

**Disturbing Translations: Distance, Memory, and Representation in Contemporary  
Latin American Literature**

by

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## ABSTRACT

“Disturbing Translations: Distance, Memory, and Representation in Contemporary Latin American Literature” examines the legacy of dictatorship and political repression in Latin America, focusing on the significance of literature in the aftermath of trauma. Dictatorship disrupts the existing order and produces distance, particularly spatial distance (often resulting from displacement) and temporal distance (between the “before” and “after” of dictatorship and its legacy in the present). These distances are formally represented in literature via instances of textual disruption, such as ekphrasis, that echo and reconfigure the ruptures of dictatorship. This dissertation introduces the figure of translation as a broad metaphor for negotiating those distances that emerge in the wake of dictatorship, with particular attention to generational distance from trauma and the complexities of postmemory. Taking Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” as a point of departure for examining the relationship between past trauma and its legacy in the present, this dissertation seeks to re-think postmemory through the lens of translation. While some elements of past trauma may be translated across space, time, and form, pain and loss are among those elements that resist translation; here, translation acknowledges its own limits, recognizing pain and loss without assimilating them. Chapter one explores the relationship between father and son and the references to photographs and film in Roberto Brodsky’s 2007 *Bosque quemado*. Here, engagement with visual materials is a form of translation, echoing the work of postmemory and the

negotiations involved in constructing personal and national narratives in post-dictatorship Chile. Chapter two addresses Sergio Chejfec's 1999 *Los planetas*, arguing that the novel depicts the city (here, Buenos Aires, Argentina) as a site of translation and memory where the past and present are contained in layers through which the continued impact of trauma on the present is negotiated. Chapter three considers the limits of translation in María Negroni's *La Anunciación* (2007), using Derrida's notion of the *parergon*, or the frame, to explore the novel's gestures toward trauma and excess. Chapter four explores Daniel Alarcón's *At Night We Walk in Circles* (2013), focusing on the novel's treatment of theater to elucidate the relationship between postmemory, translation, and mourning.

## INTRODUCTION

In a 2012 interview with the Mexican magazine *La Tempestad*, María Negroni describes translation as a kind of inquiry or investigation:

Proust dijo que los libros más bellos parecen escritos en una lengua extranjera. El objetivo es simple y difícilísimo: se trata de liberarse de las voces calcificadas, las ideas recibidas, las convenciones que anulan y entorpecen. Lo mismo rige la traducción que es, ante todo, una indagación atenta y uno de los modos de mostrar el carácter *provisorio* del lenguaje. Es preciso internarse en ella con la misma incertidumbre con que se escribe el poema: recordando que avanzamos a ciegas, en aras de un fragmento de lo real, sin olvidar jamás que verdad y totalidad son un binomio imposible (e indeseable).

Translation, in this framing, is not only an investigation, but a negotiation. Negroni aligns translation with exceptional writing, an act that has the potential to be emancipatory, but that can only emerge out of a negotiation with the extant: las voces calcificadas, las ideas recibidas, las convenciones. When done effectively, translation reveals instability, rather than coherence, uncertainties and fragments, rather than a grand totality.

I invoke Negroni's words here because this dissertation takes translation as its point of departure and begins with a similar premise. Fundamentally, this dissertation emerges out a desire to better understand the relationship between the past and the present, particularly (although not exclusively) in the context of contemporary Latin America, where the legacies of the Cold War-era dictatorships persist and, indeed, continue to be hotly contested, despite the many years (and in some cases decades) since the dictatorships' collapse. As I will argue, the concerns of the present—its culture and

politics—unfold in constant negotiation with the past, and yet they are also driven by a desire for difference and distinction. And the present exerts a force on the past, too; as we move forward in time, we review and reconsider what's come before, reevaluating, reinterpreting, and reconstructing.

In addition, this dissertation investigates the significance of literature in relation to a set of concerns—political violence, trauma, memory—that are often dealt with first through political and legal frameworks. In this vein, I am interested in literature that attends to whatever those frameworks miss—that is to instability, to fragments, to the nuances that exceed (or in some cases challenge) a political or legal or sociological approach. While much of the literature that emerged in the context of dictatorship is itself fragmented or unstable, producing discomfort in the reader in order to signal the disruptions of the era, I am here invested in literature that seeks to evoke that sense of disruption, but in more subtle ways.

It is with this set of concerns in mind that I introduce the figure of translation as a broad metaphor for negotiating the distances that emerge in the wake of dictatorship, with particular attention to the complexities imposed by imposed by generational distance from trauma and the work of postmemory. Dictatorship, as a disruption to an existing order, produces distance, particularly spatial distance (often as a result of displacement, exile, and expatriation) and temporal distance (between the “before”—the events of the past and whatever precipitated the dictatorship—and the “after,” its legacy in the present). In literary accounts of dictatorship, these displacements and breaks are formally represented via instances of textual disruption, such as ekphrasis, that echo and reconfigure the ruptures imposed by the dictatorship. I focus here on four exemplary

writers whose works engage these themes; taken together, I suggest that these writers' works form part of a new generational response to the legacy of dictatorship.

Roberto Brodsky, Sergio Chejfec, and María Negroni came of age in the early years of the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina. As adults, they have chosen to live as expatriates for significant periods of time, even as their home countries transitioned back to democracy; all three divide their time between the United States and their countries of birth, though some travel more frequently than others. Brodsky was born in Santiago de Chile in 1957. He writes about Chile under Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship (1973 to 1989), as well as about the years of transition that followed and the legacy of the dictatorship in the present day. Chejfec and Negroni were both born in Argentina: Chejfec in Buenos Aires in 1956, and Negroni in Rosario in 1951. Chejfec and Negroni's novels describe the Dirty War years (1976 to 1983), as well as their aftermath. Daniel Alarcón is a generation younger than the other three writers. He was born in Lima, Peru, in 1977, though he moved with his family to the United States as a young child and continues to live there. Like the other writers, he travels frequently to Peru, his country of birth, and has spent extended periods of time there. Alarcón's novels take place in a Latin American country that is technically unnamed but that closely resembles Peru; his work chronicles the present and recent past, as well as the Shining Path years in the 1980s, a time of war, violence, and political repression. While all four writers' work treats dictatorship and its aftermath, the writing I focus on in this dissertation was all written and published in the post-dictatorship period (a period that begins with the end of dictatorship but is, to my mind, ongoing). In sum, all four writers engage the legacy of dictatorship and political repression in Latin America, albeit from a distance that is both

geographic and temporal. As I noted above, distance emerges in the wake of dictatorship, and it marks these writers' lives and work. In their writing, Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón underscore these distances through formal instances of textual disruption, particularly references to visual media and tropes.

### **Distance and Translation**

In my discussion of post-dictatorship literature in Latin America, I use translation in three ways that correspond to the three registers of distance I mentioned above: spatial or geographic, temporal or generational, and formal. First, in the literal sense of *translatio*, or “carrying across,” translation allows for a movement or carrying of ideas across borders, national and otherwise. This idea of translation as a movement or carrying across suggests a spatial orientation and is thus fruitful for mediating spatial and geographic distances.

Second, Walter Benjamin's thinking on “afterlife” in “The Task of the Translator” suggests that translation can also be a temporal process, a carrying of ideas and meaning through time. In his essay, Benjamin writes, “a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life” (254). Here, translation mediates between the past—the moment of origin—and the present or future—the “stage of continued life.” Benjamin continues: “The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. . . . In [translations] the life of the original attains its latest, continually renewed, and

most complete unfolding” (“Task” 255). Here, Benjamin makes an explicit connection between generations, afterlife, and translation to suggest that translation is, in some ways, a forward-looking process of renewal and unfolding. It can also be a backward-looking process: “For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change” (“Task” 256). A translation represents another “unfolding” or a “renewal” of the original, but it also changes the original. In this way, translation allows for a movement of ideas across space as well as backwards and forwards in time, via continuity and renewal. Thus, translation can be used for negotiating generational or temporal distance.

In a third sense, translation is a figure for thinking through that which cannot be fully understood or assimilated; here, translation is productive for negotiating formal distance. In practice, translation serves to transform something that is incomprehensible into something that is comprehensible. Benjamin describes this relationship as one that is supplementary or harmonic:

as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*. . . . A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. (“Task” 260)

Here, the figure of translation both points toward this fundamental difference—and distance—between an original and a translation and offers a way to describe the gap between the original and its supplement, a distance that cannot fully be bridged.

Brett Levinson and Alberto Moreiras take up Benjamin’s ideas to examine that which exceeds translation and the ways in which translation recognizes its own limits.

Levinson argues that “language as such” (a term from Benjamin, also known as “pure language”) necessarily “exceeds” translation, so that translation itself can never be fully successful (24), while Moreiras describes “an untranslatable excess” (23).<sup>1</sup> For Levinson and Moreiras, translation can be an assimilatory process and often is by necessity. However, there is also something in the process of translating that exceeds or resists translation, and translation is not, nor should it be, “the final horizon of thinking” (Moreiras 23). These points are complementary to Benjamin’s “harmony” or “supplement”; both points indicate a crucial distance between what is translatable (from the original) and what exceeds translation. Levinson and Moreiras remind us that some things, including pain and loss, cannot (and should not) be fully assimilated, and translation acknowledges those limits.

In this dissertation, then, translation emerges as a figure for mediating, acknowledging, and negotiating the circulation of cultural rhetoric, including literary and visual tropes, across borders, time, and form. In the context of trauma, the figure of translation may be used to attend to the transmission of pain and loss, particularly with regard to transmission across a generational divide or through a long temporal remove between an instance of trauma and its long-term effects. Here, translation is also a lens for considering the relationship between memory and postmemory.

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<sup>1</sup> Moreiras argues: “The maximum accomplishment of translational thinking is also its total defeat: an adequate integration into the circuits of conformity, when all further translation becomes unnecessary, when language exists as such, when there can be no literary community anymore. If it is necessary to translate so that what is alien does not expropriate us, and if it is necessary to translate so that what is ours does not kill us . . . it is also necessary to understand that translation is not the final horizon of thinking” (23). The “untranslatable excess” is in response to that assertion.



## The Aftermath of Trauma: Generational Distance and Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch articulates the concept of “postmemory” in her 1997 *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*; she further develops this concept in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, published in 2012. Postmemory speaks to the generational distance between those who experienced a particular historical event and those who didn’t, but whose lives have continued to be marked by the event; in its original conception, Hirsch applied the term to the relationship between survivors of the Holocaust and their children, though it has since been used in a variety of other traumatic contexts, including Latin America and the Cold War-era dictatorships.<sup>2</sup> Postmemory is

distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. . . . Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (*Family 22*)

Here, Hirsch distinguishes between two modes of engagement with the past—recollection (via memory) and imaginative investment and creation (via postmemory)—though she notes that both memory and postmemory are “constructed” (22). She argues, too, that postmemory is intimately linked with visual materials from the past, photography in particular: “Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge between memory and

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Susana Kaiser, *Postmemories of Terror: A New Generation Deals with the Legacy of the Dirty War* (2005); Luis Martín-Cabrera, *Radical Justice: Spain and the Southern Cone Beyond Market and State* (2011); Ana Ros, *The Post-Dictatorship Generation in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay: Collective Memory and Cultural Production* (2012); and Alejandra Serpente, “The Traces of ‘Postmemory’ in Second-Generation Chilean and Argentinean Identities” (2011).

postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting” (*Family* 22).

In Hirsch’s framing, postmemory serves as a reminder that in the context of intense historical trauma, the present is often shaped, and even dominated, by the past.

Postmemory, then, attends to generational distance from trauma, and as such it resonates strongly with the generational implications of translation outlined above.

Indeed, I argue that postmemory functions as a form of translation.<sup>3</sup> As in Benjamin’s notion of translation, postmemory mediates between the past (a set of traumatic events and attendant memories) and the present or future (continued manifestation of that trauma over time, in ways overt or subtle; the persistence of memory). Postmemory reflects a kind of afterlife, a “stage of continued life,” for the effects of trauma, and the work of postmemory changes personal and collective connections to that trauma.<sup>4</sup> Postmemory unfolds in conversation with the past in the way that translation unfolds in conversation with an original; as translation develops out a negotiation with language, postmemory develops out of a negotiation with the dense materiality of memory and its artifacts. We are perhaps used to the idea that memory constitutes a continued engagement with the past, whereas the emphasis, in postmemory, on “imaginative investment and creation” ascribes a degree of autonomy to the person receiving the memories. But postmemory, though it draws on various creative processes, is not strictly an act of creation by an autonomous subject in the same way that the translator’s autonomy is circumscribed the characteristics of the original source materials. Benjamin’s notion of translation, then,

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<sup>3</sup> In her examination of visual culture after the Holocaust, Hirsch, too, occasionally connects the work of postmemory with translation, particularly in reference to linguistic translation in visual projects (see, for example, Hirsch’s reading of Tatana Kellner’s *Fifty Years of Silence*, *Generation* 87-92) or the relationship between image, memory, and speech (see her analysis of Dori Laub’s treatment of Menachem S. in *Testimony*, *Generation* 168-173).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the temporal implications of “post” in postmemory, see Hirsch, *Generation* 5-6. Hirsch also distinguishes between “familial” and “affiliative” postmemory (*Generation* 36), which is similar to the distinction between the personal and the collective.

helps to illuminate some of the ways in which postmemory functions as a form of translation, negotiating the afterlife of trauma.

