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## Part of Her: An Exploration of the Bodily Boundaries Between Parent and Child and the Limits of Personhood in Lina Meruane's *Sangre en el ojo*

### Abstract

Lina Meruane (1970-) is a contemporary Chilean author whose novels began to captivate at the turn of the twenty-first century. Her works are replete with unsettling meditations on the fragility of human flesh. And the promise of illness—its infectious potential—clings to the air in her literary worlds, such as those found in *Fruta podrida* (2007) and *Sangre en el ojo* (2012). This latter novel in particular serves as a vivid example of Meruane's talent for writing sickly atmospheres. It is a novel saturated with bodily imagery, such as disembodied eyes, parasitic embraces, and grim sexual foreplay. All of these visuals are evoked by the protagonist of *Sangre en el ojo*, Lina, who is described as a Chilean academic and recently blinded type 1 diabetic, very much like the author herself. This essay uses Kay Torney Souter's notion of the "family body," articulated in her 1998 article, "Narrating the Body: Disease as an Interpersonal Event," as a conceptual lens through which to contemplate these images. In short, the family body, as Souter articulates it, metaphorizes the biological. She argues that the onset of death and disease—all of these various degradations and mutations of the flesh—oblige one to confront the agonizing and ghostly business of participating in a genetic legacy. With this essay, I explore the various ways by which the disquieting bodily imagery of Lina Meruane's novel is further enriched when contemplated using Souter's notion. I argue that when contemplated through the prism of Souter's notion, Meruane's bodily imagery interrogates traditional notions of individuated (and healthy) personhood as achieved through fleshly circumscription.

### Keywords

Lina Meruane, Kay Torney Souter, kinship, pathographies, conceptions of personhood, bodily boundaries, familial dynamics, illness, disease, blindness, division, adhesion

### Cover Page Footnote

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Part of Her: An Exploration of the Bodily Boundaries Between Parent and Child  
and the Limits of Personhood in Lina Meruane's *Sangre en el ojo*

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“...era la perduración de esos ojos que  
tenían que alumbrar terriblemente mi  
vejez...”

‘...it was the continuance of those eyes  
that had to illuminate in an ugly way my  
aging’

Clemente Palma, “Los ojos de Lina”  
(‘Lina’s Eyes’)

I. Putting the Pieces in Place: Souter’s “Family Body” versus Bodily Intactness

“Algún día lo sabré. Este cuerpo que ha sido  
mi albergue, mi prisión, mi hospital, es mi tumba.”

‘Someday I will know it. This body that has been  
my refuge, my prison, my hospital, is my tomb’

Rosario Castellanos, “Presencia” (‘Presence’)  
*Lívida Luz (Livid Light)* (1960)<sup>1</sup>

In the concluding paragraphs of her essay, “Narrating the Body: Disease as an Interpersonal Event” (1998), Kay Torney Souter cites two literary examples in which illness is conceived of as an inter-bodily event “experienced between people” (40): *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991) by Philip Roth and *A Very Easy Death* (1964) by Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>2</sup> Souter suggests that within both these works, traditional biomedical delineation between patient and caregiver and, by extension, the infirm and the healthy is blurred. “Who is the patient in these experiences?” she asks (40). Both works, usually categorized as autobiographical reflections, narrate the respective deaths of Roth’s father and de Beauvoir’s mother. But in a darkly comedic stroke of narrative communion between these two texts, physical ailments plague both authors as well. That is to say, both sets of parent and child are

described (ostensibly by “the child”) as weaving in and out of the contentious boundaries between “sick” and “healthy” in a distressing dance of maybe-death. Roth describes the onset of his father’s initially benign brain tumor, all the while alluding to “an emergency quintuple by-pass surgery” that he, Roth, undergoes (40). Meanwhile, de Beauvoir’s text begins with her sustaining an injury for which she is hospitalized. Only later, with the frailty of her (de Beauvoir’s) physical state already confirmed, is the mother’s bodily decline introduced.

Souter questions the solidity of these boundaries between bodies, making room for her claim that both works “create a sense of disease and dying as interpersonal, intergenerational, events. One does not experience mortality in one’s own body, but in the family body” (41). It is this concept of the “family body” that Souter articulates, with its metaphorical potential and its ramifications for conventional conceptions of personhood, of an individuated flesh and blood self, that I wish to explore in this essay as it relates to Chilean author Lina Meruane’s 2012 novel, *Sangre en el ojo* (*Seeing Red*).<sup>3</sup> I argue more generally that Souter’s notion is a welcome addition to a growing body of academic contemplations on writings of illness (a genre more specifically referred to by some literary critics as pathographies) and the nature of embodiment.<sup>4</sup> Using her concept as a sort of theoretical lens, one begins to discern new and exciting lines of inquiry interwoven within the often provocative imagery of these pathographies. Questions that are raised in this essay include: Does the body of each blood relation within a nuclear family constitute one “limb” of the larger family body?<sup>5</sup> And if one limb becomes infected with the uncertain ooze of disease, does the entire body suffer? How would belief in this concept of the family body necessarily disturb conventional conceptions of an individuated self? And how does illness obscure or sharpen these bodily boundaries? At the risk of putting too fine a point on this interrogative list, this essay principally seeks to explore the following question: Where does the parent’s body end and that of the child begin?

Before delving in, I should clarify what I mean when I refer to conventional conceptions of personhood, of a flesh and blood self. I argue—and not without awareness of the myriad ideological rebuttals that lurk in the lines of other academic essays, holy books, and online chat forums—that each of us typically conceive of ourselves as *one*, at least in a bodily sense. Beyond or before belief in spiritual communion and social collectivity, we are aware of the limitations and unity of our flesh, *my* flesh.<sup>6</sup> And although this flesh is composed of cells constantly engaged in cycles of division and fusion, and although we are prone to leave behind sometimes dusty, odorous, and even watery vestigial trails of this flesh, we expect it (and thus each of us) to remain intact. As I attempt to illustrate using Meruane’s text, the desire to remain intact is perhaps more potent than any other. I may interlace my fingers with those of my mother in a gesture of affectionate proximity, but I expect to be able to pull my hand away painlessly. Or I may dance with my father, our

bodies moving in such fluid synchronization as if to appear momentarily unified. But once the music fades, I expect to separate without issue. Souter's notion of the family body, however, with its suggestion of bodily interchangeability and flesh porosity, potentially threatens the integrity, viability, and sanctity accorded to intactness. That is to say, this latter notion finds itself crushed and fragmented under the weight of the family body.

