Contesting the Narrative of Colombian Violence: Libidinal Economy in Evelio Rosero's "Brides by Night" and *The Armies*

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ABSTRACT

Even though violence in Latin America varies a lot between and within countries, Colombia has long been seen as the epicentre of an intense kind of Latin American violence that appears fundamentally different from everyday antagonism in what is known as the West, the First World, or the Global North. Colombia has been paralysed for half a century by an undeclared civil war between government and anti-government forces, fought first against the backdrop of the Cold War, and then against the United States-led war on drugs. This article will discuss the Colombian writer Evelio Rosero, who challenges the tendency to look to his country for an exceptional Colombian violence. His short story "Brides by Night" and novel *The Armies* step back from the context of the Colombian conflicts to draw attention to gender violence. This article argues that violence against women is a universal concern, and that the way it is represented by Rosero contests narratives that confine violence to Colombia as a place of exception. Using the psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity developed by Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and others, this article discusses how a similar libidinal investment in women and Colombians as *Other* confines both gender demographic and a racial demographic to a similarly precarious position. In a globalising world, it is not only counterintuitive, but unethical to imagine and, in so doing, reinforce patterns of marginalisation and violence. A collective effort to traverse the fantasy of otherness in different art forms and media is crucial.
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Background

Colombia has long been seen as the epicentre of Latin American violence. Colombians began the twentieth century fighting a civil war, the Thousand Days' War, and the country has been engaged in ongoing conflict since the middle of that century. Since 1964, Colombia has been caught in a vortex created by an undeclared civil war between government and anti-government forces, fought first against the backdrop of the Cold War, and then against the United States-led war on drugs. For much of the two decades before 1964, supporters of the Colombian Conservative Party fought supporters of the Colombian Liberal Party in a civil war known as *La Violencia* (*The Violence*). The name testifies to the fact that bloodshed became routine: violence during *La Violencia* was excessive but not necessarily aberrant. In the foreword to *Flight of the Condor: Stories of Violence and War from Colombia,* Hugo Chaparro Valderrama describes a history of violence that is often, and unfairly, peoples' first and only impression of Colombia:

> Many factors have contributed to making violence the cliché with which Colombia tends to be identified, disregarding other dimensions of its reality, among them the displacement of whole towns threatened by war, the terrorist strategy of the mafia, the increasing power of the guerrilla groups that utilize drug trafficking and kidnapping to finance themselves, the ongoing war between left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries, and the role of a State incapable of putting an end to the brutality. (xix-xx)

This quote suggests how nebulous Colombia's conflicts are becoming: drug cartel enforcers are terrorists, while guerrillas are drug traffickers; the cartel's private armies are often indistinguishable from paramilitaries motivated by political agendas, and the paramilitaries are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the Colombian army.

Attesting to these complexities, Elizabeth Lozano writes in her essay "We don't Bear Children to Feed the War: Gendered Violence and Non-Violent Resistance in Colombia" published in *Transformative Communication Studies: Culture, Hierarchy and the Human Condition:*

> Many Colombian observers argue that 'Colombia' is a plurality, *Las Colombias*. We have deep historical divisions in the country, most notably between rural and urban settings, among five distinct geographic regions, and between a large impoverished majority and a wealthy minority. These divisions and fragmentation contribute significantly to social, economic, political, and cultural frictions. They may also help explain why the Colombian civil war is in actuality a plurality of conflicts. As suggested above, the protracted war

> between the army and the insurgency exists side by side a so-called "war on drugs," and these in turn produce a war on civilians, who are caught between drug lords, army, paramilitaries, guerrillas, and opportunistic criminals. (287)

This "war on civilians" occupies the foreground of *The Armies*, a novel by the Colombian writer Evelio Rosero that was originally published in 2007 as Los ejércitos and translated from Spanish to English by Anne McLean in 2008. This article will discuss how Rosero challenges the tendency to look to his country for an exceptional Colombian violence. *The Armies* as well as Rosero's short story "Brides by Night," which was originally published in the collection *Las equinas más largas* and later included in *Flight of the Condor*, step back from the context of the Colombian conflicts to draw attention to gender violence. This article argues that violence against women is a universal concern, and that the way it is represented by Rosero contests narratives that confine violence to Colombia as a place of exception.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of subjectivity developed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan accounts for the presence of many disturbing symptoms that can affect social reality. Specifically, this article will analyse a similar libidinal investment in misogyny and racism that is tied to the subject's investment in women and Colombians as *Other*. For Lacan, the subject enters society by way of a castration that is enacted not physically, but symbolically. Lacan understands castration as "a symbolic act which bears on an imaginary object" (Evans 23). The name that Lacan gives to this imaginary object is the *objet a* or object-cause of desire. The *objet a* is imaginary and does not exist in reality, but its nonexistence so traumatises the subject that he or she endlessly fantasises about where and how to find it. It is for this reason that the Lacanian subject is a subject of desire.

