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The Docile Bodies & Vulnerability in John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men

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> 'Guys like us, that work in ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place … They ain't got nothing to look ahead to … With us it ain's like that. We got a future'
> (Steinbeck 15)

Judith Butler, in her conversation with Adriana Cavarero's work in Barcelona which led to her article "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", argues that by referring ourselves as vulnerable we acknowledge our "… radical dependency not only on other, but on a sustaining world" (2). This otherness is established when the institutions pose the question "who are you?" (3) and make room for the appearance of that otherness together with its singularity (3). Butler borrows from Cavarero and Hanna Arendt the concept of 'thatness' of the person: a being which is given its existence in a certain space and time, not chosen by itself (3). This 'thatness' which refers to our singularity and given existence is mediated physically by the bodies we live in. The political dimension of recognizing vulnerability relies on ethics: the type of bonding established with the other once its vulnerability is realised. Steinbeck's short novel *Of Mice and Men* is precisely about ties, hope, loneliness, racism, violence, dispossession, powerlessness in rural California after the Great Depression. The friendship of the main characters, George and Lennie, highlights the vulnerability of Lennie: though being very big and strong, he behaves like a child. Lennie's body is seen as a threat like many other bodies within the story. The interaction and touch among those physical entities bring injury, mutilation and death. Michael Foucault in *Discipline and Punish,* asserts that the body has been unveiled as an "object and target of power" (136) since ancient times. He articulates the notion of docility of the bodies. A docile body is a body that can be "… subjected, used, transformed and improved" (136). There is an instrumental ethos of the body: it is manipulated until it is useful to the 'discipline' or "formulas of domination" (137**).** The concepts of docile bodies and vulnerability are going to be further developed and analysed in this paper in relation to the unfair system and inequalities that Steinbeck censure and denounce through his characters all over the story.

From torture to punishment

By means of torture, the human body became a territory to be conquered. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault declares, "…if the bodies are not subjected to the discipline imposed, their punishment is death or some degree of pain" (33). In the penal history, the human body has been abused in a systematic way either in the search of confession (38), truth or expiation. Though it was not the most common device (32), public torture was a considered a spectacle and a "political ritual" (47), where power played a fundamental role that allowed status quo to be reinforced. These gatherings in public space had a moralistic aim: the idea was to dissuade people from committing any type of felony and to 'break' the body of the sentenced man in order to get an admission of guilt or repentance. The torture inflicted on the body was to be seen and even felt by the audience. The flesh was to suffer a "thousand deaths" (12) therefore the task of the executioner was double: to dispense the maximum amount of pain while keeping alive the tortured being. After death occurred, the body was still profaned: it was burned, chopped into pieces, injured (34).

As there was a reversal in the image the institutions wanted to convey, Foucault states that many changes happened between eighteenth and nineteenth century that led to the end of public executions: for instance, the executioners were seen as savages whereas the objects of the torture were sympathized or even idealized (9). Other reason raised for its abolition was that people were not afraid anymore: the spectacle had lost its 'educational' purpose (63). Moreover, many scholars, philosophers and law theorists from the Enlightenment claimed for the revocation of such practices (73) as they were considered an "atrocity" (55). Consequently, a new approach to punishment was necessary: a debate about penance was opened. One of the topics raised was that the sentence imposed should match the degree of the crime: the body is not the object of the punishment but "the representation of the penalty" (95). It aims at the "social body"(89), no longer to an individual corporeal figure. There is a shift from an individual body to a collective body. These changes are fundamental and go hand in hand with the development of economy, trade and politics: laws where needed to deal with the new ways of production and accumulation (86). An arising bourgeoisie demanded laws and penalties that would eliminate the illegalities regarding property (89) and convictions for small crimes such as theft or smuggling. All this unrest together with the new economical scenario made necessary a reform of the penal system and a 'modern' way of exercising both power and punishment: the metaphysical division of body and mind (or soul) emerged. The bodies are to be obedient and docile through the control of the mind, where the "ideological power" (103) would be inscribed. In consequence, the public spectacle of torture was substituted by "…a great enclosed, complex and hierarchized structure that was integrated into the very body of the state apparatus" (115): the prison, which embraced imprisonment and death penalty. The "atrocities" were out of the public eye and justice was exerted behind closed doors.

