Gardens of Discovery

Actors, Activists and Spain in Crisis

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is both creative and scholarly, engaging in the technique of "narrative scholarship," an increasingly accepted technique within the field of ecocriticism. The project is framed by my experiences with Spanish and Latino actors as well as activists involved with the 15-M movement in and around Madrid. It takes a "material ecocritical" approach, which is to say that it treats minds, spirits and language as necessarily "bodied" entities, and creates an absolute union between beings and the matter that constructs them as well as their habitat. I apply the lens of Jesper Hoffmeyer's Biosemiotics, which claims that life is at its most essential levels a communicative process. In other words, I will explore how "all matter is 'storied' matter," as well as how the "semiosphere," which is an important concept in biosmiotics, signaling a semiotic environment that predicts and defines all biological bodies/life, the human, the plant and the animal as beings who are made of and involved in semiotic activity, can serve as a basis for union amongst all bodies and provide a model of cooperation rooted in "storytelling." My project aims to embody what Wendy Wheeler describes as ecocriticism's, "syntheses between the sciences and the humanities" It is my strong opinion that creative writing has the power to offer the general public insight into the reasons why new research in biosemiotics is so important to the work that activists are doing to raise awareness of how humans can live responsibly on the only planet that is our home. This will help readers of creative writing and cultural studies scholars understand why they ought to embrace science, especially in literary and cultural studies, as a path to better understanding of the role of the humanities in an increasingly scientifically oriented world.

DEDICATION

To Claudia and Mark, and to my mom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the tireless assistance of Dr. Joni Adamson. It is her openmindedness and encouragment that allowed for this project. Her belief that academic work can be creative, interdisciplinary and communicative to people beyond the hallways of a given department inspired me to keep writing. I hope that one day I can offer as much support to a student as she has to me. I would also like to thank Lee Gutkind for his guidance through the difficult process of creating a story out of research. Much of the preliminary writing of this dissertation took place in his class. His generosity in sharing his mastery of the craft of Creative Nonfiction has been invaluable. Dr. Carmen Flys-Junquera shared an expansive knowledge of Ecocriticism, especially in the European context, and was kind enough to act as a reader. Thanks to Jose Juan Rodriguez Jabao for his friendship and willingness to listen to my endless questions on his trips to Madrid, and to Javier Botet for making himself available in the midst of a very busy schedule. Borja Fernandez Cobaleda allowed me to travel to his farm and even to be present during the process of slaughtering his livestock, which was an unforgettable experience. His opinions on the political realities of contemporarty Spain have been incredibly instructive, and have forced me to reconsider many of my own deeply held beliefs. I thank him for that gift.

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INTRODUCTION

It was early September 2012. We stood on Calle Fernando el Catolico waiting for the woman we had spoken to on the phone to open the shutters of a small restaurant. We were nervous. We only had a few thousand euros saved up. Claudia had gotten a small inheritance when the woman who raised her in Murcia, Spain, the woman who she thought of as a second mother, had died of cancer six months prior. My father had died only a few months later, but he had not left an inheritance. We had no idea what to do with the money, so, we decided to open a café.

The woman arrived in what seemed to be a coffee-fueled bluster. She pushed a button on her keychain and the shutters that covered the restauratnt's doors began to rise as she leaned in for two kisses.

"Marta," she said.

"Hola," said Claudia.

"Ryan," I said reaching out a hand akwardly before pulling it back and offering two kisses instead.

The shutter cranked upwards, its metal gears in dire need of oil.

"This is it," said Marta in fast Madrileño Spanish.

We walked from room to room, scanning the black and white checked tiles, the small, but elegant wooden bar, the kitchen which was no bigger than a closet, the tables of sparkling pinks and blues. I knew immediately it was the place. This was where we would open our restaurant. This is where we would host our writer's circle, our actor's

night, our friend Robbie's bluegrass group. This is where we would cook great, locally produced food, and build our community.

There was only one thing in the way. "How much?" I asked.

Marta told us we could pay her month by month over the next ten years. She was moving to Brussels for her husband's job. She was tired of Madrid, of the restaurant, of the crisis. She just wanted out. We just wanted in.

We signed the papers and a few weeks later we were hard at work sanding, sawing, painting, and doing all of the other work that would convert the space into our own. We did not know it at the time, but other people our age were doing the same all over the city. We were part of an emergence in Madrid, which would dramatically alter the face of the city's culinary, artistic, and politcal landscapes in ways that had not been seen since the Movida Madrileña of the 1980's.

I arrived in Madrid to study in 2006. I have lived there on and off ever since. In the past decade I have witnessed an economy emerging from a turbulent past, dipping into crisis, and emerging yet again. This most recent revival has been an interesting spectacle for an outsider, an immigrant, to witness. It has been a painful political process, but also an exciting arrival of Madrid to the long deserved status of cosmopolitan capital. There has been an explosion of small theaters, art galleries, and coffee houses catering to a youth that is no longer content to wait for change to come to them. The same energy has exploded onto the political stage with the rapid emergence of new parties which are changing the long-entrenched calculus of what was essentially a two party system. Even the flavors of the city have been revolutionized as Mexican, Thai, Japanese, and

American restaurants have begun to dot the cityscape. My wife Claudia and I have been part of that process since opening The Toast Café, a small restaurant dedicated to literature and food, in 2011. Our cafe specializes in American breakfast, and hosts events for local artists and musicians. I feel priviliged to have been here to see the city emerge into its current self. I feel even more priviliged to have been able to participate as a teacher of writing, an immigrant, and an entrepreneur.

As I studied in Madrid from 2006-2008, I also taught. I worked at Saint Louis University's Madrid campus as an adjunct writing instructor, and I supplemented my income as a private ESL instructor, moving around the city from office to office at lunch hour and after work, teaching people English mostly through conversation. I got to know a lot of Spanish people through teaching ESL.

Between 2008 and 2011, I left Spain to teach at Shantou University in China, and then went to work on a doctorate in Arizona which is culminating in this dissertation. While I was in Arizona I taught writing at Scottsdale Community College as well as at Arizona State University, but all the while I was anxious to get back to Madrid. I wanted to be a part of what I saw emerging there. In 2011 I moved back and resumed teaching at Saint Louis University as we began to lay the groundwork for opening The Toast. For us, the crisis presented an opportunity as rents plunged and businesses closed. The economic destruction meant that we could afford to start something of our own, and that there were locations available in the city center that would have been difficult to come by in earlier years. Everyone warned us against starting something in the midst of such difficult financial times, but, in the twisted logic of crisis, it was the difficult financial times that made it possible for us to try. Our story was unfolding at the same time as so many

others, and this little plotline, that of our café, set the stage for insights into so many other emergent narratives in our adopted home.

Emergence can take on many forms. It can be linguistic, artistic, or political. Each of these processes is built on the scaffolding of biology. There is a layering that begins with the first cellular communication that establishes the ghost of what will become language and ultimately culture. In linguistics as in signal transduction, there is a process of a signal sent, received and interpreted: There is a replication, a mimesis, that is established at the most basic levels of life. That mimesis creates the pattern on which we continue to build. There exists a line from the first animation of matter to the emergence of language, and then to the abstract worlds which verbal communication allows. The art and politics that fill our social realm are extensions of biological processes.

The question that set me off on the trail that began this project was, "why is narrative so important to humans?" I wanted to know why we tell stories? I wanted to know why we attach information to tales that travel through our culture? Ultimately, I wanted to know how those tales infiltrate our culture as politics, as linguistic realities, and as entertainment. Why do we create myths, heros, religions? Why do we create the tragic and comic charatcters that carry the weight of an era's identity beyond its decade or even its century, or the political ideologies and movements that alter who we are and how we live? How do these myths, stories and movements then travel through our worlds and influence our realities? How do they emerge, and how is there emergence integral to who we are?

As someone who writes and studies literarture, this was a very personal question about my own neurotic tendency to live in, and create, stories. As a young person I approached the question emotionally through writing, reading, creating. As a student, turning to postcolonial literature and Shakespeare, I tried to understand the stories as they were attached to history and philosophy. I read things like Heidegger—whose concepts of World and Earth come to inform Wendy Wheeler's concept of tertiary world modeling—Lacan, and Zizek and tried to make sense of this massive gap between the physical world and the world of ideas that was often contained in stories, but served only to frustrate so many of the philospohies that I encountered.

Finally, in a class with Dr. Joni Adamson, I read Jesper Hoffmeyer and was introduced to Biosemiotics. Biosemiotics seemed to connect the two worlds: The ideal, and the material. Hoffmeyer's relocation of identity in skin was one notion amongst many which put an emphasis on the embodied nature of self, and made one consider the possibility that individual consciousness was a sort of elaborate rouse or accident. This fell in line with readings by Michael Pollan and Bruno Latour that seemed to be investing the non-human world with agency in interesting ways. There was a sense that the story humanity had been telling itself, the story which saw human consciousness as somehow principle amongst consciousnesses, and perhaps even the story that placed consciousness above the inanimate, was somehow no longer satisfactory.

In a connected struggle, I began to feel that in the process of preparing the dissertation there was the everpresent sense that I was not communicating in the way that I wanted to be communicating. That is to say, I felt like I was pouring countless hours into a voice that was not my own, and that there was a very high probability that no one

would read the writing I was producing outside of class. I began to wonder why that was a mode that we valued so much, and wondered if there was a place in academia for a different kind of writing.

Luck would have it that Lee Gutkind was giving a class on Creative Nonfiction just as I was learning about Ecocriticism with Dr. Adamson, and finding that, yes indeed, there was a space in academia where narrative experimentation was feasible. Joni Adamson's Book *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* served as a model of how to perform literary criticism while at the same time telling a story. She writes about the experience of teaching composition in the Tohono O'odham Nation, and through *the story* she brings life to the criticism of works by Sherman Alexie, Simon Ortiz, and Rigoberta Menchú amongst others. The criticism no longer sits in a vacuum, but we, the reader, witness its effects in the classroom and in the community. This was the sort of active academic voice I was looking for.

Dr. Adamson also introduced me to the work of Scott Slovic, a writer who, as opposed to attempting to exclude the subjective from his academis work, embraces his own experience and tells stories that contextualize at the same time as he offers theories that bring the contemporary world and its relationship to nature into focus. Scott Slovic combines memoir and theory into narratives that challenge our relationships to nature, commerce and consciousness. His work offered yet another map of the type of dissertation I wanted to write. I think that in the context of this project, in which narrative and its emergence is the object of study, it was a natural move to build the message into story.

So, I began to think through ways in which to put all of this research together into a narrative, and the process proved very difficult. I struggled deeply with how to follow Lee Gutkind's rule of keeping the page at least half yellow, meaning consisting of at least half scenes including dialogue and description, while interjecting academic research that often asked for a complete shift in tone. I will write more about how I went about making particular decisions which shaped the project later.

At the same time, I read a book by Michael Paterniti called *The Telling Room*. The book was about a man who, in the process of completing an MFA at the University of Michigan, came to know a cheese, Páramo de Guzmán, which became something of an obsession. Years later in the midst of a successful Journalism career, he throws out several projects and moves his family to the town in Spain where the cheese is made in order to write a book about its production. In so doing, the narrative becomes, at least in part, autobiography. His book gave me a model for how to begin shaping the tone that would allow for the type of information I wanted to convey to be injected into a story.

Another major influence on the process was Adrian J. Ivakhiv who wrote *Ecologies of the Moving Image.* In his book he lays out the ways in which narratives, in particular film, but I think the metaphor can be applied to most any type of narrative, extend beyond their own borders somewhat seamlessly, entering the world and acting on consciousness and bodies which encounter them. He is not making an argument that is specifically evolutionary, but I think that his framework fits into that of Hoffmeyer's very well. If we add to Ivakhiv's and Hoffmeyer's ideas Thomas Sebeok's notion of the semiosphere, which is a sort of physical sphere in which language is an important operator in creating physical reality, and Jakob Von Uexell's Umwelt which is a species

specific linguistic habitat, we start to see how stories begin to shape and emerge, to *evolve* all around us in the creation of physical realities.

Wendy Wheeler adds the idea of Tertiary World Modeling, which is the creation of worlds through cultural production. She also begins to discuss ideas as to how us humans are actually more of a superorganism than just a collection of individual actors, and that our shared culture is in a sense that thing which we create, and which in turn creates us, and binds us together. In a sense, it is the budding of cultures—a word that not coincidentally carries meanings that are social in the human context and also important in terms of biology in the realm of bacteria—that defines us, delimits us, and offers us boundaries to challenge and or respect.

This is a recurring theme: That there is need for balance between emergent forces and those that aim towards stagnation. In linguistics this might take the form of descriptive and prescriptive approaches; in politics progressive and conservative ideologies; in religion fundamentalist and mystic practices; in evolution notions of adaptation versus stasis, which in biological terms would mean extinction.

Hoffmeyer presents the case of a carbon molecule that gets stuck in the roots of a tree for 500 years as an example of how an individual may strive for freedom and independence, but only has the ability to mean, to operate, once it is trapped within a system. Langauge, he says, is the same. Though there is a sort of chaotic reality to poetic genesis, language relies on structure to have meaning. Individuals rely on emergent systems such as art, poetry, film and other means of tertiary world modeling to expand their umwelts and semioshperes. This is the theoretical background upon which I graft my story.

I began to mold the dissertation much in the vain of Paterniti, offering an autobiographical account of how I came to be in Spain, how I came to know the actors, activists and other characters that will populate the story. I talk a bit about my own background in Chicago, which I think works to demonstrate how place is vital to understanding, and then I tell the story of meeting Claudia which I hope helps to create characterization which will encourage the reader to care about where the story is going.

Beyond the introduction I made two important choices concerning the structure. First, I chose to open each chapter with a lyrical segment. I think this serves to root the overall project solidly in a literary register and emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the abstract and the concrete that is so central to Hoffmeyer. Second, I chose to alternate Major and Minor chapters. The Major chapters are meant to carry the narrative and provide the analysis. The Minor chapters are there to demonstrate how narrative subtly illuminates messages. They are moments of landscapes or animals speaking to consciousness, and in so doing telling stories. Or, they are moments when a particular teller of stories is foregrounded as is the case with the theater director, Juan Carlos Corraza.

The biggest narrative lines that run through the project are those of Jose Juan Rodriguez Jabao's reverse migration to Spain, which as the story unfolds we realize was based on his sister's cancer, and that of Podemos and Ciudadanos emerging as viable political parties in the aftermath of the 15-M movement.

There is a minor narrative tracing my own experiences and travels with Claudia or my nephew, or simply getting to better know people in Spain and in Madrid. These take a

backseat to the previous two in the current version, though I intend to expand there importance as I go forward with the process of converting this dissertation into a book.

I met Jose after seeing him in Camus' *Caligula* in Teatro Fernán Gómez beneath Plaza Colón, or Columbus Plaza, and the gardens which are called the gardens of discovery. Taking my cues from Donna Haraway and Zizek in the beginning, I began a process of reading those gardens, which are largely void of greenery, as a commentary on the colonial moment. I was interested in this sort of robotic modernity which was attempting to create a better human habitat through the attempted denial of the natural, and how those inclinations were tied to colonialism. Through the process of writing, that initial observation began to take a backseat. The more interesting story that began to emerge came a bit later.

This meeting with Jose took place about 2 months prior to the onset of 15-M.

Again, with the metaphor of biological emergence uniting, in my mind anyway, the political, the artistic and the linguistic in one biological model, the emergence of these political movement that were so "grass roots" (an appropriate metaphor) was tied to this strange desire of modernity to control the vegetation in the garden. We were, in a sense, trying to control the uncontrollable, and wherever this sort of conservative force was applied, there were bound to spring up roots.

I spoke with Jose a dozen times, wrote him email after email, went to see him act or teach whenever he was in Madrid, and basically built a relationship over time. That relationship eventually led to his telling me the story of his sister's cancer. Narratively, especially in terms of a project based on biology, emergence, and even the potential for

malignancy, this was an important development. It was also a very sad and unexpected one.

On a sort of meta-narrative level, it was strange to me throughout the process of writing this how narratively things appeared that brought the story together. Jose's revelation was one of those things, but also simply the name of the plaza where we met, or, more precisely, both the name of the plaza and the gardens contained there. Also, dates were serendipitous. Things such as Claudia's birthday, my own return to Spain, the timing of our trip, just seemed to sort of fall into place… But, anyway…

Next came the trip through Andalucia just at the moment the pope was coming to Spain during the apex of 15-M's relevance. It was a fascinating time to get to see so much of the country. It was, of course, a bit scary, and in some ways exciting, not to know how things were going to unfold; not to know if there was real change on the horizon, and if so what that might mean. I think if I have learned anything watching the world over the last decade, it's that every action sets off an unpredictable chain of events, and what seems like good news may end up being very bad news and vice versa. Even now in Spain it is unclear who will be taking power, and when whoever does assume power arrives, it is unclear what their government might aim to do.

In that moment, there was so much contradictory energy. The anger and excitement that fueled 15-M could not have been more different than this sort of blind, maybe callous, albeit sincere, optimism of the pilgrims. For months there were daily occupations, protests, helicopters overhead, constant sirens and government reforms aimed at infringing on the right to gather, the right to avoid police brutality, or even record it when it was happening. It was a very intense moment in which I saw so clearly

the battle between this creative emergent force, and the brutal inclination to impede any and every effort towards change. The pope wandering into the middle of it all just seemed to punctuate the absurd distance between the real, material problems being faced by individuals and this very conservative institutional response.

The final night I discuss in that chapter was absolutely brutal. You can still find videos online of the police beating people who were in no way violent, or even resisting. Often, they were just casual passersby, or individuals who had been standing in doorways in unfortunate locations. It was soon after the flood of videos online that the law to ban filming police was passed.

Beyond that chapter the effort is primarily to keep the spotlight on theater as it interacts with culture in different contexts. I tell the stories of trips to Cuenca, Lerma, the theater in Segobria, and the Day in the woods in the Sierra with the actor Javier Botet. I wanted to alternately look at this artistic and political emergence and see how one did or did not affect the other.

Javier Botet states specifically at some point that art and politics are not cut of the same cloth. He claims that politics is cynical and theater is not, but I think I disagree…

Politics, acting, scenery, animals... each is a piece of the human umwelt, each spins into the other within our semiosphere (Both of these phrases will be addressed in some depth in the chapters that follow, but here suffice it to say they refer to our sociolinguistic habitats). When we connect with an animal, it challenges our sense of human hegemony. When we see landscapes as the sets of history, we see how our identities are tied to our material habitats. When we participate in, or bare witness to emerging politics, we see the narrative being forced into new shapes. We see the script

rewritten. So, I disagree to some extent with the vision of this wide chasm between art and politics.

I think that politics at its best can be poetry, and that poetry at its worst can be the lowest form of political pedantry. Maybe part of the problem is in attempting to isolate the two, in yet again enforcing hegemony where cooperation, or at least interconnection, would be the more realistic vision: Not the more idealistic, but the more realistic. We tend to see one or the other as of greater importance, one or the other as more valid or real; be it the actor making light of the political process, or the politician devaluing the artistic in the form of budget cuts. In reality the two are locked into a codependent relationship: Art is meaningless without the political sphere that it feeds, critiques, edifies… Politics, for their part, are meaningless when stale, unmoving, uninspired. When they govern a stagnant, uncreative mass, they become irrelevant and almost demand revolution.

So, to wrap up and rehash a bit: The linguistic, the artistic, and the political. These are the three areas that I am exploring in their ability to create emergent realities and also in their ability to stunt that emergence. I consider these processes to be closely related to, even completely dependent on, the evolutionary biology that allowed for them to come into being. Like the human eye, or the neck of a giraffe, these processes are completely of the material reality of their predecessors. One can only build with the material one has. Our creativity, communication, and governance are literally made of the patterns already present in genetics.

Literature is an extension of that first cellular communication which signaled the beginning of life. Theater is an embodiment of a process that has always been embodied.

The political process at its best, is that communication baring fruit. The abstract lives in the material.

Lastly, I would like to note that this is a work in progress. The stories here are not yet fully united by a complete narrative line. That narrative line is largely autobiographical, the story of my years in Spain with Claudia, teaching at Saint Louis, getting to know actors and activists, cooking in the restaurant, and learning the ups and downs of life as an expat business person. The opening scene of this introduction is meant to give a glimpse of what this project will look like when the stories are allowed to fully occupy their place at the center of this work. Those stories are in the process of being recorded, and will soon be brought into this project as it makes the transition from dissertation to book. The full integration of the stories will, I believe, also allow the urgent ecocritical message to more fully emerge.

CHAPTER 2

HOME AND ABROAD

Perfection leaves no room for improvement. The potential for growth is in imperfection, in mistranslation, in a message slightly misunderstood. Growth exists where interpretation thrives. The spaces between certainties.

An actor stands on a stage. Her body is the result of millions of years of tiny insignificant reactions, of nearly flawless replications of cells. Nearly flawless. The series of imperceptibly tiny errors that led to sight in plankton, to lungs, to upright beings. It all led to language, which is not to say that it was destined to, simply that it did. This allowed us to record our imaginations, to empathize across generations. A play is written in the 16th century recording the internal world of a being of the day, some say even inventing the "modern" human. It enshrines the political and philosophical realities as they filtered through one, albeit one very impressive, mind. The words are there, encoded just like the body before them. We read, study, repeat in nearly flawless replications. Nearly flawless.

The actor moves across the stage, embodying the character and speaking the text to the best of his ability. Errors abound. His pronunciation is different. The costume is made of fabrics that had not even been conceived in the text's moment. The language is altogether wrong. Spanish! Even the first line carries a whole new significance: "Quien Vive?" His skin is too dark. This text has been transmuted, transubstantiated. It is not what it set out to be. It is something much bigger. All of the little differences accumulate and little by little something happens: the meaning has changed.

I was not in Spain on May 15th, 2011. I was in Phoenix. The first sight I had of the occupation in Madrid's Puerta del Sol came from a treadmill. I was watching a broadcast at the gym I had joined to fill some of the lonely hours that amassed during the two years I spent studying five thousand miles away from the place I'd come to think of as home. The scene was striking. The plaza I had come to know so well was unrecognizable. There were thousands of people spilling onto the streets that spun off of the plaza like spokes from a hub. Sol was the geographic center of Spain. That all paths led to that point.

When I got back to my apartment I Skyped Claudia, my girlfriend who had grown up in Spain and was living in Madrid.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "People, they is angry. There is no work. The government only steals." Her English was much better than it had been when we met, but we both still made countless errors in the other's language. Her accent was smooth and soft, unlike many Spanish people who spoke with a gravelly rasp when they attempted English.

In the background I heard helicopters and sirens.

"Is everything ok?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "It's good. People seems happy that there is resistance. A little scary, too. There is police everywhere. But, the mood I think is a good one."

I had left Madrid six weeks prior and I was moving back permanently in a little over a month. The plan was to finish writing a dissertation, teach writing at Saint Louis

University's Madrid campus, and open a little café that would double as a community space for art, music, theater and writing. Claudia was an actress, myself a writer so, we need to find ways to pay the bills.

On that day, 3 years after the outset of the global crisis that hit Spain particularly hard, somewhere between twenty and fifty thousand people (depending on whether you choose to trust the numbers of the police or the organizers) gathered in Madrid's Plaza Cibeles. They were preparing to march towards la Puerta del Sol in protest of austerity measures, labor reforms and evictions. That first day the crowd trended young. The events were organized by Real Democracy Now and Youth Without Future. The energy was festive, electric. The movement was sparked from anger, but the sense of a transitional moment, of the people shifting the narrative, was thick in the air. People smiled as they chanted slogans, "No somos productos en las manos de politicos y banqueros!" ("We are not products in the hands of politicians and bankers!").

The march went off without a hitch. Afterwards, protesters blocked Gran Via, Madrid's answer to Broadway, and held a sit-in in Callao, which was once the home of the famous Hotel Florida which housed Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Pasos and Martha Gellhorn during the siege of Madrid in the Spanish Civil War. The sit-in was a peaceful affair from the side of the protesters, but the police, in efforts to move the crowd, turned to their batons. Several people were hit, and the crowd rushed frantically away from the plaza. The protesters and the police began what would become over the following months a familiar game of cat and mouse, the group advancing, being pushed back by the police, and reappearing in a nearby plaza or thoroughfare, only to be pushed back once again. I saw it on dozens of occasions, the worst of which would come on August the 18th as

protesters moved to the Lavapies neighborhood after being cleared from the center to make room for the visiting Pope Benedict and his legions of pilgrims from around the world.

The violence of that first day led to a decision. About one hundred people decided to return to la Puerta del Sol and stay there until the elections were held on May 22nd. The first group was ushered out by the police. More came the following day, and again the next, until the mass was so great that the police stood no chance at removing the protesters. It was organic the way that the narrative, the energy, the excitement emerging around the prospect of change infiltrated and mutated the intentions and capacities of the population.

It would not stop there. The fervor, televised and tweeted, would spread across Spain and even the globe, effecting movements as far as London, New York and Cairo. It was viral.

Over the next five years, Claudia and I would watch that impromptu movement evolve into a viable political party as we both pursued our own artistic and academic paths, and learned to run a business in the midst of a crisis.

The 15th of March, 2011 was an important day. It was Claudia's birthday, so I had flown back to Madrid to see her. I had a ring in my pocket that night as I headed to meet her at Teatro Fernan Gomez. I was planning to propose, which was as out of character for me to do as it would be for her to accept. We had no way of knowing that in exactly two months, on the 15th of May, just before I would return from Phoenix to live full time in

Madrid, the Puerta del Sol would begin to slowly fill with activists, the indignados, and that the political landscape of the nation would begin to shift. I had no way of knowing that the actor we would see in *Caligula* that night would become a friend, and that his story would impact the project I was struggling to write. That night, talking to the actor Jose Juan Rodriguez Jabao, Claudia and I planned a trip that would take us around Andalucia, winding up in Valencia where we would stop at his house, meet his wife and have dinner. On that trip we would see and meet activists, pilgrims, disaffected Spaniards. We would see historical sites that housed the main actors in Spanish colonialism, as well as Latino youth who had come to occupy the same spaces as a direct result. We would, over the ensuing years see that small activists movement burgeon into a political party with all the grammars that entailed. I would watch Claudia grow into a working actress, and witness firsthand an exciting moment in independent Spanish theater. And, I would learn much about my adopted home as a result of being a part of and witness to all of these processes of evolution, adaptation, interpretation.

Walking towards the theater I began to think about the day I first arrived in Madrid five years earlier.

I had been in Madrid for all of 25 minutes. I traipsed through the long series of hallways that lead from the baggage claim to the metro, my brother's old Navy Duffle, filled with books rather than clothes, hiked up over my shoulder. I had never been in Madrid, let alone Spain before. I had no idea where I was going. The plan was to find a hostel and head to the University where I would begin my studies in a week. The train station at Barajas was airy and modern, with tall dark ceilings, lights rushing into the

distance of the tunnel. My illusions were instantly shattered, as most of the notions I had about Spain were based in some nostalgic misconception of a country that had hardly changed since the renaissance. The train rolled in, and it too, seemed more futuristic than antiquated. It made the 'el' back home in Chicago seem like a relic, a collectors item for classic train fetishists.

The faces on the train were all foreign to me. The skin tones were similar to some of those at home, but the palate more limited than what I was accustomed to in Chicago. European. White. Maybe a little bit tan, inflections of distant North African roots. There was little variety in hair color. Dark browns, edging towards black. Eyes too. Their bodies told stories of migratory paths, of long occupations and centuries of cohabitation, of colonial return. In a strange way, I felt a part of all of that. Though my roots were largely Irish, I was caught up in the romanticism of the "European" and of learning about the ficitive body from which the Americans, at least in part, arose.

Those who spoke, spoke loudly and confidently, with a rush of hand gestures in a language I did not yet understand in the least.

The train was a long open tube. The cars each connected to the next by a short accordion-like bit which made the cars look like the belly of a snake that was burrowing beneath the city.

There was a group of young, dark-complexioned girls standing around me. One of them had a tattered orange sweater draped over her arm. The sweater edged towards me, and I did my best to ignore it until I felt a hand underneath it brush against my wallet.

"Hey!" I said, pushing her hand away.

She and the group of girls began gesturing wildly and speaking rapidly as if to accuse *me* of something. I couldn't understand.

People around the train looked at me, then at the girls, smiled knowingly and continued their conversations. The girls, still in protest, moved to a place a little further down the belly, and shortly thereafter, there was another similar commotion.

I'd been robbed before. I spent most of my life in Chicago where being robbed was practically an inevitability. My mom had been robbed at gun point. My roommates had almost all been robbed at least once. My best friend's father was stabbed in the basement of his apartment complex over the quarters from the buildings laundry machines. My grade school basketball coach lost a son not much older than me to gun violence in the alley behind their home. I'd seen a young women's nose smashed, blood gushing onto her cream-colored blouse as two young boys ran off with her purse in broad daylight. As a teenager I'd run from basketball courts when other boys my age showed up to the park with guns. I had known people who had lost their own lives or those of loved ones in robberies gone wrong. It was part of life in Chicago, as if the city somehow demanded that its citizens were always prepared to receive or inflict violence. It was the story that we told about ourselves and our surroundings that had something to do with masculinity, identity, ethnicity. It was part and parcel with the identity Nelson Algren had explored in *City on the Make* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Maybe it even had a little something to do with the toughness and edge of writers like Hemingway and Richard Wright (both of whom would flee the Chicago area only to later indulge to some

lengths their fascination with Spain, Hemingway famously during the Civil War, and Wright to lesser notoriety in the post war Franco era.)

There were fights on the far Southside at the Irish bars that lined Western Avenue that could start over the triviality of eye contact. And, in the back of the yards neighborhood amongst the Italians trying to live up to the machismo of generations past even as they rose solidly into the middle class. There was the tension between the Mexican neighborhood and the Puerto Rican, the strange transition of the city as projects like Cabrini Green were slowly dismantled and Section Eight housing traversed the city in new decentralized experiments. There were territory wars that were frontlines in the massive international drug trafficking networks. There were conflicts amongst different groups, and, there were efforts to rise within them.

Months before leaving Chicago I'd been face down on the ground with a gun to the back of my head, worried that I was about to have the lights go out for ever, like a firefly squeezed between the fingers of some jubilant child on a giant lawn in Kansas. It was that easy to extinguish a life. It was that easy to end the narrative that runs ceaselessly through our minds for x number of years. The sense of an ending brings the narrative reality of life into focus.

"So," I thought as I lay in the middle of the park, "this is how it ends."

"Close your eyes and count to 100," the man said, leaning over me near a bench in the center of Wicker Park. It was 2 am. The lights in all the houses surrounding the park were out, allowing for little to no hope of being spotted. I kept my eyes closed tight as I counted, not sure if I was hearing or imagining his footsteps in retreat.

When I opened my eyes, he was gone.

*

In part, it was in the distinctions between those two experiences that I found my home. In Spain, the crowd looked upon the attempted theft as if it were a light rain shower at a picnic, no need to pick up the basket and move everyone inside. There was no real danger. In Chicago, it was thought of as an inevitable reality, a constant and inescapable feature of urbanity, that trafficked in life and death.

*

Chicago is a city that has struggle in its narrative DNA. It was taken violently from the indigenous. What has become one of the most impressive architectural marvels of humanity was wrested from a marsh after one of the biggest natural disasters of the 19th century wiped out the first draft. Immigrant communities from Ireland, Italy, Germany, Poland, and Mexico to name a few, mixed with African Americans who headed North and they all battled to come out of the slaughterhouses, train yards and factories on top. Upton Sinclair, Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, Carl Sandburg, Studs Turkel and later Stuart Dybek and Sandra Cisneros all document the slow transition from immigrant to "American" as it plays out in the city. If there is a "Chicago School" of Literature, its subjects are immigration and the struggles of assimilation and integration. The city's literary history reflects its actual history: difficult, cold, soulful, hard. Nonfiction works like *Hard Ball, There Are No Children Here,* documentaries like *Hoop Dreams*, and even Spike Lee's *Chiraq* chronicle the ways in which those struggles continue to define the landscape. When I walk the streets of Chicago, all of those

narratives come with me. Like any body, a place can only build on the material it has. The narrative landscape of Chicago builds on the material that constitutes its past.

But, this book is not about Chicago, and it is not about violence, at least not overtly. It is about the way that narrative arises and how it acts on the world to create *Semiospheres* and *Umwelts*, and how an awareness of those processes can lead us to read our surroundings and build better futures. The Semiosphere is the realm of signs, the physical space in which language and signs dominate: the realm of communication. Umwelts are species specific realms where language or signs are shared and communication is to some degree mutual. This dissertation is about how actors and activists participate in a process of *emergence* that is the creation, transmission and adaptation of narratives that form and mutate our social fabric both for better and worse. It's a book about stories. About what stories are, materially speaking, and about how they shape our world.

*

It was August of 2006 when I arrived in Spain. It was two years before the crisis would strip the nation of the jobs and wealth that it had been amassing at an incredible pace in the decades since Franco's death on November 20th, 1975. The president was Jose Rodrigo Luis Zapatero, a socialist who had won in the aftermath of the 2003 bombing of the Atocha train station. The attack had led to a lack of confidence in the ruling Popular Party when they tried to attribute the attack to Basque separatists instead of Al Queda and as such avoid criticism of their support of the US effort in Iraq. 2006 was before the youth unemployment rates would surge to over 50%, before evictions would become a

staple of the evening news, and before the Popular Party would be swept back to power, erasing so many of the cultural gains made over the previous decade and imposing austerity and tax hikes to satisfy European lenders. The city, and the nation, was in the midst of a cultural renaissance with funding of the arts at all time highs and massive infrastructural investment creating one of the world's great transit systems and public artworks and unrivaled museum systems. The bubble that was forming in the mass development of the Mediterranean and the areas around the major cities had yet to be detected, and the sense, it seemed to me, was one of general optimism.

I had just finished my undergraduate degree after some delay… The first time I'd left school it was to hitchhike around the Southern United States in search of a mercurial lover who had a penchant for leaving me behind. The second it was because I felt a bit of terror at the prospect of 3 more years in Iowa City (a city that in retrospect I've learned to love, and the home to some of the most creative and lasting friendships I've ever forged), and I've always felt, too, that it had something to do with the urgency of the world in 2001 and 2002. I needed the city, my city, Chicago, in the chaos of all the change that fell upon us in those months. To me, at that stage in my life, Chicago was somehow real and important in ways that Iowa City was not. A protest on Daley Plaza or Lakeshore Drive seemed to scream louder than one that traversed Iowa City's Pedestrian Mall. So, I went home. I worked in a frame shop, a clothing store, a domestic violence shelter, restaurant after restaurant, a children's theater, a record store, and I studied. When I was 26 I was finished with school and what I had learned was that more than anything, I did not want to be finished, and so I applied to programs for creative writing in New York, and Literature one for literature in Madrid.

*

I spent the first months in my new home walking, teaching, eating and studying. I supported myself thanks to student loans, and the supplemental income that came from teaching English in private acadamies. I would wake up in the late morning and hit the streets. A notebook in hand, I randomly moved from neighborhood to neighborhood looking for the perfect café where I would sit, scribbling notes, people-watching and slowly working my way into the reading list for the MA program. I would wind up under a tree near a stream in *Parque Oeste* where I would write a bit more before finding a cheap menu del dia of artichokes and ham followed by roast chicken or grilled fish. In the afternoons and evenings I would either attend my MA classes or teach English in one of a dozen offices or homes. At night, I invariably found a bar where I would try to find someone to practice my Spanish with whoever was patient enough to tolerate my fumbling attempts.

