the disease involved. For example, according to Sontag, “having TB was imagined to be an aphrodisiac, and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction. Cancer is considered to be de-sexualizing” (13).

Diego Armus, in an article published in his self-edited collection *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America: From Malaria to AIDS*, has also
analyzed this depiction of TB as a disease of passion by explaining how “nineteenth-century writers depicted tuberculosis as a romantic disease mainly affecting individuals with rarified sensibility, spiritual refinement, or some tragic character flaw” (101–2). Consequently, this perception bred a new metaphorical language that referenced a “white plague” and obfuscated the realities of the disease (101–2). This sexualization of diseases that are not even transmitted sexually conflates their meaning and consequently produces damaging stigmas, ultimately affecting the concept of selfhood and conceptualizations of identity in those afflicted.

When the disease in question is indeed a sexually transmitted one, such as syphilis or HIV, many additional layers of stigma and bias often come into play because of the cultural meanings attached to sexuality, gender identity, and eroticism. As a consequence, cultural beliefs affect the language used to describe, represent, and archive these illnesses and reflect the stereotypes circulating about each disease. For example, “syphilis was often assumed to ‘confess’ the patient’s otherwise private sexual involvement with someone who had had at least one other sexual partner” (Bliss 186). Bliss further explains that the “confession” often manifested itself through physical symptoms, such as chancre, sores, lesions, or other outward manifestations of the illness (186). In this way, the physical manifestations of the disease are interpreted as a revelation of an individual’s private (sexual) interactions, regardless of whether that socially based assumption is indeed true. In the process, assumptions project upon the victims additional layers of societal shame by connecting the contraction of the illness with behaviors deemed socially unacceptable, or even deviant, such as infidelity, promiscuity, or, in the case of HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, IV drug use, or other proscribed behaviors. In fact, in the early media accounts of the HIV epidemic in Brazil, the reports often implied that “information on the new syndrome was relevant to the public more for the scandalous ‘confessions’ it exacted from celebrities so diagnosed than because HIV presented a real threat to ‘average’ Brazilians” (Larvie 297). This inaccurate, divisive, and stigma-laden representation of the AIDS epidemic is not uncommon, as I will illustrate throughout my analysis.

Like many diseases that predominated before it, AIDS is the most recent example of an illness that is rife with misconceptions, often discussed using taboo-laden and metaphorical language, and consistently conflated with social, moral, and cultural meaning. As Armus posits in Disease in the History of Modern Latin America, “diseases are not only sites where society, culture, and politics interact in a certain period of
time, but also analytical tools to understand the always elusive complexity of the historical experience” (16). AIDS follows that same trajectory and, as such, literary representations of the AIDS epidemic across Spanish America provide us with an archive of the multiplicity of meaning that AIDS has acquired throughout its history in this region. Additionally, the very act of writing as a means of facing mortality and a truncated and often isolated existence reappears frequently throughout these works. Perhaps most intriguing is that this interplay of literary production and bodily destruction can be seen in texts from divergent genres, including poetry, short story, diary, and chronicle. These divergent texts illustrate how writing and literature can, and often do, address cultural and societal issues, with the textual space serving as the arena in which the seemingly divergent realms of fiction and disease converge.

A further preoccupation of this project is the notion of silence and how it figures prominently in the narratives and works analyzed. One notes an overriding trend to refuse to name AIDS, even when it serves as a central concern. Even when silence is broken, it is often only with the equivalent of a whisper, rarely thrusting the disease into the forefront for scrutiny. Instead, AIDS is a plague, “el mal,” “la peste,” or is simply described through its symptoms. This cult of silence is intriguing and will be examined throughout this study in relation to its various manifestations and in regard to the influence it has on the overall message of the works in which it appears. Part of the examination of silence surrounding AIDS involves asking several questions, including why does AIDS appear in these works and what role does it play in the larger narrative and artistic projects at hand? How is the silence (of AIDS) trying to speak? Additionally, is this textual lacuna representative of the pervasive taboos surrounding AIDS in many societies? If so, how do these texts dialogue with and challenge those taboos?

In fact, “void” and “lack” are terms that come to mind when summarizing the critical corpus that exists at present with regard to the representation of AIDS in Spanish American literature. This apparent void is perhaps best summarized by a correspondence I received from Ricardo Chávez-Castaneda, a contemporary writer who has also served as a panelist on several juries for competitions in the field of contemporary literature in Mexico: “Como verás, es una muestra de lo poco que ha invadido este asunto nuestros imaginarios latinoamericanos. Es increíble. . . . El tema, dicho de la manera más simple, brilla por su ausencia” [As you will see, it is an indication of how little this topic has invaded our Latin American imaginary. It’s incredible . . . the topic, said in the simplest way, stands out
for its absence]. The very idea that a disease that is so omnipresent on a global scale could be considered absent from the literary production of the writers from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean seems an amazing paradox, and one that has provided stimulus for this project.