A type 1 diabetic, the Lina of Meruane's text suffers ruptures in the capillaries of her eyes during a late-night party in New York City.<sup>7</sup> She is left blinded by an "hilo de sangre" (15) 'thread of blood' (7). The profound frustration that Lina understandably experiences in response to these changes in her body demands an immediate reckoning of the tenets underpinning this cult of the intact, of the allure of bodily singularity. Has Lina experienced a loss if her physical eyes remain intact, meaning in place? (Her eyes have not rolled out of their sockets or gushed down her face in streams of white and red à la a David Cronenberg film.) Is she not still a "whole" unit despite having lost the function of her eyes? And what bodily parts must an individual possess in order to constitute a whole, singular unit in the first place? Must all parts be healthy (i.e. functioning) in order to contribute to this wholeness? Following her oculist's recommendations, Lina returns to Santiago, Chile to be with her family for an extended period of time. It is within these brief vignettes found in the middle of the novel that the reader is introduced to Lina's parents, both of whom work in the medical profession. And it is these descriptions of Lina's parents that form my primary subject of analysis within this essay, with a section devoted to either parent. I have chosen to privilege these descriptions because Souter herself relies on literary imagery of the parent-child relationship (in her case, imagery of this relationship found in the de Beauvoir and Roth texts) to construct and flesh out this concept of the family body. If Souter's notion is to be proven a viable theme or philosophical current in Meruane's text, I feel that I must follow Souter's lead and also examine Meruane's writings of the same familial dynamic.

In a brief effort to offer further clarification of this concept of the family body, I want to make mention of another element of Souter's analysis of de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death*. Souter argues that the death of de Beauvoir's mother forces her, de Beauvoir, and her sister Poupette to identify with this deceased woman of shared genetic material (and not without a touch of irony) on bodily terms. That is to say, the onset of their mother's death—and their joint witnessing of her corporeal deterioration—compels these sisters to take note of the interconnection that exists between their respective bodies and that of their mother. Souter uses de Beauvoir's literary ponderings on maternal expiration to push forward an argument wherein the discrete bodies that compose a family—however many there may be—are experienced as more unified when illness and/or death filter in. Souter writes that "They [the sisters] have uncanny fantasies that their own

embodied state is a part of hers [that of their mother]. Remembering her dying mother trying to sip orange juice through a straw, Beauvoir feels her own mouth has become her mother's" (41). The family body, as Souter articulates it, is a disquieting if not creepy affair. Death, the onset of disease, these degradations and mutations of the flesh can serve as potent reminders of just how little agency one wields over her or his incarnate form. Your body is the product of others, a compaction of genetic echoes. Distinct personhood as achieved through fleshly circumscription proves tenuous or illusory when contemplated through the prism of Souter's family body.

These concerns that Souter raises in her article are echoed by a growing field of scholarship that is invested in research of the "medicalisation of the family and kinship" (Porqueres i Gené and Wilgaux 114). In their article from 2009, "Incest, Embodiment, Genes, and Kinship," scholars Enric Porqueres i Gené and Jérôme Wilgaux mention Kaja Finkler's 2000 publication, *Experiencing the New Genetics: Family and Kinship on the Medical Frontier*. They write that Finkler demonstrates how "a person in certain clinical contexts is increasingly conceptualised through his or her relations with their ancestors" (114). And so she does. In the introduction of her book, Finkler raises a series of questions (many of which she refutes, expands, and/or disturbs throughout her book) that seem to commune perfectly with those generated by Souter's notion of the family body and her essay at large:

Concepts of familial disease give new meanings to family. Pembrey observes that, with genetic diseases, "family ties can take on a new meaning in genetics and challenge our usual view of confidentiality."<sup>8</sup> To whom does genetic information belong: the individual or the family? What right does one family member have to learn the genetic results of another member? What obligation do people have to tell others in the family of their own test results and inform other family members that they are at risk? . . . Illness of any kind may cause changes in relationships within families, but in genetic conditions, because they are believed to be transmitted through the family, these changes may have particular potency. (4)

The various ways by which Souter and Finkler's respective explorations nourish and antagonize one another—and any and all dialogue between their particular argumentative potencies—have influenced by own prodding of Meruane's fascinating novel. Moving forward, and with regard to the structure of the remainder of this essay, Section II dedicates itself to an exploration of Lina's interactions with and descriptions of her father, as he is the first parent to whom the reader is introduced. More specifically, I analyze a few images evoked by Lina in her initial description of her father in an attempt to illustrate the various (often

ironic) ways in which these images conform to Souter's concept of the family body with its suggestion of bodily exchange, porosity, adhesion, and continuity. Section III follows a similar structure but examines descriptions of Lina's mother. That is to say, I evoke a series of images found in a few sections of the book that detail this complicated, often sticky mother-daughter dynamic. Again, the objective of this section is to argue for the relevance and metaphorical potential of Souter's concept of the family body within this familial dynamic (at least as this dynamic is characterized in Meruane's novel). One such image found in "la otra de mi madre" (143) 'my mother's other' (128) is presented as the novel's preeminent example of this potential: the mother's urging that if possible, she would give Lina her eyes: ". . . hija mía, cuenta con mis ojos, son tuyos si los quieres" (146) '. . . my dear daughter, you can count on my eyes, they're yours if you want them' (130). Section IV, the conclusion, attempts to tie up any loose *hilos* ('strings') of inquiry established in previous sections of the essay. But more importantly, this section touches upon Lina's observable crescendo of intense, covetous lust for her lover Ignacio's eyes, consistently described in grotesque but also ardent detail. I argue that her fixation with his eyes not only figures into the book's conclusion, with Lina attempting to act upon these simultaneously morbid and yet lively fantasies as a last bid for bodily intactness, but also that the metaphorical quality of this fixation is suggestive of the continuation and expansion of Souter's family body. How is the family body sustained and how does it grow? And how is this notion relevant to the future trajectory and nature of Lina and Ignacio's relationship?

