

'Ni Engels, ni Freud, ni Reich': narratives of modernity in Marvel Moreno's 'En diciembre llegaban las brisas' (1987)

Article

Accepted Version

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(2015) 'Ni Engels, ni Freud, ni Reich': narratives of modernity in Marvel Moreno's 'En diciembre llegaban las brisas' (1987). *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 92 (7). pp. 805-824. ISSN 1475-3839 doi: 10.3828/bhs.2015.48 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/74287/>

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Published version at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2015.48>

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2015.48>

Publisher: Liverpool University Press

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‘Ni Engels, ni Freud, ni Reich’: narratives of modernity in Marvel Moreno’s

En diciembre llegaban las brisas (1987)

Cherilyn Elston

Abstract

En diciembre llegaban las brisas (1987) by the Colombian writer Marvel Moreno has been largely excluded from literary history. The little critical work on the text has simply read it as a critique of patriarchy. However, as this article demonstrates, it is arguably one of the most important works of Latin American literature of the late twentieth century. I argue that the novel situates its feminist discourse in a complex theoretical framework constructed around the master narratives of modernity and their critiques, registering the contradictory transformations of twentieth-century modernity and the unravelling of its metanarratives in an increasingly postmodern world. Yet in showing how this does not simply reinforce a teleological shift from the modern to the postmodern, Boom to Post-Boom, Cold War to neoliberalism, this article goes even further to demonstrate that the novel’s multiple temporalities and complex ideological frameworks complicate the predominant paradigms of Latin American literary studies.

Resumen

En diciembre llegaban las brisas (1987), de la escritora colombiana Marvel Moreno, ha sido una obra en gran medida excluida de la historia literaria. Los pocos estudios críticos de la novela la han considerado simplemente una crítica del patriarcado, sin embargo esta novela podría bien ser considerada una de las obras más importantes de la literatura latinoamericana de finales de siglo veinte. Este artículo muestra que la novela sitúa su discurso feminista en un marco teórico construido alrededor de las grandes narrativas de la modernidad y sus críticas, registrando las transformaciones contradictorias de la modernidad, y el desmoronamiento de

sus metanarrativas en un mundo cada vez más posmoderno. Sin embargo yo argumento que las múltiples temporalidades y los complejos marcos ideológicos de la novela no solamente refuerzan un cambio teleológico del moderno al posmoderno, del Boom al Post-Boom, la guerra fría al neoliberalismo, sino además complican los predominantes paradigmas de los estudios literarios latinoamericanos.

In 1967 a young Colombian writer would publish what would become Latin America's most famous novel. In Gerald Martin's *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life*, the English biographer narrates the lead up to this moment, when Latin American writing – as the narrative goes – finally finds its place in the transnational literary marketplace. Amongst those who were privileged enough to read the manuscript of *Cien Años de Soledad*, Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, the Colombian journalist, writer and long-time friend of García Márquez, sat down in Barranquilla and read the text in one sitting. When he finished – as Martin informs us – ‘He told his new wife Marvel Moreno, an ex-beauty queen and future novelist, ‘He’s done it. Gabo’s made the big hit he wanted’ (2009: 310). Behind this aside, this brief mention of ‘an ex-beauty queen and future novelist’ hides a complex and largely ignored literary history. Marvel Moreno (1939-1995), author of two collections of short stories, *Algo tan feo en la vida de una señora bien* (1980), *El encuentro y otros relatos* (1992), and two novels, *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* (1987) and the unpublished ‘El tiempo de las Amazonas’, is arguably one of the most important Colombian novelists and short-story writers of the twentieth century. Strangely excluded from Latin American literary history, her novels and short stories are powerful feminist critiques of the position of women in Colombian society, as well as engaging with some of the most important questions surrounding Latin American literature and modernity in the twentieth century.

Born into an upper-middle-class family in the Colombian port city of Barranquilla in 1939, and self-exiled to Paris in 1971 – where she would remain until her premature death at the age of 56 – Moreno's life, like her work, is an exceptional yet paradigmatic example of the complexities of the Latin American woman writer in the second half of the twentieth century. Despite her close connections to some of the most important literary and artistic movements of the period, including the *Grupo de Barranquilla*, intellectuals such as Camilo Torres and Marta Traba, and the Latin American Boom writers (Gilard and Rodríguez 1997: 255-56), the writer has failed to receive the critical attention she deserves and has suffered at the hands of the literary marketplace and publishing industry.¹ To an extent, this was the result of the problematic association of Moreno's work with the canonization of Latin American literature in the international literary marketplace. *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* was disqualified from the 1985 Plaza & Janés International Literary Prize, despite having won the jury prize, 'gracias a las presiones del editor, el cual decide no avalar ni subrayar la notoriedad de otra obra más de la ya afirmada literatura latinoamericana' (Gilard and Rodríguez 1997: 257). Moreno herself would react against the close association of her work with that of García Márquez and the literature of the Colombian Caribbean coast, stating 'leo poco a Gabriel García Márquez [...] Gabo escribe demasiado bien y yo no estoy lo bastante segura de mí misma como para leerlo impunemente' (Gilard 1981).

Displaying both an anxiety of influence and an unwillingness to be included within national literary parameters – 'La literatura de mi país jamás me ha servido de referencia' (Gilard 1981)

¹ As Moreno's close friends and editors Jacques Gilard and Fabio Rodríguez Amaya have documented, her first collection of short stories *Algo tan feo en la vida de una señora bien* was poorly printed and distributed by the publishing house Pluma in 1981, which also censored the story 'Autocrítica'; the first edition of *En diciembre* published by Plaza & Janés in 1987 had serious mutilations and mistakes; her final novel 'El tiempo de las Amazonas' has never been published, seemingly censored by the author's family. However, Moreno did have some success in her lifetime: the Venezuelan director Fina Torres' film *Oriana*, based on Moreno's story 'Oriane, tía Oriane', would win the Gold Camera at the Cannes film festival in 1985; Moreno won the Grinzane-Cavour international literary prize for best foreign fiction in 1989 and *En diciembre* was translated into both French and Italian (1997: 9–18).