Discipline: docile bodies

Owning to this dichotomy of body and soul that has been established, the body was to become both the subject and object of manipulation and oppression. There is an "…instrumental coding of the body" (Foucault 153) in order to serve the purpose of the disciplines. Foucault defines discipline as:

> … a type of power…comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology … it may be taken over either by 'specialized' institutions (the penitentiaries …) or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power… . (215)

The system became intricate and the power relationships were reworked: bodies are to be obedient and highly productive. Institutions and means of production were organized following this motto. In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice & Men,* the docile bodies of the characters could be set as an example of this new model of domination: "If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour … disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination" (Foucault 138). This "disciplinary coercion" that empowers dissimilarities and violence is what Steinbeck condemns in his novel and will be exemplified below.

The physical disposition of bodies in space and time

In the second part of the story, George and Lennie arrive at the ranch in order to work in the fields. Once they get there, where they are supposed to stay, the bunk house description is very austere: it is a "… long, rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch " (Steinbeck 19). The belongings of the men that inhabit that bunk are minimum: a razor, soap, talcum and "… those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe" (19). Foucault highlights how important is for discipline to demarcate the disposition of workers in a certain space (141). In the bunk house there are only beds and blankets and a table for playing cards games. No distractions, no possessions, nothing to be attached to, the only exception could be Candy, who sleeps there with his old dog.

Candy, who used to be a worker in the ranch before losing one of his hands, shows George and Lennie around and lets them know that there is also a barn, were a "nigger" lives: his name is Crooks. Being confined to the barn due to his blackness gives him the status of an animal or beast. As a result, there are three places delimited within the story: the bunk house, the barn and the boss' house. A fourth one would be the field. Although the

territory belongs to the boss and his son, Curley, each of these spots allocates certain people and this allocation does not depend on the physical place each occupy but on their place according to the work they do and that place is not fixed. Foucault calls it rank (145): in the bunk house, any worker could be replaced by other. In fact, Lennie and George are replacing a blacksmith who left before. The bodies 'accumulated' in the bunk house and the barn are subordinated to Slim. He knows what has to be done and is in control of the time: he indicates when to start working, when to eat, when to finish. Through the "time-table" (149) activities were controlled and the pace was imposed. Nonetheless, Slim also reports to the boss. The figure of the master/boss floats all over the narrative: like Big Brother, he is the figure of surveillance (175) who 'runs the place'. At the same time, Slim becomes 'his eyes and ears' while not around, "His ear heard more than what was said to him …" (Steinbeck 35). However, Slim is portrait as a trustworthy character: George confides to him some details of his life with Lennie, why he travels with him and why they escaped from Weed. Discipline asks not only that bodies are governable but also having access to information about their past, deeds or anything that would foster more control (Foucault 211). Anyway, Slim does not use that information against George and Lennie. On the contrary, Slim would become the only man with whom George develops some kind of bond besides Lennie.

Moreover, in the field, George and Lennie's bodies become a "tool" (153). Lennie happens to be an outstanding worker due to his strength and resistance. Slim is amazed, "Maybe he ain't bright but I never seen such a worker. He damn near killed his partners buckin' barley. There ain't nobody could keep up with him. God awmighty I never seen such a strong guy" (Steinbeck 40). Lennie's body functions almost as a flawless machine: it is highly efficient in his movements. He seems to embody the perfect body-worker: not very intelligent, does not ask questions, does not complain, does not get tired and produces much more than his fellow workers. Still, Lennie has a 'flaw' because "he wants to touch ever'thing he likes. Just to feel it" (42): his ability of 'feeling' endangers the rhythm of the bigger machine he is part of (Foucault 164). This is why his fate is doomed.

Vulnerability and corporeality

The capitalist system is fed at the symbolic level by the binary opposition of signs and labels which promote "individualization", coercion and exclusion (Foucault 199). This continuous separation between the "normal and the abnormal" (199) does not encourage the recognition of the other and its vulnerability or to establish any type of ties. Judith Butler in her article mentions the importance of connecting vulnerability to a "politics of the body" (24). If our existence is mediated by body corporeality, a social and political framework should guarantee and assure the material conditions of life and environment for those bodies (24). In Steinbeck's short novel, the bodies are deprived from achieving those conditions. However, by depicting the relationship among some characters, Steinbeck seems to acknowledge, as Butler, that as human beings, we are contingent on the other, and to each other.

