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On the Other Shore: Water in Latin American Illness Narratives

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on Afro-Caribbean and Black theories, this paper analyzes water as metaphor in Isabel Allende’s “Paula” and Gabriel García Márquez’s “Love in the Time of Cholera.” I read these texts as illness narratives to conceptualize water as a generative space where the authors negotiate death, grief, and loss. Although these texts are written by established, canonical Latin American writers, this paper attends to the overlapping iterations of water as currents, clouds, and rivers throughout the texts, emphasizing water’s potential to be a mode and method of transformation and memory. Water, as Márquez describes, can carry illness and even the threat of death. Yet water is also a necessary life-sustaining force and animates the relationships and connections that tie bodies together. Therefore, I consider bodies of water and water in bodies, exploring the linkages between mother and daughter through birth and the ways people visualize reflections of their past lives and selves. Charting water as a recurring symbol throughout the texts captures the ebbs and flows of emotion across the texts, and illustrates the blurred, rippling boundaries reverberating between grief, love, and loss.

KEYWORDS: Illness Narratives, Water, Transformation, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez

RESUMEN: Basándose en teorías afrocaribeñas y negras, este artículo analiza el agua como una metáfora en los libros *Paula* de Isabel Allende y *Amor en tiempos de cólera* de Gabriel García Márquez. Yo interpreto estos libros como narrativas enfermizas para conceptualizar el agua como un espacio generativo donde los autores negocian la muerte, el dolor, y la pérdida. Aunque estos libros están escritos por autores latinoamericanos consagrados y canónicos, noto en las novelas muchas reiteraciones del agua tales como corrientes, nubes, y ríos para ilustrar el agua como una forma y método de transformación y memoria. El agua, como describe Márquez, puede acarrear enfermedades e incluso amenazar de muerte. Pero además, el agua es una fuerza necesaria para sustentar la vida y animar las relaciones y conexiones que unen a los cuerpos. Por lo tanto, considero los cuerpos de agua y el agua en los cuerpos, como una exploración del vínculo entre la madre e hija a través del nacimiento y las maneras que las personas visualizan las reflexiones sobre sus vidas y sobre sí mismas. Trazar el agua como un símbolo recurrente a través de los textos captura los flujos y reflujos de emociones en los libros e ilustra los límites borrosos y fluctuantes que reverberan entre el dolor, el amor y la pérdida.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Narrativas enfermizas, agua, transformación, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez

This article explores how Latin American authors use illness narratives to explore the relationship between water, death, and transformation. Alternative readings of Latin American illness narratives (both autobiographical and fictional) reveal how water surfaces as a latent, yet powerful, theme. Biographical illness narratives like *Paula* by Isabel Allende (1994), for example, offer a productive form of meaning making while facilitating the author's grieving process. Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) also wields illness as a metaphor to explore the cultural significance and visceral transformation of lovesickness and age. Coupling these texts demonstrates how both authors mobilize metaphor and folklore to weave compelling stories of illness and death, with water as a recurring symbol and metaphor.

The configuration of illness narratives – texts that explore death, grief, and suffering – demonstrate that illness and death disrupt and disorient lives, shifting protagonists' priorities and sense of purpose (Crosby, 2006, 85). In contrast to supposedly objective pathologies, which focus on diagnosis and analysis, illness narratives offer a subjective and deeply personal approach to medicine and the body. Whether verbal, artistic, or textual, illness narratives allow patients and their families to deconstruct or strengthen cultural meanings of illness specific to their lived experiences. Through the writing process, both patients and their families simultaneously interrogate the cultural meaning of illness and produce embodied knowledge about suffering and loss.

My analysis of Latin American illness narratives incorporates water as a modality, arguing that its metaphors of waves, ebbs and flows, and fluidity illuminate different understandings of grief and pain. In doing so, I prioritize coastal Latin American "local cultural orientations" that "organize our conventional common sense about how to understand and treat illness" (Kleinman, 1988, 5). As Allende and Márquez illustrate, water possesses a transcendent, multi-dimensional quality that allows authors to think through illness outside of Western ideologies of time and space. Water embraces duality and contradiction, which allows for alternative interpretations of *Paula* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*. For Allende, death does not signify an end but a transformation; and for Márquez, illness can be a liberatory experience of enchantment.

This paper is shaped by Afro-Latinx, Black, and Caribbean theorists and scholars, who offer critical interventions on the poetics, language, and sometimes violence of water. Scholars like Glissant, Figueroa-Vásquez, McKittrick, Sharpe, and Hartman have all influenced how I think about *Paula* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* by sitting with water's power to disrupt life and death, sustain memories, and generate distance or connection across diasporas. They contribute critical interventions on the specters of race, death, and violence that haunt oceans, and offer meditations on possible encounters, imaginings, and routes of transcendence through salt water, rivers, and relationships.

