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Leaky, Dead, and Restless: Afterdeath in Contemporary Venezuelan Fiction*

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes “Cadáver,” a short story in the collection *Barrio bonito* (2015), by Venezuelan author Luis Freites. It argues that, rather than creating an afterlife for the dead characterized by processes of mourning, commemoration, and memorialization, the story captures the body’s *afterdeath*: the slow decomposition and transformation of the corpse from organic matter to bones and dust. Through the staging of an aesthetic gesture described by Maikel—the story’s protagonist—as “mirar pa’ dentro” (to look inside or to look into one’s insides), a temporality determined by the tempo of decay, and the multisensory attack of leaky dead matter dripping from the corpse, the afterdeath that materializes in “Cadáver” creates what I, following the work of Michael Rothberg and Venezuelan poet Igor Barreto, call “networks of implication.” These networks build connections between bodies both human and nonhuman based not on empathy, compassion, or familiarity but on contact, contagion, and unsettling moments of intersection and recognition. I propose that, in doing so, they introduce a form of relationality that is not mediated or circumscribed by grief, and that demands a radical renewal of political vocabularies and a reorganization of social life that has, as its core, the collectivization of death.

KEYWORDS: Corpse, Materiality, Afterdeath, Venezuela, Implication, Luis Freites

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Un olor a muerte vieja

Years before the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruptions it created in the country’s precarious health system and overburdened morgues, dying had become an ordeal in Venezuela. In 2015, the newspaper *El Confidencial* reported on the “absurdo coste” of dying in a country where life “no vale nada” (Hernández) but death was unaffordable. A full funerary service would cost, at the time, ten minimum wage monthly salaries. By 2021, that number would increase to 351 salaries (Heredia). Faced with the exorbitant price, many resort to leaving the corpses of their loved ones in the morgue, unidentified and unclaimed, death costing them nothing more than the feeling of unbearable loss.

Accompanying the abandoned dead in search of burial are the exploding dead: the bodies that, stored in broken mortuary cabinets for too long and at temperatures that are too high, become so swollen with gases that they explode. In 2018, *BBC News Mundo* published an article on these occurrences in one of the most important hospitals in the state of Zulia. The article includes photographs of corpses wrapped up in blankets in a room with no electricity. One cannot see the air in the photographed morgue, but it feels thick, particularly

when, further down the article, a photograph of rotten meat appears, its inclusion evidence of yet another consequence of the country’s energy crisis, which has forced people to sell, buy, and consume meat that the broken refrigerators cannot preserve anymore. Rotten meat alongside rotting bodies, and, rising from this amalgam of decay, “un olor a muerte vieja se clava en la garganta” (Olmo).

In the throat and, also, on the page. Just as the dead rot in morgues all over the country, they also rot in works of contemporary Venezuelan fiction that put narratives of afterlife, grieving, and commemoration on hold and, in their place, introduce words bloated with putrid gases that threaten to spill dead matter all over the page and the reader. In this article, I analyze one of these works: “Cadáver,” a short story in Luis Freites’s collection *Barrio Bonito* (2015). I argue that “Cadáver” is not concerned with granting the dead an afterlife understood in terms of rituals of burial and mourning that transform the flesh “from the decomposing corpse of the deceased into a ritual object that may then take its place in social memory by means of a gravestone, burial site, or other form of disposal” (Schwartz 14). Instead, it aims to capture what I call “afterdeath”: the slow transformation of the corpse from living tissue to bones and dust.

The afterdeath, I will argue, is a process marked by a tempo set to the movement of flesh-eating worms and bacteria. It zooms into the corpse and invites a gaze anchored in a gesture that Maikel, the protagonist of “Cadáver,” calls “mirar pa’ dentro” (39). In the afterdeath, the body becomes “una heterogeneidad de materias” (Giorgi, *Formas comunes* 131) that survive without any aspirations to

transcendence as something “no espiritual, ni cultural, ni simbólico” (134). The afterdeath is neither death overcome nor the long and painful act of dying, but the ongoingness of decay; not the tombstone but the dead matter it hides from view. More importantly, in the afterdeath, death is sticky: it attaches itself to the bodies of the living, to their clothes and to their nostrils, not as image or as metaphor but as what Yolanda Pantin in her poem “Hedor” calls an “hedor alocado en el tiempo.” Following the movement of this mad stench in Freites’s work and tracing the networks it creates between people, bodies, and things, I will argue that, in the staging of the afterdeath and behind the impulse to resist the move of the body from the *here* of the rotting present to the *there* of memory, afterlife, legacy” (Schwartz 2), is a call to recognize implication—as defined by both Michael Rothberg and Venezuelan poet Igor Barreto—as an unsettling space that makes possible and urgent the development of a new ethics of being with and caring for each other.

That Most Special of Things

“Cadáver” is not the only contemporary Venezuelan work of fiction filled with corpses left behind by quotidian acts of violence.¹ Alberto Barrera Tyszka’s *Patria o muerte* (2015) narrates former president Hugo Chávez’s cancer from the moment it was announced to the country to his death on March 5, 2013. Though Chávez’s body occupies a central place in the novel, overlapping with it are the stories of characters like María, who witnesses the death of her mother at the hands of two men who shoot her to steal her purse: “su madre recibió dos disparos. El primero le atravesó el abdomen, perforando el páncreas y desprendiendo el riñón izquierdo. La bala salió por la espalda y se hundió de manera definitiva en el asfalto. El segundo entró por la mejilla derecha, sacudió el paladar y luego escapó llevándose en el camino una estela de masa encefálica y cabellos. Todo cupo en un segundo” (101). Even though the event of the mother’s death occurs quickly, the narration dilates the second it takes for her to be shot by “zooming into” her body and showing the bullet’s trajectory inside it. The mother’s decomposing body is then left behind, abandoned both by María—who runs away and never inquires as to what happened to the corpse—and by the narrative itself, which also refuses to “rescue” the body and give it proper burial.