## II. "Una misma persona": Themes of Adhesion between Father and Daughter

"Sabed que la esperanza nos traiciona  
y que es la compañera de la muerte.  
Sabed que ambas —muerte y esperanza—  
crecen como el parásito  
alimentado en nuestro propio cuerpo."

'Know that hope betrays us  
and is the she-companion of death.  
Know that both—death and hope—  
grow like a parasite  
feeding in our own body.'

Rosario Castellanos, "VIII," *Trayectoria del polvo* (*Passage of Dust*) (1948)

It is with a palpable admixture of intense love, exhaustion-fueled agitation, and skepticism that Lina describes her father as he arrives at Santiago's international airport to pick up his newly blind daughter. As noted in the previous section, he is the first genetic family member and parent to whom the reader is introduced. His description is also the first in a series of images that Lina paints of her genetic kin or nuclear family. Meanwhile, any description of her lover and companion, Ignacio, never occupies as much textual real estate. He is considered and described sporadically (although Lina's descriptions of her kin are often addressed to Ignacio within the episodic structure of the narrative). It would seem that despite Lina's often thoroughgoing resistance towards her parents—she frequently alludes to seemingly insurmountable emotional and circumstantial differences between herself and this pair—she feels compelled to describe them in striking and often unflattering detail. Why? I put forward the argument that these descriptions of those with whom she is most intimately linked on a genetic level constitute an act of survival, a method by which she is attempting to remain intact (ergo distinct) within both the episodic or fragmented trajectory of her illness and, on a meta-textual level, the episodic narrative constructed for her by the author. These descriptions exteriorize her parents. They, mother and father, are their own individuated flesh-and-blood units. They exist outside of Lina and she of them. That Ignacio should be described so sparingly within the novel perhaps speaks to his tremendous emotional and bodily significance for Lina, a topic that is further explored in Section IV. Returning to these descriptions of Lina's parents, it is ironic then that embedded within these textual attempts to assert bodily intactness and distinction are the very ingredients needed to undermine this project.

Lina begins her initial description of her father within the section notably titled “operación de rescate” (59) ‘rescue operation’ (48) by remarking on her father's ability to use his saliva to utter her full first name, Lucina, and *hija* ‘daughter’ in unnerving unison: “Nadie más que mi padre usa su saliva para juntar ambos en una sola palabra compuesta: la hija está adherida a mí, pegada como una sombra palpitante a mis espaldas. Ese hija [*sic*] y yo somos para él una misma persona en un mismo dilema” (59) ‘No one but my father uses his saliva to glue those two words together into a single compound word: Lucina-daughter. That *daughter* is adhered to me, stuck like a throbbing shadow on my back. That *daughter* and I are for him the same person with a single dilemma’ (48, McDowell's emphasis). Within and with this fanciful image, Lina embarks on her own rescue mission of sorts, but one that is destined for failure if not futility. Lina can feel her father's words adhere to her at the moment of their utterance. And devastatingly, the onset of blindness may have been the tool or sensation enabling Lina to sense her father's words stick to her shoulders like “a throbbing shadow.” Indeed, Souter consistently suggests in her essay that infirmity and impending death or the death

of a relation heighten one's awareness of his or her participation within the family body, within the agonizing indeterminacy and ghostliness of genetic legacy. If committing this sensation to language is Lina's attempt to expunge the traces of her father's fluids from the surface of her broken body, she is either too late or simply acting in vain. She was built, if only partially, by the genetic material flowing through that same saliva. In fact, it is very possible that rippling through the chromosomal structure of her father's spit were the seeds of illness that have presently bloomed within her.

Lina's desire for distance also extends to the concrete realms of the geographical and situational. Her willingness to return to Chile (and ultimately stay in her parents' home) is contingent upon her ability to remain steadfast in her opposition to her parents' insistence that she undergo eye surgery in Santiago instead of New York (her father, in particular, is deeply hopeful that she will choose to have the operation in her home country). It is a position that she adopts with ferocity, unwilling to compromise as she attempts to remain intact within and faithful to the adult life she has painstakingly built far away from the bodies of her family. And yet, with nothing more than a simple utterance and the expulsion of a drop of saliva, these attempts to remain intact in her principles—the very principles that will govern the course of action she pursues to cure her broken body—are undermined. She finds herself indelibly marked by and mixed with these other bodies, specifically those of her parents.

Consistent with this oral imagery and harkening back to Souter's characterization of the family body as an indeterminate mix of embodied states between those genetically related is the line of text that follows the one analyzed in the above paragraph: "Debe estarnos observando muy serio, intentando no sentir nada, mi padre, fingiendo ser un hombre de cartón piedra. Si lo auscultara podría escuchar sus palabras haciendo eco contra las paredes de su cuerpo. Pero el centro de mi padre no está totalmente vacío" (59) 'He must be observing us very seriously, trying not to feel anything, my father, pretending to be a tin man. If you probed him you'd hear his words echoing against the walls of his body. But my father's core is not totally empty' (48). In contemplating the "fullness" of her father's body, Lina makes relevant once more the many questions pertaining to bodily intactness that this essay seeks to tackle. Interestingly, this image of bodily lacking is conjured by someone ostensibly lacking herself, or by someone who feels as if she has been forced to relinquish any claim to bodily intactness once going blind. All the same, this image that Lina paints of her father's body, a body that is empty at its core, boasts tremendous poetic potential, easily serving as a site of continued conceptual conflict between opposing philosophies or understandings of the body and its limits.