It was in October that I met Don Fernando. We called him Don Fernando because he was older, and there was something regal about him. I had gone into a random bar in the Chamberi neighborhood.

"Hello," he said in perfect English as soon as he saw me.

"How did you know I spoke English?" I asked.

He laughed before telling me, "You have Guirri written all over you!" A *guirri* is a foreigner from the US or Northern Europe. "Come," he said, "I'll buy you a beer and you'll help me freshen up my English."

He was a wealthy man, a patron of the arts who spoke impeccable English. He was Basque, but his family had moved to Columbia to start a business exporting roses back to Spain. They returned, he said, after his brother was kidnapped in Bogota.

Large and jovial with a gray beard and a nice plaid shirt that was tucked in underneath a significant belly, he had an inviting smile. He pulled me close as he talked, but his was not a closeness that made me want to retreat, rather I felt lucky to have found someone who not only was willing to talk to me, but who seemed really interested. He bought pint after pint and never stopped talking.

"Spain," he told me "is a country that is always at a party, but the party is only there to give light to a very dark night."

It's a comment, reminiscent of Hemingway's story "a Cool Well-Lighted Place" that has remained with me over the ten years since, and has guided much of my thinking about my adopted home. Spain likes to think of itself as brooding and misunderstood, though it usually comes across as filled with bluster and eros.

"What will you do for Halloween?" he asked me.

"I'm not sure. I don't think I have a plan…" I said, though I had agreed to go to a party that another grad student was hosting.

"I am producing a play in a small theater in La Latina," he said. "One of the actors is a dear friend and he is throwing a party at his house. You must come."

I hadn't really intended to go. I had planned to find the party at my classmate's house across the Manzanares River. It was a neighborhood I had yet to explore. I walked across the bridge. The Rio Madrid project which would soon turn the river into a beautiful winding playground complete with modern pedestrian bridges, ziplines and

dangerously elongated swings dangling from the undercarriage of bridges had yet to be complete. In 2006 it was a squalid construction site traversed by a puny river, a creek really. On the other side is the Usera district.

The gorgeous balconies of the Las Austrias neighborhood gave way to blocky towers that looked like projects in Chicago. What little English populated the streets of Malasaña and Huertas faded into pure Gato (Madrileños pet name for themselves) accents. Deep-throated, guttural bursts popped from the open bar doors.

"Ta' Lo," Said a man in his late fifties as he exited a bar, a newspaper folded under his arm, a black tobacco cigarette dangling from his lip. *Ta' Lo* was the abbreviated madrileño for hasta luego, or 'see you later.'

I stopped the man. "Uh…" I began, "are you acquainted with this street?" I asked in horrid Spanish, pushing a piece of paper into his hand.

He pushed the glasses dangling around his neck onto the bridge of his nose and squinted at the paper.

"Ven," he said gesturing for me to follow him.

After a block in which he managed to ask me a long series of questions I could only guess the content of, and forge poorly constructed and probably irrelevant answers to, he stopped abruptly and pointed. "Allá!"

I went to the door and pressed the button, but there was no answer. I tried several more times, but to no avail.

Defeated, I began to wander back towards the river, loosely approximating the walk back to my neighborhood, when I remembered Don Fernando's offer. I sent him a

text message as opposed to calling, because it would be easier for him to ignore if the offer hadn't been an authentic one. He responded immediately and energetically.

"Por Supuesto, hombre! Ven!" ("Of course, man! Come!") The address followed.

I jumped into a cab and headed towards Cuatro Caminos, a largely latino neighborhood in the North of the city where Bravo Murillo meets Avenida de Reina Victoria. The taxi driver spoke incessantly as I practiced a tactic I'd begun perfecting: Nodding and saying "sisisisi" to everything that came my way, laughing when it seemed appropriate, which had already led to more than a couple awkwardly misplaced expressions.

The party was on a high floor of a tall building. There were balconies off of the living room that offered a view of the plaza below. It wasn't a particularly beautiful plaza: McDonald's, a supermarket, a bus stop that apparently served as a sort of hub for many lines. The sounds of traffic rose from the street and made it even harder to understand the stories being told all around me. "Sisisis." I tried to follow the cues, the facial expressions and tones of voice. I nodded, smiled, laughed and frowned at what I hoped were appropriate times. The apartment was, I thought, though I wasn't sure, filled with actors. All of them gesturing dramatically and laughing as if there were a prize for most jovial.

A weird thing about being in a foreign country is that it is difficult to know when in the presence of fame. People spoke of directors, and jobs, commercials, plays, shorts, TV. But, it was unclear to me if they spoke of them in personal or more abstract ways. It was unclear to me if the projects they referred to were "important" ones. The apartment we were in was nice, but how nice? I had no context… I hadn't collected enough stories.

The second moment that led me to staying in Madrid came during that party. She was dressed as a witch and everyone, all the men anyway, at the party were trying to talk to her. Her skin was an olive tone that could have been Spanish, Indian, Morrocan… Her hair big and powerfully loaded into long hanging coils that could have meant Italy or Africa. I stood on the balcony smoking (I smoked then). I had been pretending not to notice her. When she came out onto the balcony where I had been hiding to momentarily escape the stress of pretending to understand conversations and mimic the appropriate reactions. She asked me something and I nodded with a stupid grin. She stood as if expecting something. Slowly my smile faded towards a sort of flattened, bewildered territory. What had she said? How could I respond?

"jou have one?" She pointed to my hand.

I gave her a cigarette (she smoked then, too).

"You are from donde, where?" she asked.

"Chicago," I said. I always answered Chicago because I'd found that it led to better responses than The United States. Being specific led to interest spiraled into the more general contempt. People had impressions of Chicago that could counter at least some of the impressions they had of the US. In those years, the Bush years, the well of thought around the United States was thoroughly poisoned. The conspiracy theorists had momentarily come to dominate the mainstream, and the general rules about efforts to avoid generalizations had been given a moratorium in the case of people from the US. It was strange how openly, how easily people attacked all things USA, and oddly, for the first time in my life I had found myself coming to the defense of so many things I would

have attacked myself had I been at home. The criticisms were too easy, facile, general. Their was no nuance to the contempt, however justifiable so many of its elements. The world, so it seemed, needed its good guys and bad guys and the US was full of fat, ignorant, bellicose nationalists who only understood the world in terms of profit and loss. At least it seems that is what the rest of the world was intent on thinking.

"I love US," she said. This was the first time I'd heard that since my arrival from anyone other than Don Fernando.

I nodded.

"Mi madre, my mom," she asked for validation with her eyes. I nodded and she continued, "live Boston."

"She is American?" I asked.

"Yes. Domincan but live in Boston." There was a broader definition of American I was fast learning about.

"You know Boston?" I asked.

"I know?" She hadn't understood the question.

"You have been?" I clarified.

"Oh. Yes. Have bean."

Somehow we extended that conversation throughout the rest of the night. When we left the party I shared the elevator with Don Fernando.

"Tio," said Fernando using the word uncle which roughly translates as 'dude,' "you're a professional." I wasn't entirely sure what he meant.

"Esta chica," I said in clumsy Spanish, unable to finish the thought.

We ended up at a late night bar each with plastic Dracula teeth mumbling inarticulate, mangled phrases. She spoke Spanish and I said "sisisisi," nodded and smiled. I could tell she thought I was a great listener rather than the truth: an incompetent Spanish speaker.

I waited a week to invite her to dinner. Spanish people don't generally do dating. They go out in groups and maybe a couple finds its moment to steal away.

"Dinner?" She said when I called her before she broke into a potentially offensive hysterical laughter. "You're so stupid, so American!"

We met at the exit of Metro Bilbao. She was wearing a brown leather jacket and jeans. Her hair was as big and unruly as I remembered from Halloween. At dinner, a restaurant in Chueca, the gay capitol of Europe, she spoke and I nodded.

"Sisisisis," I said trying to hide my nervousness.

After dinner it was pouring rain. We walked down Alberto Alguilera towards Plaza Colón underneath the downpoor.

"La lluvia," she said pointing at the sky. "Bajo de la lluvia."

"Under the rain," I translated.

We ran, sopping wet across the plaza. It was the first time I crossed Plaza Colón, having no idea that one day Claudia would introduce me to an actor whose work there would influence my own.

"Underneath, abajo?" she asked as we ran.

I nodded an affirmation of her vocabulary.

"Underneath is one very important theater."

*

The classroom was anespectic: white tiles and mint green desks. The windows of the basement room were at street level, so that we could only see passersby from the knees down.

A women walked in and we were all uncertain whether she was one of us, another student, or the professor. She seemed to hesitate before walking to the desk, putting down her belonging and approaching the white board with a fat red marker. She wrote: Dr. Clara Molina, History of the English Language.

It was my first class in Madrid. Dr. Molina introduced herself. She had studied Linguistics at Berkley. “I loved my time in the US,” She said. Her expression, eyes squinted, head tilted, seemed to doubt the statement even as she made it. “Except, no one touches you in the United States.” She looked to us for confirmation that was slow in coming. “After my first two weeks I just burst into tears in my advisors office,” she smiled at the memory of her own breakdown. “When she asked what was wrong I realized I had not been touched since I arrived. Contact is important! It’s part of language.” In Spain to speak is often to be in physical contact.

The class focused largely on the ways that languages shift and change through cultures and time, and this point about the absence of physical contact in communication stuck me as prescient. I didn’t realize at the time that she was setting the groundwork for what would become an obsession for me: the material reality of story.

She seemed nervous when she walked into the room on that first day. I was a wreck. It was my first day in a graduate classroom, after graduating from a school that locals in Chicago refer to lovingly as “Northeasy.” I felt like an imposter. I was terrified

that everyone would be smarter. Better prepared. More authentically intelligent and implicated. After all, I had really wanted to be a writer. I had accepted the invitation to this program basically because it was in Madrid, and what could be better than that? I was desperately anxious in almost all social interactions, and the effect was multiplied on foreign soil.

"Ryan," the question from Dr. Molina began, "how are you finding Spain so far?"

I pretended I had something in my eye and ran to the restroom, my heart pounding, my head swimming. Why? It wasn't a difficult question! I was finding Spain to be phenomenal. I had met interesting people. I had spent hours walking the parks and museums, drinking cañas and listening to Spanish. I was living this romantic fantasy I'd had since I was old enough to have romantic fantasies. Why couldn't I even summon a "good." I took a few minutes, splashed water on my face, focused on taking a few deep breaths and returned to class.

Dr. Molina introduced herself, we went over the booklist, we introduced ourselves, a task which I found slightly more manageable. By the end of the hour I knew I was in the right place.

We talked in depth about the role of fashion in forming a language, and the deep antagonism between the descriptivist and prescriptivist schools of linguistics. The angst associated with the different approaches seemed to parallel so many political perspectives and scientific approaches. And one word kept arising: Evolution. The evolution of language somehow hung in the balance between these progressive and conservative forces, between the need for radical departure from the status quo and the necessity for a consistency which allowed for intelligibility. This idea seemed massive to me! It seemed

like something that could be draped onto almost any frame and make perfect sense! There was a need for structure to tame emergence and for emergence to insist that structure adapt. This was language, but it was also life. This was gravity versus expansion; competing economic systems; nature versus nurture; nostalgia versus cold realism, and adaptation versus malignance… The list was endless. Four years would go by before I would meet Dr. Joni Adamson at Arizona State University who would introduce me to the work of Jesper Hoffmeyer and to biosemiotics. In her works I saw how my creative style might actually have a home in the ecocritical community, and in Hoffmeyer's I saw the path to finally uniting language and the body, to giving stories their rightful place and, to some degree, putting to rest the doubt cast on the material world by metaphysics. Here was a material approach to language and evolution that explained the realm of ideas in terms of the body and embraced the role of narrative in academic work. We need stories, because we are stories. Much of what I am trying to say here is simply this: our intense reliance on narrative is an evolutionary strategy that can only emerge from everythihng that served as its scaffolding. Our bodies, our biological realities, define our relationship to language, to abstraction. Evolution paved the way and set the boundaries. Story has everything in common with its biological predecessors. It allows for us to maintain cultural integrity and to challenge the limits of our identity as we grow into future versions of ourselves. The actors and activists that are scattered through this text all grasp this to some extent. They allow for the inevitable grammars of political and artistic systems, while at the same time they challenge the very borders of those grammars through emergent processes. They allow rehearsals to dictate texts, or they seek direct democracy through social media or hand symbols lifted into the air in a city's

central plaza. Most importantly, understanding emergence allows one to read their surroundings and adapt to the story of which they are a part instead of insisiting on the continued dominance of tired narratives whose usefulness may have past and only persists because of tradition. Traditions are of enormous importance so long as they continue to feed some crucial cultural purpose, but, like all biology, they must die, adapt, regenerate. Stories cycle though our culture doing this work.

With Dr. Adamson and material ecocriticism I had found my intellectual home, just as in Spain I had found my physical one. Yet another year would pass before I met Lee Gutkind who would help me see how to begin to blend research and story.

A couple of months after that night in the rain Claudia moved in to my apartment. Little by little my "sisisisi" reflected more understanding. Two years went by. I finished the Masters and moved to China in 2008 for a teaching job as the economy fell out from underneath the Spanish miracle. I went back to Spain for the Summer and the Winter holidays. Claudia stayed in Madrid where she studied acting and performed whenever possible. She did plays by Calderón, Shakespeare, Lorca, as well as a few original works and small parts on television programs, commercials and in short films. In 2009 I moved to Arizona to start work on a doctorate. Claudia came to visit. We drove from Arizona to California, then to Oklahoma, Chicago and Boston stopping to eat and see everything we could along the way. I spent Summers and winters in Madrid.

When I finished course work I moved back to Madrid for good. The narratives that follow trace the evolution of various groups after my return: of new emergent ideas calcifying into political structure, of actors developing their craft despite a crisis ripping

through their funding, and of my own knowledge of Spain's landscapes and traditions. The activist community became part of the mainstream political class when the Podemos party that had its roots in the 15-M movement took the mayoral elections in Barcelona and Madrid and then in December of 2015 took 23% of the vote in parliamentary elections making them a national force. This fundamental change to the country is in the background of all the stories that follow. They take place between September of 2006 and January 2016, nearly a decade. At the same time, they are stories of genetics: adaptations and cancers, evolutions and stagnations. The deaths that mark all lives, also mark this text. During the unfolding of the events narrated Claudia lost a woman who acted as her mother to cancer, and I lost my father to alcoholism. Jose Juan Rodriguez Jabao's story is one that is propelled by death, and my nephew lost another of his uncles to drug addiction during a visit to Spain. The invisible stories, the genetic realities and political undercurrents that sweep unseen across our bodies, be they human bodies or political ones, are immensely important. We must learn to read the unseen if we plan to live in collaboration with the planet. The 15-M movement arose from unseen tensions, unheard frustrations and was dedicated to stopping the deshaucios, or evictions, that rose from the crisis. It was an adaptation of the political script, a shift in the cultural DNA. These are stories of a nation and a world in financial, environmental and spiritual crisis. These crises, and all of what I will call, making use of Uexull's vocabulary, human *umwelts*, are the result of narratives that fill our worlds in ways similar to and not separable from genetics. The world is in very literal ways, a *written* world. The stories that we write also write us.

The relationship between the stories we tell and the people, and in turn societies, we are, are part in parcel with the inseparability of body and mind. As theater director Juan Carlos Corazza points out in the final chapter, stories are not some superfluous output of society, they are our parents and our children. They are as integral to us as our skin, or our technology. My point is not so much that narrative is a necessary result of biological processes, though that is true, but that biology is in its essence narrative. That we tell stories and rely on them to create memory and build culture because we are made of the same stuff. The implications of this are vast. It means that the stories we tell, and how they are interpreted, are essential to who we are, they change and create us in ways not unlike genes.

This dissertation is a consideration of what it means for a narrative to evolve. It is a look at activists, actors, writing, and how the landscape, both physical and cultural is created by and creates us. It is a project that repeats questions such as Richard Wright's, when upon arriving in Iberia as he told it in *Pagan Spain:*

> I began to ask myself how did I get there [to the Americas], who brought me there and why? What kind of people were they who dared the oceans to get slaves and sell them. It was in Spain, where tradition has not changed, that I found my answers… But my going to Spain had yet another and deeper meaning, a meaning I did not know until I got there. I found myself a man freed of traditions, uprooted from my own racial heritage, looking at white people who were still caught in their age-old traditions. The white man had unknowingly freed me of my traditional, backward culture, but had clung fiercely to his own. This is the point of *Pagan Spain*.[1]

The point of the current work is to explore the "why" of that freedom and that "clinging." How can story be conservative, how can it be radical, and where is the stasis?

[1] Wright. 110.

This is a collection of moments that span a decade. They are moments of telling the story of watching *Hamlet* in a converted slaughterhouse in Madrid the day before attending the one and only bullfight I will probably ever need to see. Then there are moments that engage the theoretical, the historical in ways that are necessarily more regimented, though I have tried to relegate those moments to footnotes wherever possible. I chose this form, because I feel that it is the most honest. To attempt to remove subjective experience from academic work strikes me as somehow unrealistic. I want the reader to know how this knowledge affects me at the personal level. I want readers to be able to couch the research in a narrative vehicle, in the hopes that it will travel farther. The story is often one of actors: Spanish and Latino. One of those actors is now my wife, the others have, in the process of conducting the research for this project, become friends. It is a theoretical work attempting to apply the tenets of *Biosemiotics* to literature and politics. It is about Spain, and what such a country can possibly mean. It is not a project that is tied closely to one era or genre, though names such as Wright, Hemingway, Shakespeare and even James Cameron, reappear. It is above all else a narrative project that will combine creative nonfiction and ecocriticism.

*

Claudia's career as an actress in Madrid has given me unique access to the world of theater in and around Madrid. My research is interjected into our story of travel throughout Spain and experiences with actors and activists in ways that are intended to create a juxtaposition of intellectual ideas and the world that they occupy. At times the stage actors give way to activists involved with the 15-M movement which developed in

the aftermath of the economic crisis in Spain and spent months occupying Madrid's central plaza, Puerta del Sol.[2]

Actors and activists are strangely similar in this context. They read from and adapt, interpret, a script that helps to encapsulate a chaotic world of power struggles and ambiguous morality into guiding narratives. Maybe Irving Goffman has already made this point, but maybe there's a subtle difference. It is not that we all act out identity, or that identity is somehow an act. It is that life/communication are one and the same. One becomes by doing, by acting. We are not all constantly telling stories. We are stories.

I was only able to meet the actors and activists that show up in these pages because I made Spain my home after a polite robbery and meeting an amazing human being at Halloween party.

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[2] Throughout what follows, I employ "narrative scholarship," an increasingly accepted technique within the field of ecocriticism as exhibited in such works as *Indian American Literature, Environmental Justice and Ecocriticism* by Joni Adamson and other well known scholars such as Scott Slovic and Serenella Iovino. My definition of narrative scholarship is deeply informed by the creative nonfiction methodology laid out by Lee Gutkind in *You Can't Make this Stuff Up,* where he writes "In some ways, creative nonfiction is like jazz—it's a rich mix of flavors, ideas, and techniques..." (6). It takes a "material ecocritical" approach, which is to say that it treats minds, spirits and language as necessarily "bodied" entities, and creates an absolute union between beings and the matter that constructs them as well as their habitat.

I couch literary and biosemiotic research on texts from Shakespeare to James Cameron in story and enhance the story with research in the hopes that both become more accessible to a wider public. My project aims to embody what Wendy Wheeler describes as ecocriticism's, "syntheses between the sciences and the humanities" (3). It is my strong opinion that creative writing has the power to offer the general public insight into the reasons why new research in biosemiotics is so important to the work that activists are doing to raise awareness of how humans can live responsibly on the only planet that is our home. This will help readers of creative writing and cultural studies scholars understand why they ought to embrace science, especially in literary and cultural studies, as a path to better understanding of the role of the humanities in an increasingly scientifically oriented world.

CHAPTER 3

LIGHTS

A spotlight hits the stage, but there's no one there. The curtain waves from some recent contact, music plays and the crowd holds its breath in anticipation. The light has shone. They know what that means. It should begin any moment. But, no one takes the stage. First a minute passes, then five, then ten. The anticipation grows until it becomes rage. The crowd, unsettled, begins to yell, to make demands. This isn't the way it is supposed to go!!! And, then, just when it seems irredeemable, a small man in red and white striped pants walks out, sits on a stool that is located in the center of the corona created by the spotlight. He wears a dummy on his right hand who looks just like him. They both open their mouths halfway as if to speak, and then close them. Nothing frustrates a crowd like the absence of a narrative.

In 1987, long before she became my *pareja de hecho*, or what we would call in English a partner in a civil union, and long before she chose to dedicate her life to acting, Claudia Yamell Ruiz Liriano sat on a runway in Santo Domingo, a city founded by Bartholomew Columbus sometime between 1496 and 1498. She was waiting for a flight to Madrid in what would be the completion of one little spin in the dizzying cycle of history after Columbus. She was 8 years old. Her parents were young and her maternal grandmother, a dark skinned woman of African decent, had decided that it was in everyone's best interest that she spend a few years with an uncle in Spain. The few years would turn out to be permanent. Her father, a meringue musician who played trumpet for

Sergio Vargas and traced his roots back to Spain, didn't want her to go, but he took her to the airport anyway.

All she'd known was Santo Domingo, and while people spoke of *la madre patria,* the mother land, she knew that no land could make up for the presence of a real mother. Spain's difference and its distance were complete abstractions, as was the meaning of a few years with an uncle. Her fingers moved uncontrollably as she boarded the plane. When she was nervous she tapped the piano scales that her father had taught her against her leg. She took her seat by the window. These were the days before draconian airport security, when family could still accompany loved ones to the departure gate. She looked back from the window to the glass wall of the terminal to catch a last glimpse of her father who would be watching the plane taxi away. She couldn't see him at first. Her eyes roamed the length of the terminal. She knew he couldn't have left yet. He had promised to stay and watch her departure.

Just when she'd lost all hope of spotting him she saw a flash of light. And then another. And then a third. Her father, who had bought a little silver flashlight for his keychain at a gas station on the way to the airport was signaling to her from the terminal, saying goodbye in their own private Morse Code.

It was those flashes of light, those signals that could have been coming from the tail of a firefly, a bioluminescent plankton, a plane soaring over the Atlantic, or a lighthouse signaling the coast of Gibraltar, that made it all real. He wouldn't be there to put her in bed. He couldn't sing her songs in the morning, or take her to the beach on Saturday afternoons. Those flashes of light were the last fading signals of her father, and the first glimpse of what this distance, this time, might mean. Signals are universal

amongst life forms, and universally they are the building blocks of meaning. Each blinking light an effort towards the universe becoming more intelligible.

Twenty-three years later, we were about to set out on a trip around the South of Spain to see the sights and walk the streets that Bartholomew Columbus's older brother Christopher must have known as he awaited word in 1492, year of the completion of the *Reconquista,* as to whether he would receive his ships and his purse to embark on his voyage to the Indies. The voyage would change the course of history for the inhabitants of what would come to be known as the Americas, and also the power structure of Europe. For better or worse, it was a voyage that five hundred and some odd years later would allow for people like Claudia, a Dominican, and myself, a Chicagoan of Irish stock, to occupy our particular worlds. I had been living in Madrid with Claudia on and off for 5 years, but during that time I had also taught in China, and studied and taught in Arizona, which meant that when I came "home" to Madrid at Christmas or for the Summer, there had been little time or money to travel. I had never seen the south where she had grown up: Andalucia, Seville, Cadiz, Cordoba, Granada and all the other old haunts of the sailors who began the process of populating the 'New World' with European customs, languages and DNA. My studies had focused on colonialism and the influence of Spain on the English imagination in those first waves of colonization particularly in terms of how literary production treated bodies and landscapes, and how in turn people treated them. I aimed to integrate ideas of ecology and the biology of signs (biosemiotics), but it had been difficult to make the connections that I intuited to be true, come across on the page. There was something about language, the way it populates the human imagination, which spoke not just to the cultures people had created, but to who

we are as a species. I suppose that anyone who dedicates their life to literature must sense something profound and originary not only in stories, but in the very act of storytelling. It is a strange thing to do, to obsessively record and pass on information, yet it is ubiquitous amongst human societies, and amongst all living organisms. Life is the passing on of information, be it biological or that subset of the biological, the intellectual.

We were cleaning our apartment when Claudia yelled "*Lo tiro o lo quieres*?" "Trash or do you want it?" I put down the dish I was washing, walked down the hall to the bedroom to look at what she was holding, waiting to determine its fate: another year of being safely stowed in the back of a dresser drawer, or a trip to some dump on the outskirts of Madrid.

It was a little silver metal flashlight of the kind that might be attached to a keychain.

"Keep," I said.

She twisted the butt and it flashed into my eyes. She twisted it again and it went off. She looked confused, then pale.

"Or throw it out if you want," I said.

She sat on the bed and put her face in her hands, letting the flashlight fall onto the sheets.

I picked it up. It was surprisingly heavy for its size. The shaft was made of a dense, textured metal.

I clicked it on, then off, then on, then off, each click accompanied by a slight popping sound and a circle of light on the Marilyn Monroe poster that hung on the wall. It looked like a stage light.

She looked through her fingers at the light as it opened and closed around the image.

"What is it, Clau?" I put a hand on her shoulder afraid her crying was my fault. I didn't suspect that it had more to do with her father, and to some extent even Christopher Columbus.

What occurred to me as strange, or at least noteworthy, was the way in which this object which resembled an object from her childhood had brought on such vivid memories and invoked such an impassioned response. This signal, this little metal flashlight, had become imbued with a narrative that was somehow so much more than its physical presence. It was a thing in relation to a context, part of a story of immigration, of lineage, of a history of people moving across the Atlantic in ships and returning centuries later by plane. For me, it invoked lighthouses like those at the opposite edges of the Atlantic, Santo Domingo and Trafalgar, signaling the faintest hints of continents of meaning. For Claudia, as an actress, the sheer coincidence of its opening and closing on the face of Marilyn Monroe invoked the spotlight on a stage, the strange illumination of a body telling stories that have been written, performed and shared across generations. For me, it invoked Shakespeare: Prospero's dream, the world as stage. Claudia was experiencing something much more personal, intimate, but we both engaged the object and immediately brought it into a seemingly endless web of narratives. Welcome to the

human *Umwelt*[3] where we are always and everywhere aiming to model and remodel the world around us.[4]

We kept the flashlight. It still sits on a shelf in our apartment, a reminder of some strange relationship between life, light, memory and the creation of meaning. A strange reminder of home, of family, of dreams and of a trip.

[3]Umwelt is a term coined by Jakob Bon Uexell which refers to the species specific semiotic environment. It will play a key role in the discussions in this project

[4]Wendy Wheeler describes the three types of world-modelling which originate with the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics and were later articulated by Thomas Sebeok:

> The form of world-modelling undertaken by all living things has been identified by the term primary world-modelling systems. The form of world modeling introduced with the human evolution of mimetic, then articulate, language, is designated as a secondary world-modelling. Finally, the production of self-reflective representative forms of knowledge in art, religion, philosophy, politics and so on is termed a tertiary world-modelling system (Wheeler 141).

The tertiary kind is what is of concern in this essay. It is in the tertiary space, the space of art and philosophy, or religion and politics, where humans can take ownership of their unique relationship to story as conscious *umwelt builders,* creating the possibility to begin to edit the stories life tells, as opposed to merely being subject to the myriad chaotic emergence that compose the evolutionary process. At the tertiary level, shaping and responsibility become issues, and gardening becomes, rather than the mindless act of a bumblebee, the location of intent, and begins to demand an ethics.

CHAPTER 4

MUTATIONS

…no model of the world - be it philosophical, religious, scientific or political - is ever complete; the world is a rich book of signs which bears infinite rereading. For ecocritics such rereading is an urgent political task.

—Wendy Wheeler[5]

The script has been received. The duty of each actor is faithful reproduction. No need to translate for modernity, to interpret the lines in the interest of injecting some sense of the personal. Just read and repeat. Perfect reproduction. The third wall, that invisible precipice between the bodies which act and those which receive is approached. There is no sentry. No door. A whisper at best, through which text will be delivered and absorbed in the form of lateral prompts. Or, perhaps every actor is meant to translate, to interpret, to create divisions within tradition, room for the modern, the different, the hopeful, the reactionary, the nostalgic, the dark. Perhaps there is no third wall, only open space through which meanings of literally infinite potential, negative and positive, can move. Perhaps it is the spectator on whom falls all of the impetus. The creator merely makes suggestions to the world, the world makes decisions as to how to unfurl them. And then, maybe there is not even a spectator per se, rather a series of infinite systems, infinitely intertwined, merely under the deception that they are individuals perceiving something of subjective intellectual import. That third wall has certainly been breached

[5] Wheeler, Wendy. Postscript on Biosemiotics: Reading Beyond Words—And Ecocrticism. 139.

in the past. John Wilkes Booth left the stage for the audience, and that oh so crucial node in our national web was lost. Actor's can diverge from the script, and even cross the third wall. The story is not outside of life, but a crucial piece within it.

Jose Juan Rodriguez Jabao stood with a friend underneath the rain on the corner of Gran Via and Calle Montera. The buildings that lined Madrid's most illustrious street loomed ornate, imposing under the gray October skies. To the Right, Calle Montera descended into a construction zone flanked by prostitutes from Eastern Europe and South America. Jabao and a friend from their world-renowned acting troupe, Teatro Buendia, stood holding cups of diluted coffee in front of a McDonald's as the bus carried their companions to the airport. The bus disappeared into the mist as the two actors, unemployed, with no home, and with no solid plan, looked at each other, terrified, "Que hemos hecho?" (What have we done?), asked his friend. "No lo se. No lo se…" (I don't know. I don't know…), is all he could answer. Under the light rain they walked down calle Montera, past the prostitutes who looked especially downtrodden in the rain, and tried not to think about what the next days, months, and years might bring. It was 1998.

It does not rain often in Madrid, but when it does it falls hard. Just like the night of my first date with Claudia, water spewed onto Plaza Colón cleansing the massive statues dedicated to Columbus and his discoveries that inhabit Los Jardines de Descubrimiento, the strange, unbotanical gardens of cement and steel that rest above the Teatro Fernan Gomez. I walked through the rain, into the gardens and over the plaza

where I had first met Jose Juan Rodriguez Jabao. It was in this theater that Jabao, an actor of Cuban origins performed for the last time with the troop that had helped define the way he saw theater: as a living text.

The enormous Spanish flag at the center of the plaza drooped intermittently under the weight of the rain, and blew wildly in the winds. The plaza, all concrete and steel, aesthetically cleansed from any biological contents that may normally be associated with spaces labeled with the title "Garden," struck a glaring contrast against the wildness, the wilderness, of the storm. Edenic narratives ran through my mind, those of Columbus's time, and later of Shakespeare's, of the deeply felt need to transition through labor from the wilderness of Eden to the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem, of the need to cash in nature for the safety of technology. The battle between the brutality of nature and the seeming safety of the technologically constructed human habitat that marked the renaissance and its obsession with Ovidian myth, marks us even today. Of course, there is no outside of nature. Nature is not a place, but a set of inviolable rules. You can play with the timetables, but you cannot change the game set between the sidelines of birth and death.

I thought of Jabao, moving across the stage of Teatro Fernan Gomez, embodying a version of Shakespeare's Caliban through the ape like gestures he had spent months crafting in Teatro Buendia's practice space, a converted Orthodox church in Havana. He moved, adapting a story that had pulsated through 400 years of human culture, setting itself against the brutality of unnamed nature, empowering people to empathize and communicate across generations. He was carrying a secret all the while, one that would force him to make the life-altering decision of abandoning his troupe. As he moved

across the stage of Teatro Fernan Gomez that night, he thought: *this may be the last time I ever take the stage*. The narrative he wished to write of his life was being altered. To continue to be a storyteller, an actor, he had to adapt the narrative he told to himself of how his own story would unfold. Narrative, and narrative alone, is what separates the living from the inanimate world. All of life tells stories through genetic processes, movement through space and time, perception and expression. The human ability to construct and adapt the stories we tell is our most powerful tool.

March 15th, 2010: Claudia's birthday, two months to the day before the foundation of the 15-M (15th of May) movement, and the day that I met Jose Juan Rodriguez Jabao. I had gone to Spain over Spring Break to begin to bring my things before a permanent move in June, as well as to see Claudia for her birthday, and to propose. I'd had the ring in my barren Tempe apartment for months. Every time I took it out my heart pounded. It was the promise of a life with someone I loved, it was the promise of a life abroad. As I walked to the theater, I carried it in my pocket, touching it from time to time to remind myself, to make it real.

The sun set late in its typical Spanish fashion. I walked down Alberto Alguilera past Alonzo Martinez as it only hinted at dusk near 7pm. The terrazas lining the sidewalks and the plazas that sat as hubs at the center of neighborhoods oscillated with the hum of conversations that came and went like the tide. Life in Madrid pulses through the streets, through hundreds of densely packed bars where people gather to talk politics, to eat tapas, to drink cañas or to watch Real Madrid, the Yankees of European football. El Pais, the nation's paper of record, screams its headlines from around the world and they

filter through the ears and minds of people with their elbows perched on bars throughout the city. It is a natural phenomenon, the movement of information, the assimilation and preponderance of stories that inform and shape reality. It is a biological necessity that makes humanity a superorganism as opposed to mere individuals or tribes: language, our defining feature, might even make the case for human kinship with viruses, or bacteria, or cancerous cells as much as to other mammals. The rhythms of nature inhabit the city no matter how hard people may try to expel them.

Alberto Alguilera is a busy tree-lined road that transitions into Carranza, Sagasta and finally Calle Genoa which leads past the conservative party's headquarters, where there is usually a small protest and often a massive one, and, inescapably, two different Starbucks, before coming to its grand conclusion at the massive Plaza Colón, or Columbus Plaza, and its central feature Los Jardines del Descubrimiento, the Gardens of Discovery. In Los Jardines de Descubrimiento an immense Spanish flag droops under its own weight. A boxy stone sculptures, Monumento al Descubrimiento de América, and a tall white stone pillar with gothic décor, Monumento a Colón, are dedicated to Columbus and his voyages. The most striking feature of Los Jardines is the striking paucity of vegetation. These gardens are of stone and metal, hard geometrical shapes and fountains set to timers. They challenge any traditional understanding of the title. The architecture of the gardens, and their dedication to Christopher Columbus, speak volumes about the relationship of the human to the material world in the colonial context and beyond. They seemed to have gone much further the human desire to tend, to improve through techne, and to have entered into some realm where the only agency was of the human variety. These were shaped for some distant inscrutable species that represents a fundamental

human tension between dynamism and stasis that is perfectly symbolized in thinking about gardens and their tending. That they are dedicated to the age of discovery and its most renowned titular seemed somehow apt.

