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Love's Sanctuaries: Erotic Spatiality and the Agora in Ernesto Cardenal's *Epigramas*.

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Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan poet-priest known for his support of the Sandinista revolution and his Spartan aesthetic *exteriorismo,* began his literary career writing love poetry. Prior to his religious calling, Cardenal experimented with an erotic lyricism that would continue to inflect both his political and religious verse afterward. Yet this side of Cardenal remains underexamined by literary critics, particularly those interested in the social dimension of his writing. The view, clearly articulated by Yvette Aparicio and others[1], is that the poet's early erotic verse, particularly the 1957 work *Epigramas,* is too beholden to the poet's

[1] Aparicio's online article cites two similar perspectives held by Ariel Dorfman and Santiago Daydí-Tolson. Daydí-Tolson for example, states: "Es evidente que el lector propuesto por el texto está limitado por coordenadas de cultura y clase económica que coinciden con la imagen que Cardenal tenía entonces de su público, como lo confirman el dato biográfico y la intención política de la colección." (21). Ariel Dorfman, in 1974, would impugn the poems for their accessibility to a reactionary, bourgeois audience: "Sin comulgar con su posición política, se puede leer epigramas cómodamente en un sillón mientras la dictadura nicaragüense espera la ocasión (como el terremoto del año 1972) para liquidar al autor de los epigramas" ("Todo el poder" 194). Dorfman would later shift to a more nuanced position ten years later in his close reading of the epigrams published in the collection *Hacia la liberación del lector latinoamericano*. Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984.

bourgeois education, manifesting a reactionary literary subjectivity that, in Aparicio's words, "grates against the inclusiveness, objectivity and openness of his *exteriorismo*'s precepts." This view not only ignores some of the vital socio-critical nuances of Cardenal's early poetry, but also presupposes a rupture between the poet's more subjective poems and his socially committed ones. I will argue that the lyrical poems of Cardenal's early period, particularly the 1957 text *Epigramas,* are socially oriented not merely in terms of their referentiality—the poems unambiguously denounce the Somoza regime numerous times, but also in their critical application of intimate language, and that ultimately the text's focus on intimate relationships is part of a broader examination of the social pathologies created by the Somoza regime.

Epigramas uses erotic discourse not merely as a vehicle for self-expression, but also as a platform for social criticism. Even during his more conservative years, Cardenal was an opponent of the 45 year regime of the Somoza family and not only used his poetry and public status to oppose it, but also participated in the April Conspiracy against the dictatorship in 1954.[2] In *Epigramas,* Cardenal refers to the Somoza regime's corruption by blending this social reality with the intimate, lyrical tone of the love poems as part of a creative strategy of social critique that had been in place in Latin America from the turn of the century. Cardenal's epigrams associate erotic discourse with the creation of what I will call "erotic spaces", purified enclosures of disinterested sentiment which stand in accusatory contrast to both the corruption of Nicaraguan society under Somoza as well as materialist modernity as a whole, which

[2]The April Conspiracy was an attempt against Somoza described by John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman as "a clandestine group of young people from good Conservative families". (65) According to Cardenal, the conspiracy headed by Adolfo Baez Bone and Pablo Leal, involved a "plan muy vasto de acabar con Somoza," in which the conspirators would take control of the Casa Presidencial: "Ibamos a subir a la Casa Presidencial la noche 3 de abril, pero el plan no se llevó a cabo esa noche; al día siguiente fuimos descubiertos y los líderes principales [Leal and Baez Bone] fueron torturados ferozmente" (qtd in Beverley and Zimmerman 40). Cardenal himself at the time was allied with his Conservative Catholic social class, even tenuously supporting the fascist regime of Francisco Franco as holding out hope for the "restitution of Catholic corporatist values" (Henighan 48). In the 1950's, opposition to the regime had become bipartisan, with Conservative Catholics such as Pedro Joaquin Chamorro and Cardenal's cousin Pablo Antonio Cuadra denouncing the dictatorship's corruption on spiritual as well as humanitarian grounds (Foroohar 108).

are linked in the poet's work and which, for brevity's sake, I will refer to as the *agora*.[3] This dialectical strategy was prevalent in Latin America during the aesthetic period known as *modernismo* in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—though by Cardenal's era it had given way to more a more explicit social poetics by writers directly involved in revolutionary activities. In spite of the movement's devotion to art-for-art's sake, elaborate aesthetics, and created forms, poets of modernismo conceived of a social dimension of their work: the purification of language, and through it, society[4]. In modernismo the poet imagines himself as a being set apart. His isolation from the social milieu is, in Theodor Adorno's sense, a condemnation of that society's reifying, alienating nature. Cardenal's early poetry draws on the modernismo of his predecessor Pablo Antonio Cuadra in which the artist is simultaneously distanced from society and beholden to it. Through the artist's self-conscious awareness of his vocation, Cardenal creates purified "erotic spaces" that expose and condemn the corruption of social relations in the agora and the effect of the Somoza regime on private lives.

Eros and Spatiality

Before entering into a discussion of Cardenal's erotic poems and the socially critical role of erotic spaces in them, this question of 'erotic spatiality' must first be theoretically fleshed out. The connection between eroticism and space is, in some ways, intuitive given the association of love

[3] Cardenal's association of Somoza's regime with rapid modernization has a historical context. The Somoza regime (1936-1979), particularly under Anastasio Somoza García (1936-1956) had increased both Nicaragua's modernization and its economic dependence on the United States. Somoza received economic support from the USA following Nicaragua's support of the Allies after World War II and used it to develop an export-based economy, which enriched him and his supporters. (see Walter 90).