According to Slovenian psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek, fantasy and reality work together to form "a fictional coherence and consistency that appears to fulfil the lack that constitutes social reality" (Cottrel 90). In clinical psychoanalysis, the analyst seeks to understand and affect how a given patient organises his or her enjoyment; that is, how they desire the *objet a* without realising that what they lost in castration never actually existed. In psychoanalytic cultural theory and literary criticism, the critic aims at what Žižek calls "the thick symbolic texture of knowledge, expectations, prejudices, and so on" (*End Times* 338) through which

groups of people organise their enjoyment.

Lacan calls this repository of knowledge the big *Other*, the order of language that organises the subject's being-in-the-world by allowing it to pursue the *objet a*. According to Elizabeth Wright, "The [Lacanian] *Other* is not so much that which determines reality and directs our choices, but a structure that works through a constitutive lack via a promise it cannot fulfil. Hence the *Other* works through a kind of deceit which, if not recognised and capitalised upon, has catastrophic results for self and society" (37-38). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject reframes its constitutive lack as loss by fantasising about another (uncastrated) subject that has (found, stolen) the *objet a*. At the level of society, groups of subjects make a collective libidinal investment in another group of subjects as *Other*. Often, as we shall see, this libidinal investment takes the form of prejudice against, for example, women, migrants, or other cultural groups.

The concept of the Lacanian *Other* has a profound bearing on social reality because of its role in the proliferation of a kind of objective violence theorised by Žižek and others. Objective violence is less or invisible, especially against the spectacle of overwhelming violence such as that associated with the Colombian conflicts. However, objective violence represents the universal in concrete, historical acts of violence, hinting at the often-unconscious complicity of the subject in otherwise sometimes distant conflicts like Colombia's.

The Lacanian *Other* as Victim

Lacan describes "the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the petit a, the separated a from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction" (116). Cottrel emphasises the adverse effects on self and society of the deceit that the *Other* has what the subject is missing:

> The logic of fantasy in relation to lack suggests that, if I am lacking, it is because some other nefarious figure has stolen it, and thus the lack of lack, as it were, becomes an object of possession under capitalism. This rendering is consistent with Žižek's assertion that fantasy leads to all varieties of discrimination: racism, ageism, and homophobia, among others (91).

At stake in the logic of fantasy is what Lacan calls *jouissance*, a term often translated in English as "enjoyment," but which designates an experience that exceeds the notion of enjoyment as the state or process of taking pleasure in

something. *Jouissance* is the excessive enjoyment initially ascribed to the *Other* who appears to possess the *objet a* at the subject's expense. However, Néstor Braunstein complicates things: "Let us be clear: the *jouissance* of the *Other* is not in the *Other* [...] but in the subject himself" (111). The image of an (uncastrated, non-lacking) *Other* is an invention of the (castrated, lacking) subject, which fulfils the lack that traumatises it.

Žižek politicises the subject's libidinal investment in the *Other*, which he calls "jealousy," by bringing all varieties of discrimination together for analysis as ways of organising our enjoyment:

> In jealousy, the subject creates/imagines a paradise (a utopia of full jouissance) from which he is excluded. The same definition applies to what one can call political jealousy, from anti-Semitic fantasies about the excessive enjoyment of the Jews to Christian fundamentalists' fantasies about the weird sexual practices of gays and lesbians. (*End Times* 81, emphasis in original)

As Cottrel notes, imagining the excessive enjoyment of the *Other* "opens the possibility of a violence predicated on destroying the enjoyment we fantasize this *Other* to possess at our expense" (91). The imagined *jouissance* of the *Other* is reified in the patterns of marginalisation and violence seen in the anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe and Australia, for example, or the talk of building a wall between Mexico and the United States.

In "Brides by Night" and *The Armies*, women as *Other* are first victims of objective violence, which "is precisely the violence inherent to [the] normal state of things" (Žižek, *Violence* 2). Gradually, Rosero's female characters become victims of what Žižek calls "directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent" (*Violence* 1). Unlike "Brides by Night," in which the scene of gender violence could be anywhere, violence in *The Armies* is, at least by the end of the novel, related to the Colombian conflicts. However, the trajectory from objective to subjective violence against women in Rosero's two works follows the passage from love to hate, suggesting that both entail a similar libidinal investment in the *Other*.

Implicit in "Brides by Night" and particularly *The Armies* is a critique of the role that Colombians play for Northern audiences and observers as an *Other* confined to a place of exception; that is, to a paradise of exotic/erotic *jouissance* that can seamlessly become the stage for a kind of violence that seems unimaginable in the North. The last section of this article will use the protagonist of *The Armies* as

an example of a subject performing a Lacanian Act by recognising the disastrous consequences of his libidinal investment in the *Other* and divesting himself of his fantasies about women. Furthermore, it will argue that Northern audiences should similarly divest themselves of their fantasies about Colombians to mitigate expectations that adversely affect life in that country.