Staring out over Plaza Colón, I could not help but see the strange and unintended metaphor run rampant: this garden had been made so inhabitable to human life that the botanical had been all but banned, and the result seemed strikingly undesirable, unsustainable. And this brought into focus another narrative of the garden, one that goes back to Augustine and is prevalent throughout the works of Milton: The City of God, which can be attained through labor through the course of human history. It is a progressive model that asserts that through technology we may be able to grow closer to our heavenly destiny. This model does not look back to the garden, but forward to the city which was meant to arise from the material of the garden. Plaza Colón sits at the juncture of Barrio Salamanca, the city's richest shopping district which is flanked by foliage, and Recoletos and the Paseo del Prado, both stretches that are spotted with fountains and greenery as they pathe the way to the Prado and the Reina Sofia, museums which house the great works of Spanish art from the Flamenco painters collected when the Flemish were under the Spanish throne, to Goya, Velasquez, Picasso and Dali. On the Southern edge of the plaza sits the Biblioteca Nacional, the National Library. Of course, the man for who the plaza itself is named sits at important junctions, too: junctions of continents and cultures, cruelty and science, discovery and exploitation, humanity and nature.

I crossed *La Castellaña*, a major thoroughfare that runs from the four modern towers in the *Plaza Castilla* at the cities northernmost edge, and changes names twice (to

Recoletos and finally Paseo de Prado) before arriving at the *Atocha* train station, which saw the March 11th attacks in 2004, descended a staircase, passed the *Café de los Artistes.* Claudia was waiting in front of the ticket booth. I approached her, my hand buried deep in my pocket to assure the most expensive purchase I had ever made did not disappear. We gave the traditional two cheek kisses, handed our tickets to the usher and took our seats in the *Teatro Fernán Gómez*. Claudia had mentioned to me that Jabao had been part of the cast for *La Otra Tempestad*, a play I had heard of, but as yet not seen.[6]

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[6] Days after our meeting, while considering our conversation and his play, I sat in the window of my steamy Madrid apartment, the windows open to capture anything resembling a breeze. I watched the news on television, and was struck as two images ran back to back. The first was an overhead perspective of Hurricane Irene, which had already made landfall in Puerto Rico and *Hispañola*, and was heading for the East Coast of the United States. It spanned 500 miles and would hit North Carolina the following day, moving slowly up the coast, passing DC and New York. The second was a wind-ravaged first family leaving a helicopter and walking across the White House lawn towards shelter. It was impossible, with The Tempest fresh on my mind, not to think of the strangely juxtaposed images of power—that of nature and that of the manmade variety, of politics and technology, of disease and the dedication of an individual to save a loved one. No amount of consolidated political will can change the simple reality of 120 mile per hour winds and torrential rain, no amount of prayer or money can guarantee health. I thought of the temptations to animism that are inherent in such storm. In the introduction to *Material Ecocriticism* Iovino and Opperman write in their definition of how the more than human world can aid in "writing" reality:

> "Nonhuman" here denotes "a community of expressive presences" (Abrams, *Becoming* 173): not only sentient animals or other biological organisms, but also impersonal agents, ranging from electricity to hurricanes, from metals to bacteria, from nuclear plants to information networks. Contrary to the vision fixed on human supremacy, a different approach based on a confederation of agencies implies that things and nonhumans in general are no longer seen as mere objects, statically depending on a subject, but as "full-fledged actors" (Latour, *Pandora's* 174). (Iovino et al, 3).

The hurricane takes on a role, not only as a metaphor for political and social turmoil, but also as an actor on the stage of the world, an agent in the sweep of history. The aim here is not to stake claims as to consciousness of the inanimate world, rather to call into question the sweeping claims to consciousness of the animate one. How has the storm written reality, and how have writers taken up its mantle and created metaphors in its wake, and in the case of such an untraditional cooperation, where should the agency be placed.

We met Jabao at a bar after the performance of *Caligula*. He invited us for *cañas,* small glasses of beer that many Spanish drink in the afternoon and evening, in a little bar on an island between southbound lanes of Recoletos, El Espejo. The bar looked like a greenhouse placed in the middle of all the congestion of the thoroughfare. It was a pastoral room amidst the chaos of an urban center. It was the exact opposite of *Los Jardines.* A commercial space made to look like a garden, as opposed to a garden stripped of botany. The glass walls were variegated by a thin, green metal structure, and the vines of plants reached across the walls towards the leaves of their neighbors as if they were trying to shake hands. Mimicking them, I tried to take Jabao's hand as we entered, but he ignored the hand, and stretched his arms out to either side.[7]

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[7] Jose had lived through hurricane's. They were commonplace, he told me. Hurricane's for kids in Pinar del Rio were like snowstorms for kids in Chicago: a reason to stay home from school. They were days outside of the normal order, escapes from the tedium of the usual. The winds would shake the trees and the houses, rattle the window panes and scuttle debris, but more often than not, everyone would be okay, and after a day or two relieved of all the normal duties, life would go on as usual. The hurricane was a disruptor of order, but only a temporary one.

It may be important to note that Shakespeare never uses the term Hurricane in *The Tempest*. In fact, he only uses it once in all of his writing in *Troilus and Cressida* where Troilus exclaims:

Not the dreadful spout
Which Shipmen do the hurricane call,
Constringed in mass by the almighty sun,
Shall dizzy with more clamour Neptune's ear
In his decent than shall my prompted sword
Falling on Diomed. (5.2.171-6)

From this quotation it could be assumed that Shakespeare envisioned the storm as something more akin to a waterspout than as a massive windstorm that might wreak havoc across whole regions over extended hours and even days. Richard Eden's 1555 translation of Peter Martyr's *De Orbe Novo* includes one of the earliest citations of the term "hurricane," and as Shakespeare took the name of Caliban's God Setebos from the text, it may be fair to assume that he had read the work. Samuel Purchas provides insight into how the terms may have been interchangeable in his *Purchas his Pilgrims* when he writes, "Oviedo reporteth of a Hurricane or Tempest" (910). We know that Shakespeare relied heavily on accounts of the hurricane induced shipwreck of the *Sea Venture* in

"Hola amigo," he said coming in for a hug, greeting me as if we had known each other for years, despite this being our first meeting. I was a little offended that he so easily picked out the American in the crowded bar.

"Hola," I coughed out as he squeezed me.

Bermuda in 1608, including that of a shareholder in the Black Friar's, and assumedly an acquaintance, William Strachney. It is not out of the realm of possibility that Shakespeare had heard firsthand accounts of the storm.

In his article for the September 20th, 2003 edition of The Washington Post, Ken Ringle offers an overview of the highlights of historical sources for 259 hurricanes that occurred between 1492 and 1996 compiled by The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). They include, among others, references to Bartolomé de las Casas, the famous chronicler of early Spanish colonialism and later the "protector of the Indies", who "considered the hurricane [of 1495] divine judgment against Columbus for his brutal enslavement and slaughter of the natives," the Taino Indians who first interacted with Columbus and had, for understandable reasons, fashioned some of their gods after the powerful storms, and the 1609 Bermuda shipwreck that stranded settlers for 10 long months as they awaited the repair of their ship and passage to Jamestown that many believe to be the source material for Shakespeare's The Tempest. The article, in less than 800 words, alludes to a complex story of colonialism, religion and art as they are shaped by a natural phenomenon, and it made something clear: Tempests have played a major role in shaping human consciousness in and of this part of the world. Nature writes our consciousness even as we tell our own stories.

The proximity of the accounts in Ringle's article indirectly led me to question the common postcolonial understanding that Shakespeare's source material was primarily the retelling of the 1609 voyage. It is at least possible that he was also dramatizing the earlier writings of Las Casas or even Peter Martyr—both of whom were translated and widely available in Shakespeare's London—gathering the available accounts of this new type of storm and using it as a metaphor for a changing relationship of humans to their environments and fellow beings, and giving nature a voice in the shaping of the garden. Nature's voice, in the character of Ariel, combined with weather in the form of the storm and the techne of Prospero, each representative of varying degrees of semiotic freedom and *umwelts*, to "write" the world. If such is the case, the play could be read not just as a work that has been convenient to re-appropriate in order to extract postcolonial or ecocritical meaning, but also as a play that actively engaged the debate—current to Shakespeare—about what the 'right' form of colonialism, along with the environmental and humanitarian consequences, might look like, a debate that was necessarily one formed in response to the colonial model of their most relevant rival, Spain. The relationship of human labor to Edenic narratives—which appeared or were invoked bountifully in Shakespeare's time by both Spanish and English writers, particularly, but not exclusively in relation to the colonization of the New World—are inextricable from The Tempest.

He was of average height and sturdy build. On a continuum from wrestler to dancer he would be closer to a wrestler. His skin was neither particularly dark nor light. His tight curls of short-cropped hair combined with thin metal-framed glasses to create a very professional impression, a look he later told me he adopted to avoid the police who had stopped him regularly on the metro before he had taken to wearing them. Inside, like many Spanish bars, it was well lit.

He exuded the strange force that permeates actors and musicians post-performance, despite a reserved, even shy, demeanor. He was in his early fifties, but had I not known it I would have assumed he was in his late thirties. His watch was big and silver, and occasionally distracting as he spoke with swift, smooth movements of his hands. He told me that he was a guajirito, a rural-dweller, from Pinar del Río, Cuba who had worked his way into the Instituto Superior de Artes Dramaticas de Havana, and eventually into one of the country's most lauded theatre groups, Teatro Buendia.

"And you, to what are you dedicated?" He asked in the typical Spanish formation of the question.

"Shakespeare," I said uncertainly. I was studying in a Shakespeare program, but my interests were really in material ecocriticism, biosemiotics and narrative in general. When I read for pleasure, my tastes tended towards the modern I had already suspected, but yet to confirm, Shakespeare would slowly become more a set piece than the center of my research.

"I first came to Madrid for Shakespeare," he said.

"A personal invitation," I tried, unsuccessfully, to joke.

"La Otra Tempestad," he said. "Un version de La Tempestad."

"Here in Madrid?"

"In this theater," he said gesturing across the street. "We went all over the world with that play. Even to the Globe in London. The house of Shakespeare," he said in a wizardly voice.

"And when did you move here?"

His smile disappeared, but only momentarily. He tapped a finger on the table and spun his caña. "Right after the play. I decided not to go home with my troop. *No volver.*"

He had travelled the world with the troupe and made a name for himself in Cuba, yet he had decided to leave it all behind and start a new life in Madrid. Because of Cuba's strict policies on migration away from the island, staying in Spain meant risking not being able to return. It was not a decision to be taken lightly. He had simply stayed after the performance in 1998, when he was thirty-six years old, leaving behind his family and a career in full swing.

There have been people affecting the landscape upon which Madrid sits since prehistoric times. Visigoth, Vandal, Roman and Islamic ruins dot the cityscape, or sit hidden beneath the layers of sediment and construction palimpsested onto the ground by later centuries, but it did not become a center of power until 1561 when Phillipe II, already at the head of an expansive empire reaching across Europe and the Americas, moved his court from Valladolid, site of the famous debates between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Ginés Sepúlveda as to the humanity of the indigenous peoples of America, to what is the present day capitol. The evolution of the city can be read in its archaeological sites, its architecture, and in its gardens. In 1492, Madrid was an outpost of no real

political importance. Toledo, Granada, Seville, Salamanca, and Valencia, amongst others, were all more important cities. Madrid rose late with the Hapsburgs and Bourbons. Much of its architecture would be more at home in Paris or Vienna than Cadiz, a city which served as the last sight on the peninsula for many America-bound Iberian sailors, and not coincidentally, bears a striking resemblance to Havana and other early colonial cities. And now, one of those people who had been created, in a sense, by that expansion into the unknown, had returned.

When we left him, we went for dinner. I still had my fist clenched around the ring in my pocket. I didn't have a plan. Not really. When the moment was right, I thought. Before dinner, over wine. We went to a bar near Calle Pez in the Malasaña neighborhood, which is probably best described as the Williamsburg of Madrid. Upon walking in, we saw Claudia's friend Sophie. Sophie was from Sweden, spoke perfect English and Spanish and worked as a bodyguard for wealthy Saudi Arabian women when they travelled abroad. They showered her with gifts, so despite average wages, she was always carrying the most expensive accessories: one of a kind type things with labels I had never heard of. I was somewhere between relieved and dismayed at the distraction.

"Hola," said Claudia between the customary two kisses.

"Hola, guapos! How are you?" Sophie asked.

We ordered a bottle of wine, and they spoke as my attention wandered from the conversation to my pocket and back again.

I have no idea how they got on to the topic of marriage.

"I know," I heard Sophie say, "the American's are crazy! Obsessed with marriage."

Claudia laughed. "It's true. All of Ryan's friends are getting married."

"It's a good excuse to go to the states," said Sophie, laughing.

"That's true," said Claudia. "But, I don't understand. It's like a type of mania. Who cares about getting married these days?"

The ring was digging into my palm as my grip tightened.

They both laughed.

The wine finished, Sophie went on her way, and Claudia and I headed for dinner at a little restaurant on Calle Vicente Ferrer.

"What's wrong?" asked Claudia

"Nothing."

"You seem preoccupied."

"No. I'm fine. It's…" I couldn't really fine the words, and a strangely long time had gone by.

"It's what…?" She asked.

"It's…" Still lacking for words, I pulled the ring out of my pocket and put it on the table.

It took her a minute to recognize the meaning. She smiled and then began to laugh. "You're so stupid! So, American!"

That was a yes.

The next day, back in the little apartment near Plaza Olavides where Claudia was living with her Catalán, Peruvian and Finnish roommates, I set to researching his old Cuban troupe Teatro Buendia. *La Otra Tempestad* had dealt indirectly with Castro's Cuba, and the plight of indigenous groups under the ambiguous regime by bringing an amalgam of characters from Shakespeare's works together with mythological figures from Yoruban and Araran cultures and housing them all within the colonial narrative of *The Tempest.* It has been read as a critique of colonialism, a commentary on the Revolution and a celebration of multi-culturalism. I found a recording of the performance at The Globe via New York University's website and watched it, looking particularly for Jabao's Caliban.

On the street beneath Claudia's window was a bar where someone always seemed to be singing. The impression was that the bar just happened to have a guitar, and the clients, with varying degrees of talent, would grab it and play. That day someone of significant talent was covering Silvio Rodriguez's *Ojala.* Silvio Rodriguez is a Cuban musician who Jabao had mentioned in our conversation the day prior. As the sounds of one of Cuba's greatest songwriters drifted up from the street, I put the play on silent and watched the movements of these actors that were somehow the result of indigenous culture, of colonialism, of rampant crony capitalism, of a reaction against that capitalism, of revolution, communism, violence, and of the education, art, medicine and poverty that followed. I thought of the steady flow of influence from Russia, China, Mexico, and of the sheer quantity of stories and histories and bodies that had rained down upon this little island, and how this director and these actors had come to embody it all, to give what was already a material reality narrative form, to make the invisible visible.

The song stopped, and the crowded bar exploded in applause. I turned the volume back up and listened to the voices of the actors.[8]

"In Cuba, the preparations were intense," Jose told me in Cuban accented Spanish that challenged my ear. The preparations, he said, were always were with director Flora Lauten. "The actors were a part of the process from the analysis of the text, to its adaptation, from the theoretical discussions, to the creation of sets and costumes," he said.

They spent months discussing what colonialism meant to Cuba, and how the works of Shakespeare contributed to the conversation. I was surprised by some of the conclusions Jose told me they came to.

"In Cuba, as in almost all Latin American countries, there have been many ways of colonizing," he said with a smile. "It's not only economics."

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[8] It was a play deeply concerned with an awareness of the vast levels of communication at work in the material world from signal transduction to hurricanes, and the untold potential that rests not in controlling nature, but in *seeing* it, *reading* it, coexisting with it as a co-creator as opposed to *merely* the material at hand for exploitation. There is no *mere* material. Material is everything including the bodies and minds that we call home.

While Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a play that is steeped in deforestation, the elimination of wilderness, and control over nature, expressing an anxiety in Early Modern culture over human subjectivity to the material world that was made possible by a perceived separation of one from the other, *La Otra Tempestad* was in a sense bridging that gap, celebrating the chaos of nature and lauding the human place within it not as frighteningly other, but as the stuff of our genes, our dreams and our stories. The island wilderness is a space in which the conscious effort of humans to "write" over the canvas of the natural world, to make something better, can be seen. Where *The Tempest* seems to illustrate this tendency, *La Otra Tempestad,* seeks to demonstrate simultaneously the power of creativity to speak to nature and the futility of efforts to dominate it. It isn't so much that humans write over nature, but that the act of writing, which we tend to associate so closely with the human, is actually a much broader category that already exists in all of the biological realm. Nature is narrative and narrative is nature.

And this narrative could go horribly wrong.

I pushed him to elaborate.

"In Cuba, specifically, the influence of the African population, the Spanish and the Chinese are brutally apparent, from the food, to the mixture of race and music. This was the first wave, then came the US."

I cringed, imagining I was about to hear the justifiable onslaught of what my culture had done to his, but Jose always had more nuance to his approach. "They left us precious architectural projects, American social infrastructure, and all of the beautiful cars that travel around Havana, not to mention jazz, cabaret that were performed in the hotels that tended to be owned by the mafia in the era of Capone and Lucky Luciano. Later, after the revolution, began the influence of Eastern Europe headed by Russia."

I wondered how it all came to mean in the play?

"When we began to improvise with the play, all of it was present. We mixed the characters of Shakespeare with our island, with African divinities, even the Yoruban religion which is very present in our culture."

The play simply let all of these elements come to mean in each other's proximity. There was no search to dominate, to label bad and good, or right and wrong, but merely to let the complexities of the past mean as they were inclined to in the present. *La Otra Tempestad* also had different ideas about how humans might relate to nature and to each other. It aimed to revel in the chaos of the natural world, of biology, not to relegate it to some space beyond the garden's borders, as it seemed, had happened in Los Jardines de Descubrimiento. The process of composition employed by the group and its director, Flora Lauten, was improvisational and cooperative. Flora Lauten has been recognized as one of Latin America's most important theatre artists, who "not only leads her own

company but has trained generations of actors and directors at the Instituto Superior de Arte at the University of Havana"[9] where Jabao studied.

The troupe gathered together in the Greek Orthodox Church in the center of Havana that the government had leant them to use as their theatre. A group of Cuban actors gathered together to paint the interior all black and constructed a stage in place of the pulpit. Before they could begin to sweat as artists, they had to sweat as construction workers.

The pews had been torn out and replaced by risers. In the basement they built a little café where they would hold smaller performances and poetry readings. They gathered there with nothing established other than the text which they would use as a starting point. One by one, or sometimes in pairs, they took to the stage and improvised. Jose improvised his Caliban as an ape: one arm dragging its knuckles along the ground, the other curled against his chest, his head tilted over his shoulder in the direction in which he moved as if it pulled him towards his labor.

He wanted him to be animal, of the Earth, to walk with his hands and his face near the ground from which he came. The only rule that Flora Lauten made was that while an actor could add whatever they wanted to the character in terms of context and gesture, what was added could not contrast with the character in the text. As the actors filled the stage with improvisation, Lauten sat unassuming in the corner, took notes and began to shape the adaptation. In this way, the players literally wrote the text as they improvised, the chaos of their ideas and movements little by little took form.

[9] Svich. 30.

Jose was 36 in 1998 when Teatro Buendia gave their first performance at the theatre that is now called Fernán Goméz (It was called Teatro de la Villa at the time). He had performed in Cadiz in 1991, but this was his first performance in the capital. I've seen pictures from him in those days. He is still very fit, but in his younger days he was thin, elegant like a dancer with a thin mustache that made him look like someone who might have occupied Schiele's Vienna.

They walked through the strange Jardines del Descubrimiento on their way in to the theatre. Jabao thought how easy it would have been, for someone who did not know what they were looking for, not to realize there was even a theatre underneath the plaza. Before the curtain was drawn for their first show static permeated the theater. All theatres rest strangely between the public and private, the imaginary and the real, and the effect seemed multiplied underground. The theatre is a social space, but in the darkness before the curtain goes up, there is a confusing sense that vacillates between isolation and interconnectedness, a sense that the performance is meant only for the particular consciousness the viewer happens to have the fate to be observing from, a sense that all of these actors are moving, breathing and speaking to specific sets of experiences and genetic accidents that have come to form a subject, an I. A spectator, ideally, is silent and passive, yet engaged in a collective communion between audience, actor and history that in their aggregate cannot help but become a reflection on the chaotic emergence that we call evolution. A spotlight opened onto the center of the dark stage, and the play commenced.

On that first trip to Madrid in 1998 the dry heat of Madrid was unbearable to the Cuban actors accustomed to the humidity of the tropics. They put buckets of water in

their rooms at night to humidify the air, to trick their bodies into thinking they were still in the Caribbean. They were a room full of young actors, half a world from home, stuffed into sleeping bags strewn throughout a claustrophobic Madrileño living room. Calibans and Ariels returning to tell their stories to la madre patria, and Jabao in the middle of it all struggling to decide between the life he knew and loved, and facing an uncertain future in a strange new place. He knew, he said, that he had to stay, but he was not sure that he *could.*

The play they had come to perform was certainly a critique of colonialism, but it was also a call to multiculturalism, to acceptance of the present in all its varied and complicated forms. These actors had come from one of the real islands that might have served as fodder for that space inhabited by the characters on Shakespeare's imagined island, his fallen Eden, to preach one of the legacies of the colonial moment: a global intermingling of peoples, cultures and ideas. Caridad Svich wrote of the group just before their US debut:

> In response to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Lauten and her longtime dramaturg Raquel Carrió envisioned not merely a post-colonial critique of Shakespeare's text, but also a collision of Prospero, Caliban and the other inhabitants of Shakespeare's mythic "islands" with the Orishas of Yoruban culture. In this syncretic collision, which incorporated texts from Carpentier, Paz, Marti and others, audiences were made witness to questions of cultural and social displacement—questions that arose from the labyrinth of Shakespeare's text that contest easily read signs of behavior, class, sexuality gender and race. *La Otra Tempestad*, which premiered in 1997, is representative of Teatro Buendia's theatrical work, which is deeply investigative and born out of months and years of research and intensive physical exploration with actors and designers.[10]

They slowed things down and aimed to "see" the text and the culture that it occupied and then rewrote it to tell a new story about nature, a new story about the garden. They

[10] Svich 30.

dispensed with traditional narrative principles, and the conventional borders of a work. They did not dismiss Shakespeare, they made him their own, bringing a huge cast of Shakespearean characters to their island, and mixing the European dreams with those of the local indigenous culture. They made him speak to their context, and they made theirs speak to his. They did not allow themselves to be bound by the text, not even by the confines of a particular play or writer, but they let their version of *The Tempest* sprawl about the "semiosphere" making meaning in unexpected ways. Their play was an act of (r)evolution. Henry Godinez, writing in *American Theatre*, has said that:

> *Teatro Buendia* may well be one of the only truly foundational idealistic theatre companies in the world. It is like theatre nirvana, where everything is about the work. Flora has said to me, 'We don't have much, but we have time,' so they 'investigate' a play for months before performing. This kind of methodology and intense commitment to the art of theatremaking is a vital part of the conversation we need to have as artists of America.[11]

A company that did not have the same luxurious budget of so many contemporaries used the main tool at their disposal: time. With this time, they aimed to see what others missed, and to create a narrative that more closely paralleled contemporary understandings of the human relationship to the world based on chaotic interconnectivity, coevolution and expanded notions of subjectivity. Jabao told me that working with Lauten was an education. He learned to see stories everywhere.

Upon arriving in Madrid for the first time, Jabao remembers the pig legs hanging in the windows of the bars. *Jamón Serrano* is a Spanish delicacy, which served as a sign of Catholic establishments where Jews and Muslims were not welcome after the *Reconquista* which was completed in 1492. The hams had lost their territorial

[11] Godinez 32.

significance over the course of five-hundred years, but they remained prominently displayed in bar windows across the city, leftovers of fading histories telling stories of which few remembered the meaning. They struck José as remnants of a fairy tale world.

At night they sat on the floor of their little Madrid apartment and ate roasted chickens from the *Museo del Jamón*. Spain had always loomed large in their minds. It had held a sentimental place in their imaginations. Cuba was the last Spanish colony in the Americas, and many Cubans had grandparents, or great-grandparents from Spain. While for most of the world, Spain still wreaked of Franco and the missed opportunities of the post-war development seen by the rest of Western Europe, to them Spain meant prosperity, a land of plenty. There was little in the way of news arriving from countries that did not form part of the socialist block in the 60's, 70's and 80's, so the ideas that people harbored about Spain lingered around the foundational Spanish literature and film that continued to form at least part of the base for Cuban culture: *El Quijote,* the plays of Lope de Vega and Calderon. José thought of Spain as a country of classical theater, where the wine was good and the chorizo savory; where the sun shined, but unlike in Cuba, it could also snow. The Spanish, he thought with disarming admiration, were a race of conquistadors and explorers who loved to sing and to eat. To Jose, the lost land was the *madre patria*; his garden was a place on the other side of the ocean where some part of his ancestry resided. It was an important insight from our conversation, that while Jose was critical of the colonial moment and all that it implied, he also considered Spain, and proudly so, a part of his heritage. His own ability to encompass the opposed forces of colonial interaction, both biologically and historically, helped me to understand the nuanced presence of the European and indigenous in the play. In some respects, the

actors were cultural hybrids just as *Los Jardines* were, but they had the semiotic freedom to rewrite the story.[12]

[12] The play brought their vivid, vital production straight to *La Madre Patria,* to Plaza Colón and its cyborg gardens. In an early scene in *La Otra Tempestad* three women in indigenous Yoruban costume give birth to one another, as two create an opening in their adjoined legs and the third crawls through, emerging with screams and cries that invoke a nightmarish threshold between the human and the animal. Once they have all crossed that biological threshold created by their appendages, they convene in a half circle, and assume the metonymical position of the witches from Macbeth who gathered on the Heath representing the evil forces that occupied the wilderness. These three women gather, not around a cauldron, but a ship of clearly European descent, which they begin to toss from one to other, playfully sending Shakespeare's mariners about the deck of their vessel. The power of the storm has been removed from Prospero's (who is represented with a strikingly Fidel-esque beard) hands and put into those of this hybrid of the witches from *Macbeth* and Yoruban tribeswomen. This is not a simple regression to nature, though the Yoruban are regularly represented as more closely connected to the natural world, rather it is a union of the two. The birth at the beginning of the sequence throws the viewer into a place of emergence as opposed to one of careful intention. The playful nature of the "witches" who occupy the nightmarish scene as they toss the boat between them seems to be of an almost unconscious nature: they are reveling in chaos, not seeking to settle some political score.What's (r)evolutionary about the work of Lauten and her company is that rather than subject one to other, they let these two living cultures, these two products, vastly different and surprisingly similar, of two different lines of semiotic emergence, coexist in the garden together. The company has the sagacity to simply let them speak to each other, to hear one another, and the result is one of the most powerful adaptations of *The Tempest* imaginable. Of course, it is not just *The Tempest.* Hamlet is on the island, the skull of poor Yorick always in hand, reliving the torment of Ophelia. Othello is there, and Lear too… In fact Jose plays Macbeth as well as Caliban, and in a final twist it is the Macbeth's lust for power that does away with Prospero's very nearly achieved utopia. Much of the action transpires in *cuadros,* or individual cells that become dimly lit on the dark stage when it is their turn to host the action, which allows for an ease of transition from one 'dream' to the next. It is almost as if Shakespeare is a bacteria that has gotten into the culture of the Yoruban tribe, and little by little the host cells and this new element are learning, adapting, cell by cell, dream by dream, to coexist.

Ariel, the bearded Prospero's ever-present assistant, is adorned in what appears to be a military helmet that is ridged to resemble a tortoise shell and tattered Yoruban dress. Her costume comes together in a union of modern and primitive, militaristic and naturalistic. As she goes about doing Prospero's bidding, it is easy to read her as the spirit of the Cuban revolution. Both herself and Caliban (played by Jabao) are the children of a Yoruban witch, and Ariel sets about imprisoning her brother in the aid of Prospero. The long standing tradition of reading Ariel as the spirit of nature which Prospero seeks to dominate becomes the spirit of revolution and war. In the post-Columbus era, Cuba still fends off efforts to shape the garden through corporeal discipline, and the inability of

"El teatro esta vivo," said Jose. "Every night it changes," he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes as he continued. "It is *because* there is room for change that each performance is alive."

Even though an actor repeats the same thing, the experience is ALWAYS new. Replication is *never* exact, not in biology, not in life, not in theater. Actors have to reinvent themselves in each and every performance, like a cell being split again and again. There is no looking back. Even if he wanted to reproduce the text and the movements in the exact same way from one performance to the next, the public wouldn't let him, because the actors and audience are both there in the theatre reacting to each other. I wondered if it was this awareness of the constant reinvention of art that had given him the strength to reinvent himself, his career.

Semiotic Freedom, for Hoffmeyer, is based on the ability for biological systems to make mistakes in their constant repetition, allowing for nature to maintain, even amidst the biological urge to repeat in endless chains of the same, its originary sense of chaos and unpredictability. Hoffmeyer put it in no uncertain terms, when the cell became capable of reproducing itself, and most importantly, doing so imperfectly, "The never-ending sequence of 'mistakes' and 'misunderstandings' that put all life-forms on Earth into a constant state of flux, the sequence which we call organic evolution, was set in motion."[13] The idea that the garden could ever be stagnate, or that it can be designed to

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nature to truly be seen, and stories of cooperation to be written. The play itself, not the narrative, but the form, provides the model of coexistence that avoids the recurring problem of inclusion/exclusion that ceaselessly inhabit human to human and human to more-than-human relationships.

[13] Hoffmeyer. *Signs.* 29.

perfection, is a false one. Relation and therefore change are the unavoidable realities in any system that can be considered living.[14]

Talking to Jose, I've come to imagine the process many times: Lauten sits in front of the stage, pen in hand, witnessing. As she looks on, the actors move about the room. They use the stage, the area in front of it, the whole theater is theirs as they try on different postures, different levels of fluidity and rigidity. They are dancers. They are writers, and she records the stories they tell with their bodies. They focused on the *action*; they put all of their energy into the corporeal, making sure their movements were clear and precise to reinforce the text with imagery so that the audience in the Globe could follow the story. Their work in countries where the language was not Spanish: France, Holland, Germany, Australia, South Africa… was almost like that of a ballerina. Sometimes, like in Singapore, there was simultaneous translation, which let them relax a little. In Spain, the crowd shared the language, but there were different expectations of the aesthetics of the theatre. The Madrid public was more accustomed to following the show based on the text, the story that was *told*, whereas *La Otra Tempestad* was based

[14] Biosemiotics provides the most fulfilling, most material foothold into thinking about the relationship of humanity to nature, one that unites story to life in a fundamental way that should deeply shake the humanities, and give a prominent place to ecocritical scholarship. It teaches not to seek the garden, but to see it. It does not stop at descriptions of outcomes of a humanity distanced from nature: fear of and hostility towards nature, though those are of some importance. It goes farther in explaining the fundamental relationship in material ways that may serve to alleviate anxieties, dispel myths and uncertainties, and lay the foundation for a knowledge-based cooperation of humanity with the natural world. According to Hoffmeyer, life is always and everywhere a semiotic process, and interpretation, play, "semiotic freedom" is always at work. Similarly, acting is something like a conversation, says Jabao. Every day, each moment, is different, and the crowd's reactions are often surprising. The premiere in London was a massive challenge for his company. For the first time they confronted a substantial language barrier. Then more than ever they learned that theatre is not text alone. They had to understand their audience, be in harmony with it.

largely on movement and image, which caused the audience to disconnect. They had to regroup, and put the focus on clear, precise narration, so that the words could carry the performance. The audiences in both England and Spain were respectful and attentive, but in Spain, they were more expressive in their reactions. The audience in Cuba had come to see them in the company's own theatre, and, generally, they knew what kind of performance they were going to see. They knew the cultural cues and references, which helped them to blend seamlessly into the action.

The body has been performing this sort of cultural adaptation for as long as it has existed. Biosemiotics puts storytelling into an evolutionary relationship with signal transduction[15] taking place at the most basic cellular level, and may offer explanations of the narrative impulse, but what has become of that impulse since the somewhat mysterious birth of consciousness is not made to fit into some deterministic framework. This knowledge gives language a material power. Again Wendy Wheeler:

> With biological systems and entities, interpretation of signs means the organization, or modelling, of a world (or Umwelt) of significance or meaning. It is here, with the world-modelling systems theory first offered by the Moscow Tartu school of semiotics and further developed by Sebeok, that we can finally come to grips with the idea that, as with all living things, human semiotic activity also involves (and is driven by) the need to produce technologies (in our case first nonverbal and then, later, verbal language) capable of more effective means of modelling the world.[16]

The world we see is always a palimpsest, overlaid and underwritten with the world we imagine, the reading and watching we have done, the stories we have been told and

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[15] Signal Transduction is what occurs when a signal is sent by some transmitter outside of a cell wall, and recieved inside, where it is "interpreted" by the cell setting off a cascade of chemical reactions which incite some action. Biosemiotics draws parallels of this process to the linguistics of Charles Sanders Pierce.

[16] Wheeler 141-2.

invented. And there is always room for interpretation. We are warehouses for our experiences in the abstract, which we share in unpredictable physical networks.

It was different, performing in one country and another, but it was also different performing two nights in a row in the same country, and even performing two nights in a row at home. As Hoffmeyer would tell us on the biological stage: change is unpredictable, even with a static text. How could Jabao quantify the levels of difference? Everything could change, even as the cast and the text and the cues were all the same. The only thing that an actor could rely on being consistent was the desire, produced from within, to communicate, to make the audience understand the intentions of the company. Change, for Jose, was the basis of interpretation, and while a sense of, and even passion for, the historical could serve an actor well, there was no great advantage in preserving nostalgia for some static source, for some original intent of an author whose reasons had gone to the grave.

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I still couldn't grasp it. I could understand a Cuban leaving home in search of opportunity, to escape repression, even simply to see the world. If he had said to me "I didn't feel I had the freedom of expression I needed as an actor," that would have fit into my narrative about why people flee life under oppressive regimes. If he had said, " My uncle was dissident, and I feared for my safety," or even simply "I'd always dreamed of living in Europe," I could have built some narrative that made sense. Any of those responses would have been substantial enough to convince me that an actor at the peak of his career, with no offers of work or professional connection, with no savings or potential income, would simply leave behind his career, his family, his country, and do so in a way

that could be permanent. This was a radical break from the narrative.

But, he never presented any comment of the sort. He offered merely an ambiguous shake of the head, and that same phrase, “Tenia que hacerlo.” “I had to do it.”

Again, I imagined him under the rain, on that strange corner uniting the most emblematic poses of Madrid’s history, of its economy: the intersection of the massive architecture of a European Capitol with its most beleaguered and abused citizens awaiting their clients. Jabao was at his own intersection, not knowing if he would ever work again, if he would ever find his way.

CHAPTER 5

CUENCA

Most divergence, of course, is productive, or at least harmless. It helps us see Hamlet afresh, to introduce Romeo and Juliet to a new generation, to move a young scriptwriter to take unexpected risks that move the consciousness we share on the screen and stage forward. Of course, if it moves too fast, there is no room for understanding. And if it moves too slow, our imagination ceases to grow. Art can incite violence, promote patriotic rises, feed revolutionary fervor, inspire heroic resistance, encourage heightened awareness.

