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Solicitation of Identity in *Cien años de soledad*

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University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
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Solicitation of Identity in *Cien años de soledad*

I. Introduction

In this thesis I intend to analyze Gabriel García Márquez' canonical, magical realist novel, *Cien años de soledad* (1967), which is the fictional (and historical) account of several generations of the Buendía family in their town of Macondo. *Cien años de soledad* made its debut in 1967 at the height of the Latin American "Boom Era" of literature (1960-1970). This novel, García Márquez' most commercially successful work, has elicited much response in the form of articles and books of literary critique.

Due to its complex and repetitive nature, many critics have traditionally sought to uncover possible allegorical and/or symbolic meanings of the work. Given Gabriel García Márquez' recent passing, a new wave of criticism has sprung forth within the literary community. I aim to insert myself into this debate in two ways: first, through a reevaluation of the role of Gabriel García Márquez within the Boom Era and, second, through a multi-layered exploration of three interrelated phenomenon most prevalent within *Cien años de soledad*: displacement, decipherment, and the myth of origin and identity.

These three themes are frequently interlaced throughout the novel, most notably in the Buendía family's constant attempts to decipher the language of the gypsies (a traditionally displaced group), in order to learn their fate. In fact, the novel ends with the final Buendía family member, Aureliano Babilonia, succeeding in the deciphering of a book left behind by the gypsies. In the process of decoding this text he discovers it is actually a detailed account of the family's history, and he comes to the realization that he is reading about the exact moment in which

he is living. The novel ends here, with the Pyrrhic victory of Aureliano over the seemingly indecipherable language of his origin.

The title of this essay serves two purposes related to my argument about the novel as a whole. I use the word “solicit” first in the Derridean sense which means to “shake as a whole.” Second, I use “solicit” in a prostitutive sense as it relates to the selling of Latin American identity for world consumption.

Throughout my study of the novel and my writing of this thesis, I will use these themes within the novel as a point of entry into a larger discussion of *Cien años de soledad*. My ultimate goal is to use this debate and my analysis in order to gesture towards a deeper understanding of the cultural implications of this novel as a whole.

II. Context

The Boom Era (1960-1970) marked a time in Latin America when, during much political and social turmoil, a great explosion of literature and literary criticism occurred that would put Latin America on the map in terms of the worldwide literary community. In this era authors like Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes would rise to prominence alongside Gabriel García Márquez with such works as; *La casa verde* (Vargas Llosa, 1966), *Rayuela* (Cortázar, 1963), *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (Fuentes, 1962), and of course *Cien años de soledad* (García Márquez, 1967). Throughout this section I will place García Márquez and his novel *Cien años de soledad* within the context of the Boom era of literature and also the political controversy of the 1960's in Latin America. This context will provide an understanding of García Márquez' writing style, the importance of *Cien años de soledad*, and some of the opposing critical theory related to the man and his work. Though references will be made to the novel in this section in this section, I will deepen my analysis of the text in the sections that follow.

The “Boom”

Though there is some argument about the exact year the Boom began, it is generally agreed upon that the 1960's were the years in which this explosion of literature and poetry took place. Many authors of the Boom era describe themselves as having been “orphaned” because unlike other areas of the world, they feel as though Latin America did not have a literary tradition or voice to build upon (Bell-Villada 6). Latin America has a history of being invaded repeatedly

by politically strong and culturally potent countries, which, over centuries of immigration and imposition, mixed together to create an artistically diverse community. Latin American writers had for a long time been inundated with the works of European writers and had been struggling to find their unique voice that might measure up to supposed worldwide literary standards. The Boom in the 1960's represents the (seemingly) sudden release of centuries of pent up creative energy. Gabriel García Márquez is an author who was able to harness this energy in the form of novels, short stories, and screenplays that would attempt to recreate the epic and mythical origins of, and simultaneously shed light on, the life of the average Latin American.

During the 1960's, Latin America, and most of the world, was dealing with dramatic political upheaval and controversy. The literature emerging at this time served as a vehicle through which Latin American writers would come to an understanding of, and respond to, the unstable environments and violent changes to which they had been subjected. In the process of this effort, much of the Boom literature began to sort through the issue of Latin American identity, not only in terms of social classes but also in regards to race, sexuality, and gender. This exploration of modern Latin American culture served to define first, second, and third world lives and to show their deeply interwoven relationships. *Cien años de soledad* (1967) was a novel that explored this newfound social consciousness, using the evolving (yet cyclical and repetitive) lives of the Buendía family to perform a study on Latin American social, familial and political structure. In her essay, "The Unbearable Lightness of History", Francine Masiello states that the Boom marked a time wherein the Latin American people suffered a crisis of consciousness (464). The purpose of the literature published during this time was to unite the people of Latin America in self awareness and self identification (466).

Gerald Martin describes the most "intense" period within the Boom as having occurred between 1963 and 1967, from the year *Rayuela* was published to the year *Cien años de soledad* made its official debut (480). According to Martin, at the time of the novel's debut, many were already referring to *Cien años de soledad*¹ as Latin America's *Don Quijote* (480). Vargas Llosa, among others, heralded the novel before it was ever published as being a masterpiece. In fact, Carlos Fuentes praised the work as Latin America's "Bible" (Martin 486). *CAS* is truly a mix of García Márquez' political philosophy and his artistic genius. Later in this essay I will show these high praises of *Cien años de soledad* to be woefully ironic, as I argue in my analysis of the novel that García Márquez sought to tear down rather than edify these notions of "Latin American identity."

Life and Literature

Cien años de soledad was published between the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the Chilean Coup of 1973, a period of "intense socialist political optimism" (Martin 486). This novel, like the others written at the time, was a place where García Márquez could struggle with the discrepancies and realities of the socialist movement. These political struggles are very clearly expressed in *CAS*, particularly in the ongoing military career of Colonel Aureliano Buendía, modeled closely after real-life General Uribe Uribe (1859-1914) of the Liberal party army who staunchly supported Guild Socialism in Colombia.

As previously noted, the Cuban Revolution was the beginning of an extremely intense period of political struggle, which placed Latin America on the world stage in the 1960's. This

¹I will shorten this title to *CAS* throughout this essay.

political climate afforded writers the opportunities to make themselves known on a large scale, typically using their work as a form of social protest. For Gabriel García Márquez, affectionately called "Gabo" by many readers, this was an opportunity for him to express his protest of the imposition of US imperialism (and capitalism) in Latin America. This sentiment can be seen most clearly in his treatment of the American Banana Company in his novel and the civil breakdown caused in Macondo as a result of the introduction of capitalism. This event in the novel is based on the real life strike of banana workers in Colombia in 1928, who had become fed up with unfair and grueling labor policies of the company. In response, the Boston based United Fruit Company (allegedly) paid Colombian military to squash the revolt resulting in the death of thousands of workers.

García Márquez had maintained communist political views most of his life, particularly during the time of the Boom when he worked for Cuba's *Prensa Latina* (1960-1961). He later became good friends with Fidel Castro. During this time, however, García Márquez became increasingly disillusioned with the changing Communist party. This he expresses through the denigration of Colonel Aureliano Buendía after he comes to power in the liberal movement. In the novel, the constant warring between political parties becomes pointless and this could be García Márquez' fictional mirroring of the violence between arbitrary political parties that has torn Colombia apart over and over. During Colonel Aureliano Buendía's campaigning, he comes to the realization that the difference between the two parties is so small that he cannot tell which is which (238). Both *CAS* and *El otoño del patriarca* can be interpreted as García Márquez' attempt to explore his own personal (and by proxy Latin America's) reaction to and experience of the changing and rocky political climate of the 1960's.

In 1967 García Márquez is quoted as saying, "the revolutionary duty of a writer is to write well" (Martin 487). This "revolutionary duty" of writers had weighed heavily on Gabriel García Márquez for some time before the publishing of *CAS*. In 1960, García Márquez released a controversial article entitled, "Colombian Literature: A Fraud to Our Nation" in which he reacts to the First Colombian Book Festival in 1959. In the article, he critiques Colombian authors, arguing that there is not a single one in the country with the artistic vision and skill required to reach the worldwide markets or put Colombia on the map. García Márquez was furious with the lack of any sense of some kind of original national identity in Colombian literature. It seems that he felt any attempt at a synthesis of Latin American identity or cultural narrative came off as fraudulent, and lacking. This question of identity, presented to Latin American authors, would find an unexpected answer in the Latin American Boom.

The Boom was vital to the marketing of the Hispano-American novel on a worldwide scale. García Márquez became one of four major "brand names" in the Latin American literature marketplace, along with Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Julio Cortázar. Thanks to the Boom, this literature has become universalized. The Boom gave Latin American writers the opportunities to not only make themselves, but also their countries "known". To the average foreigner, Colombia appears to be little more than a land of "coffee advertisements, emerald stones, drug scandals, and [...] political violence" (Bell-Villada 15). García Márquez brings his memory and experience of Colombia to life in his work, and in doing so he provides the world a "necessary counter image" to the stereotypes perpetuated by the media (Bell-Villada 16). Given his penchant for social activism and skill with language, it is no surprise that García Márquez has

been frequently associated with the voice of a nation in turmoil and canonized as a pillar of Latin American literature.

To give legitimacy to the media's claim that he represents the voice of a people, it is necessary to know where García Márquez comes from and the source of his fiction. Gabriel García Márquez was born in a small (population 20,000) northern Colombian village called Arcataca in 1928. Much like the fictional town of Macondo inhabited by the Buendía family, Arcataca did not become known in Colombia till the arrival of United Fruit and the banana industry. However, the Arcataca known by García Márquez was in sharp decline and quickly being forgotten by the world as the banana industry left the area. It would seem that the skeleton of the previously prolific Macondo explored by Aureliano Babilonia at the end of the novel is a reflection of García Márquez' experience of Arcataca. Indeed, the entirety of *CAS* is a direct manifestation of García Márquez' own life and memories mixed in with a recreation of the imagined life and memories of his family members.

The Colombia to which García Márquez belongs is that of the northern coastal region heavily influenced by both indigenous and African populations. This influence also finds its way into the novel and a small example is that the town's name "Macondo" is the Bantu word for "banana". García Márquez explores the legends, superstitions, and oral tradition of the Colombian coast in his works. In *CAS*, he utilizes (and masters) the genre of magical realism to create a world in which these legends are very real, offering the reader entry into the perspective of the rural *costeño* Colombian. In this novel he breathes life into the deteriorating structure of the town he grew up in and the fading memories of those who came before him, seeking to give a home to the "reality living inside people's consciousness" (Bell-Villada 24). It is in this life experience,

similar to that of many Latin Americans, that García Márquez began to attempt to develop a voice that represented the everyman of his nation.

