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"Bordas sobre la trama esencial": Needlework as Communal Rhetorical Practice in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* [1]

"Bordas sobre la trama esencial": la costura como práctica retórica en *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*.

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Abstract

This essay applies a feminist synthesis of rhetoric and material culture theory to José Donoso's novel, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970). Donoso's novel depicts needlework as a communal rhetorical practice among women characters within enclosed communities. They sew, embroider, and repair. Drawing from Goggin and Tobin's studies of needlework as rhetorical practice (2002, 2009a, 2009b, 2009), we investigate women's needlework and sewing, contextualizing the historical and cultural referents within Chile's long history of textile work, including the explication of epidermal aesthetics in Halart (2017).

The paradoxically violent and restorative acts of sewing and repair provides the background for the many monologues the novel sets in the sewing circles of La Chimba convent. Each woman's stitch enacts revenge for ongoing displacement and confinement to domestic spaces of home/convent. This essay argues that las viejas develop and claim a communal voice through their needlework upon the mute and bound monster of the imbunche, which becomes the fabric for their polyvocalic expression.

In sewing the figure of the imbunche, the female characters participate in a tactile rhetoric that precedes verbal and occularcentric discourse and emphasizes the immediate and relational sense of touch. Our research is feminist as it recenters Donoso criticism on the female characters within his work, to showcase how their machinations and manipulations of materials enact an agency denied by a discourse and identity which prioritizes visual and verbal expression. We encourage Donoso studies towards a feminist focus on communities of women and process over individual and product.

Keywords: José Donoso, rhetoric, material culture, sewing, Chilean literature

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Resumen

Este ensayo aplica una síntesis feminista de la teoría de la retórica y cultura material a la novela de José Donoso, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970). La novela describe la costura como una práctica retórica comunitaria entre personajes femeninos dentro de comunidades cerradas. Cosen, bordan y zurcen. Siguiendo a Goggin y Tobin sobre costura como práctica retórica (2002, 2009a, 2009b), investigamos la costura de mujeres, contextualizando referentes históricos y culturales del trabajo textil en Chile, incluyendo la estética epidérmica de Halart (2017).

Los actos de coser y zurcir proporcionan el trasfondo de los monólogos que ocurren en los círculos de costura del convento de La Chimba. La puntada de cada mujer representa venganza por el continuo desplazamiento y confinamiento a los espacios domésticos del hogar /convento. Este ensayo argumenta que las viejas desarrollan y reclaman una voz comunitaria través de sus labores de costura con el monstruo mudo y maneado del imbunche y convierten el tejido en su expresión polivocálica.

En la costura los personajes femeninos participan en una retórica táctil que precede al discurso verbal y óculo céntrico, enfatizando el sentido inmediato y relacional del tacto. Nuestra investigación es feminista porque reevalúa a las mujeres en la novela y muestra como sus maquinaciones y manipulaciones de materiales representan una agencialidad negada por un discurso e identidad que priorizan la expresión visual y verbal. Al hacerlo, alentamos una revisión feminista de los estudios Donosianos centrada más en las comunidades de mujeres y el proceso que el individuo y producto.

Palabras clave: José Donoso, retórica, cultura material, costura, literatura chilena

Introduction

José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970) represents needlework, including sewing, embroidery, and repair, as a creative channel for voice and agency that hierarchical force systematically denies to women. Donoso refers to needlework as "estas inmemoriales artes femeninas" (pp. 24, 25). This essay presents an approach not previously used to study Donoso's great novel, drawing from feminism, rhetoric and material culture theory (Goggin & Tobin 2009) to point out that "women's manipulation of the material world is central to constructing social meanings that operate in the world beyond the traditionally prescribed (and circumscribed) boundaries" (p. 2). Women's sewing and needlework are a feminized form of material rhetorical praxis; the creative act becomes a rhetorical presentation of identity that supersedes social repressions. Colombian feminist ethnographer Tania Pérez-Bustos (2016a, 2016b, 2018) further develops the study of women's textile arts as a collective political expression "el hacer textil es una forma de escritura" in a politically conscious act and methodology where "se encuentre el primer cruce entre bordado y etnografía" (Pérez-Bustos & Chocontá 2018, p.3).

Combining these perspectives, this essay argues for a communal embodied performance of identity arising from needlework and sewing in Donoso's novel. This focus turns from the figure of don Jerónimo Azcoitía, the novel's patriarch, to the old women of the Casa, whose sewing violently performs and reclaims their bodies and of the emasculated figure of Humberto Peñaloza, a.k.a. "Mudito," a transvestite, "lurking behind the verbal mask of the other characters" (Magnarelli 1978, p. 269). Among his innumerable dizzying transformations, he joins with "nosotras" and

becomes a sewn and bundled *imbunche*, an emblematic and mythic figure central to the novel's plot and to needlework as feminized rhetorical praxis.

Representing the paradoxically violent and restorative acts of sewing and repair provides the background for the many monologues that the novel sets in the sewing circles of the convent of La Chimba, as each woman's stitch enacts revenge for ongoing displacement and confinement to the domestic spaces of home/convent. While talking and sewing, the women build community and arm themselves against threats to their autonomy. Through the creative, restorative and protective act of sewing items such the handkerchiefs that Peta Ponce embroiders, the fine silk of bibs, and the body of a young child, women create and express themselves across material surfaces that become objective correlatives for discursively constructing and protecting the self within networks outside of the exchange economy.

