

Naming, Domination and Plasticity in Sarduy's *Colibrí*

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This author knows instinctively that all aggression, whether it come from man or the world, is of animal origin. However subtle, however indirect, hidden, or contrived a human act of aggression may be, it reveals an origin that is unredeemed.
Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 44.

Severo Sarduy's 1984 novel *Colibrí*, like most of his novels, is a dense and poetic text that tends to hide from the casual reader—certainly a “writerly” text in Barthes' well-known dichotomy. Sarduy is famously an author who pays close attention to the literary theories of the day—Acosta Cruz points out his “enérgico entusiasmo por las modalidades teóricas europeas patrocinadas por la revista *Tel Quel* durante las décadas de 1960 y 1970” (70)—and therefore one must suppose that any analysis of the novel based entirely in one theoretical mode, be it structural, psychoanalytic, or deconstructive, will indeed produce, but will be limited to a kind of decoding of the author's own theoretical doctrines.

Instead, I propose here a tripartite reading of the text that has rich implications, and that enables the reader to identify certain textual components that lead to a profound discussion of the philosophical nature of gender/sex and the idea of human sexuality. The spatial theories of Bachelard and Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque mesh together well, enabling a fascinating reading of “La Casona”, the country tavern that is the center of the novel's action. Within that space, the revolutionary ideas of Judith Butler on the nature of the materialization of gender, coupled with Donnellan's ideas on the nature of names, permit a broad reading of La Casona as a space that seems without borders, be they moral, temporal, spatial, or sexual. The central theme of this study will be the idea of plasticity, the bending or ignoring of “rules”, for some characters

within the context of an enabling space, La Casona, while for other characters including the eponymous protagonist, there is a struggle to fragment figuratively and literally that space and to reinscribe it to their liking. Derrida writes of the decentered text; in Sarduy's novel, one finds a text not essentially decentered but multicentered, a text which more than once is forcibly centered from within by one character or another's forceful appropriation of the narrative space. Thus while the main themes of the text are in themselves without center, being based on the lack or irrelevance of worldly law, the *neobarroco*'s unique style of language, with its high degree of autoreferentiality and almost "pre-fragmented" discourse, especially in a postmodern context, serve as the perfect material in which to work these plastic, inherently decentered ideas.

The first strategy of decentering I find in the novel is the extremely elastic manner in which the principal characters are named by adjectives used as proper nouns (a strategy to which the Romance languages lend themselves), or what Donnellan calls "definite descriptions". I do not refer to just any adjectival reference, but rather the capitalized substantivized adjectives so often used in Sarduy in lieu of proper names. The effect of this style of naming in Sarduy's novel is to emphasize one particular characteristic of the descriptee at the moment of labeling. Donnellan describes the uses of definite descriptions thus:

I will call the two uses of definite descriptions I have in mind the attributive use and the referential use. A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever and whatever is the [object]. As speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing. (184)

In *Colibrí*, one finds that the descriptive adjective (which when capitalized is invariably referential rather than attributive) is usually based either on context (i.e. the immediate situation in which the character finds himself) or on physical, bodily appearance. The title character, for example, is given these names by the narrator: Colibrí, Pájaro, Descomunal, Picaflor, Dorado, Desertor, Deseado, Descalzo, Manuscrito, Defenestrador, Salvador, Rubio de los rubios, and finally Jefe. The “villain” of the piece, the dominating presence of La Casona, is usually referred to as La Regente, but is also called at various moments Montaña, Quedada (at the same moment Colibrí is called Desertor, clearly related), Patrona, Descarnada, Huesuda, Consumida, Gerente, Geronto, Rectora, Dama, Ama, Cabeza, and at the end Diabólica.

As Sarduy will go on to plasticize the gender of human beings, so he begins by plasticizing their nomic labels, thus destabilizing the idea of name as essentially fixed. Because the names change over time and space, one could assert that they are used to “locate” the characters to which they are applied, as well as carrying a much higher semantic load than one name alone would permit. There is certainly an element of play in this whirlwind of referential labels for each character. This freedom of naming is one of the clearest postmodern motifs within the novel, but the implications of the labels are truly striking and take them beyond mere linguistic play. Naming, especially in a Judeo-Christian context, has a strongly regulatory feel to it not unlike the institutionally “assigned” nature of gender described in the writings of Pablo Ben or the socially enforced nature of gender in the ideas of Judith Butler.

