

## The Wounded Male Body: Cecile Pineda's *Face*

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*"What is this thing, this structure of skin and bone and gristle and muscle, that we are condemned to carry around with us wherever we go? Where does it begin, where does it end? And why does everyone see it rather than see me?"*

*J.M. Coetzee. Foreword to Face (xi)*

In the past twenty years, literature by U.S. Latinos/as has gained an extraordinary public currency and has engendered great interest among teachers and students of American literature in Europe. While questions of identity have always been important in Latino/a literature, some authors have, however, distanced themselves from the interrogation of themes of ethnic belonging and notions of cultural authenticity and have shifted the focus to larger concerns and preoccupations of the human condition. A case in point is Chicana writer Cecile Pineda. Her novel *Face* is a remarkable novel, for—albeit written by a Chicana—the novel does not explicitly address Chicano/a issues, thus departing from other Chicano/a texts which deal with conventional ethnic themes. Authored by a woman, the novel also does not focus on a female protagonist, but rather on the male body, dramatizing the protagonist's painful process of grounding himself as an embodied subject.<sup>1</sup> Questions of identity remain central to Pineda's novel; however, her novel tries to reach out to other communities to forge coalitions capable of addressing common problems.

Born in New York City to a Swiss mother and Mexican father and residing in the San Francisco-Bay Area, Pineda is the author of six internationally acclaimed books. She is the recipient of a Sue Kaufman Prize by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the winner of a Gold Medal by the Commonwealth Club of California. Her 1992 novel *The Love Queen of the Amazon* was selected by *The New York Times* as a notable book of the year. Pineda's novel *Face*, which was originally published in 1985, clearly enriches U.S. Latino/a literature by shifting the focus of the novel to problems which transcend racial and ethnic boundaries within the United States. "Immediately acclaimed as an existential classic for its broader social implications of place and being" (Biggers n.p.), the book was reissued by Wings Press in 2003, carrying a foreword by Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee, who hails the novel an "extraordinary achievement" (2003: xi).

Pineda's *Face* depicts the complex relationship between disembodiment and embodiment for the poor, racially underprivileged, masculine subject. The novel is set in Brazil, in both the poverty zone of the capital and the rural hinterland. It delineates the memories of a man who, due to a terrible accident, has lost his face and thus his humanity. Rendering the difficult struggle to find his way back into society, the novel reveals the complexity of human embodiment. Pineda's novel is allegorical; it could take place in any ethnic community in the Americas. Pineda consciously creates some distance between the reader and the plot, so that "readers are led to experience the reading as a lesson from which they can learn, and perhaps utilize, in their own situation" (Bruce-Novoa 1989: 75). Thematic distance, the use of a third-person authorial narrator, and didactic purpose give Pineda's novel "her characteristic quality of sacred proverb" (75). Apart from offering "an exquisite allegory of the human condition" (Bruce-Novoa 2003: xx), the novel also reveals a profound crisis of masculinity. Most importantly though, Pineda's novel shows the extent to which the human condition is sexed, gendered, and racialized.

In *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narratives*, Peter Brooks has commented upon the importance of the body in the conception of subjectivity: “Our bodies are with us, though we have always had trouble saying exactly how. We are, in various conceptions or metaphors, in our body, or at one with our body, or alienated from it” (1993: 1). In other words, questions about identity are often conceived in bodily terms. Writing the sexed, gendered or racialized body has become instrumental for many U.S. American writers, as the particularized body, which is often the source of subordination and oppression for the characters, is connected to notions of identity. It has, therefore, become a task for many writers to re-write the textuality of the body, reclaiming it through the process of writing. Crucially, in Pineda’s *Face*, lack of personhood is coterminous with the idea of the body’s violation, and the protagonist’s facelessness provokes yet more bodily violence. In the context of U.S. American culture, “the modern notion of personhood or subjectivity, which applied to neither women nor blacks, partly depends upon the subjugation of female and black bodies” (Sielke 2002: 16). The protagonist’s bodily erasure threatens his masculinity, which, in turn, is projected onto the even more vulnerable female body. The narrative thus renders the critical construction of a marginalized masculine identity, giving meaning to a body through language.

