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Chapter 12

# The Disability Twist in Stranger Novels by Mario Bellatin and Carmen Boullosa

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The difference between noting a bodily sensation and organizing those sensations as symptoms pertaining to a diagnosis aligns with the difference between meditating and narrating. In meditation, sensations that arise in the body and thoughts that pass through the mind receive judgment-free, passive observation. By contrast, narrative seeks out and assigns meaning to thoughts and sensations, and often works to group them into stories with plot arcs. Narrative tends to prefer diagnoses and cures—the opposite goal of the meditation that values impassivity and acceptance of things as they are. Disability scholar Lennard Davis anticipates the affinity between diagnosis and narrative habits when he describes the traditional novel as a journey through the artificially constructed abnormal state that concludes with an equally manipulative, reinstated ability or cure: "A normal situation becomes abnormal, and by the end of the novel, normality or some variant on it is restored" (*Bending Over Backwards* 98). The traditional novel, according to Davis, imagines certain qualities as "average" and claims this portrait of the "normal" as verisimilitude; in Davis's memorable wording for this formula, "real means average" (*Bending Over Backwards* 93). For readers interested in disability topics, the conflation of verisimilitude and the notion of the average causes problems not only because human complexity exceeds mathematical formula, but also because impairment tends to be excluded from the novelistic norm. Some ten years later, Davis updates his influential analysis and begins *The End of Normal* by arguing that even though language fashions have changed and the word "normal" has fallen from favor, a simple replacement has emerged for the offensive term: "*diversity* is the

new *normality*" (1).[1] This new normalcy continues to define itself against impairment: "We want diversity in all things, but not insofar as medicalized bodies are concerned. It is in this realm that 'normal' still applies with force" (7). Giorgio Agamben's ideas regarding devalued bare life (*zoe*) and entitled specific life (*bios*) prompt Davis's "ultimate question" here regarding "whether diversity can ever encompass disability, which is another way of asking whether diversity can ever encompass abnormality or whether *bios* under neoliberalism can ever encompass *zoe*" (6). The radical difference between bare life and entitled life anticipates the finding in the present chapter that even experimental novelists fail to manage such inclusivity. Still, a literary scholar's best hope for resistance to the confusion of nonthreatening diversity and the "real" might lie with experimental fiction that gestures toward meditation and not just diagnosis.

Mario Bellatin (Mexican born, Peruvian raised, now residing in Mexico City) and Carmen Boullosa (Mexican born and raised, currently residing in New York) craft what can be called "stranger" novels because the characters' wild impairments, a collection of unstable symptoms that pertain to an uncertain diagnosis, make the physical conditions weirder than the known courses of human illness; if readers insist on diagnosing these characters, they will soon realize that these strange figures cannot be confused with the "real." Against the truism that human longevity inevitably triggers disability—or, as Davis puts it for the benefit of the temporarily able-bodied audience, " 'them' is actually 'us' "—the physiques designed by Boullosa and Bellatin present impossible exoticism (*Bending Over Backwards* 4). Bellatin's *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* (Mishima's Illustrated Biography) (2009) presents the experiences of a headless novelist and downplays any resulting impairment. In the context of the present essay, that sense of humor presents a sort of flaw, because the jokes allow Bellatin to remain faithful to the novelistic norm of the "average," now presented as amusing diversity, despite Bellatin's effort to break the narrative into meditative fragments. For her part, Boullosa repeats a scene of fantastic bodily mutation in three novels, *Cielos de la Tierra* (Heavens on Earth) (1997), *La novela perfecta* (The Perfect Novel) (2006), and *El complot de los Románticos* (The Romantic Plot) (2009). These scenes present a kind of free-form visual meditation that confounds the narrators, who gape, horrified, at what they consider abject impairment and the very embodiment of zoe. Despite the narrators' fear of these stranger abilities in each of the three novels, the reader can identify the meditative possibilities accessible in the unashamed bodily redesign, against the narrative approach that seeks diagnosis and cure.