The Female *Other* in "Brides by Night"

The way fantasy and reality work together to position the *Other* as what Cottrel calls a "nefarious figure" (11) worthy of hate is mirrored in the position of the beloved. Žižek insists that love and hate entail a similar violence; specifically, that "finding oneself in the position of the beloved is [...] violent, traumatic even [because] being loved makes me feel directly the gap between what I am as a determinate being and the unfathomable X in me which causes love" (*Violence* 48). This means that gender violence is in part a result of the production of Others in response to the ambiguous status of the *objet a*. Lacan says, "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the objet petit a—I mutilate you" (268). Men, specifically the male subject of desire, are more likely to commit the kind of violence alluded to by Lacan's reference to mutilation, as Amy Hollywood makes clear when she writes, "Male subjects [...] only relate to the object a, not to woman herself" (156). Rosero's short story "Brides by Night" can be read as an allegory for the trajectory from love to mutilation inherent to the fantasmatic relationship with the *objet a* or unfathomable X that the (male) subject supposes another (female) subject to possess.

In "Brides by Night," one of two identical mannequins describes being delivered to a women's clothing store and installed in a display window decorated like a church. There, two women dress the mannequins in bridal gowns. That night, an old man arrives in a chauffeured limousine: "He enters the shop and tells the saleswomen that he wants to purchase the bridal gowns and *you may as well throw in the mannequins*" (143, emphasis in original). In the backseat of the limousine, the old man's trembling hands reach under the mannequins' gowns: "He unties the bows; he slaps us lightly. His swift, burning slaps make us blush. 'What delectable brides,' he says" (143). The limousine arrives at a mansion in the suburbs of an unspecified city where a group of men await the passenger and his brides. After hours of kissing and caressing the mannequins, the men descend into violence:

> Finally they slap us, they hurl us among them, as if we were dolls, and in the

> course of so much flight our gowns lift up and they peer at us and explore us as if we didn't notice, and they give us champagne to drink and the champagne spills all over our breasts, and they tear off our garments amidst biting and smacking, and they fight over us but then they smile and insult us as if they've abhorred us from the moment they were born, and they rip us to pieces with their kicking; they rend us open until we break, such that our arms and legs and heads end up in disarray, in a heap. (143-44)

"Brides by Night" illustrates the love that aims at the *objet a* from the perspective of a subject caught in the crossfire.

"Brides by Night" differs significantly from other stories in *Flight of the Condor*. Chaparro Valderrama describes one group of stories in which "we find variations of the same theme: the political violence that engulfed Colombia from the 1940s to the mid-1960s" (xviii). Other stories focus on the violence that continued despite the official end of *La Violencia*. Finally, there are stories that are less obviously political: "These plots elude literary nationalism: aside from the local colour that identifies them as stories that only could have been written in Colombia, they are able to engage a readership outside of the borders of the country through the elemental fears they reveal" (xxi). Among stories where victims and victimisers are identified by colour or creed, "Brides by Night" is barely three pages long and makes no mention of the Colombian conflicts or any state of war. It is a story of violence from Colombia, but not a story of Colombian violence. The image of heaped mannequin limbs that ends "Brides by Night" recalls the butchered bodies that abound elsewhere in *Flight of the Condor*, but engages something at once specific to the Colombian conflict and universal about it.

Lozano writes, "Like most contemporary wars, our Colombian armed conflicts are strongly inflected by issues of sex and gender" (287). Referring to an Amnesty International report, Lozano writes, "The overwhelming majority of casualties in war are men—killed by men—while women are raped, physically and otherwise—by men" (288). She calls gender violence invisible: "By 'invisible' violence I am referring to acts of daily aggression which pass unnoticed in a given context, not exceptional enough to register in our awareness" (289). Lacan describes fantasy culminating in "the image of a completeness closed upon itself" (116). To the extent that violence against women is universal, gender violence as it is represented in "Brides by Night" outside the context of the Colombian conflicts punctures the image of an essentially Colombian violence closed upon and feeding off itself. However, neither gender violence nor Colombian violence is inevitable. Hollywood writes that "only when the fantasmatic nature

of relationships between the sexes is recognised, does love of the Other become possible" (156-57). Rosero's call to traverse the male fantasy of femininity on account of which women become *Other* is redoubled in *The Armies*, which calls on the North to traverse the fantasy on account of which Colombians become Other, subject to Colombian violence imagined as its own, ontologically distinct category.

The Female *Other* in *The Armies*

The Armies tells the story of a retired school teacher called Ismael Pasos. Affectionately known as profesor, Ismael taught many of the people in San José, the small rural town where *The Armies* is set. In an interview with Maya Jaggi for the *Independent*, Rosero says that San José "can stand for any village in Colombia. I took everyday life, idyllic as it seemed, and sabotaged it as violence came in" ("Witness" par. 5). The obvious signals of violence appear in San José over a quarter of the way through *The Armies*: a gunshot, then machine gun bursts. Gradually, soldiers begin to appear, moving like shadows through the town. It is unclear whether they are paramilitaries, guerrillas, the army, or some combination of the three. By the end of *The Armies*, many in San José have been killed, kidnapped, or have fled. The fifty-odd pages that precede the first gunshot, however, illustrate an objective violence that is experienced as subjective in the final, harrowing scene of *The Armies*. It is violence against Ismael's neighbour Geraldina that begins when she finds herself in the position of the beloved.

