

“THIS IS A WAR CITY”

SUBJECT, PAIN, AND REPETITION IN DOLORES DORANTES

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Dolores Dorantes is a young poet from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico who has, to date, published three books, *Poems para niños (Poems for Children)*, *SexoPuroSexoVeloz (PureSexFastSex)*, and *Septiembre (September)*, the last two of which have been recently published in a joint edition by Kenning and Counterpath, translated by Jen Hofer. All three books form part of Dorantes' life-long writing project which she has entitled *Dolores Dorantes*. While there have been many serial books written over the last two centuries, none (to my knowledge) has taken their author's name as their title. Thus, this title, *Dolores Dorantes*, pulls us directly into the autobiographical, the site where social experience is narrativized into something we might call the "literary," but in what way is Dorantes' work autobiographical and how does it affect and think this movement from the social to the literary? The way that Dorantes' title knots together the social, the literary, and the autobiographical resonates with a series of current state-side literary debates, including explorations of performance and interventions in public space (I'm thinking of projects like David Buuck's performance work, Rodrigo Toscano's *Collapsible Poetics Theatre* or Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand's recent *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry & Public Space*) and the status of the I and the use of narrative in experimental writing practice.

One approach to the work of Dorantes is via her long-standing critique of the involvement of the Mexican state in literary affairs and her, what we might call, extra-literary projects to create the conditions for a counter public within the Mexican literary sphere (these projects include the border arts collective *Compania Frugal* and the monthly poetry "newsletter" *Plan B*). Her critique is two-fold: the first is against state involvement via the *sistema becario*, an elaborate prize and grant system set up under the guidance of Octavio Paz in the 1980s, which functions through a series of prizes for books (generally awarded by committees of senior, established writers, i.e., writers who have already been vetted by this very institutional apparatus) and grants (rewarded by government functionaries based upon the submission of a lengthy resume of prior publications and work). Dorantes' first critique rests upon her observation that the system is a manner for the State to co-opt the integrity and work of writers and artists. A second critique is that this system comes to enforce, prescribe, and necessitate a certain stylistic and formal conservatism. As Dorantes writes in the introduction to *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, "*Poemas para niños* came into being as a critique of the confessional poetry that prevails in Mexican literature, a mode imposed on writers through government-sponsored workshops in my country as a 'style' designed to win prizes." So at the first level we have to describe Dorantes' project as something involving a stance, perhaps a political one, but political in the sense of delinking the literary from the state and constructing a literary counter public. The second level is aesthetic,

but flows from the first:

The adventure of *Dolores Dorantes* as a project began when I was nineteen and refused to write like Jose Carlos Becerra. In order to achieve that goal, I needed to draw language taut in such a way that meaning alone might be the dominant force. Or, in other words, any writer who finds it necessary to exorcise Neruda in order to feel liberated must go to extremes.

I include this quote in order to foreground that at the very base of Dorantes' work is a signaling that the relationship between something we might recognize as the "social" and something we might recognize as the "literary" (thinking this relationship, modifying it, exploring its limitations and fissures and potentialities), is a key part of her poetic practice ("poetic" conceived here in broad terms to include all of Dorantes' activities as a poet, organizer, cultural critic, and not just her writing). If we assume, for example, that the literary generally somehow reflects the social, we can already see that Dorantes is working with an expanded notion of the literary, one in which the lines between the literary and the social are not so clear, and one which sees the conditioning of the "literary" by the "social" as critical to what then becomes possible in the literary field (refusing "to write like Jose Carlos Becerra"). However, what I think is most interesting about Dorantes' extra-literary projects is that they are not just "outlets" (like a small journal that serves as a site of production for a certain aesthetic tendency) but rather attempts to intervene in the realm of the possible, to shift the structural conditions which in turn condition literary production, and, finally, to construct a counterpublic around this project of "structural re-adjustment."