The abandoned corpse of María’s mother and the absence of rituals to commemorate it contrast with the excessive attention paid to Chávez’s ailing body and the efforts of the state and the people to craft an afterlife for him before and after his death. While the mother’s death affects no one but María—“No entendía cómo su madre podía desaparecer así como así, sin que importara, sin que se notara. Nadie se daba cuenta” (104)—Chávez’s cancer is described as “un enigma que contagiaba a todo el país” (57), and his death transforms the country into a “silencio eléctrico, crispado; un abismo lleno de metales, una letra abierta, un grito a punto de sangrar” (217). Moreover, while the narrative reduces María’s mother to “mejilla derecha,” “paladar,” “masa encefálica,” and “cabellos,”

Chávez’s material body disappears and, in its place, a spectral one emerges that lingers in “el espacio inmaculado donde desde ese momento y para siempre respiraría el Comandante” (196), nicknamed after his death: “Coloso, Gigante, Luz, Supremo, Guía, Único, Inmenso, Santo, Invicto, Superior, Eterno, Inmortal, Celestial, Universal, Galáctico” (195).

The contrast between these two bodies and the afterlives they can access can be read as a gesture of denunciation that calls attention to the rise of violence in Venezuela and to the continuation of inequality within the Bolivarian Revolution.² It can also be read as exemplifying an attitude toward death that Philippe Ariès summarizes as the imperative to avoid, for society’s sake, “the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so” (87). The reference Ariès makes to a happy life coincides, on one hand, with the joyful sentiment permeating the political script of the Bolivarian Revolution, a sentiment that was “made official” when in October 2013 Nicolás Maduro—Chávez’s appointed successor—ordered the creation of the “viceministerio para la Suprema Felicidad Social del Pueblo Venezolano” (Meza). On the other, it exemplifies a more generalized attitude toward death summarized in Freites’s “Cadáver”: “Los cadáveres no se recuerdan, se olvidan rápido, nunca detienen esta alegría tropical que invade siempre, sobre todo si es viernes y quincena. Decir cadáver en esta ciudad es aguar la fiesta preparada para la noche” (105).

Beyond the threat it poses to the joy of the Friday-night party, the body—whether dying or decomposing—also represents a threat to power and the illusion of strength, continuity, and authority that sustains it. Hence, the emergence of the king’s two bodies as theorized by Ernst Kantorowicz in his study of medieval and early modern ideologies of monarchy and the state. Kantorowicz draws attention to the custom that started with the funeral of King Edward II of England and that involved placing an effigy made of wood or leather on top of the coffin that held the king’s corpse: “enclosed in the coffin of lead, which itself was encased in a casket of wood, there rested the corpse of the king, his mortal and normally visible—though now invisible—body natural; whereas his normally invisible body politic was on this occasion visibly displayed by the effigy in its pompous regalia” (Kantorowicz 421). This operation allowed for the king to die and for the King—the *Dignitas*, the body politic—to live: “the triumph of Death and the triumph over Death [...] shown side by side” (425).

In the context of contemporary Venezuela and Barrera Tyszka’s novel, this anxiety over the mortal body of the sovereign manifests itself in the secrecy surrounding the cell phone containing videos of Chávez fighting his cancer. When asked about the videos, Miguel Sanabria, one of the characters, says: “Es un video desagradable, impactante, no sé si me explico. [...] Vi a un enfermo, a un ser humano, vulnerable y desesperado. Como cualquier enfermo terminal. [...] Estaba débil, frágil, aterrorizado. Lloraba. Se quejaba. Tenía

un gran pavor ante la muerte. Como cualquiera" (239). What made the videos "desagradable[s]" and dangerous, then, was the access they gave to Chávez's vulnerable body. They offered an image that, after his death, endangered his access to an afterlife where he could remain the all-powerful leader of the Bolivarian Revolution. Thus, just like the decomposing body of María's mother, these videos disappear along with the cell phone, the corpse and the corpse-to-be successfully purged from the narrative.

However, it is not only the dying body of the sovereign that threatens power; citizens, too, can mobilize their own dying bodies as a form of protest against state violence. Such was the case of Franklin Brito, a Venezuelan farmer who undertook six hunger strikes between October and December 2009 and who died in August 2010 of respiratory failure.³ Paula Vásquez Lezama argues that the power of Brito's actions derived from the visibility of his "unacceptable physical state": "The media presence of images of Brito's extremely thin frame, his gaunt visage, his seated, waiting posture, shirtless and prostrate, is deeply troubling in symbolic terms. [...] In full knowledge of the facts, Brito placed himself in an unacceptable physical state, violating his body's integrity in order to denounce his accusers" (104). In doing so, he mobilized a practice that "Venezuelan society rejects on the basis of its cultural principles" (104), principles that have to do with dominant models of beauty and bodily care in Venezuela and—going back to Ariès—with the imperative to banish from public view the ugliness of dying.

Bodies like Brito's are not part of Freites's "Cadáver," which stages the body's decomposition rather than the premortem act of starving to death. However, the challenge Brito's starving body posed to the Venezuelan state resonates with the power that the corpses in the short story acquire thanks to the uncontained nature of their dead matter and to the fact that, in both cases, the corpses talk as they decompose in the "idioma secreto de los muertos" (Freites, "Cadáver" 102). This secret language unsettles how we conceptualize communication in ways that, as Margaret Schwartz points out, "have very real, lived, ethical consequences in the relations of everyday life" (112). These relations include those established between living and dead bodies and between subjects and the political power that governs them through official narratives and systems of order and classification that collapse when encountering "the elusive power and touching vulnerability of that most special of things, the corpse," and the afterdeath that materializes in it, which resists flattening, emptying, and cohesive discursive operations of representation and symbolism (Schwartz 24).

