

“Darse la mano es como desarmar una bomba”: Division by Language and Reconciliation through  
Touch in *Los informantes* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Abstract

Jacques Derrida, in one of his last projects, took “touch” as an analytical point of departure for the study of a selection of texts by Jean-Luc Nancy. He interprets the meaning of “to touch” in Nancy's work as a “setting-in-motion,” a trope which can be observed in the novel *Los informantes* (2004) by Juan Gabriel Vásquez. This article observes an intertextual relationship between *Los informantes* and a chapter from Nancy's *The Sense of the World* entitled “Politics II: Subject, Citizen, Sovereignty, Community, (K)not. Tying. Seizure of Speech”. The narrator and his father are read as allegorical representations of Nancy's definitions of “sovereignty” and “democracy,” respectively. When mapped onto the historic and contemporary Colombian political landscape, the flaws associated with these concepts suggest the need for a new form of community based on “interdependence” and “being-in-common,” critically explored in the novel through the character of Angelina, a physiotherapist. Set against a trend in Colombian and Latin American writing of incorporating the themes of Nazism and the Second World War, the article—contrary to previous studies—finds that therapy through language (talking or writing) is not the key to healing the divides of the past. The meaningful encounters demonstrated by Angelina and others involve physical contact and affection: these are the encounters that promote reconciliation.

Palabras claves: soberanía, comunidad, ser-en-común, Colombia, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Jean-Luc Nancy, el tacto, Segunda Guerra Mundial

Key words: sovereignty, community, being-in-common, Colombia, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Jean-Luc Nancy, touch, Second World War

In interviews, Juan Gabriel Vásquez frequently quotes a number of his key literary influences: James

Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Gustave Flaubert, E.M. Forster, Philip Roth, and above all, Joseph Conrad.<sup>1</sup> Whilst these authors and their works are often explicitly mentioned in these discussions and in his own works—*Historia secreta de Costaguana* is about the possibility that Conrad visited Colombia—Vásquez rarely talks about his philosophical readings. Indeed, it could be seen to be a characteristic of the current generation of Latin American authors that they are no longer as explicit in making reference to their theoretical interests, as were authors of the “Boom” generation and Southern Cone writers from the 1980s, for example.<sup>2</sup> The plot of *Los informantes* takes place in Colombia in the 1990s with additional reflections on activities there during the 1930s and 40s. It contains brief references to Plato, Friedrich Nietzsche, and an extended dialogue with the figure and speeches of Demosthenes, an Ancient Greek orator and politician, but is not at first glance an explicitly philosophical text—dealing primarily with the relationship between a father and son. In this article I argue, however, that in addition to the literary influences that scholar Jasper Vervaeke illuminates in relation to *Los informantes*: Thomas Pynchon, Jorge Luis Borges, and W.G. Sebald, another intertextual relationship can also be observed with the French philosophical text “Politics II: Subject, Citizen, Sovereignty, Community, (K)not. Tying. Seizure of Speech” from Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Sense of the World*.<sup>3</sup> I argue that the narrator of *Los informantes* Gabriel Santoro, and his father, can be read as allegorical embodiments of Nancy’s notions of “democracy” and “sovereignty” respectively. By adding flesh to abstract concepts in this way Vásquez brings these philosophical notions alive, interacting critically with them and testing out the implications of Nancy’s thought in the fictionalized interactions between characters. I posit that the examination of these wider philosophical influences helps to illuminate what is at stake in Vásquez’s understanding of the problems still plaguing Colombia’s democracy at the time of writing of *Los informantes*, and the possible solutions he envisages.

#### Nazism and the Second World War in Latin American and Colombian literature

Before examining the dialogue of Vásquez’s work with Nancy’s text in more detail it is worth contextualizing *Los informantes* within a trend in Colombian and Latin American fiction in choosing

to deal with an era of conflict that had far-reaching political and philosophical consequences: Nazism and the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> Jasper Vervaeke has characterized Vázquez as one amongst a generation of Latin American authors who wish to distance themselves from national references and to explore “algunos de los grandes temas universales,” occupying foreign literary references as a means to “inscribirse en las corrientes de la literatura mundial” (30). Two other members of this generation who also notably dealt with the themes of Nazism and the Second World War around the same time were the Mexicans Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla. Volpi’s *En busca de Klingsor* and Padilla’s *Amphitryon* caused a stir in the Mexican cultural context for failing to deal with Mexican questions, characters, or locations.<sup>5</sup> In response to such culturally nationalist criticism directed at *En busca de Klingsor* Volpi referred to one of the respected fathers of Latin American literature, Jorge Luis Borges saying:

Para mí era absolutamente natural escribir sobre un país que no fuera el mío—por un lado, continuando una vasta tradición latinoamericana que tiene su punto medular en Borges—, y no dejó de sorprenderme que la crítica señalará con tanta asiduidad esta aparente voluntad de distanciarme de lo latinoamericano. Ahora simplemente creo que un escritor latinoamericano puede escribir sobre cualquier tema posible con la misma naturalidad crítica. (qtd. in López de Abiada 373)