The theories made salient by Black and Caribbean scholars extend literary analysis into a framework for grappling with life and

death through aesthetics and language, outside of Western epistemologies. Incorporating Black intellectual thought into my analysis of two canonical Latin American authors allows me to follow Figueroa-Vásquez's necessary call to reject "notions of a Latinidad based on social and political racial hierarchies found on mestizaje and anti-Black discourses" and prioritize the intellectual contributions of Caribbean poetics and thought (Figueroa-Vásquez, 2020, 6). Black Studies urges us to see water's endless potential not only as a metaphor, but as a force of life and death.

Although he is broadly theorizing political economy and opacity within knowledge production of the postcolonial Caribbean, Édouard Glissant dedicates a chapter in *Poetics of Relation* to Black Beach in his home country of Martinique. His attention to the endless ebbs and flows of the ocean allows him to link water's mutable and cyclical qualities to the relationship between language, violence, and chaos. In his reflection on the stormy, black beach, Glissant remarks that the edge of the sea "represents the alternation (but one that is illegible) between order and chaos," in a constant negotiation and movement between "threatening excess and dreamy fragility" (Glissant, 1990/1997, 121). For Glissant, the ocean becomes a void of simultaneous "excess" and "dreamy" possibility, shielded between murky waters and crashing waves. His writing reveals how water can obscure and clarify, wreak havoc, soothe and heal, separate, or unite. Water makes relationships possible.

While reading his words, one feels that they are standing on the shore with Glissant, witnessing the same seascape that inspires his words. From his perspective, we observe the black sand glistening "under the foam like peeling skin" and peer at the ocean that embodies a cavernous "energy of the deep" (Glissant, 1990/1997, 124). In fact, his words animate the ocean so much that we could interpret the sea as a material body, with "peeling skin" and a vacillating energy that can consume or soothe. In many ways, Black Beach embodies the poetics of relationality that Glissant theorizes and reveals the discursive and material significance of the natural world for conceptualizing how humans relate to themselves and to each other.

Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez beautifully builds on Glissant in her book *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mapping of Afro-Atlantic Literatures*, which introduces the concepts of destierro, a forceful, conceptual, and physical unmooring that facilitates modernity, to theorize Caribbean literature, faithful witnessing, and relationality (Figueroa-Vásquez, 2020). The force of the ocean remains a persuasive and consistent metaphor, Figueroa-Vásquez argues, because the sea is geographically, cosmologically, and historically central to diasporic and exilic migrations. Particularly in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, the sea was a destructive and insatiable chamber that took "technologies, ephemera, human bodies, and their wares" (Figueroa-Vásquez, 2020, 187). For enslaved people brought across the Atlantic, the ocean represented traumatic separation and death.

As I am reading these novels with a focus on death, rebirth, and

water, I am also indebted to the work of Christina Sharpe (2020). She brilliantly argues for a theorization of Black studies through wake work, which calls for inhabiting the relationships and worlding constituted by death in the wake of the slave ship. Sharpe urges us to consider how literature and aesthetics might help us perform wake work as “a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” in the wake of slavery (Sharpe, 2020, 18). She proposes a multidimensional understanding of the wake not only as processes of mourning and grief but, quoting the Oxford English Dictionary, as “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming” (Sharpe, 2014, 60). Neither Allende or Márquez are performing Sharpe’s concept of wake work, but her theory of death and disaster as repetitive, social, and material have greatly contributed to my understanding of *Paula* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

Rebecá Hey-Colón’s concept of rippling borders in Latinx literature (2017) demonstrates that water provides an incredibly generative metaphor that destabilizes borders, rethink and reimagine territories, and pushes us to conceptualize borders as physical and theoretical spaces. As Hey-Colón suggests, understanding water within the environment and as part of the human body emphasizes the role of fluidity, movement, and transformation. I also draw on Hey-Colón’s close analysis of illness in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, which examines repetition and chronic disease through water in literature. Building on her scholarship, I conceptualize water in bodies and illnesses, from a coma to lovesickness, as processes of deep love and ambiguous change. In arguing that *Paula* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* weave water as metaphor to showcase its transformative potential for relationships and poetics, I am building on the critical contributions of Afro-Caribbean intellectual thought.

Writing about bodies of water, such as the ocean or rivers, allows authors to articulate a poetic practice of longing and remembering. Recognizing water as a body invites “a welcome haunting, an unforgettable phenomenon,” with “eternal memory because they are bodies that never die” (Figueroa-Vasquez, 2020, 185). As both Glissant and Figueroa-Vásquez suggest, bodies of water serve as a form of “haunting” and remembering that transcends, perhaps even blurs, life and death. Drawing on a corpus of Black Caribbean theorists, this article further argues that water as a metaphor in Latin American illness narratives captures the complexities and contradictions of the body, illuminating the fluid boundaries between life and death, the self, and others.