Steinbeck exemplifies these bonds with two men that care about one another: George and Lennie. This pair is considered awkward: it cannot be understood that George travels with Lennie not expecting to gain any 'profit' from him. Slim has already "labelled" them. He shares his thoughts with George:

> Oh, I dunno. Hardly none of the guys ever travel together. You know how the hands are, they just come in and get their bunk and work a month, and then they quit and go out alone. Never seem to give a damn about nobody. It's just seems kinda funny a cuckoo like him and a smart little guy like you travelin' together. (40)

And George responds:

> He ain't a cuckoo. He's dumb as hell, but he ain't crazy … It ain't so funny, him an' me going around together …I knowed his Aunt Clara. She took him in when he was a baby and raised him up. When his aunt Clara died, Lennie just come along with me out workin'. Got kindda used to each other after a little while. (40)

George makes clear that he is not trying to take any advantage of Lennie's situation. He recalls that once he told Lennie to jump into the Sacramento River, just because he wanted to show off in front of some guys. Lennie jumped in and they had to take him out of the river because he could not swim. And Lennie even thanked him for rescuing him. From that day on, he would never try something similar again. George recognizes that they keep each other company. Another example of that is George and Lennie's conversation on their way to the ranch, "…We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' our jack jus' because we got no place else to go … '*But not us! An' why? Because…Because I got you to look after me and you got me to look after you, and that's why'* " (15). Loneliness is the result of a very individualistic society: there is no fertile soil so that caring bonds can be rooted, "I ain't got no people…I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time" (41). Actually, there is an underlying tension in the narrative that derives in violent episodes inside the bunk house and the barn. This void of dissatisfaction, tension and oppression makes violence emerge. The individual bodies that try to establish some sort of "bonds of solidarity" (Butler 5) in order to overcome their alienation get to be disciplined in a permanent way. This is what happens to Candy, Crooks, Lennie and Curley's wife.

Violence in the bunk house

In the third part of the book this violent tension goes in crescendo. Slim's dog, Lulu has puppies. That is good news for Lennie, because he would get a pup to pet but a turnabout for Candy and his old dog. Carlson, one of the field workers, is disgusted by the smell of the old dog. On one hand, Candy explains that he cannot put him down because they have been together for many years. The dog is dear to him although he can hardly walk or eat.

He is not willing to let go his only object of affection. Then Carlson suggests he could "take care of him". On the other hand, Slim lets Candy know that he could have a puppy as well just like Lennie. But Candy does not want a replacement. Steinbeck vividly and visually accounts for the dog's killing as a ritual: the preparation, Candy's desperation, waiting for a last minute decision, or a thumb-up from Slim to spare his dog's life. That does not happen, but Slim asks Carlson implicitly to bury the dog properly, facing Carlson's insensitivity. The tension is palpable until the shot is heard. There is an ellipsis in time, and when Carlson comes back, he goes to his bed and starts cleaning his gun. The circle is closed. When Candy is left alone with George and Lennie, he grieves his dog and expresses his wish to go away, but who would employ him with only one hand? Where would he go and be accepted? He is just as his dog: old, handicapped and unproductive. He is dispossessed in all possible aspects. Thus, another question to be raised is whether being handicapped and unproductive mean that somebody can decide upon somebody else's life. Butler in her article, addresses the question of precarious life, connoting that nobody can decide who gets to live or die or who is discarded.

It can be said that the killing of Candy's dog reveals the underlying sexual tension that exists in the bunk house. After Slim leaves the room in order to go to the barn to tar a mule, Whit, another worker, starts to talk about Curley's wife, highlighting her beauty and her provocative attitude. George sentences, "She's gonna make mess … gonna be a bad mess about her. Ranch with a bunch of guys on it ain't no place for a girl, specially like her" (52). Whit asks George if he wants to go to old Susy's place, for drinks and fun with the girls. It is then when Curley appears asking for his wife, and is sent to the barn where Slim is. They came back to the bank house altogether and Slim tells Curley he is fed up of being asked where his wife is. The guys start to laugh at him and Curley decides to attack Lennie in order to exteriorize his frustration, anger and rage. Lennie resists Curley's blows without retaliating. When Slim is about to intervene, George tells Lennie to defend himself. Lennie manages to do so and crushes Curley's hand. Slim makes a deal with Curly so that Lennie and George do not go to jail: nobody would tell what happened that night if he agrees to say that he got his hand smashed by a machine. Slim's decision of protecting both George and Lennie acknowledges Lennie's vulnerability and the injustice of Curley's deeds.