His development as a writer began during the time of *La Violencia*, a bloody civil war in Colombia spanning 1946 to 1965. This brutal party on party aggression would claim the lives of nearly 2,000 people, typically in rural areas. Researcher Paul Oquist refers to this time in Colombia as a "partial collapse of the state" (Bell-Villada 26, 27). Needless to say, García Márquez expresses in the novel the result of his witnessing of the senseless political violence and the complete disregard for civilian lives in the struggle for power. This disillusionment with the party system was a common sentiment throughout Colombia at the time, and his work in *CAS* seems to be his attempt to generalize his subjective experience and relate it to his readers.

In order for him to relate his experience to his readers, García Márquez had to tap into the general Latin American struggle with this political reality of the 1960's and 70's. Most of García Márquez' work is built around the Latin American collective experience, be it family relations, social structure, cultural tradition, or political violence. His writing and that of other Boom era writers served to present his personal experience of Latin America to the world, free of media and political bias. Though, ironically, as his (and other's) writing rose to fame it became increasingly overdetermined and incessantly interpreted/reinterpreted by the media and political figures. This "magical" illustration of Latin America captured the imagination of the world, and García Márquez was able to utilize the fascination of his readers to aid his rise to fame. The term used to describe the style or genre of this writing was "magical realism", which García Márquez did not create as some might believe, but he was a key figure in the development and mastery of the style.

Magical Realism

To understand García Márquez' contribution to the genre of magical realism as a whole, it is important to explore the development the genre from its point of inception. Magical realism had its beginnings in Germany in the 1920's, then moved to Central America in the 40's, and came finally to all of Latin America in 1955. The common characteristics of the genre are the experimentation with narrative techniques, particularly the rejection of traditionally linear narrative, the matter-of-fact treatment of magical occurrences, and the questioning of common conceptions of both history and reality. Alejo Carpentier is credited by most with having brought the concept of magical realism back to Cuba from Europe in the 1920's (though Ángel Flores believes Borges to be the first magical realist author in Latin America) (Bowers 9). Carpentier actually created his own form of Latin American magical realism, which he referred to as "lo real maravilloso," or marvelous realism. The concept of marvelous realism was meant to describe the Latin American world of mixed cultural beliefs and diverse experience, which gave birth to an understanding of reality that is "marvelous" and which creates a magical cultural atmosphere. The genre hit its climax in Latin America with the success of the Cuban revolution and the emergence of the Boom in Hispanic literature; of course Gabriel García Márquez would take advantage of this genre as he rose to fame.

The critical reception of García Márquez sheds some light on the evolution of public opinion on the author's use of magical realism and the overall changing significance of *CAS* vis-à-vis the Boom. The Boom catapulted Latin American writers into a realm of international success previously inaccessible to authors confined to their local literary market. García Márquez

was a phenomenon of Latin American literature, experiencing this rise to best-seller stardom in a relatively short period of time. He received recognition for his previous works, but with the release of *Cien años de soledad* in 1967, serious acclaim and critical analysis of his work as an author took off. That same year, Ernesto Volkening was one of the first critics to write serious analysis of *CAS* specifically condemning those who sought to value and analyze the Colombian writer through comparison to European models of literature, stating that that sort of analysis is rooted in colonial thought (Donald Shaw, 25). Simultaneously Ángel Rama began the discussion of García Márquez' narrative tone of dry realism and his strong overtones of social protest (Donald Shaw, 25). A third important critic of García Márquez was Juan Loveluck who noted that *CAS* represented something totally new in that it escapes “[...] outworn nativist and costumbrist formulae” (Donald Shaw, 25).

In his essay on the critical reception of Gabriel García Márquez, Donald Shaw credits Chilean Luis Harss with inventing the term ““Boom”” to describe the literary explosion occurring in Latin America in the 1960's. In 1967 Harss published *Into the Mainstream*, a bilingual book length study of authors such as Cortázar, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, and Fuentes. This study is quite possibly the first to link together the fab four writers of the Boom (25). This book, written in Spanish and English, gave the Boom recognition throughout North and South America. That same year Tomás Martínez wrote an article naming García Márquez the leader of the fab four for his work *Cien años de soledad*, claiming that this novel was the perfect example of Boom era literature (Donald Shaw, 26).

In 1970 writers Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Mario Vargas Llosa published *Books Abroad* in which they described the new regionalist novel (avoiding use of the word Boom and

the idea of García Márquez as leader) in four major points: first, it focuses more on the “wider human condition”; second, it represents a major progression in the realm of narrative technique; third, observed reality takes backseat to a magical reality; finally, that language has gained a newfound importance (Donald Shaw, 27). Because these qualities are so closely tied with the major techniques used in García Márquez work, his name became attached to the Boom movement in a permanent way. In the same year, two essay collections had already been published on García Márquez work, with contributions from other Boom writers like Fuentes and Vargas Llosa.

Oddly, the height of García Márquez’ influence as the model of a Boom writer occurred while he was living in Spain (1968-1975). In Barcelona, García Márquez gave several interviews and two authors (Miguel Fernández Braso and Óscar Collazos) wrote entire books dedicated to the analysis of the man and his works. In 1970 Collazos took part in a debate with other Boom writers which appeared in *Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura*, wherein he denounced Boom writers as “suffering from an inferiority complex that produced a dependency on European and North American literary culture” (Donald Shaw, 28). This negative light cast upon Boom writers made way for criticism directed at García Márquez for his apparent eagerness to separate himself from his own social/cultural context.

In the last twenty to thirty years, postcolonial critics such as Timothy Brennan have argued that García Márquez is too far removed from the perspective of the Third World due to his social class and education to pretend to represent its perspective (124). To some, this gap between the author and the lives of his characters makes his treatment of harsh third-world realities and suffering seem disrespectful. In her book on magical realism, Maggie Bowers describes

some major concerns that literary critics such as Thomas Brennan and Brenda Cooper have about the effects of the genre on both Western and third worlds (126). First, it provides an exotic/fantastic view of the third world to market a lie to unfamiliar westerners. Second, there is a concern that the genre reinforces colonial thinking, in the sense that their “patronizing attitudes” toward the third world make a mockery of the after effects of colonialism. Finally, there is the worry that Western readers cannot escape their context, which is first world, literate, and scientific (127).

When a westerner reads a novel like *Cien años de soledad*, they are not reading to appreciate and accept a specific worldview, but rather are reading to escape their own “reality” essentially establishing the “unreality” of the third world. According to Brenda Cooper, this is the major contradiction of magical realism; that in the process of attempting to capture reality, it delivers to western readers the “exotic escape from reality” they desire (Bowers 126). Thomas Brennan also attacks this facet of magical realism, referring to it as “saleable Third-Worldism” (Bowers 127). He charges writers like García Márquez of nullifying the political potential of the genre in order to better market themselves to a western audience.

Regardless of critical opinion on the García Márquez’ use of magical realism, it is important to recognize his technique and manipulation of plot and time. Through his work in this genre, García Márquez insists that the reader accept the reality of the novel; by doing so, he enforces the perspective of the marginalized culture over the more readily accepted perspective of the center.² In his book, *The New Novel in Latin America: Politics and Popular Culture After the*

² The “center” in this essay refers the dominant power (such as an imperial culture) which exerts control - or attempts to exert control - over the margins (colonies). In the collision of center vs. margin we see the colonizer attempting to consume the colonized, and the colonized fighting to maintain cultural autonomy. In Latin America the center would be the remnant of Spanish empire which has integrated itself into culture in a way that has pushed the indigenous community to the margins – both geographically and culturally.

Boom, critic Philip Swanson discusses García Márquez' technique as being political in nature, particularly concerning the perception of reality. He argues that García Márquez is "challenging the hegemony of the alien, dominant, imported culture and reinstating the value of the community's own cultural perspective" (Donald Shaw, 30). In *CAS* the "community" perspective uplifted is that of the marginalized, rural Colombian *costeños*. In *CAS* García Márquez plays with the nature of truth and reality in order to point at a greater problem in the Latin American community. So much damage has happened to "reality" on the political and social level that citizens no longer can trust the things they are told about the world they live in.

Thus, an important question this novel asks its readers is, "How can one decipher a coded reality?" The theme of decipherment is visited over and over in *Cien años de soledad* in search of an answer to this question. Now that I have given some background to the author and situations that affected the development of this novel, I will use the following section to analyze the use of decipherment throughout *CAS*. Through my analysis of his treatment of interpretation, I will search for the deeper connections between this theme and his answer to the question of Latin American identity.

III. Decipherment

This section of the essay will focus on the analysis of the theme of decipherment throughout the *Cien años de soledad* (CAS) as found in various sections throughout the work. I will present multiple references to and occurrences of deciphering, interpretation, and decoding in the text. I will first highlight how these examples display the central role of this theme to the novel as a whole; later in this section I will discuss the interplay of the theme of decipherment with the notions of displacement and origin. I will incorporate theory from two works by Jacques Derrida, "Différance" (1968) and *Specters of Marx* (1993), in order to supplement my own analysis of this theme. My central argument about the treatment of decipherment in this novel can be summarized in a quote from "Différance" wherein Derrida describes the general theme of all of Nietzsche's work as, "active interpretation, which substitutes incessant deciphering for the unveiling of truth as the presentation of the thing itself in its presence" (17-18). The novel uses the theme of "incessant deciphering" to point to the unveiling of a larger truth about identity and origin, which is that there is not a truth to be unveiled.

First, to get a better grasp on the theme as it pertains to the novel, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the word and act of "deciphering." The root "cipher" is Arabic, coming from the root *sifr* meaning "empty, nothing." In this sense, the act of deciphering is to take emptiness or nothingness and create *something*. Within the context of the novel, the definition of decipher relates to the fact that the Buendía family, which fails repeatedly in its attempts to decipher reality, is fundamentally incapable of escaping or giving substance to an "empty" existence.

A later interpretation of the root "cipher" was either a secret language or coded message. In this sense, deciphering would be the act of translating a coded language into one's own lan-

guage, that is, finding the secret meaning. This use of the word is more easily observed within *CAS* and the lives of the Buendía family, given that the entire family cannot seem to bring the world or any outside (scientific) knowledge into a language they can understand.