– Moreno seems to embody what Debra Castillo refers to as the ‘conundrum’ of women’s literary production in Latin America, in which even the ‘Western-trained and European-orientated’ privileged minority of women writers, as Castillo comments ironically, ‘does not stand up to comparison with the work of the great male writers of the Boom and after and is mercifully relegated to a mere footnote’ (1992: 26-27).

However, the period in which Moreno began publishing her work coincides with the *boom femenino*, when supposedly, as Diana Sorenson states, ‘the boom’s command of authorship was facing the challenges posed by women writers whose books were reconfiguring the publishing landscape by the early 1980s’ (2007: 161). In Latin American literary criticism it is a common assertion that women’s writing is part of the post-Boom, which is itself most often interpreted as a rupture, from about the 1970s, with the canonized Boom aesthetic; as Donald Shaw states, the *boom femenino* is ‘the most significant [development] of the post-Boom period’ (1998: 71). Indeed, the little critical work produced about Moreno’s corpus, mostly within Colombia or in the few European universities where her work has had diffusion, has been largely situated in the ‘boom’ of Latin American feminist literary criticism in the 1990s, which paralleled this creation of a market for writing by women.² Scholars have explored how her texts denounce the oppression of women within a patriarchal society and challenge the ideological, intellectual and political structures which sustain that system, its repression of female sexuality and gender violence.³

² For example, Susan Bassnett (1990), Brooksbank Jones and Davies (1996), Debra Castillo (1992), and Amy Kaminsky (1993). In Colombia such work of feminist literary criticism was represented by Helena Araújo’s *La scherezada criolla* (1989), the literary criticism of Monserrat Ordóñez and the two volume work edited by María Mercedes Jaramilllo, Betty Osorio and Ángela Inés Robledo, *Literatura y diferencia: escritoras colombianas del siglo XX* (1995); all of which include critical essays on Moreno.

³ See the essay collections *La obra de Marvel Moreno. Actas del coloquio internacional de Toulouse* (1997) and *Memorias del Encuentro de Escritoras Colombianas "Ellas cuentan"*. *Homenaje a Marvel Moreno* (2005). For more recent critical work see Yohainna Abdala Mesa (2005), Florence Baillon (2005) and Nadia Celis (2013).

Reading Moreno's first novel, *En diciembre llegaban las brisas* – the text I focus upon in this analysis⁴ – it comes as no surprise that critics have focused on this aspect of the novel. As Nadia Celis emphasizes, *En diciembre* is a psychological and ruthless portrayal of 'women's battles against the patriarchal appropriations of their bodies and sexuality' (2013: 177). The plot is structured around the violent, perverse and abusive marriages of three upper-middle-class women from Barranquilla, Dora, Catalina and Beatriz; and narrates the tragic consequences of the repression of women in a society ruled by the 'ideal del macho blanco' (Moreno 1987: 112). Dora is reduced to a sexually repressed 'cuerpo sin vida' (57) by her husband Benito Suárez, who believes that female sexuality is fundamentally perverse; Beatriz, 'obligada a casarse contra su voluntad' (225) to the philandering Javier Freisen, immolates herself and her children at the end of the narrative. Only Catalina manages to resist the patriarchal subjugation of women's lives and bodies in mid-century Colombia, escaping to Europe after the suicide of her husband Álvaro Espinoza, and therefore fits into what scholars have interpreted as the author's project to vindicate female eroticism and sexuality. Alongside the typical depiction in Moreno's work of repressed bourgeois housewives, *En diciembre* also represents a series of alternative sexually liberated female characters, such as Catalina's mother Divina Arraiga or Beatriz's neighbour Leonor Castro who 'había acumulado tantas experiencias eróticas como para hacer palidecer de envidia al propio Casanova' (269).

Yet, alongside the narrative focus on these three couples and the repression of female sexuality, this highly complex novel incorporates the wider context of not only Barranquilla and the Colombian Caribbean but a global historical framework. Cyclical rather than linear in structure,

⁴ Quotations come from the first edition of the novel, published by Plaza & Janés in 1987. Despite this edition's shortcomings this is the only available version of the novel. As Rodríguez notes, *En diciembre* was re-published in 2005 by Norma publishing house in Bogotá. However, this new version was not based on the original corrected manuscript but on the problematic Plaza & Janés edition and omitted the important 'Epílogo de Lina' (see Rodríguez 2008: xxxi), which, I argue is essential to any reading of the novel.

En diciembre shifts from the 1970s when it is set, to the girls' childhood in the 1950s, receding back in time to the histories of their parents and grandparents, and tracing the genealogy of each bourgeois family back to Europe, their arrival in Colombia and the modernization of Barranquilla in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Featuring around 260 characters and their stories, the narrative consistently digresses into the numerous subplots or backstories of its multiple characters, whose stories range across the globe and varying time periods. Importantly, this complex structure is reinforced by an equally complex narrative form, with an absence of dialogue and an extensive use of interior monologues. What appears throughout the novel to be an omniscient third-person narrator is in fact the subjective first-person narrative of one of the novel's characters, Lina Insignares, a friend of Dora, Catalina and Beatriz, who is the testimonial witness to the events of the novel, and is a veiled autobiographical representation of Moreno herself. *En diciembre* ends with the 'Epílogo de Lina', in which it is revealed that events have actually been narrated 'muchos años después' from Lina's exile in Paris.