Combining past, present, truth, and fiction, the stories of Allende and Márquez offer illness narratives at the precipice of imagination and nostalgia. Although on a superficial level these texts appear to have little in common, both novels incorporate water as metaphor to rework “historical elements used poetically” and chronicle the currents of illness, grief, and love (Williams, 1989, 136). Neither is purely fiction nor autobiography but embody qualities of Latin American storytelling and folklore that refuse easy categorization. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, for example, is a fictional

nineteenth-century love story, but according to Marquéz it is his parents’ love story, unfolding in the Cartagena of their youth (Williams, 1989, 138). Additionally, scholars such as Susan Carvalho and Linda Gould Levine have written about the narrative structure and devices of magical realism in *Paula*, suggesting an intentional crafting of the narrative despite Allende’s insistence that she barely edited the manuscript. By coupling *Paula* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the symbolism of water in all its forms is explored to think more critically and extensively about the body, knowledge production, and illness in Latin American literature.

Paula follows the year Allende spent by her daughter’s side from Paula’s first diagnosis in a Madrid hospital to her death in California. Incorporating elements of magical realism, Afro-Caribbean philosophy, and her own language of specters and spirituality, Allende’s *Paula* encapsulates the circularity of living, breathing, and dying. In doing so, she insists on a way of being that allows for fluidity between spirit/flesh and environment/body. As Margaret Crosby and Linda S. Maier have noted, *Paula* explores not only Allende’s grief but how her emotions and spirituality contribute to “una larga introspección, es un viaje hacia las cavernas más oscuras de la conciencia, una lenta meditación” where death does not signify the end of her relationship to Paula (Allende, 1994/2021, 16). *Paula* stands out as a Latin American illness narrative because of how Allende weaves history and memories into the text through a rich, poetic language that incorporates the ocean, bodies of water, and her body.

Chile’s history under the dictatorship, which forced Allende and her family into years of exile, haunts the narrative of *Paula*. Bearing witness to her daughter’s painful treatment reminds the author of her tumultuous time leaving her homeland and being forced to leave the country. She feels connected to her daughter when Paula is “en las nubes de la inconsciencia y yo pensando en tantos hombres, mujeres, y niños que fueron torturados en Chile de manera similar, punzándolos con una picana eléctrica” (Allende, 1994/2021, 246). Effectively, Allende links the invasive use of cattle prods to torture people, while the word “clouds” suggesting a blurry, ambiguous sentimentality in addition to a confusing combination of emotions. Her perspective is “clouded” by Paula’s illness medical predicament, thereby obscuring the potential usefulness of the treatment, and instead focusing on the process’ similarity to torture.

By comparing Paula’s early experience in the hospital with the brutal 1970s Chilean regime, Allende demonstrates how her identity and history inform how she makes sense of the world. Comparing a medical exam to a torture session unites Allende’s past and present, producing another layer of “cloudiness” of conflicting emotions within the text. By comparing torture to Paula’s seemingly painful treatment, Allende also seems to be cautiously hopeful that there is a larger purpose to the pain, which would make the seemingly inhuman treatments bearable. When janitors go on strike at the Spanish hospital, Paula’s grandmother reminds Allende not to

worry because "Paula se crió con el agua de Chile y puede resistir perfectamente unos miseros gérmenes madreños" suggesting her granddaughter's innate strength as a Chilean who can resist weak germs from the public hospital's water (Allende, 1994/2021, 125). In times of distress, Allende and her mother lean not on scientific rationale but an emotional connection with her Chilean genealogy that transcends exile, sustained through women. As Jason R. Jolley has written, *Paula* is connected to a "multi-generational, matrilineal consciousness [that] brings empowering benefits such as connectedness, wholeness, and self-understanding," even strength and vitality, despite a totalizing disease (Jolley, 2006, 344). By emphasizing Paula's connection to Chile and her ancestors, *Paula* embodies Figueroa-Vásquez's conceptions of diaspora that rely on waterways and seascapes to maintain connection, both with her home country and her dying daughter.

In addition to the disorientation, anxiety, and fear, Allende struggles to make sense of the role of fate in her daughter's illness, especially once she learns that the coma might have been prevented. Allende regrets dismissing Paula's early concerns about porphyria, the disease that kills her, especially because porphyria is a genetically inherited disorder. Allende's guilt becomes all-consuming and "el resto de [su] existencia se ha esfumado en una densa niebla" as the stormy clouds envelop her (Allende, 1994/2021, 33). She turns to writing to fondly remember her daughter, and attempts to accept the tragedy. In this way, as Linda Gould Levine has argued, *Paula* is as much about Allende's daughter as it is an autobiography that weaves fact and fantasy through "the archive of experience and the terrain of imagination" across different geographic and spiritual planes (Levine, 2002, 30). *Paula* explores not only Allende's grief but how her emotions and spirituality contribute to an interior voyage.

