

Gendering the Suicidal Body: Male Translation of Female Death in Javier Marías' *Corazón tan blanco*

Juan, el protagonista de Corazón tan blanco (1992) de Javier Marías, investiga su identidad indagando en los matrimonios de su padre, que están rodeados de secretos y suicidio. Un análisis crítico basado en Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (1994) de Elizabeth Grosz muestra cómo el suicidio conecta el cuerpo femenino con el sufrimiento violento, a la vez que sirve como una experiencia liberadora para la validación de la masculinidad. En busca de una narrativa interesada de identidad masculina, Juan se convierte en un traductor voyerista de las inscripciones de suicidio en los cuerpos de mujeres.

Palabras claves: *Javier Marías, Corazón tan blanco, inscripción corporal, identidad masculina, suicidio, voyerismo*

Juan, the protagonist of Corazón tan blanco (1992) by Javier Marías, examines his identity through an investigation of his father's marriages, which are shrouded in secrets and suicide. A critical analysis based on Elizabeth Grosz's Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (1994) shows how instances of suicide in the novel connect the female body to violent suffering while also serving as a liberating experience for the validation of masculinity. In search of a self-interested narrative of masculine identity, Juan becomes a voyeuristic translator of the inscriptions of suicide on women's bodies.

Keywords: *Javier Marías, Corazón tan blanco, bodily inscription, masculine identity, suicide, voyeurism*

Juan, the semi-autobiographical protagonist and narrator of Javier Marías' novel, *Corazón tan blanco* (1992), is a newly-wed translator who attempts to understand his identity through an examination of his father Ranz's past marriages, which are shrouded in secrecy and suicide. Juan worries that his new bride Luisa may commit suicide, as his life is replete with parallels to his father's. Throughout the novel, a series of repetitions establish the female body as a translatable text to be read by the male gaze, a story often culminating with death as a fate enacted upon women that facilitates life

and longevity for men. Juan purports a desire to understand his aunt Teresa's suicide, which Javier Marías admits to have been inspired by his personal history, in which a female relative committed suicide shortly after her wedding. A critical analysis of death in *Corazón tan blanco* with reference to Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) will argue that the narration engages with the violent suffering endured by female bodies on a superficial level, establishing female death as a freeing, catalytic experience for masculine identity validation. This is especially true for Juan, who is a product of Ranz's third marriage; Juan's existence would have been unfathomable without the deaths of his father's first two wives. While author and protagonist claim to investigate the reasons behind the suicides of women who played pivotal roles in their lives, instead they become voyeuristic translators of the inscriptions of death on women's bodies in the pursuit of self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing narratives of male identity. Although Teresa's suicide contributes to Juan's egotistic narrative, it arguably demonstrates personal agency, as well, through an element of self-preservation, saving herself from the spiritual and emotional death she would have endured as Ranz's wife.

The female body plays a central role in *Corazón tan blanco*, both in the way Marías' narrator represents it and through various acts of violence that are enacted upon the female body. Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body is "a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product" (23) onto which a multitude of messages can be inscribed. Grosz assesses various male theorists' writings on sexuality (Freud, Lacan, and Lingis, among others) as they apply to interpretations of the body with the intent to change the narrative from one in which bodily inscriptions have "served to constitute women's bodies as a lack relative to men's fullness, a mode of incapacity in terms of men's skills and abilities" (xiii), to a more positive and transformative representation of the female body through terms that "may grant women the capacity for independence and autonomy, which thus far have been attributed only to men" (xiii). In *Corazón tan blanco*, Javier Marías is guilty of using the woman's body not necessarily to represent a lack of meaning, but rather as a cultural text that male characters have the privilege to translate as they please in their quest for meaning and identity construction. Teresa is the novel's only character who dies by suicide, a death that invites either a confining or freeing interpretation according to the lens through which other characters approach her demise.

The novel begins with a graphic description of Teresa's suicide, which occurs shortly after the couple's honeymoon. Juan will repeatedly ruminate on this suicide throughout the novel, ostensibly seeking out the meaning behind this death, as he claims to fear a similar ending to his own marriage to Luisa. By the conclusion of the novel, Juan learns that his father Ranz has survived three wives, only one of whom died a natural death. As a young man, Ranz married Gloria, a Cuban woman whom he soon wanted to divorce after meeting Teresa, a Spaniard visiting Cuba. Although the couple's ceremony took place in Cuba, the marriage was registered in Spain under Franco's regime, precluding the possibility of divorce and uniting Ranz and Gloria until death. Ranz killed Gloria and disguised the murder by burning down their house, freeing him to marry Teresa, who shot herself after learning the truth behind Gloria's passing. After the death of Juan's "imposible tía" (137), Ranz married Teresa's younger sister Juana, who would become Juan's mother. Juana died of natural causes during her son's childhood. Juan somewhat reluctantly attempts to unravel the mystery of his father's past marriages, while feebly trying to adjust to married life himself. His wife Luisa insists that he should learn the truth about his father's past, and ultimately Ranz confesses his macabre relationship history to his daughter-in-law instead of to his son. By the end of *Corazón tan blanco*, Juan has learned the truth about the past but has not benefitted from this knowledge.