Afterdeath

In *The Dominion of the Dead* (2014), Robert Pogue Harrison speaks of funerary rites as enabling "the release of the image." He argues that, if the corpse holds on to the person's image at the moment of their demise, "funerary rites serve to disentangle that nexus and separate them into discrete entities with independent fates—the

corpse consigned to earth or air, and the image assigned to its afterlife, whatever form that imaginary afterlife may take in this or that cultural framework" (148). For Pogue Harrison, then, the afterlife is the life that the corpse's image—understood as the resemblance it bears to its previously living self—leads after death as "souls, images, voices, masks, heroes, ancestors, founders, and the like" (154).

For the afterlife to begin, the corpse *as corpse* has to disappear from view. As Pogue Harrison states, "[t]o realize their fate and become truly dead [the dead] must first be made to disappear. It is because their bodies have a place to go that their souls or images or words may attain an afterlife of sorts among the living" (1). In addition to the corpse itself, the process of decomposition also disappears from Pogue Harrison's discussion of the dominion of the dead. While the journey that the dead's bodily matter embarks upon is certainly alluded to all throughout the text, Pogue Harrison draws our attention away from perishing—understood as matter's return to earth—and toward dying and the afterlives that are made possible through the effort of turning the former into the latter. In fact, even when he looks right at the corpse, what he sees is "the site of something that has disappeared, that has forsaken the sphere of presence, that has passed from the body into... into what? Death? The past? Another dimension?" (92). Pogue Harrison thus presents the corpse as the material representation of a void, and, in doing so, he does away and does without its decomposing matter.

Pogue Harrison's dismissal of the decaying corpse resonates with an attitude that reappears in a number of scholarly works on death, which include, as we saw earlier, Ariès's analysis of death and ritual, and Hans Ruin's *Being with the Dead* (2018). Ruin's study traces the manifold possibilities contained in the act of "being with the dead" across Western philosophy. He underscores, on one hand, the Socratic disdain for the corpse—"The genuinely *rational* man is the one who is able to tell the difference, who does not mistake a useless piece of decaying tissue with that is truly significant"—and, on the other, anthropological reports analyzed by Robert Hertz on the practices of burial among the Dayaks of Indonesia in the 1800s, among whom "the potentially repulsive process of bodily decay is not concealed but integrated within a ritual form. [...] the decaying remains are carefully taken care of and later buried together with the bones and, in certain cases, even partially consumed by the relatives" (Ruin 93, 46).

The examples Ruin cites from Hertz's work point to non-Western attitudes toward death that understand being with the dead as being with their decaying remains, exposed to the stomach-turning smell and sight of decomposition. This exposure has also found a place in artistic and literary works in Latin America, where being with decaying remains is in many instances tied to the denunciation of acts of state violence and the armed conflicts that marked the continent in the second half of the twentieth century. Artist Teresa Margolles, for example, stages performances and installations imbued with material traces of death that denounce and act as evidence of the violent deaths taking place in Mexico on a daily

basis. Her installation *En el aire* (2003) invites the audience to walk across a room filled with soap bubbles made with the water used to clean dead bodies prior to autopsy in a morgue in Mexico. Gabriel Giorgi analyzes Margolles's works alongside Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* (2004) and Patricio Guzmán's documentary *Nostalgia de la luz* (2010), as he conceptualizes the materiality of the corpse as a space where biopolitical decisions are made regarding who qualifies as a person and who deserves a community of remembrance. In the aforementioned works, Giorgi reads a form of resistance that unsettles distinctions between cadaver and person through the materialization of a temporality that cannot be reduced to society's time or nature's time, but that instead "*incorpora lo natural al tiempo de la política [...] y al mismo tiempo arrastra lo político hacia su exterior*" (Giorgi, *Formas comunes* 204; emphasis in original).

At the center of this temporal and political operation is the insistence of the materiality itself of the corpse and the crisis in symbolization and representational thinking that it creates:

En todos estos casos hay un gesto bastante explícito: el de la negativa a representar el cadáver, a volverlo artefacto simbólico, a hacer que el signo lo perpetúe al precio de su ausencia; se trata, al contrario, de poner la materialidad del cadáver en el artefacto, de hacer que el cadáver se presente, se vuelva presencia, [...] que el resto orgánico se vuelva el signo de su propia ausencia (204).

This understanding of decaying matter is also central to "Cadáver" and to what I call "afterdeath."

As a concept, the afterdeath shares with the afterlife the imperative to go beyond what is considered "the end," but it presents a different take on what that journey toward the beyond does and looks like. There is no transcendence in the afterdeath: death itself is neither ritualized nor overcome; instead, its mechanisms—the ways in which it transforms organic matter—carry on alongside and in spite of what is rendered visible through remembrance or invisible through oblivion. Consequently, instead of the body afterliving through narratives of memorialization, it becomes an uncontrollable explosion of materiality: putrid smells, repulsive textures, worm food.