Nevertheless, the Venezuelan scholar Gustavo Guerrero makes a distinction between the gesture of figures such as Borges who “luttaient pour élargir les frontières thématiques de leurs littératures nationales et, par là, celles de la nation elle-même” (“fought to enlarge the thematic frontiers of their national literatures and, as such, those of the nation itself,”) compared to, “Palou, Padilla ou Volpi, dans une attitude beaucoup plus radicale, les ignorent ou leur tournent tout simplement le dos. Ce n’est pas un hasard si ce dernier ait revendiqué à plus d’une occasion l’héritage de l’antinationalisme de Jorge Cuesta” (“Palou, Padilla or Volpi, in a much more radical attitude, ignore them or quite simply turn their back on them. It is not a coincidence that the latter has, on more than one occasion, claimed the inheritance of the anti-nationalism of Jorge Cuesta”; 173). This last phrase of Guerrero’s,

however, betrays the ongoing complication, even for these authors characterized by him as “deterritorialized,” in that they still refer to national figures as precursors to their “anti-national” gestures. Moreover, aside for the specifically post-national novels mentioned, their other essays and works frequently deal with events and figures from the Mexican context. Vásquez’s novel is of course less evidently post-national than those of Volpi and Padilla given that it is set in Colombia and deals with the effects of Second World War immigration and foreign policy on the Colombian social and historical landscape. Vervaeke is right when he states that “*Los informantes* es una mirada en los abismos de la historia de Colombia,” and he adds, “En las aguas turbias del pasado Santoro divisa el reflejo del presente” (34). It is the exact political contour of this “reflejo del presente” in terms of the specific contemporary implications of the return to the era of the Second World War that critics have failed to map out, and that I will discuss below. My argument, in contrast to previous studies that have focused on the function of memory and linguistic therapy in the novel, takes touch as the central feature of Vásquez’s exploration of the possibility for personal and national healing.<sup>6</sup>

One such previous analysis of Vásquez’s novel is contained in the study *En otro lugar* by Colombian literary critic Luz Mary Giraldo. In it *Los informantes* is examined as one amongst a group of novels in contemporary Colombian fiction that deal with the painful experience of geographical displacement due to violent circumstances (19).<sup>7</sup> Giraldo identifies four main forms of dislocation in the works included in her study: the trajectory from rural to urban areas due to violence within Colombia itself; the expulsion or exodus of people from the country; experiences of immigrants who arrive to Colombia from abroad; and finally, a more general “pérdida de orígenes” with reference to national and global displacements during different periods in Colombian history. There is, of course, overlap between categories but *Los informantes* fits most easily into the third of these characterizations. It is joined by a handful of other Colombian novels that also deal with displacements caused by Nazi violence, for instance, *El rumor del astracán* by Azriel Bibliowicz and *El salmo de Kaplan* by Marco Schwartz.

With the overall focus on migration in her analysis Giraldo pays particular attention to the

secondary character, German émigrée Sara Guterman in her analysis of *Los informantes*. The narrator publishes a testimony of Sara's experiences in an act that inexplicably alienates him from his father. Giraldo's careful analysis of the function of Sara's testimony feeds into a wider conclusion in her study that, "el olvido regresa a la memoria y da la estocada final. Queda la palabra para exorcizar tanto dolor" (119). I would like, however, to illuminate several instances in the novel in which the therapeutic function of "la palabra" is called into question, and opposed to a more successful record of reconciliation through touch. I will give evidence to suggest that Vásquez places emphasis on forging relationships through embodied interactions and, ultimately, advocates forgetting—rather than testimonial remembering—as a remedy to the problem of the generational inheritance of conflict that has plagued Colombia for over fifty years.

In his book, *Literature, Testimony and Cinema in Contemporary Colombian Culture*, Rory O'Bryen takes up the themes of memory and forgetting in various significant works that attempt to construct a cultural memory of the period known as *La Violencia*, a period also referred to in Vásquez's novel. O'Bryen's study finds that the task undertaken by authors such as Gustavo Álvarez Gardeazábal, Fernando Vallejo, Laura Restrepo, and others compensates for "the absence to this day of any organized national attempt to understand the origins and genesis of the conflict, to adjudicate responsibilities, and to pay homage to the dead" (10). As he points out, the dates traditionally ascribed to the period of *La Violencia* (roughly 1948-1953) and its insertion into a narrative of ongoing conflict between Liberals and Conservatives, serve to simplify a highly complex multi-dimensional situation (2-3). O'Bryen finds amongst his authors that narrative engagement is deemed useful for contesting this sense of an inescapable continuity of historical conflict and a "cycle of violence and revenge" (3). As such he examines authors and cinematographers born in the 1940s in their function of undertaking a "kind of collective 'exorcism': an attempt to 'work through' conflicts that would have remained opaque to them in their early years" (13). This language betrays the influence of psychoanalysis on the generation observed by O'Bryen.<sup>8</sup> Vásquez, however, belongs to a new generation; he was born in 1973, a few decades after the authors and directors dealt with in O'Bryen's

study. Whilst Vásquez too makes references to various periods of Colombian history such as the riot, or *bogotazo*, set in motion by the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán in 1948, and elements of the subsequent rural conflict between *Liberales* and *Conservadores*, his is not a task of “working through” the conflict, but rather one of showing that despite these attempts conflict has still proliferated in Colombia. The narrative takes place in 1991 during another period of attempted text-based resolution by the government in the form of a new constitution. Vásquez’s portrayal of the events of a second year, 1995, show that violence had still not been halted by such a solution.