El obsceno pájaro de la noche sets the old women's sewing, binding, and piecing scraps in the highly constrained, regimented domestic worlds of the convent and home. Living detritus, the women of the novel pass time sewing, mending and telling stories with no end. These actions mirror the ongoing social disintegration portrayed in the novel's volley of fragments, arranged as indiscernible, meaningless realities. The recurring figure of the *imbunche*, whose enclosures preclude all prospect of injury, ranges across those fragments. Their effort draws attention to a wound that exists, not on that body, but on those engaged in sewing. As Mudito says to Madre Benita early in Donoso's novel (1970) "Envoltorio tras envoltorio. ¿No ve, Madre Benita, que lo importante es envolver, que el objeto envuelto no tiene importancia?" (p. 20)[3]."

Donoso criticism, especially of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* often notes the narrative's disruption and destabilization of the hierarchical subject. For Haws (1974), the splintered characters and shifting points of view represents an attempt to order the "terror of the relativity of man's world," a "result of the divestment of the ego of its normal role of harmonizing the anarchical contents of the unconscious with the demands of the superego" (p. ii). Lértora (1989) appreciates that anarchy as a "total disintegration of the self" generating "narrative structures without center, works in continuous self-transformation and mutation, and a discourse in constant displacement that shows the emptiness of everything" (p. 262). For Pollard (1990), the lack of space for the hierarchical subject leads to a "nihilistic self-destruction... which sets out specifically to destroy the patriarchal 'I'" (p. 60). For Corley (2017), the "invocation of the fantastic" disrupts social and power structures to "decenter individual and collective discourse" in a novel that "contradicts any hints of hierarchy" (pp. iv, 12).

This essay argues that, in destabilizing that centralized subject and refusing hierarchy, Donoso's novel deconstructs social and patriarchal repression by weaving fragments of text around a central subject that "no tiene importancia;" what's meaningful is the process of composing it from scraps (Donoso, 1970, p. 20). This focus on process draws from what Goggin and Pérez-Bustos stress in their studies of women and textile art to show that the decentered subjectivity of Donoso's novel directly reflects the female characters' practice of reclamation and resistance through the communal production of textile art. Studies from history, rhetoric and anthropology have shown that women's engagement with needlework (costura), embroidery (bordado), stitching (puntadas), and sewing reflects an ongoing communal practice (Dopico 2001; Goggin 2002; Pérez-Bustos 2016; Pérez-Bustos et al 2016). The novel presents the figure of the *imbunche* as the literal embodiment of those practices of reclamation and resistance. In

[3] Quotations from *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* have been taken in Spanish from the Kindle digital version; page references are to the corresponding pages in the *Verba Mundi* English edition.

contrast to critics who propose the *imbunche* as representing aspects of the self, from repressed desire to the dissolution and impossibility of any coherent identity (Valdés 1975; Madrid 1986; Pollard 1995), this essay argues that *las viejas* of la Casa develop and claim a communal voice through their needlework upon the mute and bound monster which becomes the fabric for polyvocalic expression.

Female figures in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* critique the patriarchal nature of Chile's class structure. The aristocratic figure of Inés indicates that sewing as reclamation is not limited to the serving class. Peta Ponce, the ultimate destabilization of the hierarchical subject, represents the apex of women's powers of subversion, evident in the impressive catalog of her skills: "meica, alcahueta, bruja, comadrona, llorona, confidente, todos los oficios de las viejas, bordadora, tejedora, contadora de cuentos, preservadora de tradiciones y supersticiones, guardadora de cosas inservibles debajo de la cama, de desechos de sus patrones, dueña de las dolencias, de la oscuridad, del miedo, del dolor, de las confidencias inconfesables, de las soledades y vergüenzas que otros no soportan" (Donoso 1970, p. 173).[4] Peta Ponce's character, resources and cunning are repeated in all of "las viejas," spurring their generative power to undo hegemony, especially through their rhetorical practices as needle workers.

As *embodied* rhetorical practices, sewing and needlework reflect women's physical manipulation of the material world. These actions require epidermal contact, the sense of touch as their skilled hands communicate through and transform the material world. Rhetoric (Goggin, 2002) and ethnography (Pérez-Bustos 2016; Pérez-Bustos et al 2016) shifts the focus from the produced object to the praxis, to the premeditated creative acts that empower the hand and craft. That knowledge, articulated through touch, expresses identity in an essential, immediate materialized rhetoric. Unlike verbal communication, which requires aural or visual and cognitive interaction, touch and feeling take priority over the male gaze, which "prioritizes the eye as a privileged access to knowledge," (Goggin & Tobin, 2009, p. 5). Meeting collectively, tejedoras and bordadoras exchange knowledge and develop a deeper political consciousness (Pérez-Bustos 2016a; Pérez-Bustos at al 2016; Pérez-Bustos & Chocontá 2018). Halart (2017) studies recent aesthetic practice in Chile, detailing artists whose production treats the skin as "the ground activating the sense of touch," which is "anathema to the visual hegemony imposed by the military governments and their policies of surveillance, repression, and disappearance" (p. 13). Epidermal knowledge is embodied and enacted in the *imbunche*, through whom the women's sewing performs and embodies self-reclamation.[5]

Materiality contrasts with occularcentrism and similarly privileged ways of knowing; materiality prioritizes tactile, "embodied knowledge" in a mastery that implies the "interaction between the body and the place... conceptualized as the *domain of the hand*" (Goggin & Tobin,

[4] This catalogue points to the close connections between the rhetorical practices of the "alcahueta, bruja, comadrona, llorona, confidenta" and "todos los oficios de las viejas" whose participation in material production moves from "bordadora, tejedora" to tale-telling and hoarding.