By uttering Lina's name(s), a daughter, if but momentarily, resides within the body of her father. Her name(s) echo against the interior walls of his body, reverberating within this core chamber of nothingness. They, father and daughter,

inhabit one another. Importantly, Souter's summarizations and direct quotations of the Roth and de Beauvoir texts evince similar preoccupation or engrossment on her part with this notion of genetically related bodies hosting one another. I have already cited in the previous section Souter's description of de Beauvoir's drinking straw image. Sisters Poupette and de Beauvoir begin to have "uncanny fantasies that their *embodied state* is part of hers [that of their mother]" (41) (my own emphasis)—this older woman's bodily functioning slumping over the course of several weeks—plodding toward death.<sup>9</sup> From Roth's narrativized witnessing of his father's decline and eventual death, Souter quotes the following: "I had come to feel myself *transposed*, interchangeable with—even a sacrificial proxy for—my failing father, choking on his mortality at the dinner table" (41, Roth's emphasis). All three of these literary images, with their evocations of transposition, bodily configuration, and empty spaces poised to be filled, offer an interpretation or reading of this concept of the family body wherein to participate in a genetic legacy is much like participating in the construction of a seemingly endless Russian nesting doll. Each body awaits engulfment by a larger, hollower successor or predecessor; directional ambiguity also seems a quality of Souter's family body. Furthermore, by drawing this parallel between the mechanics of Souter's family body and those of a Russian nesting doll, many of my aforementioned questions are made relevant once more (albeit formulated slightly differently): is it a Russian nesting doll or dolls, a series of individuated wholes or dependent parts?

Souter's notion of the family body becomes all the more applicable to Meruane's *Sangre en el ojo*—meaning, it becomes a viable point of analytical departure for this novel—when its contrary philosophical force, this desire for bodily intactness and neat, fleshly circumscription, is equally considered. Meruane begins this section, "operación de rescate" 'rescue operation,' with the following line: "Mi padre llega al rescate y me saca del ensimismamiento" (59) 'My father comes to the rescue and pulls me out of my introspection' (48). Rumbling under and on the surface of this deceptively straightforward opening image is this conceptual antagonism between the desire for bodily intactness (and thus singularity) and the diffuse interconnectivity between people. And I think it is meaningful that the character shown to be capable of pulling our protagonist out of her state of self-absorption is her biological father, one of her two creators. It is not suggested in the narrative that Ignacio, her lover, boasts this capability—the capability to lure Lina out of moments of isolating introspection, a sensation which seems more corporeal in its constrains (even stickier) when linguistically summoned in the original Spanish. Here again, Souter's notion proves an exciting lens through which to contemplate relational networks—those formed out of blood, lust, and everything in between—in *Sangre en el ojo*. Perhaps there is an intermingling of genetically related bodies, a certain co-inhabitation, that predates this interaction between father and daughter. He does not seem to need to reach far

to access her, as they occupy a shared or indeterminately linked embodied state. But it is the imagery used to describe Lina's mother and her mode of interaction with her daughter that offers more overt examples of the conceptual potential of Souter's family body. Bodily adhesion and eerie, often anguish-inducing continuity of the flesh reach their most vivid expression within these descriptions of the mother.

### III. Eyes of a Jellyfish: The Flow of Parts between Mother and Daughter

“Quería ser él y el otro.  
Siamés partido a la mitad, buscaba  
la columna de hueso para asirse, colgar  
su cartilaginosa consistencia de hiedra.”

‘He wanted to be him and another.  
Siamese twins parted in the middle, he searched  
the column of bone to seize it, to hang  
his cartilage [*sic*] like the consistency of ivy.’

Rosario Castellanos, “Epitafio del  
Hipócrita” (‘Epitaph of a Hypocrite’)  
*Al pie de la letra (To the Letter)* (1959)

Meruane relies on equally impressionistic language or, perhaps more accurately, potent image making for her introduction of the mother character in the section “mano de hierro” (64) ‘iron hand’ (53). Themes of adhesion and preoccupation with the body (and the fluctuating spaces between bodies) prove equally relevant in this mother-daughter dynamic. “Mano de hierro” opens with the following image: “Se me lanzó al cuello, mi madre. Era una medusa, una aguaviva, un flagelo de mar, un organismo de cuerpo gelatinoso de tentáculos que causan urticaria” (64) ‘She threw herself on my neck. A medusa, a jellyfish, an ocean flagellum, a gelatinous organism with tentacles that would cause a rash’ (53). This initial characterization of Lina's mother is, no doubt, replete with allusion and literal reference to the mythological and biological. This image is also suggestive of deep maternal love. Lina's mother, wracked with concern regarding her daughter's physical state, embraces her so forcefully as if to adhere to her daughter, to conjoin their bodies.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, though, this first line of description dedicated to Lina's mother also infuses all subsequent text pertaining to her with this now familiar sense of antagonism between the desire for bodily intactness (i.e. for a body of one's own) and the eerie continuity operative in Souter's concept of the family body. Lina paints an unflattering image of her mother as something not

unlike a parasitic organism in its movement—gelatinous, sea-like, adhesive. She, the mother, is a maybe-toxic, extraneous part to be pulled off of a complete whole, off of Lina. She suctions onto bigger things at their expense. And her tentacles ink out what Lina refers to as “veneno materno” (65) ‘maternal venom’ (53). This image, in fact, is decidedly dehumanizing in its effect. At least, it is dehumanizing within this intactness paradigm. The mother is unnervingly pared down by Meruane’s language, reduced in size, and described as something unable to sustain or nourish itself (like a parasite). And yet, this parasitic imagery also recalls one of the more outstanding of Souter’s claims with regards to her notion of the human body: genetic kin embody one another. Body of daughter and body of mother, whether detrimentally or beneficially, whether parasitically or symbiotically, somehow host one another.

As previously mentioned, though, it is an image found in a later section titled “la otra de mi madre” (143) ‘my mother’s other’ (128) that most vividly brings to the fore the relevance of Souter’s notion of the family body, with all of its implied philosophical and metaphorical potential, for Meruane’s novel. The general structure and content of this section merit description of their own, beginning with the events that precede those recounted in “la otra de mi madre.” After an emotionally exhausting one-month stay in Santiago, Lina returns (with Ignacio in tow) to New York. She is scheduled to undergo eye surgery in the coming weeks. To Lina’s displeasure, her mother decides to join her in New York and see her daughter through this risky procedure. The bristling emotional tension between mother and daughter continues—the toxicity of their relationship already established thanks to images such as the one analyzed in the previous paragraph. And although the mother is likely aware of her daughter’s unease around her, she chooses to stay. The mother and Ignacio quickly become the only two figures populating the dark spaces of Lina’s pre-surgery existence.