The task of recuperating memory is particularly relevant given the socio-historical context of the novel. *Corazón tan blanco* takes place in contemporary Spain, but Juan's exploration of identity necessitates an exploration of Ranz's past during Francisco Franco's dictatorship, years in which it was often safer and wiser not to examine memories of the past too closely. Ranz's and Teresa's actions and mentalities were indelibly influenced and confined by a society that valued hierarchy, obedience, nationalism, and strict gender roles. Teresa clearly was more limited by these societal structures, while as a man, Ranz navigated Franco's Spain comfortably, even traveling internationally as an assessor and buyer of art. His questionable business transactions and treatment of women are aspects of Ranz's past for which he does not feel guilt but nevertheless does not see the benefit in revealing to his son. Ranz "opera como regulador de la historia dentro de la novela. Es él quien sabe y decide cuándo y qué debe contarse, es consciente de la necesidad del silencio sobre el pasado como estrategia de olvido y supervivencia" (Fernández 556). For a nation whose relationship with memory is fraught with complications and possible danger, secrecy can appear to be the best option. While Ranz clearly belongs to the first generation of Spaniards who

experienced Franco's dictatorship and actively chose to forget, Natalia Núñez Bargueño's analysis of *Corazón tan blanco* suggests that Juan belongs to the second generation of the Transition, moving forward but respectful of the first generation's desire for privacy and secrecy. Luisa, younger than Juan, is a member of the third generation who "recibe el fantasma creado por la primera" (Núñez Bargueño 75), looking to close the gap between the first and second generations and seek out the truth. All three characters have cultivated distinct mentalities about discovering the truth of the past, formed by the changing Spanish society in which each individual was raised. Luisa has enough distance from Teresa's death to be unaware of the negative consequences of revisiting the memory of her suicide. Ranz's deliberate forgetfulness is an attempt at self-preservation, but Juan's approach is the most callous. Evoking and dissecting the gruesome details of her death as Juan does in his narration has a voyeuristic and exploitative quality that focuses on her body while disregarding her personhood.

Before examining the pivotal suicide scene, however, establishing the prime importance of vision in this "novela cinematográfica" (García 191) will elucidate the way in which Marías' male characters convert women into translatable texts.¹ Clear sight is akin to agency in *Corazón tan blanco* and implies danger; victims of violence in the novel suffer a lack of clear vision or are unconscious of being observed, while perpetrators of violence have good sight. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," objectification achieved through a "controlling and curious gaze" (450), is exemplified within this cinematographic novel that is replete with examples of men enjoying visual supremacy over women. A few examples will serve to establish the relevance of this pattern, as Marías uses repetition – of images, events, and character descriptions – to intentionally establish a collective male identity among his characters, juxtaposed with a less cohesive but still existent collective female identity (although Marías establishes connections between Luisa, Teresa, and other female characters, these two women encounter ways to resist generalization). A protagonist's characteristics and life experiences are frequently shared with others of his or her gender; for example, the fact that two of Ranz's wives died shortly after their weddings cultivates the notion of a pattern, influencing Juan's mentality about marriage and causing him to envision and obsess over Luisa's possible death.

One of the most striking repetitions in *Corazón tan blanco* confirms that men have good eyesight, while women do not. Juan repeatedly mentions his father's "ojos increíblemente despiertos ... casi de color vinagre, ojos de líquido, de rapaz" (96). Ranz seems never to age,

maintaining his youthful eyesight that reflects a bitter and predatory nature. In contrast, Juan recalls his mother as a woman whose vitality and sight are snuffed out early: “se le apagó el brillo de los ojos que las ocasionales gafas de una vista cansada borraron de golpe de la mirada de ella” (94). Ranz has a vampiric relationship with his wives; as their health and life fade away, he remains youthful and clear-sighted.

As male characters observe women in *Corazón tan blanco*, their gaze allows them to mentally experiment with the interchangeable nature of the women in their lives and fantasize about different potential fates for them. Women thus become objects for men’s visual pleasure and consumption. Drawing from Anne Friedberg’s *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1993), Roser Gelida compares an individual’s gaze as they window shop to that of the moviegoer, describing the shared “mirada sin compromiso (de transacción)” that allows window shoppers and moviegoers to “‘probarse’ identidades sin tener que comprometerse a su ‘adquisición’” (488).² Juan is particularly guilty of this, building imaginary lives for the women he encounters that revolve around him and bolster his sense of identity in flattering ways. For example, Juan thinks of Nieves, whom he knew as a child and whose life he deems stagnant because she remains an employee of her family’s bookstore. Juan tells himself that Nieves “sería distinta y mejor si yo la hubiera amado no sólo de lejos” (117), imagining his role in providing a superior life for her, without knowing the realities of her actual life or having spoken to her in years. According to Elizabeth Grosz, a man who objectifies a woman seeks to differentiate himself from her, distinguishing a woman as lesser due to these differences, which “makes her containable within his imagination (reduced to his size) but also produces her as a mystery for him to master and decipher within safe or unthreatening borders” (Grosz 191). This tactic not only permits Juan to create a narrative about women, but also to aggrandize the narrative he is telling about himself.

Juan’s imaginings about women are linked to his attitude toward his marriage, a reality that he finds bewildering, as if he had entered into it unknowingly or accidentally. When Ranz asks him on the day of his wedding, “Bueno, ya te has casado. ¿Y ahora qué?” (98), Juan does not know how to respond nor can he envision what married life with Luisa will look like, despite his overactive imagination. When he thinks about their life together, he evokes a laundry list of the distasteful possibilities that await him: discussing buying a piano together, having a child, or discovering Luisa’s defects. One of the only aspects of marriage he finds interesting is “verla dormir, ver su rostro cuando esté sin conciencia o esté en letargo, conocer su expresión dulce o dura” (99). By watching her when

she cannot return the gaze, Luisa becomes an empty page onto which Juan can inscribe whatever identity or emotions he chooses. He is not interested in discovering the reality of Luisa's personality but rather a loose translation that he can manipulate.