If the experimental novels fall short of addressing Davis's worry that disability "undergirds our very idea of diversity," they do successfully refuse facile notions of "progress" (*The End of Normal* 8). Bellatin's meandering *Bio-*

*grafía ilustrada de Mishima* proves difficult to encapsulate in a plot summary because the novel does not "go" anywhere; it does not progress according to the standards of diagnosis. Bellatin installs this anti-progressive structure by avoiding hierarchical distinctions between principal and secondary levels of data. To name just one example of this confusing approach that declines to make some details "count" more than others, Bellatin ends a paragraph about a swimming ritual among monks with a seemingly extraneous detail: During the monks' trance, the yellow bus remained motionless in the yard where it had been parked. (15). The bus, under the rules of neutral observance privileged in meditation, forms a detail as important, or unimportant, as nearly any other data available in the text. To a lesser degree, the multiple frames and juxtaposed voices of Boullosa's *Cielos de la Tierra* work toward an indigestible novel, though the text still contains a semblance of a narrative arc that enables synopsis. In the same style, *La novela perfecta*—as anticipated by the parenthetical subtitle (*Un cuento largo*) (A Long Story)—features an intercalated short story and failed meta-plot for a novel, but still permits Vertiz, the protagonist, to undergo a familiar development arc: from suspicion, to acceptance, to rejection of the virtual technology behind the "perfect novel." Finally, with *El complot de los Románticos* Boullosa achieves a profusion of competing narrators and events that becomes so elaborate as to defy adequate plot summary. If Boullosa voices suspicion of progress, she sometimes locates her objection in the feared triumph of the image over the word. Unexpectedly perhaps, Bellatin's and Boullosa's divergent levels of open-mindedness toward stranger impairment correlates to their degree of openness to visual mediums. Boullosa's three texts explicitly dread the imagined victory of the image over intellectual coherence, and the narrators in these novels articulate a defense of the necessity of literature against the abject disability conjured by excessive reliance on the image. By contrast, Bellatin's *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* concludes with fifty photographs, making the number of pictures roughly equal to the number of pages of written text, all couched in the context of ongoing jokes. The destabilizing, meditative approach of *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* questions the slide between the real and the normal, and yet Bellatin's endgame seems merely to twist diversity into sameness in a banal gesture that fails to defy the concept of the "norm."

## Mario Bellatin and Biografía ilustrada de Mishima

For the reader unfamiliar with protagonist Yukio Mishima's historical biography (1925–1970), I should explain that the Japanese writer committed hara-kiri and then died of decapitation by sword-blade at the hand of a

friend, Morita, who, both in factual history and in Bellatin's retelling of events, subsequently shot himself.[2] In the novel, death for the writer does not come in a "definitive" manner. In a chicken-or-the-egg paradox, Bellatin's text attributes Mishima's indefinite death to headlessness: "if [Mishima] had a head like everyone else he would be dead in the same way that the rest die: definitively" (47). The collection of reproduced photographs present the historical, black-and-white image of Yukio Mishima's severed head and a photo of Bellatin himself, captioned as an analyst who worked on Mishima's case. These captions manage to cite a reality known to the reader and challenge the veracity of that historical narrative with new information. Bellatin's intentionally clumsy stab at diagnosis jokes that Mishima seeks help in counseling, which justifies the photo of Bellatin, along with a female companion, as analysts. Hilariously for the reader attuned to the sensibility here, Mishima falls victim to a depression twenty days after his suicide, which he initially tries to treat with medication (52). The psychological counseling involves lying on a couch, in silence, while two analysts watch him. As Bellatin explains, tongue in cheek, the analysts consider this meditative exercise to wield "the eloquence of silence as a more than infallible method" (53). Bellatin's nod to meditative possibilities never quite moves into an exploration of the terrain of disability, as it is imagined to connote zoe in neoliberal diversity values, and therefore *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* laughs at the tactics of diagnosis, even as it retains them.