In this paper I argue that the little critical work on the novel, which most commonly looks at its critique of patriarchy, has failed to properly interrogate how this feminist discourse is embedded in a complex intellectual and ideological framework constructed around the master narratives of modernity. Referencing psychoanalysis and feminism, colonialism, fascism and communism, Nietzschean philosophy and Marxism, *En diciembre* cites the major thinkers of modernity: from Freud to Reich, Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir, Mao to Marcuse, in a narrative in which characters are continuously shown to be creating theoretical models and analysing the world through conflicting ideologies. Indeed, the tripartite division of the novel not only follows the stories of Dora, Catalina and Beatriz but is in fact divided into three theoretical frameworks represented by Lina's grandmother Jimena and her aunts Eloísa and Irene. The

text's constant theoretical citations, moreover, are incorporated into the novel's expansive temporal and historical framework, which depicts the ideological construction of both Latin American and European modernity. It traverses the colonization of the Americas and the formation of the plantation economy, the creation of a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie and the integration of Barranquilla into the world capitalist system in the nineteenth century, and the modernizing, consumer-based economy of the 1940s and 1950s. Characters immigrate to Barranquilla from Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, or have fought against the Nazis in the Second World War; they participate in the conflicts of mid-twentieth century Colombia known as *La Violencia* and the emergence of the left-wing guerrilla struggle, and are influenced by the utopian belief in social, sexual and political transformation of the 1960s.

Whilst I show how *En diciembre* is on the one hand formed by the developmental and emancipatory narratives of twentieth century modernity, this is not to say that the critiques of modernity are absent. Indeed, the novel registers the process of disenchantment with the world that Weber defined as being intrinsic to the very idea of the modern itself. In its citation of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Marcuse, *En diciembre* balances the idea of modernity as the culmination of reason, freedom and progress with the crisis and destructiveness of modernity as expressed by these thinkers themselves; deploying a version of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the 'indefatigable self-destruction of the Enlightenment' (1997: xi). Furthermore, this extends into a postmodern questioning of all metanarratives; represented by Aunt Irene's 'escepticismo ante cualquier ideología que pretendiera monopolizar la verdad' (Moreno 1987: 177) and Lina's final recognition of the existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations of reality. This is most apparent in the novel's cynicism in regards to the alternative project of modernity represented by the Cuban Revolution and the Latin American left and indeed of the possibilities of female sexual emancipation. By the time it was published in 1987 these

theoretical models of emancipation, development and national liberation had been replaced by the horrors and repression of dictatorial governments and the establishment of neoliberal economic policies across the continent. Indeed, in the important epilogue the mid-century Barranquilla of the novel is now long gone, replaced by the emerging postmodern, post-Marxist and globalized world of the 1980s.

Thus, whilst *En diciembre* reflects the shift in Latin American cultural politics in the 1970s and 1980s in which the utopian dreams and the master narratives of modernity, including Marxism and feminism, begin to unravel in an increasingly postmodern world, this is not to say that this is synonymous in the novel with the postmodern end of history. Following the work of Rita Felski (2000), who has critiqued the general assumption of epochal change in postmodern theory as a false teleological move from the metanarratives of modernity to the postmodern paradigms of a globalized neoliberal world, I argue that *En diciembre* complicates the very idea of an ‘epochal transition from State to Market’ (Avelar 1999: 11) predominant in Latin American studies. The novel’s complex theoretical framework, which identifies with the conflicting temporalities and theories of modernity *and* a postmodern critique of those narratives, problematizes our schematic theoretical frameworks which posit a neat shift from State to Market, Boom to post-Boom, Cold War to neoliberalism. Failing to conform to the conventional periodization in which women writers only emerge out of the identitarian turn initiated by the collapse of Enlightenment values and the end of the Cold War, or the refractory avant-garde aesthetic of the post-dictatorship novels canonized by the academy, it is perhaps for this reason that Moreno has been ignored in Latin American literary history. *En diciembre* is ‘untimely’ not simply because it mourns the loss of emancipatory narratives but because its complex and contradictory theoretical engagements question our established forms of literary and historical periodization.

Polymorphous perversity: the vindication of sexuality

The predominant interpretation of *En diciembre* has concentrated on its critique of patriarchy and vindication of female sexuality, arguing that the ‘propuesta ética y estética de Marvel se centra en la liberación de la mujer’ (Gómez 1997: 140). Such readings have commonly focused on the novel’s representation of a number of female characters who resist the patriarchal repression of female sexual desire, Dora and Catalina’s recovery of their sexuality after their abusive marriages – ‘el erotismo lo que justamente Dora y luego Catalina habían descubierto un día fascinadas’ (264) – and its depiction of an alternative feminist genealogy, ‘las subversivas brasas del feminismo en cada generación’ (144). This is most explicitly seen in Lina’s aunt Eloísa, described by María Mercedes Jaramillo as the novel’s ‘intelectual feminista’ (1997: 119):

[tía Eloísa] rechazaba sin miramientos el modelo de la civilización patriarcal y si Freud afirmaba que la represión sexual era su corolario, ella estaba en condiciones de demostrarle que curiosamente el freno en cuestión se había aplicado a las mujeres, nunca a los hombres. (Moreno 1987: 144-145)

However, Eloísa’s reference to Freud indicates an important, and unanalysed, aspect of the novel: how its critique of patriarchy is actually constructed around the theoretical models of modernity. Eloísa, who had ‘seguido paso a paso los balbuceos de la teoría psicoanalítica’ (144) critiques the phallogentric nature of psychoanalytical theory. Likewise, Benito Suárez and Álvaro Espinoza, the abusive husbands of Dora and Catalina, are not just violent *machistas* but are shown as theorizing the world through Freudian psychoanalysis and Nietzschean

philosophy. Álvaro Espinoza is a psychiatrist who chooses to ‘especializarse en psiquiatría a fin de poseer la palabra y con ella dominar el mundo’ (128), and analyses the female unconscious through dubious psychoanalytical theories: ‘comprobaba cómo la maternidad servía de sustituto al tan ansiado falo’ (150). Benito Suárez, an avid reader of Nietzsche, beats his wife as part of his project to enact the philosopher’s idea of heroic self-mastery, the ‘superhuman’ and the will to power: he had ‘digerido Nietzsche desde los veinte años’ and was convinced that ‘era superior por la fuerza’ (44).