What consequences, then, can one begin to derive from the instability of names in La Casona and for people who are affected by it? If the fixity of names is a fundamental, then unfixing the names implies a reinscription of discursive laws at the most basic level, which leads us to expect that the carnivalesque cannot be far behind. La Casona constitutes a carnivalized

space, then, within which things are different from without. Inside, the normal (normative) rules do not seem to apply—it is a space characterized by debauch, illegality, and (to say the least) licentious sexual expression, judging by those now-irrelevant normative structures. As well, the text further destabilizes the gendered nature of its characters by a deft maneuvering of nouns. In a strongly gender-inflected language like Spanish, the question of showing ambiguity of gender requires original solutions. In the case, for example, of the transvestite prostitutes who make up the aristocracy or ruling group of La Casona, who are according to the perceptions of the outside world biologically male in the sense of the possession of a penis, as well as being identified as “viejancos libidinosos”, the narrator gives them a group-label, “las ballenas” (13), which permits all adjectival descriptions of them thereafter to be marked as feminine. La Regente her/himself is described as the chief “ballena” (15), thereby also permitting her to be marked as female. If gender becomes plastic at the whim of La Regente, then La Casona is decidedly not, at the beginning of the narration, a “lugar sin límites”¹ for all of its inhabitant-patrons; it is a space of possibility upon which one dominant personality or figure may inscribe him/herself and proceed to enforce an ethical and discursive law of their own devising. Thus, even in this carnivalized space, Judith Butler’s idea of forced regulation holds true: “‘Sex’ is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices” (1). The fact that the standards within are different from the standards of the world outside is not an improvement a priori: the denizens of La Casona are as oppressed in terms of the possibility of willful self-expression as they would be outside; it simply happens that La Regente enforces an ethic more pleasant to them than the one that operates in the street. More directly, the patrons of La Casona are not free. Were they free, the enforced change of La Casona that occurs around the midpoint of the novel from bacchanal to tranquil country inn

would have been contested by the carnival addicts. Their meek acceptance of La Regente's whims marks them clearly as slaves to her discourse, not equal participants.

In this way, interestingly, *La Casona* and the novel are representative of each other. As Grossi points out, "La novela Colibrí...es una inscripción fragmentaria que se erige sobre un espacio vacío, nivelador: la página en blanco. Las palabras se convierten en huecas superficiales, en máscaras sin trasfondo ni consistencia" (93). As Sarduy-narrator is the ultimate arbiter of good, evil, up, and down in the novel, so is La Regente on the "blank page" of *La Casona*.

How, then, is this blank page inscribed upon? Bachelard maintains that "all great images assert a psychic state. The house, even more than the landscape, is a 'psychic state'" (72). The power of inscription, then, goes to the figure most able to impose his/her psychic state on others, in this way determining for those others what their opinions and desires will be. Thus it would be erroneous, as we stated above, to call *La Casona* a space of freedom for all of its inhabitants—for this reason, the comparison with Bakhtin's carnival should not be taken too far. The "normal" social order is indeed put on its head by La Regente's domination and by forms of artistic challenge like the famous winter landscape painted on the wall of a bar in the tropics, but these are not liberating to anyone except the dominatrix herself. The wall on which the fresco is painted has no opening in it which might permit anyone to get behind: "No hay, por supuesto, la menor puerta en el muro, ni mirilla o falla en el fresco, ni nada que nos permita pasar detrás de la representación" (25). The representation—that is, all life within the walls of *La Casona*—is impenetrable even to its own denizens. For Sarduy, in fact, this non-access to their own "ruling paradigm" takes away a great part of their humanity; the idea of the animalized subject, without will of its own, is further reinforced by the names placed on the characters so affected.