The atmosphere of water illustrates the novel's undercurrent of tragedy and loss, notably when Allende describes herself as "una balsa sin rumbo navegando en un mar de pena," struggling with helplessness as she desperately tries to make her way through stormy waters (Allende, 2021, 353). Writing helps Allende navigate the tumultuous, unpredictable sea of illness by serving as a "raft" that carries Allende through. She continues the metaphor of water as a site of struggle when she writes, "con un esfuerzo brutal he ido toda mi vida remando río arriba, estoy cansada, quiero dar media vuelta, soltar los remos y dejar que la corriente me lleve suavemente hacia el mar" (Allende, 2021, 214). Here Allende once again expresses her inability to cope with her daughter's illness and her desire to relinquish control, to give up. She describes herself as always fighting her way upstream, especially with her daughter's illness, and imagines herself letting go and drifting to the sea. After a long, arduous journey witnessing her daughter's deteriorating health, managing countless treatments, and dealing with various appointments, Allende is disillusioned with the potential impact of treatment, or even, hope, comparing them to "mensajes lanzados en una botella al mar," that nobody will ever rescue (Allende, 1994/2021, 213). The metaphor of being lost at sea reappears, de-

picting Allende and her daughter as stranded on a deserted island, anxiously waiting to be saved.

Like film negatives developing in water, Allende can only make sense of her daughter's illness in hindsight, when she can look back on what is already done. While writing Allende conceptualizes the visions of profound loss that she must face as "visiones como fotografías desordenadas y sobrepuestas en un tiempo muy lento e inexorable en el cual todos no movíamos pesadamente, como si estuviéramos en el fondo del mar," incapable of preventing "la rueda del destino que giraba rápida hacia la fatalidad" (Allende, 1994/2021, 269). Translated as "jumbled," "inexorably," "whirling," "flowing" and "sluggishly," Allende is immersed in a muddled temporality where past, present, and future seem inseparable. Stranded in an abyss, "the bottom of the sea," Allende helplessly watches "destiny whirling toward death" as Paula slips out of her mother's hands. She straddles the line between what Glissant terms order and chaos, unable to control her daughter's destiny. Occupying this "slow" and "flowing" time also forces Allende to confront the uncertainty and doubt of not only Paula's future, but hers: a life without her only daughter.

As a grieving mother, Allende desperately wishes to take her daughter's place, and carries deep guilt that the illness is genetic (Maier, 2003, 239). The importance of water in the text, however, illuminates how Allende also reconfigures what it means to produce life on biological and cosmological levels. Although Allende never explicitly uses that term, paying close attention to her language throughout *Paula* demonstrates that water is a recurring symbol of transition and relationships. As McKittrick notes, the body is composed of "flesh and muscle, bones and blood and water," but it is through creative literary, intellectual, artistic practices that Black life and vitality are generated (2021, 50). Analyzed as an illness narrative, Allende is therefore engaging labor in multiple senses: that of producing a literary text about her experience, and of conceiving a new understanding of the relationship she shares with her daughter. Allende must let go of Paula's material presence to forge a new spiritual relationship with her daughter.

Surrounded by family, Allende bids goodbye to her daughter in an ethical and humane way, writing:

Sentí que me sumergía en esa agua fresca y supe que el viaje a través del dolor terminaba en un vacío completo. Al diluirme tuve la revelación de que ese vacío está lleno de todo lo que contiene el universo. Es nada y es todo a la vez...soy el vacío, soy todo lo que existe, estoy...en cada partícula de ceniza que al agua arrastra, soy Paula y también soy yo misa...inmortal" (Allende, 1994/2021, 431)

As she returns to the imagery of an internal voyage, it is impossible to miss Allende's emphasis on "cool water," "absolute void," the sensation of dissolving," and "darkness" as she enters a gestational limbo where, once again, she and her daughter become one.

The water inside of her ("I am the void") is also what connects her to Paula, her own flesh and blood, who will always be a part of Allende. On one hand, the "void" is reminiscent of Glissant's usage, which evokes an ambiguous site of disorder and possibility. I also suggest that Allende's language suggests an embryo in a belly, curled up into a fetus position where a relationship is transformed from two separate humans into one. The transition from gestation to birth is, after all, often described as water breaking. However, it is important to acknowledge that in analyzing this passage as a gesture to gestation and rebirth, I am referencing a relationship through the womb that was forcefully produced through chattel slavery onto Black women on slave ships.

As Christina Sharpe has written, Black women's maternity during enslavement turned "the womb into a factory reproducing blackness as abjection and turning the birth canal into another domestic middle passage" (Sharpe, 2014, 63). On the forced voyage across the Atlantic, slave traders exploited the reproductive and sexual labor of enslaved Black women, linking the ocean with horrific death and brutalization. By conceptualizing birth as a middle passage, Sharpe asks us to consider the horrors, intimacies, and relationships that are made visible through the sea (Yomaira-Figueroa, 2020, 192). Saidiya Hartman, who writes about Black world-making and materiality through gestation, builds on Sharpe and Hortense Spillers to assert that "the slave ship is a womb/abyss," which compels us to account for the many ways in which the slave ship and the sea birthed modernity (Hartman, 2016, 166). Thus, while I interpret Allende's passage as the rhetoric of a womb and a loving, "sacramental" relationship between mother/daughter, I also acknowledge that Black women's reproduction under slavery is frequently analyzed through water to condemn the destructive, violent, and systematic dispossession of Black women's bodies and their agency.