In 1991 the current Colombian constitution was inaugurated, sparking a wave of hope for an end to a period of violence the likes of which had not been felt since the election of Gaitán almost fifty years before. Gaitán was a unique symbolic figure in Colombian history. A member of the liberal party, he was also the first Colombian politician to unite the population across party divides and expand the democratic field by reaching out to previously excluded actors and social classes. The democratising potential of Gaitán’s time in government came to an end with his assassination. As a response to the decade of extreme violence unleashed by the assassination, formal restrictions were placed on Colombian democracy, known as the National Front pacts (1958-1974), which “excluded third parties but also limited competition between the two majority parties (Liberal and Conservative)” (Bejarano and Pizarro Leongómez 7). The inauguration of the 1991 constitution known as the “Constitución de derechos humanos” formally ended some of these restrictions on Colombian democracy and as such was invested with symbolic hope, as had been embodied in the figure of Gaitán almost fifty years before.

However, by 1995—the other main point of reference in the novel—this hope was shattered. The part set in this year consists of a *posdata* that comments on the effects of the publication of the original *informe*. The failure of the 1991 Constitution to uphold human rights or civil liberties in practise was emblemized by two more high profile assassinations: those of Andrés Escobar, a national footballer who scored an own goal in a match against the United States in 1994, also referred to in an episode in the novel; and Álvaro Gómez Hurtado, a member of the constituent assembly

responsible for drafting the new constitution, in 1995. By making a narrative link between the assassinations of Gaitán in 1948, and Escobar in 1994, Vásquez draws attention to the lack of change, over almost five decades, in the State's ability to uphold the rule of law and protect the lives of its citizens.

The other main historical markers in the novel, as mentioned, were the late 1930s and early 1940s when the effects of the Second World War reached Colombia via both German and Jewish immigration (as well as through the cultural ties of the pre-existing immigrant population). The main plot of the novel is concerned with understanding why the narrator's father falsely denounced his friend Enrique's father as having Nazi affiliations leading him to be put on the *lista negra*, as well as his failed attempts to gain forgiveness from Enrique. This act of denunciation was part of a system of 'informing' designed by the Colombian government—in line with United States foreign policy—to identify possible Axis aides and sympathisers. The *lista negra* was an expansion of the United States-led trade embargo of Axis countries, seeking to identify people and businesses in the Western hemisphere that might also be harmful to national security and thus prevent U.S. businesses from trading with them. The list was announced on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1941 but had existed unofficially for the previous six months. In practice, the lists had much far-reaching consequences than just halted trade with U.S. companies. Families lost their businesses and were cut off from all economic activity. They were not allowed to buy gas or electricity from North American suppliers, buy their goods, or receive loans from their banks. As the situation intensified, the Colombian government confined suspicious individuals to a hotel in Fusagasugá known colloquially as "El campo de concentración Hotel Sabaneta". In the novel Sara Guterman, a Jewish émigrée, refuses to use this nickname: "No, me niego a hablar de 'campo de concentración', el lenguaje no nos puede hacer estas trampas. Una cosa es una cosa y otra es otra cosa" (83). Sara rejects the equivalence that might be inferred from this turn of phrase given that the hotel was elsewhere referred to as an "encierro de lujo," in a phenomenon that had significant class dimensions; wealthy Nazi sympathisers were more likely to avoid the list or live comfortably until they could overturn their inclusion, whereas humble Germans

who had not engaged in political activity would find themselves isolated and ruined. The list itself is thus another textual entity that has negative consequences for those inscribed upon it.

Vásquez has said in an interview: “If historical novels don’t comment on the present, I don’t see the point [...] They can remind us of roads not taken – how things could have been better” (“A Life in Writing”). In line with this statement it is possible to observe parallels between the contemporary Colombian political moment when *Los informantes* was being written and the policies enacted during the era of the 1940s that the novel returns to. In the early 2000s when Vásquez was researching *Los informantes* there was an “antissubversive” campaign undertaken by the Colombian government as part of “Plan Colombia” to destroy drug crops and fight the *guerrillas*. As part of this, President Álvaro Uribe (in office 2002-2010) “había anunciado la organización de ‘un millón de cooperantes’ y de redes de ‘informantes’, lo que produjo preocupación en las asociaciones de derechos humanos” (Pécaut 98). The fears amongst human rights groups described by Pécaut included the possible infiltration of these networks of “informantes” by *guerrillas* or paramilitaries, as well as false denunciations (99). One significant scandal was the accusation of the creation of “falsos positivos” in which innocent civilians were killed and passed off as *guerrilleros* to claim successes in the conflict. When speaking about Uribe’s “democratic crackdown” Vásquez shows his own concern for some of these issues saying, “In the process, he’s destroyed Colombian democracy [...] Civilians have been spied upon, or killed and passed off as dead *guerrillas*” (“A Life in Writing”). It therefore seems likely that the false denunciation involved in *Los informantes* (by the narrator’s father of Enrique’s father in the 1940s), and the return to this period of Colombian history in general, may be an example of the “comment on the present” (Vásquez, as above).