In the following analysis, I will show how Pineda’s novel offers insights into the poetics of the flesh, ascribing meaning to a male body, which, because of its wound, has fallen into the state of personal and cultural meaninglessness. Rather than being an exploration of “human nature,” I argue that *Face* is about the dismemberment of an ideal masculine stability that has historically defined human nature in its own image. The protagonist’s project of bringing the monstrous, dismembered male body into the realm of the semiotic and the significant, however, is staged at the expense of the female body. The male protagonist has “lost” his masculinity by losing his face; he therefore must “save face” via the act of rape. The notion of the universal, and so incorporeal person is thus displaced in this novel by the fleshy, monstrous specificity of embodied masculinity.

## 1. The Disembodied Male Self

For centuries the universal of “man” has been presupposed as coexistence with humanness itself, ignoring the sexed specificity of bodies. While discourses of embodiment have defined the female subject in terms of her anatomy as procreator and nurturer, the male subject has become disembodied, achieving selfhood disjoined from the body and linked with the soul. The Cartesian split between the mind and the body divorced the mind from the flesh, and the body was regarded as a soulless, inanimate machine. As a vessel for the soul, the body has come to be seen as an object which is situated elsewhere. According to Francis Barker, “Neither wholly present, nor wholly absent, the body is confined, ignored, excribed from discourse, and yet remains at the edge of visibility, troubling the space from which it has been banished” (1984: 63). As the carnality of the body becomes dissolved, the body is considered “supplementary”; it cannot signify in itself, but “becomes an object *for* discursive practice, present in discourse only across the distance of representation” (64, emphasis in the original). In this context, Dalia Judovitz asks a crucial question: “What then remains of the human, when it has been stripped not only of perception but of its very connection with and embeddedness in the world?” (2001: 96). In other words, what remains of the human being, when it has been stripped of its body? It seems, then, that the body, having been severed from

the mind and having been deprived of the ability to signify in and beyond itself, got “lost” in Cartesian thought. In fact, with the disembodiment of subjectivity, the live body merely denoted one’s fleshly existence but ceased to function as an experiential category. Cartesianism, which has been more influential than any other tradition in defining the concepts of subjectivity and knowledge, renders the body a passive, neutral “carrier or bearer of information” and thus ignores its “specificity and concreteness” on the one hand, and its historicity on the other (Grosz 1994: 9).

As recent scholarship on the body has shown, the human body is not reducible to being merely an object which stands in contrast to the “mind,” and which can then be represented in a variety of ways; rather it is produced by representation and is the result of different historical, cultural and social discourses. Foucault considers the human body a politically inscribed entity, the site of “disciplinary power” which is shaped by histories and practices of control and containment.<sup>2</sup> The relegation of the body to the margins of consciousness in the predominant Western philosophical tradition has encouraged “the process whereby others whose bodies are identified as culturally ‘grotesque’ become more fully body” (Smith 1993: 6-7). According to Sidonie Smith, the universal self was founded on exclusionary practices, positioning at its borders “that which becomes culturally as other, exotic, unruly, irrational, uncivilized, regional, or paradoxically unnatural” (9-10). The normative limits of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and class thereby served to define the boundaries around the universal self. Judith Butler argues that “the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an ‘expulsion’ followed by a ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation” (1990: 133). The notion of the universal, disembodied, “neutral” subject thus depends on essentialized identities of others as the abject, whereby “the body rendered as Other—the body repressed or denied and, then, projected reemerges for this ‘I’ as the view of others as essentially body” (Butler 1987: 133). The ostensibly stable identity of the body is a cultural fabrication whose regulation is controlled and policed through various discourses that normalize certain bodies and render others different and culturally abnormal. The body is thus never a “neutral” body but is always marked by differences, such as race, sex, gender, and class.