As a brief aside, with regard to the relationship forged between Lina’s mother and her lover, Ignacio, and in anticipation of the analysis provided in the following section, there are interesting exchanges that occur in the two sections that precede “la otra de mi madre”: “pura biología” (133) ‘pure biology’ (116) and then “las horas” (133) ‘hours’ (118). In the first of these two preceding sections, Lina, in the midst of being whisked away for surgery and aware that her mother and lover will soon be left in each other’s company, remarks, “Mi madre tendrá a mi Ignacio para asediarlo con esas historias médicas que él detesta y que yo crecí escuchando. Historias de errores médicos a las que soy adicta . . . . Pero yo que soy su escudo contra mi madre, su defensora y su secreta victimaria, yo no puedo ya protegerlo” (132) ‘My mother will have Ignacio to interrogate, she’ll have him especially to besiege with those medical stories he hates so much that I grew up listening to. Stories of medical errors, stories I’m addicted to . . . . But I, his shield against my mother, his defender and his secret torturer, I can’t protect him now’ (117). Lina’s

predictions are realized in “las horas.” To pass the time, Ignacio and the mother find themselves swapping stories of their respective families’ medical histories while they wait for Lina to be released. They detail their DNA, so to speak. Lina suggests in her narrative that her mother eagerly inventories this information that (as she perhaps knows) Ignacio would likely otherwise hesitate to share. As if made vulnerable or emotionally pliable in this tense moment, he opens up under the mother’s gaze, which Lina suggests is insistent and questioning: “Y mi madre aprovechó esa confianza para acumular datos sobre el ADN familiar, lo bombardeó a preguntas genealógicas, sacó conclusiones” (135) ‘And my mother took advantage of that revelation to gather information about his family’s DNA, bombarding him with genealogical questions, drawing conclusions’ (120). The effects or implications of this quote is explored in greater detail in the following section. In any case, these exchanges between Lina’s mother and Ignacio also impart greater interpretive depth to the goings-on of “la otra de mi madre” and the other sections that constellate around it.

This section, “la otra de mi madre,” describes Lina’s mother as she says her goodbyes to her daughter in Ignacio’s presence and gets in a taxi bound for the airport. She is to return to Chile now that Lina’s surgery is complete (although whether or not it was successful remains to be seen). More curiously, this section attempts to describe what Lina perceives to be her mother’s psychological bifurcation—the aging woman is both a mother and a doctor—as physically manifesting itself during their exchange of struggled farewells. Two women, one a doctor and the other a mother, housed in the body of one, spring forth in Meruane’s language. They, trained doctor and frazzled mother, confront and resist each other on a New York curb. Lina also describes each woman as beholden to a different set of social imperatives and expectations. It is “la médico” ‘the doctor,’ duty-bound to her patients in Chile, who feels it is time to leave: “Mi madre se estremecía mientras la médico que ella también era la impelía a contenerse, a secarse las lágrimas en el puño de su blusa, a no perder el vuelo. Tenemos que irnos, decía la otra de mi madre . . .” (143) ‘My mother trembled, while the doctor part of her demanded she get hold of herself, dry her tears on the sleeve of her blouse, not to be late for her plane. We have to go, my mother’s other was saying’ (128). Lina goes further within this section and suggests that her mother inhabits a “cuerpo en doble” (144) ‘body in double’ (129). The provocative imagery of this section—with its sustained metaphors of duality—accomplishes a number of tasks within the narrative. Once again, it offers important insight into the complex inner workings of the mother’s mind and the precariousness of her psychological state. And it is also implied that the mother’s doubleness has long wreaked havoc on her relationship with Lina. Most importantly, though, the section’s sustained metaphor makes relevant once more questions regarding multiplicity versus singularity, parts versus whole.

Situated at the end of this effective image and spoken by this “cuerpo en doble” (144) ‘body in double’ (129) are the mother’s urgings that if possible she would gift her daughter with her “healthy” or intact eyes: “Hija, como en secreto, si yo pudiera, hija mía, y esto lo decía sola, solo mi madre, hija, si yo pudiera, te daría mis ojos . . . hija, gritaba operática y visionaria mi madre, hija mía, cuenta con mis ojos, son tuyos si los quieres” (146) ‘Dear, as if in secret, if I could my dear, if I could, I’d give you my eyes . . . dear, shouted my operatic and visionary mother: my dear daughter, you can count on my eyes, they’re yours if you want them’ (130). Although in theory no more troubling than any form of organ transplantation, the mother’s comments are resoundingly unnerving and almost macabre. The significance of Lina’s eyes as the site (or “sight”) of her illness has not featured in this essay, this topic deserving, I feel, of extended exploration of its own. But certainly, the eyes are perhaps the most loaded philosophically of all sensory organs.<sup>11</sup> That they can be transposed or shared between bodies feels decidedly transgressive, if not ghoulish. And yet amid the psychological turbulence of this section, the reader is led to believe that the mother’s words emanate from a place of love—as if the mother took a risk by uttering these thoughts aloud before the silencing hand of “la médico” (144) ‘the doctor’ (128) could cover her mouth.

Love, in all of its textured and often perverse forms, is perhaps the motivating force behind the continuation and expansion of the family and of Souter’s concept of bodily interconnectivity between kin. This theme is taken up in the concluding section, when I examine Lina’s fixation with Ignacio’s eyes. It would seem that the eyes that Lina truly covets are those belonging to her romantic partner rather than those belonging to her mother (despite the latter set’s “availability” and greater genetic relatedness to her own). But to conclude this section, I simply wish to linger on this final image and its strange beauty, arguing once more that lurking beneath its gothic patina is this same sense of antagonism between the desire for bodily intactness and, of course, the ghostly forces of the family body.<sup>12</sup> The reader is invited to ponder not only the philosophical implications but also the mechanics involved in this gruesome flow of parts.