Just as it acknowledges and brings into view the body's perishing, the afterdeath also makes us aware of a time that does not surround and frame the body but locates itself within it, blending in with the sort of movement that occurs as flesh starts to rot, and that is not tied to eventfulness and abstraction but to the vibrations and micro-occurrences of putrefaction. I call this time a *tempo* to highlight the movement that takes place at an organic level and to draw a clear distinction between the time inside the corpse and the temporality outside of it. Temporality works *around* the body by inserting it within the framework of events, narratives, and other matrixes that purport to give it social, political, cultural, and historical meaning. It is what enables the dead to become souls, im-

ages, and ancestors precisely because it allows them to afterlive by ensuring that they remain a part of the collective imaginaries and institutions that dictate what living is and looks like. Tempo, on the other hand, does not work on the body but from within its *restos*, registering the millimetric pace of their decomposition and thus recording the survival of uncontainable bodily matter that escapes signifying matrixes either because it is invisible to them or because it is always mutating and spilling over them. The fact that this bodily matter escapes the confinement of these matrixes, however, does not mean that it does not affect them. In fact, a key characteristic of these remains is that, once they are brought into view, they acquire a transgressive force that allows them to corrode narratives that organize political and social life and that insist on limiting "being with the dead" to acts of commemoration that overlook the networks of implication and care that dead matter renders urgent.

My conceptualization of afterdeath draws from Giorgi's theorization of "paisajes de sobrevida": "una gramática para repartir materias" ("Paisajes" 132) that takes death not as an ending but as the beginning of a process that is not "un 'más allá' de la vida sino una vida-otra, el registro de una vibración, una latencia" (133), and that produces and overlaps "temporalidades que desbordan y desmontan los tiempos del 'sujeto,' de la persona, del yo, y lo enfrentan a los tiempos, las escalas, el peso y la interpelación que viene de eso impropio, no-humano, exterior que, sin embargo, lo constituye" (133). Afterdeath builds on Giorgi's *sobrevida*, expanding the concept to include aesthetic operations that introduce a gaze that looks nonmetaphorically inward (Freites's "mirar pa' dentro"), a time translated into the tempo of decomposition and the multisensory attack of leaky dead matter that leads to what I call, following both Rothberg and Barreto, "networks of implication." These networks build connections based not on empathy or familiarity but on contact, contagion, and unsettling moments of intersection and recognition.

Cadáver

While Barrera Tyszka's *Patria o muerte* alludes to the materiality of sick and dead bodies but purges their decomposing matter, "Cadáver" centers the corpse and records, in excruciating detail, its decomposition:

La bala perdida salió de una Glock, se aloja en la cavidad retroperitoneal, incrustada en el hígado, soltando un chorro de sangre que todavía sigue corriendo. Pedazos de órganos y plasma se mezclan con la mierda que sale del intestino desgarrado, confluyendo en el pozo de dos metros que rodea al cuerpo. [...] La noche va cerrándose con *rigor mortis*, un perro raquítico se acerca para lamer la carne fresca que se esparce por el solar. [...] Ráfagas de viento fresco arrullan el sueño eterno del cadáver, hinchando y coagulando cada palmo de su piel. Aquí en

el trópico nos descomponemos más rápido, las venas empiezan a estallar una por una, la sangre se acumula en constelaciones blancas y violentas descendiendo y estancándose por la fuerza de la gravedad en la parte que se apoya al suelo. [...] Nuestro cadáver experimenta una imparable invasión de microorganismos famélicos, ejércitos de élite invisibles al ojo humano pero no por ello menos agresivos. Bacterias hambrientas se extienden por el campo de batalla, rebuscando entre los glóbulos muertos, devorando el botín. [...] Conforme avanza la madrugada, las larvas van apareciendo. Unidos con lazos que el cielo formó, los gusanos rompen sus huevos, saludan a la noche, recitan el *pulveren revertis* y se ponen a trabajar en el interior del cadáver. Eléctrico contoneo, gusano sobre gusano, armonía pegostosa en la lucha por la supervivencia. (89–92)

It takes Freitas four pages to record the process of decomposition. The ellipses in the quote above stand in for scenes of daily life that appear interspersed between the scenes that register the rotting of bodily matter. As the “pedazos de órganos y plasma se mezclan con la mierda que sale del intestino desgarrado” (89), in the narrative they also mix with “arroz blanco con plátano frito, caraoas refritas con arepa triste, pasta blanda con atún” (89), with the sounds of a soap opera coming from someone’s television, with the salsa music playing at a nearby party, and with “ollas, cazos, bombonas de gas, duchas rápidas con tobos de agua fría” (91). Thus, afterdeath is not that which comes after life: it is part of life itself, not metaphorically but in a material and sensorial way. This life is also not just any life, but the life of the inhabitants of Caracas’s barrio El Nazareno, where Maikel—the man whose body is decomposing—lives with his family.

We meet Maikel in the short story “Barrio bonito,” which appears before “Cadáver” in Freitas’s collection. Maikel works on the set of a popular soap opera building the slums where the episodes take place and offering advice on what poverty looks like. The director often asks him to think of his own poverty when working to make sure that the end result looks realistic enough: “Siempre pasa lo mismo, él intenta hacer el barrio lo más bonito posible y le dicen que demasiado perfecto, que lo ponga decadente y mugriento, que piense en su cerro y se ponga a llorar” (38). Additionally, Maikel helps the writers recreate the *malandros*’ lingo; when the word *matar* bores them, Maikel proposes a phrase he heard at the liquor store: “poner a la gente a mirar pa’ dentro.” This construction—which from that moment on appears several times in the story—emphasizes the materiality of death, which Maikel is in charge of fabricating with glue, cardboard, and paint. “Mirar pa’ dentro”—to look inside, and, more accurately, to look into one’s own insides—inverts the direction of one’s perception so as to bring to light the internal and bodily carnage that death causes and that is invisibilized by the succinctness of *matar*.