This is not to say that Bellatin ignores the topic of impairment. Bellatin was born with only one hand and thus might agree with Davis's early support for the social model of disability that locates the dilemma of the disabled not with the individual, but in "the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (*Enforcing Normalcy* 24).[3] The "problem" of disability is only tenuously present in *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima*. When the reader learns that Mishima has penned many of Bellatin's famous titles, one implied joke teases that true disability is not located with the one-handed Bellatin or the headless Mishima, but in the reader's prejudice. In a related detail, the novel briefly recounts an allegorical farmyard experiment carried out by Mishima's uncle: a newly hatched chick with a ribbon tied to one leg is pecked to death in a matter of minutes by the intolerant chicks (41). Although the social model of disability would account for this death as a consequence of discrimination, the allegory does not hold for the rest of the novel. Because Bellatin's meditations defy the stability needed for allegorical interpretation, the sensitive reader cannot consistently apply allegorical explanations to decipher Mishima's experience as a headless writer. No single reliable understanding of Mishima's headless state appears in the text. Now viewed as inspiring gift, now as dangerous difference, now

as sideshow attraction, now as banal medical issue, the exact nature of the character's "problem" as a decapitated writer is never dependably defined. This imaginary "problem" of decapitation allows Bellatin to flirt with meditation in addition to constantly changing the diagnosis. The lack of a narrative arc means that the meditation engages rapid-cycle fluctuations between diversity and sameness, which ultimately obey a realism/normalcy aesthetic.

A diversity-to-sameness twist that excludes actual disability—or "*that* kind of difference" according to Davis's careful italics in *The End of Normal*—hints that disability today becomes difficult to name. The critic ruminates, "Thus 'we are all different; therefore we are all the same' becomes 'we are all the same because we aren't *that* kind of different' " (*The End of Normal* 13–14). Davis struggles to articulate disability here, perhaps as a consequence of the silencing and invisibility that help to exclude the category he wants to recognize. Even if he, too, fails to name the excluded disability, Bellatin marvelously captures the twisting of diversity-into-sameness, and the longing of boring sameness to twist into admirable diversity. For instance, *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* reviews an invented custom, in which the headless writer exchanges shoes with a female friend from college: "Almost without speaking to one another they practice a peculiar exchange of shoes" (10). This mysterious ritual intimates a kind of physical equality between the headless male and the female friend. In another example of diversity presented as more of the same, and sameness as somehow also representing a desirable diversity, when Mishima fails to convince a medical authority that his condition is owed to Thalidomide, the savvy nurse dismissively writes *Decapitated* on the paper that she gives him (38). This diagnosis prevents Mishima from fraudulently collecting a settlement that would allow him to buy a coveted type of prosthetic head, but the diagnosis does not otherwise affect him. Part of Bellatin's game here is to take what seems a chronic condition—for example, headlessness as disability—and treat it as a case of acute pain—for example, headlessness as diversity—that could be "remedied" with a prosthetic. After failing to acquire the desired prosthetic, Mishima perceives that the only true element in his life is that of absence: "The only true thing in life was a void. An empty space, impenetrable and infinite" (40). In case the reader manages to miss this key idea, it repeats: "The only real thing was a void" (53). Diversity bound into sameness leads, in the headless character's most perceptive moments of meditative insight, to the relief of nothingness. The implication that bios achieves enlightenment by sensing the void does not pose a particularly optimistic viewpoint from narrative standards, but it should delight the meditators. On this edge of nothingness bios and zoe might encounter one another, but *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* does not develop Mishima's awareness of the void; he

is otherwise occupied with measuring his diverse yet assimilated individuality in relation to the sameness of others around him.