The obsession of various Buendía men with the mastery of knowledge or sciences brought to them by gypsies, and the drive to interpret Melquíades' texts, gives light to a larger pattern of behavior taking place within the family. This repetition of misunderstanding (failing to decode), chaos (attempting to decode), self-realization and death (final decipherment) is the structure of the lives of both the individual Buendías and the novel itself. The family is incapable of reaching a true understanding of reality until moments before death, and this is an occurrence that will be explored through excerpts from the work itself. I will also use Derrida's arguments from *Specters of Marx* and "Différance" to further develop my arguments regarding the obsession to decode and the realizations which follow the act of deciphering.

This repetitive structure of the novel and the family begins on the very first page, with the introduction of both Melquíades and José Arcadio Buendía.³ The family of gypsies comes to the town of Macondo once a year to showcase new inventions from around the world, and the villagers marvel at their seemingly unreachable knowledge. This year the gypsies bring a magnet to Macondo. Melquíades presents the magnet as the "octava maravilla de los sabios alquimistas de Macedonia" (79). From the very beginning, this presents an image of the gypsies as possessing ancient, magical, and sacred forms of knowledge. When José Arcadio Buendía hears of the magnet, he immediately misinterprets the purpose of a magnet, and believes it to be used for finding

³ One might say that the simultaneous introduction of these two is representative of the shared importance of the family's origin and namesake (José Arcadio Buendía) and the scientific and prophetic knowledge possessed by the displaced (Melquíades).

gold. As the book says, his “desforada imaginación iba siempre más lejos que el ingenio de la naturaleza”, and this is what led him to an incorrect conclusion about the magnets (80).

Melquíades corrects him, saying “Para esto no sirve” (80), but José Arcadio Buendía misinterprets this warning as a lie borne of greed. He sets off on a wild goose chase for gold.

This section, at the very onset of the novel, sets the three-fold pattern of misinterpretation, chaos, and death in motion. José Arcadio Buendía has already managed to incorrectly decipher the true “meaning” or use of the magnets, and he also is unable to discern the truth in Melquíades’ warning. As a result of his inability to interpret the knowledge of the gypsies, he sells off his animals and delves into a chaotic (and fruitless) search for gold that doesn’t end until the gypsies return the next year - this time with a telescope and magnifying glass. The same process results from the introduction of these scientific tools that come from foreign lands. In this instance, José Arcadio Buendía misinterprets their purpose and tries to create weapons. José Arcadio Buendía desperately tries to discover the perfect calculation for the creation of a weapon, to the point that he even writes a thorough manual of use for the tools, but ultimately he makes no headway and only manages to seriously burn himself (80). These forays of José Arcadio Buendía into the world of scientific knowledge represent his symbolic search both for himself and for meaning in a meaningless world—they are his attempts to decipher his reality.

José Arcadio Buendía and his son Colonel Aureliano obsessively chase after their own imaginings of how to use the scientific tools they encounter in order to effectively perform magic (i.e. capture a photo of god or perform alchemy). It seems that what they relentlessly seek is what Derrida refers to as a “pure exchange” (57). In *Specters of Marx* Derrida describes the process of coming to be obsessed with pure exchange, “the miser, the hoarder, the speculator becomes a

martyr to exchange value. He now refrains from exchange because he dreams of a pure exchange” (57). These two Buendía men refrain from the common use of these tools, convinced they can be used for something greater, a “pure exchange.” The dream of pure exchange drives them insane, precisely because it is just that—a dream. A pure exchange is impossible, evidenced in the family struggle with failed alchemy, inability to obtain an image of god, failure to understand the true purpose of an object and to interpret Melquíades’ texts. All result in mere traces of truth.⁴ A pure exchange is not only impossible in interpretation, but also (for the Buendía men) it is not possible with scientific instruments. These scenes are the first two major instances of an attempt and a failure to decipher the world of Macondo that are closely tied to the notions of identity and displacement.

This pattern repeats again a few pages later when Melquíades takes José Arcadio Buendía and his sons to see ice for the first time.⁵ Again, José Arcadio Buendía is unable to give the correct interpretation of the reality he is observing (a giant block of ice) and attempts to explain to his children what it is. He says, “Es el diamante más grande del mundo,” but Melquíades corrects him again, “No [...] es hielo” (101). The novel opens with Colonel Aureliano Buendía (son of José Arcadio Buendía) facing death and nostalgically recalling the day his father took him to see ice for the first time. This is a common pattern in the novel—when a character faces death they begin to retrace their most important, and formative, memories. This pattern allows the charac-

⁴ This notion of the impossibility of “pure exchange” calls to mind the concept of “the trace” from the same writer. Derrida uses the word “trace” in his writings, which he never directly defines. He does say, “the movement of the trace is described as an effort of life to protect itself” (“Différance” 18). This self-protection will be discussed later as being part of the “self veiling” nature of Being. Generally, I understand the trace to be the “remnant” of the sign. As signs differ and defer from themselves, they leave behind a trace. When one translates or interprets or generally experiences a phenomenon, one is left merely with a trace - not the original.

⁵ This scene is prefigured in the first sentence of the novel, and this establishes the theme of repetition.

ters of the novel to attempt to retroactively decipher important occurrences in their lives; it allows them to search for the secret meaning inside of seemingly insignificant or unimportant occurrences. This is an important link in the novel between the deciphering/decoding of reality, and the identity of the Buendía family.

The recollection of the day José Arcadio Buendía took his son Aureliano to see the ice serves as an analysis of the formation of the Buendías as a whole. If Colonel Aureliano looks back on this moment as he faces death, it is a sign that this scene was a crucial part of his development as a man (or rather, a character in this novel). The day the Buendías saw ice for the first time, José Arcadio Buendía failed to assign appropriate meaning to his experience and to the experience of his sons. This shows the reader that the Buendías not only struggle with decipherment, but that these characters (particularly Colonel Aureliano) are the result of a subject formation based in error. This is significant to my interpretation of the text in that it gives light to the obsession with translation/interpretation of reality and identity within *CAS*. On a larger scale, if a character, person, group of people (Latin Americans), is the victim of a development based in error—this would cause a great struggle in the realm of self-actualization or self-discovery. Within *CAS* the Buendías do not possess the keys necessary to decode their own identity, only the gypsy Melquíades can do this. Throughout the book, each generation of the family endeavors to decode the texts/knowledge/instruments of Melquíades, and *Cien años de soledad* cannot (and does not) end until the Buendías Physically succeed in this battle.

This process of decoding evolves throughout the novel and plays an integral role in the development of the Buendía family. A first important encounter of the Buendía family with the texts of Melquíades is by Arcadio Buendía, grandson of José Arcadio Buendía and eventual exile

of the family.⁶ Arcadio is displaced from the family and killed by a firing squad for atrocities he carries out after being left in charge of Macondo and incorrectly interpreting the final command of his uncle Col. Aureliano, “Te lo dejamos bien, procura que lo encontremos mejor” (203).

In his younger years Arcadio became close with Melquíades, who at the time was on his death bed. Melquíades’ response to Arcadio’s attempts at communication was to read his texts out loud to the boy. The novel recounts this scene in a predictive manner: “Años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, Arcadio había de acordarse del temblor con que Melquíades le hizo escuchar varias páginas de su escritura impenetrable, que por supuesto no entendió, pero que al ser leídas en voz alta parecían encícladas cantadas” (166). This narrative prediction comes to fruition in the actual moment of Arcadio Buendía’s death by a firing squad. In keeping with the pattern of misunderstanding/chaos/realization of the novel, Arcadio hearkens back to the determinant moment in which Melquíades read him the texts, but this time his understanding is different: “En ese instante lo apuntaron las bocas ahumadas de los fusiles, y oyó letra por letra las encícladas cantadas de Melquíades” (222).

In his analysis of the novel, Jaques Joset points out that the difference between the first and second time Arcadio hears the texts of the gypsy is that in his second interpretation Arcadio seems to have achieved a decipherment of the words which he is unable to communicate— he can only experience it (222n42). In his first experience, the words seemed to be “encícladas cantadas”, now he knows what they were (222). This confirms the aforementioned pattern of the novel, and significance of nostalgia in the face of death. In the timeline of Arcadio’s life, similar

⁶ Ursula Iguarán, matriarch of the family and wife of Jose Arcadio Buendía, decides who does and does not belong to the clan.

to the lives of all other Buendía men, he misinterprets reality, causes chaos as a result of that misinterpretation, and then ultimately achieves a retroactive decipherment of his life in the moment of death. In his final moments, his mind retreads the surface of his memory in search of an ultimate meaning and finds that meaning in the texts of Melquíades. It is worth mentioning here that Arcadio is the first member of the family to achieve an understanding of the texts of Melquíades and he is also a displaced Buendía, living in exile from the family. This relationship between Arcadio's exile and his ability to achieve an understanding of the manuscripts is part of a pattern in *CAS* wherein only displaced people can know the truth of origin and identity. This truth, as I will continue to discuss, is that there is not a "truth" of identity.

To take this analysis a step further, Arcadio recalls that the texts (when read aloud) seemed to be "encicladadas cantadas" (166). This description serves three purposes. First, an "encyclical" is a letter written by the Pope and circulated to bishops all over the world discussing some aspect of the church's doctrine. In this treatment of the word, Melquíades serves as a sacred leader in the novel, and it allows the reader to infer the authority of his writings (at least, for the Buendías). Second, "encyclical" comes from the Latin root *encyclīcus* meaning "encircling." This describes the nature of time within the novel (and of course in the lives of the Buendías), which—due to the repetition of events and names—appears to be cyclical. Possibly, given that these texts ultimately prove to be the prophecy of the entire lives of the Buendías, this reference to a "cyclical" writing could be a key to the decoding of the family history. Third, *encyclīcus* is also the root of the word encyclopedia, which is another hint at the contents of Melquíades' texts. An encyclopedia is traditionally a comprehensive summary of knowledge, and these texts are

discovered to be a comprehensive summary of every “impenetrable” aspect of the lives of the Buendías.