In determining “how things could have been better” it is valuable to note a phrase Vásquez uses when he speaks positively about the ex-Mayor of Bogotá, Antanas Mockus (in office 1995-1997 and 2001-2003), who is credited with making the city much safer. The author claims of Mockus that he “did an incredible job as mayor. When I left, Bogotá was a very violent, stressful city to live in. People had forgotten how to resolve conflicts peacefully; he taught them to live together again” (“A



Life in Writing”). In *Los informantes* Vasquez asks, after decades of violent fighting, if establishing blame through memory-work—as the previous generation had done—is productive, or whether we should focus on building a new form of community, or “teaching people to live together again” (as above). As such, Vásquez takes up the task alluded to at the end of O’Bryen’s study when he returns to the notion of “forgetting,” finding that the works analysed “also demonstrate, in a more paradoxical vein, that the failure to *forget* can produce much the same effect, impeding the necessary task of a collective imagination of ways out of said repetition” (185). In exploring a way out of the repetition of violence, Vásquez suggests that there is need for literature to privilege forgiving and forgetting. This, I will show, implies a departure from the influence of the psychoanalytic notion of the talking and writing cures that informed memory and trauma studies, discussed above. I will now outline the basis for my argument that there is an allegorical relationship between the father and son in *Los informantes* and Nancy’s notions of “sovereignty” and “democracy”, respectively, as the means to understanding why a new form of community is necessary. I show that both of the characters are associated with different forms of language (speech and writing) and suffer distance from each other and those around them as a cause of this. In the following section I show, conversely, how the figure of Angela (a physiotherapist) is associated with touch and reconciliation. This, I argue, is a fictional exploration of Nancy’s call for a horizontal politics of “nonselfsufficiency” (sic) through touch and sharing, outlined in the aforementioned essay “Politics II: Subject, Citizen, Sovereignty, Community, (K)not. Tying. Seizure of Speech”.

#### Sovereign Father, Democratic Son

*Los informantes* begins when the journalist-writer protagonist Gabriel Santoro decides to publish a testimony of the life of his father’s lifelong friend Sara Guterman, an émigrée Jew originating from Germany and who moved to Colombia in the 1930s. Gabriel is shocked by his father’s extremely negative reaction of at his attempt to give a voice to “la boca menos ajena de mi vida” (14).<sup>9</sup> It is only towards the end of the *informe* that we discover the reason for this negative reaction:

mi padre había leído el libro tan pronto lo recibió, y lo había leído con lupa y en tiempo récord, buscando declaraciones que lo pudieran delatar [...] ‘No encontró nada, pero lo encontró todo’, dijo Sara. ‘Todo el libro le parecía una gran pista que le apuntaba a él, que lo señalaba.’ (256)

The father saw himself in the text even though the son did not know of his involvement in denouncing his family friend to the authorities as a Nazi. This is the first instance of several cases in the novel in which language—writing—causes conflict between characters.

The father appears to represent the notion of “sovereignty” or the “community of the one” (109), which Nancy describes as “the empiricotrascendental (or aleatory-necessary) circumscription that determines the law of such and such a city as the *ne plus ultra* of the “civity” of this city, the first and last point of its institution and decision” ([sic] 107). He is firmly associated with the law through his occupation as Professor of Oratory at the Supreme Court. His power stems from his authoritarian control over the “order of speech” based on both seizing control over the discursive space and attempting to monopolise it by demanding the silence of others. Accordingly, Vásquez uses the words “dictó,” and “pronunció,” to describe his activities and states that he sits on a “poltrona autoritaria” (14). Whilst his son is a writer he, “siempre rehusó acercarse a cualquier forma de periodismo”; he is a “profesor” from the Latin “profiteri,” “profess” – to declare publicly, as opposed to “doctor,” “academico,” or “lector” (14). The father illustrates one of the key differences between “speech” and “writing” in his privileging of form over content. When in one of his classes a student suggests that a particular speech is effective because of its ideas he cuts him off and says,

Nada de ideas. Las ideas no importan, las ideas las tiene cualquier bestia, y éstas en particular, no son ideas, sino eslóganes. No, la serie nos conmueve y nos convence por la repetición de la misma cláusula al comienzo de las invocaciones, algo que ustedes, de ahora en adelante, llamarán *anáphora*, si me hacen el favor. Y al que me vuelva a hablar de ideas, lo paso por las armas. (22-3)

He not only dismisses “ideas” as belonging to “cualquier bestia” but he enforces his control over

naming (calling the technique “anáfora”) with the threat of violence (“lo paso por las armas”).

The defining moment in the father’s career is a speech he gave for the 450th anniversary of Bogotá, which was described as a “texto legendario que llegó a ser comparado con los mejores ejemplos de retórica colombiana desde Bolívar a Gaitán” (22). The father is a great admirer of Gaitán and frequently imitates him in his Oratory classes. Like him, the father’s influence comes from taking control of language in his sphere by occupying it through speech events that serve as “persuasive” in the moment. Yet he is fatally lacking in comparison to Gaitán: he is missing four fingers from a machete attack, which prevents him from being able to imitate Gaitán’s gesture of pointing to the sky with his right index finger extended. This lack of fingers symbolically represents the incompleteness of any form of sovereignty—no *being* can exist without reference to others—and the father has no authority if he has no subjects or if the subjects refuse to obey his sovereign authority (Nancy 110-1).

The father’s machete injury meant that he had to re-learn to write with his left hand, making his writing childlike and frustrated. Gabriel hypothesizes that this may be why his father never wrote a book, “un hombre que había pasado su vida entre los libros de los otros” (24). It may be that the father uses speech—inherently less fixed than writing—to mask the secret of his betrayal, which is not formally inscribed until the son takes on his present task of documenting it. When Gabriel goes to visit him he is surprised at the small number of books in his house: “¿Dónde estaban sus libros? [...] ¿Dónde trabajaba él, dónde leía?” (18). It is, therefore, all the more significant when the father makes an exception to his distrust of writing by publishing a slating review of his son’s book, which he thinks contains the tale of his betrayal. The father enters the son’s territory to contest his narrative, not realizing that the son does not even know of his denunciation, and that by the controversy his review causes he only increases the book’s reach.