[4] Argentine *modernista* poet Leopoldo Lugones, for example, defends the poet's "social work" as the refinement of language: "[H]allar imágenes nuevas y hermosas, expresándolas con claridad y concisión, es enriquecer el idioma, renovándolo a la vez. Los encargados de esta obra, tan honorable, por lo menos, como la de refinar los ganados o administrar la renta pública, puesto que se trata de una función social, son los poetas. El idioma es un bien social, y hasta el elemento más sólido de las nacionalidades" (191-192). Eduardo Urdavinia-Bertrarelli suggests that some of Cardenal's ideas on the poet's role might have come from Lugones given "la importancia del poeta argentino en el mundo literario de lengua española" (33), though no connection has yet been made between the two.

with discrete spaces, the *locus amoenus*, or lover's hideaway, in Western literature. From Courtly love and Renaissance poetry to the Cinematic tradition, erotic love is linked to place and isolation: from the forest of Morrois, to bower of Juliet, to the Island of the Blue Lagoon, to Island of Capri where Pablo Neruda wrote his love songs to Matilde Urrutia. This spatiality is a metaphoric reflection of the paradox of communion and isolation intrinsic to the erotic experience. On the one hand, as Octavio Paz describes, love involves the transformation of the subject's desire for an "erotic object" to a "misteriosa inclinación pasional hacia una sola persona, es decir, transformación del "objeto erótico" en un sujeto libre y único" (*Llama doble* 34), On the other, the lover's discourse is characterized by Roland Barthes as one of "extreme solitude" in which the lover is "isolated from all gregarity, to the backwater of the unreal" (2). Indeed, Janell Watson, in her comparative study of Medievalist Georges Duby and Poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari picks up on this "spatializing" tendency in the discourse of love. Watson notes that ritualized *eros* in the form of courtly love was key in fostering the emergence of "private individuality" by loosening the Medieval taboo against solitude, encouraging courtly lovers to withdraw from society and to engage in a game of furtive intimacy, to hide "behind a veil" (89). Watson suggests that these practices also correlate with the development of private spaces in feudal homes "The rules of courtly love required that the lovers find solitude within the collective private spaces of the feudal manor house. Furthermore, a space of intimacy was created through secrecy, elaborated through a secret language of signs, such as objects or words recognized only by the lovers" (89).

This link between eroticism and spatiality has been relatively unexamined. Key studies of *eros,* literature and social interaction, such as Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World,* Georges Bataille's *Death and Sensuality,* and Octavio Paz's companion works *Un más allá erótico: Sade,* and *La llama doble,* articulate the tension between eroticism and social order, yet the spatializing effect of erotic love is only laterally recognized as a tendency towards erotic isolation and heightened subjectivity. In his treatise on Sade, Paz distinguishes eroticism from

sexuality by the former's "singularity": "La sexualidad es general, el erotismo singular" (*Un más allá* 3). In *La llama doble* the Mexican poet elaborates on this contrast by associating eroticism specifically with the subjective consciousness and the imagination "El erotismo es sexualidad transfigurada, metáfora. El agente que mueve lo mismo al acto erótico que al poético es la imaginación" (*Llama doble* 10). Bataille recognizes the connection with subjectivity and solitude as well, situating *eros* as an element of the "inner life of man," (29), one circumscribed by taboos and haunted by humanity's longing for "continuity" in the face of its discontinuous condition as a mortals incapable of extending themselves into others. Bataille proposes the existence of a binary between eroticism and sanctity, which hinges on the former's association with "solitude", as something which is "outside of ordinary life [...] cut off from the normal communication of emotions" (253). Sanctity "brings us closer to other men," while eroticism "cuts us off from them and leaves us in solitude" (253).

Bataille's binary construction of religion and eros is useful for any discussion of Cardenal's later works, as the Nicaraguan poet's brief retreat into monastic life and subsequent ordination to the priesthood preceded a deeper integration of his collectivist impulses. Nevertheless, Bataille's attribution of erotic solitude to the presence of taboos is needlessly reductive. Certainly, the link between lovers and the *locus amoenus* is partly an element of transgression, yet neither the presence of erotic feeling, nor its spatiality is exclusively due to transgressive circumstances. Erotic spatiality is present in acknowledged, as well as secret love. It is present in language. The yo-tú of love poetry is an exclusive and excluding construction. In *Epigramas* the erotic spaces created by the epigrammatic form isolate the lovers into a communicative exchange that forsakes all others: "Ayer estabas en el estadio/en medio de miles de gentes/y te divisé desde que entré /igual que si hubieras estado sola/en un estadio vacío" (55). Yet, this interchange also exposes the corruption of the surrounding society as individual lives and relationships are touched by the social pathologies of the Somoza regime. The exclusivity of erotic discourse and its paradoxical exposure as art sustain tension between integration and

isolation making the epigrams useful as alternative forms of social criticism. Because it is mediated through the public work of the artist, the dialogic enclosure of love-speech possess an invisible "fourth wall" through which society enters and through which society is exposed. Thus, erotic space doesn't merely isolate from, but also interacts with the surrounding society and it is this latter point which problematizes the critics' argument to the reactionary nature of Cardenal's epigrams.