Of course, postmemory is not the only concept for articulating the relationship between a past trauma and its effects in the present, nor for describing the relationship between survivors of trauma and the generations that follow. Other scholars have addressed these questions and formulated different terminologies or frameworks, particularly through the lens of witnessing. In *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting*, for example, Ross Chambers describes the form and function of testimonial and witnessing writing in what he calls “aftermath society,” a society that is “regulated by a culture in which collectively traumatic events are denied, and if necessary denied again” (xxi). Certainly, the societies that emerged after the end of dictatorship in Chile, Argentina, and Peru constitute aftermath societies, although Chambers acknowledges that probably most societies are aftermath societies. Chambers asserts that “trauma’s failure to heal . . . takes the form in aftermath culture of ‘surviving trauma,’ a phrase that might be allowed to imply both the fact of one’s having survived a traumatic event and the contrary fact of the pain’s surviving into the present, the fact that one has not survived it so much as one is (still) surviving it” (xxii). Chambers’ “aftermath societies” widen the horizon for postmemory, which is often used to refer to the experience of an individual (or a small group of individuals), rather than society writ large. In the context of an aftermath society, postmemory attends not only to “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth,” but to the experience of those who live in a society where the pain of trauma survives into the present. Here, Hirsch’s notion of an “affiliative” postmemory applies (in contrast to a

“familial” postmemory): “the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation, combined with a set of structures of mediation that would be broadly available, appropriable, and, indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission” (*Generation 36*). As the temporal gap between the present and the initial trauma widens, there may be many people who experience the effects of trauma—who are, in other words, “(still) surviving” trauma, but who for one reason or another have little direct access to that trauma—perhaps it precedes their birth; perhaps they were too young to remember it clearly; or perhaps they did experience the trauma personally, but the temporal gap has widened sufficiently that the effects are no longer immediate or direct. Chambers is careful to note that although we tend to link aftermath “to the sequential relation of a cause to its consequences,” it “can also be taken to signal a strange dedifferentiation of the received categories that divide time into past, present, and future and make cause and consequences distinguishable” (xxii). Like translation, then, Chambers’ “aftermath” looks forward and backward in time, signaling that nothing about trauma, neither its disruptive effects nor the processes that govern its transmission, unfolds in linear or orderly fashion.

In *The Belated Witness: Literature, Testimony, and the Question of Holocaust Survival*, Michael G. Levine also engages with the question of “postmemory” with regard to the Holocaust; in fact, he proposes “belated witnessing” as an alternative term. In revisiting “postmemory,” Levine highlights Hirsch’s attention to the “overwhelmingly immediate impact of the Holocaust on the first generation,” an impact so overwhelming that “it was not fully assimilated as it occurred” (17). As a result, postmemory highlights the “legacy of unassimilated memories unwittingly passed on from one traumatized

generation to the next” (17), a point that resonates with Chambers’ concern for the “fact of the pain’s surviving into the present.” Indeed, Levine’s reading of postmemory further underscores its translative undertones, the way it not only gestures toward the present and future legacy of trauma, but prompts a return to, and a reassessment of, the memories that precede it. He notes, “Although the ‘postmemories’ of this second generation thus may be said to be more distanced and mediated than those of the first, in coming after they also have the retroactive effect of revealing things about the parents’ memories which might not have been sufficiently appreciated the first time around . . . ” (17). Levine proposes “belated witnessing” as an alternative not only to Hirsch’s postmemory, but to James Young’s “received history” (20).<sup>5</sup> He points out that Young, in particular, describes “a surprisingly linear notion of generational descent”; Levine thus introduces “belated witnessing” as a term that recognizes that the “second-degree witness” is “not just one step removed from the experiences of the first generation but otherwise implicated in them” (20-21). The stress, here, is on this sense of implication in the trauma. In Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (the ur-text for both Hirsch and Levine’s conceptualizations), Levine notes that it is precisely “this implication of the second-generation survivor in the traumas of the first that not only tangles the lines of descent but makes Art [Spiegelman] a witness to the *delayed impact* of the Holocaust” (21). Translation similarly implicates the translator in his or her source materials, and translation in the context of trauma foregrounds the translator as a kind of witness to the “delayed impact” of trauma. Moreover, Levine’s approach echoes Chambers’ sense of dedifferentiation; it is not only that memories return or disrupt in “disjointed fragments” but that “time itself” is “out of joint” (20). Levine goes so far as to link that out-of-joint-

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<sup>5</sup> For more on “received history,” see Young, as well as Levine’s discussion of the term, 19-20.

ness to translation, pointing out that trauma and the irruptions of memory prompt a “rearticulation” not only of the relationship between the past and the present, but of “the temporal and logical priority of an original over a translation” (196n12). The figure of translation, then, attends to sequential dedifferentiation, to time’s being out of joint.

In *Radical Justice: Spain and the Southern Cone Beyond Market and State*, Luis Martín-Cabrera reviews postmemory with regard to “historical trauma and its intergenerational transmission” in Chile, Spain, and Argentina in the post-dictatorship period (129). Martín-Cabrera argues that “one could read Marianne Hirsch’s notion of post-memory as an attempt to overcome the ethical conundrums that arise between survivors and the inheritors of their traumatic experiences” (131), and he highlights in particular her “admonition about the epistemological impossibility of having an unmediated and authentic access to the kernel of trauma” (132). In this vein, he is critical of those scholars, especially in Latin American and Spanish studies, who “have adopted her distinction to separate the authentic trauma of the survivor from the more benign and secondhand recollections of the new generations that did not witness (or live) the horrors of the past” (132). Nevertheless, Martín-Cabrera expresses “skepticism” for the applicability of postmemory in the context of post-dictatorship Spain and the Southern Cone (132). He is particularly skeptical of its aptness for describing the “new generation of documentary filmmakers” that have come to prominence in the post-dictatorship period, since that is his point of inquiry, but his concerns resonate beyond filmmaking and into artistic production more broadly (132). Martín-Cabrera notes, rightly, that “rather than being overwhelmed and dominated by the traumatic narratives of their elders”—as in the case of Holocaust survivors and their children—“these filmmakers are

responding to the noisy silence created by the lack of a social link between the previous generations and their own. Most of the members of this generation . . . have heard about the historical traumas of the past, but in a very ambiguous manner, through rumors and fear” (132). He continues,

To be born after the disasters of the war and the dictatorship implies a higher degree of mediation and also an active or passive inheritance of the silence of the pain of others within oneself. . . . it is important to notice that the films of these new generations are not an act of charity toward the victims of historical traumas, but rather a collective necessity based on the ethical imperative to confront the unsaid, the frozen time and words of trauma. (132)

He therefore rejects what he understands by postmemory, arguing that “to reduce the experience of trauma to a discrete distinction between subject positions . . . would imply disregarding the hypersensitivity of those who did not live through the traumatic event but are nonetheless willing to lend their gazes and voices to the experience of looking and hearing what no one wants to see or hear” (133). He is concerned that to call that experience postmemory—that is, the willingness to “see and hear”—“disconnects the survivors from their inheritors” (133). Moreover, and more significantly, he points out that postmemory “overlooks the fact that the new generations address the same pieces of frozen time and words, the same ‘traces of memory’ excluded from the annals of history” (133). However, he does not reject the intergenerational implications of postmemory, calling instead for “a new understanding of the intergenerational transmission of historical trauma” (132). His approach is characterized by a concern for the other; following Davoine and Gaudillière’s work on madness and trauma, he argues, “In madness, the victims and the witnesses of these historical catastrophes demand to be listened to in a different register and in a different space” (133). He adds that the

“wound” of trauma “never speaks in the present tense, it always demands the presence of the other to face these pieces of frozen time that overflow reality” (133). “The presence of the other” is particularly crucial, Martín-Cabrera explains, given that “the frustration of the victims of state terror in Spain and the Southern Cone[ ] is always linked to the absence of others to receive their testimonies in their traumatic dimension, in their excessive intimacy with death” (133-34). Like Levine and Chambers, Martín-Cabrera’s interest in “the pieces of frozen time that overflow reality” alludes to a certain temporal dedifferentiation and disjointedness. However, Martín-Cabrera’s focus here on madness allows him to call attention to the question of transmission to an other, particularly to an other willing to “see and hear” that which has so far been “excluded from the annals of history.”

Martín-Cabrera’s distinction between the “overwhelming and dominating” narratives of Holocaust survivors and the “noisy silences” that emerge in the wake of the Southern Cone dictatorships is a point of crucial importance. Here, I appreciate, in particular, the way that he frames postmemory as a concept that potentially “overlooks the fact that new generations address the same pieces of frozen time and words, the same ‘traces of memory’ excluded from the annals of history.” In a context in which certain voices have been systematically silenced or excluded from the official version of history, the intergenerational transmission of trauma requires subsequent generations to involve themselves in “confronting the unsaid”; as Levine says, they are implicated in the same processes that affected the previous generation, and the “lines of descent” are indeed “tangled” (Levine), the distinction between survivor and inheritor blurred (Martín-Cabrera). Indeed, by putting postmemory in conversation with translation—and by



positing postmemory as a form of translation—part of what I hope to highlight is the “implication” of the translator-witness in the trauma. Thus, I invoke a broad understanding of postmemory, one that takes Marianne Hirsch’s formulation as a point of departure but that seeks, through the lens of translation, to develop and attend to some of the nuances I’ve outlined in this section. The work of postmemory requires an intense negotiation with the past—a negotiation that leaves room for an encounter with “the unsaid,” with “pieces of frozen time”—even as it looks toward the aftermath—and afterlife—of trauma. Furthermore, translation carries an awareness of audience—of an other who is reading or listening or watching—thereby foregrounding transmission, along with possibility or potentiality. And yet in acknowledging its own limits, translation indicates that something (else) will always go unassimilated or unsaid, that there is always something that exceeds or resists translation.

Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón’s work attends to postmemory in a variety of ways. Brodsky and Alarcón’s novels more clearly foreground the issues of postmemory, in their attention to generational distance with regard to political violence and trauma. While their protagonists technically experienced the historical traumas described—Chile’s coup d’etat and Peru’s Shining Path period, respectively—both were young enough that they grapple with the past through a generational remove. Indeed, both novels focus, too, on relationships between fathers (or father figures) and sons, which further underscores the generational question and the connection to postmemory. Chejfec and Negroni’s novels are less clearly concerned with postmemory. Their protagonists are old enough to experience directly the effects of dictatorship and political repression; while they escape arrest and disappearance, their peers and loved ones do not.

Their novels are concerned less with generational distance from trauma than with witnessing from a temporal remove. They explore the contours of the long legacy of trauma, and they attest to literature's capacity to attend to the emotional burdens of political violence and to illuminate some of the things that go unnoticed (or under-noticed) by politics, history, and law, particularly in the aftermath of trauma. Read in concert with each other, Chejfec and Negroni's work further develops the nuances of postmemory that Brodsky and Alarcón's work more directly addresses. Indeed, these writers are working at a postmemorial moment, as a new generation takes power and reckons with the persistent effects of dictatorship and state violence.

### **Translating Disruption: Text, Image, and Memory**

As I noted at the outset, the displacements and breaks that characterize dictatorship are often formally represented via instances of textual disruption, such as ekphrasis, in literary accounts of dictatorship and its aftermath. In the work of Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón, there are frequent references to visual media and objects, particularly photographs, film and cinema, painting, and theatrical performance. It is thus noteworthy that Hirsch explicitly links photography and postmemory. As I explained above, Hirsch refers to photographs as "particular instruments of remembrance"; not only are they "perched at the edge between memory and postmemory" and between "memory and forgetting," they are "ghostly revenants," invoking the spectrality of the past. In some sense, then, Hirsch's conception of postmemory turns on the photograph, on its capacity "to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability" (*Family* 20).