Arcadio has a son named Aureliano Segundo (and another son, his twin named José Arcadio Segundo) to whom the torch of decipherment is passed. As a young boy, Aureliano Segundo asks his great-grandmother Úrsula if he might gain access to the mysterious sealed room of Melquíades. She gives him the keys to the room and Aureliano Segundo begins to sift through the ancient books and manuscripts, which are (oddly) in perfect condition—as if the room had been untouched by time (295).⁷ Aureliano Segundo undertakes the task of interpreting the manuscripts of Melquíades and quickly finds it impossible, noting that: “Las letras parecían ropa puesta a secar en un alambre y se asemejaban más a la escritura musical que a la literaria” (296).⁸

Eventually, as Aureliano Segundo studies the manuscripts he realizes he is not alone—Melquíades is in the room with him, sitting against the window. He knows this is the ghost of the gypsy he had never actually met, and his knowledge was brought to him from a hereditary memory “transmitido de generación en generación” (296).⁹ This mention of a hereditary memory—linked directly to Melquíades (the key holder to the written history of the Buendías) shows the deeply rooted connections in *CAS* between identity, decipherment, and displacement.¹⁰ As previ-

⁷ In a symbolic sense, Úrsula hands him the keys to the ultimate decoding of the text.

⁸ Joset notes in his interpretation of the text that this comment calls to mind the “encícladas cantadas” heard by his father, Arcadio.

⁹ These ghosts inhabiting Macondo can be related to the notion of “haunting” or “hauntology” discussed by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. He quotes Marx as saying, “a specter is haunting Europe, the specter of communism” (2). He discusses the notion of haunting, of specter or ghosts that inhabit present time. In his analysis of the term, as in my analysis of the novel, these specters symbolize the present’s dependence on the past. This haunting refers to ideas or memories which, though they have died, are still “present.”

¹⁰ Melquíades is not a blood member of the family, but rather a nomad. Here again is the link between the displaced and a knowledge of origin/identity.

ously mentioned, memory in the Buendía family is a tool used to decipher the past (from the vantage point of the present), and Aureliano Segundo shows that this drive to decode is literally in the blood of the Buendía family line, or a part of their identity, and that Melquíades (the symbol of displacement) holds the key to the ultimate decipherment of the family history.

Melquíades talks with Aureliano Segundo about his travels, the world, and imparts his ancient wisdom daily on the boy. He will not help him to translate the texts, however, because he has predicted that “Nadie debe conocer su sentido mientras no hayan cumplido cien años” (296). Aureliano Segundo keeps his meetings with Melquíades a secret, and eventually Úrsula pokes her head in the room and asks him with whom he was speaking. She was unable to see Melquíades in the room with Aureliano, and so she assumed that Aureliano was losing his mind like her late husband José Arcadio Buendía. Úrsula, as noted by Joset, does not belong to the Buendía line of “decifrades de languages opacos” (123n55). It seems to be another “law” of the novel—in the world of the Buendías, the men of the family are stricken with the obsession to interpret.

In “Différance” Derrida touches on the topic of the interpretation of signs, and the problem it presents. He tells us that, “the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence” (9). Derrida goes on to use the word “Being” for the “thing in itself”. He describes Heidegger’s notion of Being as it relates to *différance*, stating that “différance is certainly but the historical and epochal unfolding of Being” (22). Here in the novel we learn that the act of deciphering, wherein the signs differ and defer from themselves, is also the process of the “unfolding” of Being. The goal of the interpreter is to sift through layer after layer of Being as it unfolds,

in order to arrive at a naked encounter. The signs put off this encounter between the interpreter and the “thing in itself,” making this process nearly impossible.

This deference of the encounter between beings and Being is the source of the constant struggle of the Buendía family throughout the novel.¹¹ Each generation’s attempt to interpret or decipher the words (signs) of Melquíades leaves it frustrated—because these words constantly defer the moment in which the Buendías might encounter the “truth” of their identity. This frustration fuels the family obsession to decode and so the cycle continues.

The Buendía that ultimately achieves the decoding of the manuscripts of Melquíades is Aureliano Babilonia, grandson of Aureliano Segundo. His parents are Meme (exiled daughter of Aureliano Segundo) and Mauricio Babilonia. Mauricio Babilonia is introduced in the novel as a working class boy in Macondo who Fernanda (wife of Aureliano Segundo) immediately recognizes as having “la piel carcomida por la sarna de la compañía bananera” (405). This connection made between Mauricio and the banana company workers suggests he is linked to a people displaced both physically and within the memory of society—as if they never existed.¹² In this sense, Mauricio Babilonia can be placed in the same category as the gypsies as being representative of exile and displacement in the novel. Additionally, in her book *Cien años de soledad: una interpretación* (1972), Josefina Ludmer relates his last name with “la ciudad de la corrupción y del pecado pero también de los sabios y magos” (66). This connotation of “Babilonia” (ancient and magical wisdom) explains the boy’s similarity and relationship to the gypsies.

¹¹ By Being I mean the phenomenon of life, origin and identity.

¹² The banana workers were a group of people in *CAS* who attempted to unionize and protest against the Boston-based company and were brutally murdered and shipped off in a train, never again to be spoken of by the greater public. They are erased from the minds of the residents of Macondo.

Given that Meme is sent away from the family for her illegitimate pregnancy and Mauricio Babilonia's relationship to the exiled/outcast community, it is clear that Aureliano Babilonia is the most displaced Buendía in the novel (though, not in name). His birth was kept secret, and his grandmother Fernanda led everyone to believe he had appeared in a floating basket on the river.¹³ The combination of his connection to the ancient wisdom of the gypsies and his apparent detachment from the family (birth in exile) allow for him to overcome the curse of misinterpretation possessed by the Buendías.

To further analyze his last name, it is necessary to discuss the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 4-9), also known to be the myth of the origin of language. According to the story, man existed in one place, and spoke one language. This troubled God, because the power of communication between all men would empower them to accomplish anything. To stop this, God scattered the people across the earth and jumbled their speech so that they could no longer understand each other. Aureliano Babilonia possesses a gift with language; he learns and speaks new languages rapidly. In this way, Aureliano becomes the Tower of Babel in reverse. He takes many languages and converts them into his own—he deciphers the babble.

In fact, at the beginning of his interpretation of the manuscripts, Aureliano discovers that they are written in Sanskrit. This is an interesting discovery, as Sanskrit is known to be the liturgical language of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. A liturgical language is one developed for use in religious ceremony or tradition, typically by those who speak a different language in their daily lives. Attendants of a particular religion will utilize a liturgical language in ceremony for

¹³ This is a reappropriation of a biblical narrative, or myth of origin. Interestingly, Moses led his people out of Egypt and into the desert to wander for 40 years—only to die just before reaching the Promised Land. In this novel, Aureliano is like a Moses figure, attempting to lead his family out of the desert (of solitude) and he perishes just as he reaches the “Promised Land” of understanding.

fear that the authenticity of the texts/words will be lost in translation. This explains Melquíades' inability (or rather, refusal) to translate the texts for the Buendías. It repeats the notion that Melquíades is the ultimate authority over the lives of the Buendía family, as only he holds the key to decode the sacred texts of their origin and identity. When Aureliano Babilonia begins his translation of the manuscripts on his own he discovers that "el texto en castellano no significaba nada: eran versos cifrados" (495). The texts are ciphered, they are in a "secret" language that he cannot translate into Spanish, lest they lose their meaning.

The notion of "versos cifrados" calls to mind Derrida's analysis of the nature of "Being" in "Différance". Derrida quotes Heidegger's *The Anaximander Fragment*, "Oblivion of Being belongs to the self-veiling essence of Being" (24). Here we see that the essence of Being is related to oblivion and importantly it is "self-veiling". This argument gives light to the struggle and resolution of interpretation within *CAS*. First, the "self-veiling essence" of Being is reflected in the "versos cifrados" of Melquíades' manuscripts, and the seeming impossibility of deciphering texts so central to the lives and identity of the Buendía family. These texts contain in them the essence of Being—and their ultimate decoding reveals the "truth" of Being, which is oblivion masked by a play of difference, or differing and deferring. Melquíades' texts defer this moment of encounter (being to Being) till the end of the novel, perhaps in an effort to conceal the absence of "cause" at the center of the overlapping effects of Being.¹⁴

As Aureliano Babilonia continues the process of decoding the manuscripts, Melquíades' ghost (or the image of his memory) slowly begins to disappear (488). This is indicative of Melquíades nearing his second death, which in the novel represents the disappearance of his

¹⁴ "Cause" here being the lack of cause, the emptiness.

memory—that genetic memory—from the minds of the Buendías. As stated previously, memory in *CAS* represents the tool used by the Buendías to decipher their reality. The disappearance of the family’s collective memory, symbolized by the fading image of Melquíades, signals the approaching end of decipherment in the novel.

Aureliano became driven to seriously decipher the manuscripts after the death of Amara Ursula and their baby. Their baby was the last official Buendía to exist, and he died right after his birth. In his loneliness and desperation, suddenly Aureliano understood the epigraph at the beginning of the papers of Melquíades. It said, “*El primero de la estirpe está amarrado en un árbol y al último se lo están comiendo las hormigas*” (556).¹⁵ The instant decipherment of this epigraph calls to mind the prophecy made by Melquíades that the texts would not be deciphered until one hundred years had passed (296). The century of solitude in the novel could possibly be symbolic of the beginning and end of the Buendía family, and the death of the last-born Buendía allowed Aureliano to begin his decipherment of the manuscript. The epigraph serves as the impetus of the final successful decipherment, because as Aureliano deciphers the meaning he realizes that the papers must contain his destiny.

Aureliano stands and deciphers the texts out loud (symbolic of the triumph of oral over literate culture) as an apocalyptic “huracán bíblico” rages around him, steadily wiping Macondo off the face of the earth (558). Joset points out that in this scene, Aureliano deciphers apocalyptic literature which interprets history from “un punto de vista determinista” (558n45). He gains an understanding of every major event in the lives of the Buendía family. This final decipherment is

¹⁵ José Arcadio Buendía dies tied to a tree outside, and the last Buendía—the child of Aureliano Babilonia and Amara Ursula—dies and is eaten by ants.

the culmination of all nostalgic self-actualization of each family member before his or her death. Aureliano combs through the lives of the Buendías, finding the reasons for all their existences—the meaning in the nothingness.

This spoken decipherment of his entire family history is described in the final moments of the novel. Aureliano is “profetizándose a si mismo en el acto de descifrar la última página de los pergaminos, como si se estuviera viendo en un espejo hablado” (559). The “spoken mirror” (espejo hablado) symbolizes both the plot and time structure of *Cien años de soledad* which centered around both repetition and inversion. This final act of decipherment creates a spoken mirror within the novel in that Aureliano speaks the prophecy of his life as it comes true, effectively tying his reality to the words of the gypsy Melquíades and causing a reflection of infinite repetitions—like two mirrors facing each other.¹⁶ This final moment of the book is the Pyrrhic victory of the Buendía family over the search for the meaning of reality and the truth of their origin/identity, culminating in their annihilation and neutralization.