[5] The collective anarchic production of the imbunche is the mirror opposite of what the solitary genius of Doctor Crisófolo Azula produces when he sews the monstruous child, Boy: "se puso a trabajar para ir dotando a Boy de remedos de párpados, zurciendole la cara, dibujandole una boca utilizable, rectificando los caprichos anatómicos [...] el doctor Azula lo tajeó y lo cosió para organizar en el revoltijo de su anatomiía los aparatos esenciales para que funcionara" (Donoso, *Obsceno*, p. 195).

2009, p. 4). The novel's attention to *obra de mano* appears in the recurring allusions to "las manos verrugosas" of Peta Ponce;[6] Brígida's delicately skillful hands, and Inés' hands, which become sticks after she arrives in la Casa. Manipulative touch is *"*key to knowing one's materials and the dexterity of the practiced hand, for knowing how to transform those materials" (p. 5). Halart writes that this artistic work makes the spectator/viewer/reader aware of "her own existence as an embodied, if precarious envelope: both containing and constraining support to the self and an interface upon which one's encounters with the outside come to play out, confront, and inscribe themselves" (p. 11). This art reinforces political resistance and the "feminine from an epidermal point of view" rather than one that regards the skin as a "stage for the performance of gender"; the "skin allows for the articulation of female embodiment as thoroughly relational" (pp. 19-20). Touch-based surfaces support encounters that articulate "resistance against a fossilized view of female bodies as cut-off from public life" (p. 21); Pérez-Bustos' work on women's sewing circles as centers of political resistance develops this further. Touch-based encounters dominate Donoso's characterization of the women's gatherings, including their creative violence toward infantilizing the male before turning him into an *imbunche*, sewn up, his flesh enclosed.

Dopico (2001) is the first to point out that Donoso's novel predicts women's contributions to material culture and national identity through organized resistance to Chile's dictatorship.The depiction of the old women's sewing in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* arises from the long history of women's embroidery in Chile, which dates from at least the colonial era as in creating cloth and garments for decorating churches (Montecino 2008; Ledezma Salse 2008; Carrasco 2016; Pérez-Bustos 2016). The rhetorical force of sewing and embroidery as expressions of political agency appears in the construction, marketing, and sale of *arpilleras* among women protesting dictatorship (LaDuke 1983; Moya-Raggio 1984; Agosín 1987; Pérez-Bustos & Chocontá 2018). This, like the polyvocalic narrative of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, reflects the focus on textile work in Chile as central to girls' education across the social classes (Rojas Flores 2010). Communal textile art is also tied to the Andean past, as *quipus*, literally "talking knots" were a method of social organization that regulated regional governance and land use; honoring these rare artifacts registers communal identity and indigenous survivance (Niles 2007; Cuba 2015). All this figures into the social fabric in which Donoso's inscription of needlework as a rhetorical practice gathers and folds fragments into discourse. Locating our reading of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* around the women whose machinations and manipulations of physical materials enact their agency joins with scholarship on materiality and Chilean experience while showing how feminist understandings of collective, personal and political agency opens new modes for understanding José Donoso's brilliant, deeply subversive novel.

Brígida

The novel's opening introduces three women on three separate planes: Misiá Raquel in her aristocratic house; Madre Benita, cloistered in the doomed Casa, and Brígida, the most recently deceased of *las viejas*. Meanwhile, a fourth woman, Amalia, lingers in the shadows, omniscient but dismissed after she is mentioned ("Cómo no, la Amalia" "Bueno, como le digo"). Amalia's

[6] Donoso reserves the term "verrugosa/o" to describe Peta Ponce's hands or "puños", symbolic of her agency.

receding figure, simultaneously named and dismissed, stands in for what's forgotten in *La Casa de Ejercicios Espirituales de la Encarnación de la Chimba*, embodied in *las viejas*.

When Mother Benita summons Misía Raquel Ruiz from within the confines of la Casa to inform her of Brígida's death, their dialogue's elision and redirection underplays that death as Mother Benita recalls Brígida repairing a bridal nightgown, sewing up holes and mending the cream-colored garment. The reference to Brígida's needle-work anticipates the sewing shut of the *imbunche*, while Misiá Raquel's response humorously recalls the embroidered "camisa de dormir de novia," spoiled when its smooth satin was caught in the zipper of a suitcase on the wedding night (Donoso 1970, p. 3). Misiá Raquel regards Brígida's repair-work, "trabajitos así" as serving no real material purpose, "para que la pobre se entretuviera un poco y todavía se sintiera parte de la familia" (p. 3). Misiá Raquel's recall of the repaired nightgown appears in a dialogue that turns rapidly to domestic functions and material items, with Brígida remembered primarily for her skill with a needle: "nadie como la Brígida para estos trabajos finos. ¡Tenía una mano…! ...sus manos cuidadísimas fueron capaces de reconstituir los bordados de unas casullas" (pp. 3, 16). That needlework encompasses marital restoration in repairing the prematurely rent bridal nightgown as well as the priest's chasuble. Both acts recall bloodshed, intimacy and a demand for physical purity. Both fabrics aesthetically enhance those acts and provide visible reminders of that physicality and violence.

Misía Raquel's later stories about her former employment as Brígida's servant reveal a surprising reversal that fractures narrative and social expectations about the hierarchy, as the aristocratic Raquel ran errands and managed investments for the vast real estate empire that the humble Brígida developed without leaving la Casa. Brígida destabilizes expectations of social mobility and security; her sewing manifests as an aesthetic and creative endeavor tied to her agency. Contra the aristocratic order that silences and discards servants, Brígida's money funds the elaborate funeral she receives. Thus, Brígida's sewing, repairs, and restorations reflect her deliberate choice.