Indeed, as Hartman contends, "gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery," and I do not wish to conflate my analysis with the ways in which Black scholars have shown how the ocean and slave ships devoured Black enslaved bodies, contributing to the commodification of Black women's sexual and reproductive labor (Hartman, 2016, 166). Allende does not explicitly invoke this history of Black women's dispossession, but it is critical context for understanding how the ocean has always been poetically and destructively connected to life and death, especially through the bodies and labor of Black women. Allende's words gesture at a method of world-making between herself and Paula, with Paula forever a part of her mother.

Read with close attention to the significance of transformation and water, I suggest that Allende reinforces the enduring spiritual bond she shares with her only daughter through her womb. Using water as metaphor for illness enables Allende to capture her grieving process, from disbelief to grief to acceptance and clarity. Drawing on Black feminist, Caribbean, and transatlantic theoretic

cal frameworks allows me to chart a relationship between Allende and her daughter, one that mobilizes poetics as a technology that "bears witness to the known and unknown terrors that we live and share" (Figueroa-Vásquez, 2020, 3). When Paula dies, Allende loses her daughter, but she also gains a new configuration of their spiritual relationship that bonds them past life and death.

Confronted with her daughter's death, Allende gains a new perspective on their relationship and is flooded by the memories and love that have sustained her for the year of Paula's coma. As Allende bids her daughter a final goodbye as a woman, she recognizes that she is also welcoming Paula as spirit because life and death are always in relationship to another, and a person can die without being completely gone (Allende, 1994/2021, 366). Allende's granddaughter is even born in the same room where Paula dies, reinforcing a matriarchal lineage and connecting the lives of Allende women. Reflecting on the powerful, transformative process of birth, Allende notes that "los hijos, como los libros, son viajes al interior de una misma en los cuales el cuerpo, la mente y el alma cambian de dirección, se vuelven hacia el centro misma de existencia" (Allende, 1994/2021, 301). In emphasizing the cyclical nature of life and death through metaphors of water, Allende participates in a philosophical tradition rooted in Black intellectual thought regarding the labor of making and sustaining life.

Through the metaphor of cool water, Allende describes the water in her body as a delicate and generative void where she is Paula and Isabel. For Allende, this space opens new possibilities of conceptualizing a relationship with her daughter that extends beyond corporeal or linear realms. Returning to Figueroa-Vásquez's contention that bodies of water never die and considering the association of water with death and the birth of modernity, Allende's words also show how water produces new kinds of life and vitality. She mourns Paula's passing while accepting that she has been given a new relationship, even entire cosmology, with her daughter. Paula will always be with Allende; in her daughter's death she absorbs the painful emotions, the beautiful memories, and the essence of Paula, and finally transmits them to the reader through the text. The contradictory images of "nothing and everything," and "sacramental light and unfathomable darkness" suggest a tenuous acceptance of Paula's death – not as loss, but as a transformation into a tender relationality sustained through the spirit.

Isabel Allende's *Paula* is a final gift to her daughter. The text embodies Allende's endless, overwhelming love for her only daughter, whose pain becomes Allende's own. Illness, like water, "is seamless in the way it moves" through the human body and ripples across a patient's life, afflicting the lives of everyone involved and never really disappearing (Hey-Colón, 2017, 111). Like the ocean eternally kissing the shore, the cathartic process of crying, grieving, and writing about her daughter allows Allende to make peace with her daughter's death without ever forgetting Paula's presence. As Rebeca Hey-Colón contends in her analysis of Gloria Anzaldúa's work, literature about managing illness and death demonstrates

that illness can create “profound transformation in our lives” and prompt a profound sense of connection and empathy (2022, 17). With tenderness and care, these texts use the metaphors of illness and water to recollect and transmit the changes and memories of tremendous love and loss.

Water is a space of remembering and witnessing. Blurring biography and fiction, Allende and Márquez use their powerful rhetorical skills to make their protagonists. During the process of writing, Allende affectionately remembers her daughter and her family’s exile, and Márquez incorporates elements of his parents’ love story into a work of magical realism, set in his beloved home country (Williams, 1989).

Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* is set in a coastal Caribbean city that follows three characters (Fermina Daza, Florentino Ariza, and Juvenal Urbino) as they navigate disease of the body and of the heart. Despite Fermina’s rejection of Florentino, he harbors an enduring, passionate love for her even while he pursues hundreds of other physical relationships. Meanwhile, Fermina marries Dr. Juvenal Urbino and grows old with him until his untimely death, which occurs at the beginning of the novel. Urbino’s death presents the opportunity for Florentino and Fermina’s final consummation on the Magdalena River in Colombia.