Lyric Poetry and Society

Ariel Dorfman in his careful close-reading of Cardenal's epigrams in 1984 noted that the tendency of critics, including himself in his discussion of the work a decade earlier, had been to read Cardenal's epigrams as merely a "prelude" containing "promesas de un esplendor por cumplirse" in later works where the poet's revolutionary commitments were made explicit ("Tiempos de amor" 223). Dorfman's attempt to defend the continuity of *Epigramas* in Cardenal's *oeuvre* is part of a larger debate about whether the text can truly be considered "political poetry" on the same level as his later works, since as Yvette Aparicio note, the text is "dominated by love poetry," and the subjective voice of the "I, Poet-lover-sometimes activist," looms over it. Aparicio describes the text's erotic subjectivity as an "elitist" phenomenon, going so far as to argue that the level of the text's political commitment demonstrated is weak, although it does demonstrate what she calls the "poet's struggle to divest him/herself of an elitist I, and adopt a more appropriate voice for a politicized speaker who advocates radical social transformation." Aparicio takes an opposing view to Claire Pailler, who suggests that the love poetry frames a kind of "chanson de geste" against Somoza, who provides its unifying force: "L'unité du livre, indéniable, vient d'ailleurs : de cette constante présence d'une voix, de l'affirmation passionnée d'un être-là, ici et maintenant, au Nicaragua, Somoza *regnante*" (111). Each critic favors one aspect of the text over the other: Pailler as a political work; Aparicio, as less political than it ought to be, implying that erotic subjectivity is inappropriate for articulating collective struggle.

This article sides more with Pailler, noting that Latin American poetry rarely conforms to the either/or model of historic realism/reactionary subjectivity which has been at the center of the confluence of art and politics from both the Frankfurt School Brecht/Lukács debate in the 1920s as well as the critical writings of Hugo Achugar, Enrique Foffani, and Fernando Alegría in Latin America well into the 1990s[5]. The Latin American debates had little connection to those of the Frankfurt School—Latin America's literary production had been integrated into historical processes from as far back as the National Period of the 19th Century. Rosa Sarabia explains, even at its most experimental, the region's literature always "pensó históricamente" (118). Nevertheless, the poetry of the twentieth century, including Cardenal whose *exteriorismo* seems more directly Lukácsian, takes a position quite similar to that of Brecht. The poetry invokes a multiplicity of "objective" and "imaginative" forms through which "one can arouse a sense of outrage at inhuman conditions" (Brecht 83).[6] The Latin American poets' preference for aesthetical experimentation even in the face of historical crisis—see for example the imaginative lyricism of César Vallejo's Spanish Civil War poetry and Pablo Neruda's *Canto General,* is at least partly due to the influence of modernismo and its concept of the poet as the arbiter of beauty, art and emotional sincerity. The view of the poet's vocation that emerges in *Epigramas* coincides with that of Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Cardenal's cousin and along with Rubén Darío, one of the major figures in Nicaraguan poetry during the early 20th century.

According to Greg Dawes, Cuadra's verse contains traces of Darío's "construction" of a "poetic discourse" responding dialectically to a "period

[5] Achúgar describes poetic production in the region during the 20th century as a "regimen bipolar" of two basic trends "the universalist claims of the avant-garde, which minimize the natural and the regional" and "a poetic system that centers its discourse in a local reality underwritten by history, whether national, continental or racial" (655). Foffani and Alegría, using Vallejo as a model, argue against this view, the former drawing on Theodor Adorno's conflation of lyricism and social critique in "On Lyric Poetry and Society", the latter examining "Revolution" as a simultaneously aesthetic and political (Foffani 14 , Alegría 45).

[6] Sarabia, in particular explores this multiplicity of elements in Cardenal's work, describing it as an "encrucijada de varias conformaciones culturales, un híbrido donde dominan una suerte de regionalismo superado; el aporte de la modernidad en su tecnología y el pujar de nuevas estructuras sociales" (119).

of burgeoning industrial capitalism, the exaltation of the scientific method, the displacement of the countryside and the acute displacement of the subject" (45). Dawes continues "The *modernista* poetry of Rubén Darío, as well as that of his successor, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, reveals the complexity of the formation of consciousness during this historical moment" (45). Cuadra's verse recognizes both the existence of a breach between the lyrical subject and the world, as well as the potential of poetry to overcome that divide. Dawes explains: "This rift between the subject and the world, according to the poet, can be rather satisfactorily narrowed via the poetic word. Indeed, for Cuadra, poetry explores the self, writing, and the world that it attempts to apprehend" (52). This "divide" and its overcoming is central to Cardenal's *Epigramas*—indeed, Dawes recognizes that Cardenal's book of epigrams "differ [s] little" from Cuadra's own *Epigramas,* also published in 1957 (48-9). The epigrammist conceives of himself as a consecrated being. His verse constitutes what Julio Ramos, in his discussion of José Martí, terms a "space generated by exclusion" from a reified society, one in which in which the literary subject "would find a voice through the contradiction and critique of rationalization; [a voice] charged with a spiritual value precisely in a disenchanted and mercantilized world" (46). In Theodor Adorno's terms, the lyric poet's "demand" for purity in sentiment and aesthetic "implies a protest against a social situation that every individual perceives as hostile, alien, cold oppressive" (39). Although Cardenal's writings postdate modernismo by several decades, this contrast between pure poet and mercantilized society is a theme in his early poetry, from the purely motivated artist of *Epigramas* to the praying lyrical subject of "Oración a Marilyn Monroe" to the monastic subject of *Gethsemani KY*, in *Epigramas,* more so than these other texts, that dialectical contrast is applied critically towards both exposing and undermining the Somoza regime.

