

Solicitation of Identity in *Cien años de soledad*

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Abstract

In this thesis I intend to analyze Gabriel García Márquez' canonical, magical realist novel, *Cien años de soledad* (1967), which is the fictional (and historical) account of several generations of the Buendía family in their town of Macondo. *Cien años de soledad* made its debut in 1967 at the height of the Latin American "Boom Era" of literature (1960-1970). This novel, García Márquez' most commercially successful work, has elicited much response in the form of articles and books of literary critique. The novel follows seven generations of the Buendía family beginning with patriarch José Arcadio Buendía and his wife (and cousin) Úrsula Iguarán. The couple found a town together after José Arcadio Buendía has a dream of a city of mirrors named "Macondo". The couple have three children (by blood): José Arcadio, Col. Aureliano Buendía, and Amaranta. They also adopt their orphaned niece Rebeca. The next generation is of the two illegitimate sons that both brothers have with Pilar Ternera: Arcadio and Aureliano José. The fourth generation are the children of Arcadio: José Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo (twins), and Remedios. The children of these twin brothers make up the fifth generation: Meme, José Arcadio, and Amaranta Úrsula. The progression narrows out as the sixth generation is just the illegitimate child of Meme, Aureliano Babilonia. He is the only Buendía at the end of the novel to decipher the hidden meaning in the ancient parchments passed down through the family concealing their "truth" or "identity". As he accomplishes this, Macondo is wiped off the face of the earth and the novel ends. The seventh generation and last new member of the Buendía family is Aureliano III who dies eaten alive by fire ants after being born with a pig's tail (the result of years of inbreeding). Due to its complex and repetitive nature, many critics have traditionally sought to uncover possible allegorical and/or symbolic meanings of the work. Given Gabriel García Márquez' recent passing, a new wave of criticism has sprung forth within the literary community. I aim to insert myself into this debate in two ways: first, through a reevaluation of the role of Gabriel García Márquez within the Boom Era and, second, through a multi-layered exploration of three interrelated phenomenon most prevalent within *Cien años de soledad*: displacement, decipherment, and the myth of origin and identity. These three themes are frequently interlaced throughout the novel, most notably in the Buendía family's constant attempts to decipher the language of the gypsies (a traditionally displaced group), in order to learn their fate. In fact, the novel ends with the final Buendía family member, Aureliano Babilonia, succeeding in the deciphering of a book left behind by the gypsies. In the process of decoding this text he discovers it is actually a detailed account of the family's history, and he comes to the realization that he is reading about the exact moment in which he is living. The novel ends here, with the Pyrrhic victory of Aureliano over the seemingly indecipherable language of his origin. The title of this essay serves two purposes related to my argument about the novel as a whole. I use the word "solicit" first in the Derridean sense which means to "shake as a whole." Second, I use "solicit" in a prostitutive sense as it relates to the selling of Latin American identity for world consumption. Throughout my study of the novel and my writing of this thesis, I will use these themes within the novel as a point of entry into a larger discussion of *Cien años de soledad*. My ultimate goal is to use this debate and my analysis in order to gesture towards a deeper understanding of the cultural implications of this novel as a whole.

Keywords: identity, origin, Boom

1. Origin and Identity

In this excerpt from my larger work entitled “Solicitation of Identity in *Cien años de soledad*,” I will discuss García Márquez’ treatment of origin and identity within the novel. I intend to conduct an analysis of his manipulation of repetition and inversion within his character development, as a means to expose the hollowness of the enterprise of “the search for self.” To uncover this theme in the novel I will specifically consider the repetition of particular identity in characters (depending upon their name) and how identity relates to origin. I will also evaluate the recurring family obsession with incest and how this might be representative of the overdetermination of Latin America’s identity and “true” origin.

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

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

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

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

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

Additionally, this overdetermination is a large part of the “center’s” drive to force marginalized Latin America into an easily marketable and consumable “identity box”. Ironically, *CAS* has come to be known as being the canonical novel, most easily recognized as representative of Latin American Literature. The genre of magical realism and the novel fell prey to the very identity trap that the author sought to solicit or bring into question.