Extensive research into the bibliography regarding AIDS in Spanish America reveals that two writers dominate the attention of critics in this area: Reinaldo Arenas and Severo Sarduy. Their stature is not surprising given their importance to the literary canon and perhaps also because it is widely known that both died from AIDS. In this sense, they have legitimacy as messengers on the topic of AIDS. The primary focus of the critical corpus at this point is on Arenas’s last work, his autobiographical Antes que anochezca [Before Night Falls]. As an autobiography written in the twilight of Arenas’s life while facing a death sentence imposed by AIDS, Antes que anochezca has provided quite a bit of fodder for critics examining the treatment of exile, political dissidence, homosexuality, and AIDS. Most often, one finds some or all of these topics intertwined in critical analyses, particularly since they all were integral parts of defining Arenas himself and his focal work. Literary critic Ricardo L. Ortiz recognizes this point and affirms that this autobiography also has a very poignant political critique and that it is “against the murderous boredom of repressive, totalizing systems that Arenas laughs and screams” (106). Ortiz further points out how Arenas’s depiction of AIDS as an unnatural disease that began as an “orchestrated political conspiracy against marginalized communities” is one facet of that critique (101).

Taken in a different light, Arenas’s autobiography can also be seen as an end-of-life exploration of his own love–hate relationship with Cuba, intensified by the knowledge that his moments on Earth were limited by the disease. Another critic, David Vilaseca, deviates from the political and social interpretation in favor of a more individualistic evaluation of how AIDS can be envisioned as literal and metaphorical elements of the Lacanian symptom, or sinthome, and how, when seen through this lens, AIDS functions both as a threat to the subject’s well-being and also as a source of “an oblique, forbidden jouissance” (271). Vilaseca bases his interpretation not only on the more explicit allusions to AIDS in the prologue, but also on the displaced expression in the body of the text of the experiences of the disease on the narrator. This silence in regard to the

5. Personal correspondence, December 2003. This and all other translations are the author’s. A special thank you to Pilar Melero for her careful editing of all translations.

6. This text received even more attention because of the popularity of the movie that was made of it.

7. See Schulz-Cruz.
disease in the textual body raises an interesting set of questions that will be addressed in my own analyses. Is this silenced text representative of the fact that the disease itself, although a silent visitor to the body, “speaks” in other ways? Does the silence bespeak the marginalization and repression that accompany the label “AIDS”? Although Arenas’s text will not be a focus of my current project because it has received ample critical attention, the idea of silence presented in it will inform my reading of many other works in which the disease is felt, sensed, intuited, but is never heard or displayed in an explicit manner.

The process of deciphering a text that refuses to name or that circumvents the idea of naming has been addressed in critical articles focusing on the other main literary figure whose work constitutes part of the current (limited) AIDS canon: Severo Sarduy. Leonor Álvarez de Ulloa and Justo C. Ulloa have played the role of literary detectives in their readings of Colibrí, El cristo de la Rue Jacob, and Pájaros de la playa, examining the various linguistic fragments and plague metaphors that, when taken together, show a progressively increasing reference to the disease that ultimately stole Sarduy’s life in 1993.

Other than the aforementioned Arenas and Sarduy, only a few other figures have been detected on the critical radar at this point. A few disparate articles on the topic have been published, but to date, still no critical corpus to speak of exists. One article provides a hemispheric overview on the topic and is perhaps one of broader perspectives I’ve seen, albeit limited to the scope of an article. Another provides an examination of some of the literary and visual representations of AIDS from the Caribbean but does not limit the scope to Spanish-language works, as I examine here. Still another makes a brief mention of Luis Zapata’s masterpiece El vampiro de la colonia Roma in relation to AIDS, but the reference depicts how the view of sexuality presented in that novel has changed since the arrival of AIDS on the global scene. Other critics have chosen to direct their attention to the works of Latinos in the U.S. instead of looking south of the border.

The tendency to divert attention from Spanish America is further exemplified in critical anthologies about the writing of AIDS and the use of literature as a vehicle for expressing the effects of the epidemic on a society. The primary focus is on the prolific literary response to the epi-

8. See Ingenschay.
9. See Romero-Cesareo.
10. See José Joaquín Blanco.
11. References to Chicano and Latino representations of AIDS are seen in Ollantay Theater Magazine, which has dedicated an entire issue to the topic, as well as segments of Taylor and Villegas’s Negotiating Performance (article by Sandoval), Foster’s Chicano/Latino Homosexual Identities, and other texts dealing with gay and lesbian perspectives (see Navarro).
demic in the U.S., a response that does not have even a passing mention of Latin America, even though other articles focus explicitly on France and Germany, for example. Even in criticism autochthonous to Spanish America, there still exists an overriding tendency to look outside, elsewhere, for literature in order to understand AIDS, such as was seen in an article in a Cuban journal about cinema and AIDS, in which, besides three brief mentions (and no analysis) of Latin American movies (Solo con tu pareja, Bienvenido—Welcome, and Fotos del alma), the central focus was on U.S. cinema. Similar patterns are seen in articles from Argentina, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. This tendency to divert attention from one’s own issues may be part of the reason that this disease has yet to receive significant critical attention despite the fact that writers, artists, and filmmakers (other than Arenas and Sarduy) are indeed producing works that reflect, combat, and at times celebrate the disease. One of the goals of my study is to help bring some of those works to light and to generate more critical discourse about the perceived lack of response thus far to the pandemic.