The novel implicitly compares two kinds of love: all-consuming obsession, like a torrential downpour, and a familiar, comfortable love as reliable as the ocean’s ebbs and flows. Other scholars have described the text as a poetic celebration of “the vitality possible in old age, love over despair, health over sickness, life over death,” and this analysis further explores how Márquez animates transformation throughout time and the finality of death through his attention to the Magdalena River and water as metaphor (Palencia-Roth, 1991, 54). Analyzing the text as an illness narrative with love and water as metaphor also demonstrates how health, age, and death are animated by conflicting Western and Caribbean ideologies that Márquez explored in his other work, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. As Hey-Colón observes, tracing the latent presence of water in Latin American literature reveals “the convergence of knowledge, transmission, and disease” (Hey-Colón, 2022, 22). *Love in the Time of Cholera* brings together cholera and lovesickness to explore the disorienting embodiment and experience of illness, made possible through the relations and routes of water.

Scholars like Peter Toohey (1992) have studied the importance of lovesickness in early Western literature, but a focus on Márquez’s portrayal of the experience offers new insight into relationships through the metaphor of water. After all, the ephemeral character of love – its fluidity, expansiveness, and ability to produce intimate new bonds between people – is not unlike the power of water to destabilize borders. Unlike the illness of love, cholera spreads through contaminated water and food and spreads most quickly in areas lacking adequate sewage and drinking water sanitation. The disease can cause severe, life-threatening symptoms, and if left untreated for too long, will lead to fatal dehydration. On a surface level, the ill-

nesses have nothing in common, but Márquez persuades the reader that the embodiment and effects of love and cholera are the same.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, lovesickness was taken seriously and treated like a serious physical ailment. Medical texts classified unfulfilled erotic desire “as a species of melancholy, with mental and physiological etiologies and cures” (Vásquez-Medina, 2013, 177). It is fitting, then, that Márquez describes the symptoms of love as an official medical diagnosis:

“La ansiedad se le complicó con cagantinas y vómitos verdes, perdió el sentido de la orientación y sufría desmayos repentinos, y su madre se aterrorizó porque su estado no se parecía a los desórdenes del amor sino a los estragos del cólera...tenía el pulso tenue, la respiración arenosa y los sudores pálidos de los moribundos. Pero el examen le reveló que no tenía fiebre, ni dolor en ninguna parte, y lo único concreto que sentía era una necesidad urgente de morir. Le bastó con in interrogatorio insidioso...para comprobar una vez más que los síntomas del amor son los mismos del cólera” (Márquez, 1985/2015, 95).

Florentino’s sensory reaction to falling in love shows up as “diarrhea,” “green vomit,” “weak pulse,” “hoarse breathing,” and “pale perspiration,” which are the grotesque and sometimes repulsive patterns of illness not typically associated with romance. Here, Márquez conjures a visceral, disgusting scene that is actually critical for illness narratives. As Hey-Colón persuasively argues, the feelings of horror, disgust, and repulsion are contextualized by the Western narratives of illness and disease that view “the body as an entity that must be protected at all costs from a steady stream of invaders” and transgressors (2022, 27). Florentino’s emotions are so deep and dramatic that they are rendered as violent and repulsive illness. Márquez manipulates the facade of falling in love as one of rosy warmth into a disgusting ailment. Seeking advice to cure his symptoms, Florentino turns to his uncle, who informs him that “sin navegación fluvial no hay amor” to convince Florentino to learn a trade, distract him from heartbreak, and bring him to the Magdalena River in Colombia (Márquez, 1985/2015, 241). Water forges relationships and memories, which challenges the authoritative gaze and power of modernity, science, and medicine.

In many ways, Dr. Urbino embodies the turning tide towards modernity and so-called progress, especially because he contributes so much to the eradication of cholera in the coastal Colombian city. Although he is trained in Parisian hospitals, once in Colombia he is immersed in traditional phenomena rooted in the city’s history. Gazing at wooden water collectors, he recalls learning as a child that “los gusarapos eran los animes, unas criaturas sobrenaturales que cortejaban a las doncellas desde los sedimentos de las aguas pasmadas, y eran capaces de furiosas venganzas de amor” (Márquez, 1985/2015, 63). Water triggers Urbino’s childhood

memories even as he attempts to retain a neutral, detached medical gaze on the cholera epidemic. In the end, though, Urbino's cultural competency allows him to empathize with the local population who believe that water possesses "supernatural" power and the ability to "inflict furious vengeance" out of passion. The juxtaposition of the clinical interpretation of water (unsanitary conditions) and the magical realism (supernatural creatures) is a defining characteristic of this illness narrative. Dr. Urbino embodies Western hegemonic knowledge that "precludes questioning by presenting it as truth," and not a singular interpretation of reality (Hey-Colón, 2022, 27). His ignorance and blind allegiance to a supposedly neutral system of medicine and knowledge completely flips, however, when Dr. Urbino falls in maddening love.