Generally, when a figure is most under La Regente's domination, he is described in terms more appropriate to a domestic animal than a human being. For example, Colibrí's first opponent in the illegal wrestling matches that make up the main entertainment (apart from sexual diversions) at La Casona is usually named El Japonésón. The first description of this character comes at the beginning of the contest with the title character, and is remarkable for its animalistic imagery:

Enfebrecido...por el influjo sobre lo real que implica toda simulación, avanzó [el japonésón] hacia el proscenio, a *pasos elefantiásicos* y planos que hicieron crujir el tablado, y con las manos en las caderas, llenándose de aire *como un pez cofre erizado de espinas*, profirió un *mugido* pentatónico, que inauguró una vocal abierta y clausuró un *ronquido* amenazador, como el de *un perro tibetano ante un barcino imprudente que le huele la nariz*. (18-9, emphasis mine)

The Japanese wrestler is not alone in his animal state; all the barflies are subject to the ontological domination of La Regente. As Varderí says, La Casona is an “espacio donde todo es...‘narratividad y acción’ motorizados por un deseo cuya ley la impondrá la Regente” (237). When Colibrí and El Japonésón make their escape from the bar—unintentionally but irrefutably demonstrating the existence of an aporia in La Regente's dominant discourse—time seems to stop; the entire cast of characters falls into a deep, strange slumber. “Todo el caserón quedó sumido en un limbo bilioso, bosque de medusas que apagaba los ronquidos y cuyos bordes igualmente alcanzables y simétricos eran la vigilia y la muerte” (39). When a group of thirsty miners, with characteristic proletarian aplomb, knock the door down searching for beer, suddenly time starts again with quite a jerk—“Los espejos se quebraron. Cayó...el turbante plateado y azul de la azafata...bostezos, anacrónicos suspiros matinales anunciaban el final de la invernada” (40). The end of the hibernation sets off a celebratory bacchanal that reestablishes La Regente's

paradigm, an attempt to cover over the conspicuous absence of her “Deseado,” Colibrí. However, the precarious inscription of such a radically transgressive moral and physical space cannot stand up to the challenge that Colibrí’s successful escape implies, and La Regente’s personal desires toward the absent Colibrí are stronger, in the text, than her wish to maintain La Casona as it has always been. This desire, sexual and textual, precludes her merely erasing the incident from the collective memory and continuing the space’s existence as if nothing had occurred. Agents (“cazadores”) are sent to find and bring back the fugitives. But as we shall see, La Regente’s control over reality does not extend beyond the confines of that space of possibility that is La Casona.

Upon his escape from La Casona, Colibrí takes refuge with a aged pair of artisans who teach him their trade: the painting and selling of decorated fleas. This exacting work requires patience, steady hands, and a good deal of calm; these qualities Colibrí possesses in abundance. The metaphorical implications of the job are farther-reaching than one might first think, however. Colibrí, in a very real sense, has been, up to this point in the novel, an essentially passive subject; his resistance to La Regente’s attempts at domination has consisted solely in fleeing. The work of flea-painting, though, is a turning point for the protagonist, as by dint of his efforts he learns (literally) to inscribe. The *pulgas* Colibrí paints, according to the proprietor of the shop, are “*plus vraie que nature*” (60), and soon his inscriptional abilities will be turned in less outward-commercial, more inward-corporal directions. The fleas, which become popular as gift items—in and of itself a sort of cultural pun, since in Cuba *colibríes*² are sold as a sort of Valentine, often given between the members of a courting couple—go out into the world and give Colibrí a sort of cultural reputation that he never had before. In a sense, then, Colibrí broadcasts his ability to alter reality into a wide arena: “Algunas [pulgas] llegaron a las ferias

benéficas y tómbolas de honor del Palacio Presidencial; otras pasaron de contrabando, en un camión de piojosos, la frontera. De las *naturales*, una llegó al Japón” (65). La Regente, too, is a practitioner of the inscription of reality, so this broadcast catches her attention. Within the text, it seems evident that Colibrí’s successful resistance of her domination, together with the desire he inspires in her, has changed her in a fundamental way, not permitting her to ignore him or move forward. His existence outside La Casona constitutes an aporia in her discursive world, one which must be erased (by returning him to her space) or destroyed (by his physical death).