Memory has been linked not only to photography, but to images more broadly. In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W. J. T. Mitchell describes “the family of images,” which he organizes into a family tree (9). Here, “image” (which includes “likeness, resemblance, similitude”) is the progenitor from which five branches originate: graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, and verbal (10). The “mental” images category includes “dreams, memories, ideas, and fantasmata”—so memory is itself a kind of mental image. Mitchell notes also that metaphors and description may be classified as “verbal” images, while graphic images include “pictures, statues, designs” and optical images include “mirrors, projections” (10). Mitchell takes the link between images and memory a step further in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, arguing that memory is “an imagetext, a double-coded system of mental storage and retrieval that may be used to remember any sequence of items” (192). Hirsch recalls Mitchell’s argument in emphasizing the significance of photography to memory and postmemory. She adds, “Images and narratives thus constitute [memory’s] instruments and its very medium, extending well into subsequent generations” (*Family* 22). Mitchell claims, too, that “while specific cultural articulations of memory may vary from one place to another, the composite imagetext structure of memory seems to be a deep feature that endures all the way from Cicero to Lacan to the organization of computer memory” (*Picture* 193). He then goes on to frame memory as a “storehouse” that holds, among other things, places and images, stories and description (*Picture* 194). Given that Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón’s work all incorporates a return to this “storehouse of memory” in some fashion, it is not surprising that images—whether objects or visual media—are among the things that get pulled out to appear on the page.

Chambers remarks on the significance of the photograph as a tool for negotiating the distance between the cultural norm that characterizes an aftermath society and the “distant extremity” of trauma (xv). It should be noted that the photograph is one of a number of “indexical signs” that serve this purpose in witnessing texts, pointing the reader or viewer toward “an X that the culture’s conventional means of representation are powerless, or at least inadequate, to reference . . .” (xv). With regard to the photograph, Chambers explains, “representation is inseparable from signifying, as is reference from address—and as the making of a certain kind of meaning *the photo functions also as an invitation*. More accurately, it enacts *a double invitation* to its audience of spectators, an invitation first to look, and then to see” (9, emphasis mine). Chambers adds, “For there is more (and other) to see, the photo implies, more (and other) that it signifies, than it actually represents; and its strategy is therefore first to engage our attention and to capture our willingness to look (essentially by techniques of euphemism) and then to divert it (through a practice of symbolism) so that we are led to see more (and other) than the photo gives us to look at” (9). In this sense, the photo is not only intimately tied up in the processes of witnessing and trauma, it is translative, carrying our gaze from whatever first catches our attention toward the “more (and other)”—the surviving trauma—that has otherwise been obscured. Chambers’ analysis of the photograph turns on the idea of a “metaphor” as a “vehicle of this transfer” from whatever captures the viewer’s attention to the “concern that’s not directly represented” (11). He points out that “transfer” is the “etymological sense of the word metaphor” (11), and, in fact, the etymology for metaphor—a transfer or a carrying over—is the same as the etymology for translation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Yago Colás also called my attention to the common etymology between translation and metaphor.

Photographs, then, are translative in multiple senses: they negotiate between past and present, and they perform the broader, indexical function that Chambers emphasizes.

While Chambers' reading calls attention to the photograph as a mediating force, it also points, first, to the idea that the photograph mediates but also disrupts and, second, to the relationship between the photograph and its viewer. With regard to textual disruption, and more specifically to ekphrasis, I refer to Mitchell's broad definition of ekphrasis, "the verbal representation of visual representation" (*Picture* 152). The verbal representation of the visual is a disruptive and mediating force in the vein of Chambers' photograph; that is, it captures the reader's attention and has the potential to divert that attention toward the image's symbolic valence, as an indicator of the disruptions that underscore dictatorship and its aftermath. Moreover, Mitchell notes, "A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do" (*Picture* 152). In this way, the textual reference to the visual is also an acknowledgement of textual limitations, a parallel to the way that translation carries an acknowledgement of its limits; both also underscore the limits of representation in the context of trauma—that which resists translation and exceeds the page.

Mitchell suggests that "the problem of ekphrasis" is one of particular "fascination" (*Picture* 151-152), but also "ambivalence" (*Picture* 163). He argues that this fascination is perhaps due, in part, to the way in which the "figurative requirement" of ekphrasis "puts a special sort of pressure on the genre of ekphrasis, for it means that the textual other must remain completely alien; it can never be present, but must be

conjured up as a potent absence or a fictive, figural present” (*Picture* 162). Indeed, he follows up this concern for the “other” and the “alien” to suggest that our concentrated interest in the distinction between text and image (when there are also crucial distinctions to be made between and among other media) stems in part

from the basic relationship of the self (as a speaking and seeing subject) and the other (a seen and silent object). It isn’t just that the text/image difference “resembles” the relation of self and other, but that the most basic pictures of epistemological and ethical encounters (knowledge of objects, acknowledgement of subjects) involve optical/discursive figures of knowledge and power that are embedded in essentialized categories like “the visual” and “the verbal.” (*Picture* 162)

In this vein, Mitchell says, “the word and the image” are not only “abstractions or general classes, but concrete figures, characters in a drama, stereotypes in a Manichean allegory or interlocutors in a complex dialogue” (*Picture* 162). From here, text and image can serve to underscore a variety of “social relations” (162), and, Mitchell concludes, “The ambivalence about ekphrasis, then, is grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation” (*Picture* 163). If relationship between text and image underscores a concern for the relationship between the self and the other—a relationship that also requires attention to transmission and translation—that concern is further underscored by the “relation of the speaker and the audience or addressee of the ekphrasis” (*Picture* 164). The relationship between text and image as a relationship between self and other is reinscribed through the relationship between text and reader, an effect that leaves “[e]kphrasis . . . stationed between two ‘othernesses’ and two forms of (apparently) impossible translation and exchange” (*Picture* 164). The apparent impossibility of the translation is, again, a recognition of the limits of translation, not a rejection of translation. In this vein, ekphrasis depends on a

general concern for the relationship between text and image as indicative of other social relationships, including the relationship between speaker and addressee, text and reader—a relationship that, in turn, underscores and metaphorizes an encounter with the other. In the context of dictatorship and its aftermath, that encounter with the other is crucial in terms of the way that trauma, in Martín-Cabrera’s framing, “demands the presence of the other to face these pieces of frozen time that overflow reality” (133).

Two other concepts are useful here: Roland Barthes’ *punctum* and *studium*, which Barthes defines and elucidates in *Camera Lucida*, and Sergio Chejfec’s description of the “efecto desestabilizador” that results from an encounter with images within an otherwise textual work, an effect that Chejfec defines in his short essay “Breves opiniones sobre relatos con imágenes.” Barthes’ *punctum* and *studium* speak to the relationship between a photograph and its viewer; the *studium* is defined as “application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment . . . but without special acuity” (26), as well as “that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste . . .” (27). Barthes adds:

To recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture . . . is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers. . . . It is rather as if I had to read the Photographer’s myths in the Photograph, fraternizing with them but not quite believing in them. These myths obviously aim (this is what myth is for) at reconciling the Photograph with society . . . by endowing it with *functions* . . . These functions are: to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire. And I, the *Spectator*, I recognize them with more or less pleasure: I invest them with my *studium* (which is never my delight or my pain). (27-8)

In contrast, Barthes defines the *punctum* “the second element which will disturb the *studium*” (27). He adds, “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but

also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27); indeed, he uses this term because the word itself indicates “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice” (27). Chejfec’s “efecto desestabilizador” speaks to the effect of juxtaposing image with text (in a work of fiction, for example), and it has something in common with Barthes’ *punctum*. Chejfec writes, “En la medida en que esas inclusiones [of images] se conciben como pertenecientes a un orden mediano o completamente ajeno al de la escritura, producen un efecto desestabilizador, a su modo son anticipaciones críticas, aparatos levantados para resistir clasificaciones inmediatas y a la vez para disponer indirectamente su propia crónica, dibujando sus límites” (“Breves opiniones”). Here, Chejfec points to the way in which the visual reaffirms textual limitations and gestures beyond the text.

Barthes’ emphasis on the *punctum* as a sting or prick—that is, something which can bring about pain or emotion—and Chejfec’s assertion that the effect of juxtaposing text with image is “destabilizing” both suggest the ways in which an image can exceed its *studium*—its intended meaning—by carrying an unexpected meaning for the viewer. Using the figure of translation, the *studium* would here be what can be translated between text and image or between an event and its photographic record, whereas the *punctum* or “efecto desestabilizador” would be that which exceeds or presents a limit for the translation. The fact that the *punctum* affects the viewer at an emotional level is significant, too, for the way in which it indicates a relationship between image and viewer—or, where the image is an ekphrastic one, between text and reader.

It is important to note, of course, that Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón’s work foregrounds a variety of visual media and objects (as I’ve already mentioned) and that we engage with different visual media in different ways—we view a photograph, for



example, in a way that is different from watching a film or a performance in a theater. In general, I have tried to address those differences through the novels themselves, as they refer, individually, to various visual media and objects. However, I also want to evoke, here, Mitchell's plea to "avoid the trap of comparison" (89). He notes, of course, that the "image-text relation"—here distinct from the *imagetext*, where the hyphen connotes "the *relations* of the visual and verbal" (89n9)—"in film and theater is not a merely technical question, but a site of conflict, a nexus where political, institutional, and social antagonisms play themselves out in the materiality of representation" (91). In the chapters that follow, I have tried to attend to some of these political, institutional, and social conflicts, even as I have also tried to keep Mitchell's central question in mind: to ask "not 'what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?' but 'what difference do the differences (and similarities) make? That is, why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended, or separated?'" (91). In my analysis, I have foregrounded the relationship between text and image as an ekphrastic device that echoes and reconfigures the patterns of dictatorship, rather than focused on the differences and similarities in the media that compose the more general category of images.

### **Translation as Encounter: Witnessing, testimony, translation, and narrative**

In the preceding sections, I have addressed postmemory as it attends to generational distance from trauma and ekphrasis and as a formal rendering of the distances that emerge in the wake of dictatorship. In this final section, I call attention to the ways in which translation, witnessing and testimonial writing, and narrative have all

been described in terms of space and, in particular, as spaces situated at a border or limit. The metaphor of the border or the limit site also draws on a motif of repetition and movement, of a perpetual return to the limit, a motif that serves not only to emphasize the repetitions of trauma but the communication of that trauma to a witness or reader. While none of the writing at issue in this dissertation is exclusively a witnessing text, all of the writers thematize witnessing to some degree.

In *The Ends of Literature*, Brett Levinson uses a spatial metaphor to describe translation as the limit site at which languages—and, more broadly, “distinct worlds”—meet (24). As noted above, he argues that “language as such” (a term from Benjamin, also known as “pure language”) necessarily “exceeds” translation, so that translation itself can never be fully successful: translation “always falls short of its object” (24). Levinson goes on to say that translation becomes a point of intersection or a border where these languages cross or meet:

Translation emerges as an issue of the frontier: that site where the relations or intersections of languages, the condition of any translation, are situated. The border, as the connection of distinct worlds, exposes the translator, as he undertakes his task, to the boundary of any single mode of speech, writing, interpretation, thereby of any translation. Translation never ends because every act of translation returns the translator to the limit, to the borderland or intersection. . . . (24)

Thus, Levinson describes translation using a spatial metaphor—translation as a site where relations or languages intersect—but insofar as Levinson argues that the act of translation is never-ending, we also have some sense of the temporal. As a task, translation can never be finished because each act of translation reveals new limits and boundaries; there will always be something more to do. Levinson argues, too, that contact with this space, as the translator “undertakes his task,” has an effect on the translator; he is “exposed” to the

very limits of that task. The language Levinson uses to describe this exposure is that of movement: the translator returns, constantly, to that border.

In *The Belated Witness*, Levine describes testimonies that bear witness to trauma in a way that resonates with Levinson's assertion that translation is "an issue of the frontier." Levine writes, "It is as though these testimonies were themselves trapped at the very frontier of speech and silence, as though the 'knowledge' they seek to give birth to were caught in the act of transmission, remaining somehow stuck in the throat above or suspended in the cervical opening below" (11). Levinson's metaphor for translation and Levine's metaphor for testimony, or the act of bearing witness, link the two terms together, first, by situating both at a border or limit and, second, through the idea that each operates according to repetition and return. For Levinson, translation repeats "because every act of translation returns the translator to the limit" (24), and Levine argues for a "mode of repetition," one that he formulates in terms of return to "the same place":

It is therefore necessary to invent new ways of listening to this "knowledge," which is articulable and indeed only audible in the mode of repetition. To begin to attune ourselves to that which perseverates at the very threshold of speech and silence, insisting like an unladen ghost—or a specter of what is yet to come—at the limit of life and death, we must also begin to treat the question of repetition in a different way. The following chapters therefore seek to view repetition as a movement that is never one with itself, as a *compulsion* that is not only internally divided but doubly driven, impelled by *competing impulses* at work within it. Indeed, what comes together and insists in the mode of repetition, I argue, are both a drive to return obsessively to the same place and a driving desperate search for someplace different—for an uncanny difference that might emerge in the place of the same. (11-12)

This exposure to testimony echoes Levinson's description of translation as repeated exposure to the boundary of any mode of expression, and both descriptions emphasize

movement and return. Indeed, Levine's repetition here is also kind of translation: translation, too, is "never one with itself" and the "desperate search for someplace different" is an appropriate response to a process that inevitably "falls short." This translation that is "internally divided but doubly driven" constitutes a return that is rendered in explicitly spatial terms; the source materials, as it were, or the instance of trauma, are conceived of as a place, one that the witness returns to again and again, even as he seeks that "uncanny difference."