The novel’s use of such theoretical structures does not just refer to their repression of female sexuality and identity, as Eloísa claims. Alongside its feminist critique of Nietzsche and Freud, *En diciembre* also deploys a framework fundamentally informed by the work of these two thinkers. In fact it is Lina’s grandmother Jimena who is the novel’s most dedicated reader of Freud and Nietzsche and who theorizes Benito Suárez’s own violent behaviour via their analyses: ‘Lina leyó los dos libros de Nietzsche que su abuela le pasó rápidamente al descubrir de dónde provenían las teorías de Benito Suárez’ (44). Jimena’s theoretical framework, which constructs part one of the novel, is based upon a Freudian or Nietzschean understanding of the instinct or driving force at work in human beings – what Freud would refer to as ‘the wide instinctual impulse untamed by the ego’ (1969: 16) or for Nietzsche would be the Dionysian creative energy in pre-Socratic Greek culture – which is shown as coming into inevitable conflict with the repressive structures of society, or the reality principle. As Freud argued in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) that man is a ‘savage beast’ (1969: 49) and the development of civilization requires the frustration of the instincts by society – ‘civilizations are built upon a renunciation of instinct’ (1969: 34) – Jimena likewise sees the fundamentally aggressive or destructive nature of those desires and impulses. She reads Suárez as having ‘un instinto incontrolable’ (55) and ‘predispuesto inconscientemente al asesinato’ (55); her

interpretation of his wife Dora sees her less as simply being repressed by her husband than as condemned by those same unconscious forces: ‘Dora era arrastrada por una fuerza oscura hacia el hombre que sin lugar a dudas iba a causar su perdición’ (10). When Benito Suárez’s aggressive tendencies finally explode into the assassination of another character at the end of Part one of the novel, Jimena’s prophecy is fulfilled: ‘Así Benito Suárez realizó al fin el acto para el cual la abuela de Lina lo había creído siempre predestinado’ (92).

Moreover, this Freudian conflict between the individual instinct and the repressive restrictions of civilization is played out through the character of Álvaro Espinoza, whose story predominates the narrative in part two of *En diciembre*. He not only represses his wife Catalina’s sexuality but his own sexual desires, as he is described as hiding ‘una homosexualidad latente’ (136). A psychiatrist who discovers ‘a través de sus estudios de psiquiatría que la sodomización era perversa’, he has to control his sexuality at all costs in a Nietzschean struggle of heroic self-mastery: ‘debía oponerle [a la homosexualidad] su fuerza de carácter si quería dominar en el mundo de los hombres’ (136). Through Espinoza Moreno critiques how both Freudian theory and the repressive structures of society discipline the polymorphous sexual desires of the individual into socially accepted heterosexual and procreative sexuality. The consequence of this is shown to be the character’s self-destruction and eventual suicide after he finally gives in to his desire for another man: ‘porque un tal placer lo condenaba a buscarlo el resto de su vida, Álvaro Espinoza se suicidó aquel domingo’ (173). This is repeated throughout *En diciembre*, which reads like a litany of Freudian categories – perverse aberrations from the ‘normal’ sexual instinct, sado-masochism, paedophilia, neuroses and hysteria – in which the codification of certain sexual desires as ‘perverse’ or the repression of sexual desire results in hysterical symptoms. Dora’s religious and sexually repressed mother Doña Eulalia del Valle spends three years in bed ‘oscilando entre súbitas oleadas de calor [...]’

y ráfagas de frío que la hacían temblar y estremecerse’ (22), Beatriz falls into ‘horribles crisis de depresión nerviosa’ (256) and is unable to have sex with her husband without ‘dolores atroces, cistitis e infecciones vaginales’ (257) and for her brother-in-law Jean-Luc Freisen ‘las mujeres le producían horror: entre sus piernas se escondían todos esos virus y bacterias que lo amenazaban’ (240).

For Daniel Balderston, who situates Moreno’s work in the context of an alternative, queer, literary history of Colombia, this critique of repression is a vindication of the polymorphous perversity that for Freud had to be mastered; arguing that Moreno is the ‘escritora que mejor ha cultivado el “polimorfo perverso” en Colombia’ (2008: 1065). Indeed, the predominant argument that Moreno aims to liberate female sexuality, which is indeed affirmed in the novel – ‘ningún hombre en el mundo podía satisfacer las ansias de una mujer que hubiera descubierto a fondo los fondos de su sexualidad y tuviera el coraje de aceptarla’ (205) – must really be extended to sexuality in all its forms, from nymphomania and the most perverse forms of sexual desire, sexual repression as a consequence of normative heterosexuality and queer identities, to the intersections between sex, class and race. Characteristically in Moreno’s work, the novel also imagines a liberatory counter-space prior to the establishment of the patriarchal structures of modernity where sexuality could be freely exercised: ‘Todo estaba permitido, inclusive la sexualidad, especialmente la sexualidad. Ni Engels, ni Freud, ni Reich habían sido concebidos’ (144). Indeed, the title of the novel, which refers to Barranquilla’s typical December breezes, reinforces this liberatory metaphor, ‘vendría diciembre, la libertad entre la brisa nocturna [...] durante el cual los más locos deseos podían ser realizados’ (186-187). This fantasy of liberation also includes elements of a telluric, mythical, cosmic world, in line with the magical real, which challenges an exhausted Western rationality. Many of Moreno’s characters retreat from the city and its middle-class repressive norms to be re-encountered with the indigenous, afro or

primordial ‘unidad primitiva’: thus Catalina finally achieves sexual fulfilment with an indigenous lover, the ‘encarnación de la antigua raza salvaje’ (154).

The ideological construction of modernity

This theme of liberation, however, does not solely appear as some mythical alternative to Cartesian rationalism, but also engages with many of the theories, coming from the West and particular to the 1960s cultural moment the narrative covers, which sought liberation from the repressive development of society. *En diciembre* speaks of sexual liberation and the women’s movement, the ‘pioneras de la emancipación femenina’ in Colombia (268), and the arrival of ‘hippies norteamericanos en busca de hongos alucinógenos’ (269). It references the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, the Frankfurt School thinker Herbert Marcuse – whose *One Dimensional Man* (1964) and its critique of the development of advanced capitalist society became one of the most important theoretical works of the 1960s – and the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, the famous advocate of the liberatory power of the orgasm and the precursor of free love (see Turner 2011). In the third part of the novel Beatriz, escaping her repressive marriage to Javier Freisen, takes a lover Víctor, who is described as having ‘entre las manos un libro de Sartre o de Marcuse’ (263), and with whom she discusses ‘existencialismo, maoísmo y liberación sexual’ (263). Likewise, Benito Suárez’s friend, the psychiatrist Jerónimo Vargas, who psychoanalyses Dora, is described as fascinated with Reich’s ‘idea del orgasmo liberador, o mejor dicho, del orgasmo permanente que en su opinión conducía a desatar en el hombre las fuerzas creadoras del universo’ (64).