The Armies opens with Ismael and his wife, Otilía, tending to their garden. The idyll that sets the beginning of the book—an Edenic garden—is filled with *jouissance* before it is transformed by artillery fire, or as an adumbration of this violence. From the top of a ladder propped against the wall, under the guise of picking oranges, Ismael watches Geraldina sunbathing naked next door. Ismael notices Geraldina's son, Eusebito, watching the family's maid, Gracielita. From beneath a table, Eusebito steals glances at Gracielita as her skirt lifts with the effort of washing dishes. In Eusebito's actions, Ismael recognises "the other essential game, the paroxysm that made him identical to me, despite his youth" (5). Ismael imagines Eusebito's eyes moving from object to object, observing "all of [Gracielita's] face in profile, her eyes as if absolved, steeped in who knows what dreams, then the calves, the round knees, the whole legs, just the thighs, and if he's lucky, beyond, up into the depths" (5). What Ismael's vicarious gaze elides in its search for the *objet a* is Gracielita herself. The male desire burdens Gracielita

with unfathomable depth; that is, her body is a space for the male fantasy of an ontologically distinct, unfathomable femininity.

Hollywood identifies "the illusion of terrifying female power that in part fuels men's desire to dominate and oppress women" (156). She writes that "woman has a supplementary *jouissance* that cannot be contained within the phallic realm and that, by virtue of its existence, reveals the partial and fragmentary character of the realm" (161). The phallic realm is the big Other; the phallus is the privileged object that the subject imagines losing during what Lacan calls a "primal separation" or "self-mutilation" tantamount to castration (83). Hollywood writes that "feminine *jouissance* is frightening and threatening to male subjectivity—or, to be more exact, to the male ego created by the coalescing of [*objet a*] and [the big *Other*]" (156). That is, women, ostensibly always already castrated, represent the Real of man's desire: that he lacks and has lost nothing. By way of avoiding the Real of desire, the male fantasy establishes women as the non-lacking Other and in doing so exposes them to violence, trauma, and catastrophe.

Evincing the illusion of frightening femininity, Ismael describes looking at Geraldina and "suffering at the vision of two thighs open showing infinity inside" (30). We know that Ismael organises his enjoyment around women, specifically Geraldina. Regarding Geraldina, Ismael says "I ask nothing more of life than this possibility, to see this woman without her knowing that I'm looking at her; to see this woman when she knows I'm looking, but to see her: my only explanation for staying alive" (28). Ismael's voyeurism can be read as his symptom to the extent that, according to Žižek, the "symptom is the way we—the subjects—'avoid madness,' the way we 'choose something (the symptom-formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic order)'" (*Sublime Object* 81). Ismael chooses the life of desire over death at the expense of the Other. Like the mannequins in "Brides by Night," at the same time as Geraldina is venerated, she is made vulnerable to aggression. Just as the mannequins are taken down from the pedestal where they are behind glass and torn limb from limb, Geraldina is mutilated in the terrifying culmination of what began in "Brides by Night."

The Armies ends where it began, in Ismael's garden, only now Ismael is free to cross into Geraldina's garden: the wall between them has been obliterated by a stray mortar shell. After a series of skirmishes during which soldiers move along the streets and through the houses of San José killing indiscriminately, the guns

fall silent. Suspecting that everyone else has fled or been killed, Ismael leaves the shelter of his house to find Geraldina and "what was absurd, find her alive" (212). Ismael pauses at Geraldina's living room window, where, he says, "I caught a glimpse of the profile of several men, all standing still, contemplating something with exaggerated attention, more than absorbed: gathered like parishioners in church at the hour of Elevation" (213). Ismael moves towards the group, which resembles the group of men waiting in the suburban mansion for the mannequins in "Brides by Night." He says, "Forgetting myself entirely, searching only for Geraldina, I found myself advancing towards them" (213). Soon, Ismael is close enough to see what has drawn their attention:

> Between the arms of a wicker rocking chair was—fully open, exhausted—Geraldina naked, her head lolling from side to side, and on top of her one of the men embracing her, one of the men delving into Geraldina, one of the men was raping her: it still took me a while to realise it was Geraldina's corpse, it was her corpse, exposed before the men who waited. (213-14)

At this moment, voyeurism and violence merge and the distance between the soldiers and Ismael is dissolved. The discovery compels Ismael to renounce his symptom-formation and sever his links with reality.