Bellatin's protagonist does not necessarily cross a category boundary when his strange impairments are revealed, and this sameness can be described through the image of the Möbius strip. In the mid-1990s, Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* famously used a Möbius strip to reimagine the Cartesian duality of mind and body.[4] A Möbius model can be formed by taking a strip of paper, giving it a half twist, and taping together the resulting loop. The resulting surface that possesses only one side helps to imagine a boundaryless relationship between two states of health, here defined as diversity and sameness. If you trace the Möbius strip, your finger will touch what were two previously distinct sides of the paper without slipping off or crossing a boundary. However, as Grosz cautions, the Möbius model does not easily represent "modes of becoming, modes of transformation" (210). Her warning suggests that in Bellatin's game, sameness and diversity implicate one another from the start, and the loop itself and not the appearance of a journey converts diversity into acceptable equality or bios; bare life remains beyond the loop. Understandably, given his reluctance to engage with the abject difference of disability under neoliberal imaginings, Bellatin decorates the diversity-to-sameness strip with ironically nostalgic references to the false solution of the prosthetic. The road to sameness is studded with fake heads, the novel seems to counsel, mocking the very symbol of embodied wisdom. As the headless protagonist's efforts to hit upon the properly diverse prosthetic become more stylish, and thus ever more acceptably "diverse" under neoliberal dependence on perpetually renewed consumer expression, Mishima moves from wearing a rudimentary prosthetic head, which elicits negative reactions, to using a rhinestone-encrusted mask (45–46). Bellatin thus pushes impairment toward a fashion discussion, which rewards stylistic diversity, and works to ignore disability.

As mentioned, Mishima fails to acquire a "professional head" through the fraudulent scheme to sue for fetal Thalidomide damage, although he does collaborate with an artist who makes him a series of "head-pieces" (46). Disability critics David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder define the verb "prostheticize" as the effort "to institute a notion of the body with a regime of tolerable deviance" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 6–7). Bellatin's Mishima hints at familiarity with Mitchell and Snyder's analysis, as the character negotiates within the regime of the prosthetic and its struggle to dictate the normalcy codes. As predicted by Mitchell and Snyder's attribution of the quality of the prosthetic to all novels, *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* cannot exit the loop that binds the diverse Mishima to the conformist Mishima. His urge to view absence as the only trustworthy element in the novel leads to a

statement of tight contradiction regarding prosthetics: "Head and the creation of words. Mishima had perceived, especially in recent times, that there could not be one without the other. Or, more exactly, that one could not exist without the absence of the other" (47). In these consecutive sentences, Bellatin manages to accumulate ideas without constructing a reliably logical statement. If only, *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* seems to wish, it were possible to eliminate diagnostic narrative and close the gap between mind and thought, between body and intellect, thereby creating a steady and spontaneous flow of experience-as-word-as-all, a point of sameness so total that it stands indivisible from nothingness. Sadly for Mishima and fortunately for writers, the division between mind and thought, word and experience, cannot be permanently soldered. Head and words, self-consciousness narrative and in-the-moment flow, continuously substitute the other, and their alternating presence implicates the unavoidable prosthetics of presence in representation. In the end *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima* is still narrated, even if it never "goes anywhere" novelistically.

In one last observation that prepares my reader to turn next to Boullosa's concerns about the image and technology as they threaten narrative, that is, as the digital and the posthuman threaten to fill the gap between "head and words," I should note that from the start Bellatin frames his novel as the gloss of a "film of reality." That is, the novel insinuates itself as a record of a series of "real" images, "a kind of film of reality" watched by an "us" defined as "the attendees" (10). This film opens with the very location from where the audience watches: "The first image to appear is the schoolyard where we are gathered" (10). The spontaneity and immediacy of such a film, reflective of the very reality that the audience experiences, perhaps means to challenge the process of narrative. Just as the desired film is hinted to form impenetrable sameness with the "reality" of the text, the supreme form of writing imagined in the novel seems to long for absolute unification with the written. Or, to put this ideal in terms of Diana Palaversich's seminal article, the essence of Bellatin's narrative aims to harness the "writable" and not the "readable" (37). Apparently for Bellatin, the question of how to write the desired literary text ends up seeking to eliminate the established binaries of the real and unreal, impairment and sameness, and the categories of writing and reading. This point is not as convoluted as it seems. *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima*, along with many of Bellatin's other novels, struggles with longing to connect the tool of writing with the "real" and thereby eliminate the aspect of "tool-ness" or the "prosthetic" in writing, or the distraction of narrative in meditation. One way for Bellatin to curtail the risk of pushing the novel too far and publishing an unreadable set of anti-norms is to gesture toward this possibility of pure writing, a creation that is never a supplement and

