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Language, desire and identity in *Shipwrecked Body*

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Cuerpo náufrago (Shipwrecked Body, 2005) is a novel by Ana Clavel, a Mexican female writer. In this work many questions about identity are explored, but gender identity is central. Questions like “¿somos lo que parecemos? ¿La identidad empieza por lo que vemos?” (Are we what we look like? Does identity start with what we look at?) permeate the narrative (*Shipwrecked* 12, translations are all mine). These questions are part of an identity discourse that is nowhere near a consensus amongst disciplines and/or academics. For generations gender identity has been thought of and studied within male parameters. The various intellectual and ideological movements of the 60’s and 70’s beget the central distinction of feminist gender theory: there is a difference between sex and gender (Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon 26). Yet, even this distinction can be contested. Judith Butler argues that both sex and gender are culturally constructed according to set categories (*Gender Trouble*). One thing is for certain—language has been the medium through which we create and perform our identity, whatever *that* is. In his essay “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” Friedrich Nietzsche discusses how the language with which we construct truth comes out of us, but also forms us. Moreover, Deborah Cameron’s book *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* explains that language is a “medium of representation” that has been used by the ones in power. In spite of language, women felt unable to communicate because of alienation from it. Patriarchal society dominates just about every sphere, creating language to describe and control each one. Women, then, need to learn such languages in order to not be left out of conversations in fields in which they find themselves. Since language, like sexuality, “is a powerful resource that the oppressor has appropriated, giving back only the shadow which women need to function in a patriarchal society” (8). Yet, in this postmodern world where “truth” and “subject” are constantly questioned, it seems that we define ourselves, and others, more by *who* we desire than anything else, including socio-economic level, race or even gender (Bennett & Royle, “Queer” 220). Even more, the narrator of this novel notes: “La identidad empieza por lo que deseamos. Secreta, persistentemente, irrevocablemente. Lo que en realidad nos desea a nosotros” (Identity starts with what we desire. Secretly, persistently, irrevocably. What in reality desires us) (13). Therefore, this essay will focus on the parallel forces that can shape identity: language and desire. *Shipwrecked Body* is a search for identity, but the protagonist giving in to desire is what shapes a sense of identity; the narrator through language and culture provides the rest. The power of language over gender identity is counterbalanced by the weight of desire.

Shipwrecked Body is set in contemporary Mexico City. An omniscient narrator tells the story of Antonia, a 27-year-old woman who is dreaming about being one of the three little boys she sees, the other two being her brothers. A moment later she wakes up and realizes that she now has men’s genitalia. Antonia believes that her desire to be a man transformed her into exactly that, “¿acaso explicarles lo único que se le ocurría, que alguna vez había deseado convertirse en un hombre . . . y que de una manera insólita ese deseo había resultado tan poderoso para realizarse y a la vez tan secreto para que no se diera cuenta que crecía con ella?” (Perhaps

explain to all, the only thing that came to her mind, that she wanted to be a man once . . . and that somehow this desire grew to become real, and was it so secret that she did not realize that it grew within her?) (14). The reason she wanted to be male is due to a perception of completeness in males and freedom: “cierto que desde pequeña había deseado ser hombre. No porque se creyera un varón atrapado en el cuerpo de una mujer, sino porque la intrigaba la naturaleza de esos seres que, suponía, eran más completos y más libres que ella” (it is true that since she was a little girl she wished to be a man. Not because she believed herself to be a man trapped in a woman’s body, but because she was intrigued about the nature of those beings she supposed to be more complete and free than her) (13). Antonia desired to be a man because, to her, this gender identity seems “complete and free,” just like in the *Bildungsroman* genre where the focus is always on the intellectual, emotional and physical growth of a young man who, at the end of his acquisition of values and beliefs, productively participates in the middleclass society to which he belongs (Buckley 18). Antonia’s desire influences her outwardly; however, she needs to behave like a man now: “¿cómo se aprendía cuando **una** no había nacido así?” (how do you learn [to be a man] when you were not born like that?) (16). Through her new body Antón/ia frequents specifically male dominated areas in search of her male identity since the everyday activities are what construct gender (Butler, *Gender Troubles* 2552). Ultimately, what s/he is left with is a synthesizing of female and male cultural identities, which are created discursively, but truly formed through the exploration of desire.