For all his anxiety about marriage, Juan retains his sight and power in the relationship, just like the other male/female relationships described in *Corazón tan blanco*. On their honeymoon in Cuba, Juan lounges on the hotel's balcony while Luisa lies sick in bed, and he is mistaken by Miriam, a Cuban woman with poor eyesight, for Guillermo, her married Spanish lover. Although Juan can see Miriam clearly as she approaches the hotel at dusk, she squints up at him. Miriam "[e]scrutó como si fuera miope o llevara lentillas sucias y miró desconcertada, fijando la vista en mí y apartándola un poco y guiñando los ojos para ver mejor y de nuevo fijándola y apartándola" (31). Juan believes her to have "algún problema de estrabismo" (33) that impedes her clear vision. Miriam's poor eyesight is paralleled in Luisa, at this moment sick in bed "con los ojos muy fijos en mí pero sin conocerme aún ni reconocer dónde estaba, esos ojos febriles del enfermo" (34). Juan and Guillermo have the privilege of sight, as the latter is already in his hotel room instead of waiting to meet Miriam at the agreed upon location, allowing him to "verla esperar enfrente y en la distancia, para contemplarla en sus breves y dolidos paseos de un lado a otro y luego en su trompicado avance y en su caída, calzarse, como también había tenido yo oportunidad de observarla" (39). Miriam makes her way to the hotel room, scrutinized by both men. As Juan listens to the couple's fight, he hears Miriam demand that Guillermo kill his wife so that Miriam can be with him exclusively. This moment is a repetition and alteration of Ranz's marital history that also has connections with Juan's marriage, as Juan has chosen to honeymoon in Cuba, where Ranz's first wife died. Listening to Guillermo and Miriam's fight, Juan watches his cigarette ash fall ominously on the mattress beside his sleeping wife, suggesting a link between her fate and Gloria's. Juan is overcome with a sense of foreboding that Luisa will die; perhaps he also feels the uncomfortable potential for murder and violence that exists within himself, Guillermo, and Ranz.

Throughout the novel, women are unaware of being watched by a predatory gaze, often with disastrous consequences. Ranz describes how his first wife Gloria could not fight back or return his gaze as he killed her; he admits: "La maté dormida, mientras me daba la espalda" (289). Even more telling than the way in which Juan describes the male gaze toward women are the similarities between the treatment of real women and the treatment of their artistic representations. In his many years working in an art museum, Ranz is surrounded by artistic depictions of women. As the

narrator, Juan describes the various paintings that Ranz encounters in the art museum, many of which feature women with impaired vision. In one telling incident, Ranz has to persuade a security guard not to burn a valuable Rembrandt painting titled "Artemisa" that features a corpulent woman being offered a cup from her servant. The subject of this painting is ambiguous, either representing Queen Artemisa receiving the ashes of her husband or Sophonisba accepting the poison that will kill her; in either case, death is the theme. The security guard wants to burn the painting - repeating the link between women, fire, and violence - because he cannot see the servant's face, saying "no hay forma de verle la cara a la chica ni de saber qué pinta la vieja del fondo, lo único que se ve es a la gorda con sus dos collares que no acaba nunca de coger la copa" (128).³ His anger stems from his inability to control the women in the painting; his lack of visual access to the women frees them from being molded by his desires. In *Corazón tan blanco*, men observe while women (real or painted) are observed. This message is further promoted by one of Ranz's wedding gifts to Juan and Luisa, a painting titled *Cabeza de mujer con los ojos cerrados* that hangs in their newlywed apartment (123). By connecting women and paintings in this way, the novel reiterates how difficult it is for male characters to distinguish between reality and a reproduction; their ability to have the same emotional reaction to a person of flesh and blood and to a lifeless image is startling. The male gaze converts women into translatable texts like art, signifying danger and potential death, especially when the women have no opportunity to return or counter the gaze.

Having established the relevance of sight in *Corazón tan blanco*, Mariás' description of Teresa's suicide at the beginning of the novel can readily be interpreted as an example of the privileged male gaze converting a woman's body into a translatable text or map, viewed through the lens of a primitive bodily inscription. In Alphonso Lingis' *Excesses: Eros and Culture*, the concept of the body as an inscriptive surface is juxtaposed in what Lingis labels "primitive" (including scarification and incisions) and Western contexts (subtler modifications according to Lingis, such as bodybuilding or the use of makeup). Lingis considers these both to be ways of converting a body into a message-laden, readable text. Lingis regards these inscriptions as sexually charged, stating that, "cutting in orifices and raising tumescences does not contrive new receptor organs ... it extends an erotogenic surface ... It's a multiplication of mouths, of lips, labia, anuses, these sweating and bleeding perforations and punturings" (34). Elizabeth Grosz explains the mixture of pain and pleasure that coexists in Lingis' primitive corporeal markings by describing this "interweaving of incisions and perforations with the sensations and sexual

intensities, pleasures, and pains of the body” as an erotogenic surface that becomes “not a map of the body but the body precisely as a map” (139).

While Lingis’ concept of bodily inscriptions allows the individual to choose the message that he or she wishes to portray with his or her physical figure, Mariás’ novel gives this power to men. Upon viewing Teresa’s lifeless form, Juan, Teresa’s father, and the other guests create their own sexually-charged translation of it. As narrator, Juan recounts that Teresa “se puso frente al espejo, se abrió la blusa, se quitó el sostén y se buscó el corazón con la punta de la pistola de su propio padre” (19). Although Teresa did not intend to transform her mutilated corpse into a symbol of sexuality, she becomes the target of scopophilia, establishing her body as a site of multiple erotogenic zones, what Lingis deems a “landscape” (37). Grosz’s analysis of Lingus’ work defines this concept further, stating, “These cuts on the body’s surface create a kind of ‘landscape’ of that surface, that is, they provide it with ‘regions,’ ‘zones,’ capable of erotic significance; they serve as a kind of gridding, an uneven distribution of intensities, of erotic investments in the body” (36). The narrator’s descriptions focus on Teresa’s breasts and thighs, sexually charged parts of her anatomy. According to Juan, “El pecho que no había sufrido el impacto resultaba bien visible, maternal y blanco y aún firme, y fue hacia él donde se dirigieron instintivamente las primeras miradas” (20), and even the delivery boy is privy to see “unos zapatos de tacón medio descalzados o que sólo se habían desprendido de los talones y una falda algo subida y manchada - unos muslos manchados” (22). Teresa’s chest, with one breast exposed, intact, and enticing, and the other obliterated by a gaping, bloody hollow, highlights the male perception of women in *Corazón tan blanco*. By dividing her into anatomical parts, the narrator dismantles her personhood and agency. This depiction of Teresa’s body aligns with what Anne Friedberg describes as a cinematographic representation of women’s figures, “a face, a hand, a leg, all cut up. A star, like most human forms in cinema, is not presented as a unified body” (41). As a young married man, Ranz saw Teresa as a sexually desirable young woman; captivated by her body, he reduced her to mere physical components. Ranz’s desire to be with her led him to murder Gloria, completely disregarding how Teresa might respond to such an action. He clearly did not know the true Teresa, but rather had created a fictitious version of her that suited him.