The epigraph of *Los informantes* consists of two quotes from the speech “Sobre la corona” by Demosthenes that speak to the father and son in turn. The first: “Nunca te purificarás tú de las acciones por ti mismo allí realizadas; no hablarás tanto como para eso,” sums up the idea contained in the

novel that the spoken language, is not a sufficient tool for “purification,” or what could be interpreted in psychoanalytical terms as overcoming neuroses through the “talking cure” made popular by texts such as Freud’s “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-through”. In the novel, the father, despite his willingness to talk, is unable to overcome his guilt over past actions towards Enrique, and he ultimately commits suicide. Through the character of Angelina, a physiotherapist, Vázquez suggests that the talking cure must be supplemented by human contact, the sensory experience of touch, affection, and the haptic that brings people together and offers opportunities for healing. In the last section of the article I show that, rather than the lack of talking, it is the absence of touch that frustrates the reconciliation between Enrique and the narrator’s father.

The second question from the epigraph states: “¿Quién quiere hablar? ¿Quién quiere hacer acusaciones respecto de los acontecimientos pasados? ¿Quién quiere garantizar el porvenir?”. These questions might be seen to address the son and narrator, asking who has the right to speak and, in the last phrase, suggesting language’s inherent “will to power” (Nietzsche). The fatal flaw of the son is his impulse to document and appropriate the stories of others, sometimes against their will. In his desire to document these stories and, as such, open up the discursive sphere to multiple voices, the son can be seen to represent “democracy,” otherwise described by Nancy as the “community of the other” (109). The father laments the son’s lack of silence, or what could be interpreted as the crowding of his sovereign discursive space and he thus resents this democratic impulse. When the son writes his book about Sara the father says, “Callarse no es agradable, exige carácter, pero tú no entiendes eso, tú, con la misma arrogancia de todos los demás periodistas que en el mundo han sido, tú te creíste que el mundo no podía prescindir de la vida de Sara” (74-5). In the following quote he attacks, directly, the problem of using language even as a figure for democracy when he says, “porque te parece que Sara lo es todo, que la has conocido a ella y nos has conocido a todos” (75). He points out that Sara is just one figure amongst many who deserve a voice and who are all different from each other. The idea that knowing one person well does not equate to knowing many people is reinforced within the novel when, later, Angelina, a physiotherapist, says to Gabriel, “Tiene que respetar más a

los otros, Gabriel [...] No todos somos iguales” (242). The word “iguales” is significant in that it means both “the same” and “equals”. Angelina is making a point about Gabriel not being able to speak for more than just himself, *and* she is drawing attention to the power dynamics involved in his attempts to do so.

Vásquez calls into question the ethics of appropriating stories and writing on behalf of others progressively throughout the novel. Through these critiques of Gabriel’s impulse to write about others, Vásquez implies that all writing, is in fact about the self. Another character, Sergio, confirms this when he accuses the narrator of not recognising him saying, “‘Yo me fijo más en la gente’, dijo él. ‘Usté en cambio no hace más que mirarse el ombligo’” (288). Gabriel’s curiosity and democratizing impulse are critically presented as he doubles the betrayal of his father’s friend, Enrique, by making public the content of his personal archive that he had requested remain private. The narrator also pushes Angelina to share more than she desires with him because of his “curiosidad” and justifies it by saying “No se ponga así. Es bueno hablar de estas cosas. Es terapéutico” (241). Angelina retorts: “Mire, si ustedes se pasaban la vida hablando de todo y eso les servía, pues me *allegro*, pero dígame una cosita, ¿por qué putas me toca ser igual a mí? [...] Además, la terapeuta soy yo” (242). The assertion of Angelina as the therapist is significant since she is a masseuse and therefore the so-called healing miracles that she proudly recounts are undertaken through tactile—and not talking—therapy. I address Angelina’s views towards physical contact and their role within the story in the upcoming final section.

Writing on behalf of the “other” is not only ethically problematic but language in general is shown by Vásquez to be imprecise and divisive. Enrique says of the father, “Con él cada palabra tenía su contenido, pero también era una herramienta para mirar desde arriba, o si era inevitable quedarse a la misma altura, para conservar la distancia” (305). Here words are specifically related to creating distance, opposed in the novel to the proximity achieved by touch. Enrique sums up the destructiveness of words in the following phrase: “Había una familia entera vuelta mierda por una palabrita suya así que no viniera a dárselas de tener buena memoria” (306). The use of the diminutive

for “palabra” further reinforces its power—the power of his word—in having destroyed Enrique’s family.