At first reading, the novel could be interpreted as a way to give voice to women, gays, lesbians, and transsexuals, using the language of the people in power: heterosexual men. This is possible, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, because “minor literature does not come from minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (*Kafka* 1451). However, this view enacts the very thing the book is trying to get away from: inflexible restrictions and binaries. Although voicing women and sexual minorities is part of the book’s structure, the text does more than just that. It transcends gender by questioning the prescriptive social rules that define and constrict gender identity; it presents a mirror into which we look at our own identities, prejudices, fears, stereotypes, etc.

The novel first provides a mirror for the reader through the author/narrator who is fictionalized in the footnotes. In Spanish many nouns and plurals are male by default. When the reader thinks of a narrator he or she sees a male one: *el narrador*. It is not usually said *la narradora* (which specifies a female narrator) when presented with a third person narrator in a novel. The fact that the omniscient narrator is a woman in this novel confronts the readers with the possibility that we have been reading literature through a male’s perspective most of the time. Furthermore, the narrator in a novel is usually identified so the reader can question his motives, and/or the positions of authority from which he is speaking. An omniscient narrator is always ambiguous in nature, whereas in a first person narrative the audience can be certain of the gender. The third person narrative usually presents its narrative as trustworthy and contains an objective perspective. In *Shipwrecked Body*, the writer fictionalizes herself in order to show us that this story is being told through feminine eyes. The way this is done in the book is subtle; we are shown a picture of a urinal in the form of open red lips, a picture that Antonia supposedly got from a friend. The author then states that the characters, author, and editors of the story would appreciate any information about the photograph so they can give proper credit: “los personajes, autor y editores de esta historia agradeceremos cualquier información que nos permita dar el crédito correspondiente” (the characters, author and editors of this story will be thankful for any and all information that would allow *us* to give proper credit). Our narrator/author finishes by adding that Antonia called her before the novel was published with the pertinent information about said picture, which was taken of a real urinal designed by Meike van Schijndel (136). This revelation comes out in the middle of the novel to a reader who perhaps has been assuming a male narrator, if so s/he is confronted with his/her own assumptions about language and social norms it constructs.

Having a female narrator in this novel is particularly important because now the reader knows this is a woman speaking and perhaps manipulating language in a different way than a male would. Male scientists have reported their findings on an array of topics in which verbiage used was never really questioned by the scientific community; however, when female scientists started to report their results in the same topics, differences in language and focus were certainly found. Basically, what is observed in science varies “according to the agendas of the investigators” (Alsop et al. 28). This is quite relevant since we are guided in texts through the narrator—we see as much, or as little—as the narrator allows, and always from a unilateral perspective. It is almost like reading the findings of a scientist (after all, literature and science have a common foundation: critical observation). Although the relationship between narrator and reader has been set, it also has been questioned because now we are aware that this narrator is not without a bias, making us think of all conventions in society through this unconventionality in literature.

Also, a female narrator changes our perspective of the story because she is not writing to promote the interests of the hegemony. This is not to say she does not have an agenda, though certainly it is not to expand patriarchy (*Between Men* 2468). The reader is faced with language that reflects the protagonist’s internal feelings by using male and female signifiers, thus expropriating the language, making it less alienating because of its inclusiveness. Also, this narrator is describing taboo places of male society that the protagonist visits, so they are not just being exposed, they are being subverted because a woman is describing them. Even more so since she is making us “into a kind of sex public” of Antón/ia’s quests and explorations of his/her desires, asserting the fact that identity, like sex, is public (Berlant & Wagner, *Sex in Public* 2614). Due to capitalism’s privatization of wealth, society sees sex as private, but in reality it is very public, “sex is everywhere present” in our lives, whether we recognize it or not, shaping us (*Sex in Public* 2605; 2613). The fact that our narrator frequently takes us to private men-dominated areas is an example. Especially when Antón/ia is invited to a Turkish bath, an area that men perceive as completely private and in which they can joke about taboo issues, such as incest. In this scene Carlos, Antón/ia’s male identity mentor, invites her/him to take a relaxing steam bath. In the room they hear the joke of a man who is asked by his daughter for permission to attend a party and by his son for the family’s car, the father requests sexual gratification from both in order to grant their petitions. Antonia is rather flabbergasted about the fact that everyone in the steam room celebrates the joke, she then confirms the rumor: “el mundo soez de los hombres podía ser tan ilimitado . . . entre ellos solos” (the vulgar world of man could be limitless . . . amongst themselves) (63–65). This is a clever way of showing precisely how sex is public: a taboo, private in nature, is made public in a steam room; a male private space, where nakedness is the norm, is made public through literature.