As I explained above, Levine frames the second-degree, or belated, witness as "one who is not just one step removed from the experiences of the first generation but otherwise implicated in them" (20-21). Levine adds, "In becoming a witness to the witness, Art [Spiegelman] elicits and records his father's testimony. Yet, in doing so he also opens a space in which the impact of that testimony is given a chance to register as if for the first time" (20-21). The "as if for the first time" also acknowledges a kind of repetition, but one that is "internally divided"; the belated witness might have been exposed to the testimony previously and repeatedly, but the impact is most powerfully felt if he is able to experience it as if he is hearing it for the first time. In addition, Levine refers to the witness/writer (Art Spiegelman, in this case) as "opening up a space." The opening of that space depends on one translation—witness to second-degree witness—but it also suggests the possibility of another translation through the opening up of a *literary* space, in which the reader comes into contact with the second-degree witness.

Chambers describes this process—wherein the witnessing writer effectively translates to the reader—as a kind of "relay," a term that also emphasizes movement and repetition. He notes that many testimonial texts

imply or make use of a metaphor of relay in their account of what the writing of testimonial entails, or they employ other metaphors suggestive of portability such as reporting or fostering. Such tropes describe the witnessing writer as a mediating agent, connecting or attempting to (re)connect those who cannot speak (the dead) and those (the living) who seem oblivious to their fate, as if it were not relevant to them. But they do not imply that the author writes ‘on behalf of’ or ventriloquizes those who cannot speak. The implication is rather that writing is an act of agencing by means of which the hauntedness characteristic of the writer’s consciousness is transferred or carried over as a haunting of the reader’s consciousness, a haunting that takes the form of the reader’s becoming aware of the hauntedness that the reader had previously been subject to but had failed to recognize or acknowledge. Writing so understood is thus not an act of representation in the normal sense so much as, through agencing, an act of counterdenial whose seat is in readerly consciousness. (37-38)

The metaphors of relay, portability, reporting, and fostering resonate with translation, and “agencing,” in Chambers’ usage, becomes an act of translation, too. In fact, “agencing” here is a translation twice over. It is Chambers’ translation from Deleuze and Guattari’s French *agencement* and an unusual one at that; *agencement* is more frequently translated as “assemblage” to distinguish it from a more straightforward understanding of “agency,” which generally relies on an ideal of coherent subjectivity. Chambers explains that he translates *agencement* as “agencing” in order to diminish authorial “subjectivity” and instead indicate the witnessing writer’s significance as “mediating agent” (36–38). He explains:

the rhetoric of testimonial writing entails a depersonalization and deauthorization of the author, who as an “agencer” becomes instead the agent of an intersubjective writing/reading relationship that is *other* than that of ‘reader’ to ‘writer.’ That is, agencing writing has a signposting function such that it becomes readable much *less* as an expression of authorial subjectivity, and much *more* as an instrumentality, one that is capable of deflecting readerly attention in the direction of what . . . is culturally obscene: the extreme event or disaster, the collective trauma. . . . (36-37)

In addition, Chambers uses *agencing/agencement* to describe the process by which messages are “constituted” in the absence of a “direct connection,” a usage that is particularly relevant in a postmemorial context, where the relationship to past trauma is inherently a mediated one (x). This understanding of agencing resonates deeply with translation, where the translator’s objective is not to assert “authorial subjectivity,” but to mediate that “intersubjective writing/reading relationship,” directing the reader’s attention toward what is significant—or translatable—about the source materials. Both processes depend not on autonomous creation, but on a dense negotiation with the past. Agencing, then, positions witnessing writing—writing that is understood not as “an act of representation,” but rather as “an act of counterdenial whose seat is in the readerly consciousness”—as an act of translation, too, the relay of that which is haunting, spectral, traumatic from the witnessing writer’s consciousness to the consciousness of the reader. Both Levine and Chambers call attention to the ways in which witnessing writing reaches and affects its reader, through an act of relay that opens up a space for an encounter with “the culturally obscene”—the unrecognized or the unacknowledged.

Chambers points out, too, that part of the aptness of the relay metaphor is that

it underscores not only the hypermediated, agenced character of figural representation—which in order to be successful must be well performed by a writer but also “picked up,” as it were in a second act of relay, by a reader—but also, and as a consequence, the relative precariousness of such a rhetorical maneuver, a precariousness that is due to its inevitably roundabout and makeshift character, by comparison with the supposedly direct mode of representation . . . that is ‘denied’ it. For a relay can be fumbled, dropped, or otherwise misperformed; and it may even be refused. (37-38)

This precariousness—the anxieties around “pick up” and the possibility of fumbling or refusal—are crucial, I think, particularly in the context of postmemory, where so much

already depends on speculation, and in the context of translation, where much is dependent on interpretation. This is not only an anxiety with regard to the reader, who may fumble or refuse the pick up, but an anxiety for the critic, whose sense of the reader's capacity for pick up is similarly speculative. On the other hand, the very precariousness that attends a text is also what invites interpretation; the variety and multiplicity of meanings is often what catches our attention in the first place.

Chambers argues that the invitation to interpretation is contingent on a degree of "singularity," a phrasing that echoes Levine's "as if for the first time." Chambers explains that for figuration "to exercise its rhetorical function"—i.e. inviting interpretation and "reading"—it must "arouse readerly curiosity" and be "intriguing" (40). He differentiates between "*conventionalized* tropes"—those tropes whose meaning is known "automatically" and therefore don't "detain" the reader—and "figural events having a character of *singularity*" (40). In addition, he explains that "successful figural 'solutions' can't be repeated (or can't be repeated too often) without losing their ability to intrigue the reader and produce the relay on which a response of detained, pensive, or engaged reading depends" (41). There is an interesting tension between the repetitions that structure testimony and the demand for singularity; while the attempt to find that singularity may be repetitive and obsessive, the end result must be singular.

The question of singularity is also related to the idea of excess that I highlighted in my discussion of translation. In *The Exhaustion of Difference*, Alberto Moreiras points toward the limits of translation and toward that which exceeds translation. In his references to excess, he invokes language that is similar to Levinson's, although the two

scholars have slightly different aims. Moreiras more explicitly cautions against

“translational thinking” as an end in itself; he writes:

The maximum accomplishment of translational thinking is also its total defeat: an adequate integration into the circuits of conformity, when all further translation becomes unnecessary, when language exists as such, when there can be no literary community anymore. If it is necessary to translate so that what is alien does not expropriate us, and if it is necessary to translate so that what is ours does not kill us . . . it is also necessary to understand that translation is not the final horizon of thinking. (23)

In response to his assertion that translation is not the final horizon of thinking—another spatial metaphor—Moreiras calls for “an untranslatable excess” (23). As I noted above, both Levinson and Moreiras’ arguments are a reminder that translation can be an assimilatory process, but there is also something in the process of translating that exceeds or resists translation. Indeed, that crucial distance that I mentioned above—between an original and a translation, between what is translatable and what exceeds translation—echoes Chambers’ reference to the distance between a traumatic event and the society and culture that emerges in its aftermath. If translation is a way of mediating between the traumatic event and the present (or aftermath), Moreiras’ words serve as a reminder that the end goal of that mediation is neither to integrate the two nor to normalize the trauma somehow. Moreiras’ description of an “untranslatable excess” resonates with a point that Chambers makes about the singularly haunting power of the residual and the spectral. Chambers writes,

the potential power of the residual to become haunting is realized through writing that rewrites its own representational inadequacy as an index of the survival that is denied, and thus as the haunting power to become a marker of liminality. The kind of indexicality I am referring to is known in rhetoric as troping or figuration. . . . It is as spectral evidence of a past that is still, surprisingly and even weirdly, present that the residual, made liminal through writing that is more figural than it is directly representational, can function culturally as a surviving indicator through which the reality of



trauma and injustice, so readily denied, can be made inescapably, and sometimes very vividly, to “return” from the oblivion to which the power of denial tends to consign it, and to “happen” to those who read. (xxvii)

Excess, the residual, and the spectral become the markers of a text’s power; its effectiveness or singularity, as it were, depends on, even expects, that the trauma being described is basically indescribable, that it can never be fully integrated into the present, nor should it be. The references to the residual and the spectral are not unique to Chambers, of course; Nelly Richard also places “lo residual” at the center of her work on cultural production in Chile during the transition period, and Levine compares “that which perseverates at the very threshold of speech and silence” to “an unlaidd ghost” and “a specter of what is yet to come.”<sup>7</sup> In order to “return,” trauma and injustice have to be denied (and repeatedly), and Chambers suggests that haunting (a form of return) occurs via an acknowledgement of representational inadequacy, via indexicality. For the “reality of trauma and injustice” to “happen” to the reader, there has to be this slippage or distance because an “adequate integration into the circuits of conformity” is a defeatist proposition, the end of the translator’s task. Taken together, we can see that Chambers is underscoring the idea that trauma is traumatic by virtue of its being exceptional or “extreme” (ix), and, with Moreiras in mind, the goal cannot be to render trauma ordinary or graspable, but rather to produce the kind of double-tongued “apprehension” that Chambers describes, an apprehension in which “something that is *feared* is simultaneously *grasped*” (xv). It is perhaps the production of this apprehension that allows the literary community that Moreiras refers to, above, to persist.

I’ve brought Levinson, Levine, Chambers, and Moreiras into conversation with each other in order to show how all four refer to an aesthetic of space in their descriptions

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<sup>7</sup> See *Residuos y metáforas* 11.

of translation and of testimony or witnessing texts and, especially, to spaces that are crisscrossed by movement and repetition in a mode that simultaneously depends on singularity and newness. Testimony and translation are not the same, of course. However, the overlap in the rhetoric that is used to describe them—space, movement, repetition, and singularity—signals the relationship between these concepts, as well as their parallels. In particular, testimonial and witnessing are, in some sense, processes of translation, returning the witness to a limit over and over again and, in so doing, exposing the witness (and his or her readers) to the limits of expression. In both witnessing writing and in translation, the witness or the translator returns constantly to the same (the source materials, the instance of trauma) with the hope—and even the possibility—of withdrawing something different.

In *Picture Theory*, W. J. T. Mitchell describes narrative itself as a site that, like translation and testimony, is situated at a border or a frontier. Crucially for the stakes of this dissertation, Mitchell writes of the relationship between narrative and memory. His description is specifically in reference to slave narratives, but he extends his analysis “beyond the genre of slave narrative to narrative modes of representation as such” (190). He argues that (slave) narratives, like both translation and witnessing writing, bring their readers into contact with certain limits—of language, for example, or, in Mitchell’s analysis, of knowledge itself. He explains: “Rather than talk of what we ‘know’ about slavery, then, we must talk of what we are prevented from knowing, what we can never know, and how it is figured for us in the partial access we do have” (190). Again, we see a reference to distances that cannot be fully mediated; “what we are prevented from knowing, what we can never know” is fundamentally distanced from whatever “partial

access we do have,” and translation can be a figure for mediating that access. Indeed, Mitchell proceeds with a spatial metaphor for narrative modes of representation that alludes to borders, frontiers, and “passing,”—i.e. moving—between the two: “Narrative seems to be a mode of knowing and showing which constructs a region of the unknown, a shadow text or image that accompanies our reading, moves in time with it, . . . both prior to and adjacent to memory. It is a terrain crisscrossed by numerous internal borders, fringes, seams, and frontiers” (190). With regard to slave narrative (and, I would argue, for other narratives of trauma, too) Mitchell points out that there are frontiers in content—“a moment (or several moments) of ‘crossing’ or ‘passing’ the frontiers that divide slavery from freedom or from one kind of slavery to another”—and in form, which he describes as a kind of “textual heterogeneity, . . . multiple boundaries and frames—prefaces, frontispieces, and authenticating documents” (*Picture* 190).<sup>8</sup> Finally, Mitchell concludes, “narrative in general is . . . a hybrid form, patching together different kinds of writing, different levels of discourse. It is the form of this heterogeneity, this difference, that solicits our attention when we look at the resistances and blockages, the boundaries we as readers must pass to get at something we call slavery” (190). Mitchell’s “textual heterogeneity” echoes Chambers’ “generic catachresis,” a recourse to what is generally considered “inappropriate” or “improper” in order to produce the anxiety or apprehension that witnessing writing seeks to effect (31). Both textual heterogeneity and generic catachresis suggest that certain traumatic events require expressive tools beyond those offered by a single genre or form; in those cases, these hybrid or catachrestic forms are

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Lazzara’s discussion of “open” and “closed” narrative forms in *Chile in Transition* suggests that some narratives emphasize these frontiers more than others. “Open” forms in particular—“narrative configurations that challenge facile resolutions to trauma and evidence some degree of metatextual reflexivity in their construction”—seems to resonate with the textual heterogeneity that Mitchell describes (154). For more, see Lazzara 154-158.

particularly effective at capturing the attention of the reader, inviting her to consider the boundaries and limits that these texts contain.