The comparison of, and similarities between, father and son in terms of their repeated betrayal of Enrique appear to coincide with Nancy’s point that “sovereignty and community can be the mere outline of an area of shared jurisdiction” (Nancy 107). They both share the name “Gabriel Santoro,” and when the father dies Sara forgets to add the second surnames to their names on the invitation so “Gabriel Santoro invitó a las exequias de Gabriel Santoro,” making it appear that Gabriel Santoro, the father, lives on (99). There is a progressive blurring of the boundaries between them; at one point the son looks down to check if his right hand is still intact or whether he has inherited the mutilation of his father (294). One of the most compelling arguments for an intertextual engagement of *Los informantes* with Nancy’s chapter is the fact that the destinies of the father and son match precisely a phrase used by Nancy to express the problem of politics based on either “sovereignty” or “democracy”. He says: “the totalitarian [sovereign] subject turns out to be suicidal, but democracy without identification turns out also to be without any *demos* or *kratein* of its own” (Nancy 108). The final twist in the story is that Gabriel Santoro, the father, killed himself and deliberately took a bus load of people with him in an act of “joder a los demás para joderte bien a ti mismo,” a repeat of the original and unexplained act of denouncing Enrique’s father as a Nazi (338). The son, on the other hand, who betrayed both his father and Enrique for the sake of writing his stories, loses touch with Angelina, and supposes that he would have lost touch with Sara had she not died. As such he ends up with no “*demos* or *kratein*” of his own (as above) and reflects, at the close of the novel, “Así me voy quedando solo, así me he quedado solo” (282). This, once again, echoes an earlier phrase of his father’s when he realises no one has come to visit him in the hospital, and he too says, “me he quedado solo” (47).

#### Touch as a “setting-in-motion”

I have argued, so far, that there is an observable engagement of *Los informantes* with the chapter “Politics II” from Nancy’s *The Sense of the World*. In one of Jacques Derrida’s last projects,

*On Touching* (2005), he focuses on “touch” as the central thread for understanding the philosophical significance of Nancy’s work. Derrida expresses the meaning of “to touch” in Nancy’s *Ego Sum* as “to tamper with, to change, to displace, to call into question; thus it is invariably a setting in motion” (*On Touching* 26). In the following sections of this article I will examine two instances in which touch appears to function as a positive “setting-in-motion” leading to the reconciliation of characters in the novel, and two examples in which the absence of touch frustrates the opportunity for such reconciliation.

The potential for reconciliation between the father and son, after the publication of Sara’s testimony, had occurred upon the discovery that the father needed an operation to replace an obstructed artery to his heart. The narrator makes clear that this is the original act that sets in motion the narrative, through a phrase he reads several times before he writes up the *informe*: “nada sería como es si no lo hubieran operado” (260). It is well known that Nancy’s own heart operation was a turning point in terms of his life and writings, as documented in his book about the subject *L’intrus* (The Intruder) (2000), and in Claire Denis’ film of the same name.<sup>10</sup> In *On Touching* Derrida describes the heart, in Nancy’s work as symbolically representative of the “absolute intimacy of the limitless secret, no external border, absolute inside, crypt for oneself of an untouchable interiority” (267). In the novel the father’s heart operation—the physical opening of the symbolic crypt, described by Derrida in the previous quote—frames the revelation of his most guarded “secret” (as above). The son says,

me ha parecido evidente que debo empezar de esta manera: recordando el día en que me llamó [...] no para detener el alejamiento en que nos habíamos embarcado, sino para sentirse menos solo cuando le abrieran el tórax con una sierra eléctrica y le cosieran al corazón enfermo una vena extirpada de su pierna derecha. (15)

The quote makes clear that the father does not call his son “para detener el alejamiento” (as above), an overcoming of alienation between them that would have been achieved through the father explaining the reasons for his negative response to Gabriel’s book. Instead he wants physical

proximity “para sentirse menos solo” (as above). Vásquez makes a point of describing the operation in detail to draw attention to the haptic dimension of the opening up of the father’s heart, a physical opening that undermines the symbolic “untouchable interiority” of the heart described by Derrida in the previous paragraph. The heart operation also impels, albeit indirectly, the father to reveal his secret to Angelina (his physiotherapist who becomes his lover): “había cometido el error que acaso cometemos todos: hacer confianzas después del sexo” (225). Moreover, the touching between Angelina and Gabriel inspires him to attempt to seek reconciliation with Enrique thus setting in motion another chain of events.

The meeting between Enrique and Gabriel’s father is full of frustrated moments, opportunities for touch and reconciliation that pass by, one after another. In the following passage, Enrique discusses at length the effects of Gabriel (the father)’s failure to offer his hand to Enrique upon being reunited with him:

Gabriel me había saludado al llegar, pero no me había dado la mano [...] muy en el fondo, me chocó que no me diera la mano, sentí que no me saludaba como es debido. Si me hubiera ofrecido la izquierda...si me hubiera abrazado (no, esto es impensable). Pero nada de eso pasó. No hubo ese contacto al vernos, y eso me hizo falta [...] Es curioso lo que darse la mano tiene de conciliador, aun a pesar nuestro. Es como desarmar una bomba, yo siempre lo he visto así. (304)

The ellipses that appear in the text after “Si me hubiera ofrecido la izquierda” leave the reader to consider the possibility of a different ending had they engaged in this simple gesture. Enrique and Santoro continue to eschew all other forms of contact. The first chapter of Derrida’s *On Touching* asks “If two gazes look into each other’s eyes, can one then say that they are touching?” (2). Derrida does not offer a conclusion to his stated question but he does point out the importance of the visibility of the eyes as a step towards being able to touch them “with my finger, lips or even eyes, lashes and lids by approaching you –if I dared come near you in this way, if I one day dared” (2). By adding “if I dared” Derrida suggests that sight is a form of connection or encounter that makes contact easier,



something that Enrique and Gabriel's father avoid by: "En este momento habíamos salido a caminar hasta la tienda de la esquina. No es que necesitáramos nada, pero hay conversaciones en las que uno se para sin querer y empieza a caminar, porque caminando no hay que mirarse a la cara todo el tiempo" (306). This walk, without looking at each other, reinforces the distance between them. Finally, Enrique offers Gabriel a cigarette, which he refuses. This last lost opportunity for physical interaction leads Enrique to send Gabriel away, forbidding him from entering house and denying him the reconciliation he sought.