Furthermore, this scene is of particular interest due to the sensuality it exudes amongst men, reinforcing the fact that people have “nonstandard intimacies” which in this case seem to emphasize their homosocial bond (Berlant & Wagner *Sex in Public* 2610; *Between Men* 2468). It is within this erotic homosocial environment that the supremacy of the heterosexual male is reasserted through the joke, where the father, the patriarchal figure, is sexually satisfied at the expense of those in his care. Then it is delicately subverted by the presence of Antón/ia. She still feels attracted to men, and she will be naked amongst them, which makes her afraid that a look, a gesture, could render her suspicious (62). Nakedness is often linked to vulnerability, a way to remove masks. Antón/ia feels exposed since s/he was Antonia, naturally and culturally, and now *is* Antón, trying to learn what that means, feeling attracted to Carlos in an all-male environment. It is under this pressure that the narrator shows Antón/ia as a male/female consciousness, uses male/female pronouns and verb endings to describe what s/he desires: a man. This is shown when Ana, our narrator tells us: “estuvo a punto de acercarse pero entonces **lo** asaltó el miedo . . . ¿eran correctos sus deseos? . . . estaba desnudo pero el peso de la armadura que más que protegerlo **la** aprisionaba” (just when he was

was about to get near [Carlos] he was jolted by fear . . . were these feelings correct? . . . he was naked but the weight of the [imaginary] armor did more than protect him, it imprisoned her” (66). It is clear that language is needed to describe what is happening, it is also trying to describe what Antón/ia is feeling, placing him/her as perceived, from the outside, as a part of the continuum of the homosocial-homosexual.

In addition, the synthesis of male and female vocabulary demonstrates that an identity is being molded through language. This, however, is also being challenged by desire. The narrator tells us while describing Antón/ia’s feelings that “somos cuerpos encarcelados por nuestras mentes. Sólo cuando el deseo se abre paso—Antonia miró con deleite la espalda y las nalgas de Carlos cubiertas por una capa de espuma—florece” (we are bodies trapped in our minds. Only when desire opens up a way (Antonia delightfully watched Carlos’ back and buttocks covered with foam) do we flourish) (66). Desire is represented as an indefinable characteristic that does not fit into the discourse of identity. Eva Sedgwick uses desire as analogous to libido (*Between Men* 2467). In this context desire can mean the force that is intrinsic and untamed in us, which can resist definition and repression. This is important because language has been a way to control sexuality since the age of Enlightenment, where the issue of sex became difficult and the way to control it was through language (Foucault 1502). So, our protagonist’s position clearly breaks with the Enlightenment ideal of reaching truth through reason; this is a postmodern position, where the “status of language” can be openly questioned, in this case through Antón/ia’s own desire (Cameron 12).

It should be noted that even though a binary has been set (external narrator/internal feelings), it is not constrictive. On the contrary, it shows precisely the fact that “gender is also a norm that can never be fully internalized . . . [since it is] impossible to embody” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2552). This internal/external binary also questions the ways Anton/ia can be perceived by the outside world and his/her internal self, because each perception is followed by a set of expectations. For instance, according to culture and Carlos, Antón is expected to ‘hunt’ women like the male he seems to be. As Carlos points out, “va siendo hora de emprender la cacería” (it’s about time to start the hunt) which refers to the conquest of women (55).