Epigramas: Subjectivity as Social Diagnosis

The poems that would make up the text *Epigramas* were written during the period between Cardenal's return to Nicaragua from Columbia University in 1950 and his brief return to the United States for a two-year

stay at the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1957. The poems are characterised by a ferment of political, erotic, spiritual and aesthetic influences. On the one hand, there was what Paul W. Borgeson calls "los dos intereses principales que tenía en esa época, las muchachas y la política revolucionaria"—the latter leading to his involvement in the April Conspiracy against Somoza García in 1954.[7] On the other hand, Cardenal's experience at Columbia and his discovery of Ezra Pound were formative in his development of both his subsequent aesthetics and philosophy. As Eduardo Urdavinia-Bertrarelli points out "creemos que a Cardenal le impresionó el concepto de Pound sobre la poesía como una ciencia y del poeta como un científico de la palabra que da a conocer objetivamente la realidad histórica que vive" (33). Romantically, the poet also became involved in what Stephen Henighan calls a "tortured courtship" with an "eighteen year old fine arts student named Ileana" (49), who abandoned him for a Somocista diplomat. This ferment emerges in *Epigramas* as three main interwoven themes: the erotic relationship as a linguistic enclosure, the eruption of the agora into that enclosure, and the enclosure's confrontation of the agora through the poet's public role. Claudia, the beloved named in the first three epigrams and whose relationship with the poet occurs as a narrative arc of the first nine[8], is the focal point of these three themes, the point at which they converge.

> Te doy Claudia, estos versos, porque tú eres su dueña.
> Los he escrito sencillos para que tú los entiendas.
> Son para ti solamente, pero si a ti no te interesan,
> un día se divulgarán, tal vez por toda Hispanoamérica.
> Y si al amor que los dictó, tú también lo desprecias,
> Otras soñarán con este amor que no fue para ellas.
> Y tal vez verás, Claudia, que estos poemas,

[7] Jesús Mañú Iragui gives a more detailed explanation of Cardenal's role in the April Conspiracy: "El plan, en el que tomaron parte varios ex-oficiales del ejército, consistía en capturar durante la noche al dictador en su propio palacio, y allí mismo asumir el poder. El papel de Cardenal debía ser vigilar y confirmar el retorno de Somoza a palacio después de asistir a una fiesta en la Embajada norteamericana" (15). Somoza García would eventually be assassinated two years later, in 1956, by poet Rigoberto López Pérez, and succeeded by his son Luis Somoza Debayle.

[8] Dorfman describes the first nine epigrams of the text as "la evolución de un solo amor." ("Tiempos de amor" 231) whose breakdown causes the text's poetic unity to shatter into lyric fragments that reappear in subsequent epigrams "con parecidas fluctuaciones, vaivenes y ajustes del poeta ante la plenitud, el malogramiento, la promesa de algo mejor" (231).

> [Escritos para conquistarte a ti] despiertan
> En otras parejas enamoradas que los lean
> Los besos que en ti no despertó el poeta. (46)

In "Te doy Claudia, estos versos," the lyrical speaker/poet constructs an erotic enclosure through the writing of verses and their presentation. For the first three lines, the poet is not a public figure but rather a lover in communication with his beloved, a state emphasized by repeated indicators of her as the recipient: "Te doy estos versos, tú eres su dueña" Son para ti solamente". Here, Claudia's influence over the poet's verses is a consistent, unbroken circle. She inspires their creation, determines their style of language and is their only intended reader. In Aristotelian terms, Claudia is the art's final as well as formal cause. The erotic space as an enclosure in which the poet's expressive language is summoned by her provocation and return to her after passing though the poet's vocational office. In line three, however, a "fourth wall" in the erotic space is introduced through an enjambed "if-clause." The beloved's rejection of the poems and the poet—which here is prophesized but becomes a reality later in the text—exposes the erotic space to public view, diverting the works to larger territories. Cardenal's term "Hispanoamérica" replaces the intimate communicative space of the relationship into a larger geographical language-space comprised of multitudes existing in the same socio-political reality. The poems, which once travelled from poet to Claudia in order to inspire love in her, now travel outward to inspire the same love in others: both potential future lovers, and couples who will use them to enhance their own erotic relationships. The reason behind Claudia's rejection is examined further on. She is affected, or "infected" by the materialism of the agora.

Claudia thus has two roles in this poem: Firstly, she mediates between the lyrical speaker's "emotions" and the language forms into which he "intones" them in Theodor Adorno's terms. For Adorno, lyric poetry involves a "paradox" of the "subjective, personal element transforming itself into an objective one," bound "to that specific importance which poetry gives to linguistic form" (63). Secondly, because of her rejection of the poet, Claudia is also responsible for the poems' public exposure.