Language is a biological reality that moves like any evolutionary process in the body. It can adapt, forging paths that could not have been forseen, and it can stagnate and even grow malignant.

Ideas, texts, can also be cancerous.

When I flew back to Madrid I didn't even stop in the apartment. I went straight from the airport to the bus station, and two hours later we were climbing the steep hill that leads to Cuenca's old town, luggage in tow, stopping every fifteen feet or so to make sure that this face and body were really the face and the body of the person I had spent every day of the prior year with, not a disembodied voice over a crackling international cellular connection, or a face on Skype speaking shyly from some loud café, but the real physical person. When a relationship has been predominately digitized for a substantial period, it is difficult to have confidence in the physical presence of the source of your emotions, and the medieval setting made it all the more difficult to fully trust the reality

of the moment. I've always wondered, but never asked, if the medieval backdrop of so many Spanish cities maintain their disorienting mystique for those who have spent their entire lives in them. Even if it is home, all you know, you must still be affected by the strange discontinuity with a technological society. It all feels like a stage, the setting of some renaissance drama. Or, maybe rather than a discontinuity it is a striking continuity that allows, even demands, people to be more attentive to the processes of history and the relationship each of us forms to time. In the United States, where most buildings are both relatively new and built to seem impermanent, our historical memories must suffer.

It was the summer after I met Claudia, and I had spent six weeks studying in St. Louis. She was doing a traveling play, *Las Picaras,* a montage of *la Lozana Andaluza, la Picara Justina* and *la Niña de los Embustes,* in small villages around the city of *Cuenca*, and I had gone to follow them for a couple of days.

The day after I arrived we woke up early and loaded the van with a small PA system, props and costumes. For the duration of the hour long drive we were flanked on either side by searingly bright yellow sunflowers, girasoles*,* as they're called in Spanish (from gira*r*, to turn, and sol, sun), because they follow the sun on its daily voyage across the sky. The flower's movement was a strange simulation of will power that made one wonder about other acts that might seem rooted in intention. The road wound through the hill-filled countryside with the atomic yellow fields stretching like a tired cat towards the horizon. The jet lag, the sleepless night, and this return to the presence of my all too recently digital mate had conspired to make the drive feel like a drug-induced hallucination.

I remembered another day, driving through a similar field, the announcement of Benazir Bhutto's death came on the radio. It was strange how the flowers, these slow-to-turn flowers, created the sensation that we were all prisoners to forces bigger than ourselves. Locked into staring at some distant source of light, to fight against some unfathomable inertia. Those fields were an eerie detractor from the place of human agency in history, they were stages filled with a million actors who never forgot their lines.

I asked Claudia that day, looking out across the fields of sunflowers, why she chose acting. She told me she caught the bug early.

"My father played trumpet for a famous Dominican meringue singer," she said.

Two years we'd been together and this was the first I had heard her mention him beyond "he lives in Santo Domingo."

"My earliest memories are of watching him on the stage. I fell in love with the stage."

I remember seeing a picture of her. She must have been five or six. Still in the Dominican Republic. A little girl in a white dress, fists on hips, a smile pushing the limits of her chubby cheeks.

"I remember to do model shows and *teatro* in school from very young. It was not about fashion I don't think. I just loved to be on the stage. It give me energy."

She was a ham from the beginning.

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The van arrived in the main plaza of the village and we began to set up the stage. The village wasn't much more than the central plaza, which was formed by a church, a

municipal building that doubled as a bar, and two series of ancient stone apartment complexes. There was a fountain in the middle of the plaza, but no water ran through it. It was the type of place where many of Madrid's movers and shakers return to on the weekend. It was where aging grandparents die alone for five days a week in a world that has little use for the agrarian throwbacks that spot the Spanish countryside. Spain is still a country of rural dwellers, but the children of this generation left the pueblos for the cities in hopes of finding work. John Hooper's *The New Spaniards* provides a fascinating account of this cultural shift which Spain has witnessed in the past 20 years. They haven't always found the work they were looking for in the big cities, and it remains to be seen what will become of villages like this, and what Spanish life will look like when they are the age of the lonesome elderly that occupy the aging towns. There are some signs that there is a nascent move back to the countryside embracing a more organic, eco-friendly lifestyle. In Navarra there is even a new school for shepherds that is pulling in some of Spain's best and brightest.

With the stage set, the old folks and their visiting families filled the plaza. Old men in cabbie caps and sweaters leaned on their canes, smoking *Ducados* and speaking in loud, confident rasps. The municipal center, which doubled as a bar, supplied *cañas* to the gathering crowd. Old women in shapeless floral prints shouted in gruff, tobacco-stained voices that rivaled the men's. Children ran through the legs of the standing adults and hid under tables. Their world seemed to exist at some invisible level, like elves or forest nymphs, their actions were right under the noses of the adults, but of another realm. As the play began, the kids inched, or centimetered, I suppose, from the enclosed worlds of their imaginations towards the shared imaginary space of the makeshift stage.

Claudia played a wandering vagabond, a light-hearted thief who found herself in the company of a stern old woman. There were identity shifts, adventures, antics. The kids laughed and shouted caution at the appropriate moments. The adults smiled and laughed, but seemed more concerned with appreciating the ways in which the children were appreciating, and with drinking their beers. Adults have their own ways of seeking imaginary spaces, of connecting to some stories and hiding from others.

When the play ended, as the actors took their bows, a little boy, a brown haired kid whose parents had dressed him like an old man in a sweater and plaid pants, ran smiling to his grandfather. He clung tightly to his *abuelos* leg. His grandfather smiled. He looked at the actors bowing, and then specifically at Claudia.

"Cual te gusta, la morena?" He said to his grandson. "Which one do you like, the dark one?"

"Si," said the boy chuckling, "la morena."

CHAPTER 6

THE PILGRIMS AND THE INDIGNANT ONES

"Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations, and arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world, within and beyond the human realm. All matter, in other words, is a 'storied matter.'"

–Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman[17]

"On one hand, the skin thus serves us as a kind of topological boundary; while, on the other hand, its semiotic capacity opens up the world to us—so that the question of where our 'self' begins and ends is not at all an easy question to answer scientifically."

–Jesper Hoffmeyer[18]

And the actions they take are not solid in their meaning. They travel through the audience, intercept with other minds, other ideas, other histories and become something new, something unexpected, something full of potential and maybe danger. One viewer walks out of the theater and into the world (a distinction which is rather arbitrary) and makes a comment, seemingly to himself, over a coffee. The comment has seemingly nothing to do with the play, with the actor's trained body and voice enacting a text that had traversed centuries. Yet, the seemingly unanchored thought takes root in the mind of the barista and she carries it home to her mother, who shares it with her lover, and so on,

[17] 55.
[18] *The Biosemiotic Body*. 173.

and so on it travels through the world changing shape and form, losing and gaining unexpected implications. It adapts to its environment, makes what meaning it can within the rigid structures of ideological minds. It thrives, or it dissipates into extinction.

We were in the café of a small hotel in Cadiz. The smell of coffee made us feel slightly more awake after a night of wine and *liquor de hierbas* as the sounds of the steamer and the clinking of porcelain and spoons filled the space and a newscaster rattled off the days happenings in fast Spanish that I could only follow with complete concentration. The waiter brought our breakfast: a toasted wheat baguette with grated tomato and olive oil. Breakfast in Spain was always a simple affair in anticipation of an abundant lunch. There was a grocery store on the screen and then an image of a lock.

"What are they talking about?" I asked as I took a bite and washed it down with coffee.

"The stores will put chains on their garbage cans so that people cannot take the food from them," said Claudia. The food that the supermarkets were locking up was not spoiled, but food that had merely approached or slightly passed its prime.

The taste of the grated tomato on my toast seemed to sour.

They were interviewing an elderly man who repeatedly asked the question, "What am I supposed to eat?"

In major cities around the world we are accustomed to poverty. In Chicago homelessness and hunger are daily sights that I, and most of my compatriots, have callously learned to ignore. In Madrid, the *Gitanos* regularly go through the trash, and we somehow see it as expected, normal, *cultural.* This, though, was something new. A well-

dressed man who could have been my grandfather was relying on trash for food, and those who needed to dispose of it were blocking his access.

As if reading my mind, Claudia said, "He looks like he could be my grandfather."

I briefly thought, but did not say, *how strange that Claudia would see this white Spanish man as her grandfather.* She is dark. Dominican. In many ways she is physically much closer to the *Gitanos* who she sees digging in the garbage daily. How is it that this man, this image, elicits more empathy? And then I wondered the same about myself… I let the thought slide away, but it alluded to very different ways of perceiving racial identity.

"How can they do it?" she asked. "It should be illegal to thow away perfectly good food."

*

It was the Summer of 2011, just a few months after meeting Jabao. The 15-M movement was in full swing. We walked along the stone breakwaters of Cadiz. It was 4 years after my first arrival in Spain, 19 years after Claudia's and 518 after Columbus' first departure. Cadiz is the oldest continuously populated city in Western Europe with a history of something like three thousand years. It has been held by the Phoenicians, the Moors, the Romans, the British, and is currently home to a US military installation, not to mention that it was the launch sight of Columbus' second and fourth voyages. The city is of a strange formation: a long skinny patch of sand that extends from the Iberian Peninsula into the Atlantic. Because of its shape, there is nowhere new to construct, no direction in which the city can expand, except the long thin strip of sand that connects the city center back to the mainland. Because it is built on sand, it is too complicated to build

up. Consequently, the population has stagnated at around 120,000 since the Middle Ages, and the architecture, at least that in the original city center, has not changed much. That is to say, it is not very different from what Columbus may have found had he come at the end of the 15th century.

"It looks like Havana," said Claudia.

"I've never been to Havana," I said.

"I know," she said. "You can't." It was a playful comment, as if she was keeping some delicious food from me.

"One day."

"We could go from Spain," she said.

"Do they like American's there?" I knew it was a stupid question.

"They don't like American's anywhere," she said laughing. "But, of course, even though they don't like you, they love you."

"It makes sense," I said.

"What?"

"That it looks like Havana."

"Why?"

"This is the last memory the sailors would have had."

We wandered the long beach that stretched from the medieval city to its more modern population centers. Apartment complexes appeared creating an anachronistic atmosphere as the canes and plaid of the old folks in the city center gave way to Latino youth sporting baggy jeans and Polo shirts with the collars popped. A punk rock band made up of what appeared to be Latin American high school students played on a

makeshift stage near the oceanfront, signs in the crowd decried the *deshaucios,* the evictions, and championed the cause of the *indignados,* the indignant. The sun set slowly over the horizon, hinting at their homelands on the other side of the Atlantic and my own, the United States that rested somewhere North of where they likely came from. The band was covering the Ramones "I Wanna be Sedated." The singer's broken English popped and crackled through a cheap PA system. As he enunciated the lyrics I thought of how we use the words of others be they in the form of songs, poems, stories, in the definition of our own identities, and I thought of how Columbus may have engaged in something similar here more than four centuries earlier, sitting at some wooden writing desk invoking the language of Petrarch[19] to explain his own longings, not for a woman, but for a land, for wealth, for adventure. It was a strange trip the poetic tradition had taken from Petrarch to Joey Ramone.

"Is funny," Claudia said staring at the bands with a slight and bewildered grin.

"What?" I asked.

"This kids. This music. This Place. I don't know. The country falls apart. Old people are eating the garbage. No one is working. But, here they is playing music in front of this beautiful beach. The people on the street with this reason that brings them together."

"The music?"

[19] Roland Greene on page 37 in his chapter "The Columbian First Person" in his book *Unrequited Conquest,* has pointed to how Columbus consistently employed in his depictions of the initial push into the Americas the language of Petrarchan love poetry, and how this language reflected attitudes that allowed for the domination of lands and peoples who were feminized and put into the position of scornful lovers.

"Yes, I guess. But, I mean the crisis. They are angry, but they are together. They are outside. They share the language of anger and this is good."

"Community comes from necessity," I said unsure if it was true. But it was undeniable that the energy, the community, the common-mindedness that we had felt and seen in La Puerta del Sol and in every plaza since, was born of, but not made of anger. There was something positive happening.

*

I thought of the long series of occurrences that had led to these kids playing on this oceanfront, occurrences that could not be cleanly removed from Columbus and perhaps even his taste in poetry. I thought of the chaos that in retrospect we call history, and how it parallels the chaos that happens in bodies and nature that we call evolution. These kids were modeling their own worlds just as Columbus had his, defining their respective *umwelts* through an engagement with their preferred texts. The Ramones, Petrarch, both reacted to notions that were current to them and created testaments that stirred their contemporaries, becoming nodes around which semiotic and material environments, were built. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann have made clear, the social and the natural are not distinct entities:

> The emerging dynamics of matter and meaning, body and identity, being and knowing, nature and culture, *bios* and society are therefore to be examined and thought not in isolation from each other, but through one another, matter being an ongoing process of embodiment that involves and mutually determines cognitions, social constructions, scientific practices, and ethical attitudes.[20]

It would be the sum of these semiotic models, the averages, the modes, and perhaps most importantly the outliers, that would define the human *umwelt*. And, of course, tertiary

[20] Iovino et al, 5.

world-modelling, the cultural construction of *umwelten,* as Adrian J. Ivakhiv writes, *is* what it *does*.[21] The stories that communities share are important because they will act on consciousness and from there on land and bodies: they will act on the environment.

*

The previous January I had gone to Tulsa, Oklahoma to see my father who was in hospice because of a liver worn out by years of alcohol abuse. One day when we were all emotionally exhausted, I had takem my Nephews Tristen and Spencer, who were 12 and 15, to see *Avatar*. It was strange: hiding in the theater, letting this external story absorb us for a few minutes, escaping from, or coping with the horrors of each day in the hospital. I felt like maybe it was inappropriate, to be indulging in this escape, but what was appropriate?

All I could imagine while watching Jake's body was that of my father, weak and immobile, wishing that there was some way to transition to another, one that hadn't been wasted by his succumbing to biological predilections. What an unfair twist in the narrative, that some of us are uncontrollably attracted to substances that kill us. Then, as a species, we have the same problems: fossil fuels, toxins, pesticides. We know what they do to us, but we cannot stop using them. We refuse to see reality, and grow complacent in our fictions. *We'll quit one day*, we tell ourselves as we hide in the dark theater.

"What did you think," asked Spencer when we were back in the car.

I didn't share my thoughts about his grandfather, or about our world. The reactions I shared were similar to those of many: more colonial Pocahantus-Last-of-the-Mohicans-white-guy-saves-the-day drivel, more indigenous cultures as magical saviors.

[21] Ivakov. 13. Qtd in full on page 79.

In the car I didactically gave my impressions to my nephews who looked utterly unimpressed by my efforts to inject postcolonial vocabulary. The white snow-blanketed fields of Tulsa's surrounding areas flew by as pawn shops, gas stations, church after church, and bars with parking lots abounded. I was born in Catoosa, Oklahoma. I grew up in Chicago, but something about the Oklahoma landscape, barren and brown, has always comforted me. It was my first home. From within the context of my father laying in wait to die, the land that he chose never to leave, the state that he loved, seemed somehow so much bigger than it ever had before. The cowboy hats, and pickup trucks, and reservations casinos, and stubbornly conservative ignorant sweetness… It all took on a different hue.

"But, it was a good story," Spencer interrupted me.

"It was derivative," I said.

"I don't know what that means, but it was *good.*"

"Be more specific," I said inducing my writing teacher skills.

"I don't mean like, a fun story. I mean it was *good*. Like the message. You're always saying all this stuff about big corporations and the oil business and stuff. I don't know. I liked it."

He was right. It was a movie that indicted all of the things I claimed to, and yet, my initial reaction was to dismiss it out of hand.

*

Across Spain, people were gathering in the plazas. They had gathered for what was known as *Botellón*, or basically an open-air party where they drank beer that was sold on the street by Chinese vendors, at least since the Movida Madrileña in the early

1980's. It was illegal, but tolerated (though that toleration was fast disappearing as the government aimed to push the public into the bars where their spending would be greater and taxed and avoid an unintended consequence of a smoking ban.) But the way they were gathering now was different. For one, there was no alcohol. It was often explicitly forbidden by makeshift signs among the group's scraggly-bearded leaders.

One day in Sol I asked a man in a dirty, tattered T-shirt who appeared to be in some position of authority why they had forbidden alcohol.

"Because of two things, he said: First, it gives them a legal reason to kick us out. Second, because if this becomes a party no one will take us seriously, not even ourselves." Then he asked me to stop taking pictures. "This is not for tourists," he said. I tried to explain that I lived there, and that I was an ally, but he turned quickly away and headed back under one of the many tents that filled the expansive plaza.

The conversations, the exchanges, they were growing, and it was tangible in the air. La Puerta del Sol, Madrid's heart, had become an international reference along with Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street.

We walked around the edges of the motion that pulsated in the city's center, peeping into the pulse of this international movement. It wasn't ours somehow. People were filtering in from around Spain and even beyond to fill these spaces with imagination and voice and to work to rewrite their relationship to their nations, to global and local economic patterns, to products and produce, to the very material world they occupied. In Spain, people walked from towns as far as Galicia and Andalucia to join the *indignados* in La Puerta del Sol. Don't get me wrong, we agreed with the cause. But, we felt like observers, like we were in the audience as opposed to on the stage.

At a march we attended one day we found ourselves behind the Actor's Willy Toledo and Carlos Bardem, the less famous brother of Javier. The Actors Union, of which Claudia was a member, was marching down the Castellana from Plaza Colón, where I first met Jabao, towards Atocha. Years later, Willy Toledo would introduce Pablo Iglesias whose role in the 15-M movement led to leadership of the Podemos Party, a party which would becme known for strong Communist sympathies and radical leftist ideas that to some degree even began alienating the Socialists.

"Viva Chavez! Viva la revolución!" Toledo would yell from a stage as he called Iglesias out to speak, and simultaneously ended his moment as a serious candidate in the eyes of many. A majority of Spaniards were not willing to see Venezuela as a viable model for a 21st century European country.

But this was before all that. This was before the rupture that was taking place had been given time to scab over into something political. This was pure. This was that necessary antagonism that any thriving system needs.

At that time, I had only seen Toledo on a television show called *Cuestion de Sexo*, in which he played a driving instructor who was going through marital difficulties, and in romantic comedies from the late 80's and early 90's. The equivalent, if there is one, would be something like marching behind John Cusack and Brad Pitt's brother who was with his ex-pornstar girlfriend (Carlos Bardem was dating a woman who was in the processes of transitioning from pornography to a career as a mainstream actress).

Needless to say I was star struck.

I couldn't help but look at their hair, their skin, their clothes. I don't know what I was looking for. Signs of quality? Of some world beyond my reach? Of fabrics unknown

to us lesser mortals? Was I looking for signs of surgeries or skin that had been treated by some elixir of the gods? The allure of fame is strange and I did not envy them for the regularity with which they must be subjected to gazes like my own. It must create such resentment! I was at the time barely aware of their work, and still, just being told they were famous made me all jello-y.

Claudia had recently started studying in *Estudio Corraza,* a school run by the internationally renowned Argentine acting coach Juan Carlos Corraza. Most famous for being the teacher and trainer of Javier Bardem, he also coached Penelope Cruz through her Oscar winning role in Woody Allen's *Vicky, Christina, Barcelona*. He worked predominantly with scenes from Lorca, Chekhov, Stringberg and Shakespeare as he helped actors find their footing in his method. A few months prior, Claudia had been in a short film that screened at a festival hosted by Cecilia Gessa, the actress in question, and by some miracle, she recognized us.

"Hola Claudia!" she said bouncing towards us, made up as for a film set with thick foundation and bright lipstick.

They gave each other two kisses and engaged in the long series of hellos that is Spanish custom. Men all around motioned towards her to their friends, and made commentaries with hands covering their mouths. I can only imagine they were not referring to her burgeoning acting career.

"Vaya locura, no?" said Cecilia looking out over the crown. It *was* crazy. A sea of people reaching far beyond our line of sight, all moving in unison, all disillusioned, and yet, all energized by this opportunity to push the system in new directions.

"Vaya," said Claudia

"Anda," she said, inviting us to walk alongside them, which we did for a very slow couple of blocks.

The Bardem family is an institution in Spanish film and stage. They also have several bars and restaurants, not to mention Javier's Oscar. In my mind I tried to assimilate their wealth with their success, their visibility, with their concern. Of course it's a good when wealthy and successful people devote their time, their resources, their energy, to causes, and yet there's always this strange doubt that gathers in some corner of my mind. It's Bono going from a party at the home of a Saudi Prince with Chris Christie, to farm aid. It's a doubt about capitalism, a doubt perhaps rooted in my own Catholic roots, the stories I was told over and again growing up about my religious culture's savior and his relation to material possessions. Can one be wealthy and good? Can one attain material success and be a friend to the poor? Is the story itself, the story about the integrity that can only exist in poverty, a move towards empowerment, or towards disempowerment? What is the correct story?

*

It was only a couple days after the march that we left for Andalucía. All along the way, we encountered two movements: the pilgrims who had come to see Pope Benedict, and the *indignados* who had created encampments in the centers of Spain's major cities, most notably those we had already seen and met in La Puerta del Sol. The groups represented very different approaches to material reality, and I could not help but think that the church's conflicted attitude towards material, an attitude that had motivated and supported some of the worst environmental and humanitarian consequences of

colonialism, was being relived in some small way in the contrast between them.[22] And then there was this nascent movement that, if it succeeded could only become the new incarnation of the institution that they were here to discard. Institutions are regularly torn down by their newest interpretation, which in turn faces the same problems and struggles to find new solutions. It's not unlike an actor approaching a classic text and attempting to find a new way to adapt, to interpret, to mean. It's not unlike a body seeking novel solutions to biological roadblocks. It's not unlike language attempting to create new meanings that expand our capacity to empathize across generations.

*

The roads of Andalucía wind along the coast from town to town, *pueblo* to *pueblo*. Clusters of white buildings sit upon the cliffs overlooking the seafront bars that slowly give way to larger homes outside of the city center, and then fade back into the sparsely inhabited spaces between the beach front cities. Farmland appears in unexpected places where cattle roam green hills which convert back into dunes as suddenly as they appeared. The water is never far. The waters that led to places as exotic as alien planets to

[22] The Catholic church's own conflicted attitude towards material and the exploitative history of colonialism to which Columbus (Colón) lent his name are both in some way problems that arise from cultural stories that are and are not told. There are stories of moral and technological superiority that allow for the decimation of those perceived as inferior. There are also stories that are constantly told by the world around us. We choose which to read, to see, and which to willfully ignore. *Avatar* becomes an important part of this story in part by sheer coincidence—it's release date briefly preceeded these events—and in part because both the pope and some of the protestors reacted to the film as one that was relevant.

Avatar is a new installment in the stories we tell ourselves about the history and present of colonial interactions, and while it is far from perfect, it seems to be doing something interesting as it departs from the narratives that have come before it. A road trip through such important historical terrain felt like the perfect occasion to study the interaction between the material environment, the stories told by biology, land, evolution, and the texts that have kept record of human cultural evolution, to see what Donna Haraway has called *natureculture*s.

the minds of the Spanish and African sailors that set out across them some five hundred years prior. Coexistence, though not always a peaceful one, is built into the landscape and the names. Al Andalus, the Arabic name that has evolved into Andalucía is the first sign that the history of this place is complex and multiple. Arabic fortresses, most famously the Alhambra in Granada, sit atop the hills of the important towns and forgotten outposts, competing against the massive cathedrals to define the story told by the skyline. Everywhere the sounds of bells rang out from steeples, intermingling with the intricate, varied songs of birds, indigenous and imported, creating a strange harmony between intertwining texts of evolution and its cultural counterpart.

Claudia had grown up in the south of Spain, and she was eager to show me her part of the world, and make me eat all sorts of things that, at the time, terrified me.

"You will love it," she said. "I'm going to make you eat all kinds of disgusting sea creatures."

I've since lost my fear of sea food.

We took the AVE, the high speed train, to Sevilla, where we rented a car and drove towards Cadiz, Conil de la Frontera, Los Caños de Mecca, Zahora, Tarifa, Malaga, then inland for Granada, before making a detour to Valencia to meet Jabao and catch the train home.

Avatar was everywhere in those months. A meme if ever there were. Yes, there was the advertising, the products, the "official" commercial presence, but there was a more organic presence. There were protesters in Gaza dressed as Na'vi. My nephew Spencer's comments, and later conversations in classes with Dr. Joni Adamson led me to

a different respect for the film. Maybe it was *good* as Spencer said. As Adrian J. Ivakhiv says in his book *Ecologies of the Moving Image*:

> Rather, a film is what a film *does.* And what it does is not just what occurs as one watches it. It is also what transpires as viewers mull it over afterwards and as the film reverberates across space between the film world and the real world, seeping into conversations and dreams, tinting the world and making it vibrate in particular ways, injecting thought-images, sensations, motivations, heightened attunements to one thing or another, into the larger social and ecological fields within which the film's signs, meaning and affects resound.[23]

A film, in other words, becomes an environmental actor. And a film as successful as *Avatar* which spoke directly to issues of environment and colonialism in a late industrial world, and which portrayed a material reality that was full of legible stories and aimed to teach the viewer to "see" the material world and its fellow inhabitants, to breed kinship feelings, could not be ignored. Jesper Hoffmeyer, Thomas Sebeok and Jakob von Uexkül had taken the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Pierce and begun to extrapolate them onto the material world in their respective fields, defining terms such as Uexküll's *umwelt*, which Wendy Wheeler has called "signifying environments composed of the signs which are meaningful in the survival of any species"[24] and Hoffmeyer's 'semiotic freedom.' Hoffmeyer explains the concept in the following way: "The most pronounced feature of organic evolution is not the creation of a multiplicity of amazing morphological structures, but the general expansion of 'semiotic freedom,' that is to say the increase in richness or 'depth' of meaning that can be communicated: From pheromones to birdsongs and from antibodies to Japanese ceremonies of welcome."[25] Biosemiotics was not only saying that communication had material effects and realities,

[23] Ivakhiv 13.
[24] Wheeler 140.
[25] Hoffmeyer, *Signs*, 61.

but that *semiosis is life*, and that life tended towards increased freedom of expression. Evolution is a series of communicative steps and missteps the sum of which is the biological world. By reading the material world, rather than insisting that it meets pre-existing textual limitations, people will be better equipped to sustain a healthy relationship with the environment.[26]

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Claudia and I weren't the only ones travelling around Spain that Summer. Pope Benedict had arrived with all the pomp implied by a papal entourage. He had come to visit a country in the midst of a severe economic crisis being compared to the stock collapse of 1929. Many of Spain's problems had arisen from selling off the Mediterranean coast—amongst other valuable lands—to foreign investors who built far beyond demand with the help of massive government subsidies. The horrendous structures, many of which remain empty, blight much of the Mediterranean coast from Malaga to Alicante. The banks, in crisis based on their own bad lending, now turned to repossessions of property, *deshaucios*, to fix their balance sheets. Pope Benedict was

[26] My call is one to a non-religious version of what Bron Taylor would call "naturalistic animism," or a connection to nature that, while scientifically founded, cannot help but hint at the sublime in its appreciation of the mystery presented by and connected to through nature. The point of departure of what I will call *Deep Green Awareness* from religion, lies in a reliance on material fact: mystery is already pervasive in the material world, and rather than force the material world to comply to ideals pre-established by a human text, humans need to be able to embrace the scientific ethic and read the text of the world, subsequently creating adaptive, fluid relationships to the texts that they themselves write. Put simply: human relationships to the material world, which are built through story, need to be capable of adaptation and evolution.
the cultural practices of the Na'vi with the assistance of Neytiri, the Pocahantas-esque princess whose parents, the spiritual and political leaders of the tribe, task her with training the "dreamwalker," the title that the tribe has given to the humans who occupy the avatars and remotely enter the forests of Pandora. He is capable of empathizing because he enters into the world-modelling systems of the Na'vi.

there to call for compassion in the midst of austerity measures imposed upon the economy. His presence, and that of the thousands of young Catholics that came to see him, clashed with the 15-M movement. The group had begun an alternate "pilgrimage," walking from their respective towns to the capital, the geographic and political heart of the nation.

The Vatican had recently said that *Avatar* "gets bogged down by a spiritualism linked to the worship of nature" and that it "cleverly winks at all those pseudo-doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium." The Vatican radio said that the film presented the idea that "Nature is no longer a creation to defend, but a divinity to worship."[27] Theorists such as Slavoj Zizek agreed, saying, "ecology is maybe the new opium of the masses,"[28] giving credence to the notion that "deep ecology" might be akin to religion in its capacity to dampen the senses, and dissuade people from deeper political investment by "greenwashing" the capitalist *status quo*. Jesper Hoffmeyer has written that the invention of the spoken word was a habit created by nature in order for humans, who had come to realize that the *umwelt* was different than the world, to empathize with one another, and to collectively free themselves from fate by becoming "*umwelt* builders." "But," he warns, "we had better take care. Nature's penchant for forming habits does not stop at language. Fate still has a few tricks up its sleeve, some of which are very much geared towards standardization. Religion is probably the most intransigent in this respect."[29] The 15-M movement was filled with young people many of whom fit the radical environmentalist description that the church feared delved into a subversive

[27] qtd. in Rizzo.
[28] *Examined Life*.
[29] Hoffmeyer, *Signs*, 35.

neo-paganism painted with animism. The church, being an inherently ideological institution, could not recognize that the fundamental drive of this group was to be multiple, expansive and non-dogmatic. While there were certainly members who identified as pagans and held animistic beliefs, the overall drive of the movement was that individual beliefs were secondary to a fundamental belief that people had the right to think differently. They were creating space for *umwelt* builders, they were creating a clearing for emergent processes as opposed to presecribing solutions. Of course, once a clearing is created, what might arrise there is unpredictable. People massed their own models of the world and aimed to find consensus, to evolve perspectives, as opposed to an insistence on a top-down, dogmatic model.

There was a contradiction in the Vatican's attitude towards the film. The religious pilgrims were in Spain expressing compassion for the victims of capitalism, and encouraging governments not to forget the poor in their efforts to get their financial houses in order, a goal which I would say is well in line with *Avatar*, as well as with those of the *Indignados*, yet they let their fears of representations of animism in a fictional work stop them from supporting the film or the legions of youth occupying the city center. It was, in fact, the Pope's presence that ultimately led to the removal of the encampment that filled Madrid's Plaza del Sol. The Pope for all of his lip service to "green" causes and equality was a very conservative figure indeed. To the church, Eden was gone, and all that remained was a fallen facsimile. The most that humans could do until the return of Christ was to preserve this dim, imperfect reflection of the real environment that would only return on the other side of revelations. He would not take a principled stand for the Earth beneath his feet, because in a sense, the material was

immaterial. The attitude of the Church was always and everywhere anthropocentric, and unapologetically so, as nature was placed under human dominion until it could be restored.

Inside the Vatican walls, *Avatar* may have been a call to long dead Pagan animism, but in the rest of the world something else was happening. Blue-bodied protesters stood along the wall in occupied Palestine. In Iraq and Brazil people dressed as Na'vi to show their affinity with the blue aliens that lived on the fictional planet of Pandora. Even in the center of Madrid people had invoked the Na'vi as a symbol of the economic oppression that they felt was destroying the potential of Spain's most well-prepared generation in centuries. Leading ecocritic Joni Adamson has written,

> What was surprising about some of the first responses to the film were the number of cautiously positive responses from indigenous groups, political figures, community leaders and scholars. For example, Evo Morales, the Aymara President of Bolivia, praised *Avatar* for its imaginative portrayal of an indigenous group fighting a greedy corporation.[30]

The Vatican, it seemed, found itself, yet again, on the wrong side of history, valuing some theological interpretation (in this case that nature is NOT divinity itself, rather a fallen creation of divinity), over the compassion for the poor and disadvantaged that should compose their very core. The Church's narrative was that the material world and the ideal stare across a chasm. This idea has allowed time and again for violence in the material world justified by ideals and the distance between them and reality.

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We drove away from Cadiz along the coast towards Conil de la Frontera. The "de la Frontera" tag was regularly added to the names of cities that were taken from Muslim

[30] Adamson. "Source of Life." 2.

hands into Christian ones during the Reconquista. “De la Frontera” or of the border, meant that the town was along the border of Muslim and Christian lands. Like Cadiz, Conil had known human occupants since prehistoric times, and had seen all of the major historical occupations since the Phoenicians.

“It must be weird,” I said to Claudia.

“What?” She asked.

“To be from a place like this…”

“A place like what?”

“A place where history is everywhere. You’re surrounded by lessons.”

“Lessons?”

The cluster of square white buildings on the hilltop over the beach was typical of Arab towns in Southern Spain. The characteristics of the Muslim world had left their mark on the architecture, but also on the faces of the Andalucians, on their skin tone and features, on their pronunciation, on their food, yet this latter legacy was seldom acknowledged. When we arrived along the winding roads that lead to the town, we parked on a steep hill and trudged to our hotel.

“It must be weird for you,” she said resuming a conversation I thought had come to an end 20 minutes prior.

“What?”

“Being from a place with so few lessons,” she smiled.

This was a vacation town. There was little hint of what we had seen occupying the centers of Seville, Cadiz and Madrid. That evening we sat in a small bar near the beach. Couples sipped wine and ate plates of fried sardines and squid with lemon halves. The

whole town reeked of fresh sea air which forced its way into my capillaries with each deep breath, tension rolling out with the waves. An old model flat screen television hung from a metal mount at the corner of the bar. There had been a football match on, but as it ended the news began. Footage of the massive protests in Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, and Madrid flashed across the screen. We were somehow separate from it here in this place. It was another world that was in disarray. The shanty-town in the center of Madrid had gotten bigger. The structures were being made of wooden scaffolding and walled and roofed with cardboard. There were kitchens, social media centers, yoga and meditation areas, and print publications being produced on the spot. There were bookstores, arts and crafts dealers, even something called a 'time bank' where you could purchase goods by lending your time. They were expanding their *umwelten*. They were creating a city within the city.

And then the footage turned to the Pope who would be making his appearance in a matter of days. Groups of youth gathered under the flags of their respective nations ran gleefully through the streets singing and dancing as they made their way from their different entry points towards the capital. There was little discussion of the hardships faced by the Spanish population amongst the pilgrims as they were interviewed on the evening news; rather they seemed populated by a bliss as if they were on their way to Oz.

Maybe we don't learn lessons no matter how old our cities are.

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Los Caños de Mecca is near Trafalgar. There is not much in terms of a town. A few hostels and bars line a barely paved road that overlooks the ocean. We climbed down to the beach. The oceanfront is rustic with none of the frills of its Mediterranean

counterparts. From the face of the cliff seeps gray clay that the beachgoers rub over their naked bodies creating a film that is supposedly regenerative to the skin. The result is that everyone on the beach looks gray and alien as they lay in the shadows created by the wall of the cliffs, avoiding the afternoon sun. The activity seems somehow ritualistic; as if by covering their skin in Earth, they are recovering something they have lost.

A group of German hippies, a few of whom had dreadlocks were covering themselves in the clay at the far end of the beach.

"Look," Claudia said. "Your Na'vi are here."