#### IV. “Otros los ojos” and *Una Caro*: Lina’s Last Resort<sup>13</sup>

Pero ¿no hemos de amarlas  
cuando así las nutrimos con nuestra sangre?

Reverenciad su patrimonio único.

Contemplad cómo las madura el tiempo.  
Alternativamente  
una se ensancha y otra palidece.”

‘But should we not love them  
when like this we nourish them with our blood?’

Revere their unique patrimony.

Contemplate how they ripen with time.  
Alternately  
one widens and the other pales.’

Rosario Castellanos, “IX,” *Trayectoria del polvo*  
(*Passage of Dust*) (1948)

Thus far, within this essay, I have offered and employed a rather literal or “faithful” interpretation of Souter’s concept of the family body for my analysis of Lina Meruane’s *Sangre en el ojo*. Representations of the parent-child dynamic within Meruane’s novel have been privileged, as de Beauvoir and Roth’s explorations of this dynamic within their respective texts form the basis of and seemingly make possible Souter’s articulation of her concept. Souter’s notion of the family body essentially metaphorizes and makes poetic the biological. It serves as an umbrella term and processing-framework for a corpus of non-biomedical writings that seek to describe and contemplate what it means to be forged from the flesh of two individuals and thus participate blindly and involuntarily in a genetic legacy. Neither de Beauvoir nor Roth was a trained geneticist. Their works are not littered with scientific jargon. Rather, the imagery and emotional atmospheres of their respective works (specifically those analyzed by Souter) commune to describe the visceral sensation(s) of participating in this genetic legacy. With that said—and though I stand by my interpretations of the parent-child dynamic within Meruane’s novel and my earlier assertion that Souter’s notion constitutes an interesting lens through which to interrogate literary representations of this dynamic—I also argue that Meruane’s novel offers vivid contemplation on the future, adaptability, expansion, and even the ironic collapse of this family body—all of which is encapsulated within the relationship that exists between Ignacio and Lina and, to a lesser (or less explicit) extent, the relationship that exists between Lina’s parents.

Ignacio and Lina are not (close) genetic relatives, nor are Lina’s parents. And yet, there is suggestion in Meruane’s novel that the eerie forces of bodily interchangeability that permeate the dynamic between a parent and their biological child are equally present among people who are variably understood to be in love, the parents of shared offspring, or simply engaged in non-procreational erotic activity. In fact, Lina and Ignacio’s relationship could be argued as reflecting (but also subversively reorienting along gendered lines) a much older (i.e. “pre-genetic”)

conception of kinship and bodily interconnectivity wherein spouses were indeed considered next of kin, affinal relations. In the same aforementioned article by Porqueres i Gené and Wilgaux, the scholars introduce the biblical notion of “*una caro*” (122), which they translate as ‘one flesh’ (122). They write:

As already noted, the recent concentration of sexual and matrimonial prohibitions in consanguinity is displacing prohibitions traditionally derived from the idea of the commingling of husband and wife through sexual intercourse—an idea that was at the centre of the cognatic kinship system created by the Christian Church and exported to family law adopted in different countries. (122)

This notion of *una caro* is acknowledged and historicized by Porqueres i Gené and Wilgaux as an “injunction in Genesis that impelled men to abandon their father and mother in order to become one flesh (*una caro*) with their wife” (122). For Porqueres i Gené and Wilgaux, this notion of *una caro* proves relevant to their exploration of the evolution of the incest prohibition, which they argue is illustrative of changing conceptions of kinship in the Occident. They claim that “in earlier periods of European history, natural identity as the sharing of substances is not simply defined among ascendants and descendants but also among spouses and among relations by sex” (123). Lina and Ignacio are not married, their bedroom activity thus sinful in the eyes of the Church. But it is interesting to consider the extent to which Lina seems to claim (or inch toward) greater ownership of Ignacio’s eyes when they comingle during sexual intercourse—as if they were of one body and thus all parts equally shared. Also, the emotional thrust of Meruane’s narrative is dominated by a sense of urgency on Lina’s part to abandon her parents (she, a woman, rather than a man)—to break free from the bodily bond(age) that interlocks these three persons seemingly to a greater extent in sickness rather than in health—in favor of unifying with her lover.

To substantiate this new claim, I want to introduce one more interesting element of the section, “la otra de mi madre,” that was not mentioned in Section III. Lina describes her already-bifurcated mother as affecting the “la voz impostada de mi padre” (143)—syntactically altered by McDowell in her translation to read as ‘assuming my father’s voice’ (128)—when uttering her struggled goodbyes to her daughter. Again, not only is the theme of bodily interchangeability or hosting—a bedrock dimension of Souter’s notion of the family body—introduced once more into the narrative, but it now saturates the mother-father dynamic. Of course, one might suggest that themes of bodily interchangeability and porosity are made relevant within the dynamic shared by Lina’s parents because they created children together. This unnamed man and unnamed woman harmonized and interlocked their bodies temporarily only to produce forever embodiments (i.e. their children)

of this momentary mingling. Put simply, the testaments of their bodily exchange can walk and talk. Ignacio and Lina, on the other hand, are never described as interested in the making of children. And yet, their lovemaking is described in striking and almost dancerly detail. It is also within one particular section dedicated to the description of their lovemaking, called “analgésicos” (89) ‘painkillers’ (77), that both the extent and the eroticization of Lina’s fixation with Ignacio’s eyes are made more visible. As I mentioned in the introductory section of this essay, it is the nature of this fixation, its metaphorical potential and physical manifestations, that I feel constitute the novel’s preeminent example of an alternative or expanded interpretation of Souter’s notion.