Since 1993, Dorantes' hometown of Ciudad Juarez has endured an epidemic of killings, abductions, and torture of women. Estimates of the number killed range from 400 to 1,200. This "story" broke in the national Mexican media in 1999; to date a number of different theories as to the cause of the killings have been advanced: serial killers, drug cartels, wealthy local "untouchables," the police, men emasculated by women who have become the primary breadwinners as a result of working in the *maquilla*. However, what makes this situation specifically a traumatic experience is that none of these explanations has been able to fill the painful explanatory gap between event and aftermath: journalists, victims, the authorities, continue to search for an "author" of the killings, but there is none. Despite repeated attempts to hang the crimes on a group or a particular sector of society, there is no one to step in and perform the role of protagonist, to make possible the conditions of narration. The failure to discover a cause for these killings has meant that the trauma remains open. Between 1997-2000, Dorantes herself wrote a series of articles for a local Ciudad Juarez paper about the killings. She stopped when she felt her safety was endangered. For the English-language publication of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* and *Septiembre*, Dorantes wrote a special introduction, in which, in the very last line, she writes, "What clearly emerges from all this, for me, is war." The reference to "war" can be read as a reference to the book *Septiembre*, which takes up in a very oblique manner the events surrounding 9/11 (although to already name the subject as such does itself a great violence to Dorantes' work: she is concerned with 9/11 for similar reasons, unsutured trauma, wounds, and the failure of narrativization and aesthetization). However, if we try to apply this statement ("What clearly emerges from all this, for me, is war") to *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* the fit is more difficult. This line sends us back to the text of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* searching for mentions of war, of which there is only one, but a very curious one:

*You navigate on foot in a departing
vessel, tell me:
this is a war city*

I want to see you
this city has a port
tell it to me

"This is a war city." And at the time of the writing of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* Ciudad Juarez was indeed a war city, a line we might have glossed over and a fact that perhaps we might have missed without Dolores' introduction. But as we've already mentioned this is not a book that takes "head-on" the feminicides in Juarez; there are no direct mentions of the place, nor direct mentions of killings, and a great deal of the book discusses the conditions of possibility for love. However, there is indeed some engagement there, but it takes place within a linguistic and psychic field that is not Juarez (a kind of realism or poetry of witness) but one that has been conditioned by the trauma of the feminicides. It is not a book *about* the feminicides but one written into the conditions of their creation. How can we describe this engagement? And what does it mean to not write a book about the feminicides? What does it mean to refuse their aestheticization (of which there are many, from songs by Tori Amos to Lourdes Portillo's celebrated documentary *Senorita Extraviada*) as a poetic practice?

So, it's a book not about something but conditioned by it, or written into its wake, into its withdrawal. I want to focus on two moments that occur right at the beginning of the book. The first page reads:

The red whinnying
of heat
of saltpeter the night...

The red returns only once, five pages in, in a "red wood table," but the whinnying never. And other sounds are curiously absent from *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*; in some ways it is an airless universe, there is no shattering, creaking, rumbling, nor sighing. I want to place *whinnying* then in an analogous relationship with war: it is something that cuts across the text, something that withdraws itself from it and which in its withdrawal does not structure the text, but rather points to the poem's "conditioning" or transversal by something we might call an absent external event. But to say "external," already conjures up a split between something we might recognize as the "literary" and something we might recognize as the "social." So instead, whinnying: not being itself, but rather only a quality, a condition, something in the air, something precarious, something that traverses, that is of the night, not the day, something that is not human, but rather animal, something that points to the not-us that undergirds us. Whinnying: either trauma or exertion, either nervousness or a sign of a calm return, of repose. Whinnying: something which even against the blackness of night can take on a color, be colored, malleable, able to be conditioned and something that is neither co-extensive with, nor separate from the night, neither one, nor just two, and thus, perhaps, pointing us towards a different relation between the "literary" and the "social," neither one, nor two, neither a priori separation, nor a reduction to a common textual structure. The way whinnying cuts across this opening page of the text points us towards what I think is one of Dorantes' key concerns: an attempt to structure, much as her extra-literary work in publishing and criticism has, a different relationship between the social and the literary.

The second withdrawal, or perhaps in this case, non-presence, is pointed to by the title: *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*. In Ciudad Juarez, one of the most common forms of employment for women after the maquila is prostitution. For a book that is so much about love *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* is a curious title; and for a book that is titled *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* (*PureSexFastSex*) there is an astounding absence of sex, either pure or fast. Again, it

would seem that the way in which this title, this conditioning, withdraws itself from the text is again at the very limit of what we can say, that the withdrawal belongs, like whinnying, to a different, non-linguistic order, which forms a line “that circumscribes not only what is speakable, but what is livable” (to quote Judith Butler from *Precarious Life*). So, proceeding more by hesitation than by argument, I would advance that *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, in the same way as “war,” points us towards a withdrawal, and withdrawal which I am reading as a conditioning by an absent external event. Absent as in something that is not fully external, neither two nor one, and conditioning because the relation between the social and the literary is neither one of relation via an a priori separation, nor autonomy, nor *écriture*, but rather some difficult, perhaps almost anti-representational, other. *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* is then not a book about the feminicides, but rather a book written into the world conditioned by that series of events, and that looks at the complicated ways that the literary and social, if not collapse into each other, at least share or can be conditioned into a type of similarity or shared structure by an event, especially a traumatic one.