When examining and selecting texts to include in this study, I considered works from many countries across Spanish America, ultimately selecting those that not only have HIV/AIDS as a primary preoccupation, but that also represent trends seen in literature and criticism across the region, paying special attention to genre and its relation to the overall messages conveyed. Although the specific texts that I analyze do not necessarily represent each country or region of Spanish America, the overall analysis does maintain such broad scope and hopefully will help initiate further critical dialogue on this topic through which an even broader range of works can be examined. Because of a dearth of theory about AIDS produced by Spanish American intellectuals or Spanish American texts, I

12. See, for example, anthologies edited by Nelson; and Murphy and Poirer.
13. See Nodarse.
14. Both Liguori and Cranwell respond to Sontag’s work. Interestingly enough, they make no attempt to apply Sontag’s theories to Latin America’s situation. Latin America is still treated as “other,” foreign. Garasa’s article is provocatively entitled “SIDA y literatura,” and given the fact that it is from an Argentine newspaper, one would anticipate finding an enlightened discussion of Argentine literature; the focus, instead, is on U.S. literature. Along these same lines, the entire volume of Ollantay Theatre Magazine (1994), which has articles titled “SIDA y teatro,” for example, is devoted to AIDS and the Puerto Rican (primarily Nuyorican) community.
15. Even when the scope is widened to examine responses to AIDS across the humanities, there still is a remarkable lack of critical attention. In fact, in a recent article, Gregory Tomso noted a “decline in scholarly attention to HIV/AIDS in the humanities” something he attributed in part to the decrease in AIDS-related activism and the fact that “nearly a generation has passed since the pandemic first appeared” (443).
recurr to a multidisciplinary approach to these works while paying particular attention to the social and historical contexts underlying the primary texts, thus modifying the critical approaches to take into account the specific Spanish American contexts in which these narratives were produced. In addition to specific AIDS-related theories, I draw upon cultural studies, sociological and medical discourses, psychology, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, among others, as I approach each text.

Despite the divergent backgrounds of the primary texts, as well as the critical theory used to analyze them, all of these works are united under the broad topic of the body, conceived of as an individual composed of a physical, emotional, and spiritual entity both in isolation and in communion with others. Because HIV and AIDS are physical viruses that attack real bodies, the individual body is the initial portal of entry into the exploration of the notion of identity and the way in which it is impacted and altered by the arrival of AIDS. However, each individual is also a part of a larger community, and the virus itself impacts society as well as individuals. These separate but related concepts—the individual and social bodies—are the uniting themes of the first two chapters and the last two chapters of this study, respectively.

The first two chapters of this work are concerned precisely with the individual body and reactions to the virus that appear, at least on the surface, to be polar opposites: the vengeful utilization of the diseased body as a weapon to exact revenge on a sexual partner and the erotic exaltation of the self as a way to celebrate life rather than mourn death.

Chapter 1
THE BODY AS WEAPON: HIV AS REVENGE

Chapter 1 explores the drastically altered body that results from HIV infection and examines the more sinister side of sexual relations in the AIDS era: the fatal potentials of the disease and the silent manner of transmitting this hidden disease as a means of exacting revenge. Three texts, which I will refer to collectively as “revenge narratives” owing to the centrality of the theme of retribution to the overall plot, will serve as the backbone of this chapter. The first two texts, “Luna negra de noviembre” by Ana Solari and “El secreto de Berlín” by Ramón Griffero, are short stories from Uruguay and Chile, respectively, while the third, El vuelo de la reina by Tomás Eloy Martínez, is a novel from Argentina. These narratives recognize the fact that HIV, as a virus that often leads to the fatal AIDS, is in essence a biological weapon whose transmission is possible
through one of the most intimate interactions human beings have: sexual intercourse. In the course of that transmission, the virus is silently passed from one person to another. These texts depict the deliberate exchange of the virus by one of the two parties in an act of revenge on the recipient as well as the reconceived notion of self that results from being infected by a virus that grants power and agency at the same time that it systematically weakens and destroys. Theories by Arthur W. Frank, sociologist and author of The Wounded Storyteller, on the diverse types of “wounded bodies” illuminate various ways in which individuals compromised by a disease choose to interact with others. Specifically, we see how the avengers function as both “dominating bodies” and “mirroring bodies,” allowing them to seduce and eventually infect their unwitting victims.

What is notable about the works discussed in this chapter is the way that the identity of an AIDS-altered individual is constructed. Each of the protagonists fails to examine the entire scope of his or her altered identity, eschewing the more reflective journeys of identity conceptualization that the protagonists in the texts I examine in later chapters undertake. Instead, the protagonists focus on one aspect of their new corporal reality: the potential to harm another through the deliberate transmission of the virus. In essence, these authors have chosen to depict the sadistic potential of those affected by AIDS, showing how the AIDS-infected body can effectively function as a weapon. The dynamic that is established in these works, then, is a victim–victimizer relationship, with the protagonists opting to exert their own distorted form of agency through the violent overtaking of another individual’s body. Elaine Scarry’s theories from The Body in Pain on “unmaking” and the use of torture as a means of exerting power over one’s victim will shed light on many of the interactions depicted in these narratives. We see this tendency most clearly in Eloy Martínez’s work El vuelo de la reina, which describes the sadistic, destructive steps that the protagonist takes to destroy his ex-girlfriend, although attempts to destroy also surface in the ritualistic acts undertaken by Griffero’s protagonist as he selects and systematically destroys his victim. Cognizant of the fact that these texts are all postdictatorial texts from the Southern Cone, I also analyze the echoes of the authoritarian discourses and rhetoric that have resurfaced in these works’ depiction of the victim–victimizer relationship and the interchange of power.