In contrast, the narrator describes how Antonia recalls having sex with a man as a heterosexual woman, and to possess a penis now is different because she recognizes the will of it; she wonders, we are told, about the possibility of fusing her (Antonia), and it (her phallus) in the thunder of pleasure (53). Antón/ia is now considered the “núcleo dominante de la oración amorosa” (the dominant nucleus of the romantic sentence), this is the first difference s/he realizes after her change: “Reconoció que, aunque ella misma gozaba de cierta autonomía . . . siempre había esperado ser salvada, elegida, rescatada, vista, apreciada, descubierta, en un uso irracional y desmesurado de la voz pasiva” (she recognized that although she had some autonomy . . . she always expected to be saved, chosen, rescued, seen, appreciated, discovered, in an irrational and excessive use of the passive voice) (17). Language again determined where she stood and what her role was. Now that she has a penis, culture wants to tell her again, using hunting metaphors of predator and prey, where s/he should be. Once more what the outside prescribes through language goes against what Antón/ia desires. As a woman, Antonia internalized her pleasure and had always been one with her body, but as man she saw her penis as an independent entity showing a very different perspective of what society expects of a heterosexual male (*Shipwrecked* 54). Later on, Ana, our narrator, tells us that Antón/ia’ sees the sexual tensions between males and females not as a hunt, but as opponents in a jousting tournament, another departure from what societal norms stipulate (66). The narrator makes us note that when the world sees Antón/ia what they perceive is just one side: Antón. S/he is shown as Antonia in the intimacy of her thoughts, but when Antón/ia is exploring her/his desire, the language becomes a fusion to show both qualities: female and male.

1 Since our narrator happens to be the fictionalized author, we will call her Ana.

Another interesting shift is when Antón/ia examines his/her desire for Carlos and questions if it is acceptable, since s/he now has a male body and is trying to analyze what being a man is. However, when s/he is with Malva, this questioning does not happen. Moreso, the narrator shows us Antón/ia thinking about having sex with a woman as a heterosexual man and getting aroused: “Por fin sentiría lo que sienten los hombres cuando hacen el amor. . . Un delectable vertigo se apoderó de ella . . . mientras imaginaba que metía a una mujer en el baño de hombres y que allí, después de sentarla en uno de los mingitorios, le abría las piernas para hacerla suya” (At last she will feel what men feel when making love... A delectable vertigo took over her . . . as she imagined sneaking a woman into the men’s room, and after sitting her in a urinal, would open the girl’s legs to make her hers) (52). As Sedgwick analyzes, many try to align the biological sex with sexual preference. As mentioned before, men do not have flexibility in the spectrum from homosocial to homosexual, at least not as much as women (“Thinking Queer Theory”). It is noticeable that the language the narrator uses to describe Antón/ia’s fantasy utilizes all-female pronouns and noun endings and it is more remarkable that s/he does not seem to question it. This language shows part of how Antón/ia looks at her/his self; the other part comes from outside, from society’s norms and expectations. It is a struggle with gender, which has “to do with the patient labour that forms the impatience for freedom”, and, in a sense, shows what Butler means by “gender performativity” since Antón/ia is actively seeking “new possibilities of experiencing gender” (Butler “Interview” 3).

Another example of this internal/external struggle is Paula, who has biologically female sex organs, but in her mind’s eye she has a penis. Antón/ia meets Paula after two failed relationships, one with Malva and one with Raimundo (another of her/his mentors), and she immediately differentiates herself not just by her looks and the immediate attraction between them but by also saying “me llamo Paula y vengo a concederte tres **deseos**. . .” (my name is Paula and I come to grant you three wishes. . .) (128). They perceived each other and sent and received inarticulate messages, Antón/ia discovers that “el deseo nunca es inocente: tan pronto despierta, trama, urde, acecha” (desire is never pure: as soon as it wakes up it warps, plots, and stalks) (127). Paula soon confesses to Antón/ia, through a short story of her own: “Historia sin lobo” (Story without a Wolf), that “este hombre despierta mi hombre” (this man wakes up the man inside me) (132). Paula shortly, but concisely, conveys a sexual exchange where gender is interchangeable because she uses language that classically describes male-female normative intercourse and subverts it, making the male passive and the female active, changing the norm of power. Up until now, the narrator has been guiding us, but this is Paula’s short story; therefore, we see Paula’s ownership of language and self-perception. What the narrator does tell us from her outside perspective is that Paula “era mujer pero sabía ser hombre” (was a woman but knew how to be a man), another clear demonstration that gender is unfeasible to personify (*Shipwrecked* 134; *Gender Trouble*, 2552).