En diciembre’s engagement with the 1960s cultural moment, and in particular its theories of liberation, is furthermore extended into the novel’s citation of one of the other major

emancipatory theories of the period, Marxism. Indeed, Moreno's entire corpus, like many other prominent Colombian women writers, such as Albalucía Ángel and Laura Restrepo, reflects the author's own engagement, and that of her characters, with Marxist theory and left-wing activism.⁵ The novel cites the spread of Marxist ideas in Colombia in the 1960s, 'los muchachos que leían con cuidado a Marx y Engels buscando una estrategia revolucionaria' (82) and mirrors the historical development of the guerrilla movements of the period.⁶ The story of Víctor, Beatriz's lover, reflects the trajectory of many Colombian revolutionaries in the second half of the twentieth century. His story contextualizes the growth of leftist insurgent groups, inspired by the success of the Cuban revolution, within a historical narrative with roots in the civil conflict of the 1940s and 1950s known as *La Violencia*. From fighting with the liberal guerrilla forces in the *Llanos Orientales* in the 1940s, he learns Marxist theory in the *Universidad Libre* in the 1960s and later forms a guerrilla training camp 'en compañía de un grupo de revolucionarios que se definían maoístas (262).

These elements point to the commonalities *En diciembre* has with the themes of the Boom narratives. Influenced by the alternative project of modernity of the Cuban Revolution, the national-popular, and developmentalism, the Boom writers are commonly interpreted as ideologically in line with the emancipatory projects of the 1960s in which literature could not only compensate for the underdevelopment of the region but could work towards the liberation of the dependent periphery: 'García Márquez's Macondo only needs to be mentioned for people to understand that it was a fantasy of a liberated territory' (Franco 2002: 7). Similarly, the

⁵ As Gilard and Rodríguez point out, in the 1960s Moreno was involved with leftist political activism and militancy ('Biography'); her daughter Camila was named after the Colombian revolutionary priest Camilo Torres, member of the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, who died in guerrilla combat in 1966.

⁶ The Marxist-Leninist organizations the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) were both formed in 1964. The FARC had origins in liberal peasant self-defence groups during *La Violencia*, whilst the ELN was formed by a group of radical students after visiting revolutionary Cuba.

novel's wider framework represents the ideological construction of Latin American modernity, and specifically the teleologies of modernization and dependency which marked the post-war period from 1950-1970. As Neil Lazarus describes, this period was

a 'golden age', as Eric Hobsbawm has called it, of a quarter-century or so of explosive global economic growth accompanied, in the core capitalist countries, by an historically unprecedented democratisation of social resources and, in the 'Third World', by insurgent demands for decolonisation and self-determination. (2011: 2)

Alongside its citation of Colombia's left-wing insurgent groups, *En diciembre* also creates a picture of the modernizing, post-war boom years. The adolescent Lina, Catalina, Dora and their friends are constantly described in their blue jeans, listening to the 'rock de los gringos' and watching 'el cine norteamericano' (Moreno 1987: 39). The male characters of the novel work as commercial directors, own industrial complexes and are described as astute businessmen; they drive Packards, Dodges, Studebakers and Cadillacs; the middle-class families of Barranquilla send their children to Harvard Business School and 'las mejores universidades norteamericanas' (24), and try to give their children 'el hermoso aspecto de los bebés norteamericanos' (24). The time period the novel covers thus registers the transformations of the post-war period and depicts the emergence of industrial monopoly capitalism in Barranquilla in the 1950s and 1960s, with an increasingly consumer-based economy under the neo-colonial influence of the United States; reflecting what Adam Sharman describes as 'the neo-colonial development models of socioeconomic modernization that swept the region after the Second World War' (2006: 20).

Moreover, *En diciembre*'s multiple time frames also include a longer view of Colombian modernity as the product of the Second Industrial Revolution from the late nineteenth century (Sharman 2006: 28). Alongside the post-war development of the girls' adolescence, the text narrates, through the backstories of their parents and grandparents, the historical image of mercantilist Barranquilla, which underwent rapid growth during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. All of the characters live, as in much of Moreno's work, in the historic neighbourhood of *El Prado*, the modernist urbanization of the 1920s and 1930s which emerged out of the industrial development of the city, and was created by the North American architect Karl Parrish in line with 'los referentes estéticos de la modernidad europea y norteamericana' (Bell Lemus 1999).

The growth of Barranquilla in this period was largely due to the city's advantageous position as a trade and commercial route at the meeting points of the Atlantic Ocean and the Magdalena River, historically the main commercial and trade route into Colombia's interior: Catalina's grandfather had owned an 'empresa fluvial [...] la casa de importación y exportación que controlaba a lo largo del país la mayor parte de comercio con Alemania' (Moreno 1987: 104). The city is described as moving away from an economy based around 'los grandes terratenientes de la Costa' (104), to one full of 'comerciantes, políticos y contrabandistas' (16), many of whom were new arrivals to Barranquilla. As Eduardo Posada Carbó states, the integration of Barranquilla into the capitalist world system from the late nineteenth century would create a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie in the city, as many immigrants arrived in Barranquilla from Europe (1997: 67). Moreno's characters are members of the growing bourgeois class, 'la burguesía de Barranquilla' (220), formed of 'muchos extranjeros, alemanes, españoles o italianos', 'creando clubes y colegios, obligándoles [sus hijos] a practicar el idioma del país abandonado, y consiguiendo tan sólo precipitarlos en la clase

media' (223). As the narrator comments, the Hispanic sounding Larosa was in fact 'Labrowska, Slobrowska en un principio' (31).