As the reader moves through the pages of *CAS* they will notice that they gradually begin to decipher the acts and occurrences within the novel. García Márquez forces his readers into the universe of Macondo, and as they study the book they enter into a mirrored relationship with the Buendía men—frantically attempting to decipher a larger meaning from the work as the family members do the same for the text within the text. José Arcadio Buendía’s dream that Macondo would become a city of mirrors comes true symbolically for the reader and the characters, as both carry out inverted versions of the same act - the decipherment of a text (108). Even the final

¹⁶ Beatriz Sarlo describes this kind of plot structure in her analytical book, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (1993), as an *en abîme* structure—that of “a mirror reflecting a mirror” (62). This type of structure is characteristic of Borges’ writings as well.

moments of the novel, when Aureliano Babilonia achieves a final decipherment and self-actualization on behalf of the entire Buendía family, the reader simultaneously conducts a final interpretation.

What occurs in this moment is the *apocalypse*, in the most literal sense of the word. *Apocalypsis* in its original Greek meaning is a “lifting of the veil” or the uncovering of knowledge. It is appropriate that a novel based in decipherment, the search for a hidden knowledge, should end in apocalypse—the ultimate disclosure of all that is hidden. The apocalypse, the unveiling, at the end of the novel is brought on by the final decipherment of Melquíades’ texts. This conquering of the texts (the sign) results in the encounter with Being which unveils (or reveals) its nature—oblivion. In this unveiling, the “self-veiling” nature of identity, Being, and origin comes undone and allows the reader to see that there was never anything there to begin with. As Macondo and its final inhabitant experience the apocalypse of reality, so the reader experiences the apocalypse of the novel.

IV. Displacement

In this portion of the essay I am interested in the theme of displacement as it relates to decipherment, origin, and identity. In *Cien años de soledad* displacement appears both in the repeated emergence of displaced or exiled characters and, in a more abstract manner, in the time structure of the novel. In my analysis of displacement and its manifestations throughout the work, I will specifically focus on the repeated introduction of characters from exiled groups and the non-linear timeline belonging to the displaced characters and the novel as a whole. To aid in my analysis of this displacement, I will utilize Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* (1997), Derrida’s “Différance” (1968), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism*

and Schizophrenia (1980), and Pierre Claustra's *Society Against the State* (1977) to reinforce my analyses.

García Márquez utilizes a plot and a timeline within his novel that are based largely on the manipulation of place and displacement. His characters experience disordered time—disordered, that is, according to commonly held notions of time. It is noted in *CAS* that the time of the universe of Macondo is a spiral rather than a straight line or even a circle (Joset 463n6).¹⁷ The most common uses of displacement pertain to characters without a home, or removed from their place of origin. In the novel, this could pertain to the Buendías or any group of people living in or moving through Macondo. Another more general definition of displacement is to move something away from where it should be. This relates to the constant repetition and inversion of identity witnessed throughout the novel, such as the shuffling of identity witnessed with the twins Aureliano Segundo and José Arcadio Segundo. At first this shuffling appears to be a humorous occurrence but then the reader takes note of a larger pattern at play, that of the displacement and inversion of identity.

These instances of displacement in the structure and lesser detail of *CAS* imply that the novel may be either a statement about or a gambol with regards to the notions of place and identity. García Márquez either seeks to seriously comment on the issue of Latin American identity and its displacement from the population, or rather he wants to expose the insanity of the worldwide discussion of that identity, proving the pointlessness of the endeavor to “find” it.

First, to observe the use of displacement in the time structure of *CAS*, consider the opening line of the novel: “Muchos años después, frente al pelotón del fusilamiento, el coronel Aure-

¹⁷ This will be analyzed later in the essay.

liano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevo a conocer el hielo” (79). The book actually begins with a timeline that leaps forward to a moment in the future. In the first three words of the novel, time has been disrupted and displaced. In the moment Colonel Aureliano actually does face the firing squad, the book says his immediate situation disappears before his eyes and he sees “su padre en una tarde espléndida conduciéndolo al interior de la carpa, y vio el hielo” (231). This is an example of the narrative genius of García Márquez but also an instance where the reader witnesses the wormhole effect of the time in Macondo. These two scenes are happening simultaneously—during a scene that is meant to be the “present.”

It appears that this novel has a phantasmagorical structure wherein memories exist as reality within present circumstances, so that time overlaps unquestioningly. Within the mind, and the structure of memory, time is constantly displaced. Future, past and present all coexist, waves crashing over one another on the same shore. The structure of *CAS* is a reflection of this magical construction. Jacques Derrida refers to the present as something which defers and differs from itself (“Differánce” 14). This differing and deferring is witnessed in the novel’s constant calling back to the past and forward to the future throughout the “present” of the novel. The present is never fully present, and the characters (as well as the readers) have difficulty finding the point in which the present differs from memory and past. In this novel, time as well as identity can only be understood through differentiation and deferment.

As mentioned above, the identity displacement of the twins Aureliano Segundo and José Arcadio Segundo brings about commentary on the laws of time and identity within the novel. As the twins grow older, they enjoy tricking people into thinking one is the other and vice versa. Over time, no one in the Buendía family can identify them anymore. Eventually the twins them-

selves no longer know the difference. It is after this realization that García Márquez give his readers the law of time in Macondo, “El tiempo acabó por desordenar las cosas” (293). Joset points out here that the author is referring to the degradation of linear time, perhaps suggesting that in Macondo historical time falls apart—or displaces itself (293n3). The only truth or “law” of time in Macondo is that it is disordered, or displaced.

So, then, what is the structure of time in *CAS* if it is not linear? García Márquez gives his readers another look into the construction of time in the novel through an interaction between Úrsula and her great-grandson José Arcadio Segundo. She discovers him in Melquíades’ room as he attempts to decipher his texts, and when he looks up at her he says, “Qué quería, el tiempo pasa” (463). She responds, “Así es, pero no tanto” (463). After this exchange Úrsula realizes that she’s had this exact conversation with Colonel Aureliano, and that an important characteristic of Macondo’s time is being revealed to her. She realizes that “el tiempo no pasaba, como ella lo acababa de admitir, sino que daba vueltas en redondo” (463).¹⁸ Joset points out that in *CAS* time appears to be circular, but it never seems to pass in quite the same place, and in fact it always seems to be slightly displaced (463n6). These important moments repeat, but are marginally out of place each time they do so. Again, one is lead to believe that the time structure of *CAS* is neither linear nor circular, but rather a spiral.

This temporal displacement affects the identitarian displacement of characters throughout the novel. Ghosts are accepted as a naturally occurring part of reality in Macondo, in part due to

¹⁸ As the matriarch, Úrsula serves as the historian and timekeeper of the family. I mentioned previously that she is also not a part of the coding/decoding obsession, and thus has no problem understanding her reality—or the reality of the family.

magical realism utilized by the author, but also because of the spiraling nature of time.¹⁹ In *CAS*, ghosts, notably those of Prudencio Aguilar (killed by José Arcadio Buendía) and Melquíades, represent the past invading the present, yet another disruption of linear time. This occurrence of displaced repetition is symbolic of the Buendía's, and simultaneously Latin America's, plague of past.²⁰ By this I mean that José Arcadio Buendía is driven mad with guilt by the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, and only moves forward from that misery once Prudencio's ghost dies its second death, which happens when his memory ceases to live alongside reality. In the same sense, Latin Americans may live with ghosts of the past that do not allow them to move forward in the development of their self-realization. They have to allow these ghosts to die their second death.

Historical or linear time is perhaps not the determinant temporality for many people, and it is not reality within the novel. As previously stated, the true perception of time (both in the mind and in *CAS*) is non-linear, spiraling, and jumbled. Through his structure of the novel and development of his characters, García Márquez points toward this truth about time.

Nomadism

Part of García Márquez' treatment of time includes the notion that displaced and nomadic groups are expatriated from linear/historical time. In *CAS*, the gypsies are an influential and frequently appearing group with strong ties to the theme of displacement. The previous section of this essay gave light to the importance of gypsies to the identity of the Buendía family, and in this section I will discuss their ties to the fate of the family as well as their displacement from

¹⁹ Once again, the overlapping of past and present reminds the reader of Derrida's "hauntology."

²⁰ "Displaced repetition" could be used to describe the entire structure of the novel.

both time and location. In *CAS* it is stated that “la tribu de Melquíades, según contaron los trotamundos, había sido borrada de la faz de la tierra por haber sobrepasado los límites del conocimiento humano” (127). Here the connection is shown between the destiny of the tribe and that of the Buendías (who are, in a sense, a tribe of their own). As previously discussed, the novel ends with the Buendías ultimately achieving total self-realization through the decipherment of Melquíades’ texts as they are simultaneously wiped off the face of the earth. This line serves as foreshadowing of the end of the book and thereby links the Buendías with the displaced gypsies. It is also worth noting that only the “trotamundos” or wanderers (nomads) are privy to the fate of the gypsies.²¹ This type of knowledge is not available to the Buendías, but only those exiled from society (without home). Though, as I will describe later in this section, it is possible that the Buendías themselves are a “nomadic” group and this is why the displaced are the only ones able to tell them of their own identity.

The behavior and defining characteristics of both the time structure and displaced characters in the novel can be described as “untimely”—a word pulled from Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*—meaning “acting counter to time”, that is, counter to the time of linear history (Nietzsche 60). Examples of this untimeliness can be found in the spiraling and disjointed nature of time in *CAS* and the fact that gypsies and other displaced groups survive linear time untouched. Melquíades never appears to actually age; it is only his ghost which appears to grow older (as his memory does).

It is also worth mentioning that the Guajira indians are a small, but important, displaced group in the novel. Amaranta and Arcadio (child and grandchild of José Arcadio Buendía) were

²¹ This notion of nomadism will be discussed later in this section.

raised by a woman named Visitación—a Guajira indian who moved to Macondo with her brother hoping to escape the plague of insomnia that had wreaked havoc on her tribe. Arcadio and Amara both learned the language of the Guajira Indians before learning Spanish, which is yet another connection between the identity and development of the Buendía family and a displaced group. The Indians bring a plague of insomnia with them to Macondo which causes the collective amnesia of all those living in the town. The actual symptoms of this insomnia are described dramatically: “[...] empezaban a borrarse de su memoria los recuerdos de la infancia, luego el nombre y la noción de las cosas, y por último la identidad de las personas y aun la conciencia del propio ser, hasta hundirse en una especie de idiotez sin pasado” (133). Clearly, this epidemic is reflective of the lives and fate of the displaced. The insomnia causes a forced emptying of the mind, including all memory, sense of self, and any signifiers utilized to give context to one’s surroundings. This group of people is forgotten by the world, alienated from their surroundings and displaced from their own identity. It makes sense, then, that they would be carriers of a disease that causes others to experience a mental illness impacting their entire reality.²² Here again, the importance and effect of the marginalized groups on the conscience/mind of the center is reinforced.