The tension between what is fabricated and narrated and the fabrication and narration shown on television constitutes the driving force of the story. The exploitative nature of these media representations becomes unbearable through Maikel’s nonchalant acceptance of his role as “barrio expert” and the changes he experiences in the way he perceives his own life. After being informed of the art director’s needs, he walks around taking mental notes of the misery he sees so he can later reproduce it on the set: “Coño, buena idea para la novela, le voy a contar a los guionistas, lo dejaron mirando pa’ dentro y los sapos se quedaron con su único medio de subsistencia. Debe ser un ejemplo de eso que ellos llaman metáfora” (46). As the unofficial barrio expert, then, he is made to participate in the fabrication of the narrative that turns his own body into the quintessential image of the *pobre*: an object of visual consumption produced and mobilized by the soap opera director and, more broadly, by political discourses created to advance various ideological agendas. Toward the end of the story, however, Maikel’s life and the plot developed for the soap opera intersect, resulting in Maikel dying in the same way Esteban Marciano—his soap opera alter ego—does:

Marcaje. Cámara uno en picado muestra a Maikel Marciano subiendo los escalones de El Carpintero, justo en la frontera con El Nazareno, resoplando, con una bolsa de plátanos que su mujer le pidió que comprara. Cámara dos, plano medio. No se oye ningún grito y una sífrina periquera sale corriendo de detrás de un solar. Corte. Aparece un malandro con los pantalones en los tobillos y una enorme erección morada. Empieza a disparar indiscriminadamente con una pistola que quién sabe si es de utilería. Cámara uno, plano subjetivo, la tipa baja como loca y ve cómo Maikel Marciano cae de bruces agarrándose la barriga. Corte. *Zoom*. Una segunda sangre metaficcional se dispersa sobre la sangre ficcional que llevaba en la camisa. (49–50)

This paragraph collapses the boundaries separating what is represented from its representation: Maikel appears with the last name of the fictional protagonist of the soap opera, his last moments are narrated using cinematographic language, and the fake blood that he had made mixes with his real blood as the latter pours out of the fatal bullet wound in his stomach. The bodily excess—the “sangre metaficcional”—that is incorporated in this description complicates the dynamic of “watching” that the reader/viewer has developed with respect to Maikel. The frames that are put into place for such watching to take place—represented by words such as *corte*, *marcaje*, and *cámara uno*—are unable to contain the blood flowing out of Maikel, and, as a result, a space is created for his bodily matter to saturate the narration, as it does in “Cadáver.”

“Cadáver” makes the reader *mirar pa’ dentro*. Instead of the dead body as self-contained and fixed and thus easily absorbed by a

superficial gaze that feels no obligation to linger on it, the reader's gaze looks *into* the corpse, where the movement of decomposing organic matter dictates the tempo of the narrative. This decomposition is both eventful and slow: the ruthless work of worms, bacteria, and larvae dilates the narrative, which cannot "move on" until each of the steps in the corpse's afterdeath is registered. The period of Maikel's decomposition goes from sunset to sunrise; however, this way of measuring time is translated into the tempo of bacteria that move across the "campo de batalla," larvae greeting the night, and worms engaged in an "eléctrico contoneo." Narratives of time that frame the body are thus displaced by the tempo coming from within the body. The consequence of this temporal change is the simultaneous collapse of the narratives that hold the nation together, ground the authority of the state, and enable processes of mourning and memorialization.

We see this collapse in the quote above, both in the military language used to describe the army of worms that takes over the body and in the phrase "unidos con los lazos que el cielo formó," a line taken from the lyrics of Venezuela's national anthem. By incorporating these elements into the description of the corpse's decomposition, Freites buries the nation deep inside the body, where the matrixes that hold it together—such as an epic history of military achievements and the imagined community that materializes in the singing of the national anthem⁴—lose meaning and referentiality as they are suffocated by the smells of putrefaction that mark the transformation of the body into worm food. Furthermore, in drawing our attention to the worms "recitando el *pulveren revertis*"⁵ and dancing in an "eléctrico contoneo, gusano sobre gusano," the narrative acquires a humorous tone that will last for the rest of the story and that threatens to degrade the solemnity of the liturgical threat and of death itself. In fact, the discovery of the body and its decomposition shocks neither the people of El Nazareno, nor the dead themselves, who engage in a "meet and greet" on their journey to the morgue while the two men driving the "necromóvil" eat hotdogs:

La radio expulsa un discurso presidencial sobre la dignidad humana. En la parte de atrás de la cabina, los cadáveres se saludan, comentan el frío que hace en la cámara, se quejan titiritando de que pueden pillar una pulmonía. Tras las presentaciones de rigor, comienza la sesión de socioterapia. Mucho gusto, mi nombre es Maikel, me alcanzó una bala perdida. [...] Larga hilera de motos fluye, hay humo y ruido por todas partes, la panza del chofer Montoya empieza a rugir salvajemente. Vamos pararnos a comer panita. [...] A las 12 en punto, una furgoneta con tres cadáveres tertuliando en la cabina se desvía ligeramente de la ruta hacia la morgue, deteniéndose frente a un carrito de hamburguesas y perrocalientes, rodeado de peatones que almuerzan con fruición antes de regresar al trabajo. (95)

This description, saturated with commas and short sentences, highlights the fast-paced rhythm of life outside the van; people walk, work, eat, and drink undisturbed by the presence of the morgue van and its morbid load. This not only draws our attention to the everyday nature of violent deaths in a country plagued by homicides and stray bullets, but it also evinces an absolute lack of memorialization; no one sheds a tear or even bothers to stop eating. The scene that results from this lack resonates with the sort of grotesque realism Mikhail Bakhtin reads in the work of François Rabelais. The essential principle of grotesque realism is "degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" (Bakhtin 19). This is achieved through the mobilization of laughter as something that "degrades and materializes" and that frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination from "all pretense of an extratemporal meaning" (Bakhtin 20, 49). Furthermore, the grotesque body is open to the outside world; it "transgresses here its own limits; it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense" (Bakhtin 281).