The development of this cosmopolitan bourgeoisie is specifically narrated through the story of the Freisen family, which Beatriz marries into, and structures the third section of the novel. The first Freisens to appear in Barranquilla in 1921 are described as 'dos hermanos franceses medios locos' who attempt to establish 'una fábrica de tejidos' (211) in the city. However, it is through the arrival of one member of the family, Gustavo Freisen, that *En diciembre* explicitly sets out the ideological narratives of Latin American modernity:

Él, Gustavo Freisen lo había intuido en el barco que lo traía a Colombia, cuando una mañana subió a cubierta para descubrir con estupor al capitán, que apenas la víspera, lucía digna y ceremoniosamente un uniforme de paño azul con galones dorados, convertido, por el paso del barco a la zona tropical, en un obeso y sudoroso personaje parecido a un panadero italiano. (215)

Describing his arrival in Barranquilla after the Second World War, *En diciembre* narrates how as the ship enters Caribbean territory, the rigor and discipline of the crew is radically transformed by the drowsy, apathetic tropics. This journey from a seemingly rational, civilized Europe to a stagnant and backward Latin America is repeated throughout the novel as numerous characters arrive to the port city: Benito Suárez's mother, the Italian immigrant Giovanna Mantini, views on her arrival 'un río color de fango, inmenso, despidiendo un tufo podrido de caiman, de animal muerto, de mangles descomponiéndose desde el comienzo de los siglos' (46). Structured by the transoceanic adventures that became the basis for the colonial world system and from which European modernity was itself born, the novel thus plays out the

ideological narratives of modernity which constituted Europe as metropolitan centre, the cradle of civilization, and Latin America as periphery, the backward, barbaric Other.

In this sense, in its performance of the binaries centre/periphery, civilization/barbarism, *En diciembre* appears to reinforce the ideological narrative of Latin American modernity, which goes back to the foundational debates in the work of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and José Enrique Rodó. For these thinkers a barbaric America posed a threat to the image of reason, progress and civilization represented by the modern (European) nation. Barranquilla is figured as ‘aquella ciudad polvorienta, donde el reconocimiento resulta imposible y la reflexión ineficaz’ (113), in contrast to the reason and progress of the modern European or North American nation: ‘toda aquella armonía era el resultado de un largo proceso de civilización seguido por los pueblos del hemisferio norte’ (243). This binary is reinforced by how Beatriz’s husband Javier Freisen, born in Europe, is described as being caught between ‘la influencia de dos mundos antagónicos’ (218), and the text’s reiteration of the predominant trope of the ‘belatedness’ of Latin American modernity. As the Mexican intellectual Alfonso Reyes famously stated in the 1930s: ‘Llegada tarde al banquete de la civilización europea, América vive saltando etapas, apresurando el paso y corriendo de una forma en otra, sin haber dado tiempo a que madure del todo la forma precedente’ (1942: 132-133). Following Reyes, Giovanna Mantini figures Latin America as the belated guest or copy of Western civilization, ‘el empobrecimiento intelectual, en un continente que nunca había elaborado una sola idea limitándose a copiar, remedar y llevar caóticamente a la práctica las teorías concebidas por los pensadores europeos’ (48).

However, *En diciembre* also complicates its representation of the ‘backwardness’ of Barranquilla and the Colombian coast in comparison with the ‘West’. As numerous

postcolonial theorists have pointed out, the idea that modernity occurs in set historical stages following the development of Western civilization, as Reyes suggests, has obscured the fact that those elements identified with modernity – the emergence of the nation state, industrialization and capitalism, the bureaucratization, secularization and rationalization of culture and daily life – are inextricable from the history of European conquest, the discovery of the Americas and slavery. As the Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez states, ‘la modernidad no es un proceso regional, que acaece fundamentalmente en las sociedades europeas y luego se extiende (o impone) hacia el resto del mundo, sino que es un fenómeno intrínsecamente mundial’ (1998: 138-139).

Similar to the argument of Walter Mignolo and others that colonialism is the ‘dark side’ of Western modernity (2011: 3), *En diciembre* depicts the relationship between modernity and the history of colonization on the Caribbean Coast. Adding another layer to the novel’s complex genealogy, in addition to the 1950s consumer economy and the arrival of the new cosmopolitan bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, *En diciembre* also traces the lineage of ‘la aristocracia de la Costa’ (Moreno 1987: 20), back to their European, colonizing origins: ‘fue a título de Inquisidores y Oidores como desembarcaron en las ciudades más importantes de la Costa, y sus hijos adquirieron o se adjudicaron tierras labradas por esclavos’ (15). Beatriz’s family ‘Los Avendaño’ ‘habían llegado a la península Ibérica al frente de sus tropas’ (200), Lina’s great-grandfather was the reason why ‘Cartagena de Indias había estado a punto de ser destruida por la flota holandesa’ (66) and Dora’s grandfather was ‘un hombre cuyo tío abuelo había sido Inquisidor General de Cartagena’ (19). The consequence of this is a society ruled by neo-colonial racist and sexist ideologies in the twentieth century, which Moreno savagely critiques. The author parodies how these aristocratic families, which had been ‘rubios y blancos desde su apariencia en el mundo’ (200), lament ‘que el criollo de Bolívar hubiese puesto fin a la

dominación española permitiendo abolir la esclavitud (130), and attempt to avoid any form of *mestizaje*, ‘esos bastardos tiznados por la débil sangre del indio caribe y la endiablada del esclavo negro’ (201).

In this way, the novel’s performance of the centre/periphery binary reflects how this ideological narrative was founded on ‘the myth of modernity’, which allowed Europe to constitute itself as the centre of a world-system through its creation of a periphery. As Enrique Dussel states: ‘Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the “center” of a *World History* that it inaugurates; the “periphery” that surrounds this center is consequently part of its self-definition’ (1995: 65). *En diciembre*’s positioning of a world system constituted by both a European colonial and a North American neo-colonial centre, against an underdeveloped peripheral Colombia, formed by colonization, slavery, and later mass consumption of US goods, instead hints towards a Marxist critique of imperialism or a dependency school critique of the uneven development of Latin American modernity. This also points to the possibilities of a postcolonial reading of the novel and its representation of the complex syncretism of the Caribbean; as Sarah González de Mojica argues, *En diciembre* ‘revela las mezclas modernizadoras en una región periférica del mundo colombiano y caribeño’ (2002: 206).