Following his discovery of Geraldina, Ismael occupies an impossible third-party perspective, from which he and the rapists are indistinguishable, possessed by the *objet a* and propelled by it to exceed all limits. Helpless to intervene, Ismael says "I listen to myself demean myself," and that "I see myself lying in wait for Geraldina's naked corpse, the nakedness of the corpse that still glows" (214). Ismael wonders whether he, like the other men, is waiting his turn to rape Geraldina: "I have just asked myself that, before the corpse, while hearing her sound of a manipulated, inanimate doll" (214). Ismael's sudden disembodied introspection, his moment out of time, registers the shift from desire to drive: a perspectival shift that transforms the very thing the voyeur wishes to see:

> [T]he Thing is first constructed as an inaccessible X around which my desire circulates, as the blind spot I want to see but simultaneously dread and avoid seeing, too strong for my eyes; then, in the shift towards drive, I (the subject) "make myself seen" as the Thing—in a reflexive turn, I see *myself* as It, the traumatic object-Thing I didn't want to see. (*Ticklish Subject* 300-1, emphasis in original)

For Ismael, the traumatic object-Thing in the rape scene is not Geraldina's corpse. Instead, it is Ismael as he sees himself under the spell of *jouissance*.

The mortar shell that explodes in Ismael's garden destroys the wall against which he had previously leaned to ogle Geraldina and shakes the foundations upon which his utopian fantasy rests. Before the obvious signals of violence interrupt it, Ismael establishes the parameters of his utopia: he asks nothing more than to see Geraldina. Žižek writes, "I am able to exert control over myself only in so far as some fundamental obstacle makes it impossible for me to 'do anything I want" (*Ticklish Subject* 390). In *The Armies*, the wall between Ismael's house and Geraldina's represents an obstacle that makes it possible for Ismael to assume the position of a distant observer.

Žižek describes "a double movement of de-realisation that characterizes utopian fantasies":

> [T]he scene presented is a fantasy (even if it "really happened" [...], what makes it into a fantasy is the libidinal investment that determines its meaning); we (the participants) de-realize ourselves, reducing ourselves to a pure de-substantialized gaze ignored by the objects of the gaze—as if we are not a part of the reality we observe [...], but rather a spectral presence unseen by living beings—we are reduced to spectral entities observing "the world without us." (*End Times* 82)

Ismael gazes at Geraldina, to paraphrase Žižek, as an external observer of the paradise barred to him (82). When Ismael is no longer barred from the paradise of erotic *jouissance*, he realises himself. As though awakening from a hypnotic trance, one of Geraldina's rapists tells the others to stop. Ismael says, "The three or four left do not respond, they are each an island, a drooling profile: I wonder if it is not my own profile, worse than looking in the mirror" (214). Ismael is no longer a spectral entity but an excessive presence. The erasure of Ismael's fantasmatic frame reveals that his is the true face of *jouissance* and confirms Braunstein's assertion, which is worth repeating in full, that "the *jouissance* of the Other is not in the Other (who anyway does not exist) but in the subject himself" (111).

The last paragraph of *The Armies* finds Ismael surrounded by Geraldina's rapists. At gunpoint, they demand to know Ismael's name. The last sentence reads, "I shall tell them I have no name and I shall laugh again; they will think I am mocking them and they will shoot: this is how it will be" (215). The shift towards drive accounts for the fact that we do not hear Ismael tell the soldiers his name, though his silence almost certainly condemns him to death. As opposed to desire, Žižek writes that "when drive subjectivizes itself, when the subject sees itself as the dreadful Thing, this other subjectivization is [...] signalled by the onset of silence" (*Ticklish Subject*

305, emphasis in original). When the soldiers ask Ismael his name, he says, "I shall tell them I am Jesus Christ, I shall tell them I am Simón Bolívar, I shall tell them I am called Nobody" (215). Drive dissolves all identities; having seen the essential game of desire played out in full, the man called Ismael, supported in a symbolic universe by a voyeuristic symptom-formation, dies. Literally, "Nobody" remains: the subject chooses Nothingness instead of something. However, it is possible to discern in Ismael's choice, his suicidal gesture, the outline of an ethical edifice that applies more generally to the way we as subjects organise our enjoyment.

The Colombian *Other* as Victim

The Armies unravels Ismael's fantasmatic relationship of love for Geraldina as the Other. Ismael navigates the battlefield that San José becomes as though impervious to gunfire and grenades, captivated by Geraldina's feminine *jouissance*. Renata Salecl writes, "When Lacan speaks about feminine *jouissance* he emphasises the impossibility of defining what it is" (70). Feminine *jouissance* is impossible to define because it does not exist as anything other than the way in which Ismael binds his enjoyment to something instead of letting it slip into nothing. Geraldina's rape reveals the consequences for women of such a symptom-formation. Moreover, Ismael's decision to tell the soldiers holding him at gunpoint and demanding he identify himself that "I am called Nobody" (215) conforms to Lacan and Žižek's definition of an authentic Act. It is "a non-response, which short-circuits the dimensions of form and content, meaning and being" (Kunkle 3). Kunkle writes, "Every ethical edifice [...] is grounded in an abyssal Act. [...] Real change must coincide with our acceptance that there is no Other" (5). The final section of this article will discuss the consequences for the South of a certain symptom-formation that is revealed in Rosero's sustained critique of exoticism. In doing so, it advocates a change in the representation of Colombian violence that must coincide with Northern audiences' acceptance that there is no Colombian *Other*.