In Pineda’s novel, the narrator’s body is clearly defined by sex, age, racial and class background: Helio Cara is a “thirty-six-year-old man of mixed birth” (2003: 23). As a subject marginalized by his racial and class background, Cara therefore does not have access to the privileged status of the universal self. His physical markedness is stressed in the novel by his name Cara, which means face in Portuguese. Because of his unrecognizable face, Cara is considered a societal outcast. He becomes ostracized: he loses his job, he is the target of molestation and violent attacks by his neighbors, and his girlfriend leaves him. Cara’s body can certainly be characterised as culturally grotesque—mutilated and faceless, it has come to define, for Cara, his very “self.” Almost entirely body, Pineda’s protagonist is marginalized by Western, Cartesian ontology as less than rational, less than autonomous, less than worthy of recognition—in short, as less than human. Deeply alienated from his body, he has lost control over his life, and much of the narrative thus focuses on his reclamation of the private, autonomous body from ideological confiscation.

## 2. Helio Cara's Dismemberment

As shown above, the disembodiment of subjectivity has led to a disengagement of consciousness from the body as an experiential entity. *Face* addresses the dismemberment of the lived, experiential male body, recovering the body from its Cartesian reduction to an object and its isolation from consciousness. Reconceptualizing bodily experience through the metaphor of the face, Pineda's text writes the male body and shows how that body signifies in culture. As Dalia Judovitz has pointed out, "The capacity of the body to attain signification through embodiment reflects its provisional assumption of a position within representation, as well as its potential transpositions made available by the material substracts of representation" (2001: 7). The focus on embodiment as a function of representation in this text is already made clear in the epigraph to the novel, which is taken from Merleau-Ponty: "Like a novel, the face is a web of living meanings, an inter-human event, in which the thing and its expression are inextricably joined" (Pineda 2003: vii). This statement locates the text firmly in the phenomenological tradition: meaning is embodied, and in this particular novel, meaning achieves signification in the face. Phenomenology has understood the human body as a cultural-historical matter, viewing the lived body as not distinct from the object body. The self is thereby indivisible from its corporeal capacities, and the being-in-the-world of the subject is intricately bound up with the constitution of the body. In analyzing the relationship between the body and language, Merleau-Ponty states that "for us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions" (1971: 5). The body thus operates as a metaphor for culture that carries within it our history and meanings. It is the locus of both individual and cultural memories, and, as Dennis Patrick Slattery puts it, "our style of inhabiting the world in an embodied way is already an expression of the meaning that the body carries" (2000: 8). By placing the face in the foreground, Pineda firmly inscribes the logic of meaning in the body.

The protagonist suffers a tragic accident: He falls down a slippery cliff, which literally leaves him defaced. When he wakes up in the hospital, Cara cannot remember anything. He has lost his consciousness, and, reminiscent of a baby that needs to acquire a self-image, the protagonist attempts to regain a sense of self by taking a look at himself in the mirror in his hospital room. He cannot find a face in the mirror, however:

In the sudden light, someone stands weaving before him on unsteady legs, something without a nose or mouth, eyes dark with purple splotches, sealed almost shut, particles tattooed onto the skin. (2003: 19)

This scene clearly evokes Lacan's "mirror stage," the constitutive phase in the formation of subjectivity, but the specular image that Cara sees is far from a perfect image of the bodily self. His image is not an ideal figure of bodily integration and unity with which he can identify.<sup>3</sup> Shocked by this sight, the protagonist can only exclaim: "*Not me! Not me!*" (19). Cara's utterance marks the other, speaking the language of the abject. Julia Kristeva has powerfully argued that "proper" subjectivity requires the expulsion of the improper and the unclean. However, the abject is also that which can never be fully eradicated and will also threaten the fictional unity of the subject. As Kristeva explains:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also, abjection itself is a

compromise of judgment and affect, a condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives.  
(1982: 9-10)