In Chambers, Levinson, Moreiras, Levine, and Mitchell, we have a description not just of the content and form of literature or narrative, but of the reader's encounter with that content and form. As Levinson writes, "Literature *happens*; it does so when the reader is exposed to the finitude of his own common sense (in a work of literature, often by tropes) and is thereby forced to interpret or phrase the articulation, to add an unfamiliar element to his field of understanding, thus to shift that field: not to know necessarily, but to learn or grow" (27). Here, literature's effects turn on an encounter with the unfamiliar, or unexpected, because it is that which, in Levinson's terms, forces learning or growing. Levine, too, writes of "attun[ing] ourselves to that which perseverates at the very threshold of speech and silence," while Mitchell points to the "difference" in narrative "that solicits our attention when we look at the resistances and blockages, the boundaries we as readers must pass to get at something we call slavery." In the context of trauma, literature's particular contribution seems to lie, first, in its ability to solicit the reader's attention (in a singular fashion, perhaps, beyond what has become conventionalized) and then to attune that attention toward the unfamiliar, to nuance, to the unexpected, to blockages—to whatever is necessary for learning and growth.

Translation, testimony, and narrative compose literature (albeit to varying degrees), and taken together, they encompass borders, frontiers, and limits—in form and in content. But they also create spaces in which the reader is brought into contact with something—"the finitude of his own common sense," in Levinson's terms, or, perhaps

more broadly, the sense that a crossing of those borders must occur in order to approach the substance of the trauma that is being named or described. Translation is, in a way, a site of its own, laid over the sites of testimony and narrative; it mediates access, signaling the borders and boundaries—between the dead and the living, silence and speech—that must be navigated. And yet translation also acknowledges that a full crossing, a communion with the dead or a complete conversion into speech, is impossible. It is significant, too, that each of these “spaces” is mediated temporally; as Mitchell says, narrative is a tool by which we learn or are shown; it accompanies us “in time” as we cover its ground, and it signals to us when we have reached a border that cannot be fully breached.

In the pages that follow, I attend to those borders as part of an effort to understand how and when “literature happens” in the context of trauma, political violence, and dictatorship in Latin America. In chapter one, I address Roberto Brodsky’s 2007 *Bosque quemado*, which tells the story of a son who follows his father into exile following Chile’s 1973 coup d’etat. Distance is a central theme in Brodsky’s novel, as in the other novels; Brodsky’s novel, in particular, foregrounds the geographic distances wrought by exile and expatriation and the generational distance between father and son. With regard to formal distance, the novel makes recurrent references to photographs and film, and these visual objects function as both mediating and disruptive forces that intervene in the novel’s many distances. I argue that the various forms of working with those objects (developing film negatives from many years prior, e.g.) are acts of translation that attend to the nuances of postmemory. Furthermore, the narrator’s engagement with visual materials echoes the negotiations involved in the construction of personal and national

narratives over time, particularly the difficulties in making sense of—and finding a place for—the legacies of trauma.

If Brodsky's novel examines the relationship between visual artifacts, memory, and translation, Sergio Chejfec's 1999 *Los planetas* treats the city itself (here Buenos Aires) as a site of memory and translation. In contrast to Brodsky's novel, Chejfec's protagonist, S, never leaves his home, but he is plagued by the loss of his best friend, M, during Argentina's Dirty War. The young men's friendship, as well as their relationship to the events of the Dirty War, is intimately tied to Buenos Aires and, more broadly, to Argentina. In Chejfec's novel, the most pressing distance is the temporal distance between the past—when M was still alive—and the present—long after M has died. As S walks the streets of Buenos Aires, he navigates between the two, recalling his adventures with M as a child and exploring the contours of his loss. In the second chapter, I examine S's walking as a physical manifestation of translation (in its most literal sense, as a "carrying over"), a way of negotiating his grief. Where Brodsky's novel calls attention to the significance of material (and, especially, visual) objects in the absence of a place to call home, Chejfec's novel highlights the degree to which the city and its inhabitants continue to bear the scars of trauma long after that trauma has passed.

María Negroni's 2006 *La Anunciación* takes place in exile, in Rome, though it frequently flashes back to the Buenos Aires of the Dirty War years. Like Chejfec's novel, Negroni's is a series of fragmented vignettes, but where S's wandering ultimately lends the narrative a relative (albeit tenuous) degree of coherence, Negroni's narrative remains fractured. Much of it unfolds as an interior monologue, as the narrator struggles to make sense of all that she has lost: home, lover, community. I focus my analysis of Brodsky

and Chejfec's novels on translation as a mediating and reconstructive process, even as I acknowledge the limits of translation; in the third chapter, however, I examine Negroni's novel as an extended meditation on the limits of translation and on the elements of grief that resist understanding. Here, I use Jacques Derrida's concept of the *parergon* to suggest the ways in which the novel gestures to those elements of trauma and violence that persist at the edges of the novel and function as a kind of frame. I argue that Negroni's novel acquaints the reader with those labored attempts at articulating grief, thereby exposing the reader to the limits of translation.

Daniel Alarcón is the youngest of the four novelists, and his 2013 *At Night We Walk in Circles* describes a revolutionary theater troupe formed during a period of political strife that decides to go on a revival tour nearly two decades later. As in the other novels, *At Night* considers the persistence of trauma and its legacy, but here Alarcón explicitly contemplates the relationship between art created under duress and its significance once the violence has passed. Theater and performance present a particularly apt context for that question, and I argue that each performance represents an attempt at translation: the recreation of a theatrical work borne of one era so that it resonates in a new context, even as it carries the scars of the past. The final performance in the novel extends that idea beyond the context of the theater and into a private home; as a theatrical staging, that last performance attends to the private nuances of mourning. Here, theater and its interpretations (indeed, in Spanish, interpretation is also used as the word for performance) elucidate the processes of memory and the relationship between postmemory, translation, and mourning.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Negotiating Translation: Inheritance and the Work of Postmemory in Roberto Brodsky's *Bosque quemado***

After Roberto Brodsky's novel *Bosque quemado* won a Spanish literary prize, the Premio Jaén de Novela, in 2007, he traveled to Buenos Aires to present his novel. The presentation was covered in the online edition of *El Mercurio*, one of Chile's most important national newspapers, on July 13, 2008. The article, unsigned, quotes Brodsky: "Tengo una relación muy frágil con el sistema literario chileno y tampoco puedo reconciliarme con Chile, ni desde mi obra ni desde la vida." The article adds, "El escritor chileno Roberto Brodsky admitió que es incapaz de reconciliarse con su país porque persiste 'la herencia cultural' del régimen de Augusto Pinochet." Brodsky is from Chile—he was born in Santiago in 1957—but he followed his father into exile in Buenos Aires after Chile's 1973 coup and lived there for several years. Since then, he has also lived in Caracas and in Barcelona, and he currently lives in Washington, DC. Though the article begins by claiming Brodsky as an "escritor chileno," the rest of the text notes his alienation from Chile, emphasizing his distance, and expatriation, from his place of birth. Similarly, Brodsky's own words indicate that the legacy of Pinochet's rule continues into the present, long after the official end of the dictatorship—and this is part of the reason he's chosen to stay away.



These themes—distance, inheritance, and the legacy of repression—are also key elements of *Bosque quemado*, which tells the story of a son who, much like Brodsky himself, follows his father into exile after Chile’s 1973 coup. Clearly, distance is a motif in Brodsky’s own life; he moved from place to place as an adolescent and young adult and thus lacked a single place to call home. Distance is a motif in the novel, too; the son inherits his father’s essential homelessness. In addition to the geographic distances wrought by exile and expatriation, the novel foregrounds generational distance (between father and son, for example) and formal distance (in its thematization of disruption and mediation). With regard to the latter, the novel makes recurrent references to photographs and film, emphasizing the relationship between text and image. These material objects function as both mediating and disruptive forces that intervene in the novel’s many distances: between Chile and exile, past and present, father and son, and image and text.

Brodsky’s references to photographs, as well as to the relationship between father and son, recall Marianne Hirsch’s “postmemory,” a term that speaks to the generational distance between those who experienced a particular historical event and those who didn’t, but whose lives have continued to be marked by the event. As noted in the introduction, postmemory is

distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. . . . Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (*Family* 22)

Here, Hirsch distinguishes between two modes of engagement with the past—recollection (via memory) and imaginative investment and creation (via postmemory). She argues, too, that postmemory is intimately linked with photography: “Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting” (*Family* 22). Brodsky and his protagonist experienced the historical events he describes (so the events do not strictly “precede their birth”), but both were young enough that they grapple with the past through a generational remove. Over the course of the novel, the son engages with photographs and film as “instruments of remembrance,” attempting to make sense of the events, both political and personal, that have structured his life.

Brodsky’s novel is an exemplary text for considering the nature of postmemory, particularly the ways in which postmemory is not strictly an act of creation from an autonomous subject, but a form of translation. In this vein, the figure of translation serves as a broad metaphor for acknowledging and negotiating the distances that emerge in the wake of dictatorship, political repression, and exile. In this chapter, I examine the recurrent recourse to photographs and film in *Bosque quemado*. The photographs and film in the novel are emblematic not just of the past, but of the materiality of the past and its representations, and postmemory, understood through the lens of translation, requires a negotiation with that dense materiality. In the novel, for example, the son’s engagement with photographs and film is a way of translating the past into the present in order to make sense of—and find a place for—the legacies of trauma. The various forms of working with visual objects (developing film negatives, e.g.) are acts of translation that

echo the negotiations involved in the construction and reworking of personal and national narratives over time. These processes are infused with creativity and imagination, but they are inherently translative, unfolding in negotiation with the past and its materials. In what follows, I will briefly outline the ways in which I am using translation, before moving on to a reading of several scenes in which these translative processes are in play.

As noted in the introduction, I use translation in three ways that correspond to the three registers of distance I mentioned above: geographic, generational, and formal. First, in the literal sense of *translatio*, or “carrying across,” translation allows for a movement or carrying of ideas across borders, national and otherwise. This idea of translation as a movement or carrying across suggests a spatial orientation and is thus fruitful for mediating the geographical distances in the novel. Second, with regard to generational distance, I refer to Walter Benjamin’s thinking on “afterlife”—and the assertion that a translation indicates a “stage of continued life”—to suggest that translation can also be a temporal process, a carrying of ideas and meaning through time. This temporally-oriented understanding of translation is particularly useful for underscoring the connection between translation and postmemory, illuminating some of the ways in which postmemory functions as a form of translation, negotiating the afterlife of trauma. Finally, translation is a figure for thinking through that which cannot be fully understood or assimilated, pointing toward the fundamental difference (and distance) between an original and a translation. Translation in this sense acknowledges its own limits, allowing us to consider that which exceeds or resists translation, particularly in reference to pain and loss. Here, translation is particularly productive for negotiating formal distance.

In Brodsky's novel, translation and its limits are reflected in the thematization of disruption and mediation, particularly a motif of still photographs and film. Just as the references to photographs and film are not surprising given the postmemorial context, the references to disruption are not surprising in the Chilean context. An aesthetic of disruption characterizes much of the work by the generation of writers associated with the baroque, many of whom were writing in the era of dictatorship and its immediate aftermath. These writers, such as Diamela Eltit, tend toward a style and structure that is hermetic, dense, and highly self-reflective, with a heavy focus on corporeality and bodily functions and on materiality in general. This style operates according to what Nelly Richard called "las estrategias de lo refractario" (*Insubordinación* 16), seeking to explode the hegemonic culture and authoritarianism imposed by the military regime and to reflect the kind of fractured lived experiences that resulted from so much violence and repression (*Insubordinación* 17). Works by writers of this generation are immediately recognizable as disruptive because their very form and content disrupt the reader's capacity to engage continuously or comfortably with the text. Brodsky's fiction, however, is markedly different in style and structure. Though it similarly foregrounds disruption on a thematic level, Brodsky's style is far more conversational and readable, i.e. not immediately recognizable as disruptive. Rather, he indicates disruption in subtler ways, particularly via the motif of photography and cinema mentioned above. This recourse to ekphrasis indicates a formal distance that subtly underscores the geographic and temporal dislocations—and the attendant pain and loss—that come as a result of political violence and exile.