Paula is particularly important to Antón/ia because she is a clear example of a well-rounded being. At the beginning, Antonia desired to be a man; this desire defined her, poured out of her externally and she recognized that her desire derived from a perception of completeness in males. Paula is a synthesis of male and female consciousness with her own possibility of gender since she experiences it freely, proving that you do not have to be a man to be complete like Antonia thought. When Antón/ia first saw Paula, s/he had no doubt of her sex: “**ella**—porque no cabía duda sobre su sexo . . .” (**her**—because there was no doubt about

2 It is worth mentioning that puns are not common in Spanish. Yet, in this text the narrator/author, Ana, is using *deseo* as wish, but also as desire, which are the two meanings of the word. Therefore, Paula’s statement can be interpreted as “my name is Paula and I come to grant you three desires.”

3 Gender neutral possessive pronoun that reassures this synthesis.

her sex . . .), showing the external appearance of Paula. Later, she shows us Paula's internal perception (an active woman with an imaginary phallus), which Antón/ia accepts (127). Moreover, the narrator shows Antón/ia again in amalgamated male-female terms, but now Paula herself "era un cuerpo provocadoramente resuelto en sus ambigüedades" (was a body provocatively resolved in its ambiguities) (134). Paula is a sort of mirror for Antón/ia, who is searching for validation and for her/his place in life and love. Paula is not just represented ambiguously through inner reflections, like Antón/ia, but also through her body and personality.

Throughout the novel, the narrator has shown an Antón/ia that wears an imaginary armor that protects him/her from anyone or anything that can out her as a once-female. Although we read of her/his discoveries in female signifiers that are followed by female-male integrated language that happens when s/he is probing his/her desires, Antón/ia does not want people to know her past. It is with Paula that she is able to embrace her past and think of a future as s/he is: "en su interior, el capullo de magnolia había abierto sus pétalos rotundos y comenzaba a exhalar su aroma acidulado y penetrante. —Antes fui mujer...— exhaló también Antonia rotunda e irrefrenable" (in her/his interior, the magnolia bud had opened its absolutely round petals and started to exhale its bittersweet, penetrating aroma. — I was a woman before...— Antonia exhaled as well, utterly and unstopably (161). Finally, Antón/ia is able to express through language what she was physically and part of who s/he is internally. Besides, as s/he already recognized, there is no change without memory; Antón/ia should not forget who s/he was and move on (29).

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that throughout the novel a series of urinal pictures are shown and these are relevant as signs, as part of an identity discourse. As part of the narrative, Antón/ia photographs different urinals. S/he gets entranced with urinals because they exist for males only, outside of the home (*Shipwrecked Body* 103-4), and besides s/he sees a shadow of a female form in them, as later Raimundo notes: "Tenías razón Antón, es un hallazgo haber pensado en el mingitorio como las suaves caderas de una mujer" (You were right, Antón, thinking about the urinal as the soft contours of the hips of a woman it is quite the discovery) (86). The reason s/he decides to photograph them is because, according to Raimundo: "tú crees tomar las fotos, pero es el ojo de la cámara el que en verdad percibe y capta. En las buenas fotografías, se descubren cosas inquietantes...como en los sueños" (you think you take the pictures, but it is the eye of the camera that truly perceives and grasps. In good pictures, unsettling things are discovered...just like in dreams) (40). Antón/ia wants to find the true nature of these devices that puzzle her/him so much, and maybe by doing so find something about her/him self. Roland Barthes thinks of the photograph as a mirror, and elucidates, "the conventions of [photographs] are full of signs" (1320-1). Although Barthes was talking about pictures used as blackmail in political campaigns, his analysis is very much pertinent here in the sense of them being signs and mirrors. Photographs speak, they have their own conventions; they are a way to convey a message and to explore intimate desires, like Antón/ia does. The pictures play with this external image/language/internal feelings and desires; they are a way to analyze the amalgam s/he perceives her/his self as.