Rendered into aesthetic language form, and absent the beloved as recipient, the erotic enclosure created by the poet is externalized, becoming part of the social discourse connecting all of Hispanoamérica. Interestingly, Cardenal's view of the poet expressed in the first epigram coincides with that of Octavio Paz in "El arco y la lira". The poet's lyrical praxis "abstracts" the couple's erotic enclosure, "consecrating" the communication between them into "un instante…perpetuamente susceptible de repetirse en otro instante, de reengendrarse e iluminar con su luz nuevos instantes, nuevas experiencias" (*El arco* 233). As the result of its "consecration" in poetry, the erotic enclosure exists independent of the relationship itself as something indestructible and exterior to the flow of temporal contingency. The relationship continues to exist *as art* (and as language) even if the relationship itself has broken, indeed *because* the relationship has broken. Claudia has, in a sense, opened the enclosure to exposure in the agora via her rejection, a rejection which later on is revealed to be a product of her bourgeois proclivities. Cardenal builds on this idea in the third epigram "De estos cines, Claudia" which sets up a modernist dichotomy between the erotic enclosure and other social milieus such as the cinema, parties and horse-races. These spaces are associated with the agora, which are implicated in Claudia's rejection.

In this poem, as in subsequent epigrams, the agora is a conflation of activities and persons associated with corruption, classed relationships, economic interest, and antagonism to the poet's emotional sincerity: "De estos cines, Claudia, de estas fiestas, / de estas carreras de caballos, / no quedará nada para la posteridad / sino los versos de Ernesto Cardenal para Claudia (47). Here, the agora creates its own territories of love, in which Claudia and presumably the poet entertain themselves. The agora's social milieus are also metonymically linked to the elite social class to which Claudia and the poet belong. Interestingly, these three milieus are associated with erotic pursuit, but an *eros* circumvented by sublimations and substitutions. In "los cines" love occurs as an on-screen imitation devoid of true sentiment[9], in "las fiestas", love occurs as publically vetted

[9] Compare, for example the false love of Cinematic performance in "Oración a Marilyn Monroe": "Sus romances fueron un beso con los ojos cerrados / que cuando se abren los ojos/se descubre que fue bajo reflectores" (126).

performances of flirtation, while in "horse races" sexual pursuit and marriage is inferred through tropes of pursuit and wager. Additionally, unlike the former two activities, horse races are a form of entertainment exclusive to the upper classes who possess the lucre to make wagers for pleasure, and for whom the breeding of race horses was a form of investment. The love of these milieus is a classed and false love, inseparable from questions of economic interest and social status. Claudia, meanwhile, becomes not only a product of this culture, but its representative. This is the interpretation of Claudia critically undertaken by Canadian poet Dionne Brand in her dialogic work *Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia*. As Henighan explains:

> [Brand's text] interprets even the early epigrams as being less about romantic entanglements than the seductions of the flashy Americanized culture dangled before the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie by the Somoza dictatorship [...] This reading would explain the outsized bitterness that appears in the early epigrams, a bitterness that sometimes seems more proportionate to the anger one expresses at a corrupt social order than to that directed at an inconstant young woman. (63)

Thus the diametric opposition between Claudia and the poet corresponds to an opposition of spaces: the one created by pure sentiment and art, the other by commercial interest shaping personal erotic interchanges. The poet is the sacrificial figure at the heart of his epigrams, one who renounces a mutually beneficial marriage of class for a love founded on emotional sincerity and self-sacrifice. Claudia, meanwhile, clings to the conjugation of love and economics that determines relations in her social class and corrupts the purity of love itself[10].

> Al perderte yo a ti, tú y yo hemos perdido:
> yo porque tú eras lo que yo más amaba
> y tú porque yo era el que te amaba más.
> Pero de nosotros dos tú pierdes más que yo:
> porque yo podré amar a otras como te amaba a ti
> pero a ti no te amarán como te amaba yo (49)

[10] Brand, interestingly, turns this idea on its head suggesting that Capitalism classes all relationships, not merely bourgeois ones: "some Claudias are sold to companies/some Claudias sell to street corners/even debasement has its uptown/even debasement has its hierarchy" (in Henighan 63).

Ella fue vendida
a Kelly & Martínez
Cía Ltda.,

y muchos le enviarán
regalos de plata

Y otros le enviarán
regalos de electroplata,

y su antiguo enamorado
le envía este epigrama. (50)

In "Al perderte", and "Ella fue vendida" the relationship with Claudia settles into this agora/enclosure dualism, leading to the poet's abandonment. "Al perderte" draws its central conceit from a famous verse by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer: "Volverán las oscuras golondrinas", in which the poet's rejection is reconfigured as the beloved's own loss due to the poet's sacred role ("Rima LIII"). "Ella fue vendida" adds an element missing from the Bécquer verse: the influence of the agora in the beloved's rejection. "Al perderte" also echoes Bécquer's poem structurally, manifesting erotic spatiality through chiastic inversion and repetition. In Cardenal's poem, the same nouns, verbs, prepositions and conjunctions bounce back and forth in a perfect discursive enclosure, a square-shaped cell even in its typography. Lines 1 and 4 set up the reality of both lovers in a "nosotros" statement, which lines 2, 3 and 5 and 6, expand upon with a single verse description of each member of the couple's reality. Lines 1-3 establish in what ways each member of the couple's fate is similar, while lines 4-6 establish in what way it differs. The poet and his beloved only have one line in which they are brought together in any kind of union, a union of losses described at the beginning. The second *nosotros* line divides the pair into unique destinies. The poet, the architect of the enclosure, is the source of *eros*; the beloved, rooted in the agora, is the receptor of it. As in the Bécquer poem, the lyrical speaker compensates for his rejection by asserting control over the beloved's future and prophesying her sentimental demise. In Bécquer's case, the love rejected is pure and worshipful, and her loss of it is expressed as an absolute, a condemnation that rings in the final stressed syllable of the simple future "como se adora a Dios ante su altar,