Moreover, in line with the Marxist paradigms of the 1960s, the text also complicates its own representation of the backwardness of the tropics through its depiction of the destructiveness of European modernity itself. Those who see Barranquilla as an uncivilized, barbaric place are all European immigrants in Colombia, who, as Moreno shows, are deeply implicated with the fascist politics of twentieth-century Europe. Gustavo Freisen’s vision of Barranquilla as only subsisting with the ‘ilusión de habitar un lugar civilizado’ (127) is undermined by the fact he had escaped to Colombia ‘apenas un mal viento empezó a soplar sobre los ejércitos del Tercer

Reich, al cual había servido' (214). As he believes that 'De Marx a Freud, pasando por Trotsky [...] los judíos habían sido el enemigo oculto, la plaga de la humanidad' (215), Giovanna Mantini is depicted as a fanatical supporter of Mussolini: 'convencida aún de la necesidad de educar a la juventud bajo la divisa creer, obedecer, combatir, y repitiendo de memoria los discursos del *Duce*' (45). Moreno thus contrasts the perspective of the (fascist) European immigrants who arrive in the Caribbean, who articulate the civilization/barbarism binary, with a depiction of the barbarous development of European modernity itself.

These characters are just some examples of *En diciembre*'s numerous references, via its complex family genealogies, to the fascist politics of twentieth-century Europe and the Second World War – from Hiroshima, to Auschwitz, to Stalingrad. Catalina is the granddaughter of an 'aristócrata polonés perseguido por los Nazis, miembro active de la Resistencia Francesa, torturado en una vieja casa de Bretaña hasta la muerte' (103) and Javier Freisen was born 'dos días antes de la caída de Stalingrado' (217-218). This aspect importantly parallels another major theoretical paradigm of the post-war period, the influential vision of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Written in the shadow of the Holocaust, they argued that the rise of fascism, the crisis of capitalism and the failure of social revolution had actually led to the reversal of modern rationality, as Enlightenment progress was in fact 'sinking into a new kind of barbarism': 'What the brazen fascists hypocritically laud and pliable humanist experts naively put into practice – the indefatigable self-destructiveness of enlightenment' (1997: xi). Indeed, in this sense, the destructive impulses that Lina's grandmother identifies as having catastrophic consequences for the individual characters, are extended to the entire nature of Enlightenment rationality itself. As Aunt Eloísa reflects:

Si alguna duda le quedaba a tía Eloísa de que el hombre era una especie condenada a desaparecer del planeta, se había esfumado el 7 de agosto de 1945, cuando todavía en la cama [...] leyó en un diario que una bomba atómica había sido arrojada sobre Hiroshima. (126)

The postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives

To further complicate an already very complex narrative, this dialectic-of-enlightenment disenchantment with modernity is extended, particularly in the third section of the novel, into a postmodern critique of metanarratives. As I have shown, the theoretical structures of modernity, particularly its major thinkers – Nietzsche, Freud and Marx – are intrinsic to the novel, as characters are continuously shown to be reading the world via theoretical structures. However, it is through Lina, the novel's first/third person narrator, that all these ideological theories are really interpreted. She is shown as continually attempting to rationalize and theorize according to the models referenced by those around her, 'las fuerzas que invocaba su abuela – y cuyo nombre apropiado descubriría Lina leyendo a Freud' (11), and failing to understand the conflicting ideologies at work in the novel, 'Lina no podía comprender la dialéctica que había conducido a tía Eloísa a elaborar aquella escala de valores' (110). If in the first section of *En diciembre* she tries to theorize Dora and Benito Suárez's relationship through her grandmother's psychoanalytical or Nietzschean perspective, and in the second section of the novel is influenced by Catalina and Eloísa's feminist politics, it is only in the third section, under the influence of Aunt Irene, that she learns 'ir más lejos de su percepción de las cosas hasta alcanzar una nueva perspectiva' (180). Irene's home, the *torre italiana*, becomes a central metaphor for the existence of multiple, conflicting, interpretations. Defined as 'un irónico

reflejo de las problemas que se plantean los hombres' (190), it is structured as a *mise-en-abyme* covered in mirrors, to which all the rooms of the tower arrive:

Con los años Lina comprendería que el simple hecho de vislumbrar aquellos espejismos había modificado su concepción de la vida a sugerirle la existencia de la incertidumbre. Tía Irene y el jardín, los sueños y sus sombras terminarían haciendo añicos la estructura de reflexión que su abuela le había ofrecido como modelo. Mucho más tarde. (228)

This shattering of any single explanatory rationality, and specifically that of her grandmother Jimena, is reinforced by the novel's important 'Epílogo de Lina'. Here another temporal layer is added to the text as it is revealed that the narrator is in fact remembering events 'muchos años después' from her exile in Paris. Narrating the arrival of the drug trade in Colombia – 'Nuestras casas desaparecieron por la misma época en que llegaron a Barranquilla, en camionetas de vidrio azul, los marimberos' (282) – the epilogue registers the increasingly globalized, postmodern and postfeminist world of the 1980s in which 'las nuevas muchachas de Barranquilla, ya liberadas [...] hacían el amor con desenvoltura' (282). The emphasis on memory in Lina's epilogue seems to instil the novel with elements of a melancholic work of memory, linking this 1987 novel to Idelber Avelar's discussion of postdictatorial Southern Cone literature, whereby the totalizing works of the Boom have fractured into allegorical works of mourning (1999). In her last and unpublished work 'El tiempo de las Amazonas', finished in 1995, these transformations become fully realized as Moreno creates a world defined by the fall of the Berlin wall, the AIDS crisis and the backlash against female sexual liberation and the feminist movement.