Mother Benita struggles with Brígida's disruption of order while she sorts through the items in Brígida's cell. That inventory initially seems a comprehensible arrangement of needlework and other tangible representations of her life, which she touches:

> Y sobre el peinador usted palpa con la punta de dos dedos, sin mover los objetos, la fila perfecta formada por el dedal, el alfiletero, la lima, la tijerita, las pinzas, el polissoir para las uñas, todo en orden sobre la carpeta blanca, fresca, almidonada. (Donoso 1970, p.16)

For those, like Mother Benita, who believe in order and unity, the perfectly ordered row of objects displays the deceased woman's life as a coherent whole. While rummaging under Brígida's mattress, however, Mother Benita unearths the inverse of the façade, "a esta otra Brígida no oficial, la que no se exhibía sobre la carpeta almidonada" (1970, p.18). Here, Mother Benita extracts multiple wrapped packages, representing the women as accumulators of useless things:

> amarrado, empaquetado, envuelto en algo, dentro de otra cosa...cosas guardadas por el afán de guardar, de empaquetar, de amarrar, de conservar, esta población estática, reiterativa, que no le comunica su secreto a usted, Madre Benita, porque es demasiado cruel para que usted tolere la noción de que usted y yo y las viejas vivas

> y las viejas muertas y todos estamos envueltos en estos paquetes a los que usted exige que signifiquen algo porque usted respeta a los seres humanos. (1970, p.19).

As Magnarelli (1977) observes, when Mother Benita unwraps them, she finds that "all that remains are packages within packages, signifiers that refer only to other signifiers" (p. 415). The packages represent the futility of attempting to organize a disordered world, just as the novel's narrative structure continuously shifts attention from one signifier to another, redirecting and substituting one sign for another. While this event is "a metaphor that clearly resembles the critical act," Mudito's recognition of Mother Benita's desire for ordered meaning, "exige que signifiquen," defers to a community creation that encompasses the living and the dead (Maganarelli 1977, p. 415).

In Donoso's novel, spurring Brígida's *making* of the packages, is her zeal "de conservar, esta población estática, reiterativa" (1970, p. 19). Unlike the items on the starched runner, ordered one by one, the hidden packages are a wrapped, knotted jumble that bespeaks an intra-communal rhetorical, useless *act*. Lest we as readers "comienza a jugar al juego de suponer que desatando nudos, desenvolviendo trapos, abriendo sobres y cajas, va a encontrar algo que vale la pena salvar," we are reminded that "lo importante es envolver, que el objeto envuelto no tiene importancia" (1970, pp. 19-20). Brígida's wrappings, like her repairs of the nightgown and chasuble, involve discarded, broken, and forgotten items that are like *las viejas* of la Casa: not intended for distribution or display, nor entirely self-reflexive. Brígida represents these women, often described as bundles or heaps of rags and scraps, working rhetorically to create community.

Las Viejas

Brígida projects a visually comprehensible self, but *las viejas* remain nameless or are endlessly interchangeable, "de otra muerta, y ésa de otra y de otra y de otra" (Donoso 1970, p. 20). Their collective existence mocks external hegemony:

> With their desacralizing erotic rituals and their endless, futile wrappings, [*las viejas*] warp and savagely mock the patriarchal models, the genealogy of origins, and the values of (re)production and productivity imposed by the world outside its borders; they pose the threat of otherness and relativization…La Casa in this sense is a potentially subversive female space where binary oppositions…are disrupted. (García-Moreno 1998, p. 35)

Brígida participates in this mockery by devaluing "(re)production and productivity" as do all *las viejas* with their bundling and packaging. This is part of their collective power, as Mudito's narration invariably refers to the women as "las viejas." Even when naming them individually, he insists on their collective power. They are not "a community" in any conventional sense. The difficulty of discerning any single identity among *las viejas* is reflected in the novel's representation of the indeterminacy of speech: "it is impossible to discern the 'origin' of the words" on the page, to identify the speaker of any given sentence (Magnarelli 1977, p. 95). *Las viejas*, marginalized women, refuse to participate in a "monolithic sign system" (Pollard 1990, p. 126). Their collective voices are so powerful that they can summon fabric to

defend them so that a pair of underpants covers Don Clemente de Azcoitía's aggressive nakedness: "el murmullo de sus rosarios al atardecer envuelve la Casa con un runruneo de insectos atareados en hilar la tela" (Donoso 1970, p. 44). Their murmurs strike the increasingly childlike Mudito as disembodied, without external referents, "un runruneo."

The narrative represents communal voices, such as the communal and collaborative litany of "dicen," as stronger than the written word. "The 'truth' of the story derives from the 'they say' [dicen] discourse that is embedded and encircled within, devoured by, the discourse of another and another, and without the authoritative (and authorizing) benefit of quotation marks" (Magnarelli 1977, p. 114). Reducing truth to discourse, *las viejas* perform the work of *envolviendo* on the concept of truth. Amid their communal sewing, the connection between speech and authoritative meaning fades away: "El hilo de sus voces va ovillando y el ovillo no crece, es otra versión del silencio" (Donoso 1970, *p.* 32).