[....] ¡así no te querrán!" (qtd in Picon 192). Cardenal borrows this construction, stripping it of Bécquer's religious implications and emphasizing the dualism between himself and beloved "porque yo podré amar a otras como te amaba a ti / pero a ti no te amarán como te amaba yo." Here, the ringing stressed syllable of Claudia's condemnation is bracketed by the softer sounds he associates with himself: the imperfect "amaba", and the modal that softens his own simple future destiny: "podré amar". Indeed the poet can "love another" because he has the power to create a purified erotic space steeped in authentic feeling, a feeling that manifests in the softness of the language he assigns to himself. Claudia, on the other hand, seeks the colder, harder, eros of the agora, contingent on a bourgeois exchange of material goods for sexual and reproductive favors. This is expressed in "Ella fue vendida a Kelly & Martínez Cía Ltda." The agora only sees love in terms of matrimonial material exchanges, "regalos de plata"; in technological materialism "regalos de electroplata," and in corporate association "Kelly y Martínez Cía Ltda." These are contrasted with the gift of Claudia's "old lover", the epigram written for her from his pure heart. As Claudia leaves the enclosure, she will only find the false loves of the agora. However, as was predicted in the first epigram to Claudia, her rejection of the poet will send the poems outward:

> Me contaban que estabas enamorada de otro
> Y entonces fui a mi cuarto
> Y escribí ese artículo contra el gobierno
> Por el que estoy preso. (49)

In *Epigramas,* there is a transition between Claudia and Somoza García as the metonymic faces of the agora, a transition which creates intentional ambiguities between the two as addressees of the poet.[11] "Me contaban que estabas enamorada de otro," begins this transition by introducing the dictatorship of Somoza as a secondary scope of the poet's attention following the beloved's rejection. The poem also presents an alternative trajectory to the previous epigrams where communication generated from within the erotic enclosure is extended outward. Here something pertaining to the couple enters from outside, via an alternative

[11] See, for example, "Este sera mi venganza", (51) and the single line "Tú no mereces ni siquiera un epigrama" (50).

form of public communication, the dissemination of gossip. The erotic enclosure becomes a kind of shortcut between two points on the continuum of public discourse, gossip—the information given to the poet regarding Claudia's new love affair, and journalism—the article the poet writes against Somoza as a vent for his frustration. The existence of such a "shortcut" between one form of public speech and another lends itself to two basic interpretations: either the poet is a lousy revolutionary, or a brilliant one. The causal link between hearing the news, writing the article and ending up in prison is so disjunctive as to be nearly humorous, making the lyrical speaker comically unsuccessful both as activist and lover. This is Aparicio's interpretation, arguing that it "relegates [the article] to the sphere of jilted love," reducing the political engagement of the poet to erotic grandstanding or revenge. Yet the poet's handcuffing of eroticism and politics in an unexpected cause-and-effect relationship might not be as apolitical as Aparicio proposes. The poem offers a metonymic piece of information expressing something of the reality of public discourse under the Somoza regime[12]. The extreme nature of such a trajectory, from being jealous of his ex-girlfriend to ending up behind bars, is indicative of the chaos of the regime which presses in on it, where the weight of the law falls heavily on any questioning of the regime through established organs of communication. In an interview with Margaret Randall, Cardenal describes the difficulties he faced in publishing his epigrams under the Somoza regime

> I'd been publishing in magazines, but I couldn't publish the political epigrams, for example, even outside Nicaragua under my own name. Because, under Somoza García's dictatorship, press censorship was much worse than under the other Somozas. The other Somozas were forced to let up to some extent. They allowed at least veiled attacks in *La Prensa*. But Somoza García wouldn't even tolerate a joke. During his first year in power he even forced the opposition papers to publish articles in his favor. A paper could be closed down indefinitely for the slightest uncomplimentary allusion to his person. (97)

[12] This type of understated denunciation of Somoza appears elsewhere in the text, notably the epigram "En Costa Rica cantan los carreteros" (60), which buries its criticism of the regime in a poem of praise to Nicaragua's democratic neighbor, whose president can "walk through the streets on foot."

In such a discursive atmosphere the relationship between eros and politics in relation to gossip and journalism, changes. If gossip is primarily a vehicle for transmitting erotic news, and journalism for transmitting political news, when journalism is under strict state controls gossip becomes the only means by which political news can be successfully transmitted. By hiding in the constantly moving molecular system of gossip, political information is able to travel freely and avoid the repressive state apparatus. Political news can hide in the erotic field not only because of its fluidity, which makes repression a matter of practical difficulty, but also, as Aparicio proves even in her own criticism of Cardenal, erotic news is not taken seriously enough to repress. In the case of "me contaban" the real story is not that the poet's girlfriend is in love with someone else, but that the poet is writing from prison for challenging Somoza. Cardenal buries this lede in the second two lines of the epigram, underemphasizing them by addressing his lost love.