In the evening, at the bars, people are still covered in traces of the clay like churchgoers foreheads late on Ash Wednesday. It is a spiritual experience to cover one's self in earth, to breathe in the ocean air that has travelled so far, to know the world by touching its skin to your own. There were no pilgrims in Caños de Mecca, or at least none that I could identify. This was not a town that would be easy to find for the papal tourist. There was a small encampment of people with signs in support of *los Indignados*, but it did not seem like a particularly dedicated outpost. There was something pagan about the naked people covered in clay, something ancient, pre-Abrahamic, and pre-dogmatic.

Claudia was right. They did look like Na'vi. As I watched them cover themselves in the clay, I thought of Jesper Hoffmeyer's discussion of skin. In his chapter "the Biosemiotic Body," he treats human skin as a concrete example of a membrane in which we can begin to understand signs in a different way: "From birth we humans are in fact skin more than we are anything else. The skin of a newborn is, as Thure von Uexküll says, a kind of pre-actual atmosphere, and what enters the awareness of the newborn

infant is only qualities or differences between qualities—grades of intensities of touch, taste, and smell."[31] Hoffmeyer's goal in leading us away from the brain and towards the skin as a potential location of identity is to resituate human experience from something that is considered largely cerebral to something that is founded in the material world, not in the interest of belittling the realm of ideas, but to bring the world back to its deserved presence, not to establish balance (which it was never possible to lose), but to "see" the complete interdependence and begin to model more accurate, more productive worldviews. Ultimately, his is a call to dwell on surfaces, on material, on the skin, the "preactual atmosphere" and the natural landscape which Rachel Carson dubbed "Earth's green mantle" to learn from the stories that their visible and invisible inhabitants can tell. Taylor's "Deep Green Religion" also calls us to nurture an awareness of those visible and invisible inhabitants. Nature is not carrying messages from some terrifying and jealous deity. Nature *is* the message. Hoffmeyer's insistence that life is always and everywhere a semiotic process, and Wheeler's tertiary world-modelling step perfectly in line with Taylor's thesis that knowing, respecting and loving the material world, not hoping for some mysterious beyond, can and does have deep implications. This is a scientific spirituality aimed at prodding space and the inner workings of cells, at understanding the potentially infinite stories that life has to tell. There is more to the surface than we at first assumed:

> Now, traditionally, most of us are taught from childhood appearances are deceptive, and that we should not 'judge a book by its cover'—which is to say that we should not be superficial but rather go after the heart of truth that lies

[31] Hoffmeyer, *Signs*, 17.

> concealed within the surface statement. The most important and essential aspects cannot be seen or sensed directly, we are repeatedly advised, but must be dug out from their hiding places deep within the depths of things. Deepest within, goes this logic, we will find what we most profoundly feel and know.[32]

Hoffmeyer is careful to acknowledge all of the good reasons for such instruction. Much meaning does reside at a deeper level. People should not encourage shallow judgments that are often referred to as "only skin deep." But caution towards relying too much on the information of surfaces, can go too far, and people should not develop distrust, fear, or even hatred towards the physical world in the name of evading deception. Hoffmeyer would ask us to dwell on the surfaces, to meditate on "Earth's Green Mantle" and to know the skin of the planet, the garden, farmlands, jungles, forests and even the urban centers, to develop kinship feelings for the land itself, and of course all of its animal inhabitants. As encompassed by the Na'vi expression, "I see you," we are called to "see" our environment and our fellow inhabitants of the planet. As the quotes at the opening of this paper indicate, surfaces offer access to, not merely separation from, what lies deeper. There is meaning in material.

Stacy Alaimo, writing specifically about trans-corporeality, or as Iovino and Opperman have described it "the transit of substances and discursive practices within and across bodies"[33] says, "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment,' offers a critical lens that unites the body to its environment, creating a material bond between subject and the world" that

[32] Hoffmeyer, *Signs*, 181.
[33] Iovino et al, 4

for both Alaimo and Hoffmeyer is represented by skin.[34] The importance of trans-corporeality, she writes, is "Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the 'environment.'"[35] The ability not only to transition the location of the human from mind centered to embodied consciousness, but also to realize that the body itself is endlessly interdependent would be paramount to a new understanding of semiotic processes and altered relations between Subjects and Objects, creating a material understanding of being that evaded the need for the type of transcendence advocated in *Avatar* and offering instead a world in which dream and reality are completely interdependent.

As I looked at those bodies coated in gray Earth, I could not help but meditate on how true it was. The sounds of waves crashing in the distance traversed my body creating a sense of calm as I looked out over the Ocean imagining it curving below the horizon and stretching all the way back to sneak up behind me. I let my gaze focus on the blue sky which hid all but the sun and the moon. What miracles might lie out across those skies? Not miracles of the imagination across some spiritual line delimited by the physical universe, but miracles of the physical universe, miracles of physics and biology.

Images of the youthful papists that I had left behind hours ago continued to populate my consciousness and intermingle in my memory with the images around me creating a strange coexistence of memory and vision. I was momentarily sad at how blinded they were by their own faith. They sought the infinite, and in so doing, looked

[34] Alaimo 238.
[35] Alaimo 238.

directly past it. My experience of everything "out there" was what made me who I was. The world, that of the human and the more-than-human, were indistinguishable.

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The next day we stood beneath the lighthouse at Trafalgar. The off-white structure cut into the orange sky like the center of a dream-cicle. Africa was visible in the distance like Indiana popping up out of Lake Michigan across from my hometown, Chicago. 205 years before the waters might have been filled with French, Spanish and English ships jockeying for control of the strait of Gibraltar and some of the world's most valuable shipping routes. Famously, it was a change of wind that led to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in that other channel, and the rise of England as a global power. Now the waters were filled with windsurfers. The lighthouse wasn't there during that famous battle at Trafalgar which witnessed the beginning of the end for Spain and France and the dawn of English supremacy. 518 years ago we might have seen the sails of Columbus's fleet sail over the Western horizon still sure he was en route to the Indies. The lighthouse came in 1860, 150 years before me, when Cuba was still under Spanish control—yet unaware of the turmoil that awaited it throughout the twentieth century. Evolution, biological or historical, is not an obvious or predictable process. There is no room for ideas of predestination where there is so much room for interpretation and variation, the smallest of which can have far reaching consequences.

"Imagine how much changed that day," I said referring to the events of 1805. But, I was conflating in my mind the Battle of Trafalgar, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the sailing of Columbus' ships. I wasn't so concerned with a specific historical

occurrence as with the notion that these waters had seen so many moments that had signified radical shifts in the human story.

"What day?"

"The battle. The ships fighting for control. Those battles sort of made us. We wouldn't be where we are, who we are if…"

"You know this isn't the English Channel, or the Bay of Biscay," she said.

I did know. Sort of. "It doesn't matter," I said uncertain of myself, and defending my irrational grip on my awful American sense of geography.

"I know what you mean," she said holding my hand. "At the beginning of a battle it's all potential, you know. North America, the Caribbean, Central and South America, it could be English, French, Spanish, Portuguese! And then someone wins, someone gains an advantage. History chooses a direction. People are born in those places. *We* were born in those places."

Staring across the waters that had seen so many vital historical moments, I was reminded again of Jesper Hoffmeyer, of "fate" and "freedom" in the context of the development of life, and its connection to the tendency of the physical universe to acquire habits, and of Jabao's discussion of his own acting technique. "Usually," wrote Hoffmeyer, "when we employ the word *cell* in a human context, we are referring to what we call the loss of liberty…. Similarly it can be said that atoms caught by a cell and absorbed into its structure are deprived of their freedom."[36] He goes on to playfully personify the cell and its ambitions:

[36] Hoffmeyer, *Signs,* 28.

> Until then a carbon atom might, for instance, dream of seeping down, as bicarbonate, into the ground water, whence it would flow out to sea and travel round the world. But once it has been sucked up by the roots of an oak tree and captured by a cell at the growth point of the trunk, the atom runs the risk of having to wait a thousand years for the oak tree to be felled by a storm and rot away. Only then will the carbon atom be set free. By being captured by life the atom loses its freedom.[37]

A first glance, it would seem that once the cell enters a highly regulated biological system, it's potential for "freedom" dissipates. But then Hoffmeyer makes his most important move: "But the point at which the true focus of this account starts to become clear is when we discover that it is precisely this freezing of the cell's chemical make-up which institutes a totally new kind of freedom, which I will call *semiotic freedom.*"[38] He roots semiotic freedom in the ability of a single-celled organism to "write" itself in the form of an abstract code: DNA, and goes on to explain that, "Fragments of this coded self-description could then be copied, sometimes wrongly, and traded with other members of the same species—or even, on occasion, with members of the same species." An actor's, or for that matter an activist's, relationship to text may not be so different from the atom's relationship to the organism.

It was chilly as I stood under that lighthouse at Trafalgar, strangely so for July. I watched the strange beam of light emanate from the tower and spin like the light saber of some celestial Jedi. The Atlantic is different than the Mediterranean. The waves crash loudly, crowding out thoughts, mingling with them, creating space and filling it all at

[37] Hoffmeyer, *Signs,* 28.
[38] Hoffmeyer, *Signs,* 29.

once. The water is cold and violent beyond the protection offered by the borders of the ancient world. This was the world of *the Tempest,* of *Gulliver* and *Crusoe*, of Joyce and Wolfe, rather than that of Homer and Virgil where the Gods may have tormented, but at least they had not forgotten. The beaches along Spain's Atlantic coast were less cultivated, the cities less polished with the sheen of tourist's currency. The rough seas have protected the coast from the full exploitation suffered by its Mediterranean cousin.

The beam of light stretched far out across the water. Home, I thought looking at the strange disappearance of the Earth over the horizon. I had been in Cadiz the night before, Seville the night before that. Columbus was inescapable. I'd seen scale models of the Niña—of the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria fame—sculpture after sculpture, namesake after namesake. Colón was everywhere. And, so was the theatre. Shakespeare (as is true in much of the world) is the most performed playwright in Spain, followed by Lope de Vega. Everywhere we went we came across performances of one or the other. Both were writers who lived through the age of discovery, of colonization. It may have just been a metonymic relationship, but it all began to swirl together in my head.

We may not be here if it weren't for Columbus, I thought looking out across the orange sky, across the seascape, sensing not only the distance that the surface of the Atlantic signified, but also the union. Then, I wondered if the same was true of *Hamlet*, or of *the Tempest*. Would someone else have brought us there? I thought of the mixture of cultures represented in *La Otra Tempestad.* The strange emergence that could transpire when cultures were allowed to "read" each other as opposed to embroil themselves in attempts towards domination. I thought of the garden back in the plaza, and how efforts

to dominate had led to the exile of the biological, and how that was not a world that anyone could want.

Like it or not I understood the impetus to set out across the Ocean in search of new limits. I could not rationalize the violence and mayhem that ensued, but I could understand the initial push. And despite all consequences, I had to recognize that I, we, all of us, were where we were in this world because of such far flung decisions. What I wondered above all, as I stood looking out across that ocean, was why Jose had decided to cross it in this direction, and why he decided to stay?

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Every town in Spain is built around a Church. You step into the quiet, the air cool from the Stone floors and walls, the lighting low, resembling the dull glow of candles despite the long ago addition of electricity. There is often a recording of chants or organ music droning softly in the background. If you close your eyes you might think you were in some new age spa. But, you do not close your eyes. To do so would be to miss the stories written across the expanse of gray interior. The heretics and saints being burned, the nipples sliced from breastfeeding mothers, the gruesome Stations of the Cross that circumvent the nave in vivid stained glass. The churches were over-crowded with the addition of millions of pilgrims from all over the globe trekking from Cathedral to Cathedral as part of their journey. Many churches were even housing them, so the floors of the cathedrals were often covered in sleeping bags gathered around the respective national flags of their owners. The public schools were also, controversially, housing many of the travellers. Looking around the ornate interior of the Cathedral in Malaga, I couldn't help but wonder how a church that denied the importance of the material world

had managed to amass so much material. And, I wondered if it was not this complicated relationship to material that had caused the church so many problems. Their denial of the physical seemed to have developed into a fetish for it.

And then I thought of *Avatar,* and of how the film seemed to be working in a different direction. Not a regressive direction in which we were called to some neo-pagan nostalgia for lost indigenous connectivity, but a decidedly modern scientific awareness that might not be completely alien to that bygone connectivity. There may be a middle ground where science and spirituality write new stories based on material facts as opposed to unfounded superstition. The transubstantiation that occurs in the film requires a body that has been made by humans *and* physical phenomena that are beyond our understanding.[39]

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[39] *Avatar* was clearly engaged in the "turn to the material," which is so often invoked by ecocritics. Iovino and Opperman describe the "material turn" as "an extensive conversation across the territories of the sciences and the humanities and embraces such fields as philosophy, quantum physics, biology, sociology, feminist theories, anthropology, archaeology, and cultural studies, just to name a few" (2). The film calls the viewer, in a profoundly technological medium, to return to the Earth (or to Pandora), and it brimmed with what Bron Taylor has dubbed "Deep Green Religion," specifically one of the four subsets he demarks, Naturalistic Animism, which he describes in the following way:

> Naturalistic Animism involves either skepticism or disbelief that some spiritual world runs parallel to the earth and animates nonhuman natural entities or earth herself. But those engaged in it nevertheless express, at minimum, kinship with and ethical concern for nonhuman life. Moreover, for many naturalistic animists, understanding and even communion with nonhuman life forms is possible (Taylor 22).

Taylor lists Charles Darwin, Rachel Carson, Jane Goodall, Thomas Berry (a Catholic Priest), and Aldo Leopold among others as practitioners of Naturalistic Animism. There is no consistent theistic belief through those mentioned. Each has a different approach to the religious which it is not my interest to pursue in detail here. Suffice it to say that they run the gamut from deep religious belief to agnostic. Nonetheless, none of them, by the end of their lives would be considered traditional or dogmatic. Their rooting of their belief in experience of the natural world allowed them a fluid approach to the divine, however, or if, they ultimately defined it.

It was strange then, to think that the Pope, whose army of youth marched about the streets, had called the film immoral for its invocations of animism, when it was, in a sense, exactly this animism, though tinged with science perhaps and not religion as the church seemed to fear, that animated the crowds. It is dangerous to assume that any one attitude filtered through all of those amassed under the banner of 15-M. The organizers and attendees were careful to note that this was a diverse movement if it was anything. But, it is undeniable that many in the crowd of *Indignados*, even if only a significant minority, shared a belief that the human relationship to the environment needed to be foregrounded in contemporary life, and that the crisis was a crisis of global capitalism infringing upon the commons, or that space that all beings have the right and necessity to share. Their goal was to realign the distribution of material. Signs throughout the plaza read: "Nuestros derechos valen mas que sus privilegios", "Como en todos partes nuestros politicos son marionetas del capitalismo", "El mundo por fin despierta", "Violencia es el robar casa y pan", "End the Fed", "Españoles Franco… ha vuelto." The spirit of sharing was everywhere present in the makeshift villages. We wandered through crowd, camera in hand, snapping photos as if we were tourist witnessing some completely foreign culture, and in a way we were. But never once did I sense that there were dogmatic religious undertones to what was transpiring. This was "semiotic freedom" in motion, attempting to carve out a space in the material world.

In the evening, the Pope's pilgrims went inside the many schools and churches that had been disposed to their use. From outside of our hotel window I could even see shower stalls and portable toilets that had been set up in the playground of one school at the government's expense. The *Indignados*, in contrast, pulled tarps over their wood and

cardboard structures and bedded down. Both groups strummed guitars at dusk. The cadence of the religious tunes was upbeat and fixed as the pilgrims sang the lyrics that they all seemed to know along to the steady chord progression. The *Indignados* seemed to be making it up as they went. A bongo player started a rhythm, a guitar joined in, and then a cajón, followed by a man's voice improvising the doleful moans of Andalucía's past. Even the music was an act of collective emergence. The lyrics that he belted out were observations of the world around him. He sang of the people in his proximity, of the trials that *los deshaucios*, the evictions, had brought to his *pueblo*, of the sadness that blanketed the countryside. But, as the night went on, the music became more animated, and the songs trended away from woe and towards the hope that had been instilled by this collective action. The contrast of the fluidity of the music of the *Indignados* against the songbook of the pilgrims struck me as emblematic, yet again, of the importance of religious dogmatism which Hoffmeyer earlier described as "very much geared towards standardization," and tended to operate as a limitation on "semiotic freedom."[40]

[40] All of this forced me to question Bron Taylor's assignation of the title "religion" to what he sees as a commonality in the beliefs of Darwin, Goodall, Carson, Leopold, Berry and others. What they have in common, more so than any consistent religious attitude, is an insistence that knowledge of, and relationship to the material world, the environment and its inhabitants, is paramount to a full human experience. An awareness of and concern for material circumstances of beings and the world they occupy, empathy and kinship for nature and its occupants, these things are not necessarily religious in nature, and often even find themselves directly at odds with religious mindsets which prize dogmatism over reality. What the above individuals seem to share in common, rather than religious tendencies, is *awareness.* Be it a scientific awareness, a spiritual awareness, or the awareness of a nature writer, the common tendency is an attitude of reverence towards the material world, maybe even an appreciation of the sublime, but it does not arrive in every case to levels of worship. Berry, for instance, was "a Catholic priest who urged that we consider the scientific story of the universe, and of biotic evolution, as a sacred story" (Taylor 26); however, Goodall "retained her theism," while remaining capable of becoming "intensely aware of the being-ness of trees" (27), and Darwin "lost his faith in a superordinate divine, creative force," but nonetheless wrote

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When we arrived in Valencia, we headed straight for Jabao's house. It was a a small, but nicely decorated apartment near the train station. Vintage suitcases had been assembled to form shelves and there were books scattered throughout the living room. This was the space of creative people. After a couple of minutes of small talk, he put his hand on my shoulder and said that all important word…

"Pizza?"

I nodded and we walked down the stairs leaving Claudia and his wife, Elena, to talk. The streets of Valencia are not unlike those of Madrid, though history and the ocean are more present in the air. Unlike Madrid, Valencia is an old city with the restored remnants of its city walls standing prominently at the center, and the streets winding through hip young neighborhoods in the unorganized way that speaks of medieval city planning, following the curvature of the landscape rather than imposing geometry where it is not naturally occurring. The Ocean air is fresh and breezy and gives off the smell of relaxation. The streets were buzzing with young people carrying the flags of every nation imaginable, wearing shirts that professed their Catholic faith. These were the pilgrims preparing for their Pope's arrival.

"They're everywhere," he said laughing.

"kinship-promoting passages, as expressing reverence for life" (23). My point is, with this myriad approach to, and attitudes about, nature what need is there to to attach it to the concept of religion? It seems to me that a broadened awareness of the semioshpere, a heightened attention to the biotic world, and even the assumption of kinship feelings and reverence, can fit within the confines of any religion (so long as the practitioner is not dogmatic), and can also be harbored by the atheist or agnostic. Ultimately, what should be bread is an open, aware, scientific attitude that can subsequently make room for any religious beliefs, or none at all, in the interest of attaining communion with the natural world.

I asked him about life in Valencia as we headed down a street flanked by red concrete bicycle paths towards his favorite pizza place.

"It's cheaper," he said, "than living in Madrid, and when I have work I catch the train. I spend a lot of time there still." A group of pilgrims with an acoustic guitar was singing a song about Jesus. Jabao stopped and looked on with what first seemed a bemused smile, then slowly transitioned towards deep appreciation.

"Do you ever think about going home, to Cuba?" He still had not told me why he left, and I was determined to get it out of him.

"No," he said in an uncertain tone. "I like it here, even when work is hard to come by it's a nice place to live. I miss the music, though," he said without breaking his meditative watch of the singing pilgrims.

"Are you religious?"

His response was an enigmatic smile that might have been interpreted as a negation.

He changed the subject to a musical group of mutual friends in Madrid, Havana Abierta. Luis Barbieri was a singer in that group and the boyfriend of a close friend of Claudia's. Luis and I had many conversations about life in Cuba. Luis had chosen to leave, and he had many points of departure from the regime, but he always harbored a deep respect for Fidel and company due to his having been able to study music in a great conservatory despite his humble background. The arts, he had always claimed, had thrived under Fidel. I asked Jabao what he felt about this, and again, he gave that smiling, enigmatic response.

I never received any sense of his politics from our conversations. He spoke of the revolution, of the absurdity of life under the regime, of the costs and benefits of the Castro government, but he never tipped his hand as to where his heart lay in relation to the government of his island home. One of his greatest charms was that he seemed infinitely capable of listening and understanding, and rarely cast judgement. The more he talked about his past in acting, the more I understood the way that he had come to view the world. There was no point in casting judgment on what had emerged, only in contributing to the narrative currently being written, in being a positive voice, an influence for good.

Back in the apartment where Claudia and Elena had been waiting, we opened the pizza and Jabao offered us small bottles of beer, quintos, they were called because they were 20ml, or a fifth of a liter.

We talked about the crisis, about the pilgrims, about the indignados.
I could sense that Elena was slightly irritated. Her body was tense, and her eye contact seemed to suggest I was crossing some line. I wondered if she had taken my questions about what was happening as judgments.

"We all know where the crisis started," she said.

I nodded. I knew that there was American guilt. That the model of capital we were exporting was over the top, exploitive. Still, I chafed at the suggestion that the US was somehow solely responsible for the decisions of the world. That somehow our corruption was worse than that of others. In Spain, the Spanish government had essentially sold off the coast to German and English investors in order to line the pockets

of Spanish contractors and politicians. The bubble resembled that in the US housing market, but was it the same?

I got the impression that Elena felt almost invaded by American ways of thinking, that her story had become one that was somehow subject to ours. This was something that I have encountered over and over again in Spain, and in the midst of the crisis, in the midst of the 15-M movement, it was a massive sentiment with people, for instance more focused on the Fed than the European Central Bank. When I made this point, Claudia responded, "Si, but Spain is not the primer potencia del mundo, It's the US that is the great power in the world. When they are corrupt, we all are."

The most frightening outcome was that people had decided en masse not to vote in the upcoming elections. The thinking was that PSOE, the socialist party, was just as corrupt and bad as the PP, the conservative party that continued to have ties to the remnants of the Franco regime. With the elections upcoming, the failure to vote by the traditionally socialist crowd meant all but certain victory for the PP. People looked at democracy itself as part of the problem. In a country that had been democratic for barely 30 years, this was alarming. Their collective response to the plot souring was to stop writing the national narrative.

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The train was packed with pilgrims on the way back to Madrid. They sang and laughed from their seats, jovially pestering the pagans in their midst who simply wanted to nap as the train made its way from Valencia to Madrid. Once Claudia and I arrived at Atocha train station, the sheer numbers were astounding. Every train to the city, from any direction, was packed with youth groups from The United States, Canada, Cameroon,

Ecuador, South Korea, Romania… They had come from everywhere. It was impossible to get on the metro. Every car was filled to overflowing and so many people waited for trains, that it was practically impossible to approach the platform. We decided to walk.

We lugged our bags up Calle Atocha underneath the constant chatter of helicopters. There were police vans at every corner with heavily armed *municipales* in full riot gear lined up in intimidating formations. The city had changed drastically since we had left it ten days prior. The *Indignados* had gathered around the train station as well, they were planning a march from the Atocha train station to the Puerta del Sol where the massive encampment had been staged over the previous months. The police had formed ranks to prevent the two groups of pilgrims from coming into contact, but to the *Indignados* it felt as though the authorities had chosen sides. The authorities were putting all of their effort into protecting, once again, the capitalist purpose, making it safe for the pilgrims to spend their money and sightsee through Madrid as tourists would at any other time, ignoring the crisis that permeated the city and the economic suffering that befell so many of its citizens because of the crisis and subsequent austerity measures. A game of cat and mouse ensued with the police cutting off the protesters, and the protesters regrouping in an effort to make another approach to the plaza. As we were not party to either of the masses, and walked with suitcases in tow, the police politely allowed us to pass into Puerta del Sol and advised us to be careful. Once in the plaza, the atmosphere was the same as ever. Groups engaged in makeshift town council meetings in which a series of hand gestures communicated democratically support, opposition or indifference to various proposals. In one of the kitchens, someone was making a massive batch of lentils to share with whoever so desired. It was enchanting, this potential for a new

beginning, for cooperatively rethinking foundations. It was obvious that the situation was temporary, and that the system would survive this temporary challenge to its hegemony, but it was nonetheless an exciting window into the potential of semiotic freedom to emerge from the status quo, for human civilization to start writing new chapters.

I thought of what George Orwell wrote in *Homage to Catalonia* about the strange arrival and rapid disappearance of the anarchist state in Barcelona during the Spanish civil war. About how disorder always broke through, shook things up, but quickly and unconsciously systems sought order and hierarchies emerged. It was a biological reality and maybe a linguistic one. Entropy: systems move towards greater order, and when they become too stagnant to be productive, they break and the process begins anew…

We passed through the plaza and headed home. Throughout the night the helicopters kept us awake, and sirens blared ceaselessly, racing from one side of the city to the other. The schoolyard behind our house was filled with pilgrims who continued to sing, seemingly oblivious to what was going on all around them. Twitter and Facebook had been blocked from functioning, but videos began pouring in on YouTube. The police and the protesters had clashed in Lavapies, a largely African and Pakistani neighborhood just south of the Puerta del Sol. The confrontation turned violent and police were injured. The reaction was swift and brutal with videos of old men and children who seemingly had no role in the protest, and certainly not in the rioting, were beaten with clubs. Cameras were destroyed, but enough video survived to show the mindless brutality that set about putting the experiment to an end. As I watched the videos on YouTube, I felt guilty for sitting in my apartment, and I grew angry with the pilgrims as they sang what had increasingly begun to sound like frivolous songs outside of my window about love

and peace. If their savior had been present, he would not have been carefully avoiding the dispossessed and indignant; rather, their cause would have been his. How could they sing of love, as so nearby people were being brutalized in order to make the city "safe" for their presence. It was clear that they simply could not see their surroundings. Pope Benedict was not the kind of Pope I could understand. He seemed to be willfully blind to exactly what he should have been most able to see as a spiritual leader from a tradition that is dedicated principally to the poor.

And somewhere in the background of all of this was a movie, *Avatar*, and a discourse which deeply engages this relationship to the surrounding world with its notions of what it means to 'see' another being, and its representation of naturalistic animism, and a physical connection to *Eywa*, who does not exist as some transcendent non-physical being, but as a goddess who is one with and of the trees themselves, and whose miracles are the product of science (signal transduction), as opposed to some unfathomable beyond. Despite the tired tropes, it succeeds in presenting a world where the human (or humanoid) benefits from an awareness of its complete integration in the environment. It actively pursues a world in which the genetic and the mimetic are allied as the inseparable pillars of life. Prior to the climatic battle at the end of *Avatar,* in a semblance of his line at the beginning of the film, Jake Sulley says, "I was a warrior who dreamed he could bring peace. Sooner or later, though, you always have to wake up." At the beginning of the film, he finds that there is a way to stay in his dream, to fly, and yet again, it seems that he will be able to find peace as a warrior, and through a naturalistic recovery of the transubstantiation, he will be able to leave the dream behind and fully occupy the material world. Benedict, and the pilgrims, in a sense, were living in the same

dream there in Madrid, singing beneath my apartment window as if the real world, where love and understanding and caring for the poor was vital and at their fingertips, was somehow subverted to the dream of what lay in their text and in their promise of an afterlife. They were unaware of their environments and unable to own their "semiotic freedom" in the modeling of new worlds, because they were bound by a text, a fiction, that instead of aiding them in seeing, liberating their vision, which I believe religion is capable of offering in its best moments, bound them.

"It's like they can't see what's going on around them," said Claudia as we looked out over the tents in the schoolyard beneath our apartment window. "They can't see how hypocrite they are."

"They don't know what's going on," I said in their defense. "They're here for something else." But, I agreed with her.

"They should be on the same side these peregrinos and these indignados," she said. "This is why no one wants religion."

I nodded.

We can, and must, write better futures by fostering an awareness of the material world, by reading reality. As tertiary world-modellers, it is our responsibility to hone our capacity to mold *umwelts* in which humans and their co-inhabitants of the planet will thrive. We must use language to build knowledge, and a better world. Hoffmeyer has said:

> While the most intimate, most profound of human experiences can, at all events, hardly be said to be of a linguistic nature, to maintain that language is nothing special is quite absurd. For good or ill language accords us human beings a totally

> unique position within the natural world. The fact that we have, perhaps, abused this position, is no good reason for denying this.[41]

With luck the *Indignados* and the many occupy movements to which they provided the model, will only be the beginning of experimentation with open-minded, non-dogmatic, nature-aware societies which foreground their material circumstances as the site from which to write new worlds, and with luck, they will not fossilize into movements that are principally ideological. If people could be made to "read" the text of their surroundings better, to share in the tertiary world-modelling systems of their fellow humans, perhaps the future of intercultural interaction would not have to consist of the same exploitation and violence that had marked the past.

[41] Hoffmeyer, *Signs*, 197.

CHAPTER 7

WHEN SPAIN WAS SPAIN

The landscape changes. A theater near the river burns down, and for a time no stories are told. Life takes on that staleness, that greyness of walking to work early on a rainy day, crossing a bridge perhaps. But, the theater always reappears. Beam by beam, wood moves from the forest to its new home, its new role. The structure is put in its place. The roof is assembled and the planks united to create the beginnings of a stage. It's all painted black. Seats are arranged as the lives of actors converge in the preparation of a text. A crowd empathizes across centuries, across a room, with the person to their left or right in the form of a smile at intermission. There's no separation between the physical world and the stories it tells, the stories it allows us to tell. Constant change is where we live.

My favorite bar back home in Chicago was a place called Johnny's. A short eighty-year-old Croatian man, always in a suit and tie, would buzz you in, where more often than not you would be alone or with one or two other familiar faces, drinking large bottles of Russian beer with inscrutable labels, watching Letterman on a television that actually had an analog dial and was placed at an awkward distance. The records in the jukebox hadn't been changed since the '70s. Once, *Murder on the Orient Express* came on and Johnny loudly exclaimed: "I vas der! I vas on dis train!" He told stories about working as a translator in the Second World War, about traveling with his wife, about coming to Chicago. In some ways, I think he's part of the reason I ended up living in Europe. Johnny died a few years ago. I had already been living in Madrid for years when

it happened, but a friend was nice enough to stop by and take a picture of the door before they could change it.

I was sad to see Johnny's go. It was a relic. Its closing was the symbol of the passing of a certain kind of Chicago that can probably never return, not really. But, forward is the direction of reality. People die and the people that come after them are different. There's no point in languishing over the inevitable, right?

On a morning here in Madrid, soon after Johnny's death, a morning on which I was obliged to do something bureaucratic in some official building, an old *Guardia Civil* officer, old enough to remember the days when his agency functioned as Franco's enforcers, walked by me, sweeping me with icy eyes perched between his forest-green suit, more military than police, and that hat, the black vinyl oddity that looked like it should adorn a citizen of Lego Land. An old woman noticed me pondering him and rolled her eyes. "*No te preocupes, él tiene recuerdos de cómo era."* Don't worry, she said, he remembers how it was. He overheard her and took a step towards us. "*Sí, cuando España era España*." Yes, when Spain was Spain.

I'd never heard the phrase before, but it stuck. It rattled around in my head from time to time over the next week or so, bumping up against thoughts about Johnny and nostalgic advances of my imagination towards a Chicago I wasn't sure I'd ever see again. Was Spain no longer Spain? What was it then? Who was it that had stolen some essential Spanishness? The European Union? The usual culprit, the United States? Maybe it was globalism generally. Or all of the above intertwined until it became an indistinct but rancid flavor in the mouths of all those who remembered better times. Was this just run-of-the-mill nostalgia, or was there something more? Something lost?

Ultimately, it was easy enough to write off the bitter reminiscence of a fallen authoritarian, but a few weeks later I heard a different spin on the same phrase. I was speaking to an older woman who owns a bar in my neighborhood. I asked her why she didn't offer a *menú del día.* "No more," she said. "It used to be very strong, when people didn't have to work so much, when we remembered how to enjoy life," she said, "when Spain was Spain."

And, there it was again. This time seeming to lament the loss of leisure, the loss, or at least the shift, of identity that has accompanied many of the changes both assumed from within and asserted from without. Her bar had once been able to serve ten times as many customers because they could buy their *cañas* and then move into the street to talk and lean against the cars. Now, noise complaints take precedence. Police ticket for drinking in the streets. Smoking and music have been strictly regulated indoors. The bar, Spain's social and economic center, is being squeezed even as the economy lags.

On a trip to Salamanca, I heard the same refrain a third time. I stopped in Ciudad Rodrigo. There was a man carving ham with a knife he told me cost nearly one thousand euros. He cut the ham into thin strips that really were strangely beautiful in a way I had rarely seen meat be beautiful. I told him as much. "Well," he responded, "years ago all the ham was cut with such care, when we had pesetas, when we could afford it, when Spain was Spain."

The familiar tone of lament for the past and resigned disdain for the present was all there, as if somehow Spain were a ghost country that had disappeared from the map. Or at least changed its name, put on glasses and glued a fake mustache somewhere over the Pyrenees.

I failed to see the connection between pesetas and well-cut ham, so I asked. "People's salaries were more in pesetas than they are in euros. They cared more about their work even as they worked fewer hours. Money went further, and we spent it in the bars," he said. "*Todo ahora,"* he said, "*es una mierda."*

The tendency to lament the lost Spain has been captured by two recent commercials. First, *Benditos Bares*, a commercial for Coca-Cola that eulogizes the disappearing Spanish bar in part by cataloguing the events that were once-but-no-longer housed there — the political union, the physical contact, the sharing of life's events, the forging and fostering of friendships. The second, a very strange Campofrío commercial, *Hazte Extranjero*, in which Almodóvar favorite *Chus* walks through the streets of what appears to be Alcalá de Henares deciding what nationality she would rather be now that hers is essentially lost, or as the comedian Enrique San Francisco puts it in the text of the commercial, "*nos han echado del bar*." They've thrown us out of the bar.

And yet, a walk through the streets of any Spanish town seems to refute this. If there is a country with more bars, or with more people in them, I am not aware of it. The bars are plentiful and lively. No one has thrown Enrique out of the bar (as a matter of fact, I regularly see him bellied up in my neighborhood), but it's true that the bars have changed. Where once they were universally Spanish, now they are merely predominantly so. Japanese bars, Argentine bars, Senegalese bars, German bars, of course Irish bars, and yes, even American bars (a few of which I am guilty of having installed). One cannot help but sense that somewhere in that phrase, c*uando España era España,* there lies at best a suspicion of the foreign, a distrust of the outsider, and at worst a deep-rooted xenophobia.

I understand the anxiety. I'm from a city that is slowly seeing its dives, its Johnny's, replaced by upscale wine bars, a city where even the independent coffee chains are beginning to feel like Starbucks, a city where every time a hot dog stand shuts down, a new hundred-dollar-plus tasting menu pops up. Ironically, these days most of those restaurants have Spanish names and feature Serrano and Manchego alongside a list of overpriced Riberas and Jumillas. As some Spanish lament the loss of their local habitat, it spreads its wings farther across the global markets than it has in three centuries. As they fear the loss of their bar, it invades bars from Shanghai to Los Angeles. As the Spanish brand flourishes, the landscape of Madrid begins to resemble the cities that it is being exported to. Wines from Madrid show up in bars in Brooklyn even as Malasaña looks more and more like Williamsburg.