Later in the novel, as Aureliano Segundo discovers the “untimeliness” of the long abandoned room of Melquíades, it appears frozen in the present. The actual phrase used to describe its state is “todo era tan reciente” which, coincidentally, were the same words used to describe the world of Macondo before it was settled by the Buendías. This description serves two purposes

²² These displaced characters are carriers of a “disease” brought over by the Spanish in the colonial/imperial era - a disease as malignant and contagious as small pox.

es. First, it is yet another connection between Melquíades, his manuscripts, and the origin of the Buendías. Second, this is an indication that Melquíades (and gypsies generally) exist outside of the temporal progression of the greater interpellated masses. He is displaced from the timeline of the majority. It is interesting that he is exiled even from the already disordered and displaced temporal structure of the novel, suggesting to readers that the gypsy group is set apart from all others. This extreme exile from the reality of society (or the center) is indicative of another “law” of *CAS*. Mythical time and historical time are separate: historical time is subject to degeneration and disorder while mythical time is untouchable. In this sense, gypsies and other displaced groups (the indigenous, for example) exist within the construct of mythical reality. Within this reality myths of origin, folklore, and oral tradition coexist. Outside of this reality, in the boundaries of historical reality, narratives of the center and literate tradition exist.

Another type of displacement pertaining to Melquíades is his displacement from death. The rumor of his death overseas floats around Macondo, only to be put to rest when he appears again to live in the town. After his physical death, his ghost reappears to help Aureliano Segundo decipher his manuscripts (296). It seems that Melquíades cannot find a resting place—he is exiled from both this world and the next. It is beginning to appear that García Márquez is poking fun at the obsession with deciphering identities and the idea that only the exiled (the indigenous) know the truth. The notion that a gypsy’s singular tether to the reality of common society is the duty (or maybe obligation) to bestow some hidden knowledge, destiny, or truth upon that society

is repeated so frequently throughout this novel that it evolves from something interesting, to exhausting, to humorous.²³

As the novel progresses, García Márquez once again provides a scene in which he echoes this suggestion that the displaced possess knowledge unattainable to the common man. Towards the end of the novel, José Arcadio Segundo witnesses the massacre of the banana plantation workers at the hands of the military stationed in Macondo. He escapes the massacre only to return to a town that has been brainwashed by the military into believing that no such massacre ever occurred. The migrant workers are displaced from the memory and historical narrative of the center.

The military, perpetrators of the lie, that, “En Macondo no ha pasado nada”, come to find José Arcadio Segundo, presumably to get rid of him in order to squash the truth of the massacre (436). José Arcadio Segundo hides in the abandoned room of Melquíades to escape them. When the soldiers open the door to Melquíades’ room, not only do they *not* see José Arcadio Segundo, but they also cannot see the timelessness of the room. All they can detect is an old, dirty, and forgotten room. This scene reestablishes two repeated concepts of the novel. It is first apparent that this is a reiteration of that fact that Melquíades’ time (mythical) is totally alienated from the soldier’s conception of time (historical). This mythical time escapes the historical time of the State.

The idea of the margins escaping the constructs of the state calls to mind Pierre Claustre’s work, *Society Against the State* (1987), wherein he describes the autonomy of marginalized groups. Claustre discusses the notion of power (political power) as it relates to all societies, re-

²³ This thought calls to mind a line from Karl Marx’ essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, “[history repeats itself] [...] the first as tragedy, then as farce” (1).

futing the idea that marginalized/displaced people or “noble savages” do not take part in the power struggle of the center. He argues that even the marginalized and isolated savage lives in a society of complex structures which allow him to refuse and escape the controlling power of the state—i.e. the literate, historical “center” which seeks to contain him within its “apparatus of capture”.²⁴ Even those displaced from the power structure of the center must manipulate or subvert the structure of power in order to maintain autonomy. Claustre describes this as follows, “It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said, with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the State” (218). This is related to the survival of (and removal from) history, time, and disaster by the displaced groups in *CAS*. These groups cannot be contained in history’s, and the State’s, apparatus of capture—not by linear time, not by death, and not by “place”. Their only history is the refusal of history. These lines of flight or escapes from the apparatus of capture are represented by the displaced groups escape from linear time, which is historical or State-time.

The soldiers, the enforcers of the Historical and State-centered narrative of the center, cannot perceive the true state of the room because they cannot seem to enter into the same time/reality as the displaced. The next point made in this scene is that Jose Arcadio Segundo, who knows the truth about the exiled and marginalized, has joined the ranks of the displaced, because now he is invisible as well. In this scene, like in so many others, García Márquez reiterates the

²⁴ A phrase taken from Deleuze and Guattari’s work, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. This phrase, to my understanding, describes the state’s attempt to regulate and control the perception of reality by those existing within it.

idea that the exiled are set apart and unseen by the majority - and this is because they exist outside of the “apparatus of capture” designed by the State.

After the (forgotten) banana plantation massacre, it begins to rain in Macondo and does not stop for many years. This rain causes constant flooding in the town and begins to rot the buildings, drown the animals, and generally destroy everything that once flourished. Once the rain stops (marking the beginning of a drought that would last years) all that remains of Macondo is a skeleton of its former self—even the citizens are decomposing while still alive. Their flesh is green and putrid. The lone survivors of the years of devastating loss and decay are the Arabs from La Calle de los Turcos. This is another group in Macondo that is displaced from its homeland, surviving on their ability to interpret dreams and divine the future. This group shares its defining characteristics with those untouchable gypsies.

The novel describes the state in which the Arabs are found: “[...] pero los árabes de la tercera generación estaban sentados en el mismo lugar y en la misma actitud de sus padres y sus abuelos, taciturnos, impávidos, invulnerables al tiempo y al desastre, y tan vivos o tan muertos como estuvieron después de la peste del insomnio” (457). This quote is significant to my analysis of García Márquez’ treatment of the displaced because it serves to reinforce the notion that displaced groups exist in *CAS* outside of the temporal progression of “History.” García Márquez says here that the Arabs are invulnerable to time *and* disaster. The disaster comment is noteworthy because it shows that these exiled groups also may be displaced from the physical reality of the center (not just the temporal). Additionally, this reference back to the plague of insomnia draws another connection between exiled groups and the plague of forgetting. The quote states that the Arabs were just as dead or alive as they were after the plague of insomnia, which leads

the reader to think that they survived the plague the same way they survived the floods—invulnerability. If the Arabs (or any other exiled group) were invulnerable to a disease that destroys identity and memory and untouched by a natural disaster, it may be because no certain identity or memories associated with it have been impressed or imposed upon them. These groups remain outside of the apparatus of capture.

After the rains stop, Aureliano Segundo goes to speak with the Arabs and he asks them what “recursos misteriosos” they had taken to avoid drowning in the storms (458). In a humorous fashion, García Márquez gives the secret to their survival “...y todos le dieron la misma respuesta: Nadando” (458). This again calls up Nietzsche’s concepts of “untimeliness” and “suprahistoricity.” Untimeliness applies to characters throughout the novel that are displaced from time. The gypsies are what Nietzsche refers to as “suprahistorical,” the suprahistorical man is above history, he does not take it “too seriously,” he is not affected in the same way as the historical man (65). This concept of the suprahistorical relates to the previously mentioned “swimming” of the Arab people to survive the disastrous floods of Macondo, in that the response symbolizes the floating above history that suprahistoricity entails. Their response may be a hint at the hermetic knowledge of survival possessed by the displaced. They seem to know something about the continuance of identity that the center does not, perhaps they are unaffected by the gravity which weighs down “placed” people. They swim, weightless, outside of the physical and chronographic realm of the masses.²⁵ That said, the constant repetition of the theme at this point in the novel

²⁵ Also, earlier in the novel, Melquíades cryptically states “Somos el agua” which causes the reader to infer that he is disclosing a part of his secret knowledge of the origin of man. This ties to the response of the Arabs, in that they may also be hinting at some knowledge of origin/identity unrecognized by the rest of Macondo.

now appears a bit overdone. The excessive returning of this theme brings the reader back to the idea that the quest for and history of identity is a farce—something to be laughed at.

Finally, I would argue that not only are the gypsies, Arabs, and Indians who flow in and out of Macondo displaced—but that the Buendía family is a nomadic and marginalized group as well. Deleuze and Guattari give a definition of a nomad in their work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, “even historically, nomads are not necessarily those who move about like immigrants. On the contrary they do not move; nomads, they nevertheless stay in one place and continually evade the codes of settled people” (404). This describes the Buendía family, exiled from itself, exiled from larger society, constantly slipping from the historical apparatus of capture though never truly moving from Macondo. This definition of nomadism joins the family to the ranks of the displaced.

At the end of the novel, Aureliano Babilonia searches Macondo for anyone who remembers his family. It turns out that nobody can remember the Buendías, save the oldest “negro antillano” in town (another displaced person from the West Indies) (520). This symbolizes the ultimate conversion of the Buendías into a displaced people—their memory and their identity no longer exist for the center. Now, the family only survives in the mind of the marginalized. Once the family joins the margins, they can finally (through Aureliano Babilonia) achieve self-realization. This theme repeated over and over forces the reader to wonder: does García Márquez laugh at (Boom) literature and culture’s infatuation with identity (and/or Latin America’s lack thereof), or does he simply join in the parade? What is the point of this recurring message?

Even the granddaughter of the “negro antillano” is named Nigromanta, possibly stemming from “necromancy.” Joset points out that again, this name carries connotations of ancient

magic and knowledge (520n16). Repeated here is García Márquez' suggestion that somehow those marginalized groups possess secret knowledge that the center, or majority of society, does not. The more that García Márquez repeats this idea (ad nauseam), the more it seems to be a joke. He appears to be thrusting these thoughts into the minds of his readers again and again until it becomes utterly meaningless. To be sure, this whole book and its nonstop recapitulation of the obsession with identity and the one truth being hidden in the margins seems to point at the absurdity of the tiresome narrative. In the following section I will discuss García Márquez' treatment of the notions of origin and identity as it relates to his use of inversion and repetition to assert its ultimate emptiness.