The abject is that which is neither wholly inside nor outside of the body but participates in both states. It is therefore the marker of the very boundary of the body with society and, as such, is carefully controlled. Elaborating on the relationship of the notion of the abject and the border of the body, Butler states that “[t]he construction of the “not-me” as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject” (1990: 133). In Cara’s case, the constitution of a coherent body image is not possible, as the bodily boundary between self, the “I,” and the abject, the “not-I,” has become dissolved. Cara’s body image is distorted as an entire body part—the face—is disavowed and refused a legitimate place in the construction of a corporeal identity. This abjection also “testifies to the precarious grasp of the subject on its own identity, an assertion that the subject may slide back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed” (Grosz 1990: 90). Indeed, as a result of his bodily disfigurement, Cara slides back into chaos: He falls again, and this fall signifies a fall into oblivion, divorcing him from all memories and feelings: “He would remember feeling nothing, nothing at all” (2003: 20). Marking his bodily erasure, the absence of a face thus vanquishes any possibility of subjectivity, reducing the protagonist to a pre-natal state of featurelessness.

The protagonist is too poor to afford plastic surgery. Upon leaving the hospital, he is issued a mask to protect his privacy and “spare the feelings of those near him” (34). This mask, however, institutionalizes his face, obliterating any individuality by making him look anonymous. It defies personal recognition, denying the protagonist personal history. When Helio Cara returns to his shack, his neighbors do not recognize him anymore. As the narrator tells:

It perplexes him more and more in the days following. But the most curious thing is meeting them, in the dusty alleys, between the corrugated tin, the tar paper. They begin not to recognize him. At first he thinks it must be the mask. “It’s me, Helio.” He tries to say it: “It’s me. Helio.” But no matter how he says it, they answer less and less. Their grunts of fading recognition give way to silence. He becomes as one invisible. Finally it seems they no longer even see him. (40)

As becomes clear in this passage, neither his name nor his voice offer cues for his identity. It is the face that “keys all inter-human relations” (Johnson 1991: 82). Disposing himself of his rubber mask, Cara then substitutes a white handkerchief for his face, but he still remains invisible to the people around him.

It is not his face, this handkerchief. He knows it. And the ones with whom he has history, they know it, too. But the clerks at the windows, the armies of men standing in the endless lines of the rehabilitation center, none of them know it. For them, he has always been like this. It doesn’t matter at all that he wears the handkerchief. (2003: 43)

The handkerchief provides a hiding space, supposedly offering a protective shield from a society that has abjected him as other. More importantly, however, the handkerchief fulfills the function of masking the outsider within him and protecting him from the stranger that he has become to himself. It creates a distance between himself and his distorted body image, offering a means to deal with his otherness. Masks disrupt the fantasy of a coherent, unitary, stable identity, by replacing clarity with ambiguity and phantasmatic constructions of

wholeness with constructions that are imperfect. According to Napier, masks therefore embody a paradox of appearance, as they “testify to an awareness of the ambiguities of appearance and so a tendency toward paradox characteristics of transitional states. They provide a medium for exploring formal boundaries and a means of investigating the problems that appearances pose in the experience of change” (1986: xxiii). They challenge “dualistic differences between essence and appearance” (Tseñlon 2001: 3). While the mask evokes an idea of authentic identity, the “behind the mask,” it dismantles the illusion of such identity. Cara’s facelessness thus inhabits his bodily self as a ghost, marking an estrangement that renders any stable foundation of his self impossible.