There are important differences between Rabelais's grotesque realism and the grossness of Freites's cadavers, including the lack of a spirit of regeneration in Freites's work that Bakhtin associates with the carnival spirit present in Rabelais's literary world. However, the role Bakhtin assigns to laughter and the openness of the grotesque body coincide with the humorous tone of "Cadáver" and the repeated allusions to eating, drinking, and bodies that are "open to the world" inasmuch as their organs fall off of dissecting tables and pile up on the ground, frustrating the necrobureaucracy that aims to identify and classify them to allow for the burying and mourning to begin: "Órganos varios ruedan por los suelos de baldosa, olvidados de sus dueños, en una rápida carrera por la supervivencia, intentando escapar como sea de los patólogos que los persiguen y los terminan recogiendo con sus guantes de latex" (102).

The exposed corpses and humorous tone serve to degrade the state's official narrative, represented by the voice of the president. Though brief, the allusions to the president's seemingly endless speeches are not inconsequential. While Chávez was alive, he would spend hours talking to his audience on his television show *Aló Presidente* and in his "cadenas presidenciales." Chávez's death did not put an end to this daily exposure to his voice; the Comandante continues to talk "from the beyond" as recordings of his voice are played during Maduro's own presidential announcements on television and radio and as part of the current government's political propaganda. Amid the murmuring of the dead in "Cadáver," however, the president's voice appears as a disembodied presence whose message goes to waste. In fact, his voice is "expulsada" by the radio, a choice of words that equates it with the kind of bodily secretions that inundate the space of the morgue. As a result, the president's voice does not hover over or contain the dead but mixes in with their decomposing matter, where it becomes nothing more than another piece of worm-infected tissue.

Decomposing bodily matter thus becomes a space for collap-

ing narratives of the nation, of the state, and of mourning and commemoration. We could read this collapse as a form of denunciation of the precarious state of the country's infrastructure and social tissue, and of the increase in daily and fatal acts of violence.⁶ Without dismissing this denunciatory tone (which is certainly present throughout Freites's collection), I would argue that "Cadáver" goes beyond denunciation in order to create what I, following the work of Michael Rothberg and Igor Barreto, call "networks of implication."

Rothberg proposes the category of the "implicated subject" as one that breaks with the binaries victim/perpetrator and innocent/guilty that have often been mobilized to read the social, political, and economic effects produced by structures of power throughout history. Drawing from an understanding of implication that differentiates it from complicity and that underscores "how we are 'folded into' (im-plied in) events that at first seem beyond our agency as individual subjects," Rothberg argues that an implicated subject is "a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victims and perpetrators, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles. Less 'actively' involved than perpetrators, implicated subjects do not fit the mold of the 'passive' bystander, either" (1).

The urgency of the demands marking the historical events Rothberg focuses on ties the collective responsibility that the implicated subject renders visible to the recognition of benefits acquired by occupying privileged positions that cement racist states and unequal societies. This acknowledgement of privileged positions is, without doubt, central to Freites's work, which casts a critical eye on Venezuela's class divisions and illuminates the ways they intersect with and collectively support stale political imaginaries and ongoing forms of social oppression. For "Cadáver," however, I take a more literal approach to Rothberg's understanding of implication, focusing on the "being folded into events"—and, I will add, bodies—that seem beyond our agency and our willingness to care. This "being folded into" is precisely what I would argue is at stake in Barreto's poem "Implication":

Every object is the same thing
inside of something else,
we don't know how many times
(that is a mystery).
There is a bridge inside a bridge,
a door inside a door,
a car inside a car
a house inside a house,
including us
we are others inside themselves.
[...]
To write is to "implicate"
without anything stopping us.
[...]
This chain of things contained

possibly have the "one" as origin:
possibly not, possibly not:
possibly the repetition is infinite
and doesn't end
and is the only meaning of the All. (269–70)

Barreto's poem merits careful analysis and close reading. However, for the purposes of this article, I read it as a theoretical statement regarding writing as a form of implication: as revealing and performing the folding of things, times, spaces, and bodies into other things, times, spaces, and bodies. Writing, then, as creating and rendering visible a form of ontological depth that materializes in the "chain of things contained," in the being always already "others inside themselves." This chain might refer to the different cultural traditions and voices that inevitably permeate every literary work: the debt owed to those who came before and to whom we remain connected through words pregnant with voices that "van y vienen, entran y salen del texto, adelgazando el umbral de distinción entre la literatura y la realidad" and that reflect what Gina Saraceni in her analysis of Barreto's work calls poetry's "capacidad vinculante." Yet, the materiality of Barreto's language, the "thingness" he associates with the act of implication, opens up a possibility for thinking about the mobilization of a literary language that is itself affected by its own *capacidad vinculante*, that does not represent but bears the weight and texture of things folded into one another. In Saraceni's words, a language that becomes "una materia más de deshecho que solo puede hablar desde la reducción de su potencia expresiva porque no alcanza a decir el espesor experiencial de la condición de pobreza."

"Cadáver" is written in that language: a language-*deshecho* that decomposes just like Maikel does, creating in the process networks that implicate textures, smells, and sounds coming from bodies both human and nonhuman. This begins with the gesture of *mirar pa' dentro*: the narration of the corpse's decomposition and the narration of daily life in El Nazareno appear folded into one another, to the point where "el olor a arepa frita se confunde con el tufo que desprende el difunto" (92). This confusion permeates the entire narrative, manifesting itself not only in the repeated jumping from the corpse to the food eaten by the inhabitants of the barrio and back to the corpse, but also in the way human attributes slide *into* the corpse and become part of the bacteria, worms, and vultures that feed on it. Hence, then, the bacteria behaving as "soldados microscópicos, ejércitos de élite invisibles al ojo humano" (90), the vulture, "nuestro viejo amigo," thinking, "Mmmh. Carne fresca, te dije que te esperaba en la bajadita" (92), and the "eléctrico contoneo, gusano sobre gusano" (91) that occurs just as Güilia, a teenager from the *barrio*, is celebrating his birthday in a party where couples "bailan enérgicas recordando cómo en los años 1600, cuando el tirano mandó" (91). This is neither coincidence nor parallelism, neither metaphor nor symbolism, but a form of bodily resonance that magnetizes: the materialization of points or surfaces of contact and

(con)fusion. The structure of the narrative ensures this contact precisely by folding the life inside the corpse and the life outside of it into one another, ultimately leaving no outside that is not, at the same time, an inside (and the corpse's insides).