Once La Regente locates Colibrí, she repeats the earlier strategy of sending her minions to return him to her place of control, La Casona. El Gigantito comes to the shop in disguise and attempts to force Colibrí physically to obey. At this point, Colibrí returns to his usual state of nudity and presents his real work: his own newly inscribed body. “¡No hay dios que me ponga una mano encima!’...Y quedó al pelo. Lo cubrían, desde el cuello hasta los tobillos y las muñecas, glifos feroces: espolones, colmillos, picos y pezuñas, ojos desorbitados y concéntricos, testículos hinchados, sexos sangrantes colgando de una boca abierta” (68). The skills he learned inscribing the fleas enable him to inscribe his own body with powerful signs of exploded bodies. At this point, the narrator uses one of the most significant epithets in the novel; Colibrí is referred to as the “Manuscrito”. Etymologically, the term breaks down into an ablative of instrument and a past participle, producing a morphemic translation [that which was written by a hand], an epithet that represents Colibrí’s increasingly active nature. El Gigantito does manage to take Colibrí back to La Casona, but this time only by drugging him: “¡le entierra en pleno brazo una jeringuilla entera de seconal!” (76). By drugging Colibrí to return him to the tavern, there is a tacit admission on the part of La Regente and her team that Colibrí is too potent a discursive challenge to be met fairly, without interference from substances.

After some travails, the second period at La Casona ends with another escape. This time, though, Colibrí keeps going and enters into a more natural, forested space, one barely inscribed by human action. The title of the second section of the novel, “El robo del relato”, is particularly significant in light of Colibrí’s escape: it is evident that more than simple physical possession is being carried off. Colibrí’s flight this time will be characterized by a narrative as well as physical appropriation of freedom. This natural space is presented as unmistakably oppositional or contestatory in relation to La Casona, the perversely built environment. Colibrí is succored by an anonymous shepherd, who gives him food and wine; the two set off romping together up and down the hillsides like happy dogs, and like animals they achieve a sort of friendship-bond without using language. Their physical bonding is taken to an intensely erotic level, but their mental links are virtually a verbal. This pastoral experience³ adds a new dimension to Colibrí’s inscriptive powers by allowing him a sort of rehearsal; in the natural space, *tabula rasa*, he can experiment with techniques of domination. These acts of dominance start very subtly, as when walking with the shepherd “Colibrí subía deprisa...siempre delante del supuesto guía” (105), but will develop quickly into a power that rivals La Regente’s own.

Another involuntary stay at La Casona reveals the degree to which La Gerente (note the change of name) is losing the capacity to sustain the carnivalesque energy that previously characterized the bar; the location has become a sort of tearoom, with flowers on the tables and skaters painted into the winterscape on the wall (114-5). Once Colibrí is captured and hung by the wrists in the basement, though, life returns to “la cumbancha continua de ayer”, as if Colibrí were a capacitor, the source of the transgressive energy that drives La Gerente’s paradigm. La Casona is changing, though, in tangible and intangible ways: the fresco on the wall is covered by a curtain (130), and Colibrí, whose presence within the carnival space was previously

characterized by a voracious physicality, frenzied dancing and musical shouts, is ritually tortured in the lowest levels of the building by La Gerente, his body becoming ever thinner and his hair, before described as cut short, now reaching his waist (132). Contrary to expectations, though, the long captivity seems only to distill his will to power; when released by a rebellious Gigantito, he escapes, his physical presence now represented as more energetic than material: “No se trataba de un cuerpo material, sólido, sino más bien de una aglutinación de puntos, de una pura energía. De algo oscuro” (139). The plasticity characteristic of La Casona as a space has affected Colibrí at the physical level, but he has appropriated its effects to become stronger, more able to contest La Gerente’s domination.

This new Colibrí, having escaped once again, returns with some companions to the forest and discovers an ancient seigneurial house, in which they take refuge (151-3). For the first time, Colibrí’s inscriptive powers are permitted to work upon a built environment of their own. When agents of La Gerente attack the fortress, they witness the newly inscribed space and become “converted” to Colibrí’s discourse, leaving La Gerente’s behind; they beg Colibrí to return to La Casona, this time to appropriate it to himself and destroy La Gerente’s paradigm (158). At a country inn, Colibrí takes the next step in the development of the powers of spatial and discursive inscription. The inn, filled with dancing *campesinos* and music, becomes subject to his will: “Como quien entra a la cañona en casa ajena, o toma posesión de una cumbancha: acopló las parejas...reprendió, veterano del relajo con orden, más de un toqueteo, y otras lujurias digitales...Ya era un verdadero jefe” (164).