The first most noticeable exchange and repetition of identity occurs between José Arcadio and Aureliano, the sons of José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula. During their formative years (before Aureliano becomes Colonel Aureliano Buendía) the boys exchange behaviors and character traits on and off. Josefina Ludmer gives a concise analysis of the inversion of the identities of these characters in her book *Cien años de soledad: una interpretación*: la oposición no se establece solamente entre uno y otro hermano, sino en el interior de cada uno de ellos: Aureliano se expande y su nombre cubre un espacio histórico; José Arcadio se retrae; pero Aureliano sigue hermético en su expansión y José Arcadio expansivo en su retraimiento [...]. (63)

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

Later in the novel the identity relationship between these brothers is repeated with twins José Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo (the grandsons of José Arcadio). The use of the same names followed by “Segundo” makes it clear that these boys are a repetition of the original brothers, but in keeping with the laws of CAS they are not perfect reflections of the first two. Rather, the brothers are distorted and dispositioned copies of one another. The twins mix up their identifying characteristics so much throughout the novel that by the end no Buendía is quite sure which is which (the twins themselves may not even know). From the moment of their baptisms (a rite of passage, an important initiation) they began to call one another by the wrong name. This shuffling of identity becomes so confused that the novel states, “Desde entonces no se sabía con certeza quién era quién” (293). Here again the repeated inversion and confusion of identities in the two characters gestures toward the fact that they are not separate, but part of one entity. This relationship is thus an example of “displaced repetition” which is the general structure of the novel itself, the disruption of linear time and progression in character and plot development through deracination and reoccurrence.

Another repetition of identity can be found in the relationships of the original Buendías, Úrsula and José Arcadio Buendía. These characters have a relationship that parallels that of (son) José Arcadio and Pilar Ternera. The relationship of the founding couple is described as follows in the novel: “Era un simple recurso de desahogo, porque en verdad estaban ligados hasta la muerte por un vínculo más sólido que el amor: un común remordimiento de conciencia” (103). This “remorse of consciousness” is related to the fact that they are cousins, linked by their shared shame of incest. José Arcadio and Pilar are thusly described later in the novel, “José Arcadio y Pilar vivieron muchas horas de desahogo [...] y hasta llegaron a sospechar que el amor podía ser un sentimiento más reposado y profundo que la felicidad desahogada” (116). The similarity of “desahogo” or “relief” shared between the couples suggests that when two inverted identities come together they become two parts of a whole, and find an escape from the constant process of repetition and inversion. It would seem that when two come together, on either side of one coin, they find wholeness. In this wholeness they find an escape from the “play” of difference and deference (a notion pulled from Derrida’s “Différance”) experienced by others. This is a reiteration of the pattern of marginal displacement because although the characters join in mirrored relationship with each other, the first couple is not joined by love (but by shame) and the second couple has begun to understand the love that connects them.

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

Finally, inversion of identity occurs within singular characters. José Arcadio Buendía eventually loses his mind and is tied to a tree outside where he babbles nonsense (later discovered to be Latin). The local priest, Padre Nicanor, asks José Arcadio Buendía how it is possible that he is kept tied to a tree. He responds, “*Hoc est simplicissimum*: porque estoy loco” (180). In this character we find a paradox of identity. He is, according to Ludmer, “un loco lúcido” (117). José Arcadio Buendía is operating within the same paradox as Remedios, the previously mentioned child bride of Aureliano. She is both woman and child. This internal opposition of identity is just a further step in the development of the pattern witnessed throughout the novel of contradiction, inversion, and repetition.

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

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

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

The nature of identity is alluded to briefly in the text when Aureliano goes, in a delirium, to sleep with Pilar Ternera (who is also sleeping with his brother José Arcadio). This is, of course, another reference to the fact that these brothers share experiences with each other. In particular, their shared sexual initiation with Pilar Ternera indicates that they continue to develop as one, even in the inverted image of each other. They continue to be connected by their mirrored identities. When Aureliano reaches Pilar's room he does not know how he got there, but he does know why. The novel describes the reason, “porque lo llevaba escondido desde la infancia en una estanco inviolable del corazón” (161). His fate and his identity are held within an “inviolable seal” of his heart. This scene is another instance of the family focus on incest, although here it is subconscious. The text says that Pilar kissed Aureliano with a maternal gentleness and whispered, “Mi pobre niño”, suggesting an emotional incest displayed between the two. The drive toward incest, and the general destiny of Buendías is contained within an “inviolable seal” in the heart suggesting that identity is something a person is born with, and it is unchangeable. How then, do these brothers exchange characteristics?