Maybe, just maybe, the Madrid that emerges will be as interesting a place as the Spain that has apparently disappeared.

*

Mixed into this narrative is a troubling fact for a young democracy. In the elections of 2011, the turnout was a historic low for Spain in the democratic era.

We'd opened our little arts café, The Toast Café, in the Moncloa neighborhood not too far from the presidential palace and Madrid's Complutense University which had a student population of some sixty-thousand, including a huge number of international students from the UK, the US, Germany, Norway, Saudi Arabia, China etc…

"I won't vote," I heard over and again from the students. "All the parties are the same, so there is no point. There is no democracy."

A man had come in soon after we had opened. He was an old man, maybe senile. He walked with a cane, wore thick lensed glasses and a fedora.

"I lived my whole life in this neighborhood," he said.

"I bet you have a lot of stories," I said as I always did in an effort to get people who knew the neighborhood to share.

He nodded as he wiped spit away from the corner of his mouth with a handkerchief.

"This was a coal depository before the war," he said.

I nodded.

"I'll never forget one day when I was just a little boy," he said looking towards the door and shaking his head, "I saw a woman, a young gypsy woman sitting with her back against the façade of this building, a baby in her arms. I was standing at the end of the block, by the church. I saw her and thought how beautiful she looked." He shook his head at the memory. "Just then a bomb fell and she and the baby evaporated right before my eyes."

The neighborhood is full of stories like these: Stories of the loss of life that accompanied the loss of democracy, the loss of the Republic. But, they seemed accompanied by a strange nostalgia for that era in which there was no democracy, no choice. There was a strange nostalgia for the time when there was a clear reason for what was wrong, when there was a simpler notion of the enemy.

A woman walked in one day after dropping her children off at the school across the street. There was an older man at the bar reading the newspaper.

She ordered her coffee and I prepared it.

Evidently she noticed me accent, “Where are you from?” She asked.

“Chicago,” I said.

“And what are you doing here?” She sounded alarmed, offended even. “All I do is think of ways to get away from here!”

The old man chuckled without looking up from his paper and offered an affirmation, “Hombre!”

“Do you teach English?” She asked.

“No,” I said. “I have, but not usually.”

“I want my kids to learn English,” she said. “It’s the best ticket out of here.”

“Si, señor,” said the old man.

“Why do you want them to leave?” I asked.

“Because if things keep going in this direction there will be blood in the streets,” she said.

“Si, señor,” said the old man once again without looking up from his paper.

“Will you vote?” I asked them.

The man shook his head, “Pa’ que?” he shouted. (For what?)

“Son todos iguales,” said the woman. (They’re all the same.)

Strangely, the low turnout was something of a starting point. The PP, the conservative party, took a complete majority, and once they had power to do what they wished, people began to see that there was indeed a difference between one party’s ideology and that of the others. People were looking for a party they could

enthusiastically vote for, and from the ashes of the 15-M movement, the Podemos (The Yes We Can Party) was emerging.

CHAPTER 8

APPLAUDING THE SLAUGHTER

"That is where the first Indians that Columbus brought from America were baptized," the taller boy informed me.—Richard Wright

The crowd has gathered in the city center, their rage bubbling. Each affirmation makes the mass more volatile. Weeks of uncertainty surround the main actors. How does one govern without government? How does one act with no director? A language had emerged: A series of hand gestures designed to express affirmation, negation, uncertainty. It's a pantomime en masse. Enacting Democracy. Who counted all these gestures? Who tallied them into a decision? How did gestures become politics? And wasn't the woman on stage, the one with the microphone, guiding the crowd like a bull in the ring, wasn't she really in charge?

We waited in what used to be a slaughterhouse in Madrid's Arganzuela district: The Matadero. Built in 1911, it was in use as a slaughterhouse until 1996, providing meat to the people of Spain through the Republic, the civil war, Franco's regime, and then awaiting the outcome of the bubbling ascension of whatever the new Spain was in the process of becoming. The 21st century saw it brought into its current use: One of Madrid's largest public arts centers. Pathways of metal scaffolding hung from the ceiling, reminiscent of the insides of a submarine's belly. This part of the Matadero had been converted into a theater, but one with the parts usually left hidden above the curtain—the metal walkways typically reserved for the eyes of puppeteers and stage hands—twisting

through the rafters in plain sight. Being from Chicago, I tried to imagine an equivalent: a Bridgeport arts space, a Back Of the Yards theater carved out of the stockyards that set the scene for Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle.* I don't know why, but I just couldn't see it.

I had been to the Matadero once before. We had seen a group of young actors from Equatorial Guinea in the matadero directed by Jabao. Jabao traveled to Equatorial Guinea to give acting lessons to the group, and the opportunity had arisen to bring them to perform at the Matadero.

The play was based on tribal legends and featured the young actors dancing and singing.

Afterwards we waited at the bar for a chance to talk to Jabao. We were with a couple of friends of his from Barcelona who we did not know at all. Somehow the topic of Shakespeare arose.

"You have not seen Shakespeare until you've seen him in Catalán," said the woman in a nearly perfect Spanish.

"Really?" I asked.

"Far better than the Spanish," she said. "Maybe better even than the English."

"Do you speak English?"

She shook her head.

Jabao walked into the bar and we sat together at a table with friends who included several people from Spain's consulate to Equatorial Guinea one of whom seemed to be in the midst of the all too commonplace discussion of how Spanish colonialism was inherently less bad than English colonialism. The story went something like this: The Queen had banned slavery, and there had been a larger degree of miscegenation. It was

imperfect, but nowhere near as vile as that of the English. Yes, there was Las Casas, and the Black Legend, but that was all that it was… a legend.

Jabao smiled uncomfortably throughout the discourse.

When the table thinned, Claudia and Jabao and myself were left.

"It must be fun working with the kids," Claudia said. "They were amazing."

He laughed and exhaled deeply. "A lot of work," he said. "Travelling with them is a chore, but a lot of fun. Rewarding." He squinted a bit as if remembering something while looking towards the vacant space where the consular workers had been seated. "It's difficult to gain their trust."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the organization is Spanish, and there are a lot of ideas about what that means in Guinea."

Equatorial Guinea is an ex-colony where Spanish is still one of the official languages.

"When they find out I'm Cuban it makes things a little easier," he chuckled. "But, first I have to explain to them that Cuba was once a colony too. When they see that I, an ex-colonial, trust the Spanish, they think, maybe they're not all bad."

Jabao talked about the home he left behind, Pinar del Río, is the westernmost portion of Cuba, the land where the world's finest tobacco is grown.

"It's a pastoral place, a garden. The landscape seems to go on forever even though you know you're on a little island, and the people are the nicest people in the world. They will give you anything though they have nothing," he said.[42]

Cuba and the surrounding islands of the Caribbean were among the earliest sites of the colonial moment in the Americas, the first wildernesses that the European Prosperos set about taming, and one of the first places where the storm that may have leant its force to the drama in Shakespeare's play was encountered. It was his garden, he repeated, his perfection. Again, I was stuck wondering what it meant that he had chosen to leave this place for which he harbored such intense affections.

"Why did you decide to stay?" I asked.

His face turned serious. "Tenia que hacerlo," he said yet again, "I had to." I was left with the distinct impression that there was more to the story. He was not ready to let me in.

On this occasion, we were at the Matadero to see *Hamlet.* The stage was sparse: a desk, a handful of chairs that alluded to a monastic grammar school that had stagnated in

[42] His invocation of the garden made me think of Carolyn Merchant's work on the subject, and the accompanying outline of Western society's two contradictory—but equally dangerous—narratives, the biblical and the secular, of the steady decline or fall that humanity has undergone from its original oneness with nature, and the constant drive to regain that integral state, or alternatively, to create something better, something more. The European Renaissance garden, for Merchant, was the natural outcropping of that first Recovery Narrative, the religious, which demanded that the original status of unity between man and nature be re-attained through labor, through converting the wilderness, the desert, back into the garden. Only, what was the garden? Was it a long lost homeland, like the Spain that Jabao would later tell me he imagined as a child, or the Cuba which he later longed to return to? Was it some integral material space that could never be approached because it only existed in the past? Or, was it a fictional idea that served to separate humans from the integrity of the present, material world which they occupy?

some fifties mountain village. I think there was an intermittent strobe effect, but that could be my memory adding special effects. The same goes for the fog machine that made me think of the cheap haunted houses we used to mount as gradeschool fundraisers.

"Quien Vive," Bernardo shouted. ("Who lives?")

In the original English the line that begins the action of *Hamlet* is simply "Who's there?" But, for whatever reason, the Spanish translation adds this extra layer of meaning to the question. But then, the question of who is there is much the same as the question of who that is there is also alive. Can you be alive without being *there*? Can you be *there* without being alive? The translation predicts the question at the center of *Hamlet*: what is the difference between being merely alive, and truly *being*.

There'd been sightings of Hamlet's father, or his ghost anyway. In this performance the ghost was represented by a disembodied voice, a choice that darted, perhaps unavoidably, in the direction of melodrama in what was an otherwise crisp performance. Given the rather gruesome—if all too commonplace—slaughterhouse history of the room we occupied, my mind converted the groans, evocative of Vincent Price's thriller (but in Spanish) into a series of low foreboding "moooooooos". I imagined this same room lined with cow carcasses hung from chains by their back feet, drains in the floor releasing the thick currents of blood. I pictured the men who spent their days dispatching cattle then parsing their bodies into edible units. I tried to envision the quantities of cattle that had passed through these halls, and the quantities of meat that had been trucked beyond them. Then I thought of one cow, separate from the heard: Hamlet becomes a stumbling, irresolute calf, this being Spain, a young bull in the bullring, charging and retreating in his auditions for the final encounter to which he is

destined. He plots from the far side of the ring, frightens the torero with his erratic gestures, but does all he can to delay proximity to his fate.

*

Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, went to Spain in 1953 to answer the question, "how did I get there [to the Americas], who brought me there and why? What kind of people were they who dared the oceans to get slaves and sell them ?"[43] Gertrude Stein, amongst others, encouraged him towards the task even as she was on her deathbead.

"Dick, you ought to go to Spain," She said.

"Why," he asked her.

"You'll see the past there. You'll see what the Western World is made of. Spain is primitive, but lovely. And the people! There are no people such as the Spanish anywhere. I've spent days in Spain that I'll never forget. See those bullfights, see that wonderful landscape…"[44]

He set off from Paris and crossed the border into Franco's Spain seeking his answer. One of the many things he learned there is that who controls the story holds the power.

Early on in his travels, he met a young woman named Carmen in Barcelona who worked the desk at the pension where he stayed. She spoke English, German and French. He noticed that she was reading a book with a green cover entitled *Formación Politica: Lecciones para las Flechas*. His interest in politics drove him to ask her about the text,

[43] Wright. 110.
[44] Wright. 4.

but he had difficulty convincing her to talk. Finally, she agreed to meet him in an American hotel, where the locals could not afford to drink and she would not be spotted and treated as *una mujer mala*.

Two young men who he had previously met had informed him that there were two types of women: *malas y buenas*. Bad women were those that could be bought, or those that could be brought home easily and discarded. Good women were like their mothers and sisters, those that could be married. The boys were wearing a familiar medallion, one that is seen often in Wright's narrative, a medallion that features the Virgin Mary. Upon meeting Wright, the boys, under the pretense of showing him to a decent, well-priced *pensión*, take him to a cathedral and show him what are obviously, to them, precious sights. "The taller boy took my arm and pointed to an oblong, transparent box towards which all eyes in the room were gazing."

> "What is it," I asked.
> "It's the body of one of our greatest bishops," I was told. "He has made many miracles."
> "Then I understood: in a glass coffin lay the mummified remains of a human body. I saw sunken eye sockets, yellow, protruding teeth, and a mass of sagging, gray flesh falling away from the cranial structure of the head."[45]

Wright ascertains that the boys have brought him here, as opposed to the *pension* because they see him as a heathen, who must be saved.

Upon leaving the cathedral, they tell him that they know where to find *las malas* with a wink and a nod, and a pattern is established between deification and abuse: of women, of bodies, of animals and of the land, and all of this somehow seems to come full circle in explaining the past, Colón and the subsequent colonialism. *La Madre Patria* was one of the *mujeres buenas.* Anything that deviated from the understood pattern, anything

[45] Wright. pg. 13

that took a different form, would have to be made to conform or be violated for what usefulness it may possess. Carmen's little green book would lay it all out.

*

A few days before attending the Mataderos production of *Hamlet,* I'd seen my first bullfight. Six years in and out of Spain, and I'd never been tempted to watch. But my nephew came for a visit. His seventeen-year-old machismo drew him to the slaughter, just as my desire to be a cool uncle drew me. He had just finished his sophomore year in high school. He hated *Catcher in the Rye*. I gave him some Hemingway stories thinking maybe he was more the active, concise, athletic type of reader. I'm weary of Hemingway. I like long descriptions, philosophical segues, meandering pretension in general. So, I'm weary of Hemingway's certainty, of his strongly located identity, but as an American in Spain, a writer at that, I have some genetic connection to him, too. I set my nephew up with a collection of stories, the page of "A Cool Well-Lighted Place" marked, and headed off to bed. The story doesn't deal in bullfighting, but I should have known that through some sort of paginated osmosis we would end up at a bullfight.

*

We walked towards *Las Ventas*, Madrid's storied bullring. The crowd was thicker than I imagined. The atmosphere festive, like that of any other sporting event. People felt light, recreational. The ring itself is a gorgeous red brick structure that elicits all the grandeur and antiquity of what it so desperately desires to make its point of comparison: the Coliseum.

One case Thomas Sebeok and Jesper Hoffmeyer make, among many, is that communication at its advanced and abstracted levels (i.e. human speech) finds its

prototype at the unconscious cellular level. The difference between a protein setting off a cascade of signals from the other side of a cell wall, and Hamlet stabbing through a curtain to fulfill some oedipal revenge narrative—or perhaps more to the point, the continued (evolutionary?) relevance of *Hamlet* four centuries beyond its creation through a constant process of being passed from one generation to the next, like some coded chunk of cultural DNA—is one of scale. The difference between the automaton and the conscious being is that one has reached some critical mass where reaction becomes, at least in part, reflection, and the other has not. One has become, or at least achieved the illusion of having become, self-reflective. This is a process that is facilitated by the ability to symbolize: In the case of mitochondria, to read chemical signals as road signs; In the case of humans, to use language as a method to store and pass on information, and to emerge from a primordial societal mass into an independent grammatical unit, an 'I'. *Hamlet* is doubly interesting in this context, being that it is so often cited as the place where the self-reflective first showed its face in art. Critics have regularly gone so far as to deem *Hamlet* the location of the birth of the modern human. I've always been dubious about that claim, but it's a thing that gets said *a lot* in Shakespeare studies, and in that regard, is probably worth taking seriously.

But a critical mass of what? Of sensory data? Proteins? Synapses? All of it somehow in the aggregate giving birth to something *more* alive, something akin to a soul? I like Hoffmeyer's world, because where so many philosophers have turned either to faith or linguistic trickery, his world seems to provide answers. It re-roots a philosophical tradition that has floated off into the ether in something concrete: the body, the Earth, the constant presence of signs that constitute biological life. What's a human?

It's the same as every other life form, but it houses just a few more connections, links. Biology, becomes the sight of genesis, genesis the natural outcome of increasingly complex signification and interpretation. The gaping hole in our understanding of the relationship between ideas and the world they occupy is obliterated in the most simple way possible: through his notion of *code duality* it is deemed not irrelevant, but rather the very source of life. The cooperation, not the animosity, between the Real and the ideal, is what makes life possible. DNA needs the cell to travel; the cell needs DNA to mean. Digital codes and analog mimesis are the partners that make life. It does not answer all the questions. We still cannot know what makes the human inner world, or *umwelt* to borrow once again the term of the German biologist Jakob Von Uexküell, so much richer and more tormented than those of our animal cousins who seem less inclined towards the abstract. We always end up one bridge shy of connecting the continent of the physical over the airy canyon of the ideal. In other words, deeming consciousness the natural offspring of semiosis and mimesis that is present at every level of biology, makes the ultimate appearance of a self, an 'I' phenomenon, a 'souled' being for lack of a more creative way to put it, no less mysterious.

I mean, is saying that the self is a biological matter really any more meaningful, or any less complex, than saying it's a spiritual one? And where is the line the crossing of which constitutes consciousness? Who draws the line? Has the bull reached that critical mass?

*

The little green book that Carmen was reading at her desk in the *pensión*, as it turned out, was something like a catechism for the religion of Franco, Wright tells us. She

wanted to employ her linguistic skills in order to work abroad, but in order to do so she would have to dedicate six months to memorizing a book that defined the nation of Spain and its destiny as envisioned by the Franco regime. This book, this story, of what Spain was, was an attempt to define reality, and to maintain power over it. Wright obtains a copy and includes excerpts in his account:

What is Spain?

Spain is a historical unit with a specific role to play in the world.

What does this mean?

That destiny has constituted all the people of Spain, varied as they may be, for all time into a unit in the natural order of things.

What is a unit?

The union in one body of a number of distinct parts.

What does destiny mean?

The purpose assigned to everyone in life.

What is meant by the natural order of things?

Something that concerns not only the Spanish, but all nations.

What then is meant by saying that Spain has been formed by destiny into a unit in the natural order of things?

Because it is a whole constituted from the various peoples who are united by the common destiny they have to fulfill in the world.

Is Spain our Motherland?

Yes.[46]

[46] The above is quoted from Wright. 26-27

It continues on in that vain, like Socrates for nationalist kindergartners, for chapter after chapter, and Wright presents several chapters within his text. It is all laid out. The blueprint, the DNA if you will, for a social order. It is a cynical ploy that assumes an intellectual elite can dictate to a plastic masses with ideology alone… a cynical ploy disproved by the necessity of soldiers with machine guns filling the cities and the countryside. The ideas can penetrate only once the body is subdued. The land becomes a thing imbued with destiny, and to be frank, this should not be a notion entirely unfamiliar to an American like Wright, Manifest Destiny residing in the not too distant past, and being inextricably connected with notions of race, and reliant on slave labor and indentured servitude.

Nonetheless, there seems to be something distinct here. This is not just a foul policy, it is a catechism aimed at indoctrinating a people, enforced by a militarized state.

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All of this might be terrifying with a biological metaphor extended atop it, if one were inclined to believe in notions of predetermination. Hoffmeyer, in his book *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*, lays out the battle between Freedom and Fate as it has played out in the history of biology. There is a radical intent towards change, governed by a strong inclination for nature to reproduce itself identically. The two meet in a stasis that is fragile and at times explosive. Hoffmeyer makes the case that one of the most important of these explosions of freedom in the face of determination, was the human adaptation of the spoken, and later the written, word. Language arose to allow for empathy and shared experience and to defy efforts by nature to establish an unchanging stasis. I repeat the words of Hoffmeyer because I think they are of particular relevance:

> But we had better take care. Nature's penchant for forming habits does not stop at language. Fate still has a few tricks up its sleeve, some of which are very much geared towards standardization. Religion is probably the most intransigent in this respect but there are times when politics can seriously stifle the imagination. And yet nothing has so far been able to suppress the fundamental freedom of the intellect for long. The anarchistic nature of human thought and imagination appears to defy any and all civilizing influences.
>
> But we will have to close this account of fate and freedom by acknowledging that Fate can afford to bide its time. Its timescale is measured not in thousands but in millions of years. So who can say that it is not sitting there thinking, "Ah, let the child have its fun."[47]

*

And there we sat in the midst of our own suspended disbelief, in that slaughterhouse reimagined as theater, watching Hamlet stumble through his own consciousness. Waiting for him to be put out of his misery. In this case, just like that of the bullfight, we know the outcome in advance. It's right there in the title: *The Tragedy of Hamlet*. One glance tells us this won't turn out well. Yet we return. For four centuries we—or our ancestors—have returned to witness this strange degeneration of a character who finds his own sense of generational succession, his own sense of time, of evolution (pardon the anachronism) even, out of wack. We watch him break down. We watch him die. And somehow his death is restorative for us. We suspend our disbelief to accept a fake murder as purification in the case of Hamlet. The bull has no such luck.

Hamlet is stuck because he denies the physical. He is attempting to live merely in the world of ideas and this is a tragic error. The ideas need the body, the state needs the land. There will be no room in his head, not even for remorse, if Fortinbras is not deterred.

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[47] Hoffmeyer. Signs. 35.

The day before the bullfight we sat eating burgers in a tapas bar in *Alcalá de Henares* with my nephew Spencer and two Serbian friends. Surely this was no grass-fed beef.

"Is cruel," said a friend from Serbia as she chewed her burger. "the bullfighting. I could never watch."

"This is cruel," I said lifting my burger.

"This is nature," she said. "People eat meat."

"This? Nature?" I asked, incredulously eyeing my increasingly repellant sandwich.

"We didn't torture this," she said.

"*We* didn't," I said.

"The bull is tortured publicly for entertainment," she added.

"The cow is tortured privately for overconsumption," I responded.

Her boyfriend, happily devouring some pork sausages chipped in, "But it leads a good life, the bull… until the end." He paused for another forkful. "Best food, open land, all the cows it can screw."

"Is cruel," she repeated.

Undoubtedly.

My phone rang during the conversation. It was my sister in Oklahoma. I imagined she had called to speak to her son.

"Are you with Spencer," she asked.

"Yeah."

"Can you get away?"

"Sure," I said.

"If you can keep him away from Facebook for a few hours, until we have a chance to talk, I'd really appreciate it," she said waiting me for me to ask a question that I couldn't quite summon. "His uncle died of an overdose. They were close."

I was his uncle. My brother was his uncle. I didn't know the other side of his family well.

"Brian's little brother," she said. Brian was her first husband, Spencer's father, who she had married soon after high school. She was remarried now with two children from her current husband to add to the two she had with Brian.

I looked at Spencer who had no idea what we were discussing, and I wondered what the right thing to do was. Was it right to keep it from him?

"Just for a little while until I can talk to him," she said.

I didn't tell Spencer, and we continued with the day as if nothing had happened. We took the train back from Alcála de Henares, the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes, and arrived in Atocha station. We walked up the Paseo de Prado, passing the museum housing so much Spanish history and turned onto calle Alcála. The terraza in front of the Circulo de Bellas Artes was rumbling with voices, drinking wine and waiting to see some performance or exhibit. The news weighed on me. Was it fair to know something that he did not?

Months before, just after New Year's Eve, I had to fly to Oklahoma because my father, Spencer's grandfather, had gone into the hospital. He had always been a drinker. It had led to hospitalization before, but this time it seemed serious.

I grew up in Chicago with my mother. My brother and sister had lived most of their lives in Oklahoma near my father. We weren't close. We spoke infrequently, but I still felt near to him in some unexplainable way.

It was just before midnight when I got the call.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Fine. Fine," he said. "The doctor said I've got a couple months."

My stepmom grabbed the phone. "Bob, you're gonna scare him," she said away from the receiver, then to me, "he's just fine, Ryan. Just needs to take better care of himself, cut down on the drinking."

In the morning I was heading to the airport with a Romanian taxi driver who offered to take me to Romania if I paid for gas. It was a beautiful country, he said. I had to see it. For a second, I considered taking him up on his offer. Instead of getting on a plane and facing what the next month would bring, I could turn off my phone and drive East with this strange man with the high-pitched voice and the slightly tinted glasses. I could see landscapes I'd ever seen and pretend nothing was happening. Ultimately, it was better to see. Even the hardest things are better to see.

*

That night, when we got home from Alcalá, my sister called and as I spoke to her, Spencer looked at his facebook and saw the news.

His face went white, and I handed him the phone so that he could talk to his mother. He wasn't one to show his emotions.

"Damn," he said as he hung up with her. "This just sucks."

What was there to say? How could I console him? It didn't make any more sense to me than it did to him, and "this just sucks" seemed like a pretty good way to sum it up.

It was late, but we decided to go for a walk. We went down to the Plaza Dos de Mayo made famous in the paintings of Goya as the site where the Madrileños took their ill-fated last stand against Napoleon III's troops. There were young people drinking beer and playing guitar. We sat on the cement benches that line the round plaza and listened to the disorganized sounds of a hundred impromptu parties. We stared out, occasionally repeating the combined wisdom we'd assumed from the event, "this sucks."

Spencer had been much closer to my father than I had. He had grown up in the period that my father was a much gentler alcoholic. He had missed the more fire-filled emotional times, but he had seen the sloppiest bits of the degeneration. He loved my father in ways that I was never close enough to have loved him.

We spent nearly a month in the hospital. The first week there was a good deal of consciousness and we all had our chance at least to make our amends and express our love. As his consciousness faded, and his speech became rare behind eyes that darted from ecstasy to terror, our emotional composition decomposed.

Spencer, I couldn't help but notice, always seemed the strongest among us.

He sat, pouring over algebra textbooks, asking for help when he needed it, trying his best not to feed into the chaos that the rest of us allowed our emotions to generate. He was quiet in all the right ways.

*

Slowly, my father passed. We held the funeral. I delivered the eulogy. Then I flew back to Spain where the classes I was teaching were already underway. There were two

texts I had to read in preparation for the first week back: *Julian of Norwich* and *Hamlet*. Julian of Norwhich was a 14th century mystic who claimed to have suffered the wounds of Christ and who attained a type of spiritual enlightenment before dying very young. She is lauded for her surprisingly modern approaches to gender (referring to Jesus as a 'mother' at times) and her metaphysical views, which strongly root all of creation in the smallest organic miracles, famously, an acorn. Her deep and constant reflections on death were very difficult for me to read, and several times during the flight I nearly cried.

Hamlet, which I was reading in Spanish for the first time, provided an interesting counterbalance. Putting aside the issue of succession, the issue of fathers and sons, which was obviously a relevant one for me at the time, I focused on the question that became so obvious in the Spanish translation, *who lives*? What does it mean to be alive? What is the difference between the inert skull and the raging mind inside of Hamlet's? It would be hard to make the case that it is rationality as many have done. Hamlet does not act rationally. He reacts. He is subject to wild emotions, unpredictable environmental factors, history in the making far beyond his control, psychological impulses that had yet to be given names in Shakespeare's day, and so much miscommunication. Life is not a rational process, not in the way we think of rationality.

I thought of my father's struggles with alcohol that had led to liver failure at 58. I thought of how night after night he ceded his rationality, becoming inarticulate and, on occasion belligerent. I thought of his father's drinking, which was far more controlled. I thought of his brothers and sisters who had submitted to different pressures and many of whom had also died too young. I thought of the genes that somehow, somewhere deep

inside them beyond any rational control, set things in motion, sent messages which took the whole thing, to some degree, out of their control.

I thought of Hamlet's Mousetrap. Of action and reaction. Life was an almost intolerably chaotic process of unpredictable emergence, death the absence of such, and language the best effort to confine that emergence, to encapsulate it enough to create the vocabulary to name it, to influence it. Language emerged from that chaos as a tool: it's own (not our own) self-reflexivity, a moderator.

*

Richard Wright, speeding through Valencia with Carmen's brother Carlos in order not to be spotted together in the instance that Wright publishes something that could be incriminating for Carlos, asks the question, "Is it that bad?"

"It's bad. I've a brother in exile. He's a Freemason. I'd like to get out of Spain, go to America, perhaps. But how can I?"

"So Franco is not only against Communists?"

"You don't know! This government is against Communists, Radicals, Socialists, Anarchists, Protestants, Liberals, Freemasons, Atheists, Agnostics, Existentialists, Surrealists, Vegetarians—"

"You're joking! Why Vegetarians?"

"Because many Anarchists are Vegetarians," he explained.

"Only recently they closed down a Vegetarian restaurant in Barcelona. Anarchists are mystics and many of them won't eat meat. So, if you shut down a Vegetarian restaurant, you defeat Anarchism. Simple."[48]

[48] All of the above dialogue is quoted from Wright. 32-33.

*

When I think of butchers, I always think of what Tomas More wrote in Utopia. In a civilized society, he wrote, only slaves should be allowed to act as butchers. It was bad for the soul, he wrote, for someone to spend their day butchering. Ignoring the obvious irony of considering slavery as a more acceptable social norm than butchery, I can't help but picture him standing over a pyre of burning Protestants as the thought occurred to him. Was your own butchery bad for your soul St. Tomas? Maybe in a civilized society slaves should have had the duty of killing infidels, too.

*

One of Hoffmeyer's ideas is that as the individual springs up, we lose sight of the super-organism. We begin to see the unit as opposed to the whole, the tree and not the forest. Expanding upon his idea, morality must become personally oriented as opposed to species oriented. Subjective as opposed to (and this may not seem like a natural opposite) utilitarian. Hamlet becomes more important than Denmark even as Fortinbras marches across the Danish border somewhere in the distance. For that matter, Denmark is of more importance than humanity. Borders become points of delineation as opposed to points of intersection. The individual consumer feels him or herself as separate from the practices of the culture of consumption. Responsibility evaporates like ozone. Maybe the bullfight is the sight of a confused effort by the community to take ownership of its own role in the brutality of consumption. Maybe it is an effort to ensure that each person knows the cost of his or her own survival. Maybe *Hamlet* is a lament at the birth of the individual, because that birth means the loss of collectivity. Maybe it is a prescient glimpse of the tyranny of the illusion of individuality that has come to dominate the human race. Maybe.

*

There are two moments in *Pagan Spain* that I see as crucial to our conversation. The first is when Carlos, Carmen's brother, brings Wright to his orange groves outside of Valencia. Carlos discusses his passion for horticulture and his embrace of the most modern techniques for irrigation and planting. But, his situation is a bitter one. There is a strong government hand in the regulation of production, and strong ties between the major producers and Franco's regime. He is not allowed to bring his oranges to market, and on the rare occasion that he can, he is completely out of control in terms of setting the price or, in the case of foreign sales, even receiving a fair exchange rate. Preference is given to the big producers despite, not because of, their methodologies. His trees stand full of unpicked fruit that will never be sold so that the demand will stay high, and the major producers, who sell freely, will reap the profits. The land that constitutes the very substance of *La Madre Patria* is spoken of as a virgin, as one of *las buenas*, but treated quite differently: exploited, abused, traded.

Wright describes Carlos as he inhabits the environment he so loves:

> His lips were open and he breathed heavily. He grew conscious of my presence and controlled himself. He reached down and tenderly plucked a leaf from a young orange tree and crushed it in his palm and smelt it, then tossed it away with a gesture of disgust. I did the same and the pungent odor made me look wonderingly at the dark fecund earth from which the plant had sprung, at the high blue sky overhead that had watered and warmed the plant and then at the tight, bitter, baffled face of Carlos—a man alienated from his dark rich earth, from his sea of green, prolific plants, from his deep blue sky, yet silhouetted against the darkness and the greenness and blueness that he so obviously loved.[49]

The scent draws Wright's mind into relation with the environment, eliciting an intuition in the reader of the interconnectedness of mind and body, of a human subject with his or

[49] Wright. 33.

her environment. *La Madre Patria* is not just an ideology, it is a landscape. When the people are alienated from the landscape, coerced towards dwelling in ideology alone, they cannot be fulfilled. With full acknowledgment of the risk of stretching the limits of the concept, I think it is worth bringing Hoffmeyer's code duality to mind in this context. The ideology and the body, the encoded and the mimetic, have to work together if the organism is going to be successful.

The second moment, and perhaps more to the point in the current discussion, is when Wright interviews a bullfighter named Chamaco. In this scene Wright constructs *himself* as the bullfighter. Wright calls out to Chamaco causing a crowd of people to recognize him and gather around the two men, interviewer and interviewed, much like matador and bull surrounded by the crowd in la plaza de toros. When Wright asks for an autograph it is pointed out that Chamaco does not have a pen, calling to mind the sword of the torero. He is quickly given one as Wright reaches for his own. With the aid of a young translator in the crowd Wright begins to ask questions and Chamaco is "forced back into the entrance of a store."[50] Wright constructs Chamaco as the bull by establishing him as somewhat more of a primitive than himself, not possessing the same access to logical discourse. When Chamaco claims to acknowledge the beauty of the bulls that he fights, Wright responds, "I wanted to ask him for a definition of that kind of beauty, but I felt that my question would have been too abstruse."[51] That is, 'too abstruse' for Chamaco; to abstruse for the bullfighter who may have some instinct level comprehension of his craft, but will certainly lack the ability to verbalize it. Later, at the bullfight in the country, he writes this of the bullfighters: "Their mode of expressing

[50] Wright. 129.
[51] Wright. 130.

themselves indicated that they thought in images, that the world of ideas was very far away."[52] He is not confident in the ability of the bullfighters to express their position in the ring abstractly, though he later credits them with a certain elevated spiritual understanding of their role much like the toreros credit the bull with a spiritual awareness though the bull itself is obviously without the ability to make any such claim. Yet, much like the bullfighter's innate understanding of and respect for the bulls that he fights, Wright recognizes an unspoken commonality between himself and his subject upon asking whether "the only wild beast in the arena is the audience," and this is worth quoting at length:

> Chamaco's expression indicated that he knew exactly what I meant; he stared at me for a moment and then came nearer to laughing than I had ever seen him do. But he shook his head and refused to answer. He knew the answer, all right, but he did not want to commit himself publicly… And, suddenly, I saw a detached, withdrawing look come into his eyes. Something urged me not to question him anymore. I could feel that he was hiding a consciousness of death; there was in him the presence of death; he was a bridegroom-to-be of death.[53]

All this acquires weight when later in interviewing the American bullfighter Harry Whitney, the necessity of knowing and understanding the subtlest movements of the bull is explained to Wright. Wright is an adept interviewer carefully surveying his subject and assessing his moves based on the reactions he witnesses. The difference that arises here is essential. Wright upon seeing the resistance of his subject does not move in for the kill, but ceases to question. Wright is not acting out a semi-religious ritualized confrontation of death, but rationally engaging in a humanistic discourse. He is seeking to understand this culture and his positioning, dialogically rather than dialectically, in respect to it. Yet, like the matador, he also recognizes the fatedness of his subject in referring to Camacho

[52] Wright. 139.
[53] Wright. 130.

as ‘a bridegroom-to-be of death.’ Much like the bull in the ring, the matador, already repeatedly constructed into the position of the bull, is destined to death, is locked into a system in which death is always at hand. The bull is at the mercy of the matador, the matador is at the mercy of the crowd, the crowd at the mercy of the culture and the culture at the mercy of those who surveille, all swirling around one another inscribing repression in their paths.

Of the bullfighters Wright encounters, Whitney is the most able to express himself, though it must be pointed out that he is also the only one who is fluent in English and shares Wright’s nationality. He explains that it is the crowd that creates the danger, first, quite practically speaking, through their creating a demand for the bullfight, and second for their creation of the myth around the torero that the torero himself is subject to believe, allowing him to move closer and closer to the danger. It is a collective experience, though the focus is drawn towards individual heroism. He explains the abject poverty in which most bullfighters live (though this is not representative of their station today). He explains the quasi-religious status of the bullfight and of the bullfighter and how as a bullfighter “you offer up your life to the bull.”[54] In essence this is a system that draws the poor into a ring among the masses to potentially die in an effort towards excising some unwanted material from identity; to move self from a threatening dynamism to a more palatable domination. It is Whitney that brings Wright to the bullfight staged in the pueblo outside of Madrid where he gives us the gruesome, unhomely final scene of his account:

> When the matador finally killed him, hundreds of men and boys squeezed through the spaces in the stockade and swarmed on to the sand of the ring and converged

[54] Wright. 136.