Literature that is baroque or refractory situates disruption as the exclusive domain of writers and artists: the reader's encounter with disruption depends upon the writer's ability to produce it. Brodsky's fiction suggests otherwise, that literature doesn't have to be disruptive per se in order to signal disruption and its effects. Brodsky's novel calls attention to our encounters with disruption in the world: through photographs and film, in familial separations and rifts, in the cracks and breaks in memory and the inevitability of decline. His approach to disruption relies on a process of translation: of reception (or recognition) and re-inscription. This approach also indicates a potential distinction between responding to a traumatic event in its immediate aftermath, a process often governed by external and internal constraints, and responding to the repercussions of trauma that emerge in the long wake of devastation. Brodsky's style marks not just the initial disruption, but the echoes of that disruption, signaling the ways in which disruption is translated over time, space, and form.

*Bosque quemado* is narrated by the son—he goes unnamed—of a man named Moisés; Moisés is a Jewish-Chilean doctor who is forced into exile immediately following Chile's 1973 coup, which ousted the democratically elected Salvador Allende, a Marxist, and installed a dictatorship, led by General Augusto Pinochet, that lasted until 1989. Moisés is forced to leave because of his involvement with the Communist Party—the narrator describes him as “parte de una generación de profesionales que veía en la salud pública la verdadera misión de la medicina” (39), and he brings his fifteen-year-old son—the narrator—with him.<sup>9</sup> They stay first with family in Buenos Aires; when Argentina's Dirty War begins, they leave for Venezuela. During this time, Moisés is

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<sup>9</sup> Moisés is an exile because he is forced to leave Chile, whereas his son, who accompanies him voluntarily, is better termed an expatriate. In the novel, the exile/expatriate distinction also underscores the generational gap between father and son. For more on these terms, see McClennen 14-17.

trying to revalidate his medical credentials so that he can continue to practice outside of Chile. This process of revalidation eventually takes him to Lechería, on the northeastern coast of Venezuela, and although the son comes to visit him there, he spends most of that time in Caracas, as well as in Chile and Spain. Against this story of exile, wandering, and return, the son also tells us of his parents’—and his own—repeated infidelities; his mother takes up with another man, Félix (though she seems never to fall entirely out of love with Moisés), and Moisés, too, has a number of lovers. The son chooses to follow his father into exile, rather than stay in Chile (as his brothers do), and he tells us that this decision is partly an act of choosing his father over his mother’s lover.<sup>10</sup> Moisés is finally allowed back in Chile in the early 1980s, and although he returns to practicing medicine, he never fully re-integrates. As the father’s name suggests, Moisés wanders without ever making it to the Promised Land, such as it is. Eventually, we learn that Moisés has Alzheimer’s—indeed, “bosque quemado” is later invoked as a metaphor for the mind of an Alzheimer’s patient—and his disease and subsequent death structure the latter half of the novel. The novel’s treatment of the disease is nuanced and evocative, but the attention to dementia is another way in which the novel thematizes disruption, dislocation, and ultimately loss. In this way, the novel focuses not just on memory, but on the vulnerability of memory—to damage or illness and to forgetting.

The novel begins in the recent past, well after Moisés has returned to Chile, before it slips back in time to the more distant past in Venezuela and Argentina. These movements through time and space are marked via narration (and sometimes via section break), but not always clearly, so the sense of time is strange and even disorienting,

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<sup>10</sup> In an interview with Claudia Donoso for the Chilean magazine *Paula*, Brodsky describes Félix as “la vida útil,” whereas “el otro, el padre, es la vida inútil, perdida.”

though not fragmented or disjointed. The novel unfolds as a series of vignettes—across time and even geographic space—that are assembled, by the son-cum-narrator, into a coherent narrative, a process echoed in the son’s engagement with photographs and film. The lack of emphasis on temporal linearity and a clear geography is another one of the ways the novel formally underscores disruption and dislocation, but it also reflects the experience of someone living with Alzheimer’s (or someone who cares for an Alzheimer’s patient). In this way, the novel not only thematizes disruption, it allows the reader to engage with, and navigate, those disruptions—not overtly or uncomfortably, as in a more baroque work, but as part of the reader’s ordinary progression through the trajectory of the narrative.

Toward the end of the book’s first section, “Golpes en la puerta,” Moisés and his son are living in Venezuela, but the son has remained in Caracas while Moisés has left for Lechería to work on revalidating his medical credentials. Of the four scenes that I focus on, this is the only one that occurs during the period of dictatorship and exile, and it deals with a film, a moving image. The son gets involved with a film project, the first of several engagements with materials from the past as part of an effort to make sense of the coup and its legacy. In both its content and its material form, the film mediates the distances that emerge in the wake of Chile’s coup and dictatorship: the geographic distance between Chile and Venezuela, the temporal distance between past and present, and the formal distances between text, sound, and image. In addition, the ekphrastic reference to the film in the novel further underscores the formal distances between text and image, as well as between image and sound.

The narrator attends classes at the university; in the evenings, he works on a film project at an audiovisual production company. He also begins sleeping with his boss's daughter, María. The film project is a peculiar one: in Santiago, before the coup, María's father made a movie about a group of revolutionaries that tried to rob a bank, intending to use the money to help "los oprimidos" (71). Not only has the film literally been translated—carried over—the South American continent, the project is based in another place and time, in pre-coup Chile. The film would have had a different resonance in Allende-era Chile than it will go on to have in the exilic space of Venezuela; in the wake of the coup, it becomes a memorial project in the sense of both record and commemoration.

In addition, the film has no sound. The narrator explains that although the shooting had finished, the soundtrack and the dialogue were lost because the film and the sound had been taken out of Chile in separate canisters and suitcases on separate trips ("al sacar por separado las latas fuera de Chile, escondidas en distintos viajes y maletas de embajada"), and even the script "había desaparecido" (71). The fact that the film canisters left Chile "escondidas," along with the references to "viajes y maletas de embajada," recall the means by which many people left Chile in the days and weeks after the coup. Even Moisés sought refuge in the Argentine embassy in Santiago until he received a safe conduct pass to leave Chile. The use of "desaparecer" is significant, too, given that so many people were disappeared under the Pinochet regime. The narrator does not comment on the fate of the film's subjects and crew, but they may well have been disappeared. Indeed, the circumstances were such that the physical elements of the project could easily be lost in transit, and so could the creators and participants; families



and loved ones were often separated or lost, temporarily and even permanently. As an object, the film is one example of the many kinds of things that are carried across borders, but it also emblemizes the precarious process of transport and translation, particularly in the wake of crisis.

María's father makes it to Caracas with his visual material intact, and he decides to reconstruct the film's speech, scene by scene.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the film carries a piece of Chile into the refuge of Venezuela in the same way it carries a particular revolutionary moment—now obsolete—into the reality of life in exile. The narrator notes that “el único método fiable de reproducir los contenidos consistía en leer los labios de los personajes y anotar lo que pareciera plausible” (71). There is a tension between the prescribed method for replacing—or “reproducing”—the sound, where “fiable” implies fidelity, and the understanding that whatever is gleaned from these readings will be plausible, but speculative (as the subjunctive “pareciera” implies). This tension is also a hallmark of translation, and this reconstructive process is a translative one. Similarly, the film project, with its dependence on speculation, signals a shift toward postmemory. The director has put together a group of actors whose voices resemble those featured in the film; they gather in the studio each evening to follow the film's “imágenes frías e insonoras” (71), using the silent images to recuperate some semblance of the lost dialogue. Whereas María's father maintains a connection to the original project that is mediated by some degree of recollection, the group of actors he assembles in Caracas is connected to the project only via imaginative investment, and yet their dialogue develops not as an

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<sup>11</sup> The interplay between image and sound here—particularly with regard to sound as script or as dialogue—also points to the film's significance as an imagetext, in Mitchell's sense (*Picture* 89n9), where the formal distance between image and text or image and sound indicates rupture and disruption, but also points to the complementarity of image and text, i.e. the film's sound renders its images more legible, and vice-versa.

autonomous act of creation, but from close negotiation with the extant footage. The film project straddles the border between memory and postmemory, and the image the narrator describes is an unnerving one: “Era como hacer hablar a un muerto y luego intentar oír lo que decía, para enseguida repetirlo” (71). The work of dubbing represents several layers of reception and re-inscription: making the dead speak, listening to what they say, repeating it for somebody else. The interplay among image, sound, and text raises a set of questions that echo those raised by both postmemory and translation: about the reliability of the lip-reading process, for example, or about the tenor of the new actors’ voices as juxtaposed with the images of the old actors. The dubbing process highlights translation’s inadequacies, exposing the inevitable gaps between an original and any subsequent translations. On the other hand, in the context of so much destruction and loss, the choice to continue with the project represents a stage of “continued life” for the film and signals the possibility of regeneration. The reconstructive—and postmemorial—effort in Venezuela carries the original film and its actors into Benjamin’s afterlife. Thus, the film translates between the past and the present, as well as between the living (the actors in Venezuela) and the dead (the likely disappeared actors in Chile).

The film project, especially the narrator’s part in it, is marked by repetitions. The narrator’s main role is to fit the day’s cut onto the projector and run it in “un loop incesante que llenaba la pantalla con la misma toma repetida hasta la náusea” (71). The repetition of the images on the screen sets the tone for the narrator’s involvement with María, the earliest of several lovers in the book. Their encounters unfold against the backdrop of the same scenes playing on loop, and this apposition gives their actions a

certain continuity and circularity. In the recording studio, when the actors believe they've determined the "original text," they begin recording "en medio del mayor silencio" (71); during that time, María joins the narrator in the projection room. Their relationship is prompted, and intensified, by being together in that dark, enclosed space, and their actions reflect what they see onscreen. They stand together "remedando de los personajes con un ligero movimiento de los labios hasta que [sus] bocas se iban una encima de la otra de tanto musitarlo" (72). The whispered mimicking—a quiet echo of the actors' dubbing—is converted into the intimate act of kissing each other, so the film project brings the lovers together and affords them space for their lovemaking. Moreover, something—"quizá la prohibición de hablar y de hacer escándalo"—pushes them to affect the air of a chance encounter (72). Although they know what will happen once the actors begin dubbing, each encounter between the narrator and María is performed as if it were unplanned. Thus, the encounters themselves take on a translative quality: each encounter a translation of the previous one, similar but not precisely the same. By performing each meeting as if it were happening for the first time, the narrator and María focus on what makes each one new, rather than what makes them all the same.

While at first the sexual encounters are quiet and secret, the two become progressively more reckless: "nos zambullíamos con descaro bajo el rumor del loop que flotaba y se expandía dibujando curvas en la oscuridad como una serpiente o un tren que volvía sobre sí mismo golpeando a intervalos regulares el aire pesado y húmedo" (72). Again, we have an image of their physical entanglement set against the repetition of the images on screen and against the spinning and clicking of the film reel. Their actions absorb the cadence of the rotating reel, and its noise provides cover. Once the lights have

been turned back on, they lie together exposed, “los cuerpos violentamente dibujados por las ampolletas y el hostigoso canto de los grillos alrededor” (72). To avoid being interrupted, the couple has the routine down to a science: “con María debíamos calcular al milímetro los tiempos de intimidad entre el doblaje de la película y los rigors de mister Dewitt” (73), the studio administrator. Like the images circulating in constant repeat on screen, the couple’s intimacy is routinized, its patterns established by something other than (or in addition to) their own desires. Later, the narrator says: “La situación se volvía incómoda, sobresaltada, pero María sabía tanto como yo de la falta de espacio propio. . . . pretender estar solos en su casa nos exponía a un juicio colectivo cada vez que explorábamos bajo las ropas” (73-74). In contrast to the judgment awaiting them at María’s house, the harsh studio lights are neutral. While these conditions seem less than ideal, they are the best available, and even though each encounter is routinized, it is nevertheless unique.

The juxtaposition of the watching and dubbing with the lovers’ rendezvous in the projection studio suggests another element of distance, between the steady, mechanized loop of the silent images and the organic, albeit constrained, interactions of the lovers. Indeed, this moment of ekphrasis performs the generational divide between María and the narrator and their fathers—and, in particular, between María’s father’s revolutionary-turned-memorial film project and its effect on his daughter. If the speculation inherent to the dubbing work signals a turn toward the postmemorial, the lovers’ bodies, entangled beneath the shadows and images of the past, underscores this turn even further. Their response to the film and all it represents is, in some sense, a literal act of creation, even if their sex is not strictly procreative. They carefully negotiate their circumstances in order

to come together, and in the shadow of what has come before them, their project is to continue to live, a regenerative and translative task.