Interestingly enough, the handkerchief the protagonist uses is white, which begs the question as to whether the function of this mask is also to grant the protagonist cultural recognition. As a category, whiteness is constructed as the norm against which non-hegemonic groups are defined as “other.” Traditionally, whiteness and masculinity have been powerful, dominant identity positions that work through a double structure of visibility and invisibility. Although they are by no means the same category of difference, there is an overlap between the (in)visibility of masculinity and the (in)visibility of whiteness because they are highly dependent on each other and function as disembodied normative categories. As Thomas Di Piero has put it, both categories are “overdetermined and articulated in such a way that each becomes more complex by association with the other” (2002: 5). Like whiteness, masculinity “does not appear to be a cultural/historical category at all, thus rendering invisible the privileged position from which (white) men in general are able to articulate their interests to the exclusion of the interests of women, men and women of color, and children” (Hanke 1992: 186). The cultural power of white masculinity can therefore be understood as being primarily dependent on how all other subject positions involved in the construction of identity invisibly stand in for concepts and discourses that appear undifferentiated, non-gendered, non-sexed, and non-raced. Cara’s white handkerchief clearly serves as a prosthesis that is supposed to grant the protagonist the phallic power that he has lost because of disfigurement. Cara’s white mask, however, does not give him any privilege; in fact “it doesn’t matter at all that he wears the white handkerchief” (2003: 43). People still will not treat him as a human being. Cara cannot become culturally visible by wearing a white mask that covers his wounded racialized body. Paradoxically then, it is the visibility of his monstrous body that ensures his cultural invisibility. Rather than give him privilege, the mask makes the protagonist’s facelessness even more pronounced. As a result, like Frankenstein’s monster, Cara becomes “a creature of the night” (80). It is only at darkness that he dares to go out in the streets to look for food in the back alleys of the poor district of Rio de Janeiro:

In the city at sleep, in the deserted alleys, or in the Whale Back, he had come to know them, the creatures that roamed the night, parasites that fed, like himself, on the leavings of the day, of those not afraid to show their faces in the back alleys, or even the streets. (81)

As a novel that evokes the Gothic tradition, *Face* focuses on the technologies of subjectivity, exposing the constructed nature of race, class, and sex/gender. As Judith Halberstam has pointed out, “improperly or inadequately gendered bodies,” that is bodies which “represent the limits of the human” as they present a “monstrous arrangement of skin, flesh, social mores, pleasures, dangers, and wounds,” draw attention to the constructedness of gender simply by demonstrating that gendering can fail (1995: 141). Marking all identities as “stitched, sutured, bloody at the seams and completely beyond the limits and the reaches of an

impotent humanism,” disfigured bodies propose that the categories “male” and “female,” and therefore also sexual difference, are culturally constructed and should be reconfigured (144). Dismembered bodies represent the limits of the human and thus exceed humanness. While Cara’s body is clearly inscribed with a narrative of class conflict and racial subordination, the focus on his monstrous body is a sexed and gendered body. With his mask and dissembling, Cara turns into an image of a violence that cannot be contained any longer.

### 3. Wounded Masculinity

The process of abjection involves that Helio Cara becomes estranged from his masculine self. The constitution of a coherent body image is not a gender-neutral phenomenon, and as Butler states, “the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern *the regulation of identificatory practices* such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed” (1993: 3). Cara’s distorted body image thus also involves a disavowal of his sexuality. Joan Riviere has posited that femininity is a strategy which masks a desire for phallic power with a charade of powerlessness.<sup>4</sup> Cara’s facial mask also turns his masculinity into a masquerade as the protagonist becomes aware of his phallic powerlessness.

Cara’s feelings of emasculation stem from the fact that his face is disfigured; it is “too ugly for living” (2003: 75). Even at the hospital the clerks consider him ugly:

Really ugly. Not unattractive (they said that of women), but ugly. Sickening beyond imagining, so monstrous that were he to approach each of them as they sat there, stand in front of them one by one, and deliberately take off the handkerchief for each one of them to see, they would back away in horror, shield their eyes, cry out perhaps. (76)

Since his body is expelled through classification, he is socially abject, relegated to the status of non-human. The inhumanness of Helio Cara is hinted at by his boss: “‘God!’ The boss turns away. ‘It’s not ...’” (48). This ellipsis, as David E. Johnson interprets it, “marks the absence of any number of possible utterances, but the most horrible, and thus the word all others point toward, would be ‘human’: ‘It’s not human.’ No statement would be more frightening either to say or to hear” (1991: 81). The lack of a face reduces Cara to bestiality, and as “a creature of the night” (80) he turns into a posthuman being. More importantly, however, Cara’s inhumanity also signifies his loss of masculinity, and the crisis of sexuality “will exact a price in female flesh” (Halberstam 1995: 6). Not only his boss turns away from him, but his girlfriend, Lula, also cannot stand to look at him anymore. She tells him:

“Why? Because I can’t stand it,” she blurts. “I don’t want to look at you. I can’t stand to look. I don’t want to be close to you. I want to be far, far away . . . . Please . . . .Don’t ask me. I can’t. Please!” (2003: 68)

Lula becomes afraid of him and she admits that she “can’t make love to a monster” (68). Faceless, Cara is not a man to her anymore. In order to prove his humanity, his masculinity, Cara rapes his girlfriend. While raping her, he notices how disassociated he feels from his body:

His hands and arms become separated from the rest of him. He watches them hit her face, her neck, smashing at her cheekbones, whipping her head from this side to that. The bones crunch under his blows. Again and again. He feels nothing as the small white

teeth shatter against his knuckles. (69)

Helio Cara has indeed become inhuman. He deals with the horrors of his male body by displacing them onto the body of the female. Lula becomes the victim of his inhuman act, and he later wonders whether he had taken his aggression out on her because “women are weak, their flesh softer?” (71). In this most troublesome scene, Pineda shows that the very notions of personhood and subjectivity partly depend on the subjugation of the female body. Cara’s act of sexual violence is triggered by his sense of powerlessness, constituting his attempt at regaining bodily control. Raping a woman constitutes a renegade attack on the female body, which, culturally speaking, is more vulnerable than the male body. During the act of rape, the victim’s body identifies him as sovereign individual and serves as the site for the attempt of violent reassertion of masculinized agency. This act of remasculinization, however, leaves him spiritually empty: “Had he hit her like that because he wanted someone to share in his ugliness? Because the monster he had become wanted company?” (71). Aware of having committed an inhuman act, the protagonist reflects on the victimization of his girlfriend. While the reader is not encouraged to pity the sexual violator at this point in the novel, Pineda’s resolution of the representation of Cara’s attempt at becoming a man does seem crude. The two questions posed after the rape scene, “Did a man’s face point to what he would become? Is he such a man now?” (71), are answered assertively in the text: a man without a face is no human being at all. Humanness, however, is exposed in its sexed character: it means maleness and when a man experiences a deep crisis of masculinity, his only recourse left is his physical power over the female body. Pineda’s depiction of sexual violence thus does not so much ponder a savage, uncontrollable part of human nature as it exposes the power dynamics of patriarchal culture.

As de Lauretis has put it, the subject of violence “is always, by definition, masculine; ‘man’ is by definition the subject of culture and of any social act” (1987: 43). Therefore, as Higgins and Silver argue, violence against Woman is the context for Western identity formation, and rape, in particular, is the metaphor of choice in portraying this establishment of agency. Heterosocial order defines masculinity through a manifestation of physical and social strength. Helio Cara lacks both, as his wound has not only left him “facially impaired” (1991: 63), but also socially stigmatized. Sexual assault therefore results from violence to which the narrator himself has been subjected by a society which denies the marginal, the destitute a face. Perceived as a faceless creature, his environment has emasculated him, and Helio Cara’s violent act is an act of desperation. Pineda therefore shows the tragic irony “by which an oppressive system manages to have its own violence reproduced without itself actively imposing more violence” (Sielke 2002: 117).

#### **4. Remembering the Wounds**

Since the body of Helio Cara is a wounded body that is not considered human anymore, the meaning of his life has to be carefully carved out through a process of remembering the fragmenting experiences of the body. His wound lets the body speak, and the narrative bespeaks the protagonist’s attempt to find a place in his society through his scarred face. As Slattery states, “the body wounded is a very mortal flesh remembered in a particularly unique way” (2000: 6). The wound opens the body up to the world, and “[t]he wounded body is sacred in some deep level of its existence; it is a body specialized and formed by experience;



in its new way of being present to the world, the wounded body gains something not possessed before” (7). Through the remembering of his wound, the protagonist can construct his identity, giving coherence and meaning to a series of experiences.