Žižek and Salecl have repeatedly discussed the different modes of modern racism in terms of the decade of interstate conflict and ethno-religious tension that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Specifically, they describe a Balkan *Other* that, like the Colombian *Other*, is excluded from a community of subjects because of, on the one hand, its propensity for exceptional violence, and on the other, its possession of an exotic authenticity that is strictly correlative with the *objet a*. The first mode of racism is subjective. Žižek calls it "the old-fashioned unabashed rejection of the (despotic, barbarian, orthodox, Muslim,

corrupt, Oriental) Balkan Other on behalf of authentic (Western, civilized, democratic, Christian) values" (*Fragile Absolute* 4-5). While the second and third modes of racism are less obvious, they are equally invested in the production of Others.

The second mode of racism involves a less obvious libidinal investment: a distant sympathy for the suffering of the *Other*. Although it appears sympathetic to the victims of violence in places like the Balkans and Colombia, it relies on and reinforces a neat divide between ordinary and extraordinary violence, good and evil. Žižek describes the position of some in Western Europe who were horrified but helpless spectators of the impossible situation in the Balkans:

> Then there is the "reflexive" Politically Correct racism: the multiculturalist perception of the Balkans as the terrain of ethnic horrors and intolerance, of primitive irrational warring passions, to be opposed to the post-nation-state liberal-democratic process of solving conflicts through rational negotiation, compromise and mutual respect. Here racism is, as it were, elevated to the second power: it is attributed to the Other, while we occupy the convenient position of a neutral benevolent observer, righteously dismayed at the horrors going on 'down there.' (*Fragile Absolute* 4-5)

The end of *The Armies* reveals what is at stake in the ability of the subject to attribute *jouissance* to, in Ismael's case, the female *Other*. However, in spite of the universal forms of violence experienced by women, the Northern subject secures its fantasy of peace, tolerance, and rationality by attributing *jouissance* to the Southern (Balkan, Colombian) *Other* in its capacity as exceptional victim and victimiser. Salecl writes, "The pain of the victim constitutes the ontological proof of the existence of the Other for the racist" (122). Insofar as the *jouissance* of the Other is our own, the suffering of Others in places of exception bears the traces of our *jouissance*.

Just as the voyeuristic gaze elides the person being looked at in its quest for the *objet a*, the final form of racism that Žižek describes ignores a group of people in favour of an unfathomable property invisible to them. Žižek writes, "Finally, there is the reverse racism which celebrates the exotic authenticity of the Balkan *Other*, as in the notion of Serbs who, in contrast to inhibited, anaemic Western Europeans, still exhibit a prodigious lust for life" (*Fragile Absolute* 5). One can identify a fantasmatic frame within which the Colombian Other appears for a particular Northern audience to exhibit a prodigious lust for life, inhabiting a place of exception where magic and violence vie for the position of master

signifier.

The first quarter of *The Armies* is full of allusions to the flora and fauna of Macondo, the setting of Gabriel García Márquez's magical realist novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In the following three quarters of the novel, however, San José succumbs to the reality of indiscriminate violence that is well documented in Colombian history. The distinction between realism and fantastic literature awaits any novel that leaves Latin America, but Rosero writes, "[*The Armies*] is no nightmare, it is reality itself knocking on your door with its knuckles, three hard knocks, knocks with the sound bones make—death" (n. pag.). What follows will abstract Ismael's renunciation of the *objet a* to show that, concurrent with his Act, *The Armies* points to the possibility and necessity of short-circuiting the pendulum swing from the utopian fantasy of love and the exotic to the nightmare of hate and extreme violence.

From the top of his garden wall, Ismael ogles Geraldina. Before this, however, the reader is treated to an explosion of "local colour" that involves them in a type of voyeurism. *The Armies begins*:

> And this is how it was: at the Brazilian's house the macaws laughed all the time; I heard them from the top of my garden wall, when I was up the ladder, picking my oranges, tossing them into the big palm-leaf basket; now and again I sensed the cats behind me watching from high up in the almond trees. [...] Further back, my wife fed the fish in the pond. (1)

The reader's attention is drawn to a series of objects familiar to the Northern audience that embraced *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and continues to hope for, if not expect, more magical realism from Colombians like Rosero. The residents of Macondo and Arab merchants swap macaws for glass beads, clocks, bells, and other "knickknacks" (Márquez 39-40, 47, 57, 75). The palm-leaf basket is metonymic of exoticism as Sarah Pollack understands it: an object "offering both the pleasures of the savage and the superiority of the civilized" (362). The founder of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía, lines the streets of the town with almond trees like those from which the cats peer at Ismael. Arcadio Buendía's wife, Úrsula Iguarán, makes candied fish to supplement the family's income just as Otilía tends to the fish in the pond. The beginning of *The Armies* suggests that San José is a place, like Macondo, where anything can happen.