While the notions of a reconceptualized identity and the utilization of the body as a weapon thematically unite these works, they also share stylistic commonalities as well, namely, the recurrence of metaphors that, according to Sontag, continue to perpetuate stereotypes about AIDS. These authors recur to militaristic, apocalyptic, and plague-ridden meta-
phors that follow tendencies seen in other works, but they fail to question or reinvent the representation of AIDS through their own works. Furthermore, these three texts all refuse to name the disease “AIDS,” choosing instead to shroud references in metaphor, euphemism, and textual clues. I will show how these stylistic traits, combined with the overtly dark themes that pervade the works, contribute to, rather than deconstruct, many of the negative stereotypes that continue to pervade public perception about HIV and AIDS. In effect, through the depiction of individuals who knowingly construct their nascent post-HIV-infection identities on the deliberate infection and destruction of others, these works further contribute to the demonization of HIV-positive individuals and perpetuate rather than erode stereotypes surrounding HIV transmission.

Chapter 2
EROTICISM AND AIDS: THE CONFLUENCE OF DESIRE, DEATH, AND WRITING

In this chapter, I focus on how two authors attempt to defuse the power that AIDS has over their protagonists’ sexual expression and eventual deaths. The first is the Puerto Rican poet Manuel Ramos Otero and his collection of poetry, Invitación al polvo, published in 1991 after his death from AIDS-related complications. Ramos Otero’s work is overtly erotic, exalting both homosexuality and unabashed sexuality despite the impending demise brought on by AIDS. I compare this collection to Andrea Blanqué’s (Uruguay) short story “Adiós, Ten-Ying,” in which she narrates the exploits of a young girl who chooses to leave her cloistered existence in Montevideo, opting to prostitute herself to sailors in exchange for worldly travels. Contracting AIDS as a result of her adventures, the protagonist reflects fondly on her sexual exploration and what she views as both personal and sexual freedom, thus opting to celebrate her life and sexuality rather than fear her rapidly approaching death.

Both Ramos Otero and Blanqué choose to assert the sexualities of their protagonists in a way that defies current notions about protection and caution in this AIDS-affected epoch. Because of the enhanced risk associated with sexual activity, bodies have increasingly been policed and disciplined by the political hegemony that has determined which sex acts are “safe,” and by extension acceptable, and which are considered “unsafe” and therefore reprehensible (Singer). This increased projection of the sexual being into the political and social discourse has appropriated some of the individual power over one’s own body and sexuality and has created a marginalized view of any practitioners of “unsafe” sex, such as the protago-
nists of these narratives. In response to this marginalization, the authors use divergent strategies to transgress the boundaries of sexuality imposed by society and, in the process, are able to deflate some of the symbolic currency attached to AIDS.

In Ramos Otero’s case, I explore the connection between disease, desire, and death, utilizing Georges Bataille’s theories regarding eroticism as well as the connections that Jonathan Dollimore has made between sexuality, desire, and death in his work Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture. The confluence of these seemingly discordant forces surfaces as the central tenet of the majority of Ramos Otero’s collection. I analyze three key moments that appear throughout the work: the celebration of life, love, and eroticism that occupies the majority of the initial poems; the devastating void resulting from the loss of his lover and the solitude that haunts the poetic voice as he faces his dismal future because of AIDS; and, finally, how sexuality and eroticism, combined with the powerfully indelible force of writing, allow the poetic voice to accept death on his own terms without erasing or negating the pleasurable experiences that led to his final moments of life.

The confluence of eroticism, death, and narrative can also be seen in Blanqué’s treatment of AIDS. I explore these three concepts against the backdrop of the fairy tale trope, which underscores this story. Ten-Ying becomes a modern-day Rapunzel, choosing to flee her sequestered existence despite the risks that await her. I utilize theories from Christina Bacchilega’s work Postmodern Fairy Tales to analyze this reworking of a traditional story against a nontraditional backdrop consisting of prostitution, eroticism, AIDS, and untimely death.

In contrast to the first two chapters of this study in which my primary concerns are the different manifestations of the individual body through both destructive, vengeful sexuality and celebratory, defiant eroticism, in the last two chapters I shift focus away from the individual body and her interaction with one other being onto the notion of the solitary being in relation with the community or social body. I examine both the rejection of interpersonal bonds through self-imposed isolation as well as the formation of unity through the shared bond of AIDS and a peripheral existence.

Chapter 3
ISOLATION AND EXILE: AIDS AND THE SOLITARY BODY

This chapter centers on the individual AIDS-infected body as it purposely separates itself from the social body, whether physically or emotion-
ally. Here the focus is on the new markers of identity from the position of isolation and the altered perception of the body and AIDS itself, as viewed from the protagonists’ positions on the physical and psychological margins of society. The works I use to illustrate this point are Ricardo Prieto’s play *Pecados mínimos* (Uruguay), Nelson Mallach’s (Argentina) short story “Elefante,” and Pablo Pérez’s (Argentina) diary *Un año sin amor*. In essence, the protagonists in these narratives attempt to erase themselves from the social body by fleeing the society or social group they are part of, thereby self-destructing. Particularly in the first two works I study, there is an internalization of the early messages by many societies toward AIDS patients: they were treated and seen as a type of leper who should be isolated from the general population. These narratives perpetuate that urgency to cleanse the social body by showing the protagonists willingly removing their diseased bodies from the collective realm. In contrast, Pérez’s work focuses more on the destruction that AIDS wreaks on the individual rather than playing into the paranoid notion of the risks posed by the HIV-positive individual to society.