There are several instances of subtle disruption in Brodsky's narration of this scene, not just in the references to image, sound, and text, but in the evocation of the lovers' bodies and their vulnerability to interruption. That vulnerability also points toward creatureliness, that is, the vulnerability of the self with regard to the other, also known as finitude. The creatureliness in Brodsky's novel stands in contrast to the more overt emphasis, in baroque literature, on bodily functions (spit, blood, semen, etc., none of which are explicitly present here). In *On Creaturely Life*, Eric L. Santner draws a connection between postmemory and creatureliness. Using Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and J.J. Long's essay on W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, Santner writes:

If the constructions of postmemory are not to become so many flights of unregulated projection and fantasy, they must, Long argues, "exist in some kind of dialogue with the empirical, must be open to confirmation or contestation by the real. One way in which this can take place is through photography, whose perceived privileged relationship to reality, as icon or index, can check, correct, relativize, but also prompt both primary memory (based on recall) and postmemory (based on retrospective reconstruction)." (158)

To this, Santner adds,

one also needs to turn this claim on its head; because Sebald's methodology is a *spectral* materialism, the relation to reality constructed on the basis of photographs—on what Barthes calls their *studium*—must in turn be corrected, checked, and relativized by one's attention to what sticks out from or stains the surface of reality, to the *punctum* that functions as a kind of umbilical cord to the other's creatureliness. (159)

Here, the relationship between a photograph and reality is a complementary one; we might use a photograph to help us remember, but the sense of reality (whether recollection or reconstruction) that we create based on those photographs must also be

checked and relativized. The *punctum*, in particular, invites these questions, drawing attention to gaps in our reasoning.

In *Bosque quemado*, it is not clear whether the silent film is a documentary, a fictionalized narration of a true story, or a work of fiction entirely (I imagine it's one of the former two), but regardless, it depicts a Santiago and a revolutionary moment now gone. The film, like a photograph, is a record of the past with some kind of "relationship to reality" capable of "dialoguing" with the empirical. The dubbing work is also inherently speculative, no doubt subject to "flights of unregulated projection and fantasy," and yet the project is a tenable one precisely because the Chilean director and the Venezuelan actors are in possession of the film and its images, which function as icon and index—as the *studium* that prompts both recollection and reconstruction.<sup>12</sup> The lovers' bodies, then, are the *punctum*, sticking out from the surface of this reality. Their bodies attest to their own creatureliness, but also to the creatureliness of the postmemorial task, to the -life in Benjamin's afterlife. Insofar as the film translates between the past and the present, between one generation and the next, the lovers' bodies and their desire point toward that which exceeds translation. Their bodies are a reminder, first, of that which cannot be reconstructed (what has, in other words, gone lost in translation). But, second, the bodies-as-*punctum* remind us of the ways in which the legacy of trauma and the task of postmemory are borne not just collectively, but personally, in dynamic and unpredictable ways. In the presence of real, desiring bodies, the film fades into the

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<sup>12</sup> Santner returns to the question of "projection" in a psychoanalytic sense later in the chapter, in the context of catastrophe and paranoia; see 176-177. In my reading "projection" has a kind of double valence; Santner (and Long) no doubt employ the term in its psychoanalytic sense, whereas Brodsky's "proyeccionista" refers to the visual (and filmic) connotations of the term. The reference in Santner is fortuitous for my reading here; in addition to the literal projection of the images onto a screen, we might imagine that the film director also imbues his project with some of his psychoanalytic projections, particularly those related to any desires or ambitions that were restrained with the onset of the dictatorship.

background, a relic of a distant, but haunting past. Their lovemaking occurs against the backdrop of a film that narrates, on loop, the story that is destined to become their inheritance—both literally, because it is the story their fathers have passed on to them, and figuratively, because they will be forced to confront the legacies of this story upon their return to Chile. They may have been too young to suffer directly the effects of Pinochet’s violent coup and subsequent rule as dictator, but as adults, they will come to terms with its aftermath.

The second section of the novel, also entitled “Bosque quemado,” opens with the revelation of Moisés’ Alzheimer’s disease, a moment of singular shock and disruption for the narrator, as well as for the reader. This section begins only a few pages after those that describe the son’s rendezvous with María, but it represents a significant jump in time, taking place fifteen years or more after the events in Caracas. The previous scene elucidates the (often speculative) work of memory and postmemory, depicting that work as a negotiation with the dense materiality of the past, one that results in translation rather than autonomous creation. The negotiation that takes place here is more subtle; in this scene, the son’s primary engagement with visual materials is as a viewer, and the revelation of his father’s illness comes almost as a kind of visceral response.

Nevertheless, this scene depends on a moment of translation, of reception and re-inscription: the son recognizes the symptoms of his father’s illness and begins the process of integrating that knowledge into his life—that is, of finding a place for this new information and making sense of it. This revelation is among the most disruptive moments in the novel, for the son and for the reader. The son’s life is about to change dramatically, as he begins to care for his father and tend to the emotional burdens of his

father's deterioration. This is also a pivotal moment in the narrative; at this point, the novel is rearranged from a story of exile and return into a story of illness and decline. The two narrative threads are intertwined, of course, but this moment represents a shift in the novel's stakes.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the photograph prompts new knowledge and sets up the painful circumstances for the son's inheritance. Whereas the previous scene, in Caracas, signals a shift toward the postmemorial, this scene affirms that shift and highlights it: Moisés will forget what has come before (literally, not as metaphor), and any negotiations with the past will henceforth be the son's alone.

When the son realizes that his father has Alzheimer's, he is at an exhibition, in Santiago, of some of the previous summer's works from the Venice Biennial. Each of the artists featured—one from England, one from China, and one from Japan—displays photographs that reveal some sort of relationship between parent and child (in the case of the Chinese artist, the father figure is Mao). The narrator is most struck by a series of photographs by a Japanese artist, Tatsumi Orimoto, that depict the artist and his mother surrounded by loaves of bread, “marraquetas y hallullas” (83).<sup>14</sup> Of the four scenes analyzed in this chapter, the description of Orimoto's photo is perhaps the truest moment of ekphrasis, in which the photographic image is translated into text; while the other scenes revolve around visual materials, they tend to be more concerned with the visual nature of their form than with the precise content of those materials (the details of their

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<sup>13</sup>In the *Paula* interview, Brodsky draws an explicit parallel between exile and Alzheimer's: “Es el exilio al cubo, porque no reconoces nada, ¿quién es amigo mío?, ¿quién no lo es? Nadie es lo que es, entonces, ¿en quién puedo confiar? Ni siquiera en el hijo y el efecto del Bosque quemado también le quema la ampollita al que está más cerca del enfermo, eso está médicamente comprobado.”

<sup>14</sup>This description is itself a bit of a linguistic translation. Orimoto is a real artist; he is sometimes known as “Bread Man,” and he is famous for the “Art Mama” series that Brodsky describes in this section, which depicts his mother—who does have Alzheimer's—surrounded by bread. But marraquetas and hallullas are two typically Chilean styles of bread, so while Orimoto's mother is surrounded by loaves of bread, Brodsky describes this fact in a Chilean idiom.



subject matter is left to the reader's imagination). In this scene, however, the description is quite specific, and the reader is asked to imagine a photograph from a series that actually exists. By now, we know that the narrator himself has dabbled as a photographer, but at this exhibit, he realizes that he has failed to accomplish what these photographers have: "convertir el ojo de la cámara en una extensión del cerebro" (83). These photographers are real "artistas," but he is not. The narrator engages with the photographs, but as a viewer, not as an artist; he is outside the processes of creation and production.

The narrator is looking fixedly at Orimoto's photographs, when his partner, Victoria, points out that the photographer's mother suffered from Alzheimer's (84). He had found the series, entitled "Art Mama," "gracioso y devastador a la vez," but when Victoria mentions the Alzheimer's, "se volvió más inquietante" (84). That detail is jolting—"Fue como si me acusara"—and the narrator asks for "una explicación" (84). In reply, Victoria hands him the catalogue for the exhibition, supplying him with its missing text—"una nota destacada junto a la información sobre <<Art Mama>>"—in a very subtle gesture toward the sound-and-dialogue restoration project in Caracas. The narrator recounts its explanation, thereby supplying the reader with the missing text, too:

Orimoto había ideado su artificio para lograr comunicarse con su madre, luego de que los médicos le diagnosticaran la enfermedad de Alzheimer. Advertido de que en las fases terminales este mal limitaba el uso y la comprensión del lenguaje corriente hasta llegar a una total agnosia, Orimoto había decidido intervenir en el progresivo aislamiento que amenazaba a su madre. De acuerdo a la nota explicativa del propio artista, la disposición de objetos primarios y de necesidad básica como los zapatos o un simple pedazo de pan eran capaces de aliviar la perturbación mental de los enfermos de Alzheimer, o al menos disminuir sus efectos, creando un entorno de afectividad que por lo general les estaba negado. (85)

The addition of the catalogue note renders the significance of the photo more legible; once he's read it, he recognizes that his father is suffering from the same disease, and this knowledge has a bodily effect: "Me estremecí y el pavor me invadió. A mi mente acudieron relojes, paquetes, bolsas plásticas, ruidos de llaves, cucharas y tenedores abandonados en el baño . . ." (85). Here, he recites a litany of misplaced objects that suddenly and clearly suggest the disorder in his father's mind; each object is mundane on its own, but taken together, they present damning evidence. He turns to Victoria and tells her they have to leave the exhibition. When she asks why, his answer is "pedagógico, casi ilustrativo": "Moisés tiene Alzheimer" (85). The sentence is short, but declarative and powerful. The son's immediate reaction is to reach his father, first by telephone and then to see him in person. While he does not actually relay what he has learned, his desire to leave the museum and go home to his father highlights the son's position as mediator and translator; he carries this news with him as he seeks contact with his father.

As noted earlier, the revelation of Moisés' illness is an exceptionally disruptive moment, not only because it previews Moisés' decline and eventual death, but because it forces the son to confront his inevitable inheritance and the legacy of his father's life in his own life. Here, the intangible burdens of Moisés' tragic history are converted into the concrete reality of his illness, particularly with regard to the loss of memory. Indeed, Moisés' illness lends a concreteness to the work of postmemory; not only will the son attend to the reconstructive and translative projects of postmemory, he will do so in the wake of his father's increasing agnosia and isolation—and, ultimately, in the wake of his father's death. Moreover, Moisés' Alzheimer's calls further attention to the creatureliness of the postmemorial task, to the ways in which trauma plays out on the body—and to the

vulnerability of the body as it deteriorates and declines. Again, the emphasis in Brodsky's novel is not on bodily decrepitude, as it might be in baroque literature, but on the invisible degeneration of the mind and the increased vulnerability of the self as that degeneration progresses. Even the son's visceral reaction to Orimoto's photo suggests that creatureliness; he responds not with autonomy or rationality, but with an instinct that manifests as a desire to be close to the man (and the mind) he's about to lose. And yet even as Alzheimer's serves a thematic function within the novel, underscoring disruption and loss of memory, it is not an empty narrative ploy, but a moving and sorrowful portrayal of the ravages of this degenerative disease. As in the previous scene, the attention to the creaturely—particularly to the degeneration of mind and the increasing agnoisa—serves as a reminder of that which exceeds translation, of all that will be lost, no matter how successfully the son is able to care for his father.

As the son learns from the exhibit catalogue, Orimoto's photographs were meant to capture the very sort of everyday objects that might offer an "entorno de afectividad" to the Alzheimer's patient, familiar surroundings that could help to alleviate some of the more violent or disorienting effects of the disease. This description resonates with Barthes' *studium*, the part of a photograph that is legible via "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment . . . but without special acuity," engendering a response that "derives from an average affect," or a general cultural training or knowledge (26). That general cultural knowledge is part of what the Alzheimer's patient loses, and Orimoto uses "objetos primarios y de necesidad básica" (bread, shoes) to re-create a kind of *studium*, a generally legible setting that might be used to help the Alzheimer's patient credibly recollect and reconstruct the past. In the narrator's eyes, however, these basic

objects are converted into a kind of *punctum*, that which “pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthes 27). The *punctum* may even be time itself, which “tells me death in the future” (Barthes 96). In this scene, the bread and the shoes stick out, leading the narrator to draw the connection between Orimoto’s mother’s Alzheimer’s and that of his father, a connection that inflicts pain, pricking the narrator and wounding him; he “shudders” and is overwhelmed by “terror,” and the revelation of Moisés’ Alzheimer’s is also the augury of his death. Moreover, the *punctum* invites the checking, correcting, and relativizing that Santner describes, drawing attention to our sense of reality and to any gaps in our reasoning. The revelation of Moisés’ illness prompts the son to re-evaluate his father’s behavior—to consider whether some of his more peculiar actions might in fact have been symptoms of this disease—and to recalibrate his own life accordingly. Part of the devastation of Alzheimer’s is that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when it begins, which has implications for the father’s suffering (how long has he been impaired?), as well as for the narrative (did we, as readers, miss some of the symptoms, just as the son did?).