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

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

2. Overdetermination

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

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

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

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

Another example of this primal urge to copulate within one's own family line occurs between Amaranta and Aureliano José. Amaranta (daughter of the founders) raised Aureliano José as a son, though technically he is her nephew (the illegitimate child of Pilar and Aureliano). He bathes with her and sleeps in her bed for many years, and then one day as she is showering in front of him he becomes aware of her naked body (246). This awareness sparks in him the same uncontrollable (that is, primal or natural) incestuous desire found in Arcadio, and he pursues his aunt. His sexual initiation occurs in her bed one night, and a love affair continues on for weeks.

The final couple to perpetrate the narrative circle of incest is Amaranta Úrsula (daughter of Aureliano Segundo) and Aureliano Babilonia (grandson of Aureliano Segundo). As the novel concludes, Amaranta Úrsula returns from her studies abroad to Macondo, where she meets Aureliano Babilonia for the first time. She says, upon seeing him, "¡Miren cómo ha crecido mi adorado antropófago!" (512). This statement is a hint at the beginning of a final incestuous obsession and a hearkening back to the original fear of Úrsula—the human baby with a pig's tail. Interestingly, the word "anthropophage" comes from the Greek word *anthrōpophagos* meaning "people-eater." This notion of cannibalism, of one man consuming another, is related to the overdetermination of identity in CAS (which is again connected to incest). The symbology of man eating man, like a snake biting its own tail, represents the cyclical and unending repetition of identity and origin—with no beginning or end. Úrsula uses this word, "antropófago," affectionately towards Aureliano Babilonia with increasing frequency, and eventually the boy can no longer contain his incestuous desire (552). This marks the start of a romance culminating in pregnancy. This baby is the continuation of the anthropofagic circle of the Buendía identity.

Amaranta Úrsula gives birth to the baby, and he is described as "un Buendía de los grandes, macizo y voluntarioso como los José Arcadios, con los ojos abiertos y clarividentes de los Aurelianos" (552). Joset points out that this final Buendía represents the synthesis of all of the masculine branches of the Buendía family, the realization of a completed identity in one person (552n32). Then, upon closer examination they realize he has something more... the tail of a pig (553). With this detail, the reader realizes that the baby is not only the complete identity of the Buendía family but he is also the outcome of generations of incest or biological overdetermination. Before they can begin to celebrate the birth, Amaranta Úrsula bleeds out uncontrollably and dies. Her death, and that of the baby, is representative of the previously mentioned overdetermination of identity causing it to collapse in upon itself. Their deaths are the end result of the process—oblivion.

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

3. Conclusion

The structure, plot, and even character formation within *Cien años de soledad* is representative of Latin America's search for identity in that there is no way to clearly discern such a thing. The contradiction, inversion, and displacement witnessed throughout the novel serve to show the reader just how pointless is the nature of that pursuit.

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

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

Reflecting on this conclusion, it is clear that “emptiness” may seem excessively pessimistic to some, but I argue that there is hope to be found. This concept, though nihilistic, is liberating. One must ask; Is there a light in the nothingness? Can we decipher the void? To both questions, I say yes. Throughout the novel the Buendía family is fundamentally incapable of deciphering the meaning in their existence. Here, to decipher means to make something from nothing. This inability to decipher may have been a reality for the Buendías, but is it a reality for the readers and the world they (we) live in? No, we can rise above arbitrary identity constructs and “truths.” The freedom to be found in emptiness is hard to notice at first, as it appears to be an end—a death. An “apocalypse” as it occurs in the novel, does not necessarily mean an “end” despite the connotations the word carries. In my analysis, the apocalypse is merely the revelation of the groundlessness of identity, not its death.

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

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

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