Not only are the male characters of the novel voyeuristic spectators, but the narrator also implicates readers as participants in the male gaze, directing their sight to the female form, upon which violence is repeatedly suggested and finally enacted. The “asimilación de la experiencia del

narrador a la del lector" (Faber 196) is a common technique in Marías' writing, in this case demonstrating how easily one can create an inaccurate version of another individual. Juan describes Teresa's remaining breast, still desirable and firm, as "donde se dirigieron instintivamente las primeras miradas" (20). Readers have no choice but to mentally gaze upon Teresa's breast, becoming voyeurs with their own translatable image of her. In 2001, critic Margaret Drabble described Marías' novel as "dark, hot, erotic" and "more disturbing than offensive" (11). Drabble wrote that Marías' depictions of gender interactions "seem to reach back into a darker past where women and men were more sharply differentiated than they now allow themselves to be" (11). Despite Drabble's acceptance of Marías' portrayal of gender roles, this sharp differentiation allows readers to forget about Teresa's humanity and agency by focusing on her body. Although the scene might titillate readers, the sexually stylized account of Teresa's suicide is intentional on the part of Marías and Juan. As Juan was not alive at the time of Teresa's death, and whatever account he received of her suicide was secondhand at best, it is his choice to sexualize her demise to this extent. As well as everyone who gazed upon her lifeless body, Juan should be held accountable for his role in Teresa's fate, because "even a watcher, a voyeur, has blood on his hands; that by playing with fate - other people's as well as one's own - you risk creating tragedy" (Rudman 52).

The male gaze upon Teresa's physical form serves to strip her of her agency and turn her into a translatable, consumable body. When the dinner party finds Teresa's cadaver, her father still has a half-chewed piece of meat in his mouth. In the same sentence, the narrator describes Teresa's "cuerpo ensangrentado" and the "bocado de carne" (19) that her father continues to masticate, passing from one side of his mouth to the other. The juxtaposition of the two images assists in reducing Teresa to mere remains, another bloodied object sacrificed for male consumption. Juan describes her death and its timing as an embarrassing event for her family, an act unthinkably undignified for a dinner party. Her father has the impulse to tidy as much of the scene as he can, wanting to hide the evidence as he would discretely discard a piece of chewed up meat that remained unswallowed. He covers Teresa's bra with his napkin, "como si le diera más vergüenza la visión de la prenda íntima que la del cuerpo derribado y semidesnudo con el que la prenda había estado en contacto hasta hacía muy poco: el cuerpo sentado a la mesa o alejándose por el pasillo o también de pie" (19). Teresa's death is messy and inconvenient; it becomes a public spectacle for the dinner guests. The witnesses of Teresa's corpse quickly begin to distance themselves from her previous identity as a person, noted in the previous description. Teresa's father has already

begun to think of her as “el cuerpo sentado a la mesa” instead of an individual and family member. In this moment, no one questions why Teresa killed herself; by turning her into a sexualized object that is observable and translatable, Teresa is easily replaced. In fact, Ranz will not hesitate to marry Teresa’s younger sister and will move on without concern for the motivations behind her suicide.

An inquiry into the factors behind Teresa’s suicide would reveal that, as Judith Butler asserts in her discussion of Spinoza’s writings on death in *Senses of the Subject*, committing suicide is not a decision that a person can make completely independently; rather, individuals are always driven by external forces (69). As a woman living under the oppressive conditions of a conservative Spanish dictatorship, Teresa is marginalized and influenced by gender roles and social expectations. Although Teresa never wanted Ranz to kill Gloria in order to be with her, she insisted they could be together only if he were not married. Due to her strict Catholic upbringing, Teresa would not accept a relationship that she had been taught to view as sinful. Teresa undoubtedly feels trapped in a society where divorce is illegal and she will remain bound for life to a murderer. Ranz assumes responsibility for Teresa’s death, even though he never alludes to a guilty conscience, recounting to Luisa that Teresa “[s]e mató por algo que yo le conté” (269). Teresa’s story is central to the novel although she is never allowed to speak for herself, so observers can only attempt to craft a version of her story that approximates the reality of the situation. She quite possibly was weighed down by feelings of guilt and responsibility for Gloria’s death, or she could have entertained a sense of “horror at the autonomous power of her own words” (Christie 92). Regardless, Teresa’s suicide was not a completely independent act; societal pressures and the actions of others compelled her to reach this decision.