I recur to various theories on both internal and external exile, particularly those offered by Amy K. Kaminsky and Sophia A. McClennen, to scrutinize the types of isolation and exile depicted in these works. While not the overt variety experienced by individuals forced to leave their homes and countries because of war, repression, or other reasons, these three works depict varying degrees of both physical and psychological exile consistently imposed by the protagonists rather than by the society around them. I have termed the depicted social separation “radical isolation” in Prieto’s and Mallach’s works because the protagonists take extreme measures to depart from their previously known existences. In Pérez’s work, I use the term “solitary separation” to refer to the increasing separation between the protagonist and the life and world he knows, despite the fact that he never physically leaves that space.

The most drastic of the three works is Ricardo Prieto’s play *Pecados mínimos*, in which Marcos, the protagonist, sadistically isolates both himself and his mother, Julia, from the outside world in an attempt to separate both of them from the malicious “Sr. Sida” [Mr. AIDS] that exists beyond the threshold of the family home. While the protagonist ostensibly claims to be protecting his mother from the evils of the world and the disease that he himself carries, his methodical psychological and physical destruction of her reveal the apocalyptic tones of the work, which were particularly common at the inception of the epidemic when this play was written (1981). I examine this notion of AIDS = death = end of the world, showing how it not only motivates the extreme isolation of the protagonist, but
also further informs his fatalistic views of his own state of being. Last, I explore the deplorable treatment of the mother, connecting it to the hatred Marcos feels toward his own loss of agency as well as his conviction that the destruction of society as he knows it is impending.

The second example of “radical isolation” is Mallach’s story of a young, HIV-positive man, Rodrigo, who flees home, family, and, for the majority of the work, self, in order to avoid the realities of his condition. During his two-year journey away from home, I examine his attempts to redefine himself in relation to his new condition. Central to this process is the notion of the “other” as theorized by Jacques Lacan, who, through the gaze, reflects back to the individual the idealized version of the self. Rodrigo passes the majority of his time avoiding contact with others, thus avoiding the alterations in self that their gazes could reflect back to him. Slowly he begins to face his new version of self through a series of interpersonal interactions and solitary experiences. All of these moments ultimately comprise the modified “mirror stage” that Rodrigo undergoes as he comes to terms with his changed identity as a result of AIDS.

In contrast with the representation of individuals who flee from society as they grapple with their experiences with AIDS, the last text discussed in chapter 3, Pablo Pérez’s Un año sin amor, illustrates an individual who becomes trapped because of the overly signified body that has been taken over, both physically and symbolically, by AIDS. I refer to Pérez’s work as a reflection of “solitary separation” because it chronicles one year in the life of the author, who is certain that death will visit him before the end of the year. As a result, he sinks into an increasingly deeper state of psychological depression and physical solitude, even though he lives in the same apartment, works at the same job, and studies at the same school as he did before AIDS took over his life. It is as if a barrier exists between Pablo and the world, and in this chapter, I explore his life on both sides of that barrier and the ways in which the cumulative experiences influence the portrait of self that he creates.

Chapter 4
FORGING (COMM)UNITY THROUGH HYBRIDITY: PEDRO LEMEBEL’S LOCO AFÁN: CRÓNICAS DE SIDARIO

In contrast with using exile as a solution and thereby further allowing society to isolate and marginalize those suffering from AIDS, others have asserted their agency to build a community of support and create a unified front within the existing political and social body with which to combat
hegemonic subjugation. Providing an illuminating example of this confluence of community and social identity is Pedro Lemebel’s stunning collection of chronicles about the effects of AIDS on the (homosexual) transvestite community in Santiago de Chile, entitled *Loco afán: crónicas de sidario*. The collection details the fate of the transvestite community (“las locas”) from the fall of Allende, through the Pinochet dictatorship, and into the transitory period of democracy that followed in its wake. In this chapter, I utilize the theories of Homi Bhabha, particularly those expounded in *Locations of Culture*, to show how Lemebel’s text takes advantage of the liminal space between what Bhabha identifies as the pedagogical and the performative aspects of national identity in order to create an alternative cultural identity based on the experience of multiply marginalized protagonists: AIDS-infected, homosexual, transvestites.

By utilizing this liminal space, Lemebel continually employs the notion of hybridity to achieve his project and write the transvestite community into the literary history of Chile. There are multiple manifestations of this hybridity, but I will focus on six specific examples, each illustrated in Lemebel’s work: 1) the genre of the text itself, the crónica, which is an amalgam of many different genres; 2) the notion of gender, a sexual hybridity that is depicted by the transvestites who protagonize the works; 3) multiple urban spaces that resist a centralizing, reductionist tendency; 4) diachronic historical time, which alternates between predictatorship, references to the regime, and the indeterminate current reality of the “transition”; 5) national–transnational hybridity as seen through the interplay between external–internal cultural factors; and, finally, 6) the influence of AIDS, which creates hybrid bodies, blurring the boundaries between illness and health, youth and old age, life and death.