Further, to speak with a singular voice is to become a publicly reified identity. Pollard comments on the socialized large spaces of la Casa as particularly feminine: "they embody the danger of...reification and refiguration for those who inhabit them" (1990, p. 161); that dangerous socialization is part of Donoso's intense inheritance from Henry James, for whom the house is likewise an opportunity for metaliterary reflection, narrated from direct and indirect perspectives (Schoennenbeck 2010). Mudito observes that these voices cancel one another out: "nuestras voces añosas, ese ovillo interminable de comentarios" work to "reconstituir con esas porquerías algo como una placa negativa no sólo de los patrones a quienes les robaron las porquerías, sino del mundo entero...para formar algo que reconozco como el reverso del poder" (Donoso 1970, pp. 55, 50).

Through speech and material production, *las viejas* reclaim what their employers stole from them. In claiming *things* and "menesteres", the former servants continue "robándose algo integral de las personas de sus patrones al colocarse en su lugar para hacer algo que ellos se negaban a hacer" (p. 49). *Las viejas* lay claim to their masters' identities, reversing the masters' position as the father discovers in the *beata-bruja* legend, when he spreads wide his poncho to cover his shame. That change is performed through substitution, by reconstructing the scraps left to them. The women form a new anarchic world, rejecting power as they claim and perform *menesteres*, menial tasks, rather than objects. In so doing, they rob a de-commodified identity that's wrapped up in the *material processes* rather than in the *reified products* of their actions.

The imbunche

The *beata-bruja* myth that first appears in one of the early *dicen* narratives subsequently guides the novel's history of the Azcoitías and the origins of la Casa. Its continuous metamorphosis marks it as an origin story conveyed through oral tradition. As the mythic landowner in Donoso's novel seeks to conceal his shame (in the person of his daughter), his sons tell of witches and the *imbunche*:

> Las brujas…querían, robársela para coserle los nueve orificios del cuerpo y transformarla en imbunche…con los ojos cosidos, el sexo cosido, el culo cosido, la boca, las narices, los oídos, todo cosido, dejándoles crecer el pelo y las uñas de las manos y de los pies, idiotizándolos, peor que animales los pobres, sucios, piojosos. (p. 29)

The witch, a proto-*vieja*, through her repeated sewing, creates the *imbunche*, which symbolizes "the enclosure performed upon the Chilean body in general, shutting it up from the outside world, infantilizing it, wounding it for the proclaimed sake of its own protection" (Halart 2017, p. 77).

Las viejas welcome the myth's promise of *bodily* reclamation and restoration through sewing. They speculate about the future of Iris' miraculously conceived male child and conclude that they must take possession of this being which they envision as "con los ojos cosidos, el sexo cosido, la boca, las narices, los oidos, todo cosido"; to limit the child's ability to act and speak for itself, they decide that they "injertarían en el lugar de los miembros y los órganos y las facultades del niño que iba a nacer: extraerle los ojos y la voz y robarle las manos" (Donoso 1970, p.48). This corporeal grafting requires them to sew their own bodies onto his, as this will "rejuvenecer sus propios órganos cansados mediante esta operación, vivir otra vida además de la ya vivida, extirparle todo para renovarse mediante ese robo" as "el poder de las viejas es inmenso" (Donoso 1970, p. 48). Despite the aristocratic masters who silence the novel's female characters and restrict their agency, the male child upon whom *las viejas* perform their restorative act becomes the fabric where they sew their new identity. Each of the *imbunche's* nine closed-off orifices reclaims an aspect of sensory experience that the women had lost. Among all these closures, the *imbunche* knows only touch, which requires presence for communication and heightens awareness of the material world.

The landowner performs "the masculine gesture of sealing the room by spreading the poncho across the threshold... in each version of the legend and in every act of enclosure intended to shut away the unwanted, to expel and be rid of it" (Francis-Rusk 1986, p. 122). Likewise, the progenitor of the Azcoitías constructs la Casa to silence women by closing them up into wholly domestic domains bereft of agency, influence, and public identity: Donoso's novel draws from sewing to sketch out the Azcoitía women's professions of ignorance:

> discretas, silenciosas en su mundo de costuras y sirvientes...con los ojos gachos sobre las sedas multicolores del bastidor mientras las ásperas voces masculinas se enardecen discutiendo cosas que nosotras no entendemos ni debemos entender porque nosotras sólo entendemos cosas sin importancia como el calado que adorna el borde de un escote. (p. 37)

Their wholly material knowledge derives from touch; they are immersed in decorative and discreet tasks. Within what García-Moreno (1998) describes as the "potentially subversive female space" of la Casa, she laments the women's ultimate expulsion, resulting in the "dissolution of their ultimately feeble countercultural space" (p. 40). The women look to protect that space, as does Mudito, who imitates feminine power by binding la Casa, nailing shut its windows and doors, joining them as one of "las mujeres las que hemos preservado esta Casa...urdiendo una red de protección para esta Casa" (Donoso 1970, p. 302). When Mudito becomes Iris' child, the women perform restorative needlework upon him, constructing him as a holy child whom they verbally bind. As Mudito moves through identities, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* literalizes metaphor.

When marginalized women, acting from no motive or design take charge of the figure of the *imbunche*, sewing and binding the holy child, they lay claim to a world that has marginalized

them. Participants and the reader accept it without hesitation or surprise. Mudito is the magically *real* (material) incarnation of that myth when the women bind him, making him the center of their endlessly wrapped packages, using "tiras de trapo" in an act of bandaging (Donoso 1970, p. 267). Using the same terms, (*trapo*) as have been applied to the old women of the novel (both *las viejas* and Peta Ponce) implies grafting (*injertar*) as *las viejas* had proposed in their initial plans for the holy child.