Oppression in the barn

The threatened and precarious bodies that inhabit the ranch are gathered in the barn in the fourth part of the story. This location can be read as either a metaphor of hope for the rise of a new model of community or the place of the oppressed, where all the dispossessed and discards of the system are reunited.

Crooks, the black man that lives in the stable, is surprised by Lennie while he is trying to relief himself from his back pain with some balm. Being all the workers gone to the brothel, Lennie sees his light and looks for company. He tell his story to Lennie:

> 'I ain't a southern negro…I was born right here in California. My old man had a chicken ranch … The white kids come to play at our place, an' sometimes I went to play with them … My ol' man didn't like that. I never knew till long later why … But I know now … There wasn't another colored family for miles around. And now there ain't a colored man on this ranch an' there's jus' one family in Soledad". (70)

He is a self-educated man who has many books and more possessions than the field workers because he is bound to stay there. Not only is he marked by the colour of his skin but also due to his back condition. Crooks finds his way to inflict some of the cruelty he himself has been subjected to towards another subject he considers intellectually inferior. He starts playing some mind games to Lennie, asking him what would he do if George did not come back. After distressing Lennie and sensing the danger of his possible reaction, Crooks makes a statement that sounds almost as an apology:

> …You know he's going to come back. S'pose you didn't have nobody…How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an'read books …Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody-to be near him…A guy goes nuts if he ain't nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you…I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gest sick. (72)

Crooks is the most alienated character in the story. He is very lonely and defensive. When Candy arrives asking for Lennie, Crooks invites him to come in harshly, though he is glad to have company. Looking around, Candy recognizes that this is the first time he enters the place, even though they have known each other for years. Crooks answer is "Guys don't come into a colored man's room very much"(75). Slim and the Boss are his only 'visitors', reinforcing the idea that he is not a hermit but an outcast in the ranch.

Still, there is place for dreaming in between Crooks "cozy little place" and the "manure" (74): Lennie and Candy share with him George's project of owning a piece of land. Crooks reaction is dismissive:

> "I seen hunderds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches … an' that same damn thing in their heads…An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven. Ever'body wants a little piece of lan…Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land". (73)

Candy is not taken aback by his speech. He truly believes in this idea of having a place of his own "I planted crops for damn near ever'body in this state, but they wasn't my crops, and when I harvested 'em, it wasn't none of my harvest. But we gonna do it now, and don't make no mistake about that" (75). Candy's certainty convinces Crooks about getting a place of their own on earth. Nonetheless, this sense of excitement vanishes when Curley's wife enters looking for Curly. Not knowing what to say she utters, "They left all the weak ones here" (76). In that group, she is included. She is also lonely and confined to the big house: she does not have anybody to talk to because Curly "Spends all his time sayin' what he's gonna do to guys he don't like, and he don't like nobody" (77). She gets

frustrated because she does not get the true story about what happened to Curly's hand, but especially because it is Saturday night, she is in company of "a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep- an' likin it because they ain't nobody else" (78). When she asks Lennie about the story, he is addressed as a body-machine when giving 'official version' of the event, "O.K, Machine. I'll talk to you later. I like machines" (79). All the same, Candy and Crooks feel very uncomfortable with Curley's wife presence. Yet she is also an example of the oppressed: Curly's wife as her name indicates, is Curly's property. Feeling intimidated, she exercises that oppression towards Crooks and Candy. When Crooks in a very articulated way tells her to leave and that he would tell she was in the barn, her reply is cruel, "Listen, Nigger…You know what I can do to you if you open your trap? ...Well, you keep your place then, Nigger. I could get you strung up on a tree so easy that it ain't even funny" (80). This operates as a cascade: she undermines Crooks and Candy's hope and confidence. When gone, Candy tried to empathize with Crooks but damage was already done or reminded, "You guys comin' in an' settin' made me forget. What she says is true" (81): in his body and mind, the brutal "label" of racism is imprinted.

Responsibility

Butler remarks that "…the life of the other, the life that is *not* our own, is also our life…being already, and from the start, dependant on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world" (12). This dependence on each other is an experience that is not "always happy or felicitous"(13) as our material existence depends on the conditions of that exposure: this denotes the body "precariousness"(13).