I want to turn now to the question of autobiography in Dorantes’ work. *Dolores Dorantes* announces itself as autobiography, but the relation between the work and the genre known as autobiography is never clear cut. Perhaps in part because the project is open ended, a series of ongoing books titled *Dolores Dorantes*, thus its valence as a project has neither the documentation of Bernadette Mayer’s *Hunger Journals* or engagement with autobiography as Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*. There is a sense of openness to the future in Dorantes’ project, the possibility for recalibration, that the horizon of the work is not that of the (dead, closed) past but rather that the project (in a way that is radically different than any other autobiography) is projective, prospective, directed in part to a horizon of the future. But this directionality is not significant just on the level of genre. It cleaves directly into the heart of Dorantes’ engagement with autobiography as a site where both the potentialities and actualities of the subject, both individual and collective, are measured and mapped.

Unlike works such as *My Life*, the point of Dorantes’ series of books collected under the name *Dolores Dorantes* is not so clearly an extension of the possibilities of autobiography via an expansion of the I; rather in Dorantes there is both less of a fidelity to autobiography as a genre and more of a fidelity, though oblique, to the subject. Part of this shift, has to do with the fact that Dorantes is interested in how the subject is formed by repetition, by the repetitive affective investment in particular objects or, in the case of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, the subject’s continual suspension and interruption by pain. In Spanish, the word for pain is *dolor* and its plural is *dolores*, thus in the name Dolores or in a title such as *Dolores Dorantes*, pain and autobiography are already placed into a fraught and intimate relationship. In the following, I want to briefly examine the links between pain and autobiography in *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* and then turn to how the I in Dorantes is never individual but always suspended between the individual and the collective.

In *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, the subject is not identical with the I, rather the subject is defined by a repetitive positioning in relations (to a you, he, or she) or continual undoing by trauma (pain). The following is the second poem in *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* and lays out the deep knotting between the subject, relation, repetition, and pain:

Darkness where new
lights being

and grow:
fast swarms

buzzings
slice and trace the colors of the city

(*May be*

I had to forget how)

Pain inserts its hardest expression

The impact, extend it
toward clarity

(*Afterwards*

our separated forests
will be places—hot—
abutting memories

replete)

Pain and repetition. “May be / I had to forget how” is a phrase that repeats both as the title of Dorantes’ blog and as the final line of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, where it stands opening out into the horizon of the work’s futurity. The repetition of “May be / I had to forget how” here is linked both to a curious temporal structure and to pain and subjectivization. As we noted above, for a work of autobiography there is very little “past,” and many destabilizing openings to a horizon of futurity. However, there is something about this present which the poem is charting. In the need to forget there is a past, and then after the “impact” of pain’s hardest expression there will be an “afterwards,” but these temporal pasts and futures are not themselves present in the poem, they can only be indicated. What lies in between them, at the center of the present, is pain, a subject structured by repetition, and the inability to forget and an inability to arrive to this afterwards wherein the fusion of an *our* separates out into a *you* and an *I*, and where a process of becoming-place, a movement from non-site to site, from forest to not home, but place, would reach a terminal point. “May be / I had to forget how” leaves off into the blank unqualified present, the space of pure repetition: How? How it was done? Or how to do something? Something that I do, or something that was done to me? Does the speaker need to forget something about herself or something that was done to her? Or: the suspension of the ability to assign agency in the aftermath of trauma?

These questions force us to turn to pain, pain as an actor and what it would mean for pain to “insert its hardest expression.” Does its expression have a form? And is the subject the site of its insertion? Pain (*dolor*) has a long and important tradition as a rhetorical trope in Latin American poetry. In the modern period, a certain liberal humanist (and dominant) reception of Cesar Vallejo’s later work, especially *Black Heralds*, has constructed a set of linkages between Vallejo’s concern for the pain of the other and a limited form of political engagement. We don’t have time here to extricate the subtlety of Vallejo’s conceptualization of pain from these overcodings of interpretation, but I do want to play something of his understanding (or better one instantiation of it) off Dorantes’ poem. In his famous essay “I Am Going to Speak of Hope,” Vallejo writes:

I do not feel this suffering as Cesar Vallejo. I am not suffering now as a creative person, or as a man, nor even as a simple living being. I don't feel this pain as a Catholic, or as a Mohammedan, or as an atheist. Today I am simply in pain. If my name weren't Cesar Vallejo, I'd still feel it. If I weren't an artist, I'd still feel it. If I weren't a man, or even a living being, I'd still feel it. If I weren't a Catholic, or an atheist, or a Mohammedan, I'd still feel it. Today I am in pain from further down. Today I am simply in pain. The pain I have has no explanations. My pain is so deep that it never had a cause, and has no need of a cause. What could have its cause been? Where is that thing so important that it stopped being its cause? Its cause is nothing, and nothing could have stopped being its cause.