An outspoken critic of magical realism, Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet describes "García Márquez's magical and invented town of Macondo where levitation

mingled with eternal rain and the eccentric, the over folkloric, was the only way to grasp a world where true civilization would never be established" (69). One form the North's racism takes is a love that is reached by what Žižek calls "the elevation of the Other as leading a life that is more harmonious, organic, less competitive, and aiming at cooperation rather than domination" (*Violence* 126). At the beginning of *The Armies*, the lives of Ismael, Otilía, Geraldina, Eusebito, and Gracielita are elevated in such a way that they contrast favourably with life in the (inhibited, anaemic) North. Ismael and Otilía live in harmony with nature, tending to their orange trees and goldfish under the watchful eyes of the cats. When a pain in Ismael's knee becomes unbearable, he visits a folk healer high in the mountains and is cured. Ismael and Geraldina are sexually uninhibited, and Geraldina is unperturbed by Ismael's voyeurism.

Cottrel writes that "while fantasy might not provide us with the object itself, it can provide something of equal consequence: the scene of attaining the privileged object that renders attainment as a possibility" (90). Read in this way, the beginning of *The Armies* is fantasy par excellence. The organic unity of exotic cultures, their spiritual authenticity and lack of sexual inhibition, implies a non-lacking *Other* with access to some ineffable object that the North lost in the so-called civilising process. Importantly, however, the same object threatens to transform a utopia of *jouissance* into a dystopia. From a safe distance, the North watches the Southern *Other's* (inauthentic and only ever temporary) civilization collapse, as it does in *The Armies*. In turn, the chaos "constitutes the ontological proof of the existence of the Other for the racist" (Salecl 122). The first page of *The Armies* establishes two voyeuristic relationships: Ismael's and the reader's. Before the radical movement of realisation that destroys Ismael's utopian fantasy, Geraldina is exploited as the object of his desire. Similarly, the rustics of San José are exploited as the objects on which Northern readers project the fantasies that support their desire.

The explosion that destroys the wall between Ismael and Geraldina also irrevocably alters the reader's fantasmatic frame. With the barrier to the realm of feminine *jouissance* removed, readers return to the parodic slice of provincial Colombia that begins the novel, approaching the familiar objects from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* a second time. Ismael stumbles outside to see the extent of the damage: "At the back, the wall that separates my property from [Geraldina's] smokes where it has been blasted in half: there is a breach the size of two men, there are pieces of the ladder scattered all over" (104). Ismael says, "I found the fountain—of polished sandstone—blown apart; on the ground shiny with water the orange

fish still quiver" (104). He then discovers that "half the trunk of one of the orange trees, split lengthwise, still trembles and vibrates like a harp, coming apart inch by inch; there are piles of smashed oranges, sprinkled like a strange multitude of yellow drops all over the garden" (104). Ismael makes his way through thickening smoke toward the breach in the wall:

> The smoke is coming from another of the trees, burnt and split from the top; further down, on the very white pulp of the trunk stripped of its bark, I see a bloodstain, and, on top of the roots, pierced with splinters, the corpse of one of the cats. [...] I enter my neighbour's garden, which has not suffered as much damage as mine—except for the absence of the macaws, their laughter, their strolls, although I soon find them, stiff, floating in the pool. (106)

No aspect of Rosero's Colombian idyll is spared the ravishes of Colombian violence, the point being that Northern audiences produce an *Other* for whom such extremes are ordinary reality.

The reduction of the contents of the garden to a smear of blood and pulp coating rubble and splintered wood can be read as an expression of the hysterical reaction of the subject to the ambiguity of the *objet a*. Clinical psychoanalysis establishes a relationship of desire between analyst and patient. It leads the patient to confront that X on account of which he or she is an object of desire: "*I give myself to you, the patient says again, but this gift of my person—as they say—Oh, mystery! is changed inexplicably into a gift of shit*" (Lacan 268, emphasis in original). The garden is similarly traumatised by the reader's second approach to it. For psychoanalysis to be successful, the patient has to pass through their fantasmatic relationship with the analyst by abolishing the object-cause of the analyst's desire for them. Žižek describes the analyst's post-fantasmatic relationship with the *Other*:

> The desire of the analyst (insofar as it is "pure" desire) is consequently not a particular desire (for example, the desire of interpretation, the desire to reveal the analysand's symptomal knot by way of interpretation), but [...] quite simply non-pathological desire, a desire which is not tied to any fantasmatic "pathological" object, but which is supported by the empty place in the Other. (*Interrogating* 46)

The task is to aim for a similarly pure desire. Emptying the *Other* of its contents becomes all the more important considering a situation like Colombia, where the exotic has turned to shit before the eyes of a Northern audience that accepts things as they are.