Lina uses sexual intimacy as both a pretext and an opportunity to satisfy the physical urges of her fixation. In “analgésicos,” Meruane writes:

El suyo era un dormir tan intranquilo, tan agotador como mi no dormir, y yo quería despertarlo para regalarle un poco de sexo . . . Empecé por poner mi lengua en una esquina de los párpados, despacio, y a medida que mi boca se apropiaba de sus ojos experimenté un deseo despiadado de chuparlos enteros, intensamente, de hacerlos míos en el paladar como si fueran pequeños huevos . . . (90)

His was a sleep as restless, as exhausting, as my lack of sleep, and I wanted to wake him up to give him a little sex . . . I started by putting my tongue in a corner of his eyelid, slowly, and as my mouth covered his eyes I felt a savage desire to suck them, hard, to take possession of them on my palate as if they were little eggs . . . (78)

This section is not the first in which Lina is described as attempting to engulf or, at least, vigorously caress Ignacio’s eyes with her mouth. In the section “caja negra” (112) ‘black box’ (98), which describes Ignacio and Lina’s journey back to New York, Lina’s fixation demands of her the same behaviors (this time performed in the public eye): “Te separé los párpados y pasé la punta de mi lengua por ese borde desnudo que sentía como mi propia desnudez, y pronto lo estaba lamiendo entero, te estaba chupando entero el ojo con suavidad . . .” (113) ‘I separated your eyelids and I ran the tip of my tongue along that naked edge that I felt like my own nakedness, and soon I was licking the whole thing, I was sucking on your whole eye softly with my lips. . .’ (100). But the enactment of this fixation during sexual congress is, again, perhaps more notable. Mimicking the metaphorical quality of conception and childbearing, Lina’s engulfment of Ignacio’s eyes seeks to make permanent the temporary conjoining of their bodies—as if there were something to be born and gained from this temporary conjoining. It is also as if she found feasible and realizable the gruesome actions implicit in her mother’s parting words: “. . .

hija mía, cuenta con mis ojos, son tuyos si los quieres” (146) ‘. . . my dear daughter, you can count on my eyes, they’re yours if you want them’ (130).

All of these various strains of thought or secondary questions that come with exploration of Souter’s concept—the effects of physical touch versus isolation of the body, love, possession, organic and biological transposition, etc.—find their nexus point in this description of Lina and Ignacio’s lovemaking. Possession, in particular, is interpreted and anticipated differently by different members of the family. Returning to the conversation that transpires between Lina’s mother and Ignacio in the hospital, when they swap information on the genetic makeup and frailties of their respective families (the mother doing so with both grizzled ease and off-putting eagerness), it would seem that Lina’s mother is so insistent on knowing more about Ignacio’s medical history because she senses his gradual incorporation into their family. She anticipates and observes the gradual fusion of these two bodies—one of these bodies which, in part, was made by this mother-doctor—and seems motivated to ensure that with Ignacio’s body come no unwelcome promises of disease. But this verbal exchange between these two figures takes on an ironic tone when it is understood that this notion of the family body does not and likely will not apply to Lina and Ignacio “conventionally” or orthodoxly (i.e. marriage and the birthing of offspring). Unbeknown to Lina’s mother, she is looking too far ahead.

*Sangre en el ojo* concludes on a chilling note, but one that also thrillingly affirms the relevance, metaphorical potential, and powerful ambiguity of Souter’s notion of the family body within the narrative. In the book’s final section, “punto” (171) ‘stop’ (155), Lina’s ocular surgeon, Lekz, informs her that her eyes are a lost cause, destined to burst and bleed. He greets her with the following post-surgery ruling: “Vas a estar ciega dentro de nada. Stop” (172) ‘You’ll be blind in no time. Stop’ (156). Lina is devastated and suggests an eye transplant. But Lekz makes clear that eye transplant surgery has never been performed on human beings. There is no organ bank for eyes. Recalling that Ignacio is waiting for her in the hallway—she describes him as “tan perdido mi Ignacio en algún pasillo” (174) ‘Ignacio so lost in some hallway’ (157)—Lina searches with her irreparable eyes for the face of her doctor. And using the same mouth with which she has “tasted” and traced the outline of her lover’s eyes many times before, she says to Lekz, “No se mueva, doctor, susurré, espéreme aquí, yo le voy a traer un ojo fresco” (174) ‘Don’t move, doctor, I whispered. Wait for me here. I’ll bring you a fresh eye’ (157). It is implied that Lina will ask Ignacio to gift her one of his eyes so as to make possible the transplant surgery.

Furthermore, it is implied that Lina’s once unsettling but at least strictly fanciful fixation with Ignacio’s eyes, considered excusable within the confines and performative possibilities of sexual intimacy, will perhaps now be introduced and maybe even validated within the confines and performative possibilities of an

operating room. The tonal or atmospheric effect of Lina's final words is tremendous. All Lina need do is utter this vague idea of hers, and Ignacio's body transforms into an assemblage of parts ripe and ready for harvest. This last resort, no doubt the product of abject desperation, seems almost evil, as if emanating from a moral blind spot. It is also deeply ironic that Lina's last bid for bodily intactness (and thus restored personhood) would demand the fragmentation of her lover's body. The acts of "breaking up" and "reuniting" among lovers take on a host of perverse new meanings and interpretive possibilities in Meruane's novel.

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### Notes

1. Sections I-IV each begin with either an entire poem or a selected stanza from the poetry of Rosario Castellanos. All cited poems can be found in Amalia Bautista's 2011 anthology of Castellanos's poetry, *Juegos de inteligencia: antatología poética 1948-1972*. The English translations of stanzas from "Presencia" 'Presence' and "VIII" are my own. I have also translated all of the titles of the poems and the collections in which they were first published. The English translation provided for "Epitafio del Hipócrata" 'Epitaph of a Hypocrite' (just the poem itself) is taken from Rachel M. Popma's undergraduate honors thesis, "Selected Poems of Rosario Castellanos in Translation" (1998).

2. The book's French title is *Une mort très douce*, originally published in 1964. English translations of the book appeared shortly thereafter. The earliest English translation of the book with which I am familiar was published in 1966 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson and translated by Patrick O'Brian. Souter cites a 1992 Penguin reissue of this English translation in her essay.

3. All English-language translations included within this essay of Meruane's *Sangre en el ojo* are the intellectual property of Megan McDowell. McDowell's 2016 translation of Meruane's book was published under the English-language title, *Seeing Red*. The respective page numbers for these English-language translations are also included.