V. Origin and Identity

In this final section I will discuss García Márquez' use of origin and identity in *Cien años de soledad*. I intend to conduct an analysis of his manipulation of repetition and inversion within his character development, as a means to expose the hollowness of the enterprise of "the search for self." To uncover this theme in the novel I will specifically consider the repetition of particu-

lar identity in characters (depending upon their name) and how identity relates to origin. I will also evaluate the recurring family obsession with incest and how this might be representative of the overdetermination of Latin America's identity and "true" origin.

This novel consistently questions commonly held notions of origin and identity. This questioning is similar to that of other theory and writings of the same era, and I will use the work of Jacques Derrida in this section to help illustrate points made by García Márquez about identity and meaning in the novel. In his essay "Différance," Derrida refers to this type of questioning as "soliciting" which, in the Latin sense, "sollicitare [...] means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in its entirety" (21). In his essay, Derrida discusses the nature of signs, which in my case represent identifying characteristics, and their arbitrary quality. He states:

There can be arbitrariness only because the system of signs is constituted solely by the differences in terms, and not by their plenitude. The elements of signification function due not to the compact force of their nuclei but rather to the network of oppositions that distinguishes them, and then relates them one to another [...]. (10)

With this, Derrida asserts that there is no central origin or source for these signs (identity)—there is no "nucleus" around which these signs revolve. The reason these "signs" have any meaning at all is the system of difference between them. I will argue that García Márquez makes this same assertion, that he rejects the notion of "true identity" and its origin. García Márquez uses this novel as a means to escape and subvert the "apparatus of capture" of the center (of Europe and the rest of the Western world) that demands Latin America should bring itself under the umbrella of "national identity" and enter itself into Western History.

Before I begin my analysis, I will define the terms I want to explore to better clarify my argument. First, identity relates to the set of characteristics by which an individual is recognized. Identity comes from the Latin “identitatem” meaning “sameness”, which is also related to “identidem” meaning “over and over.” The second meaning is particularly interesting, as it is reflective of the general treatment of plot development in *CAS*, and also that identity is not necessarily what makes an individual unique but rather it is what joins them to a larger pattern or group.²⁶

Second, the term “origin” refers to the birth of a person, their root, or their foundation. Origin also relates to the commencement or initiation of something. In this analysis the notion of origin and initiation will later be related to the development of character identity. Finally, to say that Latin American identity has been overdetermined is to suggest that it is possible to make a single argument or have a single continuing conversation on the topic and yet an excessive amount of argument, description, and labeling of identity has occurred. This excess of attention and description of a single issue becomes overdone—it adds layer upon layer of repetitive ideas onto a subject until it just collapses in upon itself. The topic of Latin American identity has been discussed to excess, and with this novel García Márquez suggests that identity has no central truth to support such overdetermination, and because of this it has collapsed into itself.

Additionally, this overdetermination is a large part of the “center’s” drive to force marginalized Latin America into an easily marketable and consumable “identity box”. Ironically, *CAS* has come to be known as being the canonical novel, most easily recognized as representa-

²⁶ This is possibly an indication that the entire novel is meant to reflect the entirety of Latin America’s identity, and its many facets.

tive of Latin American Literature. The genre of magical realism and the novel fell prey to the very identity trap that the author sought to solicit or bring into question.

The first most noticeable exchange and repetition of identity occurs between José Arcadio and Aureliano, the sons of José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula. During their formative years (before Aureliano becomes Colonel Aureliano Buendía) the boys exchange behaviors and character traits on and off. Josefina Ludmer gives a concise analysis of the inversion of the identities of these characters in her book *Cien años de soledad: una interpretación*:

la oposición no se establece solamente entre uno y otro hermano, sino en el interior de cada uno de ellos: Aureliano se expande y su nombre cubre un espacio histórico; José Arcadio se retrae; pero Aureliano sigue hermético en su expansión y José Arcadio expansivo en su retraimiento [...]. (63)

In her analysis it is evident that a mirrored (and inverted) relationship is established between the two brothers. Ludmer points out that the frequently opposing identities of the two does not serve to separate them, but rather it shows that they are reflections/inversions of one another. The brothers are two parts of one larger thread of identity, two sides of the same coin. José Arcadio and Aureliano begin a long line of repetition and inversion of identity, particularly for family members born with the same name.

Later in the novel the identity relationship between these brothers is repeated with twins José Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo (the grandsons of José Arcadio). The use of the same names followed by “Segundo” makes it clear that these boys are a repetition of the original brothers, but in keeping with the laws of *CAS* they are not perfect reflections of the first two. Rather, the brothers are distorted and dispositioned copies of one another. The twins mix up their

identifying characteristics so much throughout the novel that by the end no Buendía is quite sure which is which (the twins themselves may not even know). From the moment of their baptisms (a rite of passage, an important initiation) they began to call one another by the wrong name.²⁷ This shuffling of identity becomes so confused that the novel states, “Desde entonces no se sabía con certeza quién era quién” (293). Here again the repeated inversion and confusion of identities in the two characters gestures toward the fact that they are not separate, but part of one entity. This relationship is thus another example of the “displaced repetition” mentioned in the previous section.

Another repetition of identity can be found in the relationships of the original Buendías, Úrsula and José Arcadio Buendía. These characters have a relationship that parallels that of (son) José Arcadio and Pilar Ternera. The relationship of the founding couple is described as follows in the novel: “Era un simple recurso de desahogo, porque en verdad estaban ligados hasta la muerte por un vínculo más sólido que el amor: un común remordimiento de conciencia” (103). This “remorse of consciousness” is related to the fact that they are cousins, linked by their shared shame of incest.²⁸ José Arcadio and Pilar are thusly described later in the novel, “José Arcadio y Pilar vivieron muchas horas de desahogo [...] y hasta llegaron a sospechar que el amor podía ser un sentimiento más reposado y profundo que la felicidad desaforada” (116). The similarity of “desahogo” or “relief” shared between the couples suggests that when two inverted identities come together they become two parts of a whole, and find an escape from the constant process of repetition and inversion. It would seem that when two come together, on either side of one coin,

²⁷ This link between initiation (origin) and identity is another theme to be discussed later.

²⁸ This is another tie between origin and incest, which will be discussed later.

they find wholeness. In this wholeness they find an escape from the “play” of difference and deference (a notion pulled from Derrida’s “Différance”) experienced by others. This is a reiteration of the pattern of marginal displacement because although the characters join in mirrored relationship with each other, the first couple is not joined by love (but by shame) and the second couple has begun to understand the love that connects them.

The pattern of repetition and inversion of identity continues with Amaranta and Rebeca. The inversion between the two is one of physical identity. Rebeca is described as beautiful, youthful, and having magical hands that embroider flawlessly, whereas Amaranta is graceless and mature. Joset relates their opposition to the same identity relationship between brothers José Arcadio and Aureliano (146n60). Later in the novel a similar opposition occurs between Remedios (late wife of colonel Aureliano) and Rebeca. Remedios is a prepubescent girl who rapidly matures in order to marry the older colonel Aureliano. Rebeca is unable to break from the habits of her childhood (eating dirt) and her marriage never occurs. These inverted identities, brought to light through the juxtaposition of two characters, serves to point out the arbitrary nature of unique identity. Regardless of particular identifying characteristic, each character is subsumed into the Buendía lineage—and all is eventually made neutral, and thereby... the same (in the apocalypse).

Finally, inversion of identity occurs within singular characters. José Arcadio Buendía eventually loses his mind and is tied to a tree outside where he babbles nonsense (later discovered to be Latin). The local priest, Padre Nicanor, asks José Arcadio Buendía how it is possible that he is kept tied to a tree. He responds, “*Hoc est simplicissimum: porque estoy loco*” (180). In this character we find a paradox of identity. He is, according to Ludmer, “un loco lúcido” (117).

José Arcadio Buendía is operating within the same paradox as Remedios, the previously mentioned child bride of Aureliano. She is both woman and child. This internal opposition of identity is just a further step in the development of the pattern witnessed throughout the novel of contradiction, inversion, and repetition.

The next facet of origin and identity is the affect of origin on identity. Are the two linked within the novel, or does one displace the other? If they are linked, what is the significance of that connection? In *CAS* the attachment of identity to name is repeated frequently. This pattern begins when we see José Arcadio taking on the character traits of his father (and founder of Macondo) José Arcadio Buendía. This process of integration into the line of José Arcadios is described in *CAS*, “sucumbió al mal humor, igual que su padre” (117). This initiation into the lineage of identity passed from father to son tells the reader two things. First, the reference to José Arcadio’s father tells suggests that origin and identity are, in fact, related. Second, the novel says that he “succumbed” to the transition meaning that he could not resist it. This gives the reader the idea that identity is directly passed to a person from their origin. Identity is something unavoidable.

Later, the name/identity connection is reinforced when Aureliano changes his name. He dedicates himself to the war and so he decides, “ya soy el coronel Aureliano Buendía” (201). When he changes his name, he is transformed. His physical appearance is altered by that transformation. He maintains his tie to origin by keeping his true name but the addition of the military title determines where his life is focused. The connection between name and identity/trajectory seems to say that your origin (birth), the moment you receive that name, is directly linked to identity.

At this juncture, the novel births a new question, is it merely name that affects identity, or must one have the blood of a Buendía to experience their characteristics? Rebeca arrives on the doorstep of the Buendía household a frightened orphan, carrying the bones of her parents in a bag around her neck. She is not a Buendía but she is integrated into the family and raised alongside Amaranta. Though she is not a Buendía by name or blood Rebeca adopts the identifying characteristics possessed by the family. Namely, she develops her own form of solitude and engages in an incestuous relationship with José Arcadio (though she doesn't realize they're not fully related). What does this say about the nature of identity? It seems to contradict the original notion that origin and identity are inextricably linked. The contradiction of notions of identity in *CAS* gives light to the potential impossibility of the search for its source. It appears that the origin of identity is displaced, because wherever the reader thinks to search for the root of identity there is frustration—it is not where it “should be.” The search for identity (and its origin) becomes like a Borgesian labyrinth, an infinite spiral without a center.