This shift is also apparent in *En diciembre* in how, whilst it shows its characters as formed by the revolutionary utopias of the 1960s, it also reveals a fundamental disillusionment with those emancipatory paradigms. This is most clearly seen in the character of Beatriz. Whilst scholars have concentrated on the ‘liberation’ of Dora and Catalina, they have failed to note how Beatriz ends up killing herself at the end of the novel; her self-destruction therefore mirrors the tragic ends of the two main male characters, Benito Suárez and Álvaro Espinoza. As we have seen, it is Beatriz who engages with the emancipatory theories of the 1960s alongside her left-wing lover Víctor. Reflecting the author’s own disillusionment with the left,⁷ Víctor’s ideological consciousness is also shown to be dubious: ‘Beatriz ignoraba que antes de cada entrevista Víctor se aprendía de memoria la explicación banalizada de los textos filosóficos’ (263); his guerrilla training camp descends into ‘el infierno [...] a los seis meses fusilaban al capataz y convertidos en déspotas, trataban como esclavos a los pocos indios que no habían podido ir’ (262). This parallels the novel’s reference to a generation of idealists in Colombia who would ‘sacrificarse en el holocausto de la guerrilla’ (82). Moreover, from reading ‘existencialismo, maoísmo y liberación sexual’, Beatriz herself begins to question the theories of sexual liberation:

a medida que Javier se volvía más hiriente y agresivo, ella trataba en vano de concentrarse sobre *El Segundo Sexo* o los recientes escritos de las feministas norteamericanas; en lugar de consolarla, aquellos libros le dejaban un gusto de amargura y la impresión de ser responsable de su suerte [...] las soluciones

⁷ As Gilard and Rodríguez note, when the author moved to Paris in the early 1970s she was an active participant in the formation of the magazine *Libre*, which became the main platform for the intellectual debates over the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla’s incarceration for criticizing the Cuban revolutionary government (1997: 256). Moreno’s disillusionment with the Cuban Revolution, and indeed the left in general, is a consistent theme throughout her work. Her story ‘Autocrítica’, which deploys an anti-Stalinist metaphor, was dedicated to Carlos Franqui, the Cuban dissident who officially broke with the revolution after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

ofrecidas se le antojaban irrisorias o imposible de realizarse en el contexto de Barranquilla; la liberación sexual, tan en boga por entonces, la remitía a las angustias de su propia experiencia, y Víctor le había mostrado la faz más negra de la revolución. Cerró los libros declarándole a Lina estar cansada de tantas utopías y complicaciones. Javier volvería, se puso a esperarlo. (268-7)

Beatriz's belief that feminist theory is inappropriate in the context of Colombian society provides a counterpoint to Aunt Eloísa's explicit feminist theorizing, and seems to reflect a postmodern/postcolonial critique of the exclusionary (Western) female subject of feminist theory. Importantly it points to how, alongside the novel's feminist critique of patriarchy and its vindication of female sexual desire, *En diciembre* also displays a contradictory questioning of feminist theory as an emancipatory narrative of modernity: 'la liberación sexual no liberaba en nada a las mujeres, sino que las colocaba a todas en condición de disponibilidad total para los hombres' (269).

En diciembre thus display an incredulity towards metanarratives, in line with Lyotard's definition of the postmodern, and registers the decline of the developmental and emancipatory narratives of modernity. In Latin American literary terms this reflects 'the crisis of a specific cultural politics proper to the boom of Latin American literature in the 1960s' (Avelar 1999: 11) and seems to situate the text within the paradigms of the post-Boom and the conventional periodization in Latin American literary history in which women's writing emerges out of the collapse of the lettered city, Enlightenment values and the end of the Cold War (Franco 2002). However, whilst to an extent this is true, the multiple theories of modernity cited by the novel, and its engagement, as I have shown, with the historical development of modernity, colonialism and capitalism in Barranquilla, problematize any attempt to neatly define *En diciembre* as a

postmodern text. Whilst the novel exposes the repressive and limited potential of theories of social and political transformation, the time frame it covers and many of the topics it discusses – the ideological construction of Latin American modernity, modernization, Marxism and the Latin American left and the theories of emancipation of the 1960s – also position the text within such paradigms. Indeed, its critiques of modernity do not solely relay a postmodern questioning of historical truth but are derived from those very thinkers of the modern – Marx, Freud, Nietzsche etc. – who register the crisis and destructiveness of modernity from within.

Consequently this 1987 text complicates the predominant narrative in which the emergence of women's writing is seen as synonymous with the postmodern/post-boom, which in Latin America is often confounded with the postdictatorship paradigm. In contrast to the neo-avant-garde experimentation, or the refractory aesthetic of the women writers canonized in late twentieth century Latin American literature (Franco 1996), Moreno's novel shows itself as fundamentally formed by narratives of modernity and their critiques. In this way, the novel complicates the idea of an epochal shift from modernity to postmodernity, which in Latin American literary terms is often uncritically seen as synonymous with the transition from the Boom to the post-Boom. Indeed as Rita Felski has argued, the idea of postmodern rupture with the teleological, linear and developmental narratives of modernity problematically reinforces a narrative of epochal shifts which it supposedly refutes: 'big historical stories about the demise of historical consciousness testify to the continuing power of the very modes of thought that they are trying to disprove' (2000: 12).

In the same way that by placing women – who were never the subject of the Enlightenment – at the centre of analysis, which as Felski argues, exposes 'the varied and often confusing meanings of modernity and postmodernity' (2000: 3), I would argue that focusing on non-

canonical works such as *En diciembre* likewise reveals a more nuanced understanding of Latin American literary history. To borrow Avelar's term, the novel is 'untimely', not in the sense that it mourns narratives of emancipation, but in that it challenges our established forms of literary and historical periodization, our teleological narratives which move from modern to postmodern, Cold War to neoliberalism, Boom to post-Boom. *En diciembre*'s dazzling mixture of Freud and Marx, colonialism and feminism, the Frankfurt School and postmodernism, demonstrates how the schematic teleological shifts, which predominate conventional understandings of Latin American literary history, often fail to account for the contradictory theoretical and historical transformations of the late twentieth century.

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