> upon the dead bull's carcass. Then something happened that made my lips part in utter astonishment. The crowd went straight to the dead bull's testicles and began kicking them, stamping them, spitting at them, grinding them under their heels…[55]

As Wright subsequently points out, "the bull had been a proud, sireing, fighting, lascivious sexual machine and now, having been ceremoniously slain, they went straight to the real object on that dead bull's body that the bull had symbolized for them…"[56] The men and boys of a viciously patriarchal society, held fast under the papacy for centuries and recently subjected to Franco as well engaged themselves in the destruction of the testicles of a freshly killed bull. This ending cannot be seen as return to the image of the virgin. This is an act in which they, to use Wright's words, "…poured out the hate and frustration and bewilderment of their troubled and confused consciousnesses."[57] It is important that in his final scene, the bullfighter is nowhere to be seen. It is the crowd, those who demanded the killing, who are displaying confused love, and evident disgust for this corpse, who is on display, something like the body of the bishop that we saw earlier in Barcelona. The portion of the dynamic dance that represented the animal, the portion always intended to be brought to submission has been slaughtered, repressed, dispensed with, and the men in the crowd immediately engage in a confused act of destruction. Is it that their social role rests fundamentally in conflict with their ideology, the primacy of the masculine in the face of the divinity of the feminine? What has been demonstrated most clearly is that any of these violent efforts to repress are sure to fail. The effort, as Richard Wright is engaged in it, should be one towards an understanding of the dynamism, because dynamism under pressure to stasis only moves more violently.

[55] Wright. 143.
[56] Ibid
[57] Ibid

Remembering that Wright had carefully situated himself in the position of the torero during the interview as he constructed it, we must also be conscious of the fact that in the bullring he associates with the bull, the tormented, the black, animal that is entirely predetermined upon entering the ring. Especially though, we must return to the audience and their role in the figuration of this violent exorcism. The audience is the reason, of course that the bullfight is occurring. This is an act of entertainment and without an audience it would not exist.

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When we went to the bullfight, all that had happened in the preceding days and months was circling both of our minds. Spencer and I sat in the cheap seats, but it felt close. There was a refined air to the crowd. Bullfighting, these days, is a sport for the elite, the traditional. True or otherwise, it still reeks of Franco, whose picture, along with the Virgin's, used to adorn every bullring. The clapping, airy and occasional, was accompanied by intermittent shouts of 'ole!' and the scent of black tobacco and stale beer.

The culturally specific sounds and smells aside, it could have been Wrigley Field, except for there were fewer participants in the game. In an American imagination, I cannot speak for a Spanish one, Rome is present throughout. It is impossible not to invoke the gladiatorial origins of such a spectacle. I imagine two men battling to the death for the entertainment of the crowd, and I wonder what the intentions were. A close encounter with mortality? A pacification of violent urges? A spiritual recognition of the contingency of life on violence? And I am sure that whatever those intentions were cannot be far from those that occupy the ring.

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The bull grinds his hooves against the sand and charges towards the torero, but he charges too hard, and one of his hooves is dislodged from his leg. He writhes, his back covered in deep red blood that leaks from under wounds and glistens in the afternoon sun. Oddly, in the midst of it I understand, in some distant way, how this is so attractive to so many people. It's mesmerizing and gruesome. It's sublime, and full of life in all the most morbid ways. The bull is now three-legged and wobbly, confused and enraged.

The bullfighter is urged by the crowd to take pity on the bull. The people seem to have taken a grim view of the bull's injury. Some are upset at seeing the animal suffer, which seems perverse considering that they, we, came to watch it be cruelly dispatched towards its next destination. Others are upset because it is such a large, impressive animal, and now it will have to be put down three minutes sooner than expected.

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Spencer looked away as the bull knelt, but I could not. I was mesmerized by the cruel, brutal, unnecessary sublimity as the matador slid the blade effortlessly into the nook where the bull's neck became his back. The maimed animal dropped to the ground hesitantly, like a drunk giving one last effort to stand before falling unconsciously. The fight had not been particularly impressive, so he did not remove the tail as a trophy.

CHAPTER 9

CRIADOR

It's impossible to know from where it comes, to where it is heading. It just happens. The intersection of one idea with another leads to a collision, an explosion of new ways of thinking, new ways of being.

Borja Fernandez Cobaleda received a phone call. There had been an accident. His father, the famed *criador de toros* for the Spanish bullfighting circuit, had not survived. Borja caught a plane from Paris where he was working at an investment bank, and while he was home he made the decision to return to the farm where he had his roots, to reinvent the farm that was floundering amongst the changing cultural attitudes about the bullfights, and create a sustainable meat business with some of Salamanca's best beef.

*

"I don't like it when people use the word *hate* in relation to political parties," he told me over coffee in the terraza of Pepe Botella, a café in Plaza Dos de Mayo.

The elections had heated up. Podemos was looking to be a serious influence in the next parliament. What began in Puerta del Sol was slowly solidifying into becoming a legitimate political party.

"I will say that from the perspective of a business person, Podemos scares me a bit." The plaza where we sat was once the home of the armory stormed by the people of Madrid in an ill-fated effort to fight off the French troops who occupied the city. It was the site of a sort of failed Bastille.

Borja's family was a large and traditional one with expansive lands in Salamanca. His father and grandfather had supported the PP, the conservative party, but they were not particularly partisan.

"As a gay man, I find that to support the PP I often have to go against my interests, but as a business man I do the same supporting PSOE. Each party has its good and its bad." PSOE is the Socialist party, who Borja considered largely responsible for the collapse of 2008. "Things have gone best for business with the PP, generally."

I met Borja Fernández while searching for meat providers in the process of opening our restaurant. He quickly became someone that I wanted to know more about. As an individual who grew up in the environs of bullfighting, a farmer, an ex-financier—who for years put his Oxford economics training to work in London and Paris—an art collector, opera aficionado, and oral historian of cattle in Spain, he storms the streets each day, face red from his rapid pace, visiting clients and selling his product.

"Why does Podemos scare you?" I asked him.

"Because they are living in an idea that doesn't match reality," he said pushing his coffee away from him half-finished. "I understand a revolution in 19th century Russia, in 20th century Cuba, but not in Spain today. We would be shooting ourselves in the foot. They want independence for Catalunya, they are open to the possibility of leaving the European Union, they support the nationalization of industries in a way that is simply not practical. In short, if they get their way, they will destroy the economy which has been steadily recovering over the past years."

I was torn. I liked Podemos in many ways. They stood for many things that I stand for: higher minimum wages, more social protections, accountability for corruption.

But, on the other hand, I agreed with what Borja said. They held up Venezuela as a model, and flat out denied the inevitability of interconnection in a global economy. I was as weary as them about the downsides of globalism, but I also saw the potential, the promise. How, for instance would we fight global warming as a series of isolated states dependent on fossil fuels and nationalized energy? There was so much power in global cooperation, and all of the difficulties seemed to me worth the struggles of reaching consensus. I felt like in some sense Podemos were another party that was offering a model of a set of ideals as opposed to reading the world around them and reacting with flexibility and innovation. Why did it seem that no one wanted to cast off the ideal and traffic in the material? Why was it so hard to see that every ideology had value and elements that detracted from that value, and that the very good in Democracy was that, in theory, it should help us arrive at the best sorts of compromises.

"Ciudadanos is interesting," he said. "But, too young. They aren't prepared, and it's unclear who they are, what they represent."

Ciudadanos was another new player on the scene. They were a young party that was socially liberal and economically liberal in the classic sense. In a sense they had also emerged from the space created by 15-M, though the genesis was less direct. They wanted to modernize Spain's economy by raising minimum wages while liberalizing labor laws and decreasing the level of *funcionarios*. *Funcionarios* are an interesting group in Spain. They are government employees who generally work from 9am to 2pm in the various ministries. Professors and other government workers are also considered funcionarios. Borja once tolm me an apparently common Spanish joke in which one person asks a funcinoario: "You don't work in the afternoon?" and the funcionario

responds, “no, we don’t work in the mornings, we don’t *come* in the afternoons.” They are similar to government workers in the US, but their numbers are much larger, and the positions are coveted for the stability and comfort they provide. People tend to refer to them disparagingly, as when you need to do anything bureaucratic, it is a funcionario whose face will sit behind the desk, and bureaucracy is anything but easily navigable in Spain.

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Borja had an eclectic, maybe even slightly eccentric air, and I wanted to know more about this man who seemed so keenly balanced between the world of Madrid galleries and European opera houses on the one hand, and the pastures of Salamanca on the other. He struck me as a figure embodying the opposing forces of art, business, rural and urban life in a way that paralleled the stark contradictions that have long made bullfighting such a mysterious muse. I wanted to discover how his early life surrounded by *toros* and his later passion for the arts collided to create this unique *criador de vacas*.

From one perspective, Borja seems an acutely modern figure who has benefitted from the increased travel, and the growing demand to be one’s own marketing force, taking your product directly to the city and the cybersphere and understanding the importance of branding and technology (In a Spain where most comerciantes still stop by with a clipboard once a week, he’s the only provider who I can get in touch with via whatsapp, and interact with on facebook). From another perspective, there’s something about him that hints at Victorian nobility, something traditional, pastoral, or as they might say in Spain, he was a bit of a Señorito.

Situated 20 km from Ciudad Rodrigo in the province of Salamanca, Campocerrado is a farm that gained fame as a center of some of the finest *toros* that made their way into the plazas of Madrid, Barcelona and Sevilla. Borja's grandfather was the great *criador de toros*, Anastasio Fernández who founded the farm in 1927 after leaving behind a farm that *his* father had founded at the begininning of the 19th century. Borja's father, Bernabé Fernández Cobaleda, continued to raise bulls until his death in 1992. Under Borja's guidance the farm now dedicates its energies to producing high quality beef and pork that they provide to families in the Madrid area, as well as to a select few restaurants.

Borja grew up with toros. He admits to an intrigue around the tradition of bullfighting, "I carry it in the genes, of course. I went to a lot of bullfights with my parents and my family, so logically I like them, and I see them, but I am not a fan, not of the toreros, not of the business side."

Though he says he is not a fan of the fights, he is a fan of the animal: "I like the bull first as an animal, a bull in the countryside is a marvel." In explaining his antipathy for the corridas, he provides a typically enigmatic answer: "It's a very specific world," he said watching a group of dark-skinned young boys kick a soccer ball in the center of the plaza a few meters from the table.

"Specific how?" I asked.

"The torero is a person that has had a rogue's life. For better, or for worse, they are often people who have suffered hunger. They are people who are willing to stand in front a bull!" he laughs, leans his head back, and raises his eyebrows betraying a certain nostalgic fondness for the spectacle of the bullfight, "From necessity, they are very

masculine men, but if you watch the way they walk into the plaza, the way they look about the crowd, or pose for the people, the poses can seem very feminine, and, of course, their has been more than a few homosexual toreros. Nothing official, we're speaking about the 40's, 50's, and 60's, and as with *fútbol* players, they were all controlled by the regime," he says. He briefly looks as if he's staring into some inscrutable mandala. "There's always been something very feminine there… for some reason, there's a point of femininity to the form of the bullfight." His eyes snap back into focus, "It's not all just ladies underwear being thrown from the stands," he laughs again.

In this transition from cosmic consideration to comic abjection lies the strange force of the bullfight to suck you in just at the point that you want to dismiss it, to make you doubt your efforts to reject it as some cruel relic of more brutal times, to balance itself majestically on some strange limn between civility and barbarity.

"Did you expect to return to the world of *criadores*? Was it part of the plan as you studied business and finance at Oxford, and as you worked in banks? Did you want to get back to the farm?" I asked.

He didn't pause to consider. "No. No. My father always said, study and work, because it's the best inheritance that I am going to leave you. And, one day if you decide to live in the countryside, it will be because you decided to, not because life decided for you and you weren't capable of anything else."

He learned a lot throughout his rural youth, but beyond adolescence, he was called towards grayer pastures: "I saw the farm from a young age. I saw it with my father, but what's true is that when you are 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, you stop seeing it. What you want at that age is Madrid. You want to go out, to drink, to party, but then there

comes a point in your life when you decide to return. In my case it came about because my father died in a traffic accident, and it became necessary."

He visits the farm multiple times a week, but continues to make his home in the city. "I couldn't live in the countryside. It's a way to travel, to relax, a passion that I carry inside, but I need the life of Madrid, the culture of Madrid. I couldn't even live in Salamanca. It's a little city. Even Madrid can feel small at times next to London and Paris."

Besides the necessity created by the sudden passing of his father, he found that while he loved the city, the culture, the art, he was not called by the work of finance. "I went to work in banks in London, in Paris, I returned to Madrid and worked corporate finance and one day I woke up and said what in the hell am I doing here. The people I worked with were waking up and taking cocaine just to get through the day, and I just didn't like it."

But, he held on to a few tendencies he picked up along the way: "What I really love, and what the world of meat gives me time for, is the world of culture and art. It's something very different from selling meat."

Despite his claim that the two worlds were quite separate, I couldn't help but sense some common source for his love of art and the farm. When he spoke of family, or of the bullfighting lore in which his childhood was steeped, there was an infatuation with these liminal figures that seemed to encapsulate and explain some of the complexities of his own personality.

The bullfighters, he explained, while often brutal and severe, were far from simple characters, "Belmonte was known for going to literary lectures in Café Gijon, and

Domingin, for example, was a friend of Franco and a friend of Picasso, He was a Fascist and a Modernist all at once. Can you imagine?"

His political perspective, of making space and rejecting hate seemed to make more sense through this lens.

The bullfighter seemed to be a bridge between the city and the country, art and nature, brutality and civility, not only in the ceremony that they acted out, but in their personal lives as well. They were, and to a lesser extent maybe even are, figures that reminded the urban resident of the brutality that dwelled beyond the city's borders, sacrificially allowing for the abundance that marked life in the city, and at the same time, they were reminders of the alienation of the city, of the deep roots of art in those pastoral places beyond the fray.

As our food slips ever farther from its origins, as art and media slip ever closer to pure abstractions, maybe the production of something real, the proximity to the realities that buttress our misconstrued culinary fantasies is an act that is not altogether dissimilar to that undertaken by the bullfighter, a retrograde act, focused on tying the community to its origin. Or, maybe it's just about good meat. In any case, I'm glad that Borja has applied his farm-raised wisdom to bringing Madrid some of it's best beef.

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A few months after our conversation Podemos took the mayoral elections of Barcelona and Madrid. They did not win majorities, but no party did, and they became the strongest voice in a "coalition of losers."

On the day the new mayor was sworn in, I found myself with Borja in a small café near the same plaza where we had spoken before. I asked him what he thought of the new mayor.

He took a moment to consider the question. “You have to see what she does. I don’t believe in judging before seeing. The story will unfold, and then we will know.”

CHAPTER 10

LERMA

The town was all but abandoned most of the year. One day in summer all of its inhabitants past, and the offspring who had grown up on more populated lands, returned to their garden, the site of their families genesis.

The town erupted in story. History, fable, and religion combined as people reminded themselves who they were, what they were, and how they meant in terms of one and other, in terms of this material space called 'home.'

You could tell Lerma was normally a sleepy place. When we arrived in the small town outside of Burgos it seemed that there were few bars or restaurants. The plaza mayor, one of the largest in Spain, was sparsely populated. There was a Parador, a state run hotel that usually occupies an old palace, in this case el Palacio Ducal, and at the other end a restaurant. The houses were old, in withering condition along streets that sprung from the hub of the Plaza Mayor and meandered down hills until the pueblo suddenly, without reason, came to an end and the landscape, barren and expansive, took up exactly where it had left off.

My friend Jorge and I checked into our hotel and headed down to the bar in the Parador for a coffee. The town was bustling a bit more than usual because it was the fiesta of the pueblo, the annual party when the descendants returned home to celebrate Lerma's heritage and their own.

Part of the celebration was typically some sort of cultural offering. This year it was Calderón's play *Casa con Dos Puertas Mala es de Guardar* and Claudia was playing the lead.

For weeks she had been walking around the house, mumbling lines in verse under her breath, expelling rhythmic bursts of almost inaudible language as she looked towards the ground, grumbling in frustration when the rhythm paused or broke. What a strange process to watch, that of a person internalizing a text, a character, allowing her body to carry, momentarily, someone else's being.

Jorge and I had a coffee and wandered the streets of the pueblo.

"It's nice here," I said.

He laughed. "There's nothing here but old ladies and stray dogs."

Jorge is an ex-professor of engineering who now has a company that builds wind farms in Equatorial Guinea and the Phillipines. He spends half the year in Malabo. When he is in Madrid, he regularly meets with the Ambassadors of the countries where he works. He is plump, with wild hair and even wilder eyes. In his late forties, he smokes incessantly and drinks beer as if it is water and he has just finished a maratón. The most endearing if ocassionally frustrating quality in Jorge is a near complete incapacity for cynicism or negativity. He is easily the most upbeat person I have ever encountered.

We wandered towards the church where the play would be later that night. The stage had been constructed just in front of the church's façade. At the apex of the roof was a cross, and at the base of it a pair of storks had built their nest.

I pointed it out to Jorge.

"They always build at the highest point in town, and the highest point in town is almost always a church," he said.

I had never seen a stork's nest before. To me it was a mythical bird, the bird that brought babies, but Jorge seemed unimpressed. How strange that the church had become the de facto home of the bird because of it's height. Our own piety expressed architecturally bled into the birds choice of real estate, and made the bird itself into a religious symbol.

"They always nest in pairs," said Jorge.

I looked up at the two heads, side-eyeing us suspiciously as we stared up at them.

As we headed back towards the Plaza Mayor, I asked him what he thought about 15-M and the politics that were emerging from the remnants of the movement, what he thought about the state of Spain in general.

"Spain needs something different," he said. "It's been the same story for too long. PSOE, PP, PP, PSOE… No one trusts them. They're both corrupt. Change is always good."

"Do you believe that? Is change *always* good? I mean, Franco was a change… the Civil War itself was a change…" we had reached the top of the hill and were stepping into the main square.

He laughed. "No, I suppose it's not! But we are stuck. Stagnant. In this case, we need a change. We need youth! Fresh blood!"

This was a phrase I had heard over and again: Fresh blood. It might have been the translation, and I know we use the expression in English as well, but somehow, hearing it in Spanish, in this context, it rung more violent, more loaded. The war is an odd vacancy

in Spain. Young people seem relatively ignorant to it, as if there was some intention to let it be forgotten. This comes, largely from the fact that the battle was not so much a regional one as one fought between households within pueblos. Neighbors, town councils, families, were divided, and when it all came to an end, the life of these little towns, little towns like the one we were in now had to let go of the grudges even when that may have meant the son of one family had killed the son of another. Michael Paterniti's book *The Telling Room* provides a fascinating look into the life of the pueblo, of the family, after the war.[58]

"Do you think Spain could become violent again?"

"It's possible," he said looking into the plaza as if he was imagining a century sweeping across the open expanse. It occurred to me that the Plaza Mayor of a town was where people were burned during the inquisition. This was a site where so much blood had been spilled. "People are hungry. Nothing good happens when people are hungry." He squinted towards the Parador through his black-rimmed glasses. "Let's eat something," he said.

We set off in search of a restaurant. Jorge was right, there was little to see or do in Lerma. Claudia was somewhere preparing for that nights performance, so we went for lunch. We ate scrambled eggs with a local specialty, a blood sausage called Murcilla de Burgos, and afterwards a hearty lentil stew with chorizo and bits of pig ear. The wine flowed freely at our table and all those around it as the festive ambience in the town

[58] Paterniti's book tells the story of a quintessential Castillian man recovering his father's long lost cheese récipe in postwar Castilla la Mancha. The life of the pueblo, and the relationships amongst its inhabitatnts are what propels the book forward as Paterniti spends nearly a decade visiting the pueblo of Guzmán. It is highly reccomended for anyone who wants to further their understanding of Spanish Pueblo life.

began to swell. The wine was followed by a neon green *liquor de hierbas* over ice, and then we both needed a siesta.

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In the evening we headed towards the Convento de las Clarisas, where the stage had been constructed. The streets were packed now. What had seemed to be a pueblo with no bars, had become a pueblo packed with them. Each bar was filled to overflowing, and people stood on the streets in front of them with small bottles of beer and glasses of wine, eating apertivos from shared plates, smoking and talking in loud, festive voices. The sun had gone down, and the church's façade was lit from the ground up, creating a beautiful backdrop for the stage which culminated in the stork's nest. The birds themselves seemed perturbed, watching from the precipice with the annoyed eyes of neighbors who are being kept awake by an unexpected party. What a strange instance of our human self-importance.

We sat on a semi-circular concrete stairway which created the sensation that we were in a small Roman amphitheater the convent's façade acting as the stage's backdrop. The crowd filtered in and filled every available space. The lights dimmed, and then the actors took the stage.

It was a comedy, similar to 12th night: People hiding in closets, men dressing as women and vice versa, mistaken identities and misunderstandings all, of course, leading to a tidy conclusion. I had never seen a play like this in an environment so well-suited. We were in a town that likely hadn't changed much since the play was written. Claudia was great. The hours of mumbling rhythmically and pausing in frustration had done their

work. She rattled off line after line of verse until the lights went down for the final time and the crowd exploded into applause riddled with shouts of “olé!”

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After the play, the audience, ourselves included wandered towards the expansive Plaza Mayor. Claudia and her actor friends would join us once they had changed.

We bought a couple of beers and staked out a good location in the plaza to see the night’s final performance.

The lights went out, and music, tribal and electric, leapt from speakers around the plaza. A voice said, “In the beginning, there was only the darkness.” The music cut, and the voices of the crowd went silent as we waited in the darkness for whatever may come. All at once, the music bounded again from the speakers and a massive flaming ring appeared in the center of the plaza. The voice began to tell the story of how existence exploded from the nothingness as the ring expanded into a series of rings which formed the body of a dancing dragon. From the nothingness came animals, and humans, hunters, then farmers, all represented by fire-wielding dancers who moved around the dragon in various costumes. Little by little it felt as if there was some attempt to retell the tale of El Cid, Spain’s foundational myth.

It was amazing, this jumble of Pagan ritual, Christian mythology, human anthropological development, and narrative engagement with scientific phenomena like the big bang all brought to bare on the development of this town, Lerma.

CHAPTER 11

THE BAN AND THE MIME

"The question 'in what way does the living being have language?' corresponds exactly to the question 'in what way does the bare life dwell in the *polis*?'" (Agamben, p. 2)

*And even the trees can speak. Through algae that spreads through roots like a viral photo of some celebrity tattoo, they offer stories, tell tales of warning, pass nutrition to their neighbors. Do they watch us? Do they judge us? Do they enjoy the theater that we make deep in the woods on stages supported by the trunks of their kin? What sorts of stories might they tell if they inhabited those stages? Or, ha*ve *they already coopted our voice to advocate for their cause?*

He hunched over me, a pack of cold steaks had been cut into strips, and he pressed them against my belly, pulling them away as if he were ripping out my spleen and chewing on my innards, devouring me from the inside out. His eyes were wild and distant, his face and my stomach covered in faux blood. When the director yelled "corte," Javier laughed. "You don't taste very good," he said in choppy English, spitting the raw meat onto the grass.

I had met him in passing many times, but the first time we spoke was only a few hours before as we were heading to the woods. Claudia had a role in a short film. With the crew, we drove in a big white van past the giant crucifix that marks the Valley of the Fallen which serves as Franco's tomb, and out to the Sierra de Guadarama, the mountains outside of Segovia. The cross wouldn't have been there when Hemingway and Dos Pasos

were traipsing around Spain, but it was there by the time Wright made his pilgrimage to Iberia, though Franco had yet to make it his eternal resting place.

Javier Botet, an actor who would later become famous for playing monsters in Spanish and American horror films such as *REC* and *Mama*, rode along with us from Madrid. Javier's limbs and digits were long and skinny. His knees and knuckles bulged like cysts on the branches of a tree. His eyes were set deep into dark sockets and his cheeks collapsed into the cavern of his mouth. His looks were grotesque, but that is how he made his living. It was a disease of some sort that made him so tall and lank. He is funny and kind, disarmingly so. All the way to the mountains he told stories about movie sets and stages with the enthusiasm of an eight year old.

"The stage is easy," he said. "Boring." His gaze drifted towards the giant cross fading off to the East. "Frankenstein," he said matter-of-factly, letting the word hang in isolation for long enough to let us all wonder if there were more coming, or if simply stating the name of the monster was a sort of micro-fiction left to intermingle with the fascist symbol on the horizon. "I played Frankenstein on a tour across Europe. Every night's the same. I just don't get a thrill out of being on stage. Applause is boring." I had never heard an actor say that.

He felt differently about film, which I suspected had something to do with the difference in the paycheck, though he didn't put it so crassly.

"With film you can play, make mistakes, create what you want. You make the story instead of just telling someone else's." The internet is full of shorts that he and his friends had made on lazy Sunday afternoons in the Retiro park in Madrid, or in the office of a colleague that had been abandoned for the weekend. The shorts were invariably

humorous, and tended to be different from Javier's "work" in that while his physical appearance was bound to be a feature, his roles tended towards the oddball, the Kramer-esque, rather than the supernatural. I wondered if somewhere deep inside he was bothered by always being cast as the monster, seemingly destined to be an asterisk in the world of film.

When we got to our destination in an unoccupied corner of the mountains near Guadarrama, which had been site of one of the early Republican victories in the Spanish Civil War, and the location of Hemingway and John Dos Pasos' famous falling out over the murder of the scholar and Republican stalwart Jose Robles[59], Javier stepped out of the van, his big foot lumbering. He wandered a little ways towards a fence, a giant smile brought on by the mountain air. He was always smiling, and his smile was always infectious.

His head dropped quickly from above all of ours down to the ground. Everyone scrambled towards him to find out why he had fallen so fast, and if he was alright. His foot had slid through a grate that was meant to keep cattle from escaping designated pasture area, and there was a big bloody blister on his bulbous knee when he came up. With limbs so delicate, everyone was sure he had ruptured or fractured something, and they were afraid the shoot would be over before it had begun. An hour long drive into the mountains for nothing.

"*Joder,*" said the director as Javier was brought to the hospital by one of the sound recorders. "Let's set up and hope they get back quick."

[59] See *The Breaking Point.*

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At the time I was teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a class that I was teaching at the University in Madrid. The trip to the woods and the folly of the actors, the strange and silly bliss of a group of young people heading to the woods to create could not help but feel like life imitating art. Strangely, the day made Shakespeare feel more contemporary, or maybe Shakespeare made the day feel more Early Modern. In either case, a familiarization took place, and the play seemed more accessible with the filter of our day in the woods filming this project, which would (unbeknownst at the time) years later become a dream sequence in the directors first feature length film.

In the play, Bottom the joiner has just returned from a dream in which his head was converted into that of an ass, when he famously says:

> Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard. The ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It will be called 'Bottom's Dream' because it has no bottom.[60]

Bottom confuses the language of sight for that of sound, of taste for speech or thought. He has just taken a journey into what may have been a dream world, or what may have been something akin to Agamben's realm of bare life, and his senses, the basis of the rational self, are not sufficient to the task of amassing the appropriate detail to retell the events. Instead, they can only inch closer and closer to whatever it is that lay, complete,

[60] Shakespeare MSND 4.1.202-09.

changing, incomprehensibly becoming, on the other side of the narrative. The goal of communication, semiosis, and ultimately narrative is empathy, and when an individual loses the narrative, they also lose their capacity for empathy and their place in the social order. But, there is also a sense in which loosing the "I" allows a more honest glimpse of the social, an awareness of the systemic. Actors and activists can forgo the self in order to blend into a larger "movement" or "act."

If Bottom's dream truly 'has no bottom,' it might also mean that as he veered off into an emergent world, as he became animal, or at least his head, his center of consciousness did, leaving his human body intact, his rationally defined self, slipped away. There was no longer a subject, a Bottom, present in the world of the dream, intimating that the 'I', the apex of a rationally centered world in which information is gathered and processed via the senses, faded into the distance with the Athenian polis. The paradox is, however, that while his senses cannot meet the challenge of intelligibly compiling the events, he turns to language, to the poet Peter Quince, to retell the events, to reintegrate his adventure in the forest into his life in the polis. This invites the question of how narrative interacts with bare life, of how a story can confine, and through confinement in some ways exceed the chaotic flow of raw data that we might call Nature. We return to Agamben's parallel questions: "The question 'in what way does the living being have language?' corresponds exactly to the question 'in what way does the bare life dwell in the *polis*?'" [61]

[61] The answer according to Biosemiotics and its principle avatar Jesper Hoffmeyer, is that where there is life, there is semiosis, therefore life is made of language and the *polis* consists of some critical mass of bare life. The higher level of sophistication, and the moment of transition from communication to intelligence, or from anarchy to civility, remains mysterious, but the building blocks are clear. The Biosemiotic argument in its

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An extra had failed to show up. My tag-along role became participatory. I would play the cadaver. They handed me the wardrobe, a hunting vest and canvas pants. The makeup artists covered my head and abdomen in fake blood.

"*Ponte,"* the director said, pointing at a rock in the woods.

I lay down next to the rock and they moved me around like I was a piece of luggage until I was in a position uncomfortable enough to wish I really was dead. Arm extended over my head, body twisted, head and ass pointing in the same direction, legs splayed.

"Okay," said the director in English. "Like this. Stay like this."

It was only half an hour until Javier made it back. He hopped out of the car and lifted his arms like Rocky. Everyone clapped and shouted. I stayed perfectly still, my head against a sharp bolder, covered in cold, sticky, false blood, wondering if this wasn't a practical joke, a malicious revolt against the American who was dating their leading lady.

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essence is that cellular mimesis is the earliest descendant of language; that mimesis is a current running through all of biology and its directly resultant outcroppings: conscious and unconscious communication. To put it simply, Biological Life and communication are synonyms, while intelligence, informed choice, and civilization exist in the rather mysterious process of these concepts attaining reflexivity. In our biological lives we are the sum of trillions of mimetic and transformative acts, and it has become clearer that the case for linguistic life is the same. We become by imitating, by transforming, both at the cellular and linguistic levels. That is to say that our bodies are constructed by creative, imitative, language, much as our identities are. As George and Muriel Beadle wrote in 1966, "The deciphering of the genetic code has revealed our possession of a language much older than hieroglyphics, a language as old as life itself, a language that is the most living language of all—even if its letters are invisible and its words are buried in the cells of our bodies."

Claudia was in a vintage dress, white with blue polka-dots. She had bright red shoes and carried a wicker picnic basket. Her hair, normally gigantic and full of spring-loaded curls, was straightened and tamed. With curls in full effect she was Dominican. With straight hair she became Spanish, though she could as easily be Indian or Arab if the role called for it.

The shoot began. Javier, who was playing a forest dwelling cannibal, feasted on my guts. He cut out little chunks of cheap steak that they had bought from a cut rate supermarket and chewed on them as if they were my liver and spleen. I was strangely uncomfortable throughout this expedition into the land of make-believe. The cold steak brushed up against the skin on my belly and I was not completely capable of isolating the pantomime from the thought of being devoured by a cannibal.

As I lay there I thought about the relationship between stories and life. By what mysterious process did information stored as narrative *become reality*?

In his discussion of code duality, which simply put is the necessity for both digital codes (abstracted codes in the sense that they rely on 1's and 0's, for instance, to represent objects and ideas that are not 1's and 0's) and analog codes (which tend to imitate more closely that which they aim to represent: think sundial), Hoffmeyer states that digital codes can store information, but they do not unto themselves affect reality. The written word, for instance, needs a reader to act upon it in order for it to become effectual. DNA is the same. In itself it is merely recorded data, which needs an analog interface, RNA (the worker bee to the flower if you will), in order to begin to take effect. Within this context it seems somehow fitting that Shakespeare's Sonnets have become

the first text to be recorded in DNA.[62] The person who is so often cited as the creator of the modern subject, has the *body* of his work transcribed into the alphabet of life itself, completing, perhaps a cycle of self-reflection (or self-fashioning even?) which has seen language evolve from cellular behavior, aid in discerning its own roots, and then becoming a central metaphor for understanding the very rote life from which it springs. In a sense, the very mystery that AMSND ponders: where is the line between nature and human, wilderness and civilization, is spoken to by the recording of written language, human creative product into genetic material. But, of course, the recorded material is nothing without the ability to decode, interpret, act the words into the world. Just as DNA is nothing without RNA, the text, however recorded is nothing without the reader or actor. The line between human and nature, it would seem, is in the conscious creation of narrative, which gives humans an unprecedented potential to control reality to some limited extent. We can store the text in DNA, then reproduce it on the stage, in the world just as DNA can be made to work by RNA, the difference comes in our ability to shape the initial text with intention. In the moment of the above quote from George and Muriel Beadle, the genetic code had only begun to be deciphered, and its status as language was metaphorical at best, but now that code has been made to store human narratives, and more recently, scientists have even begun to explore composing directly in the genetic alphabet.

In the tradition of the great poets, scientist have begun to expand our lexicon. Deciding that A, G, C and T comprised a limited tablet, and so decided to add X and Y in

[62] Read about the project in the journal *Nature*.

order to expand the potential for DNA to store information.[63] The DNA with artificial letters included has proven capable of reproducing as usual. Humans are not only storing narrative in genetic material, but now may be capable of creating narrative in the medium. Given that the metaphor of writing is so strong, and that the creation of narrative seems to be the division point of the human from other sorts of Nature, now may be the time to understand just what a narrative, and the human instinct towards it, is.

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As I lay there perfectly still while they gathered shot after shot, I could not help but think of Michel de Montaigne's "Of Cannibals." In it he describes Native Caribbean culture based on a neighbor's first hand account of the "New World." He discusses cannibalism dispassionately, and makes his understanding clear that the indigenous only ate human flesh to exact revenge and deter their enemies. He says that the Roman's ate human flesh when they were under siege, and the Scythians just for nourishment. Eating people who are dead, he concludes, is no more cruel than torturing those who live, which, he points out, was a common practice throughout Europe. Shakespeare used Montaigne's essay as a source for *The Tempest,* which may be why Caliban, the island's mutilated 'savage' which was embodied by Jabao on the stage in Madrid, bears a name that is an anagram for Cannibal. It is not unthinkable, for that matter, that Shakespeare may have known Columbus's diary as well. "Of Cannibals," in any case, is a text that helped to shape Shakespeare's view of colonial life, a text that has come to shape our cultural vision of Indigenous Americans, and despite its best intentions, a work that tied the notion of the cannibal to the imagined inhabitants of the Caribbean. As I lay there, I could

[63] Read "Scientists Add Letters to DNA's Alphabet, Raising Hopes and Fears" and the NYT. May 7, 2014.

not help but think, how strange the process of life becoming literature, of literature becoming performance, and of performance becoming life all over again.

Later in the day, my part finished, I hung out with the more extraneous crew members while the others shot Claudia and Javier traipsing through the forest, acting out this bizarre reversal of fates, the European cannibal enamored with the artful Dominicana.

"Cru-eese," said Roberto, a lighting guy, a friend of the directors from film school who was more or less just in town by coincidence. He wanted me to teach him the English pronunciation of American actors names. "Tom Cru-eese."

"Oh, you mean Tom Cruise."