The nameless, plural status of *las viejas* shields them from such impositions and threatened violence. When the process of binding Mudito begins, he still hopes that they will not discover his secretly male anatomy, which is concealed under bandages. As soon as *las viejas* begin to sew him up, they remove his identity and potential for violence and begin, at the same time, to name one another, as their voices overtake his in the narrative:

> Me cosieron bien cosidito adentro del saco para que no se vaya a mover el niño, otra puntada, ahí con esa aguja para coser sacos, mejor ponerle otro saco más, tú que no estás comiendo, Zunilda, y que tienes fuerza, mételo adentro de este otro saco y cóselo, yo también quisiera darle unas puntadas porque sé una puntada que no hay quién corte...puntadas, a ver tú, Carmela, tú tienes más sacos. La Carmela cose. (Donoso 1970, pp. 419-20)

The agency and rhetorical power of *las viejas* appear in their remarks and skillful wielding of needles, of strong, complex stitches while they polyvocally summon particular women within the community who are adept at performing tactile material tasks. Although the narrative voice engages in self-reference while referring to the women in the plural, as they wrap "el niño" in the sack, he becomes a nameless, passive and objectified child substitute. They speak of him in the third person, indicating "no se vaya" rather than "no me vaya." Subjective shifts in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* occur from one word to the next, while the text's ambiguous pronominal referents imply multiple subjects (Magnarelli 1977, Lértora 1989, Pollard 1995).

In the social discourse around sewing and stitchery, "women's engagement with the material world is…informed by a deep knowledge of the materials used" (Goggin and Tobin, "Materializing Women" p. 2). In assembling that "deep knowledge," the women construct the *imbunche* collectively, using rags indistinguishable from their own bodies. *Las viejas* are first-person rhetors. Wedding words and action, they call for tools specific to the job: "esa aguja para coser sacos." No mere embroidery needle, but one large and strong enough to punch a hole in the burlap or jute, to handle thick twine, with a blunt hooked point and a very large eye. The needle chosen is "a vehicle for women's own construction of alternative discourses, discourses with the potential to expand women's discursive worlds and the power they wield over their own lives" (Pristash, Shaechterle & Wood, p. 13). Knowledge governs the selection and use of a sack needle, measuring up to 5+ inches in length, an image of the phallus, blunted at the end, with a single blind eye, that circles and ties up the enclosure on the body of the male sacrifice. The material is "áspera y hedionda del yute," rough and coarse, whose fibers invade Mudito's orifices and draw blood from his neck (Donoso 1970, p.420). The nameless polyvocalic communal narrator's story is the "yarn" (OED: a long and rambling story) throughout which instructions are dispatched while summoning workers to sew.

With variations on the verb "coser" ("cosidito," "cóselo," "cose"), the text's language prioritizes action. Verbal repetition of a voiceless velar stop followed by an open vowel and a sibilant "s" mimics the puncture, opening, and sliding thread, gathering the fabric into folds.

Turning from the imperative voice, the polyvocalic narrator employs the first-person singular pronoun, as "yo también" joins with Zunilda as a participant rather than as an authoritative speaker, yet one with "the power to perform magic with a needle comes through the embroiderer's familiarity with stitches: with their structure, with hand movements required to make them and with their seemingly infinite variation" (Wearden cited in Goggin 2009b, p. 4). *Las viejas* reclaim, restore, and reinforce of community while they take turns sewing. Each vocalizes her part in the "infinite variation amid repetition" that characterizes rhetorical skill in oral tradition and in needlecraft. Rejecting abstraction in favor of a use-based familiarity with tangible, existing materials, the material act of *las viejas* reflects their traditional epistemic knowledge, based in epidermal contact that precedes and informs rhetorical practice.

Otras y otras join Carmela in "cosen el saco" and completing the enclosure (p. 423). Although the "rhetor is long dead" in historical engagement with material practices (Pristash et al p. 16), the murmuring of those *otras y otras* collectively evades historical and linguistic comprehension in Donoso's novel. Detached from origin or function, the *imbunche* is reduced to "materia pasiva sobre la que van proyectando imágenes, el niño, Boy, el milagro" (Donoso *Obsceno,* p. 420). The process, not the product, provides identity.

Inés Santillana de Azcoitía and Peta Ponce

Despite Inés' origins in the landowning class, like *las viejas* she has experienced silence, elision, enclosure. After her trip to Rome, Inés returns to la Casa, not to don Jerónimo. In Donoso's novel, both Humberto/Mudito and Inés reject their assigned, subaltern status: "al fin y cabo ella, como yo, no era más que una sirviente de don Jerónimo, una sirviente cuyo trabajo era dar a luz un hijo que salvara al padre" (p. 173). Inés even undergoes a post-menopausal hysterectomy to avoid Jerónimo. In joining the community, Inés escapes being "esclava de un orden, de ciclos que renovaban la esperanza" (p. 322). Inés only begins to embroider after joining the community and discarding her identity to instead wear the worn garments, wrinkles, slippers, and voices of *las viejas* while they steal her costly possessions. Inés becomes a consummate storyteller when she joins her voice with theirs, as another convent resident remarks, addressing her and the reader: "bordas sobre la trama esencial, inventas detalles y adornos para electrizar a las huerfantitas que nunca se cansan de oírte" (p. 347). Metaliterary references appear throughout her tale, just as Magnarelli (1985) suggests that the novel's "conglomeration of narrations" be seen as "rhetorical embellishments" on reality understood through "the referent," a "metaphoric embroidery" (p. 118).