Another point Aparicio misses is that both Claudia and Somoza are two halves of the social pathology created by the collision of rapid modernization and caudillo authoritarianism that characterized the Somoza regime. The "feminine" half of gross materialism—represented by Claudia, affects the intimate sphere, supplanting disinterested love for the quasi-prostitution of classed marriage. The "masculine" half, represented by Somoza, combines material avarice with totalitarian violence, infecting the public sphere through terror and corruption. The agora's influence touches every dimension of life, including the intimate sphere and even the subjective thoughts of individuals. The collapse of boundaries between social and personal is characteristic of both these secular epigrams and the religious poems of the same period. In Cardenal's 1961 monastic text *Gethsemani KY,* for example, the poet describes an internal struggle recalling both personal sins and those committed by Somoza:

> Es la hora en que brillan las luces de los burdeles
> y las cantinas. La casa de Caifás está llena de gente.
> Las luces del palacio de Somoza están prendidas.
> Es la hora en que se reúnen los Consejos de Guerra
> y los técnicos en torturas bajan a las prisiones.
> La hora de los policías secretos y de los espías,
>
> cuando los ladrones y los adúlteros rondan las casas

y se ocultan los cadáveres. Un bulto cae al agua. (92)

The poem describes the chaos of thoughts that trouble the poet's mind during the night hour of prayer in the Gethsemani monastery, memories of personal iniquities are strung together alongside images of biblical and social sin. Cardenal makes no distinction between them, threading all sins together as nocturnal activities. Thus, erotic pursuits of the poet's youth, drunken episodes and conversations, nightclubs, dances and movies are brought together with bordellos, war councils, torture chambers and biblical battles. The monks, and the poet himself, oppose this internal cacophony by repeating as an antiphon a verse from the 51st psalm: "Y mi pecado siempre está delante de mí," a psalm commonly attributed to King David's contrition following his seduction of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. The story of David's sin represents an intersection between historical and personal corruption. David's sin is an erotic one, occurring within his own body, but it also involves the misuse of power and the oppression of the weak. The poem thus recognizes that personal and social sins exist on a continuum. As was the case with Claudia, Cardenal's individual iniquities and the social sins of the regime are parts of the same pathology. This collapse is vital to the reading of the "Claudia" epigrams. The irreconcilability between the poet and his beloved is due to the agora's influence on the enclosure. The reification of the Somoza regime touches everything, including the individual.

This thematic conflation of personal and political corruption reemerges throughout the text, sometimes with varying degrees of effectiveness. In one curious epigram, the poet describes a young Adolf Hitler secretly pining for a girl who rejects him for a "Cadet," "y de ahí más tarde la Gestapo, la anexión de Austria, la Guerra Mundial" (60). Unlike "Me contaban que estabas enamorada de otro," this poem's attempt at establishing a continuum between personal and political corruption stretches credibility. Yet, one can infer something of the poet's recognition of his own susceptibility to the agora's corruption. Both Hitler and Claudia's poet-lover exist in a state of alienation and longing, and both are rejected due to the beloved's preference for a marriage of status. Of course,

there is an enormous historical lacuna in Hitler's progression from alienated youth to the author of the Holocaust, yet this lacuna also implies a potential trajectory for the poet's own social alienation. As we saw with the example from *Gethsemani Ky*, Cardenal recognizes his own iniquities on a continuum with those of historical and public figures. He is as afflicted by ambition as Somoza, though his own inclination is towards artistic glory.

(Imitación de Propercio)

Yo no canto a la defensa de Stalingrado
Ni la campaña de Egipto
Ni el desembarco de Sicilia
Ni la cruzada del Rhin del Gral. Eisenhower.

Yo sólo canto a la conquista de una muchacha

Ni con las joyas de la Joyería Morlock
Ni con perfumes de Dreyfus
Ni con orquídeas dentro de su caja de mica
Ni con cadillac

Sino solamente con mis poemas la conquisté
Y ella me prefiere, aunque soy pobre, a todos los
millones de Somoza (52)

The recognition of the poet's own internal susceptibility to corruption is perhaps most clearly articulated in this "imitation of Propertius". The poem is divided into two adversative statements subdivided into anaphoric repetitions. Each statement represents the two species of corruption that reemerge repeatedly in the text, the "masculine" temptation for power and the "feminine" preference for conjugal economic security over love. The anaphora of "Ni" phrases emotionalize the poet's renunciation of both his and his beloved's temptations. The poet's temptation occurs through the extension of his public role to the point where he loses touch with his emotional sincerity, becoming merely a voice in praise of historical events—one wonders if the first line is not a backhanded reference to Pablo Neruda's "Canto de amor a Stalingrado" written in the context of the Chilean poet's renunciation of erotic verse in the name of historical epic. There is an implicit link between the self-aggrandizing acts of "epic poets" too proud to write poems about girls, and

Somoza who, in a later epigram, erects statues to himself and puts his name on everything from the stadium it sits in to the street where its located (59). Whoever attempts to be the "epic" poet of great historical events runs the risk of corrupting language by grasping at personal glory. The poet must remain in the erotic enclosure, speaking to the agora from and through it.