4. I was first introduced to the term "pathography" by Souter's essay. She writes, "In this paper, I propose that biographical narratives of illness experience, often called pathographies, have implicit in them an idea of the body which is fundamentally in conflict with the usual subject of biomedical history" (35). In her footnote affixed to this term, Souter acknowledges that the term's use and viability remain a contentious subject. She also directs the reader to Arthur W. Frank's 1994 article, "Reclaiming an Orphan Genre: The First Person Narrative of Illness," for further information on the topic of pathography. Also deserving of mention (although not referenced in Souter's essay) is the author Anne Hunsaker Hawkins. One of the most notable works on the topic of pathographies is Hawkins' book, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography*, originally published in 1993.

5. My analysis of the bodily boundaries between Lina and her parents is reliant upon and makes explicit use of the genetic connection between these figures. With that said, the inclusion of adopted children—or simply the notion of adoption—within another literary study that seeks to explore similar questions has the potential to deeply enrich or even challenge any conclusions I draw. Additionally, several chapters in the edited volume *European Kinship in the Age of Biotechnology* explore the various ways by which contemporary adoption processes, foster parenthood, and assisted fertility treatments have altered and are poised to further alter Western conceptions of kinship: "The Family Body: Persons, Bodies, and Resemblance" by Diana Marre and Joan Bestard, "'Loving Mother' at Work: Raising Others' Children and Building Families with Intention to Love and Take Care" by Enikő Demény, and "Adoption and Assisted Conception: One Universe of Unnatural Procreation. An Examination of Norwegian Legislation" by Marit Melhus and Signe Howell.

6. Much of the critical literature written on *Sangre en el ojo* has sought to explore its political underpinnings. More specifically, Daniela Gallego Zapatas's "Enfermedad y resistencia: *Fruta podrida y Sangre en el ojo* de Lina Meruane" (2017), Juan Manuel Mancilla's "Enfermedad y monstruosidad en *Sangre en el ojo* de Lina Meruane" (2017), and Simone Fenna Walst's "Ficciones patológicas: la enfermedad y el cuerpo enfermo en *Fruta podrida* (2007) y *Sangre en el ojo* (2012) de Lina Meruane" (2015) all seek to make correlations between writings of illness and the metaphorization of resistance against dominant political hegemonies.

Zapata writes, “El cuerpo enfermizo de la protagonista se relaciona con otro cuerpo enfermo, el de la sociedad chilena . . .” (22) ‘The sick body of the protagonist is related to another sick body, that of Chilean society’ (my own translation). While my essay is more concerned with metaphorization of the biological, one could make interesting work by building upon claims made in these critical essays and extending Souter’s notion of the family body to include the political—the family body politic.

7. I mention here the “Lina of Meruane’s text.” The protagonist of *Sangre en el ojo* is, like the author, a Chilean academic and writer named Lina who is burdened with type 1 diabetes. These recognitions give way to contemplation on the categorization of the text: is it autobiographical, autofiction, or maybe autobiographical pathography? Other critical essays written on the book are concerned with these questions (i.e. to which genre does it belong?), including: Beatriz Velayos Amo’s “Estancia en las fronteras del género: autoficción y posmemoria en *Sangre en el ojo* de Lina Meruane” (2017) and Vittoria Martinetto’s “*Selfies*. Lina Meruane y la poética de la autoficción” (2017) both shed light on this topic. Again, that Lina Meruane is seemingly the author, narrator, and protagonist of *Sangre en el ojo* allows for tremendous possibility with regard to exploration of genre. But given the scope of my essay, questions of genre are not of principle concern per se.

8. Here, Finkler cites Marcus Pembrey’s book chapter, “The New Genetics: A User’s Guide” in *The Troubled Helix: Social and Psychological Implications of the New Human Genetics*, originally published in 1996.

9. I have chosen to emphasize Souter’s use of the singular form of the word “state” over the plural, as it makes more explicit what I argue as Souter’s desired takeaway for her reader from her essay-long articulation and exploration of the family body: the literal and figurative interconnection between bodies that feels more palpable during times of sickness and pain. Sororal bodies become sororal body during both the anticipation and wake of a mother’s death.

10. This desire to somehow physically unify with her daughter also recalls the myth of Hermaphroditus and Plato’s *Symposium*. Both of these literary and cultural artifacts from Western antiquity are examples of enduringly provocative musings on the politics of bodily intactness and the limitations of fleshly circumscription.

11. The “philosophical weight” of the eyes is alluded to in the final section of *Sangre en el ojo*, titled “punto” (171). Running out of options, Lina suggests that she undergo eye transplant surgery (supposedly never performed on humans). Her doctor, Lezk, balks at the thought and replies, “Se creía, dijo Lekz, que la memoria

residía en ellos, que los ojos eran una prolongación del cerebro, el cerebro asomándose por la cara para pellizcar la realidad. Alguna gente pensaba que los ojos eran depósitos de memoria, dijo, y otra gente todavía creía que ahí se escondía el alma” (173) ‘It was believed, said Lekz, that memory lived in them, that the eyes were an extension of the brain, the brain peering out through the face to grasp reality. Some people thought the eyes were depositories of memory, he said, and others still believed that the soul was hidden in there’ (157).

12. I propose that one could make good comparative work between Meruane’s bodily imagery in *Sangre en el ojo* (and perhaps the larger philosophy of the body she seeks to construct with this imagery) and Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1832) or, at least, the Frankenstein motif. Absolutely, the “monstrous” is a thematic domain that is directly influenced by if not premised on this desire for bodily intactness.

13. The title of this section is taken from the following quote also found within Lina’s initial description of her father: “Porque los ojos de ahora ya no son los de antes. Se queda otra vez en silencio y le pega un vistazo, estoy convencida, a la cinta quieta y todavía despoblada de maletas. Luego me dice, aunque más bien se dice a sí mismo porque su murmullo es casi inaudible: hace medio eran otros los ojos” (61) ‘Because eyes today are not what they used to be. He falls silent again and glances, I’m sure, at the conveyor belt, motionless and still empty of suitcases. Then he says to me, although really he says it to himself because his murmur is almost inaudible: half a century ago eyes were different’ (50).

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