Just as bodily matter and the matters of daily life appear folded into each other, sounds—the sounds coming from radios and conversations between the living and the “infrasounds” (Campt 7) coming from decomposing corpses and the “idioma secreto de los muertos” (Freites 102)—become entangled and, in the process, further cement networks connecting the vibrating matter that produces them. Infrasound, Tina M. Campt argues, is sound that, “like a hum, resonates in and as vibration. [...] While the ear is the primary organ for perceiving sound, at lower frequencies, infrasound is often only *felt* in the form of vibrations through contact with parts of the body” (7). The embodied modality of infrasound thus emphasizes contact: feeling the sound, and touching through sound. In the story, this happens as Maikel's corpse decomposes—when, as described above, a resonance materializes between worms dancing and reciting liturgical quotes and the national anthem and couples dancing at a party—and when he is picked up by the policemen in charge of taking the body to the morgue. During the journey, the silent conversations between the corpses traveling in the back of the van, the president's speech coming from the radio, the stomach of the driver named Montoya that “empieza a rugir salvajemente” (95), and the “ruido de cornetas y motores” (95) overlap and touch each other, producing, together, the “temblor” felt by the corpses, the drivers, and everyone else stuck in the traffic of the city. Thus, each of the sounds that travel in the atmosphere of the story drags other sounds with it, creating a layered resonance that brings bodies (alive and dead) together in simultaneous vibration.

The atmosphere in the story is thick and humid, overflowing with fluids that, like all liquids, allow for the sounds mentioned above to travel faster. This is partly because the city is a tropical one: “Aquí en el trópico nos descomponemos más rápido” (90). However, the weather is only a minor cause of the humidity; more significant is the role the bodies in the story and the surfaces they interact with play in the creation of it.⁷ Maikel's corpse leaks from the very beginning of the story: “Pedazos de órganos y plasma se mezclan con la mierda que sale del intestino desgarrado, confluyendo en el pozo de dos metros que rodea el cuerpo” (89). The people waiting in the plaza near the morgue to recover their loved ones are described as “personas sudorosas” (97). The corpses, while being sorted, “se despiden con lágrimas amarillas” (99). Inside the morgue, “hay filtraciones hasta en el suelo” (101), and, upon entering, Maikel's wife Yasmely encounters “algo de sangre nueva sobre sangre seca. Todo repartido y desordenado a los lados del trayecto. El olor a humedad se mezcla con el de mugre rancia” (110). Thus, inside and outside the morgue, from dawn to dusk and from day to night, the corpses do not cease to literally *aguar la fiesta*, their leaking matter making it impossible to separate living bodies from dead bodies and to conceive of any body as ever being properly self-contained.

Caught in the (con)fusion of fluids, smells, and sounds, the living inhabitants of El Nazareno appear arranged in networks of implication that extend across “Cadáver” and beyond it. In the story, their bodies are constantly touching the bodies of the dead. When the police arrive on the scene of Maikel's decomposition, they handle the corpse with their own bare hands because “[e]so de las cintas de perímetro, el maletín, los guantes y los tapabocas no es más que un invento de las películas gringas” (93). Then, Montoya, the driver of the van carrying the corpses, is found by his partner “abrazado al cadáver de Maikel Marcano” (97). Lastly, inside the morgue, the workers move awkwardly, “tropezando unos con otros, camillas chocando, piernas sorteando los cadáveres del suelo, botas llenas de sangre fresca sobre sangre seca” (102). This network of linked materialities gives the “nosotros” that repeatedly appears in the story a nonmetaphorical and unironic dimension: when the narrator speaks of “nuestro cadáver” (90), that ownership reveals itself as defined by the act of being in contact with the corpse, touching it and breathing it in.

This material network that constitutes “Cadáver” is folded into a network of accidental and fleeting encounters between the characters that appear in each of the stories in *Barrio bonito*.⁸ The man who kills Maikel and Maikel himself appear in the first story, “Periquera”; the vendor Maikel buys plantains from before he is shot appears in “Cadáver” and in “Barrio bonito”; Esteban Marcano, the protagonist of the soap opera from “Barrio bonito,” also appears in “Cadáver.” These appearances complicate efforts to categorize *Barrio bonito*: Is it a collection of short stories, is it a fragmented novel, or is it both? Left unanswered, these questions underscore a feeling that permeates every story and that is triggered each time a character unexpectedly reappears: the feeling of anxious witnessing, of being uncertain of what role each character might play in which story, of who is inside and who is outside of a narrative, and, ultimately, of who bears responsibility for the leaky and restless dead.

“Everyone,” Freites seems to answer. It is, after all, *nuestro cadáver*.

Un hedor alocado en el tiempo

In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler argues that obituaries function as instruments by which grievability is publicly distributed: “It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition, the means by which a life becomes noteworthy” (34). The absence of obituaries and, more generally, the absence of grievability as part of the structuring of a “hierarchy of grief” (32), leads to dehumanization: to the derealization of a life that, ungrievable, appears as never having existed in the first place.