Žižek describes "an excessive excremental zero-value element which, while formally part of the system, has no proper place within it" (*End Times* 23). When a particular person or group of persons comes to occupy this position outside of the system/society they become like the Christians in the Roman circus. The spectacle of the *Other's jouissance*, confined to places of exception like the coliseums of the Roman Empire, belies the fact that the excess of *jouissance* pertains to the whole of the system/society that exists with reference to such places. The problem is that most obvious *jouissance* of the community that organises its enjoyment around the image of the *Other* as enemy. However, there are other particular desires that induce *jouissance* within the community that organises its enjoyment around efforts to promote tolerance of the *Other*. Their desires are tied to fantasmatic pathological objects that give rise to the image of exotic authenticity. These objects seem to have no place in the North, where they would be diluted by the pressures of an anaemic society; no longer sublime, zero-value elements, they would be adulterated and commodified, joining an ever-growing glut of kitschy objects and options for consumption.

Salecl and Žižek agree that it is not enough to promote tolerance of the *Other*, the crucial step is to choose neither love nor hate in the current configuration of the dyad. Salecl diagnoses the problem, pointing to psychoanalysis as the solution: "If a community's victim can be said to be its symptom, it then becomes evident that the community holds itself together by means of a vital attachment to an intense negative pleasure — or *jouissance*. Psychoanalysis has always held the subject responsible for his or her *jouissance*" (123).

Žižek writes that the first step toward letting go of the *Other* should be "to *universalize* their excremental status to the whole of humanity" (*End Times* 23, emphasis in original). He argues that "the shit of the earth is the universal subject," but that "elevating the exotic Other into an indifferent divinity is strictly equal to treating it like shit" (*End Times* 24-25). The subject treats the *Other* like shit instead of (or to avoid) treating him or herself like shit.

Geraldina's rape reveals the libidinal economy between Ismael and Geraldina as Other. To paraphrase Žižek, "[Ismael's] discovery changes the past, deprives the lost object of the *objet a*" (*End Times* 29, emphasis in original). The convergence of love and hate destroys Ismael's "ego-ideal," which Žižek calls a "symbolic identification [...] with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love"

(*Sublime Object* 116, emphasis in original). Other people determine the content of the subject's ego-ideal. For example, Otilía is aware of Ismael's indiscretions, but nevertheless affirms the pleasure he takes in voyeurism by helping him reduce himself to a pure, harmless gaze. Otilía calls Ismael a "pitiful old man" (12) and tells him that "you've never stopped spying on women. I would have left you forty years ago if I thought you would take things any further. But no. [...] You were and are just a naïve, inoffensive peeping Tom" (17). The pitiful, naïve old man who is nevertheless inoffensive, exercising saintly forbearance in the face of feminine *jouissance*, is Ismael's ego-ideal. However, the battle for San José destroys what Žižek calls the "exterior symbolic network offering [Ismael] the points of symbolic identification, conferring on him certain symbolic mandates" that are supports of and obstacles to his desire (*Sublime Object* 46). Žižek writes that psychoanalysis should bring the subject into confrontation with "a truth that would hurt him/her by demolishing his/her ego-ideal" (*Looking Awry* 62). From where Ismael looks at himself in the last scene of *The Armies*, he appears identical to the soldiers gathered around Geraldina's corpse.

The Armies unties Ismael's symptomal knot: the concatenation of objects and events that turn in on themselves and perpetuate desire. One part of his symptomal knot is feminine *jouissance*; the other parts are the fantasmatic obstacles barring his way to the utopia of full, feminine *jouissance*. Ismael's existence is provisional on Geraldina as the *Other*. She is his "only explanation for staying alive" (28). When the obstacles are removed and Ismael really sees Geraldina, not as the *Other* but as a woman, deprived of the *objet a*, Ismael moves beyond desire. Renouncing his object, Ismael is in a position to actually love, suspended there between the knowledge that he will die—that "they will shoot," that "this is how it will be" (215)—and the bullets leaving the soldiers' guns.

Discussing the countries that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Žižek says something that touches the perverse core of how and why the North enjoys the South. He writes, "Eastern Europe functions for the West as its Ego-Ideal: the point from which the West sees itself in a likable, idealized form, as worthy of love" (*Tarrying* 200). The ultimate perversion is the possibility that Northern readers derive what Salecl calls an "intense negative enjoyment" when they imagine themselves from a place of exception as anaemic people who are nevertheless rational and able to live in peace (123). Ismael—a naïve, inoffensive old man—ogles the *Other* while the North—neutral, benevolent observers—awaits the violence it has come to expect from Colombia and other parts of the

South. Colombian violence appears to prove the existence of the *Other*, but it is the subject's *jouissance* that is borne out by images of violence that have been used to the point of becoming cliché.

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