therefore never a prosthetic. This pure writing as sameness, or the void, once again neatly sidesteps the question of the disability as bare life that lies just beyond the diversity loop, but then again, meditation does not claim to provide answers but merely relief from narrative.

True to Bellatin's perpetual, inexhaustible games with switching out the diagnostic arc in favor of spontaneous meditation and its idealized culmination in pure writing, the fictional academic who presents the "film of reality," identified this time as, "a kind of reflection of reality" comes to deny the reality of his subject (54). More specifically, the expert affirms Mishima's nonexistence: "The impeccable Japanese professor finished his intervention for that afternoon by affirming that Mishima has never really existed" (54). Not every novelist dares Bellatin's self-amused approach to the diversity twist that only seems to stop short when it hits upon the possibility that what *really* exists is nothing. This reality of nothingness, and the shifting, uncertain body of knowledge that leads the mind to perceive it, entails precisely the sort of uncertainty that terrifies Boullosa's narrators.

## Carmen Boullosa and the Stranger Novels

Boullosa's narrative voices differ from Bellatin's example because they wield moralistic judgments and tend to favor allegorical interpretations. These narrators belong in analysis informed by disability studies because they interrogate facile notions of progress, and for disability scholars, the connection between progress and normalcy is perpetually ripe for questioning. Historian Douglas Baynton locates the origin of the disability-rejecting concept of "normality" in its modern sense in the mid-nineteenth century, when it arose "in the context of a pervasive belief in progress" (36). Boullosa's texts tend to attribute the imagined, frightening new bodily abilities to thoughtless applications of technology, or a naïve belief in the linear march of progress. *La novela perfecta* illustrates this point. The "perfect novel" of the title turns out to be a virtual narrative machine that creates a "real" illusion through technology, in a vague parallel with Bellatin's "film of reality." As the informed reader can predict, given Boullosa's insistent defense of the literary word, the attempt by narrator Vertiz to harness the technology of the "perfect novel" and synchronize his imagination with the virtual image proves disastrous. Vertiz's creativity works along partially intuitive, meditative lines, and he needs to be able to write down ideas in order to arrange them later along a stricter narrative arc. Without the process of writing, and perhaps even better said, without the written negotiation that balances spontaneous fantasy and planned narration, Vertiz loses control over his art.

His flight of fancy expressed through first-draft-is-final technology ends up killing its scientific creator and forming an allegorical tableau of characters that captures the "essence of contemporary man": "Broken all, like disposable beings, repeated, forgotten that they are each a unique world, they ended up being slayed by that fabulous machinery, the vertigo of diamonds, the vertigo of money, the splendor of money" (150). Sameness, expressed here as having forgotten that everyone belongs to a unique world, nearly wins out. Boullosa hints that the void triggered by this sameness is not Bellatin's ideal, but an apocalypse. Though the chaos achieves a certain splendor before it winks out, the figures horrify Vertiz: "[. . .] they remained also filled with nonsense, insanity, repetition, violence, horror" (148). Boullosa's narrators need to believe in interpretative stability, and they express faith in the reliable presence of the prosthetics of writing with a fervor that Bellatin might label as naive. Because this vision of imagined mutilation, harboring the end of writing and the beginning of abysmal sameness, repeats in Boullosa's oeuvre, it seems worthwhile to cite at length from an example of the malfunction of narrative technology in *La novela perfecta*:

> No one realized who was the other, or the space each occupied, or the place; no one was anything to one group or to the other; no one knew who he was, nor whom she attacked; and as much as they penetrated each other, they also hit each other, they also kissed each other, without anything seeming to make any sense, and immediately the ones and the others began to. . . . How should I explain it? They dismembered themselves or the others, some ate the others or themselves within themselves, without any of those acts meaning anything either. (143)

The confusion produced with the use of vague pronouns and the absence of possessives indicates that Boullosa intends to build horror in these scenes by stripping out individualistic understandings of bodies and their borders. For narrator Vertiz, the body merging lacks morality, or in his words, an author: "I was not the author of that. I could not be the author of that. It was, above all, an image WITHOUT an author" (144). Vertiz requires diagnosis, a linear narrative arc, for meaning to emerge; when confronted with the meditative, nonprogressive, interdependence, Vertiz knows that his status as author, as diagnostician, critic, and moralistic observer, is threatened. Under conditions of free-for-all meditation, narrators are not needed.

Given Boullosa's staid interest in allegory, it perhaps comes as no surprise that even as her narrators reconsider the intellectual, environmental, and community damage caused by errant notions of progress, the narrators

cling to an ideal of the "normal." Across Boullosa's stranger novels, the lonely narrators give the impression that they view themselves in terms of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of "normate" as "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (8). The self-appointed, implicit demarcation of the normate appears with Lear of *Cielos de la Tierra*, Vertiz of *La novela perfecta*, and the principal narrator of *El complot de los Románticos.* These malcontents tend to lack children, living romantic partners, and promising careers. They are, thus, "diverse" from the mainstream and yet not abject; despite their discontented and hypercritical personalities, constantly primed to a bad mood and always alert to problems, they do not assess themselves as impaired, much less disabled or representative of bare life—*that* kind of difference applies to the posthuman or digital figures that horrify them. In addition to their privileged condition as bios, staked on their literary tastes if not skills, the narrators revel in their individuality as normates and emphatically recoil at scenes of unfamiliar bodily sameness or exchangeability.

To give another instance of this "normate" narrative, Boullosa's *Cielos de la Tierra* includes a posthuman race, the "Atlántidos," that decides to give themselves a language-destroying lobotomy. According to holdout narrator Lear, the language-free Atlántidos promptly exile themselves from stable chains of cause and effect, linear time, and expected spatial relations. Lear stays behind in the world of words, of narrative arcs, and of moralistic judgment, which allows her to diagnose her compatriots as hopelessly disabled. The postsurgical Atlántidos live in pure meditation, a mind without words, a state that Lear cannot view as freeing. Lear describes the Atlántidos' new abilities as gruesome, such as the scene in which the female character Carson removes, bloodlessly, one of her own arms; she opens herself up and sticks the arm into her torso, ultimately extending the fingers through her ear, nose, and mouth (352). Lear is repulsed by the grotesquely reformed body:

> The wonder and the horror would not allow me to keep my eyes closed. The opening left by the fringe of skin that now was hanging from her [Carson] in a frontal tail, exposed the arm that had entered through the hole, plus a countless number of things. Not of guts, but of *things*, things of different colors and shapes, things arranged in a rigorous order and economy of space within her body. (353)