"You say like this?" He shook his hand back and forth like he was DJ-ing on an invisible booth just in front of his chin. "*Joder*."

"Yeah, Cruise, just like Penelope Cruz. Same sound."

"*Joder."* He was pensive. "Y Swaze. Patrick Swaze?"

"Sway-zee," I said.

"*Joder.* We've had it all wrong."[64]

[64] Biosemiotics views biology, evolution, life, as fundamentally *interpretive*, allowing space for the changes, adaptations, and missteps that form the chaotic continuation of existence. This is not to say that the *intelligence* already exists in the most basic phases of life, but that the ghost of a subject is present in the very rote transmissions of cells. The basic model of the mysterious transition of crude data into interpreted information, of meaning from transmitter to receiver, of messages between subject and object, of the indeterminacy of a message, is nascent at the cellular level. This is the case in signal transduction, as a message is sent 'wirelessly' across the cell wall, as it is in conversation, when the signifier floats between the speaker and the listener. The mystery is not in the matter, but in the way in which matter takes on meaning to a subject, and then becomes duplicated, trasnsmitted, mimed, through the production of stories, rationalizations, justifications. Likewise, a transmitter can take detours, produce unexpected results, carry

The topic shifted to the upcoming elections.

"Yo no voy a votar," said one of the cameramen.

"Tampoco," said another crew member.

"If you don't vote, you can't complain," said a third in a familiar appeal.

"Then I'll write in some name," said the first. "I can't vote for PSOE or PP. They're all criminals."

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messages to the surface of a cell wall where they can be interpreted by proteins and signaled from the exterior to the interior inciting action by a second receptor.

Again, Shakespeare seems to have presciently provided us with a model of what he could not possibly have known scientifically. In *AMSND,* characters forget who they are, transition from human to animal form, question the roots of human emotion, attributing them alternately to some deep spiritual source, to chemical deception, to divine spell. Perhaps most pertinently, they question the source and reliability of their senses as they relate to the series of narratives around them (here narrative should be understood as not only fictive or poetic output, but also law, custom, etc..). But, the same divisions (forest/city, human/animal, wilderness/lawful, fiction/reality) that are made so plainly and exploited so effectively are also complicated and layered into an almost impossible to separate palimpsest. The points at which art, fantasy and reality begin and end find parallels in the relationship of the city to the woods beyond its borders, but we never see where one can be cleansed of the other. Puck's antics have real effect on lives of the Athenians, and the Athenians are only capable of taking the lessons of the chaotic night home because they are civilized—narratively oriented—beings who know how to parse emotion into logic and vice versa. The law, in the plays finale, proves more flexible than we originally imagined, and nature, while often brutal, also proves to have a sense of humor. Again we are returned to Agamben's parallel questions. Language inhabits people, just as the basest Nature inhabits the city. The question remains, where do we locate the point of separation? When is the one elevated to the other?

The language Hoffmeyer employs to discuss the communication across a cell wall is strikingly parallel:

> Signal transduction is a remarkable process because it does not, as one might perhaps naively suspect, imply that signals from the outside somehow find their way into the cell and successively instruct the cellular machinery to initiate distinct activities. What happens is, semiotically seen, much more interesting and typically consists in the following three steps: (a) the primary molecular signal is received at the surface of the cell because it is recognized by a specific glycoprotein, a receptor, and (b) the receptor responds to the signal by changing its conformation which then activates a 'mediator-protein' in or at the cell membrane, (c) the mediator again activates a secondary signal at the inside of the membrane (176).

Amongst the young, there was near universal disdain for the PP (the current president who is the leader of the PP was punched in the head by a 17 year old yesterday, and it is a major news item as I write, with the next round of elections coming on December 20th, 2015). But, they couldn't summon support for the Socialists either. They felt as if they were being forced to choose between two parties that were irredeemably corrupt.

*

True to their word, many young people did not go to the polls in that election. The PP won easily and had an absolute mandate. The laws were changed rapidly and almost always to the chagrin of the young people who had not shown up in the elections of 2011. But something did come out of it. Two things really.

First, from the ashes of 15-M, arose Podemos, a party that has its origins in the Marxist rhetoric of the young professor Pablo Iglesias, who, amongst other things, had served as a consultant to the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez. Second, the centrist party Ciudadanos, fronted by Albert Rivera. Ciudadanos is a party rooted in Catalunya that has supported unity with Spain, a serious attack on corruption, and economic reforms, essentially market liberalization. These two young parties, unthinkable in the bleak elections of 2011, promise to completely refurbish the Spanish political landscape.

*

Nearly five years would pass before I sat down to talk to Javier Botet again. We met at the main entrance of the Conde Duque cultural center where Claudia was performing scenes from Lorca with the director Juan Carlos Corazza. Javier had gone to

see the play and he wrote to see if I would like to meet up afterwards. It was an unseasonably warm December evening as he lumbered out from under the massive entryway. He looked more mature somehow, like a successful artist as opposed to a young, struggling one, which, of course, he was. He wore a black sweater and black-rimmed glasses.

I imagined him as a little boy, tall, sickly, not knowing if his body would hold out, see him through adulthood. He was obsessed with comics as a kid, he had told me years earlier: Comics, Star Wars, anything science fiction or fantasy. I suppose it's normal for kids to like those things, but, he said, his obsession was different. He related to the monsters, the freaks, the aliens.

"How was the play?" I asked him. My Spanish had improved a lot over the five years since we first met.

"I don't like plays," he said. "I always sit there thinking about how I would do it differently. I want to jump on the stage and act. I am not a good spectator."

The play had been an open rehearsal for the actors of Estudio Corraza. The actors perform scenes over and again, rotating through various parts, often speaking lines simultaneously as the director listens, offers suggestions and lets the narrative change as the actors tailor their expressions, positions and tone.

*

We walked away from the imposing cultural center down Calle la Palma to a little craft beer bar. Javier ordered an American Porter. He liked dark beers best, a habit I imagine he picked up on his travels for work in the US and Canada.

He had recently returned from a set in Los Angeles where he had been doing scenes with Leonardo DeCaprio. In the years since we had last seen each other, Javier had become something of a star. He was the go to guy in Hollywood and Madrid for monster rolls.

"Do you like playing monsters," I asked.

"Yes… no… yes… no… maybe… let's see. I always loved to draw monsters. That's how I got into the art world. I never liked horror, though… I don't know. All my life I've been exploiting my body for comedy." He took a long pull on his Porter and seemed to contemplate his own hands. "After art school, I did a few acting courses, I met Alex de las Iglesias and Santiago Segura and I realized I could make a life of it. I saw it as clear as water that they were interested in me because I had the right structure… An interesting body.

"I always liked the figures from fantasy, creatures like Jaba the Hut… I always felt like a freak because of my disease, Marfan Syndrome. I felt like something from science fiction. I felt alien. I always thought that if the aliens came, they would say to me 'you're one of us, come and learn.'" As he spoke he gestured with his long, monstrously-elegant fingers, and his phrasing made me think of the chant from the movie *Freaks*: "One of us! One of us!" I wondered if he had seen the film.

*

His father was a banker turned real estate agent. His mother was into real estate and local politics in their pueblo, a small pueblo on the edge of Granada, Huertovega. His mother worked for years for the Partido Popular, the conservative party.

"I shouldn't have lived past 20," he said. "My mother brought me to the hospital all the time without ever quitting work. She's a superior being."

I asked him if his mother's dedication to the PP had influenced his own political allegiances.

He seemed to drift into the distance as he contemplated the question. "I don't identify with any political party," he said. "I identify with human beings, and they are something in which I have no confidence. I don't *believe* in human beings, but I'm glad there are people who do. In this life, you have to delude yourself to survive. There is very little likelihood of creating an ideal world. If someone needs to lie to themselves, to be religious or political, I understand."

"Do you think that art is a part of that delusion, that escapism?"

He looked perplexed, as if he literally could not understand how I could ask that question.

"Art is a necessity," he said. "Everyone needs to express themselves, but because of societal pressures there is no way. You can relax with tennis, singing, it doesn't matter. People have to open up, and art is a way. Art is not delusion, it's expression."

"And politics?"

He shook his head. "There are 4 centimeters of difference between you, me and the next person, but you say that I'm Satan because I decide to vote for Podemos or for PP. No señor, politics is not about opening. It's not about freedom."

"What's freedom?"

“There are probably only four people in the world who know,” he laughed. “They’re homeless. Not like urban homeless, but they live somewhere far away and answer to no one.”

“Do you feel free?”

“Money has given me some degree of freedom,” he said without hesitation. “I do jobs that I would rather not do for money. Acting is, in the end, often a business, and unfortunately, money perverts art.” He looked closely at his hands. “I am a cynic,” he said. “I use my body for profit. I tell my friends all the time that I’m a cynic. I tell them not to let the girlfriends be alone with me,” he laughed.

“I don’t think that is cynicism,” I said.

“Why not?” He asked.

“Because, in the case of your body, you are making the most of what you have, that’s optimism, that’s creating possibility from limitations. Cynicism is imagining the worst of people… The girlfriend thing, that might be a little cynical.”

He raised his glass to meet mine and we finished our beers.

CHAPTER 12

XATIVA

The animals speak too. With their eyes and their movements and their very being they tell us their desires: hunger, anger, love… They have seen these lands for at least as many generations as we have. They just forgot to write it all down. The Little dog looks out from the stone window of the house on a hillside and senses the perfection in the rolling horizon. He wants to capture the birds that fly across the sky in their perfect formation. He wants to feel the grass, warmed by the sun but still cooler than the scorched Iberian air, against his fur. And then shots ring out in the distance, startling him from his windowsill, breaking his contemplation of this perfect day. Thick, black smoke rises from behind the tree line in the distance. And, for a moment, he is glad that his memory is so short, that he will not be able to tell his children about this day.

It can be easy to forget the depths of the crisis while living in the capital, but when you travel deeper into Spain, it was impossible to ignore. The wealth of Madrid faded fast into the background as we headed East, and perhaps nowhere was the decline so stark as in the regions around Valencia. Abandoned, or nearly abandoned pueblos dotted the countryside. Strips of discarded efforts to build town centers reminded me of stretches of road I had seen in China: yellowing facades with letters crooked or altogether absent, windows smashed out of what had once been impressive buildings, and that saddest staple of the South of Spain, abandoned Greyhounds or Galgos, roaming the sides of the roads, their ribs on even greater display than usual.

The dogs were abandoned, or worse yet, hung, after they finished their utility of a couple of hunting seasons. With the crisis, the dogs were, to an even greater extent than usual, considered additional mouths to feed, and disposed of as superfluous after their utility of racing or hunting had expired. We saw two dogs patrolling the side of the road and Claudia pulled the car to the side.

"How sad," she said.

I was unaware of the enormity of the issue of Galgos in Spain at the time, and thought they were just strays.

"Let's try to help them," she said.

"How?"

"We can capture them and bring them back to Madrid. We can find them a home."

We got out of the car and approached slowly as the dogs eyed us with arch suspicion, tiptoeing two steps away with each step we advanced. You could see them weighing the benefits of the possibility that we had food with their fear. You could tell that they had an intense mixture of love and distrust for humans.

In these places it was easy to forget the economic miracle that had hit Spain's urban areas, and feel as if you were still in a surprisingly underdeveloped country, where despite the addition of cell phones and a television in the local bar, life hadn't changed all that greatly in centuries. The wealth of the Mediterranean all but disappears half an hour from the coast. I thought of Oklahoma where my father had lived and where my brother and sister still lived. There is a strange commonality to rural life the world over.

The dogs had patches of fur missing and were desperately thin even for a breed that is naturally emaciated. Their tails stayed motionless between their hind legs as they eased backwards, never breaking an intensely pained, sweet even, eye contact. One of them moved far into the distance, while the other remained at only a few yards distance. A roadside sign advertised a roman ruin somewhere in the distance down a long dirt path. I felt time dissipate into the ether. There was no 2010. There was no 476. There was only these relationships, passed in the form of story, between animals, humans and land. I thought of the cruelty of the coliseum so long ago, of the cruelty of the bullring, the still so present cousin of roman tradition. I thought of the omnipresence of invasion and domination from Carthage to Iraq, of the will of the masses from Haymarket to Tahrir. The sweep of history as it populated land and was enacted by all of us willed beings. All the anxiety of the coming hither and retreating that was our past was encompassed in this dogs eyes and this ruin that sat upon land that had begun to retake it in unkempt growth.

And here we were trying to capture this mangy, forcibly retired hunter. Granted, we had his best interests at heart, at least I would like to think so, but nonetheless, we were pursuing a creature that had not decided he wanted to trust another human.

"Will they let him into the hotel?" I whispered. We were already travelling with our own dog, a little white terrier named Mark.

"I doubt," she said in an equally low tone.

The dog tilted its head as if we were crazy for using such a low, conspiratorial tone in such a wide open space.

"But if we leave him, he will be hit by car I am afraid."

We moved an inch, as he backed away a yard.

"Do you have any food?" I asked.

"Pringles. Sour cream and Onion."

We shared a smile that the dog seemed to appreciate, allowing us to take a step without retreat. Cars passed at long intervals as we slowly edged nearer. Just as we were close enough to extend a hand towards his nose, he turned and fled at full greyhound gallop. His friend following close behind, they disappeared across the horizon in seconds.

*

Xativa is the one time home of El Borgia, the 15th century Pope whose name has become synonomus with corruption. It is a small, but imposing pueblo. The city center is adorned with marble walkways, and the town is crested with one of Spain's most impressive palaces. Valenciano, a language that is nearly identical to the Catalan spoken to the North in Barcelona and the rest of Catalunya, but for political purposes referred to as a distinct entity, is the language that is spoken in the pueblos of Valencia, though in the capital Spanish is at least as frequently heard. In the pueblos, it can feel as if you are in another country entirely.

The town maintains some notion of its regal self as the once power center of the region. Two popes, Callixtus III and Alexander VI, were born in Xativa. We checked into a small, surprisingly modern hotel and set about climbing up to the palace. I could not help but wonder what growing up in the shadow of such a structure must mean. The palace, the constant reminder of Arab, medieval and renaissance versions of your own cultural identity lingered above the young, forming minds. In Chicago there were parallels, but they ran much less deep: the Water Tower, Haymarket Square, Pullmanville… But these were mostly references to the 19th and 20th centuries, of the

rise of labor, and the advent of modernism in architecture. Here was the natal home of a Pope who came to power in 1492, who oversaw the division of the Americas between Spain and Portugal, and who had a hand in the reunification of Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella. This little pueblo was a power broker during the Reconquista and the subsequent push of Europe into the Americas… and now it was a little populated place, largely off the radar of even most Spaniards.

We walked up the steep slope towards the Castle. Feral cats ignored us all along the path, pausing with caution before darting across the path to the safety of trees that lined the way. The castle was of strategic importance as it was along the road from Rome to Cartagena. It had been held by the Moors for over two hundred years before James I retook it in 1244. Later, it became an important prison site where political prisoners, including a member of the Borja lineage (a lineage shared by Callixtus III and Alexander VI) many of whom had held important roles in the early Spanish colonies in America, spent time.

At the top of the hill, the castle is open to be explored. We wandered from room to room, reading the exhibits and taking in the sprawling past of this small town from a center of linens mentioned by Ovid, to one of the first places the Arabs introduced paper in Iberia, to the Crusades and Reconquista.

We stood in a small cell where prisoners were kept.

"Can you imagine," asked Claudia, "being locked inside here?"

I could, and it made me shiver.

"Such beautiful views just past the stone wall," she said as if reading my mind.

The landscapes were stunning as the village gave way to what looked like an infinite expanse of hills and trees. It was absurd to think how much death and suffering had been witnessed by those landscapes across the centuries of Romans, Moors, Catholics, Republicans, Fascists… What next, I wondered? What political evolution is boiling beneath the political landscape? What will the actual landscape be subjected to in the coming years? Bloodshed? Physical exploitation? Nourishment and cooperation? We have the capacity to tell whatever story we wish.

*

On the way back to Madrid there aren't many places of interest to stop. We needed to let the dog out and Claudia remembered somewhere that her adopted mother had brought her when they were young. Segobriga is not a town. It is a roadside attraction, a museum, a ruin. We parked in an absolutely empty lot and went into the little visitor's center, bought tickets and started the trek towards the site. It was hot, scorching even as we trod the long path through the hill-filled countryside. There was no one else to be seen. Our dog Mark trotted along beside us. Every stone along the path was potentially a piece of history.

"Do you think that's something? A burial mound?" I would ask.

"No," said Claudia. "I think that's just a rock."

As we approached, the stones that had been sparsely collected began to appear more closely gathered together into increasingly familiar shapes: piles became walls, pillars, platforms. The structures, ruins to be sure, but impressive given their two-thousand years resisting the urge to erode back into the rolling terrain of Castilla La Mancha, seemed to fit seamlessly into the horizon. There was nothing out of place about

the amphitheater, like a stone orange slice had been disgarded by a giant on the side of some path through history.

I sat in one of the theater's stone seats alongside Mark as Claudia descended towards the stage. Her footsteps echoed through space in a way that seemed impossible in the open expanse of that surrounded us. What engineering genius the Romans possessed to have been able to create such acoustics, such lasting acoustics, even in a small Iberian trading outpost.

Claudia reached the stage and proceeded across it in long, exaggerated steps, moving her arms slowly in broad arcs as if she was a Shakespearean lover, gesturing to a crowd that at present was only me and the dog. There is no backdrop on a Roman stage. The landscape runs from the horizon right up behind the actors. There is a unity of the act with the world. Our theaters today are enclosures painted black, pushing our consciousness into itself as we escape the world in favor of the narrative. The Roman theater did not allow such an attempt at exclusion of narrative from nature. There was no distinction between the world that ran out towards the rising moon and the stone stage from which the players spoke.

Mark ran down the stairs and across the stage towards Claudia. I wondered briefly if he could appreciate it, the history. I wondered if the energy of this place was all in the narrative, all carried in my awareness of the history, my need to connect to the past and understand to some degree the path that had led to here, or if somehow even he sensed that there was something special here. I wondered if the material traces of narratives past that dotted the landscape spoke to other *umwelts*.

The experience was colored by a more modern story that had been in the news. Palmyra had just been destroyed by the Islamic State in Syria, and the news had been covering the event extensively. That larger site loomed over this one as I was forced to consider how humans react so differently to the power of narrative. There were echoes of Plato in the destruction of art, of representations, in the name of order. And, echoes of Protestantism in its reaction against the iconography of Catholicism. A tangible fear of allowing story to occupy the physical world runs through the history of human thought. Palmyra was no longer a city, it was a symbol of a history that to some was better forgotten. How could one gaze upon something as majestic as this and feel anything but awe for our ability to extend ourselves across the centuries, to write ourselves in stone?

CHAPTER 13

SHAKESPEARE'S CHILDREN

The words pulsated from the sore wrist of an aging Englishman across centuries. He did not know where it came from. Not really. He just sat down and wrote. The only thing he knew was that if it were going to flow, he would have to show up. Whatever it was that emerged from the ether, that would be up to some other magician that floated somewhere above him like a sprite in a forest tormenting passionate youth, or a spirit trapped in the wood of a tree until its services were required. The words carried on, across oceans and cultures, into worlds filled with unimaginable technology, unthinkable music. How did it come to be that those words created some of the ways in which we think of love, youth, power, race? How did it come to be that those words gave birth to us, at least in part?

The theater was scorching hot. The summer of 2015 was the hottest on record in Madrid since before the Spanish Civil War. The audience fanned themselves with programs as if they were collapsible Spanish fans, *abanicos*. The air conditioner in Conde Duque's theater was broken. We took our seats. A bulky man with long greying hair in a T-shirt and jeans lingered near the stage. The director, shorter, thinner and greyer made a brief pre-show appearance to greet the man. He patted the man on the back and the man turned towards the crowd before sitting. A series of whispers collected into a minor storm. Javier Bardem had come to see the play.

The set is black. The lights are dim. The actors walk onto the scene, forming a circle around a triangle that is painted on the stage. The circle formed by the actors collapses and expands as they step towards the center and away as if collectively

breathing, then they burst into childish laughter as they run towards the back of the stage. The triangle is the family, two parents and a child. The play explores this connection in scenes form *Romeo and Juliet, King Lear, The Merchant of Vencie and Hamlet*. The text is focused on the relationship between parents and children, while the subtext treats us all as the children *of text.* "We are all," Corazza says, "the children of Shakespeare."

Claudia, in the role of Lady Capulet, walks from the line at the back towards the center of the triangle, "Ama!" She shouts, "Ama!" and the nurse comes towards the center of the stage, followed by Juliet.

Corazza wasted no time in interjecting. "But how does she feel Lady Capulet? Is she happy to see her daughter, nervous? I don't know, try! Try! Try!"

Claudia changes her expression, shakes her arms and takes a few steps back. "Ama?" She says, this time more as a question than a demand.

"Good. Good!" says Corraza. "Again!"

*

It is not like any play you have probably seen. The director is never silent. He wants the audience to see how he interacts with the actors. He wants to expose the directorial influence, and show how it cohabits the space of the stage along with the bodies and minds of the actors and the text that they have worked so hard to internalize.

"This is the kitchen, and we are opening it to the viewer," Corraza is fond of saying. "We are letting you see the preparation, the evolution, the story as it emerges. This is the process of cooking."

He sits whispering notes to his assistant as the actors work. Sometimes he lets the action go for a few minutes, but usually he cannot help but interject.

"The attitude is to try. It means to be willing to jump in the middle and let things fail," he says.

When the play is over, Javier Bardem stands and applauds. When the applause dies down he speaks.

"I just want to say thank you," he says, "to all of you young actors. Thank you for your bravery, for your dedication. It makes me want to go back to the trenches."

*

In December of 2015, the group is back in the same theater, this time with scenes from Lorca and Chekhov. It's cooler in the theater. The audience fills seats of red velvet in front of the same black stage. This time there's no triangle, just chairs arranged in a semicircle. No Bardem, either.

Outside of the theater, Spain is 5 days away from a national election. It is bound to be an historic election. For the first time parties that are outside of the traditional PP and PSOE, the conservatives and the socialists, are gaining significant ground. Podemos is polling well, as is Ciudadanos. As I sat there, I thought of all that the emergence of these parties, and of these plays had in common. They were both processes of collecting material experience, trying different combinations until it seemed like something worked. Podemos had been accused of being too close to Venezuela, so to make themselves fit the national profile, they had begun a drastic shift away form those policies and statements that might have been deemed too radical. Ciudadanos had been seen as a party that was too interested in economics and not enough in people, so they had begun to tout their social programs and investments in the arts. They were trying, much like the actors in front of me, to appease their director, and their director was all of us who comprised the

society that would either give them time on stage, or send them off for another audition. The established parties were in new territory as well, realizing that simply bashing their only real opponent was no longer a viable strategy. They would have to adapt.

Days before, the President of Spain, Mariano Rajoy had been punched in the head as he walked the streets of his hometown in Galicia while campaigning. He was not seriously hurt.

There was a lot of tension from every side over the election, but also a lot of hope.

*

I thought of Javier Botet's comment that we were all only a few centimeters apart, but casting blame and hatred as if one side or another was the enemy.

I thought back to Shakespeare's children and all of the unnecessary violence, hatred, rage, that is always understood only too late, and leaves us with regret where hope had been possible.

It is, perhaps, the spirit of emergence that gives us the confidence to try without the fear of failure.

*

In 2015, a full five years after my first conversation with Jabao, and after a series of conversations via email or during my visits to Valencia and his to Madrid, we met at the restaurant Claudia and I had come to own in Madrid's Conde Duque neighborhood which sits in front of a massive complex that continues to serve as a convent, and behind the Conde Duque cultural center that once served as the stables for the horses of Franco's troops. Jose pointed out that we were near a Cuban restaurant where he had found employment soon after deciding to stay in Madrid. He laughed as he described an anti-

revolutionary shirt that the owner made the waiters wear, and talked about the heated debates that arose amongst the Cuban clientele.

"It must have been hard," I said, "To leave everything behind. Your career, friends, family, and to be here in Madrid waiting tables."

"Initially, I thought it would be a temporary situation, but the time just kept getting longer, extending one year and then another and then another." Each time he counted a year he extended a finger on one hand and counted it with the other.

"Why?" I asked. He had yet to tell me the why he had decided to stay, though he had always hinted that there was some vital reason beyond politics or economics.

He continued to smile, but I could sense him tensing up as he spun a *caña* between his fingertips. "My motivations were very serious, and I couldn't look back." He paused for a moment, then said "Really, I came to try to save my sister's life. She was sick with Leukemia and she didn't have the treatment. My working in Madrid at least allowed her to live a couple more years."

While he had been in Cuba embodying Shakespeare's Caliban, adapting the character through his movements, another adaptation was taking place in the body of his sister. There was a connection between the chaos that had been harnessed into this brilliant play, and that which had coalesced into a cancer that was eating away at his sister's body. The magic of Nature and all of its infinite capacity to communicate could turn on you. Jose's sister was living proof that the stories bodies tell are often grim. A loyal reproduction of genes had gone on and on, until one day the narrative shifted slightly, and the process of reproduction turned against her.

He and his family had hoped the treatment would be quick, and he would only need to stay a short time, but months became years, and Jose found himself leading an unrecognizable life.

"I worked as a waiter, a construction worker, and on rare occasion as an actor. I had to start from zero in this country, to distance myself from the comfort and stability I had in Cuba." It was difficult to find work on screen or stage, as both were still largely dominated by white actors. He was occasionally cast, but always in roles such as "immigrant neighbor" or "Cuban on the street." He appreciated those roles when they came, but it was a far cry from being able to support himself as an actor as he had grown accustomed to in his twenties.

He was afraid, he said, that he would never again find sustainable work as an actor. "In these situations a person is afraid of everything, but they know that they have to keep moving forward because there is no other option. There's no room for doubt."

After two years, Jose's sister passed away.

"Death is surreal in Cuba," Jose had once told me. "People think that Garcia Marquez was writing about Columbia, but no, he was writing of Cuba." He smiled and looked into some distant, perverse memory. "In our village, for example, there is no ambulance. We rely on the state to send one from Havana, but they won't come for only one body. You find yourself in the strange position of wishing that someone else would die so that you can be rid of the body of your loved one. That is death in Cuba." He paused, letting the absurdity drift between us before finally speaking, "I'm glad she had those years. Had I not stayed in Madrid, her life would have been even shorter."

In the meantime he had met his wife Elena while working at a night club. She would come to the club and dance all night without ever having a drink. Jose was impressed. They began as friends. She helped him deal with the difficulties of being so far from his family, alienated from his calling. Eventually, they were married, and Elena pushed him to dive back into his career. It was a long journey back to becoming a working actor.

She had friends that were actors in a troupe from her hometown of Valencia, and she brought him to a performance in Madrid at the Teatro Abadía. By sheer coincidence one of the main actors had been part of a company with which Buendia and Jose had coincided in France years earlier, and he invited him to Valencia to audition. Jose and Elena moved to Valencia and he began working with the troupe immediately. Soon thereafter came an audition back in Madrid with L'om Imprebis, one of the most prestigious troupes in Spain. Working with L'om Imprebis led to other opportunities and soon he was appearing regularly in small roles on TV and ocassionally in the movies. He landed a part in Soderberg's *Che*, a small part in *No Habrá Paz por los Malvados*, and Ridley Scott's *The Counseler.* Every director was different, and he liked some more than others, but none, he said, allowed for the same collaboration as had Lauten. None allowed the text to emerge from the very participants. None embodied a process so closely attuned to nature, the nature of language, of acting, of communication, of life.

For Jabao, Teatro Fernan Goméz, the theater that sat beneath Plaza de Colón and Las Jardines del Descubrimiento was the center, the physical point, that he most associated with theatre in Madrid. It was where he last acted with his Cuban troupe, Teatro Buendia, who he worked with for thirteen years, and whose members, at least

some of them, he had attended the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana. Back then, when they performed *La Otra Tempestad* for the last time, it was called Teatro de la Villa. The next time he was there, he was above the theater in the plaza itself.

The massive Spanish flag draped overhead, the bold sculptures paying tribute to Columbus, flanking the actors like stone giants. Together with his new troupe L'Om Imprebis, he performed a play called *Moon*. *Moon* was a play geared towards families and children that brought together Caribbean, African and European traditions in "a place without space or time, a place of understanding, to appreciate and take interest in the other." The play was, "a real invitation to dialogue between cultures and traditions that combined live music, puppets, black theater, storytelling, improvisation and a cast from Spain, Africa and the Americas" (imprebis.com).[65] I couldn't help but be struck by the compassion, forgiveness even, implied by this play, so lively and immersed in nature, being produced by this international cast largely from the postcolonial world, in this space, a park dedicated to the age of discovery, devoid of biology. The play brought the spirit of cooperation, of interdependence and understanding to the cold and fascinating historical moment that this space celebrated. *Moon* reflected light on even the darkest park, and made life possible even where it seemed most remote. I mentioned all of this to Jabao, and asked him what he thought about the intersection of this venue with this work. "La verdad es que no lo sabía que se llamaba así," he said laughing (The truth is I didn't

[65] This is my translation of the description from the companies website: www.imbrebis.com

know the park was called that). “Que casualidades de la vida. Que casualidades.” (What coincidences in this life. What coincidences.)

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I couldn’t help but connect the conversation I had with Jabao and that I had with Botet. They had both, in a sense, landed where they had as actors, because of Biology, because of genetics. Botet found his calling based on his body. His psychology as a child had been formed in part because of the way that he felt in his skin. His body had opened doors. What had seemed a life-threatening limitation had become something that built a very successful career. And, Jabao had altered his course because of a cancer, but that altered course had led to perhaps a more successful career than he might have had in Cuba.

And, I couldn’t help but tie all of this into the process of making art itself. I thought again of Flora Lauten watching as her actors created her text, of Corraza pushing at one actor or another, inciting reactions that he could never predict to let the work as a whole emerge as if it were some biological entity. I thought of a young Botet, having no idea that this body of his, this monstrous body, was going to become part of his professional gift, or of Jose waiting tables at a Cuban bar in Madrid, thinking that all of the work he had put into building his craft had led to a dead end. We never know how things are going to evolve.

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I watch the actors on the stage, and think of the politicians, young and old who are running about the country, trying to convince people that their narrative, their story, is the

best one for the future of a nation. I think of Jabao and his struggles, and I wonder how his narrative of immigration and struggle, his act of generosity towards his sister, and his struggle to rebuild a career and a life in Spain fit into their policies, into the stories they will write into law. I think of Botet and the way that his body, his imperfect body, became his greatest asset because he *chose* to make it so, to use the material at hand in the best way he could. How does his story fit into the politics of the nation? I thought of Borja, of his efforts to grow the business that was his legacy, and of his generous approach to the changing political landscape, of his willingness to let the story be written before insisting on offering his reading. I thought of Corraza and of Claudia. What place did art have in the hearts of these political beings that would fund or defund our cultural future? I thought of myself as a young teacher, writer, immigrant and business person. How would their stories effect me? As Corraza had made clear, we are all the children of texts. But, which texts? The plays of Shakespeare, of Lorca, of Chekhov? The novels of Hemingway and Richard Wright? The films of James Cameron? The laws that would define the limits of all of our respective playing fields?

And then, I thought of Ivakhiv again:

> Rather, a film is what a film *does.* And what it does is not just what occurs as one watches it. It is also what transpires as viewers mull it over afterwards and as the film reverberates across space between the film world and the real world, seeping into conversations and dreams, tinting the world and making it vibrate in particular ways, injecting thought-images, sensations, motivations, heightened attunements to one thing or another, into the larger social and ecological fields within which the film's signs, meaning and affects resound.

Stories are part of our environment. They are the Human *Umwelt.* But, they are not just films. They are plays, books, and, yes, politics. We are narrative beings, and we have to read our world as such.

CHAPTER 14

AFTERWARD

The energy is strange as Christmas approaches in Madrid. There is a sense of new possibilities and new challenges. The elections provided results, but not definitive ones. The conservative PP held onto the most votes, but, with 29% of the vote was not able to obtain a majority. There is no foreseeable coalition which they would be able to forge. The Socialist PSOE, with 22% is in a similar position with the slightest possibility of creating a coalition with Podemos who garnered 21% and several smaller regional parties, many of which are based in support of independence for Catalunya. Forming such a coalition may mean alienating their base in the rest of the country. The effects could be very long term. Ciuadanos had a weaker than expected showing, with 14% of the vote, but remain an integral voice in whatever government will be established. The most likely outcome is that there will be another election in a couple of months. No one knows what to expect, but there is excitement about something new emerging, about trying something different. And, of course, there is plenty of anxiety.

Claudia continues to act. I continue to write. We both work hard to make our business grow so we can keep eating as we pursue our artistic endeavors. I am teaching writing at Saint Louis University. Claudia is working closely with *Estudio Corraza* as well as making short films, and plays at every opportunity. She did a commercial for JC Penny's this Christmas amongst other campaigns. As Botet said, ultimately, it is a job.

Jabao's career is going well. I see him whenever he comes to Madrid.

Botet spends a lot of time in Los Angeles these days, but when he is in Madrid he can be found at a bar called Picnic in Malasaña where he runs games nights for actors.

Borja has become a good friend and business partner. We go to his farm regularly to visit the cows that we serve in our restaurants. While I seldom agree with his political preferences, I have learned a lot from his sense of history, and form his spirit of generosity towards even those parties he disagrees with.

It has been an honor to spend the better part of the past decade getting to know a culture, a nation, a history, that has had such an impact on the world's imagination. From the period of colonization, the inquisition, the Republic, the Spanish Civil War, the massive influence of the Spanish struggle on Modernism, Spain is truly special place. I've been lucky to have found such a wonderful partner who has introduced me to people and places that I never would have known or found otherwise. She literally taught me the language that I needed to immerse myself into the politics and art of this nation.

I have tremendous hope for the future here in Spain. People are kind, generous and aware. There is an interest in global politics, in the health of the planet, in the well-being of our human and animal neighbors that is, I think, unique. The path is sure to be bumpy, but I think it will also be peaceful.

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The purpose of this dissertation has been to explore and to celebrate the emergence of material reality as a text to be read and responded to. It is, in a sense, a call to allow the stories that the material world tells to emerge and to be read. It is a call to put ideology aside to whatever extent possible, and to allow texts to live, to interact, to be constantly reinterpreted as opposed to attempting to force them into our limited ideas of

what they may have meant in some historical context. Texts never stop growing because the material world in which they live never stops changing. We must permit ourselves the availability to see, to adapt, to change, because we are occupying a world that does just that, and if we are incapable of adaptation, it will certainly leave us behind.

We can learn so much from actors as they take the stage and approach words that may at first glance seem to be stagnant creatures. We can learn, also, from directors who watch, listen, prod, in the instance of eliciting something which maybe they themselves won't recognize until it arrives. We can learn from farmers who watch with patience as new forms of governance are given room to take their first steps. We can learn form immigrants, who struggle to form new phrases in a foreign tongue and create unexpected, even amusing new phrases like infants or poets. Most importantly, we can learn from the world itself if only we allow ourselves to read its constantly emerging text in a spirit of generosity. The world is one massive garden of discovery, we can attempt to live in harmony with it, continuing to learn from its generous offerings, or we can attempt to banish the wilderness and with it our greatest gifts.

I am optimistic.

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