When he seduces his patient and partakes in a passionate extramarital affair, Dr. Urbino experiences the jarring and disruptive side effects of lovesickness. He can feel "la forma del hígado con tal nitidez," "el gruñido de gato dormido de sus riñones, sentía el brillo tornasolado de su vesícula, sentía el zumbido de la sangre en sus arterias," waking up in the middle of the night "como un pez sin aire para respirar" con "agua en el corazón" (Márquez, 1985/2015, 354). Like Florinto's repulsive symptoms of lovesickness, Márquez uses rich, fantastical language to play around with the contagious, all-consuming experience of lust, choosing words like "clarity," "purr," "brilliance," and "humming" all convey the electric sensation of falling in love. Whereas a less verbose writer might have used butterflies to describe Dr. Urbino's symptoms, Márquez conceptualizes desire differently. He uses animals like cats and fish to describe the symptoms of lovesickness, connoting a primal, almost feral quality to Dr. Urbino's symptoms, suggesting the carnal desire that fuels his infidelity. Dr. Urbino is forced to reconcile his body's symptoms with his internal, illicit desire and attraction for another woman. Love disturbs his modern ideas of distinctions between the mind and the body, and he deals with imaginary symptoms that are manifested by his guilt but nonetheless real.

The physician struggles to retain his sense of self and identity while flailing through lovesickness, not only because his commitment to Western medicine is threatened, but because he cannot control his passionate and unruly response to extramarital desire. Like Florentino, Dr. Urbino emphasizes the physical and embodied sensations of lovesickness, and his body "becomes a surface to be scrutinized" by the medical gaze that implicates both Fermina and the reader (Vázquez-Medina, 2013, 165). His inability to self-diagnose his symptoms, in addition to his guilt, begins to consume him as he tries to shield Fermina from his adultery. Instead, he recites for her "la amarga letanía de sus insomnios matinales, las punzadas súbitas, las ganas de llorar al atardecer, los síntomas cifrados del amor escondido" under the guise of old age (Márquez, 1985/2015, 356). Dr. Urbino attempts to use age to disguise his symptoms, but for Márquez only cholera can compare to the feelings of passionate love. Age is a separate experience that both takes away and provides new life.

Despite his misgivings, after her husband's death Fermina still experiences painful sorrow and grief. She recalls that her deceased husband once told her something which she could not imagine, "los amputados sienten dolores, calambres, cosquillas, en la pierna que ya no tienen," and this describes how she misses her husband, "sintiéndolo estar donde ya no estaba" (Márquez, 1985/2015, 399). Phantom limb crystallizes Fermina's sense that losing her husband is like losing a part of herself. In this moment, Fermina embodies Colón's theory of "rippling borders" because for her, Dr. Urbino's death creates a visceral grief that serves as a bittersweet reminder of her loss, haunting her memories and physical body. Thus, Fermina's experience "brings us back to the body and acknowledges that the epidermis is the body's own ever-changing (and porous) natural border," and that "our skin, like so much of our body, is largely made up of water" (Colón, 2017, 111). Just as water is seamless, defined by its fluidity and rippling movement, through love and partnership two bodies can become one. Dr. Urbino's death offers a kind of clarity for Fermina, who is offered a new chance with a former flame.

When Florentino and Fermina finally reunite, they must reconcile their memories of each other and confront the older, current versions of themselves. Critically, the reunion between Florentino and Fermina occurs on the Magdalena River, a site that was deeply important to Márquez and imbued with his own histories and recollections. That one of the most transformative and emotional scenes of the novel unfolds on a river is not accidental, because "rivers are uniquely positioned to create a third-space of belonging, one that is neither completely fluid nor completely rooted," creating a tension between land and water (Hey-Colón, 2017, 184). The river becomes a liminal space in between what Hey-Colón argues is a masculine space (the land) and a feminine one (water). In the context of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the parallel is quite literal between Florentino and Fermina, who came from two different classes, even worlds, in Colombia.

Gazing at the water as Florentino shares his fondest memories of the river, Florentino reaches out with "los dedos helados en la oscuridad," although "ambos fueron bastante lúcidos para darse cuenta, en un mismo instante fugaz, de que ninguna de las dos era la mano que habían imaginado antes de tocarse, sino dos manos de huesos viejos" (Márquez, 1985/2015, 468). The description of "icy" is important, as the word suggests the concept of being frozen in time. In the suspended moment before Florentino and Fermina connect, they have not yet shattered the illusion, preserved in golden nostalgia, that they are still the same young lovers they once were. The couple struggles with what Márquez himself grappled with: a push and pull between nostalgia, imagination, and disenchantment (Ganguly, 2005, 128). Their memories of each other cannot possibly map onto the current versions of themselves, and the river that the boat cruises down is not the same Magdalena River of Florinto's youth.

Now, the river is dried up, polluted, and dirty, due to deforestation and erosion. Much like the nostalgia he harbors for his

young love, Florentino realizes that “el río padre de la Magdalena, uno de los grandes del mundo, era sólo una ilusión de la memoria” (Márquez, 1985/2015, 471). Weathered over time, the Magdalena River suffers from the same inevitable marks of age that Florentino and Fermina encounter in one another. Florentino’s experience is reminiscent of Glissant, who identifies a circularity in his own relationship to bodies of water that he must haunt and confront. Gazing at the ocean, Glissant bears witness to the “infinite variations of life and death” made visible in the churning waves (Glissant, 1990/1997, 125). Similarly, Florentino grapples with the distance between his nostalgic vision of the river and Fermina and his increasing proximity to death. By emphasizing the physical changes of the characters and the different appearance of the Magdalena River, Márquez uses water as memory to make sense of the slow, inevitable transformations wrought by time and age. For the characters of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the Magdalena River is a transformative liminal space that “encourages the confluence of contradiction” like new love and old age (Hey-Colón, 2017, 100). Memory, nostalgia, and narrative coalesce for Florentino and Fermina during their trip, allowing the couple to reconcile with each other, their past, and seek out a new adventure together.