Learning from the mistakes of his encounter with Gabriel the father, Enrique and his wife Rebeca welcome Gabriel the son with tactile affection: "Rebeca, su esposa, me había saludado de beso al presentarse; al contrario de lo que suele pasarme, la intimidad inmediata me había gustado en ese momento, pero me había gustado más la disculpa que me ofreció la mujer en su acento de paisana despreocupada" (295). Despite enjoying the embrace Gabriel, faithful to his occupation as a writer, values the words, which turn out to consist of an unremarkable comment about her having her hands full. Enrique's recourse to touch is presented as affectionate and gratuitous: "antes de que me diera cuenta ya Enrique me había tomado por el codo y se apoyaba ligeramente en mi brazo para bajar las escaleras, a pesar de que nada en su cuerpo parecía necesitarlo" (295). The meaningfulness of touch is further reinforced through anecdotes told by Enrique. He attributes his own redemption to Rebeca who, when he met her, "Se dedicó todo el almuerzo a hablarme de sus antepasados vikingos como si yo fuera un niño de cinco años, y a tocarme con la rodilla por debajo de la mesa. Qué digo tocarme, se estaba frotando contra mí, era como una gata en celo" (299). Enrique suggests that her words were patronizing but her touch, on the other hand, was alluring, and that which brought them together.

Enrique consolidates the atmosphere of reconciliation by explicitly suggesting that Gabriel let go of his sense of inheriting of his father's mistakes, combining it with a touch that moves Gabriel:

'no cargués vos con las cosas que hizo él, no es justo. Vos olvidate, viví tu vida'. Se limpió los dedos en el delantal y me dio una cachetada cariñosa. Era la primera vez que me tocaba con la mano (ese momento siempre es memorable). '¿No te importa que me meta?'. (312)

In contrast to his father, Gabriel is welcomed in, invited to dinner, and even stays over. Yet he still cannot help but satisfy his desire to appropriate elements of Enrique's story that the latter had wished to keep private. Rather than making his family's history public, Enrique wishes to end the divisive cycle that the writing of history can perpetuate by establishing blame. Gabriel risks the bonds that have been created by sneaking out in the night to transcribe Enrique's documents, which he reproduces in his *informe*, betraying Enrique's wishes for the sake of his writing.

The father and son, in their "shared jurisdiction"—both operating in the sphere of language (oration and writing)—are unable to avoid their tragic destinies of committing suicide, in the case of the father, and ending up alone in the case of the son. "Communicability" or "sharing," on the other hand, are elements of that which Nancy envisages as an alternative form of what he calls a "horizontal politics" also described as "tying the (k)not," in which each person speaks for themselves, and opens themselves up to others in acts of "exposure" and "exchange" (111). This is also described as a politics of "nonselfsufficiency" (sic) or, "dependence or interdependence" (111). In this schema, "Politics would henceforth be neither a substance nor a form but, first of all, a gesture: the very gesture of the tying and enchainment of each to each, tying each time unicities (individuals, groups, nations, or peoples) that have no unity other than that of its enchainment" (112). The possibility of this alternative form of politics, consolidated through relationships of "interdependence," is explored in the novel through tactile associations, most notably exemplified by Angelina, in her role as a physiotherapist. After Angelina publicly defamed Gabriel's father (enacting the violence of language) Gabriel wishes to confront her. His anger dissipates when he finds a copy of the *Kama Sutra* that Angelina had brought for his father and thinks "Angelina la yegua masajeaba el lingam de mi padre, aquí, en esta cama" (226). The recognition of the intimate contact between Angelina and his father fades his anger and allows him to have a phone conversation with her, after which they separate as friends. During the conversation, Angelina undertakes a process of self-conscious sharing with Gabriel specifically related to her love of touch. She says,

A mí me gusta tocar. Me gusta sentir a la gente, eso no se puede decir en voz alta. Otras

fisioterapeutas sientan al paciente a veinte metros y desde ahí le dicen qué hacer. Yo me acerco, los toco, les hago masajes. Y decir que los toco y me gusta no está bien visto. (236)

It is an interdependent relationship that exists between Angelina and her patients. She says: “Me gusta el contacto, qué puedo hacer. Después de un fin de semana sola en mi casa, pues me hace falta” (236).

The same applies to her contact with complete strangers: “Me gusta meterme en un ascensor bien lleno de gente. Me siento acompañada, me siento tranquila. En esos sitios los hombres se rozan contra uno, mis amigas odian eso, a mí en cambio me gusta. Eso no se lo he dicho a nadie nunca” (237).

Each of these phrases expresses a sense of shame: “qué puedo hacer,” “eso no se puede decir en voz alta,” and “eso no se lo he dicho a nadie.” This highlights the taboo nature of physical contact, and yet for Angelina it is the main thing that keeps her going after her family were killed in a terrorist attack.