As in the first three chapters of this study, AIDS becomes a marker of both individual and social identity, continually modified and reconceptualized through both the impact and the absence of interpersonal interactions. This shifted identity is ultimately expressed through the process of writing, which becomes a central theme in the majority of the works examined. Lemebel is inherently aware of the act of writing and intentionally chooses the chronicle to best narrate the experience of protagonists facing multiple hybridities. In chapter 3, the diary form utilized by Pérez enables an intimate exploration of the effects of AIDS on the author’s identity construction, but, as I explore, Pérez deviates from the traditional genre by explicitly stating his intentions to publish his thoughts and share them with the public. In chapter 2, the act of writing is central to the process of confronting death through a very deliberate choice to celebrate life vis-à-vis narratives that depict the eroticized and often romanticized
lives of the protagonists rather than the impending death that each is fac-
ing. Chapter 1 is the only chapter in which the act of writing does not enter explicitly into the texts I study. Unlike those in chapters 2–4, these protagonists focus their efforts more on the destruction of others than on the construction of self, choosing to exert the caustic potentials of their altered bodies rather than reflecting on those changes and examining the self. I address the act of writing and the choice of genre as it relates to the different works studied in each chapter, ultimately examining its intercon-
nection with HIV/AIDS as well as the construction of personal and com-
munal identity.
Throughout the thirty-year history of the AIDS epidemic, there have been many significant advances in the areas of both prevention and medical care, drastically slowing the progression of the disease in infected individuals and cutting the rate of infection. Despite these medical advances, the physical reality of having AIDS is often compounded by the social construction of the disease and the multiple meanings attached to it in a particular society. Einhat Avrahami, in an enlightening study on illness autobiographies, asserts, “Clearly associated with not only the devalued category of the body but also with the subcategory of the ailing body, sick and disabled people are marked as Others” (41). Avrahami’s assertion is particularly relevant in the case of narratives about HIV/AIDS because of the compounded issues of physical and psychological decline combined with the oft-stigmatized views of the disease and the perceived behaviors of those who contract it. As we have seen throughout this study, the authors discussed often have keen awareness of this subaltern status: it has become a formative part of each of their texts. The protagonists, while divergent in many ways, all contend with the serious notion of how to confront a drastically altered sense of self in the face of a potentially fatal illness, and they struggle to find a place in societies that often attempt to marginalize and ostracize those afflicted with HIV and AIDS.

Throughout the course of my study, I have focused on these multiple markers of identity and the ways in which these protagonists conceptual-
ized and navigated their status as others at distinct moments in the history of the epidemic in Spanish America. Despite this vastly diverse depiction of AIDS in the lives of drastically different protagonists from authors from divergent areas of Spanish America, certain common themes and trends emerge in these works that merit further discussion. The first is the notion of agency and how each protagonist, vis-à-vis his or her particular struggle, attempts to come to terms with the fact that his or her body has been subjugated on a cellular level by a pervasive virus that often causes drastic physical and psychological changes which impact all areas of their lives. In the face of this waning control on a biological level, many of the protagonists turn their focus toward other avenues to exert agency over their own lives or, in some cases, the lives of those around them.

The concept of agency intersects and often overlaps with the other two notions that reappear in these works: the act of writing as one manner to construct and exert a reconceptualized identity and the importance of space to understanding one’s new reality, particularly in relation to the hegemony that often seeks to exclude or erase HIV-positive individuals from the social body. In that sense, the appropriation of individual and communal space on the part of these protagonists, as well as their appearance in texts that delve into these complex, oft-ignored issues, is one of the fundamental steps necessary for the re-inscription of HIV-positive individuals not only in literature, but in the broader social ambit. Each of these texts examines to some degree the notion of agency, often in conjunction with the mechanism of writing, as an attempt to exert control over their protagonists’ new situations as well as carve out space for their altered beings.

In the texts examined in chapter 1, agency is the primary preoccupation, whereby each protagonist manipulates the body, recognizing the potential to use his or her body as the weapons they have become due to HIV infection. All three choose to exert that potential, opting to eschew any moral responsibility for their conditions and instead directing their rage toward other, seemingly “healthy” bodies. Despite exhibiting agency, the way in which it manifests itself in these texts is disturbing because it involves the overtaking of another person’s body in the name of dominancy and authority on the part of the protagonists. In other words, in the process of taking control over their own body and life, these protagonists encroach on others and usurp their societal space through sadistic manipulation and determined destruction of the other. While Eloy Martínez’s protagonist acts out this cycle on one unwitting victim, Solari’s and Griffero’s characters turn it into a pattern, carving an increasingly larger niche for themselves out of the void left from the destruction of others.
The authors structured this dynamic within the realm of revenge narratives that focus much of the narrative attention on the protagonists’ perceptions of self and thoughts about their actions rather than on the victims. However, the implications of those actions on a societal level raise serious questions about this type of representation. This depiction of HIV-positive individual as violent, destructive aggressor plays into societal paranoia about the disease and contributes to negative stereotypes about AIDS because it promotes, and perpetuates, the notion that HIV-positive people are inherently dangerous to those around them. This stance is further supported by the recurrence to damaging plague, militaristic, and apocalyptic metaphors that continually reinforce pervasively negative and judgmental attitudes about AIDS.