Pain in this Vallejo text is that which both overcomes the subject ("I do not feel this suffering as Cesar Vallejo") and which successfully sutures individuals to a collective by overcoming difference (neither Catholic, Mohammedan, nor atheist). Moreover, it is a pain without a cause, without an explanation, other than "nothing," the void, nada. We can see how radically different Dorantes' approach is. Pain in Dorantes' text is not tied to the "human," rather it is *constitutive* of the subject by interrupting or placing it into suspension. In Dorantes, pain both structures and becomes a structure. Dorantes' pain is always in the present tense, always perpetual, always still happening. The future, the point where the pain will have ceased to be pain can only be imagined as a hypothetical, as an "Afterwards..." In Dorantes, pain effects a brutal subjectivization. But notice the not-quite "passive" construction in the previous sentence ("pain effects"): it's impossible to write in the active tense that pain subjectifies. There's pain, there's the subject, but exactly how pain structures by interruption that subject is not clear; we only know that "pain inserts its hardest expression." There's something ambiguous about how it does this, if it's the "actor" or agent or author or not, an ambiguity that Dorantes' work doesn't resolve. Pain has an ambiguity in Dorantes: its unclear if its an object, a scene, a mood, or merely a psychological state. The key is not that pain can't be fixed, but rather that it is *only* known by its effects: the structuring of the subject by suspension, the creation of the non-site of the not place (the forest), and its the blank eternal present (whose horizon is conditioned by the need to forget and an inaccessible "afterwards"). In Dorantes, pain cannot be resolved by one person alone, it can never be made object, and thus pain is never something that was done to us, rather it is something that structures the subject. Pain and a repetitive return to its wound has replaced futurity as the horizon.

On the one hand, this is autobiography interrupted. The subject in suspension. But there is another vector to Dorantes' engagement with autobiography and that is how her text seems suspended between an autobiography of a subject and one of a collective. As we noted in the poem above, pain makes everything hazy, blurs the boundaries, expands: the subject, the city, the poem, they all expand into this blank present speckled by flashes of futurity. *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* is not the autobiography of a person. It's too generalized for that, but its not a collective either; as we have seen the our breaks down into a you and an I. In this way, Dorantes resists the rhetorical (political, poetic) tradition of epic gestures to a Latin American national-popular subject, *the people*, while at the same time refusing as we noted earlier "to write like Jose Carlos Becerra." Critical autobiography then: very conscious of the role literature has played in the construction of a national popular subject in the 20th and 21st centuries, but also suspicious of the "individual," voice, the pleasant music of light lyric in the service of culture masquerading as the state. If we can call *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* autobiography, it is the autobiography of a subject that tends towards two, or a group that moves away from one. It is the autobiography of a subject who is not an individual, who is incompletely becoming-collective, and a group, a collective, a we and our that is fragmentary, not closed, and not realized as a national subject.

There is an almost dialectical movement, a maintenance of an ambiguity in *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*. One of the most impressive achievements of Dorantes' text is how it suspends the subject between individual and collective, the way the 'our' and 'we' throughout the text fragment and particularizes into relations of I and you, and the way these relations are kept in constant motion, spinning pronouns into a skin of neither you nor I.

From the other side
(in the part of you
that doesn't show) I construct
what I think

we imagine

I conjure the red wood table
the chair where I wait for you on snowy days

love, we imagine

From the other side
(in the part of me
that doesn't show) throbs the fog
of your kiss: is that you? You open. You enter

questions from my mouth (9)

In *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, I never occurs by itself. Literally. It is always linked, followed or preceded by another pronoun, a you, a she, a he, a we. The only place in the text that it occurs by itself is in the penultimate poem and even here it only occurs as negation:

Love
we are strange

but that borrowed form is already gone
I don't speak (41)

In "From the Other Side," Dorantes establishes a shifting array of relationships among the pronouns I, you, and we. The mirror structure has a dialectical push to it, highlighting the small differences in the repetition, especially the shift from "*we imagine*" to "*love, we imagine*." So once again repetition enters, but here it's repetition with difference, where the difference creates a kind of oscillating relationship between reading love as a form of direct address and/or as what is being imagined. The repetition of "red" sets up a complicated relationship with "the red whinnying," wherein withdrawal would appear to meet its instantiated form, but it occurs here under the sign of memory and as conditioned by love. The lines of "I conjure..." are also positioned as the pivot, the mirror itself, and in addition to being memory, they are mirror, suspended somewhere between a real and a reflection.