Now dominant instead of dominated, Colibrí sweeps toward La Casona. In charge of a group of subordinates, among them many of La Gerente’s former followers, he gives orders that the building itself, symbol of the power of La Gerente’s discourse as well as the physical

structure that protects her while she creates it, be set ablaze. The thatched roof catches fire easily, and the locale is destroyed utterly—not in the physical sense, as much of the building survives; but in terms of the previously dominant discourse, which ends abruptly with La Gerente's and her followers' deaths or conversions. Colibrí, the figure emboldened by the possession of remarkable inscriptive powers of discourse, has created an open space upon which he may write whatever he likes. Sarduy's distrust of domination, however, means that within this narrative, a dominant discourse is in itself a perverse influence on the figure who wields it; Colibrí is fundamentally changed by his possession of power, and the very positive characteristics that enabled him to acquire these abilities vanish as he sets about establishing his new order. The sexual freedom and ambiguity—both constantly positive in Sarduy's universe—that had been defining traits during the entire narration is gone. El Japonésón, with whom Colibrí had previously maintained a passionate sexual attachment, is now no more than a servant whose sexual ambiguity is a shameful thing: “Déjate de mariconerías. El poder es cosa de machos. O te mandaré solo al fanguero. Para que te pudras” (177).⁴ The carnival atmosphere that reigned under La Gerente's domination is gone: “Se acabaron para siempre, ¿oyeron bien? para siempre en esta casa el alcohol y la hierba. Se acabó todo lo que corrompe y debilita” (177). Colibrí's physicality has suffered as well. “Las comisuras de los labios han bajado. Ya los ojos no tienen brillo. La piel se muere” (178).

Having traveled full circle, then, Sarduy shows us that space open to inscription is not without its pitfalls. It is true that La Casona seems to act as a sort of barrier between the characters of the novel and the outside world that does not condone their existence or their way of life, and that the carnivalesque subversion of the normative rules of conduct can go on within it. It is even possible for Colibrí to go from a simple wrestler to the creator of his own (albeit

small) universe, with its own laws of behavior and possibility. What Sarduy problematizes in this text is the nature of any discourse—even a carnivalized one—that ceases to be oppositional or contestatory and instead becomes dominant. La Casona offers the opportunity to inscribe anything at all—which could include, for example, a sort of Nietzschean absence of moral categorization, or a set of independently derived standards. The new paradigm under the rule of Colibrí, though, is set to be as traditionally repressive as the street outside, leading us to wonder if it is really any improvement on La Gerente's regime. As Rene Prieto points out, Colibrí has been characterized by that transgressive discourse so often associated with Sarduy during the entire action of the novel, but at the end, “después de acabar con la Casona y destruirlo todo, el protagonista llega a ocupar ‘poco a poco, el lugar de quien lo persiguió’, llevando así a cabo una identificación con la regla representada por la Regente” (326). I take from this that whether or not the new bar's relation to the world at large, the street outside, is in the end relatively unimportant; the point is that la Casona will be as repressive as ever, it will merely be managing a new dominant discourse.

Notas

¹ I refer here to José Donoso's 1995 novel *El lugar sin límites*, a text with many intriguing parallels to Sarduy's novel—a rural bar with a transvestite spectacle, frequented by working men and ruled by a cadre of figures whose gender is as questionable as any of Sarduy's characters.

² “Colibrí” is the Spanish name for the smallest species of hummingbird, which are given as lovers' gifts in small cages and released after a few hours.

³ The presentation of the experience in the novel calls to mind Curtius's description of the *locus amoenus*, an ideal place commonly found in 18th century fiction wherein the protagonist rests, eats, and is healed of wounds.

⁴ It is interesting to note that Colibrí's new laws for the space previously occupied by La Casona are based on an increasingly traditional, paternalistic view of the subjugated population. His discourse is characterized by a return to the old definition of manhood, which Ben defines in this way: “Los varones debían ser padres de familia, racionales, con deseo sexual desbordante, activos, heterosexuales” (69).

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