What results is a distinct sort of identity-construction process quite different from what is examined in other chapters. Because so much of the focus is on one component of the new bodily reality brought about by AIDS, namely, the possibility to wreak havoc and harm on others, the gaze remains focused outward. Very little self-reflection occurs, thus truncating the possibility of truly reconceptualizing the individual identity. Instead, the protagonists exert their energies by intentionally destroying others to create the illusion of power over their new corporeal identities. Despite the illusion of control created by these destructive actions, none of the protagonists actually takes over the narrative power, thus illustrating the incomplete process of constructing a new identity based on a “dominating body” that destroys others for its own benefit. What we see in later chapters is that when agency, writing, and space all converge, the protagonists appear more at ease with their new identities, suggesting that the act of writing and creating a textual space to explore the conceptualization of self is essential to the full actualization of agency.

In chapter 2 the concept of control manifests itself quite differently. In both Ramos Otero’s and Blanqué’s works, the protagonists come to accept their compromised physical states and choose to confront their impending deaths by guiding the way in which their lives are to be remembered. Armed with the tools of poetry and fairy tale to construct their own biographies, both protagonists have the freedom to portray their sexuality as they choose. Ramos Otero’s poetic voice confronts his past and future through the construction of an “hombre de papel” that utilizes the poetic conventions of both traditional love poems and elegy to exalt his sexual self while coming to terms with his impending death. Writing provides a space to explore these conflicting realities, ultimately bestowing upon the poetic voice the power to portray his life through his own pen, and to confront AIDS through memories and words.
In Blanqué’s case, although her protagonist does not have the ultimate control granted in Ramos Otero’s work, the story is constructed as a retelling of the protagonist’s own words about her life, sexual exploration, and impending death. For Ten-Ying, agency manifests itself first in her defiant decision to leave home despite her family’s wishes, and, further, through her insistence on romanticizing her life as a prostitute, celebrating an otherness that society would typically condemn. The story she conveys depicts a fairy-tale-like existence as she travels the world after intentionally fleeing her father’s control, much as Rapunzel did in the classic fairy tale. Ten-Ying portrays a life in which she appropriates spaces dominated by males, offering her sexualized body as currency to obtain adventure, excitement, and freedom. Even when her body succumbs to AIDS’ advances, her mind relives her experiences with satisfaction and pride, allowing her to confront death without any expressed fear.

Both Ramos Otero’s and Blanqué’s protagonists choose to direct their gazes backwards, toward memories of lives filled with sexual adventure and defiant freedom, envisioning their bodies as portals of pleasure rather than vectors of disease. In the process, they renounce castigatory views of sexuality and their conditions, effectively celebrating their subaltern status in a way that allows them to commemorate life to the fullest, despite AIDS. Throughout that process, narrative allows them to exert control over the construction of their memories and, ultimately, their lives.

In chapter 3, the protagonists depicted by Prieto, Mallach, and Pérez are all acutely aware of their status as others in society as a result of their HIV status; as such, they all grapple with the compounding effects of the social taboos against HIV and AIDS, made more difficult to contend with because of their physical deterioration and concurrent unwillingness to accept their burgeoning identities as HIV-positive individuals. They all perpetuate this notion of subalternity by choosing to erase themselves from the social space through extreme isolation and self-imposed exile. The most perverse example of this attempt to re-assert control over one’s life and redefine one’s personal space is seen in Prieto’s work, which is significant because it reflects some of the perceptions circulating at the inception of the epidemic in 1981.

His sadistic protagonist, Marcos, has internalized all of the negative connotations surrounding the virus, including the notion that AIDS = death, and he views his own infection as a harbinger of a personal and familial apocalypse. He sees no way to live with the disease and exerts his agency by taking control over his mother’s life. We saw his control exert itself through a drastic reduction in space, to the point where the family home is cloistered and the mother is physically restrained in her own bed.
Marcos reduces his own ambient to a coffin that he is constructing as he prepares for his own demise. In addition to the manipulated physical surroundings, Marcos becomes obsessive in his need to control. Convinced that the arrival of AIDS is a sign of the destruction of mankind, Marcos cuts his mother off from all external contacts and sadistically controls her body. Being unable to stop the destruction going on in his own body, he turns his focus to his mother. However, instead of transferring any desire to become well onto his treatment of her, he instead regulates her daily bodily functions, often neglectfully. The ultimate assertion of agency comes in the end, when Marcos chooses to take not only his own life, but that of his mother, again in adherence to his deluded belief that AIDS would destroy humanity.

Negative social connotations regarding AIDS also infiltrated Mallach’s work, in which his protagonist, Rodrigo, chooses to flee his life rather than learn how to continue to live it while succumbing to the physical deterioration that accompanies AIDS. His agency presents itself in the intentional extrication of self from his surroundings, as he chooses to travel through unknown locales, avoiding contact and communion with most others. For Rodrigo, this shifted space was necessary to be able to begin the process of reconceptualizing his identity, having freed himself from all of the traditional markers associated with the physical spaces and social connections he left behind. Initially, distance serves as a way to try to erase and forget his identity, particularly the diseased portion of it. However, through some interactions with others, as well as an eye-opening experience in the solitude of the Amazon, Rodrigo, in the end, uses this self-created distance from his previously known existence to confront and slowly come to terms with his new identity. It is only upon accepting his new self that he is able to re-enter the world he fled, altered not only physically by the disease, but also by the journey of self-discovery he undertakes.