Lennie has been already referred to as a character that has a 'flaw', which is being able to have feelings towards living entities. In spite of being simple-minded, he is not judgemental: he does not "label" people. His love for beautiful and soft things leads him into trouble: before their arrival to the ranch, George and Lennie had to escape from Weed because he touched a girl's dress and was accused of rape. In the story, Lennie struggles to find a recipient of his tenderness. Due to his caresses, he kills the puppy he was given by Slim. Worried about George's reaction and still mourning, Curley's wife appears in the barn. She wants somebody to talk to. Her life with Curley is miserable: she got married to him but wanted to be an actress. She desperate seeks to love and to be loved. Lennie tells her that he adores to "…pet nice things with my fingers, sof' things" (89). Taking his big hand, she put it in her hair so that he can sense how smooth it is. Carried away, his "big paw" (5) runs too vigorously through her hair. Nervous and enraged, she moves her head but Lennie's fingers get stranded in her hair. She fights to be released what makes Lennie shake her, breaking her neck. After realizing that she is dead, he knows he has "done a bad thing"(90) and he escapes towards the place George made him promise to go in case something happens. Candy discovers the dead body and without delay goes to fetch George: when he sees Curly's wife, everything shatters "I think I knowed from the very first. I think I knowed we'd never do her [the land]. He [Lennie] usta like to hear about it so much I got to thinking maybe we would"(93). From now on, the ritual begins: we can see some symmetry with the killing of Candy's dog. Curly wants to get Lennie and kill him. George turns to Slim for alternatives, as Candy did for his dog. There is no

easy way out, even if he is imprisoned, that is no place for Lennie. Carlson again goes to get his gun, but this time it is not there. They think Lennie stole it, but really is George who has it. Finally, George makes the ultimate act of love: he kills Lenny in order to avoid him the suffering and fear he would endure if Curly or Carlson catch him. The only man who is compassionate enough to understand the whole situation is Slim. He knows how affected George is by taking such a difficult decision. Going back to Butler, George difference with Carlson and the rest is that he is not deciding whether somebody deserves (or not) to die. Thinking in Lennie's sake and his vulnerability, his action is based on ethical basis: George was and is to be accountable for Lennie's life.

Conclusion

To conclude, Steinbeck manages to encapsulate in such a short story many topics that are still contemporary in our society. In Capitalism, the exploitation of the bodies is fundamental for power and wealth accumulation. This exploitation, in Foucault's term, became sophisticated: those bodies are subjected to usage and transformation in order to perform their part in the machinery of mass production. Paraphrasing Thoreau, this machine does not accept any "counter-frictions". If those arise, there is no doubt that the bodies will suffer, just like in *Of Mice and Men*. With Lennie's death, the dream of having a piece of land is blasted: the impossibility of owning land by American working-class is condemned through the characters. The 'American dream' and the 'self-made man' archetypes are, in Marx's words, the opium of the people: they provide the narrative of hope and progress needed so that the injustice is not questioned. Nonetheless, within the story there is a reflection upon what kind of interaction is 'produced'. In the ranch, we can see that the 'disease' of loneliness is spread and that the bodies, though together, suffer in isolation. Then, the remedy is an alternative society, made plausible through Lennie and George's friendship. Since their arrival to the ranch, George and Lennie are tagged as different because they are not alone and certainly not lonely. Lennie is a threat not because of his strength and big body but because he is able to feel love. Erich Fromm, in his book *The art of Loving,* conveys that the only answer to overcome the problem of human existence is love. Conceived as an act of faith and will, love implies more giving than receiving. Lenny is a character that is really eager to give love and he is not judgemental towards the other. Therefore, he is disciplined with death. George also pays the price for his attachment. This seems the reason why Slim is compassionate though distant: he understands the risk that presupposes this connection. Like Butler sustains that each life depends on one another, Lennie's life depends on George and he embraces the responsibility. Steinbeck's intention is to depict love and solidarity as the ultimate subversive forces: bonds of empathy can be reproduced and mirrored in order to respect and secure the lives of other beings as well. Life in community is where it can be found a place that we can call home. Then, it is the system that has a 'flaw': we can make a piece of heaven for everyone on earth.

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