The drive to live is linked to what Judith Butler describes as a desire to persevere, which is intimately connected to other people and society. Teresa loses this desire toward the end of her life because she is unmoored from what she understands to be the rules of her society, as Ranz is not complying with these standards and no one seems concerned with his actions. The desire to live is dependent upon belonging to a society that one deems worthy of persevering in, that provides its members with acceptable norms and a liveable environment. According to Butler, a liveable environment is one in which individuals feel that their own and others’ lives are valued (65). Teresa’s reality is no longer acceptable to her after learning of Ranz’s actions, which indicate a lack of importance placed on women’s lives. She can no longer fathom a way to persevere in a society that has facilitated Ranz’s ability to dispose of one wife and acquire the

next with no regret or accountability. Juan's ambivalence about uncovering the truth behind Teresa's death indicates his discomfort about analyzing where to place responsibility and blame for the suicide. Musing on the nature of life and death, Juan proposes a theory not unlike Butler's, discussing the interconnectedness of human life and the impact our actions and selves have on those around us, stating his conviction that,

esas vidas nuestras dependen de estar juntos un día o responder a una llamada, o de atrevernos, o de cometer un crimen o causar una muerte y saber que fue así. A veces tengo la sensación de que nada de lo que sucede sucede, porque nada sucede sin interrupción, nada perdura ni persevera ni se recuerda incesantemente, y hasta la más monótona y rutinaria de las existencias se va anulando y negando a sí misma en su aparente repetición hasta que nada es nada ni nadie es nadie que fueran antes. (45)

Juan describes life as a delicate ecosystem in which a small action might have broad consequences.

While Teresa's suicide is undeniably caused by a variety of factors beyond herself, Mariás' male characters interpret female death as a tool for understanding and fortifying their personal identity. Instead of questioning the broader social mechanisms behind the suicide, Juan seeks personal meaning in Teresa's death. He cannot be faulted for reflecting on his own identity, as death leads individuals to evaluate their own existence. Butler asserts that identity formation is intricately linked to the life/death cycle, as the former cycle "requires the death drive, but it also requires that the death drive not triumph it" (73). However, Juan reads the bodily inscriptions of murder and suicide of female characters as actions that are only significant in relation to his identity development, giving little thought to the meaning of such inscriptions for the women whose bodies are violently affected. While Juan is understandably curious about Teresa and the ways in which their lives are connected, his inability to recognize her humanity and his exploitation of her story impede him from comprehending her lived reality, therefore prohibiting the revelation of any truths that might enable his personal growth.

Juan views Teresa's death as a necessity to his survival; in fact, for Juan and Ranz, the death of female protagonists is often the only way in which they may continue subsisting. Juan would not exist without the suicide of his "imposible tía Teresa" (137); he knows that without her death, Ranz would not have married his mother Juana. Ranz's decisions, as well as Teresa's, are a part of his family's history that have greatly impacted Juan, even in ways that he cannot fully comprehend. For Butler, identity cannot

be formed in a vacuum; even though a person can make choices and take actions that distance him or herself from the past, an individual's "formation does not suddenly fall away after certain breaks or ruptures; they become important to the story we tell about ourselves or to other modes of self-understanding. There remains that history from which I broke, and that breakage installs me here and now" (6). Past experiences are clearly not the only factor in self-definition, but they create an indelible impact on one's identity, as Juan discovers when he attempts to understand himself through an examination of his father's past romantic relationships. Throughout his life, whenever Teresa's death was discussed, Juan was given vague responses and lies, which he readily chose to accept because according to him, children prefer to "pensar en la inevitabilidad de sus padres unidos para justificar su existencia y creer por tanto en su propia inevitabilidad y justicia" (134). Juan creates a fictitious narrative about Teresa's life in order to attempt to understand and legitimate his father, and therefore, himself. Juan's work as a translator extends to his world view, allowing him to "certificar la verdad de sus conclusiones" by "aproximándose a la vida, traduciéndola" (Serna 35).

Juan's search for identity is troubled by his anxiety about women (mother figures and romantic partners) and their marked absence from his life. *Corazón tan blanco* examines the figure of the orphan, following in the tradition of Spanish literature produced during the dictatorship.⁴ The literary mother figure during this time period is often absent, dead, or a character incapable of communication with her children, described as "a ghostlike, internalized presence even after the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of the democratic, bipartisan government by Juan Carlos I" (Schumm 13). *Corazón tan blanco* contemplates the idea of the woman (who is almost always a mother figure, even in the case of Luisa) as loss, her death or absence affecting not only herself but those she leaves behind. Perhaps Juan feels so unmoored in his identity because, figuratively, he has been orphaned three times. Any of Ranz's wives could have been his mother, although of course he would not be the same person with Gloria or Teresa as he was with his mother. Juan describes his biological mother Juana as a muted presence in his life who died before his adulthood.⁵ Although Juan lacks maternal figures, Javier Marías does not view Teresa as a missing or absent character but rather as a ghost. In an interview with Paul Ingendaay, Marías spoke about telling a story from the perspective of a ghost, a figure impervious to further harm but with the power to haunt or help those she knew in life. A ghost is powerful because he "is not indifferent and at the same time he's objective, because he knows the end of the story" (Ingendaay 82). Teresa may be physically gone, but she still

has a message to impart. If not her actual ghost, Teresa's memory haunts Juan's family, as if she demands to be understood or at least considered in Juan's process of identity formation. When Juan begins to investigate Ranz's romantic past, he feels that Teresa's story was "en cierto sentido sobre mí mismo" (23). Juan is not wrong to sense a connection between them, but throughout the novel he fails to recognize that his voyeuristic attitude toward Teresa makes it impossible to glean any meaningful realizations about her existence and the impact she has had on his history.