The "beloved" here is presented as an "anti-Claudia", one who rejected those material pleasures that led Claudia into the arms of her *somocista* husband and was "conquered" by the poet's creative expressions of authentic eros. The poet finds his perfect match, and the relationship is sustained by poet and beloved's renunciation of their contingent corruptions, which is invariably a rejection of Somoza himself. Somoza emerges at the end of the poem as a signifier of both species of corruption. He is wealthy, possessing "millions"—described in the following epigram as having "worked twenty years to collect twenty million pesos" (52)—and he is powerful, controlling the masses through brute force. Interestingly, this rejection of artistic glory is not a complete rejection of a public role. The lyrical speaker is able to speak on behalf of the people through his individual sentiment, and to articulate through it his opposition to Somoza and the model of false love he represents.

Thus, the subjectivity which troubles Cardenal's critics to the point of the work being termed "reactionary" is actually a dimension of the poet's social criticism. All individual lives are touched by the social pathologies of the regime, including that of the poet. As William Rowe explains, Cardenal exposes the way in which under Somoza "Politics invades with violence and shame all areas of life" (91). Even at their most "subjectivist", the poems emphasize that Somoza's presence is felt in every dimension of existence. We see this particularly in a pair of more explicitly denunciatory ones later in the text: "Tal vez nos casemos este año" and "No has leído, amor mío".

> Tal vez nos casemos este año
> amor mío y tengamos una casita.
> Tal vez se publique mi libro
> o nos vayamos los dos al extranjero
> Tal vez caiga Somoza, amor mío. (62)

"Tal vez nos casemos" functions by exploiting the socially critical potential of poetic tension. The epigram sets up its erotic enclosure through the use of affective language cues such as the repetition of "amor mío," the use of the subjunctive mood, and the diminutive "casita." The soft buildup in which the couple spins out their hopes for their future, immediately increases the impact of the poem's final verse. Somoza is an ineludible element of the couple's reality. His fall from power is as much a requisite for the couple's happiness as marriage and the purchase of a house. This violent eruption of Somoza into the softness of the intimate enclosure is echoed in the comma that follows his name, creating a pause in the line and breaking the flow of the poem. Somoza's appearance in the final verse also works backwards against the rest of the epigram, underwriting the couple's earlier wishes. The lyrical speaker's desire to publish his work is no longer the wistful desire of a working poet, but rather due to his inability to do so in the repressive atmosphere of the regime. Similarly, the possibility of "going abroad" is now not just because they want to travel together, but also because they may need to go into political exile. Somoza is both "in" the couple's private life, preventing them from extending or expanding their relationship, and in the public sphere, preventing the poet from publishing, thus any real "closure" of the enclosure is impossible.

> ¿No has leído, amor mío, en Novedades:
> CENTINELA DE LA PAZ, GENIO DEL TRABAJO, /
> PALADIN DE LA DEMOCRACIA EN AMÉRICA,
> DEFENSOR DEL CATOLICISMO EN AMERICA,
> EL PROTECTOR DEL PUEBLO,
> EL BENEFACTOR? (64)

"No has leído" is structured similarly to "Tal vez nos casemos", using the framework of an intimate conversation to draw attention to Somoza's invasion of the erotic enclosure. Somoza intrudes upon the conversation in the form of effusive and false epithets printed in *Novedades*, one of the country's opposition papers. As Alfredo Veiravé notes, Cardenal frequently uses newspapers as "information sources" used "para suministrar al lector datos verosímiles propuestos como narraciones de hechos sucedidos" (86). Here, they represent Somoza's inescapable presence in Nicaragua, as the headlines are false appositions of the dictator himself. At the same time, newspapers are also indicators of the fourth wall between agora and

enclosure. Somoza, through the news organs, which members of the public consume in their own homes, attempts to shape both public language and private perception. Newspapers thus provide points of entry or invasion into the intimate sphere by the regime.

The poet responds to these headlines by turning to and addressing his beloved, telling a truth through intimate lyricism that he is prevented from saying anywhere else. Here, as in "me contaban que estabas enamorada de otro," gossip and journalism are made equal to one another. Private conversations from within the erotic enclosure are the only means by which truth can be uttered. Part of the poet's specialized vocation involves retrieving these conversations and using his lyrical skills to "express" these truths with precision. As Urdavinia-Bertrarelli explains, the poet is a scientist who "da a conocer objetivamente la realidad histórica en que vive" (33). By "writing love poetry," truths shared in private conversations and can be pushed back into the agora, to counter its corruption. To contradict Somoza's falsehoods to his beloved in a private conversation is not sufficient; he has to be able to apply these contradictions against the regime on its own terrain of public language, sending them, "por todo Hispanoamérica".

Conclusion

Cardenal's erotic poetry is not, as Yvette Aparicio suggests, a kind of narcissistic blip in a poetic *oeuvre* dedicated to articulating "collective struggle." There is deep awareness in *Epigramas* of the way in which subjective reality both affects and is affected by social pathologies. The individual and the social intersect continuously in these poems. Cardenal demonstrates how the Somoza regime affects the marital motivation of couples, how it invades the private sphere, and how it problematizes the domestic circumstances of individuals. Even the modernist alienation of the poet, which by the 1950's had become something of a trope, is re-inscribed as an effect of the reification of Nicaraguan society under Somocista modernization and not, as the critics note, a holdover from the poet's bourgeois literary education. Indeed, the same multidimensional creativity that made Cardenal's later writings such fine expressions of

aesthetically visionary yet socially committed work was already present and flourishing in these early love poems.

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