However, the greatest difference occurs between the stanzas that begin "From the other side..." It is here that we can examine in a fine grained way how the I and we in *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* plunge into each other, structuring and undoing and recalibrating each other, how they are not fixed, how they are suspended and purposively structured into one another. In the first stanza, the you is presented as cleaved by a complicated series of divisions: in a part that is non-visible, there is another "side." But a

side is not quite a place, like the difference between the real object and its reflection, a side is defined only by a line and is suspended between the actual and virtual. "On the other side of x" doesn't give us a concrete place, but rather a region, and regions are always both real and imaginary, both able to be mapped and unspecific, vague, waiting to be filled with content and memory. Moreover, Dorantes' choice of a preposition ("From the other side," instead of "in" for example) underscores the virtualness of the region. Thus, we have a you that is divided into parts (some visible, some non-visible) where there exists an additional division or marking of a region, "the other side."

The same holds for the second stanza and for the me or the I of the poem. From this opening divide, a series of complicated differences and repetitions are set up that resonant, fray, and decay against one another. The most significant for our purposes is the division between the mind ("I construct/ what I think" and "we imagine") in the first stanza and the body ("your kiss" and "my mouth") in the second. The movement from the mind to the body mimics the actual/virtual split that we discussed above with reference to the mirror and the nature of regions or an "other side." But the poem complicates this by, in the first stanza, putting the I in relation with a we, and in the second stanza effecting a bleeding between the you and the I, wherein the you and I physically become part of one another ("You open. You enter/ questions from my mouth").

In the first stanza, the relation between the pronouns (the I and we) is almost one of competition, the I thinks and constructs, while the we imagines. The we traffics in the hypothetical, ideal, virtual, but even the act of a thinking I is enmeshed in an "other," as all thinking in the poem proceeds from that "other side." So there's a tensile, differential relationship from an I who's thinking moves out of a region both actual and virtual to an undefined you and then to a we that unlike the I traffics in the ideal, the promissory, the future. The result is the blurring of each pronoun (I, you, we) into the other without erasing completely their specificity. In the second stanza, the you becomes diffuse ("From the other side... throbs the fog/ of your kiss"), becomes diffuse like a fog. But then the constituent identity of both the I and you is suspended further as the you both opens and then (provisionally) enters the I ("You open. You enter / questions from my mouth"). The I and you, become a fog together, they mingle, hover, and structure. The I and you are suspended into a tertiary zone, where they become constitutive of each other, where they become something that falls short of being a collective, something that is neither one, nor two. In this poem, then, Dorantes spins pronouns into a kind of skin, something stretchable, elastic, an I stretches into and is differentially specified against a you and a we, and this skin, this thin film that the poem generates through differential repetition suspends identity and it turns pronouns, not into deictic markers of identity, but rather into "regions," into sites both specific, concrete, and relationally realized and unspecific, vague, and waiting to be filled with content.

To return to our earlier discussion of the "literary" and the "social," pain is another site where we can see a productive working through of a related set of concerns in Dorantes' poetry. In *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, pain is something that interrupts subjectivization (forcing the subject into an eternal present, into a holding pattern) and places the I into suspension), but in such a way that a past and a future ("may be / I had to forget how" and "afterwards") still vaguely condition the horizontality of the present. In Dorantes' work, between pain and the subject, between the literary and the social, between the I and we, there is a refusal of aestheticization, a decision to try to "stay in the room" with something difficult, something impossible, something neither one, nor not quite two. Dorantes' work attempts to map the difficult terrain between these

sets of binaries while engaging critically their specific histories within Mexican literary culture to chart new sets of relations between them. In the end, this is what I think is important about *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*; namely, that it is an attempt to engage with a serious, traumatic event that doesn't collapse into a poetry of witness and that also asks important questions about the effects of that trauma on a subject who is neither just individual nor wholly collective. It looks at the ways that an event which has already happened and withdrawn itself conditions the environment into which any writing of the event would take place. And it attempts to create a place where these binaries (in particular literary vs. social, and the I versus the we), which are so often either collapsed into each other or held apart at arms length, are looked at for how they come to be structured together, how, like whinnying and the night, they are not just the same nor different, one nor two, but rather both separate and co-extensive.