Juan's inability to retain maternal figures, compounded with Ranz's tenuous romantic relationships, contribute to Juan's preoccupation with marriage, a prevalent theme in the novel.⁶ Juan looks to Ranz's past unions as potential models or indicators for how his own wedlock will transpire, but the information he uncovers is bleak or unhelpful at best. *Corazón tan blanco* presents marriage as "an erasure of one's identity" (Simonsen 203), a fragile venture to be embarked upon with great caution. Critics have perceived the description of matrimony in the novel as a sickness, an "analogía efectuada por el verbo 'contraer'" (Grohmann 75). As he is surrounded by a repetitive cycle of female death, Juan constantly fears that something will go wrong in his relationship with his wife, most notably that Luisa will die. He thinks about Teresa's death, even before he truly understands the underlying motivations for her suicide. While Juan has a vague sense that emulating Ranz as a husband could somehow endanger Luisa, he has no other model from society or personal experience for how to be a husband. Juan does not know how to take on this new state while maintaining a sense of autonomy, as he "teme al matrimonio por la desestabilización que impone en la construcción del *yo*, en su recursiva soledad; el ingreso de otro que genera un inquietante *nosotros*. El matrimonio con Luisa impone una historicidad que termina siendo una amenaza" (Fernández 545). He is incapable of incorporating himself into his new identity, and continues to travel extensively for work, even though Luisa stops working almost entirely in order to establish and maintain their new home. When Juan is in their apartment, he hardly recognizes the furniture and feels uncomfortable. The apartment is a reflection of Luisa's style, as well as Ranz's, who has been more involved in the decoration than Juan. For Juan, the "nueva casa se iba pareciendo un poco, iba recordando un poco a la de mi infancia, es decir, a la de Ranz, mi padre, como si él hubiera hecho indicaciones durante sus visitas o con su mera presencia hubiera creado necesidades que ... se hubieran ido cumpliendo sobre la marcha" (93). Juan's marriage is comparable to a second childhood, wherein Ranz retains his paternal role and Luisa cares for him like a mother. At the end of the novel, Juan feels like he has settled into conjugal

life, still watching Luisa, but now “como un niño perezoso o enfermo que mira el mundo desde su almohada” (303). Juan has not matured enough to assume an adult role in his union with Luisa.

For all his ruminations about reality, identity, and relationships, Juan does not learn anything of substance about himself by the end of the novel, neither through matrimony nor through his exploration of Teresa’s suicide. The novel does little more than objectify and sexualize suicide, proving the motives for investigating Teresa’s suicide to be disingenuous at best. Javier Marías shares certain autobiographical characteristics with his narrator; in addition to those already mentioned, these aspects include connections to Cuba and having an aunt who killed herself in a similar fashion to Teresa with no explanation. *Corazón tan blanco* is presented as narrator and author’s attempt to understand these suicides and their impact on their own lives and identities. Despite these claims, both Marías and Juan seem reluctant to truthfully investigate and understand the suicides. Juan “se caracteriza justamente por no querer investigar, por no querer saber, por sus recelos ante la idea de que la verdad debe conocerse siempre o debe resplandecer” (307). Instead of proffering agency to Teresa, Marías and Juan engage in a self-indulgent contemplation of woman as object, only concerned with Teresa’s death in so far as it affects them. Indeed, by the end of the novel,

the negative *Bildung* or formation of Juan is a process in which he acknowledges more and more, until the end where he knows it all without having been transformed as a person. After the final revelation Juan is not an enlightened, responsible person. He has resigned, and has become almost infantile and regressive. (Simonsen 207)

While Juan is curious about his father’s past wives and their demise, he is simultaneously reluctant to delve into the truth. In fact, Luisa is the one who insists on knowing and starts the conversation with Ranz that leads to a disclosure of his past. Juan purports, “No he querido saber, pero he sabido” (19). His reluctance to emerge from his ignorance does not excuse him from his guilt. Juan, like all other men in this novel, is implicated in the misogynistic social structures that affected Teresa’s decision and inflicted violence or suffering on other women. Just like Juan, Marías is unwilling to fully learn and accept the truth. About his own aunt’s suicide, he writes, “Precisamente porque no es fácil imaginar lo ocurrido, intenté imaginarlo, y no averiguarlo” (307). *Corazón tan blanco* allows Marías and Juan to talk through their identity insecurities in a low-risk manner while raising the question of reality and truth; can a person or situation ever really be

completely understood or known? Juan's experience would indicate the impossibility of this desire; at best, he creates translations of people or situations that can merely approximate reality. Juan believes that

Contar deforma, contar los hechos deforma los hechos y los tergiversa y casi los niega, todo lo que se cuenta para a ser irreal y aproximativo aunque sea verídico, la verdad no depende de que las cosas *fuera*n o sucedieran, sino de que permanezcan ocultas y se desconozcan y no se cuenten. (209)

As much as male characters look to female death and suicide as a barometer by which to measure their own lives and identities, the method is unsuccessful. Juan does not experience growth throughout the novel, and is no more advanced emotionally after learning the truth about Teresa. Simply knowing the truth does not guarantee that Juan will react in a positive or productive fashion, as the "problem is how to make truth matter; how does one make truth influence life; how does the truth make a difference" (Simonsen 197). This realization about truth and reality is reflected in the socio-historical context of post-war Spain as well. As members of the first generation like Ranz have learned, "la recuperación de la memoria, una vez cumplida en los desenlaces, no representa alivio sino que mantiene o incluso intensifica la perturbación inicial" (Oyata 86). While the truth has the potential to heal an individual, it can also evoke painful memories that do more harm than good.