The old servant and family retainer, Peta Ponce, works for Inés. When Rodriguez Monegal interviewed Donoso (1971), the novelist claimed to have developed her character from an anecdote concerning his maternal grandmother: "su abuela se llamaba Peta Ponce y tenía una casa de juego en la Chimba, una cosa uno poco ambigua. Y se decía que hacía grandes correrías por el país en una carretera trayendo y llevando mujeres no se sabe a dónde ni para qué...esta especie de Madre Coraje criolla, digamos" (p. 530). Peta Ponce's character is the most disruptive, chaotic, materially creative of all *las viejas* in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*. She is identified with needlework, ornamentation, and rags from her very first appearance in the text, when Inés

explains how Peta Ponce first appeared, "había traído del fundo de mi abuelo Fermín para que bordara las sábanas de mi mamá cuando se casó y después se quedó en la casa para ayudar a coser" (p. 146). After Inés and Jerónimo become engaged, she takes him to meet Peta Ponce, who resides

not in the house, but rather, "más allá de los gallineros y galpones, donde la casa se desmenuzaba en un desorden de construcciones utilitarias sin pretensión de belleza: el revés de la fachada" (p. 146).

Peta Ponce's vast influence over the novel, from its narrative movement, plot, and character creates its "anarchic freedom, temporal elasticity, and repetitions" (García-Moreno 1998, p. 37). Donoso's novel first introduces Peta Ponce to the reader and Jerónimo, presenting her as a "montón de andrajos" whose first sign of her disruptive inversions appears in "tres pañuelos blancos de la batista más fina, con ribetes e iniciales tan ricamente bordados" (p. 148) that she gives to Jerónimo at their meeting. That gift challenges Jerónimo's epistemic knowledge and destabilizes his sense of order:

> Eran los tres pañuelos más bellos y perfectos que había visto en su vida... si alguna vez soñó con pañuelos, eran éstos, su fragilidad, su equilibrio, esta finura, sí, había soñado con estos pañuelos, exactos, estos pañuelos que tenía en sus manos..., esa vieja se introdujo en su sueño y se los robó. Porque de otra manera, ¿de dónde, en la miseria de su mundo, de qué oculto centro de fuerza podía haber sacado la Peta las sabias nociones de gusto y destreza para ejecutar esas tres obras maestras? Un tizonazo de admiración hizo trastabillar su orden al reconocer en la Peta Ponce a una enemiga poderosa (Donoso 1970, p. 148)

This beautiful gift from a subaltern disrupts the anticipated gift economy that requires him to respond in kind when he cannot, for their rhetoric excludes him, for the handerchiefs are not commodities. He attempts to put Peta Ponce in her place by putting a "moneda en las manos de la vieja," but his clumsy effort to shift from a gift to an exchange economy fails (Donoso 1970, pp. 148-9). Jerónimo's surprise springs not from the gift itself, but from his inability to reconcile Peta Ponce, whom he despises, meditating on her hands "verrugosas, deformes, tembleques, de uñas astilladas y amarillentas," that "no tenían derecho a crear" (Donoso 1970, p. 149). Jerónimo feels that their *process* of creation denigrates him, "relegaban a él a un plano inferior, de admirador de la belleza mínima de esos tres pañuelos" (p. 149). Dexterity, skill, and material knowledge turn Jerónimo's role from empowered sovereign to speechless admirer. In *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, Jerónimo fails to pull Inés wholly into his linear, orderly world and "romper la relación de Inés con el mundo de abajo, de la siniestra, del revés, de las cosas destinadas a perecer escondidas sin jamás conocer la luz" (p. 149). Peta's embroidery triumphs as a "form of meaningful mark-making—a polysemous system of writing" (Goggin 2002, p. 314). Her gift of the handkerchiefs resists and rejects the reified economy of exchange and enacts a "feminine milieu [which] resists conversion into an exploitable form" for *las viejas* (Pollard 1990, p. 151). While their needlework is pragmatic, it is not produced for financial gain, just as Brígida's wealth, gained through her genius for stock market speculation and real estate investment goes unused. The creative act, removed from the market, decommodified, becomes the focal point. In claiming skill and ownership of their needlework, *las viejas* move from serviceable and functional identities to creative ones.

Brígida's wealth funds the women's move from la Casa while the *imbunche* sack is abandoned to darkness and silence. As Mudito claws his way out of the sack, clamoring for meaning, Peta, a nameless, singular *vieja* identified with the group, remains active; her hands "vuelven a coser, puntada y puntada, cosiendo la rotura" (Donoso 1970, p. 436). With delicate and grotesque skill, "las manos verrugosas vuelven a coser con la prolijidad de que sólo son capaces

esas manos, puntadas menudas, muchas puntadas en cruz zurcen o bordan una cicatriz sobre la trama del saco, no puedo salir" (p. 436). These stitches embroider for aesthetics and pleasure, not utility; they perform a cross-stitch, shaping the X that is the mark of one who cannot sign her name. The cross-stitch links two stitches together to form a bond that bars exit. A plurality of *puntadas* unify consecutive *cruces* in a sequential XX, the female genetic pattern, forestalling any violent protrusion of the body from the sack and calling attention to the closure of a hole, as Magnarelli (1985) observes in "Betrayed by the Cross-Stitch."