The nature of identity is alluded to briefly in the text when Aureliano goes, in a delirium, to sleep with Pilar Ternera (who is also sleeping with his brother José Arcadio). This is, of course, another reference to the fact that these brothers share experiences with each other. In particular, their shared sexual initiation with Pilar Ternera indicates that they continue to develop as one, even in the inverted image of each other. They continue to be connected by their mirrored identities. When Aureliano reaches Pilar's room he does not know how he got there, but he does know why. The novel describes the reason, “porque lo llevaba escondido desde la infancia en una estanco inviolable del corazón” (161). His fate and his identity are held within an “inviolable seal” of his heart. This scene is another instance of the family focus on incest, although here it is

subconscious. The text says that Pilar kissed Aureliano with a maternal gentleness and whispered, “Mi pobre niño”, suggesting an emotional incest displayed between the two. The drive toward incest, and the general destiny of Buendías is contained within an “inviolable seal” in the heart suggesting that identity is something a person is born with, and it is unchangeable. How then, do these brothers exchange characteristics?

This is another shuffling of the source of identity, causing the reader to wonder if the inconsistency of the theme is a sign of the author’s disdain for the topic of the search for identity in general. This can be interpreted as the very nature of identity and origin as being something that differs and defers from itself... which is never stable, never certain. Again, this inconsistency is linked to Derrida’s questioning of the nature of identity (and textual) meaning in “Différance.” He, much like García Márquez with *CAS*, questions the search for meaning and the notion that there is any truth or concrete center in the groundless labyrinth of identity.

García Márquez calls into question the privileging of identity, or the idea that there is some unshakeable source of identity. In the novel he plays with the system of identity, inverting, contrasting, and contradicting the ipseity of each Buendía family member. This play of difference and deference is García Márquez pointing to the arbitrary nature of identity and the nonexistence of its origin. Derrida describes this arbitrariness and emptiness in “Différance” using the example of language, “Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system” (11). This posits that no identity or individuality exists outside of the system of difference and comparison - that identity only exists because of the system. This

reasoning leads to the revelation that there is no source of identity (or language), it all arises out of a play of difference.

Overdetermination

Moving on from the notions of inversion and emptiness, I now turn my attention to the concept of the “overdetermination” of identity. This issue can be most readily noted in the recurring theme of incest within the novel. The obsession and primal drive toward incest is a character trait of the Buendías, as well as those absorbed into the family (Rebeca). One could say that the focus on incest and the drive to reproduce within the family symbolizes the overdetermination of identity, the constant answering and re-answering of a question that has already been resolved. Incest is truly just the attempt to replicate within the same gene pool over and over, recycling the same traits until the process implodes (creating a severely handicapped baby). This cycle occurs in *CAS* and is representative of the plot of the book as a whole.

The narrative circle of incest finds its beginning with Úrsula and José Arcadio Buendía. As previously mentioned, the two founders of Macondo are first cousins. Úrsula is afraid to have children with her husband, for fear that her superstition that children born of incest will have a pig’s tail. He dispels her fears by telling her, “No me importa tener cochinitos, siempre que pueden hablar” (104). Once they begin the family line, the obsession never stops.

Another category of incest previously mentioned is that of psychological incest between Rebeca and José Arcadio as well as Aureliano and Pilar.²⁹ Rebeca was raised alongside José Ar-

²⁹ It is worth noting that these two are the sons of José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula, there is not a member of the family untouched by the obsession save for Remedios la bella, who ascends into heaven and is not perceived to be “of the world.”

cadio as a sibling, and the night of Aureliano's sexual initiation with Pilar was shown to be more of a relationship between mother and son. An adult Aureliano falls in love with a small prepubescent girl named Remedios Moscote, and he stubbornly pursues her to be his wife regardless of the fact that her parents begged him to choose someone else (largely because she was a small child). Although his marriage to and obsession with Remedios is not technically incest, Joset points out that their relationship mirrors one of a father and daughter and not husband and wife (164).

As for a primal subconscious drive toward incest, Arcadio Buendía finds himself uncontrollably attracted to his own mother (Pilar) even though he doesn't actually realize she is his mother. The novel says that her laugh, skin, and smell "perturbaban su atención y lo hacían tropezar con las cosas" (171).³⁰ In this relationship the reader observes that although Arcadio is one of the most exiled family members (Úrsula at one point disowns him) he still falls prey to the unavoidable identity of the family, which again points to the fact that identity is a part of nature—its repetition and overdetermination are unavoidable.

Another example of this primal urge to copulate within one's own family line occurs between Amaranta and Aureliano José. Amaranta (daughter of the founders) raised Aureliano José as a son, though technically he is her nephew (the illegitimate child of Pilar and Aureliano). He bathes with her and sleeps in her bed for many years, and then one day as she is showering in front of him he becomes aware of her naked body (246). This awareness sparks in him the same

³⁰ Her laugh is her identifying characteristic throughout the novel. This is another hint at the overdetermination of identity—her identity is the target of his incestuous desire.

uncontrollable (that is, primal or natural) incestuous desire found in Arcadio, and he pursues his aunt. His sexual initiation occurs in her bed one night, and a love affair continues on for weeks.

The final couple to perpetrate the narrative circle of incest is Amaranta Úrsula (daughter of Aureliano Segundo) and Aureliano Babilonia (grandson of Aureliano Segundo). As the novel concludes, Amaranta Úrsula returns from her studies abroad to Macondo, where she meets Aureliano Babilonia for the first time. She says, upon seeing him, “¡Miren cómo ha crecido mi adorado antropófago!” (512). This statement is a hint at the beginning of a final incestuous obsession and a hearkening back to the original fear of Úrsula—the human baby with a pig’s tail.

Interestingly, the word “anthropophage” comes from the Greek word *anthrōpophagos* meaning “people-eater.” This notion of cannibalism, of one man consuming another, is related to the overdetermination of identity in *CAS* (which is again connected to incest). The symbology of man eating man, like a snake biting its own tail, represents the cyclical and unending repetition of identity and origin—with no beginning or end. Úrsula uses this word, “antropófago,” affectionately towards Aureliano Babilonia with increasing frequency, and eventually the boy can no longer contain his incestuous desire (552). This marks the start of a romance culminating in pregnancy. This baby is the continuation of the anthropofagic circle of the Buendía identity.

Amaranta Úrsula gives birth to the baby, and he is described as “un Buendía de los grandes, macizo y voluntarioso como los José Arcadios, con los ojos abiertos y clarividentes de los Aurelianos” (552). Joset points out that this final Buendía represents the synthesis of all of the masculine branches of the Buendía family, the realization of a completed identity in one person (552n32). Then, upon closer examination they realize he has something more... the tail of a pig (553). With this detail, the reader realizes that the baby is not only the complete identity of

the Buendía family but he is also the outcome of generations of incest or biological overdetermination. Before they can begin to celebrate the birth, Amaranta Úrsula bleeds out uncontrollably and dies. Her death, and that of the baby, is representative of the previously mentioned overdetermination of identity causing it to collapse in upon itself. Their deaths are the end result of the process—oblivion.

Amaranta Úrsula and Aureliano Babilonia die parallel deaths, symbolic of the end result of the overdetermination of identity. The child birthed by Amaranta Úrsula is meant to represent the product of years of incest, identity overlapping identity, and repetition of family habit. The product of this constant determination of identity and repetition of history is a creature that is partially inhuman and unable to survive. The result is material and symbolic death. Similarly, Aureliano Babilonia's death occurs in the culmination of years of attempts at decipherment representing the ultimate realization of the family's origin and identity. This realization also ends in total annihilation of the Buendías, their home, and their story. The message once distilled is that the overdetermination of and equally overdetermined search for a Latin American identity only serves to neutralize the concept and render it meaningless.

Conclusion

The structure, plot, and even character formation within *Cien años de soledad* is representative of Latin America's search for identity in that there is no way to clearly discern such a thing. The contradiction, inversion, and displacement witnessed throughout the novel serve to show the reader just how pointless is the nature of that pursuit. I stated earlier that one can derive from the definition of identity that it is (at its core) a process of repetition that creates

“sameness.” But, because origin and identity have been so displaced, muddled and distorted in Latin America, and throughout the world, there can be no sameness. The only consistency is change (or inconsistency). The only truth is that we are perpetually lied to. These truths (or untruths) are at the core of the novel as the source of the constant inversions and paradoxes in the plot.

At a time when the world turned its eyes onto Latin America (specifically its writers) to provide some kind of defining cultural narrative, this novel refuses to promote the idea of a “national identity.” The subversion or “solicitation” of this concept in *CAS* points to the nihilism lying behind the thin veneer of identity which cloaks all people, societies, nations, and states. The lesson García Márquez suggests in *Cien años de soledad* is that there is no single identity to discover in Latin America, the quest to find one is fruitless and quite literally self-consuming. This novel ends in total neutralization of character and place because there is no transcendent or absolute meaning. Macondo is a city of smoke and mirrors disguising the recurrent emptiness of history.

Reflecting on this conclusion, it is clear that “emptiness” may seem excessively pessimistic to some, but I argue that there is hope to be found. This concept, though nihilistic, is liberating. One must ask; Is there a light in the nothingness? Can we decipher the void? To both questions, I say yes. I stated earlier in this essay that the Buendía family is fundamentally incapable of giving meaning to an empty existence. Here, to decipher means to make something from nothing.

This inability to decipher may have been a reality for the Buendias, but is it a reality for the readers and the world they (we) live in? No, we can rise above arbitrary identity constructs

and “truths.” The freedom to be found in emptiness is hard to notice at first, as it appears to be an end—a death. An “apocalypse” as it occurs in the novel, does not necessarily mean an “end” despite the connotations the word carries. In my analysis, the apocalypse is merely the revelation of the groundlessness of identity, not its death.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1911), Nietzsche refers to the “higher man” who, free from the constraints of absolutes and truths, can dance and even laugh (240, 359). This dancing symbolizes the levity of spirit a person possesses when free of the weight of concrete meaning, dogmas, myths of origin or identity (363). This dancing allows for creativity and play with the system of “meaning” man creates for himself. In other words, the overman is free to be whatever he wishes himself to be. Once a person recognizes the meaninglessness of the aforementioned “identity box” they’re held in, they have the freedom to escape it. They discover a “line of flight” which brings them out of reach of the State’s “apparatus of capture.”

In order to begin this process of escape from the apparatus or box of identity, we must rid ourselves of the despair encountered in the face of oblivion. We have to learn to decipher (give substance to) the freedom in the emptiness. We as people and as nations are no longer obligated to sell ourselves to the rest of the world. We no longer have to market the narrative of “who we are.” We open ourselves up to the play of difference, we wander aimlessly through the unending labyrinth of Being. As the veil is lifted between ourselves and the void, we can laugh into the emptiness and listen to the echo’s infinite repetition.

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