Juan's attempt to understand his identity through an examination of Ranz's past fails, largely due to his selfish attitude and inability to appreciate his interconnectedness with others. In her discussion of life and death cycles, Butler asserts, "it will not suffice to say that I desire to live without at the same time seeking to maintain and preserve the life of the Other" (84). The life and death cycles may be intricately linked, both necessary for identity formation, but those who disregard the preservation of other lives cannot truly benefit from the cycles because they cannot fully realize their role within them. Juan's callous attitude toward female life in *Corazón tan blanco* indicates that he is not connected to the larger society, a lack that limits his identity formation. Even though women are murdered and commit suicide in this novel, the male characters are the ones who do not know how to live in a way that creates meaningful relationships with others. They expect women to sacrifice themselves for everyone, as they have seen this pattern repeated in Spanish society, wherein a woman

usually enacts the narrative of loss and recovery. In other words, it is woman who is required to re-experience this drama on behalf of *both* female and male subjects

– presumably because it is more acceptable within the dictates of patriarchal ideology for a woman to play the role of the masochistic victim. (Merck 6)

The difference between Juan's and Luisa's approach to the story of Ranz's past is telling. Luisa acknowledges connections between stories and individuals, seeing the need to evaluate the situation on a larger scale, while Juan remains interested only in how Teresa's story affects him. Critic Álvaro Fernández compares the two approaches, explaining that, "Contra la actitud narcisista y reconcentrada del narrador que sólo puede remitirlo todo a la construcción de su yo, Luisa se atribuye como mujer una necesidad de evasión del yo en favor del relato" (559). Juan's selfish focus ultimately is a disservice to himself and the memory of Teresa.

Although Juan tries to convert Teresa into a translatable text that serves his own interests, Teresa should not be seen solely as a victim, as there are moments in which she escapes the male gaze and refuses masculine translation or definition. Teresa and other women in *Corazón tan blanco* are repeatedly associated with bodily fluids – specifically sweat, tears, and blood – which can be seen as symbols of rebellion. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas writes about the uncontainable and therefore threatening nature of bodily fluids,

[their] refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity - the very notion that governs our self-representations and understanding of the body. It is not that female sexuality is like, resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity. Rather, it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations. (195)

While Teresa's suicide is messy and embarrassing for her family members, she uses her blood and death to escape the rigid limitations that her society established for her. Choosing to kill herself by gunshot in the semi-public moment of a dinner party, Teresa's death becomes a final statement of defiance that anticipates and revels in the discomfort that her lifeless body will cause for viewers. She knows that the noise of the gunshot will draw everyone's attention, while the unlocked door will ensure that the dinner guests partake in the spectacle of her dead body. The male gaze has negatively impacted Teresa's life, but her death is a challenge, forcing the men in her life to witness the uncomfortable, unsightly reality of her deceased body. In the end, Teresa can no longer be contained or controlled by her family, husband, or society.

Bodily fluids connect Teresa and Luisa, as well, as there are similarities between the description of Teresa's suicide and Luisa's illness during her honeymoon. The way in which Juana cleans up Teresa's blood is mirrored in the description of Juan mopping the sweat from Luisa's forehead on their honeymoon, connecting the two women. The towel that Juana uses to soak up Teresa's blood "se empapó al instante y quedó inservible para su tarea, también se tiñó. En vez de dejarla empaparse y cubrir el tórax con ella, la retiró en seguida al verla tan roja (era su propia toalla) y la dejó colgada sobre el borde de la bañera, desde donde goteó" (21). Instead of blood, Luisa drips sweat due to her illness. Juan describes that,

En esos momentos yo tenía en la mano una toalla con la punta humedecida y me disponía a refrescarle la cara, el cuello, la nuca (se le había pegado su pelo largo alborotado, y algunos cabellos sueltos le atravesaban la frente como si fueran delgadas arrugas venidas desde el futuro a ensombrecerla un instante). (42)

If any female characters in *Corazón tan blanco* have the power to control or subvert the male gaze, Teresa and Luisa are those women. Luisa convinces Ranz to tell her about his past relationships, as she does not fear seeing or comprehending the past as Juan does. Juan compares the two women, saying that, "ambas tienen una expresión de confianza, Teresa en su retrato y Luisa en persona continuamente, como si no temieran nada y nada pudiera amenazarlas nunca" (136). The association of the two women with liquid or bodily fluids highlights society's inability to completely contain or define them.

Although Juan sexualizes Teresa's suicide, she exhibits a level of agency in the way in which she uses bodily fluids and her body to subvert the male gaze and control. Elizabeth Grosz calls for a new understanding of bodily inscriptions, as even traditional markers of inscription can be used as "modes of guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes" (144). While a nuanced act, Teresa's suicide can be interpreted as a message of defiance and agency, a refusal to participate in a society or marriage that thought so little of inscribing violent messages on women's bodies. In Grosz's words, "even various acts of apparent self-destruction have something persistent and at least potentially life-affirming in them" (64). Teresa's decision to take her own life arguably contains an element of self-preservation, saving herself from the spiritual and emotional death that she would have endured throughout a lifetime of remaining married to Ranz. Butler writes that an individual's desire to persevere is tied to her feelings towards those

around her, both individuals and society as a whole. One's desire to persevere is affected by

whether one feels hatred or love, whether one lives with those with whom agreement is possible, or whether one lives with those with whom agreement is difficult, if not impossible. It seems that self-preservation is, in nearly every instance, bound up with the question of what one feels toward another or who one is acted on by another. If we are to call this being that one is a "self," then it would be possible to say that the self represents itself to itself, is represented by others, and that in this complex interplay of reflection life is variably augmented or diminished. (66)

Agency becomes a convoluted subject within the realm of suicide, as Butler would argue that readers can both ascribe a certain level of agency to the individual (Teresa) who chooses to act, but it would be remiss to ignore the multitude of other people and factors that influence her decision. Teresa understands the interconnectedness of human life more deeply than Juan, sensing the impact that her own existence had on Ranz's first wife. She more clearly comprehends her own identity because she knows that her life impacts those around her.