The book opens with an address of a plastic surgeon given at the “Twenty-fifth Annual Meeting of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 1975” (2003: 3). In this report an omniscient narrator informs the reader of an unrecognizable man who has suffered from a defacing accident and who, as a consequence, has been forced to hide and leave the city. He briefly summarizes the plot of the ensuing narrative and raises the reader’s attention by asking, “You may ask what this man was doing all this time he was in hiding”(3). What follows is the story of Helio Cara’s wound, told in third person, gradually becoming more and more interspersed by long stretches of figural narrative situation, in which the reader gets insight into the man’s bodily perceptions. According to Bruce-Novoa, the structure of the text is that “of the ascetic journey of self-discovery through suffering, degradation, renunciation, and disciplined work” (1989: 76). The movement of the book is clearly circular: Helio Cara’s return to the place of his childhood, which is described in the second part of the novel, triggers his memory and at the same time provides the incentive for telling the story.

At the beginning of the narrative, the reader is confronted with a series of loose incidents in the protagonist’s life. The first chapter of the first part of the novel is an authorial description of a man standing on a cliff overlooking a bay: “The man stands there, not thinking of anything, fighting the stiff wind with each intake of air—the breath fought for, briefly denied, then won” (2003: 7). At this early point in the novel, the protagonist “still has trouble remembering” (10). That his memory is gradually coming back, however, is made clear soon by the repeated use of the word “remember” and the phrase “of late he has been thinking” (21 and 30). The story then slowly begins to take shape “with the recuperation of images by the protagonist coinciding with the accumulation of information by the reader” (Bruce-Novoa 1989: 77). Through the act of recalling the experiences of his body, the protagonist discovers an incident in his childhood that is the true origin of his alienation, and his act of coming to terms with his fragmented past leads him to remember his body’s dismemberment.

The de-composition of Helio Cara’s face provokes an urge to reconstitute his self, centering around the unnamable lack that is the maternal body. The mother is mentioned at the beginning of the novel when the protagonist vaguely remembers receiving a telegram that sent him running to the post office. It was his dying mother’s call for her son that triggered Cara’s fall down the slippery cliffs. This faint memory of his mother’s call from the country is interlaced with the voice of a small boy in the city crying for his mother as he witnesses Cara’s accident. The archetypal figure of the mother is powerfully evoked here to point to Cara’s repressed deeper wound: the loss of his father, and his mother’s subsequent betrayal. As the reader learns later in the text, Cara was five years old when his mother brought home another man. Cara felt betrayed by his mother and started to withdraw until he left for the capital Rio. His alienation from his mother, which surfaces when Cara’s body is wounded, awakens his desire for home and it is small wonder that the protagonist decides to return to his birth place.

The second part of the book then focuses on the reconstruction of his identity in his native village. As the protagonist’s sense of self is threatened by the lack of a face, he has to engage in face-work and body-repair. Cara literally engages in such a process of face-work when he begins to reconstruct his face with the help of a manual of plastic surgery borrowed from a

library. Using self-injected novocaine, he sculpts a new face in front of a mirror. A recognizable face, the protagonist thinks, will enable him to return to Rio and make possible his re-initiation into society:

He would grow a face back, a skin—with time. He would be just like everyone else once more. He would walk in the sunlight again, strut on the patterned pavement of the Capital, his hat coked at a raffish angle, appraising women in their tangas, their breasts bobbling, their bodies glistening with salt water, their looks inviting, appraising his dark body and his face alive with wanting, and the knowledge he could have them. Like anyone. (140)

Cara's sense of empowerment, which his new face gives him, is rendered in sexual terms in this passage, stressing once again the maleness of his body and the vulnerability of the female body. It is his hope that his new face will reinscribe himself within patriarchal culture and that it will also provide passage back to his masculinity. For Cara's sense of personal identity, he needs a face which he can recognize in the mirror. Describing the fact that he has sculpted the face for himself, the protagonist states:

It is a face; it is not particularly striking, certainly not attractive or handsome. It evokes neither origins nor class. It is unremarkable—like anyone else's. But no. Not like anyone. It is his, his alone. He has built it, alone, sewn it stitch by stitch, with the very thin needle and the thread of gossamer. It has not been given casually by birth, but made by him, by the wearer of it. (168)

Unremarkability is an important criterion for the protagonist because it connects his face to his father's face, thus establishing a link with his past. After having begun his facial reconstruction, Cara is forced to remove his handkerchief when he is persecuted by a gunman at night. This incident is the crucial turning point in the novel because it is at this moment that Helio Cara can experience his body. Feeling the freshness of the wind against his face, memory finally comes back to him and the first memory that he can evoke is the unremarkability of his father's face. What follows is a chapter on an early childhood experience of his father, signaling the protagonist's capacity to remember his past. Memory is thus related to bodily presence, and the birth of his new face—albeit an unremarkable one—enables the protagonist to seize bodily agency and become the author of his own story.

## 5. Conclusion

Peter Brooks has argued that “stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative signification” (1993: xii). Narratives in which the body becomes a central occupation often dramatize the ways in which the body becomes a key signifying factor in a text, in other words, how the body comes to embody meaning. In *Face*, Cecile Pineda addresses the living meaningfulness of the male body, rendering the face a prime vehicle of narrative signification. The protagonist remembers his fragmented past by overcoming the disturbances of dismemberment, which have also caused a crisis of his masculinity. Pineda marks her protagonist's body as a tangible insignia of his physical and emotional suffering, and Cara's wounded face becomes the distortion through which he revises its phenomenology as a lived experience. As I have shown, Cara's attempt at gaining control of his body also involves the subjugation of his girlfriend's body. While the novel emphasizes

that this act of violence is the result of the societal violence to which the protagonist is exposed, it also shows how the construction of heterosexual, masculine identity is interrelated with the female body. The novel offers a glimpse into the dismemberment of the male body, showing that the body as a bearer of culture is marked by the multiple intersections of race, sex, gender, and class. Whereas the first part of the novel charts the conditions that have placed the protagonist's identity under erasure, the second half of the book traces the protagonist's process of regaining bodily agency by reconstructing his face. The protagonist needs to narrate his history so that he can find his place of home in his own bodily existence. In writing the history of the subjected and violated ethnic male body, the text thus enables a recuperation of the body. The process of gaining bodily autonomy is not an easy one for the protagonist, but, finally, a reintegration of the meaning of the body is achieved through the articulation of his bodily experiences.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Because of its non-Chicano characters and setting, the novel has received virtually no attention from critics of Chicano literature. For further details on this problem, see Bruce-Novoa "Deconstructing" and David E Johnson "Face Value." Pineda's novel has also been ignored by feminist critics, which could be due to the fact that it does not treat female issues.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, in which he elaborates on the different ways in which the body is "produced" through specific historical practices. See also, Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, in particular 1-6. As Susan Bordo states, for Douglas, "the body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body" (1993: 165).

<sup>3</sup> Lacan posits that the child's recognition of his/her own image in the mirror results in a misrecognition because the mirror reflects a perfect image of the bodily self that is incongruent with the child's underdeveloped motor capacity. Since the mirror image is conceived as more complete than the experienced body, the child constitutes this enjoyable image as his/her ideal ego. Cf. "The Mirror Stage" in *Écrits* 1-7. The coherent body image, as Kristeva stresses, is only achieved through a process of abjection of some aspects of bodily experience. See, *The Powers of Horror*, in particular 1-7.

<sup>4</sup> Riviere's essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" defined "woman" as a construct that depends, for reasons social and political as well as erotic, upon masks and masquerade. Riviere argued that it was impossible to separate masquerade from womanliness. Femininity is always already masquerade.

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