Peta handles the burlap sack with the same care as an exquisite bastiste, far from the *arpillera* of agricultural products: "la remienda cuidadosamente como si se tratara de bordar iniciales sobre la batista más fina, no de coser arpillera. No quedan orificios: el paquete es pequeño y perfecto. Guarda su aguja" (Donoso 1970, p. 436). She sews each patch, mend, stitch as if embroidering initials on batiste, closing up all orifices with her X marking a semasiographic reclamation of identity ownership on her work. *Puntada* implies repeated punctures in a series, penetrations that create holes where no holes were before. This penetration "call[s] attention to the tensions between both being subjected and a subject...between oppression and power, and between women's confined space and imagined space" (Goggin 2009a, p. 34). *Puntada* also suggests the space between two stitches, the text where rhetorical practice plays out. Pulling tightly on the thread to close up that space, the stitches link the physical space between two holes on fabric that wards off external threat. In knowledgeable hands, a rough burlap that draws blood from the *imbunche* becomes batiste, a lightweight cotton known as "lawn," associated with fine, gauzy garments.

La trama esencial

Donoso has indicated that in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, "the form becomes part of the narrative itself" and that this destabilized narrative form expresses "a sense of disquietude towards human existence" (Pereira & Donoso 1987, p. 60). Donoso further acknowledges that his use of "the elastic forms of pronouns with varying points of view and accent" creates tension between the "inside" and "outside" in both identity and narrative performance (Donoso 1999, p. 131). This ambiguity in the form and structure of the novel points to Donoso's concern with disunity as he weaves together characters who in turn "tejen y destejen la vida" (Rodríguez Monegal 1971). This weaving alternates between the *paquetitos*, the *dicen* narratives, and those of the *imbunche.* Amid these, the novel's litany of *puntadas* replaces grammatical *puntos*, for the "punto final" is not an authoritative marking; rather, "muchas puntadas," which emphasize repeated puncturing/punctuating, acting as *puntos y seguidos* and *puntos de agujas* instead of *puntos finales.* Encircling and weaving replace closure or ending: the language of sewing creates a simultaneous inside and outside in the text, a möebius strip, "un hilo de sus voces," "voces añosas, ese ovillo interminable" (Donoso 1970, pp. 32, 50).

Donoso employs the language of sewing in his comments on the novel when he suggests that "la recuperación literaria del olvido, o de lo que parecía olvidado, es una de las hebras de la

trama en esta novela" and "la trama (el argumento, por llamarlo de algún modo) se desencadena ante la amenaza del mundo exterior de invadir esos recintos cerrados" (Donoso "Las casas"). *Trama* appears when Inés tells the story of the Casa: "bordas sobre la trama esencial, inventas detalles y adornos" (Donoso 1970, *p.* 347). *Trama* or plot is the surface of the myth that Ines verbally embroiders, ornaments and adorns in the narration of Donoso's novel, while closure comes

from Peta Ponce. Her sewing the woven fabric reinforces "una cicatriz sobre la trama del saco" (p. 436). In both instances, sewing is rhetorical invention that involves "the refashioning of the old and of the unanticipated advent of the new or, more accurately if more paradoxically, the advent of the new *is* a particular refashioning of the old" (Goggin 2002, p. 316). The fabric of the *trama*—myth, plot, sack, male body—is woven of voices, a novelty refashioned from the old, as the seamstress fashions the *cicatriz* of the cross-stitch, a scar and signature, her *punto* in the form of a cross-stitched X.

Conclusions

El obsceno pájaro de la noche radically destabilizes settled hierarchies, participating in the grotesque, the fantastic, gendered spaces, post-structuralism, and social commentary on late 20th century Chile (Nigro 1974, Francis-Rusk 1986, Magnarelli 1993). The novel's representation of sewing reveals Donoso's dramatic and rhetorical weaving of the individual and collective elided lives of female characters. They claim agency and reject repression in creative rhetorical acts. A focus on sewing and textile arts, on women's engagement with material culture as portrayed in Donoso's novel reveals their unrepentant departure from the enclosed space of la Casa. That departure displays their resilience as they gather their profoundly useless bundles of rags, their purpose hidden in the *process* of material creation. This study has sought to uncover the methods of their resilience and offer new methods of reading Donoso's novel, centered on touch-based processes of community-creation and through discovering the active rhetorical agencies of resistance in his representations of seemingly silenced women.

The communal resistance of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* anticipates the women who gathered to construct *arpilleras* during the Pinochet dictatorship. These material texts, sewn onto burlap, lay claim to memory, voice and agency, to tactile knowledge and political protest by communities of women who met to maintain their memories of family members who had been detained without trial, tortured, disappeared and murdered. When the names of those they loved were dropped from public discourse, the arpilleristas created their own semasiographic rhetorical practice of "thread and needle now at the service of images representing a collective memory" (Moya-Raggio 1984, p. 279). The *trama* of Donoso's novel anticipates that trauma and move toward the collective reclamation of history and identity.

Tactile, materially based knowledge appears throughout Donoso's novel, among the groups that met to construct arpilleras, and in Halart's epidermal approach. These works, plus Tobin and Goggin's studies of rhetorically constructed needlework and the ethnographies of Pérez-Bustos set Donoso's novel in a tradition of communal sewing as political acts that build women's agency. Further study of the gendered, tactile rhetorics of material culture could consider the domestic activities of cooking, pasting and gluing depicted in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* and more broadly in Chilean cultural history. Halart's observations about skin as fabric suggest new avenues for recognizing how touch-sensitive processes generate community and identity. Touch creates rhetorical invention in the muted world of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche,* as the female discursive body attends to what floats immediately on the sign, a flor de piel y/o labio, "justo debajo, justo detrás de la línea," revealing a discourse that has been there all along (Donoso 1970, p.18).

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