The sharing brings Angelina closer to Gabriel and this is consolidated through actions when she sends him a Christmas card with a cut out picture and a note: “Un recuerdito de nuestro último encuentro telefónico. 19-XII-94. PS: A ver si algún día nos vemos en vivo y en directo” (281). Gabriel is touched emotionally: “Me conmovió que se hubiera acordado de mí [...] y también que se hubiera tomado el trabajo de buscar unas tijeras y recortarla y comprar una tarjeta y meterlo todo en un sobre y ponerlo en el correo, el tipo de diligencias cotidianas que siempre me han sobrepasado” (281). By listing all the elements individually, he acknowledges the care that went into the gesture. Nevertheless, he says,

Sí agradecí el gesto; y sin embargo nunca la llamé para decírselo, ni tampoco hice intento alguno para verla en vivo y en directo, y Angelina salió de mi vida como sale tanta gente: por mi incapacidad para tomar contacto [...] por esa ineptitud terrible que me impide mantener un interés sostenido y constante –un interés que vaya más allá del intercambio de información, de las preguntas que hago y las respuestas que espero y las crónicas que redacto con esas respuestas. (282)

Gabriel’s inability to maintain contact with people is presented as a problem and he realizes that there

is nothing meaningful in his incessant desire to appropriate the stories of others.

### Conclusion

It may seem paradoxical that this presentation of the reconciliatory possibilities of touch be put forward in the context of a novel. The fictional work is a textual entity composed of the same language that the author suggests can be divisive. Yet it is significant to note that the author Juan Gabriel Vásquez, shares a name with the narrator, Gabriel. This autobiographical marker, though not necessarily to be taken as a suggestion of autobiographical content at the level of the plot, signals that Vásquez might agree with Nancy's definition from *The Inoperative Community* of writing as being the expression of a "singular voice" (66). This coincides with the point I developed earlier relating to the narrator's father and Angelina protesting that the narrator cannot speak for others. No matter how hard we try to see things from a different point of view we are limited to our own epistemological horizon and can, therefore, only "expose," "share," and "present" ourselves to others (Nancy *Inoperative Community* 66). In Nancy's thinking this "presentation of the self" through writing helps to constitute the literary community of "being-in-common" that forms the basis for his philosophical position as further outlined in *Being Singular Plural*. I am not suggesting that Vásquez unproblematically subscribes to Nancy's philosophy, but as I have shown in this article he tests the abstractions of philosophical thought—the limits of "sovereignty," "democracy," and the possibility of a horizontal politics of "nonself-sufficiency"—against human nature as exemplified by his characters' own rejection of the affection and contact that they appear to need. The novel provides an exploration of an alternative way of living together; and the ellipses, the moments of "what if" allow us to imagine how things could be different, and how new relationships and forms of being-together *could* emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, “Juan Gabriel Vásquez: By the Book”.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Carlos Fuentes in *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* and novels such as *Cambio de piel* make explicit reference to the influence on his ideas of Paul Ricoeur, Claude Levi-Strauss, Friedrich Nietzsche and others. Similar examples could be provided in the cases of other Boom authors such as Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar. On the relationship of Latin American women writers to theory in the 1980s see Kantaris.

<sup>3</sup> In various interviews Vásquez uses Nancian terminology. See for example “History, Memory, and the Novel,” in which he says he found literature to be his way of “being-in-the-world,” a heideggarian phrase that Nancy has re-cast in his own work.

<sup>4</sup> The treatment of these themes appears to be somewhat of an accelerating trend in contemporary Latin American literature of the last two decades. See for example: *La literatura nazi en América* (1996) by Roberto Bolaño, *El salmo de Kaplan* (2005) by Marco Schwartz, *Wakolda* (2011) by Lucia Puenzo, *K* (2011) by Bernardo Kucinski, *Diario da Queda* (2011) by Michel Laub, and *O Evangelho Segundo Hitler* (2013) by Marcos Peres. This undermines the statement made by Carlos Fuentes, in one of his last published works *La gran novela latinoamericana*, that *Los informantes* plays an important role in the historical memory of the region by dealing with “un territorio poco frecuentado: los efectos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en Latinoamérica y el destino de las comunidades alemanas en nuestros países” (390).

<sup>5</sup> One critic, José Felipe Coria, is quoted as saying “ya no podemos considerarlos autores mexicanos porque ni su tema ni su tratamiento se remiten a México” (qtd in Ortega Ávila).

<sup>6</sup> The close examination of touch as a privileged site for reconciliation establishes another intersection between the work of Nancy and Vásquez’s novel. In the third section of this article I call upon Jacques Derrida’s examination of the function of touch in Nancy’s work to examine this connection further.

<sup>7</sup> *Los informantes* has not received as much scholarly attention from within Colombia as Vásquez’s other novel *Historia secreta de Costaguana*. See, in that case, Montoya and Carpio.

<sup>8</sup> The form of psychoanalytical thought invoked is that which is extrapolated from individual analysis and used to understand the broader cultural psychological circumstances. This practise of extrapolation was already common in the late nineteenth –and early twentieth-centuries when figures such as Sigmund Freud, Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Janet produced works on the interactions between memory and culture (see Erl 8). In the 1980s the work of these figures influenced the particular branches of ‘memory studies’ that began to examine personal, generational and cultural memory relating the Holocaust, as well as other traumatic events such as, in this case, *La Violencia* in Colombia.

<sup>9</sup> The narrator and his father share the same name: Gabriel Santoro (the significance of this shall be explained below). To avoid confusion I will refer to the son as “the narrator” or “Gabriel” and the father as “the father” or “Santoro”.

<sup>10</sup> For more details regarding Nancy’s illness and the effect it had on his career see his biography page at The European Graduate School: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-luc-nancy/biography/>. Web. 13 Aug. 2015.

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