The couple embarks on a beginning marked by older age, wisdom, and the opportunity for a new, nascent love story. They head for what Márquez described as “la otra orilla,” or the other shore of life beyond the daily tribulations of youth (Márquez, 1985/2015, 224). Ecologically, the Magdalena River represents Fermina and Florentino’s process of aging as a transformative experience of movement and growth, bringing a person from one stage of their lives to the next. The same way Allende used voyage as a metaphor for gradual acceptance, the Magdalena River offers a generative site of possibility, “a portal capable of generating multiple beginnings” (Hey-Colón, 2022, 17).

When Florentino and Fermina depart on the steamship for the final time, they decide that they will remain on the steamship forever. Although the captain is initially skeptical, he gazes “a Fermina Daza y vio en sus pestañas los primeros destellos de un escarcha invernal,” and begins to wonder “de que la vida, más que la muerte, la que no tiene límites” (Márquez, 1985/2015, 495). Fermina’s icy eyelashes hint at death, a place beyond even the other shore, but even her age does not prevent her from rekindling with a love from her past. Thus the captain charts the ship with only Florentino and Fermina as passengers, with “la bandera amarilla del cólera flotando de júbilo” on the mast (Márquez, 21985/2015, 488). The couple surrenders to the flowing currents of the river, deciding to give themselves completely to their love affair. They embrace the yellow cholera flag, using the illusion of one disease to explore their passion for one another and dissuade anyone who might interfere.

Rather than seeing death as a bleak, never-ending void, Márquez offers the vision of vitality through the Magdalena River ambling through the forest in its seemingly infinite curves and bends. The image of the river lingers as the last scene in the text as a

recurring “site of possibility, a reminder of the past, and the linchpin to the future” as a salient, material, and metaphorical separation and connection of the ocean (Figueroa-Vásquez, 2020, 184). Even as a site of memory, water also produces futurities and new possibilities for Fermina and Florentino. Gazing at the horizon, they see “el sueño de otros viajes futuros” on the horizon, “viajes locos, sin tantos baúles, sin compromisos sociales: viajes de amor,” old age, and death (Márquez, 1985/2015, 490). As they transition into a new stage of their lives, both Fermina and Florentino navigate uncharted and unfamiliar territory but are guided by their love for one another.

Cycling from ice, snow, clouds, and its liquid form, water is constantly in the process of transformation. Both Márquez and Allende texts use water as a metaphor to excavate the experience of illness as an embodied, visceral, emotional, cultural, and social process, portraying illness as a voyage of transformation. As Latin American illness narratives, both Allende and Márquez articulate Humberto Maturana’s philosophy that neither science nor technology can ever replace the spirituality that sustains humanity and language as an art (Maturana, 2011, 598).

In her daughter’s final moments, Allende wishes goodbye to Paula’s intelligence, memories, and finally her body, concluding that although she has lost everything, “en última instancia lo único que tengo es el amor que le doy” (Allende, 1994/2021, 327). Allende’s maternal love is enduring and the spiritual relationship they share sustains her heartbreaking loss, transcending death. Allende mourns her daughter, writing that “la frialdad de la muerte proviene de las entrañas, como una hoguera de nieve ardiendo por dentro; al besarla el hielo quedaba en mis labios, como una quemadura” capturing the intensity of the experience that is sustained through memory and writing (Allende, 1994/2021, 429). Her words suggest that this moment will forever be frozen in her memory, creating a space where only the two of them exist, in a world where “la vida y la muerte se unieron,” evoking Márquez’s suggestion that life, even more than death, knows no bounds (Allende, 1994/2021, 429).

In this essay, I’ve argued for a critical analysis of two Latin American texts that demonstrate water’s powerful capacity for transformation, remembrance, and relationality through and despite illness. Although Allende and Márquez published their books years ago, they embody Gumb’s call to “dream until you claim the ocean” by offering new ways of conceptualizing and grieving death through water as metaphor (Gumb, 2020, 13). Coupling two powerful Latin American texts that intertwine fiction and biography to explore the themes of death, grief, and memory through water as metaphor shows how “futurity is predicated on the ability to take up remembering practices” through aesthetic labor (Figueroa-Vásquez, 2020, 189). Water allows us to produce these futurities through writing, which is a generative life force that bridges temporalities and bodies through language. Reading these texts invites us to partake in this literary tradition, so deeply shaped by Afro-Caribbean thought, of conceptualizing and creating alternative practices of remembering and sustaining relationships with one another.

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