The last text of chapter 3 illustrates the degree to which extreme physical weakness and deterioration can lead to a reduction in social space and interaction. Such is the case for much of Pérez’s diary, in which he recounts his daily issues with HIV and his concurrent psychological depression and conviction that death will come within the year. For most of that period, Pablo’s body is so weak that it usurps much of his agency, rendering him unable to function in most aspects of his life. Despite this physical lack of control, Pablo’s diary and the very act of writing are the primary manifestations of agency he can render, providing him the forum in which to grapple with his altered sense of self and the increasingly reduced social space within which he functions. Short of being liberating, the diary becomes the only destination he has the strength to visit on an almost daily basis,
at times providing solace for the claustrophobic physicality and social and personal isolation that dominate his life. This text is significant because it marks an important moment in the history of the epidemic—the introduction of AZT and other antiretrovirals into the medical arsenal to fight the disease. This diary depicts that drastic shift as we see a reversal of a previously rapidly degenerative disease. As Pablo’s body becomes stronger and the virus’s grip on it begins to recede, he is able to leave the textual space within which he records most of his year, and he ventures out into his community, reconnecting with friends and family and forging new alliances as he strives to not only survive but also live with HIV.

Throughout the first three chapters of this study, I have primarily focused on individuals in interaction with a sexual partner, friend, or lover, or in solitude. In each case, there is an awareness of the position of these protagonists on society’s margin because of their HIV status, but this status as other is seen through the eyes of individuals who have internalized society’s proscription of HIV-positive individuals and whose actions result from the perceived negativity surrounding their conditions. All manifestations of agency on their part strive to overcome individual alterations in self-identity, and have less to do with constructing a space for themselves within the society at large or coming to terms with how to live in society as a subaltern being. Part of this failure to construct a space for their newly subaltern selves is due to the realities and perceptions of the epidemic as depicted in these works. Most works focus on the earlier years of the disease, when fatalities were the norm and promising medical advances were still in the distant future. In addition, social stigma was a force so strong that it shrouded any ability to rationally confront the disease as a simple biological reality, and it therefore often perpetuated mistruths and stereotypes that prevented people from accessing medical care.

The last chapter of my study differs significantly from these earlier depictions, both in the fact that it depicts a later moment in the history of the epidemic (1996, the year that AZT entered the scene), and in Lemebel’s insistence on deconstructing the social meanings of the disease to show the possibility of subverting the notion of the subaltern to create a new space in society for those previously marginalized. Lemebel’s crónica illustrates the plurality and cohesiveness that derive from the creation of a community of individuals previously cast out of society because of AIDS, homosexuality, and transvestism, all conditions relegating them to the periphery. His text illustrates an astute awareness of this seemingly compromised position on society’s margins. Lemebel appropriates this ambivalent liminal state, celebrating the multiple hybridities of the individuals to assert their identities and create a social space for them
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through his writing. Using the crónica, Lemebel gives voice to these previously silent, subjugated individuals, allowing them to construct their own version of nation and self, one defined by multiplicity of gender, time, and space and united by difference, transvestitism, and AIDS. Instead of conforming to the version of nation imposed by the dominant culture, these protagonists forge their own collective space out of the precise differences that were cause for their persecution. In the end, Lemebel’s writing affords these locas a textual space from which to exert their agency and construct a space for themselves and their companions in a society that would prefer to negate their existence. Perhaps more than any other text that I have examined, Lemebel’s crónicas provide an example of how a strong sense of agency, combined with a carefully constructed textual space that “writes” this community of locas into the social landscape, affords these protagonists the tools to confront the oppression wrought by AIDS, as well as the social subjugation prevalent in the lives of many who face the disease.

When I began to conceptualize this project, I was struck by the apparent lack of literary and critical attention paid to this topic in the realm of Spanish America. The seeming contradiction between a pervasive social topic that appeared to have been ignored in the realm of fictional narrative was difficult to comprehend, particularly from my position in the U.S. academia where critical and literary discourse on AIDS is abundant. In fact, as I mentioned, the words of Ricardo Chávez-Castaneda resonated with my initial findings: “el tema, dicho de la manera más simple, brilla por su ausencia.” However, as I began to delve into contemporary Spanish American literature in search of representations of AIDS, I discovered some trends. First, AIDS does appear in narrative, but often it has been shrouded in silence and secrecy. The notion of the taboo is still very strong, so that those who have addressed the topic often do so using some of the aforementioned techniques of silence and metaphor common to individuals accustomed to maneuvering around a social taboo. Second, representations of individuals with AIDS are still connected to the margins, with many of the protagonists conceptualized as subjugated societal outcasts. Furthermore, the texts themselves are marginalized to some degree; the majority of authors I studied do not belong to the traditional literary canon, but rather are emerging writers or figures like Ramos Otero and Lemebel, whose work is renowned, but who seem to prefer to exist outside of the traditional spaces of literature.

The central question for future research, in my view, relates to how this disease will be depicted in the future. Will HIV-positive individuals consistently be depicted as others, or will there be a day when a shift occurs and the disease loses its connection to the margin? Given that HIV and AIDS
are constantly evolving and affecting societies in different ways, particularly in relation to the treatments that are developed to combat them, it is likely that literary depictions of them will also continue to evolve, mutate, and shift as writers respond to a global epidemic with very personal implications. It remains to be seen how these shifts will be reflected in literature and how the textual archive of this epidemic will be transformed. It is my personal hope, however, that as societies begin to develop more effective treatments (and possibly a cure) for AIDS, future studies will have the option to explore not only the current connection that AIDS has with physical decline and death, but also the triumphant association with survival and life as individuals and societies find ways to usurp the power that AIDS currently wields in contemporary society.


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