Before she pulls the trigger, Teresa looks into the bathroom mirror, an important detail as she wills herself to see, in addition to being seen. Although she has "ojos llenos de lágrimas" (20), Teresa is the only female character in *Corazón tan blanco* who embraces the vision of herself in the mirror. By choosing to commit suicide, she rewrites her life story. Her body becomes a palimpsest, inscribed upon by the men she has encountered, but also bearing her own inscription:

This analogy between the body and a text remains a close one: the tools of body engraving - social, surgical, epistemic, disciplinary - all mark, indeed constitute, bodies in culturally specific ways ... These writing tools use various inks with different degrees of permanence, and they create textual traces that are capable of being written over, retraced, redefined, written in contradictory ways, creating out of the body text a palimpsest, a historical chronicle of prior and later traces, some of which have been effaced, others of which have been emphasized, producing the body as a text which is as complicated and indeterminate as any literary manuscript. (Grosz 117)

Teresa has undeniably been marked and affected by others' translations of her body and identity, but the bodily inscription with which she chooses to end her life is powerful as well. Teresa has more agency in the scene of her

death than the guests and family members who find her body, because they cannot perceive the meaning of what has happened. Her suicide is the only moment in which male sight is compromised. “Uno de los invitados no pudo evitar mirarse en el espejo a distancia y atusarse el pelo un segundo, el tiempo suficiente para notar que la sangre y el agua (pero no el sudor) habían salpicado la superficie y por tanto cualquier reflejo que diera, incluido el suyo mientras se miró” (21). Again, subversive liquids play a role in obscuring the vision of those who most likely do not want to see clearly in the first place. From the little information revealed about Teresa, her suicide is a moment in which she takes control and is not manipulated by the men around her. She becomes an active decision maker instead of fulfilling the stereotypical role of woman “constructed culturally as the perfect spectator – outside the realm of events and actions – it is important to note that spectating is not the same as seeing” (Doane 13). In this one, brief moment, Teresa has broken free from her role as spectator to be the one who sees, reversing this dynamic with the men with whom she has interacted.

Through her decision to commit suicide, Teresa demonstrates a degree of defiance and personal agency, an attribute that Juan is unable to acknowledge. Grosz considers bodies to be “the centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency” (xi); by refusing to stay trapped within the male characters’ translations of her, Teresa takes her position as a subject who inscribes her own meaning on her body. Sadly, this message is lost upon Mariás’ male characters, who cannot consider the female body in life and death as more than a facilitator of their own desires and wellbeing. Ranz and Juan have failed, perhaps because as products of Franco’s Spain, they are unable to understand what Butler describes as an ethic

in which the death drive is held in check, one that conceives a community in its irreducible plurality ... It would be an ethic that not only avows the desire to live, but recognizes that desiring life means desiring life for you ... in which the body, and bodies, in their precariousness and their promise, indeed, even in what might be called their ethics, incite one another to live. (89)

If Ranz and Juan could have placed more value on the lives of others, they may have developed a more complete sense of identity and belonging.

In *Corazón tan blanco*, Juan struggles to grasp how the meaning of truth, the relevance of his father’s past, and his own marriage affect and shape his identity. He looks to Teresa’s death as the key to comprehending how his father’s past has shaped him or how this history might repeat itself with Luisa. His investigation of Teresa’s suicide, however, does not

extend beyond a superficial, sexualized translation of her anatomy. Juan's attempt to bolster his identity through a voyeuristic interpretation of the female figure often subjugated to violence and death is unsuccessful because it does not allow Juan to realize his role within the greater life cycle. Although objectified for male gain, Teresa counters masculine interpretations of her physical form with her subversive gaze into the mirror, reclaiming her identity and choosing to release herself from a society that otherwise would have trapped her for life. While *Corazón tan blanco* does not necessarily end on a positive note for any of the characters, Marías raises many interesting topics for further discussion. By expecting that women should put their bodies and selves through violence and loss in order to fulfill masculine desires, every character loses the opportunity to participate in a positive and rewarding life cycle.

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NOTES

- 1 In addition to his cinematographic structure, Marías' style includes the use of repetition of ideas and characters: many of his novels include a character named Luisa as the narrator's romantic partner, and Marías' narrators are often translators (Edemariam). Themes in Marías' work include secrecy, the meaning of reality, the difficulty of encountering the truth, and death, which is often a violent and graphic moment for female characters. Marías is known for long sentences and paragraphs, as well as "discursos más bien ensayísticos" (Faber 196).
- 2 In addition to Laura Mulvey, multiple critics have written on the powerful nature of gaze or vision. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* discusses how mass culture has become dependent on visual representations (cinema, television, etc.) instead of lived experiences. Although it would be unwieldy to provide an extensive list of theorists in this article, other visual critics of note include Martin Jay, Jonathan Crary, Anne Friedberg, Norman Bryson, Kaja Silverman, Mary-Anne Doane, Hal Foster, and Teresa Brennan.
- 3 On three separate occasions, fire has dangerous potential for women in *Corazón tan blanco*. Ranz kills his first wife Gloria by lighting their bed on fire while she sleeps. During Juan's honeymoon, he allows his cigarette ash to fall onto the bed in which Luisa is sleeping, alluding to the possibility of Luisa's body being consumed by flames. Father, son, and the security guard are connected by the flames, a threat used by men to control and harm women.

- 4 Spanish post-war literature is teeming with orphans, like the ones found in Carmen Laforet's *Nada* (1944), Ana María Matute's *Primera memoria* (1959), and Juan Marsé's *Si te dicen que caí* (1973). While these are only a few examples, they indicate a narrative of loss and suffering that has not yet been expunged from the Spanish psyche.
- 5 Javier Marías lost his mother when he was twenty-four, yet one of the many autobiographical connections between author and narrator (Edemariam).
- 6 While there are many autobiographical connections between Marías and his narrator, one interesting difference is a fact that Marías calls "seguramente ... más trivial" (308): Marías has never been married. Just as Juan uses his transcriptions of the female body to attempt an understanding of his identity, the narrator – and arguably the author, as well – uses the space of the novel to elucidate his anxieties about the state of marriage.

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