The threat of dehumanization that comes with ungrievability, particularly in moments of conflict and state violence, has led literature to perform the sort of commemoration and public recognition of loss that obituaries are tasked with. Through stories that bear

witness to and ground the existence of characters who are always themselves *and* someone else (someone nonfictional who was murdered, tortured, or disappeared), poems, short stories, and novels have successfully constructed tombstones for the silences, the unidentified remains, and the dead gone missing, making a space for grief and affirming the right to an afterlife that would prevent the further dehumanization of an already dehumanized life. The ever-growing corpus of literature on the Argentinian disappeared and on the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez is an example of this. So is the work of Barreto, whose collection of poems *El muro de Mandelstam* (2017) includes a number of obituaries that directly address the reader, compelling her to acknowledge that a life was lost, and that it deserves her attention and, perhaps, also her tears.

"Cadáver," I have argued, does not perform this role; there is no cathartic burial of Maikel and no tears, only detached organs falling to the ground and fluids leaking from decomposing corpses. The point of the story is not compassion understood as pity, as altruism, or as identification; it is "com-passion" as Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of it: as "the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. [...] the disturbance of violent relatedness" (xiii). The point is not grief, because grief demands the certainty of a specific recipient, the subjectivation of a relationship, the making of death into a personal affair. The point, instead, is the materialization of a stench that, mad and maddened, clings to the folds of history and draws our attention to the corpses left forgotten there, not so that we feel pity for them, but so that we realize that what we feel or do not feel for them does not matter, for they have already taken up residence inside our nostrils, in the food we eat, and in the sounds we hear. We are always already implicated, "Cadáver" insists, folded into the dead as the dead are folded into us, part of a network, or of what

Jane Bennett calls a "knotted world of vibrant matter, [where] to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself" (13).

This is not to say that grief does not matter; it certainly matters, and the sorrow of Maikel's wife portrayed in the story does not allow us to forget that. However, grief can also limit how far we dare to go in order to take responsibility for the organization of collective life, including death. If we acknowledged and felt, *in our bodies*, the presence of the dead, not as spirits but as matter, what do we owe to them then? Whatever answer we give cannot rely on the ideals of self-contained subjectivities that the modern political order has long produced, or on politicized binaries that, in the context of Venezuela, have transcended the limits of ideology and monopolized understandings of ethics, care, and social responsibility. Decomposing matter and decomposing language demand a radical renewal of political vocabularies and a reorganization of social life that has, as its core, the collectivization of death. They also constitute a radical challenge to the necrobureaucracy of the state, which sustains itself on the belief that, if the dead are kept behind closed doors, they will stay behind closed doors: well behaved, obedient even in death, and amidst the precarious conditions and the disarray of both fictional and real morgues. But, as "Cadáver" shows, the stench always escapes, and no one is safe from it. The concern is not visibility, but the unbearable weight of the invisible dead stuck to us, neither resting nor in peace, and the sense of responsibility for the other that comes with that weight and that cannot be contained by grief or commemoration, guilt or memorialization, nor erased by the power of the state or the indifference of the people. What "Cadáver" ultimately argues for then is an understanding of implication as a precondition and of sociality as the unsettling connections wildly drawn by an *hedor alocado en el tiempo*.

NOTES

¹ Other works include Rodrigo Blanco Calderón's novel *The Night* (2016); "Exhumación," a chapter/short story in Laura Cracco's *El ojo del mandril* (2014); Karina Sainz Borgo's *La hija de la española* (2019), and Igor Barreto's poem "Trascendencia," in the collection *El muro de Mandelstam* (2017).

² The Bolivarian Revolution is a political process championed by Hugo Chávez with the support of the PSUV (the United Socialist Party of Venezuela) after he was elected president in 1999. It developed a foreign policy focused on Latin American economic and social integration, and social and economic programs—called *misiones*—meant to empower and increase the political participation of the poorest and marginalized sectors of the Venezuelan population.

³ Brito's was the first death by hunger strike in Venezuela's history, marking a before and an after in the history of protest in the country. His strikes were connected to the land ownership dispute he had with the Venezuelan government because of the enabling laws enacted by Chávez at the start of his mandate, which created *cartas agrarias* that provided provisional land titles to occupiers interested in invading lands administered by the National Lands Institute. In the case of Brito, the laws allowed a neighboring farm owned by government supporters to invade and seize a large part of his land. For a detailed analysis of the Brito case, see Vásquez Lezama.

⁴ The role the national anthem plays in the conception of the nation as an imagined political community is discussed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*: "No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance" (145).

⁵ The full liturgical quote is: "Memento, homo ... quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris" (Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return). The Catholic Church speaks these words in today's liturgy while ashes are placed on the foreheads of the faithful during mass on Ash Wednesday.

⁶ As of 2016, Caracas was considered one of the three most dangerous and violent cities in the world based on crime and homicide rates, according to

media reports and international and nongovernmental organizations. In 2012 the homicide rate in the capital was 122 per 100,000 inhabitants, over twenty times the global average (see Tremaria).

⁷The understanding of the corpse as leaky appears in Margaret Schwartz's analysis of the ethical commitment that emerges when one encounters dead matter as a place of interconnectedness that shows the limits of a political vocabulary that understands the subject as "self-contained, sovereign, enclosed" (107). It is also mentioned by Douglas J. Davies, who, quoting sociologist Robert Hertz, distinguishes between "two phases of death-identity": The first one dealing with the "'wet' medium of the body" or the corruptible flesh, and the second with the dry medium of the body or the bony remains and ashes (13).

⁸Freites describes *Barrio bonito* as a "libro de cuentos semi-conectados entre ellos. Puede ser una semi-novela si se quiere. Su principal protagonista es la ciudad" (González Olhabé).

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