The pictures also serve as a mirror for the reader, who, along with Antón/ia is discovering his/her political, social and/or emotional position regarding language, desire and identity. Through a conversation with Carlos, Antón/ia reflects that desire can be a house of mirrors where you can see a pleasurable reflection of yourself (61). The pictures s/he likes to take of urinals, serve as a mirror into which s/he can find her/him self since they reflect male and female attributes. At the same time, the reader is invited to reflect on this and find his/her own desires, prejudices, identities, fears, stereotypes, ignorance, etc. As Butler mentions, we are responsible for others, "[we] should think about what kind of political structures we need to sustain life and minimize those forms of violence that extinguish it" ("Interview" 6). This is particularly important because in the story the narrator confronts the reader with Antón/ia's

fear of being beaten by the men in the steam bath: “¿qué pensarían aquellos tipos si supieran que antes había sido una mujer? ¿La golpearían, la insultarían, gritarían indignados o simplemente abandonarían el lugar consternados?” (what would those men think if they knew that he had been a woman? Would they hit her, insult her, yell indignantly or simply abandon the place appalled?) (63). The reader now has to ask him/her self many questions, some political, many related to language. When we read of this synthesis in the language, what do we think? Some of us do not like the female-specific language. For instance, a female doctor would be *doctora*, which is acceptable since many are in the profession, but if you call a female poet *poetisa*, or a female engineer *ingeniera* it is not taken lightly. It is actually seen as a way of patronizing the work females do in these areas, a way of saying that they are less than their male counterparts. Yet, the Spanish language is very male-dominated, we do not have language for Antón/ia, and it does seem like a form of oppression. For instance, if a group of women has one male in it, the whole group has to be referred to in male-specific language, even amongst the group itself. This usage of language creates stereotypes that are deeply ingrained, and in some ways remained entwined in the very fabric of society. Therefore, we unknowingly perpetuate ideas that are incorrect, for instance, the fact that a male and his needs come first.

Additionally and powerfully, this novel presents language and desire as parallels that can shape identity. However, identity is not a fixed inorganic thing, on the contrary it is fluid and ever evolving. Having a female narrator describing a male world is subversive enough, but then she describes the search of Antón/ia who is her/his self a deviant of the social norm because s/he will not accept the identity that has been set for either gender. Instead of taking the language that oppresses who s/he is, Antón/ia decides to follow her/his desires, challenging essentialism and finally emerging as pure light, beyond the shadow of language: “Tan pronto tocó la orilla y pudo reponerse, se miró las manos y la piel translúcidas como si hubiera emergido de una pileta de químicos reveladores. Un cuerpo naufrago, una sombra iluminada al fin” (as soon as s/he arrived at the beach [after her/his plunge in the sea] and composed her/his self, s/he looked at her/his translucent hands and skin as if s/he had emerged from developing chemicals. A Shipwrecked body, an illuminated shadow at last) (185). On the other side, Paula has a clear understanding of who s/he is. Maybe our narrator keeps Anton/ia as Antonia with no slash (suggesting a split in gender) most of the time because the homosocial-homosexual continuum is much more flexible for women, showing us that there is still homophobia to avoid. (I keep a slash when I talk about Antón/ia because I am still working on my prejudices and stereotypes, I do not yet know how to address her/him, how to integrate her into my life, my language). Yet, at the same time, when the narrator exposes herself, questioning patriarchal narrators, we cannot help but question her agenda and objectivity as well. Finally, Oscar Wilde wrote in *De Profundis* that “...every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetops” (1928). Clearly, public performances come from private identities; however, the public also forms us, and in that struggle we can find an identity of freedom.

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