Lear anchors the negative aspect of this uncertain diversity—that is, *that* kind of difference, or *disability* as bare life—in her companions' lack of

shame over their new bodies. In fact, Lear seems less bothered by the bodily experimentations themselves than by the Atlántidos's insufficient embarrassment over their contortions, including wanton sexuality, which she describes in moralistic tones as "filthy acts" (353). To the Atlántidos' credit, it must be observed that the pro-lobotomy vote comes about because the Atlántidos cannot bear their state of perfect health. They seem poised for immortality, as long as they protect themselves from radiation, but they apparently cannot resist the desire for a "normalcy" plot. Just as Lennard Davis's formula predicts, the Atlántidos manufacture a situation of abnormality out of their perfection that needs solving, and so to eliminate the "problem" of lies and confusion, they eliminate language. Yet, this elected "cure" manages to kill the novel—a problem for the narrator. Lear finds her final solution in the abstract and places herself into a book: the "Heavens on Earth" of the title. To surmise from this meditation (a posthuman realm of perfect health) turned to plot (the lobotomy) turned toward meditation (the end of the novel), it would seem that no alternative to narrative exists *in the novel*: Lear's attempted construction of another "real" narrative platform constitutes merely another pass within the diversity loop, another embrace of carefully defined narrativized sameness, created by excluding disability, that incorporates two other narrators—Estela and Hernando—against the willing bypass of separated bios and zoe that her compatriots dare. Estela and Hernando are included in the embrace of narrativized sameness because—note the near paradox—they express uniqueness fashionable under a diversity discourse. Their difference is not *that* kind of difference but the winking sameness of acceptable diversity.

The sixteenth-century chair-bound narrator Hernando provides a case in point. Lear and the narrator from the 1990s, Mexican academic Estela, independently discover a text by elderly, largely immobile Hernando, who attracts the other narrators' platonic love. Hernando's impairment does not frighten Lear or Estela, probably because unlike the Atlántidos' postlobotomy state, the oppressed indigenous man's inability to walk or twist his head toward the sky does not threaten established relationships with narrative. Hernando's younger self, also described as metaphorically impaired, similarly fails to scare Estela or Lear. Despite Hernando's insistent image of having lost his hands, a symbol of the loss of his family's native culture in the colonial oppression of New Spain that leaves him with only a tongue through which to apprehend the world, he remains respectable in Boullosa's diagnostic manual (142–144). Hernando's literate isolation may underpin his appeal for Lear and Estela. This loneliness supplies a sort of "diversity chic" that defines a narrator's outlook as distinctive and yet within the limits of "normate-tivity."

As a final example of moralistic rejection of meditative body melding and mutation in Boullosa's novels, I cite *El complot de los Románticos* with its dead writers' conference held in Madrid. The organizer of this conference is also the main narrator of this experimental novel, and she blames the location for spurring the revived authors to turn too "alive" (211). That is, instead of writing or presenting papers as individuals on a reprieve from mortality in Madrid, the setting gets to them and they start "mixing it up." The result of this uncontrolled joie de vivre involves the catastrophic fusing of bodies:

> And the anomalous gymnastics turned sinister: the celebrated authors threw parts of themselves from themselves: a head launches itself to attack the foot of its own body; hands work loose, they turn into pinchers, they open chests, take out hearts, replace their locations; the legs walk without torsos; a shoulder wanders over there; the spinal column of every one of those present—except for we two mortals—became one column of vertigo, the feet were the hooves of imagination. Instead of grammar, there were muscles. It would be unthinkable, if we did not have the referent of comic books. In any case: horripid! So much so that even among the toughest of the mob, some felt moved. (249–250)

The scene does not require detailed interpretation because it fits with the previous citations of bodily confusion and mutation. Boullosa's narrator once again fears the ominous privileging of the image over the word, that is, "muscles" over "grammar," and the body part mêlée proves grotesque enough to put a permanent end to the yearly writers' conference. Apparently, the conference-curtailing threat has to do with the possibility that meditation and its retooled expectations for diagnosis, narrative arcs, and interpersonal relations threaten the very need for writers, whether dead or alive—and perhaps even for normates, those narrators who are not famous dead writers, but wish that they were fashionably exceptional enough to be like them.

Why don't Boullosa's narrators in *Cielos de la Tierra*, *La novela perfecta*, and *El complot de los Románticos* shake off the conventions of shaming diagnosis, break free from the compulsory judgment of the normate, and indulge the newly ungoverned and recombinant physique? The answer links Boullosa's intentionally limited experiment with that of Bellatin.

## Conclusion

Given the brisk pace of technological developments—from new pharmaceuticals to prosthetics and surgeries—Bellatin's decapitated novelist and Boullosa's detachable body parts may one day strike readers as not so far-fetched. The hypocrisy of the neoliberal diversity twist teaches with only pretend tolerance that unfamiliar bodily stylings are welcome. However, because Bellatin and Boullosa tinker with the structure of the novel, from *within* the structure of the novel, the very genre that according to Davis creates the problem of the realist average, their literary experimentations do obey certain constraints. If Bellatin and Boullosa cannot craft texts that exit the disability twist, this constraint may reflect the origin of novelistic protagonists as artificial abnormals made to "do the twist" and end up normal. The idea of bare life incorporated into the textual focus, into bios, to the extent that such a notion surfaces at all, in Bellatin's case seems to point toward a paradisiacal void of pure writing, and in Boullosa's novels seems to threaten the end of writing. Still, fiction matters to them both. In the final analysis, a literary critic finds herself hard pressed not agree. Whatever its limitations, narrative invites us to think again, even as it seems to want to think for us.

## Notes

1. The change in language sustains the original point of instituting the imaginary norm as reality; the novelistic formula means to ignore the fact that the "normal" is "not a static or peaceful, but a dynamic and polemical concept" (Canguilhem 239). Likewise, the inverse is true, and to cite one critic's wording, "Disability, as a category, is fundamentally unstable" (Hall 12).

2. Henry Scott Stokes's history explains that Morita did not get the job done and a fourth and final head-severing blow was delivered by the unruffled accomplice Furu-Koga, a messy detail not recovered in Bellatin's text (Stokes 31).

3. An impressive line of scholarship has cataloged Bellatin's fascination with strange bodies and seems to take inspiration in Bellatin's impairment. For example, in his Spanish-language prologue to a reprinted collection of Bellatin's novels, Ariel Schettini applies the English-language label "freak" and notes that Bellatin's odd figures use their physical difference as a means for integration into a community (9). Schettini lists some of Bellatin's stranger characters, such as the paralyzed man from *Perros héroes* [Hero Dogs] (2003), the one-handed writer from *Lecciones para una liebre muerta* [Lessons for a Dead Hare] (2005), and the long-nosed protagonist from *Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción* [Shiki Nagaoka: A Nose for Fiction] (2001).

This last title concerns a brilliant chapter in Susan Antebi's groundbreaking book on disability in Latin American fiction, and in a foundational article that first prepares the way for Antebi's and Schettini's thought, Diana Palaversich creatively juxtaposes Rosemarie Garland Thomson's review of freak shows and Bellatin's portrayed genetic human mutations in *Flores* (Flowers) (2000), the decomposing characters' bodies in *Salón de belleza* (Beauty Salon) (1994), and the odd bodily practices that obsess characters in both *Poeta ciego* (Blind Poet) (1998) and *La Escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán* (The School of Human Pain of Sichuan) (2001) (36). Palaversich observes that the experimentation with characters' physiques never denotes the abject in Bellatin's texts, and merely disturbs notions of unified identity. Because the aforementioned critics have not yet taken up *Biografía ilustrada de Mishima*, I chose that title for my analysis.

4. Kristin Lindgren cites Grosz's use of the Möbius strip in *Volatile Bodies* (1994) in order to articulate the notion in autobiography of illness, aka pathography, that imagines a postillness self "not as a distinct, bounded entity entirely separate from the old self but as a fluid configuration in which elements of old and new, self and other, inside and outside, exist concurrently" (148). Joy Cypher and Deb Martin use the Möbius strip to model the goal of critical thinking in the disability studies classroom. They praise the flux and lack of endpoint in the Möbius strip, which for their purposes came to be "not a thing but rather an undulating activity" (Cypher and Martin).

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