When the narrator sees Orimoto’s bread and shoes, his mind flashes to similar objects that his own father has misplaced, that litany of lost objects—watches, packages, plastic bags, keys, spoons, and forks—that have been left in the bathroom, rather than where they belong. Where the father misplaces them as a result of—and thus as evidence of—his illness, the son recognizes that they have been misplaced and, presumably, seeks to replace (or, to re-place) them in a more suitable, legible location, as Orimoto has done for his mother with the bread. This re-placing and re-locating, is in many ways a response to the dislocations that have so far structured the lives of both father and son; indeed, the

re-placing of the objects very subtly echoes the replacing of sound in the silent film in Caracas. The act of re-placing and re-locating serves, on the one hand, to alleviate Moisés' suffering, and in this sense, the son does what he can to confront, and then subdue, his father's burdens, burdens that are now his, too.

On the other hand, as the son recognizes, and moves to replace, these lost objects, he signals both a recognition of this sad and painful inheritance and a willingness to take it over on his own terms, in his own time—a turn toward translation and the postmemorial. Those objects, which were meant to function as *studium*, are here translated into *punctum*, upsetting the narrator and throwing his world into chaos. But, in some sense, the *punctum*, as a kind of invitation to interpretation, also facilitates the process of translation; as the son begins to re-place these objects, removing the keys and spoons from the bathroom and putting them back wherever they belong, they are re-translated into *studium*, but a *studium* in which the culturally legible meanings are made not by the father, but by the son. Here, again, is the son's postmemorial task: meaning-making in his own way, on his own terms, but via an intense—and difficult—negotiation with his father's legacy, through a translation of the materials of the past into something that is culturally legible in the present. Moisés' degeneration contrasts with the regeneration that is still possible for the son; his task, even as his father declines, is to continue to live.

By signaling the impending death of his father, the confrontation with Orimoto's photograph also sets the stage for generational distancing to come, where death, rather than geographical distance, divides parents from son. Indeed, the last section of the novel, *Cuarto oscuro*, begins with another disruption in the narrator's life, just after he has lost

both his parents. *Cuarto oscuro* takes place after the dictatorship ends, in the years following the father and son's return to Chile. In the section's first lines, the narrator explains that his father died in 1998 and that his mother died some years later; he notes that their deaths affected his own sense of self. Relatively little time elapsed between his father's death and his mother's, but at times, he says, it seems even shorter, reduced from years to "meses en verdad. A veces sólo días o minutos." He explains: "La distancia es minúscula al medirla con la ausencia de las personas que nos explican. Lo que fuera, ambos se han ido" (183). Distance as a result of loss is a key theme of the novel; here, the distance is primarily temporal, but the remark that his parents "have left" also echoes the geographical distances and departures that have shaped his life. This distance is also a generational one because his parents' deaths cement his place in the world: "Desde entonces soy padre sin padres en el arrollador mundo de los hijos. Un mundo de belleza siberiana, más frío y remoto del que nunca pensé encontrar . . ." (183). The son, again, evokes a metaphor of geographical distance to describe the nature of life without his parents; this new world is cold, remote. The distinction between being a father—which the narrator has been since his own son was born, some ten years prior—and being a "father without parents" signals a generational realignment, in which the son is now the patriarch (and given the biblical connotations of his father's name, it is especially momentous that he has inherited Moisés' position). His mother's lover, Félix, is the only person, in his immediate circle, who remains "entre los recuerdos" of his parents' generation (183). This particular moment is ripe for re-engaging with the task of translation.

After Moisés dies, the narrator inherits Moisés' apartment. Initially, he uses the apartment as place to meet and have sex with Manuela, his latest lover; he is still with Victoria, so his trysts with Manuela are illicit. But after one encounter there, he decides to keep the space for himself alone, although he continues the affair. The apartment seems to invite solitude; as the narrator explains, "ocupó el sitio de la alteridad que habitaba. Ni matrimonio, ni hijos, ni trabajo ni amante ni nada. El lugar no admitía compañía" (192). He decides instead to turn the apartment into a darkroom, planning to develop some negatives (taken while the narrator was still abroad) into photographs. The darkroom in Santiago is another iteration—and in some sense, the legacy—of the studio in Caracas. As the son claims his inheritance, we see the ways in which his time away from Chile has shaped his life and his desires. In Caracas, the son dreamed of privacy; in present-day Santiago, he has a privacy that approximates alienation. The new project in Santiago also echoes the project in Caracas. In the wake of the father's illness and death, it represents another attempt at reconstructing the past, part of the son's effort to translate, and make sense of, his own and his father's experiences.

In Caracas, the son and María engage reluctantly with a project that is not theirs. In Santiago, the son declines to admit his lover into his private space, reserving it for a project of his own, but finds that he cannot work. He writes: "Pensaba revelar y copiar los cientos de negativos que reservaba celosamente para un momento estelar como éste, definitivo y transparente, largo como el día después del combate que lo había consumido en su trinchera . . ." (192). Here, "el día después del combate" indicates a comparison between the narrator's personal reconstructive project and the collective effort to regroup in the aftermath of conflict. The narrator, however, is unable to work, and he muses on

possible reasons: “El momento ya había pasado o nunca llegaría, lo cierto es que el desánimo me invadió” (192). He seems to refer to his place in history (and perhaps that of his whole generation), as much as to this particular moment. The moment for action has passed, perhaps never to come again, and the narrator’s present is characterized by lingering despondency. He is overcome with a kind of malaise:

Los rótulos envejecían mi entusiasmo, como un indiscreto espejo al fondo del ropero: <<Lechería 1976>>, <<Caracas 1978>>, <<París 1979>>, <<Barcelona 1981>>, <<Caracas 1982>>, <<Santiago 1984>> ... Era para desquiciar a un archivista. En ocasiones, un solo vistazo a las tiras ennegrecidas me sumía en un estado de postración que se extendía por horas y me dejaba inmóvil, sin voluntad, con el cuerpo tenso y estragado. (192; ellipsis in orig.)

Like the soundless film, these negatives have been literally translated, carried across international borders, and these places and dates offer the reader a concrete set of geographical and historical citations in a novel that otherwise floats from place to place, often with no clear sense of time. Here, again, there’s a formal distance between the clearly labeled canisters and the undeveloped negatives, though the label text also complements these hidden images, making it possible for the narrator (and the reader) to guess at their contents. For the narrator, the list is exhausting. The “envejecer” here is telling given the generational implications of this moment in the novel. The narrator has watched his father grow old and die as a result of a horrible, degenerative disease, and in the apartment that is his inheritance, the list of places, at once timeline and biography, exhausts his interest in a project composed of materials from his adolescence in exile. He dissociates himself from the role he has inevitably inherited, that of archivist and translator, declining—for the moment—to mediate between past and present. The anguish involved in the work of reconstructing, archiving, and translating is an



immobilizing, enfeebling force, one that takes over not just his mind, but his entire body. Again, the novel draws a connection between the creaturely body and the legacy of trauma; the narrator reacts bodily and unpredictably to the task bequeathed to him and to the work of postmemory.

He continues to describe the effects of the project on his body and bearing: “me descubría de pie con la cámara en la mano y la vista perdida en pensamientos crepusculares. Hacía clic para romper el embrujo y un peso de tumba me derrumbaba sobre el sofá, donde permanecía otras dos horas recreando hazañas del pasado y modificando el futuro con actualizaciones arbitrarias” (192). In contrast to the desire he feels in Caracas and the shock he feels at the museum in Santiago, the malaise he feels in the Santiago apartment is like a curse, its embrace crushing and deathly. He finds himself at a translative limit, caught between past exploits and future possibilities. His desire to do this work, a task of his own, is zapped by these drowsing thoughts. What saves him in these moments is to turn away from the project and toward the television, with its own peculiar set of moving images: “el aparato me regalaba con su indiferencia el duelo que necesitaba” (192). In these moments, he wants indifference, rather than recognition, however painful it may be.

In this scene, the narrator could create an archive of his own past, turning (transforming, translating) the disparate negatives into a coherent collection. In fact, the negatives hold an intermediary (and inverted) ground between a distant time and place, which has literally made its mark on the emulsion-coated plastic, and the future possibility of photographic prints with their original contrasts restored (light made dark made light again). The negatives are his, and in a very concrete sense, developing the

negatives and printing the photographs would result in tangible artifacts of his adolescence abroad. Here, the photographs would serve “to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability” (Hirsch, *Family* 20). But he declines to put this archive together, overwhelmed and immobilized by the weight of the past. It rids him of desire and prevents him from acting, in contrast to the scenes with María, at the studio in Caracas, where the projection of images arouses and propels his desire. Moreover, these moments of crushing malaise take place, in a very literal way, at the site of his inheritance, in “un departamento célibe” (193). His father is gone, but haunting reminders of his presence continue to disturb the narrator. Whether or not the project ever comes to fruition, the existence of the negatives carries the past into the present, mediating between the narrator and the spectral presence of his father.

Finally, the narrator decides that the project with the negatives is impossible. He sets them aside and decides to write a book: “Definitivamente debía apropiarme del lugar, adaptarlo a mis necesidades y llenarlo con otros materiales, insuflarle vida. Era una tontería, pero decidí escribir lo que no podía copiar” (194). In choosing both to abandon photography and to take up writing (he alternates between the two throughout the novel), the narrator also draws a connection among mediation, translation, and form.<sup>15</sup> The decision to write—an election of a new form—is linked with the appropriation and adaptation of his father’s territory and space. He also wants to fill the space with the physical materials essential to that new form. Rather than rely on his photos to mediate his memories, he sets about constructing his own narrative of the past. He must grapple

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the narrator’s photographic and written work as a form of refuge after dislocation, see Areco 262-67.

on his own with his and his father's story; what was a shared experience is now his alone. By opting to write rather than develop old pictures, the narrator chooses a more interpretive act. His story unfolds in negotiation with that of his father, and so his artistic autonomy is constrained, but he claims for himself a kind of translation that seeks to supplement rather than reproduce.

In the wake of his father's death, the decision to write also signals an attempt at translating his experience into something he can grapple with on his own. Just as the narrator makes space for writing, his written work makes space for a renewed dialogue between past and present, as well as between father and son—but one that happens on the narrator's own terms in his newly-adapted place. As he settles into the writing process, he begins to see his approach as characterized by “negación”: “Adiestrado como estaba en relaciones de correspondencia,”—another kind of mediation—“apelaba al espíritu activo de la negación. El rechazo era mi forma de encajar” (195). Although he initially considers taking on his father's voice, he ultimately rejects that idea: “Mientras impostara el lugar de los olvidados, siempre abrigaría una esperanza de salir de allí. Dar cuenta de mi padre, hacer fé de él, equivalía sin embargo al mayor de los abusos que podían cometerse” (195). Ultimately, the narrator chooses translation over reproduction, opting to tell his story of expatriation and repatriation, rather than attempt to reproduce his father's story of exile and return. He recognizes that the two are essentially connected (that one begets the other), even as they are fundamentally distinct, as is warranted by a translation. And no matter the output, there are elements of his experience—the acute pain of homelessness and exile, his grief over losing his father—that will resist the translation.

By way of conclusion, I want to consider a conversation that takes place late in the novel, between the narrator and his girlfriend, Victoria. Victoria asks the narrator about the nature of his writing, and he explains that it is “una mezcla . . . ni puramente novela ni tampoco biografía, en sentido estricto. Es ficción, en el fondo” (195). This description of fiction gets at the translative relationship between (auto)biography and the novel (or, literature) and the way they work together in order to be inscribed onto the page as fiction. Victoria asks about the title of the book, and the two have an Abbott and Costello-esque exchange:

- *La carta del padre*, ¿te gusta?  
 —¿Así se llama?—dudó, cautelosa—. Sí... Me gusta, pero ese libro ya existe.  
 —No, ése es otro, donde un escritor le escribe a su padre. Aquí es al revés; el padre es quien le escribe al hijo.  
 —Ah, es una carta tuya a tu hijo.  
 —No, no estás entendiendo. Es *mi* padre quien escribe la carta.  
 —Y te la manda a ti.  
 —No, a mi tío. En Buenos Aires. Desde Lechería.  
 Me miró raro, asustada. Como si me hubiera vuelto loco.  
 —Entonces es la carta del primo.  
 —Olvidalo—me ofusqué—. Hablemos de otra cosa.  
 —A ver, de nuevo—insistió ella, imperturbable—: Tu padre le escribe una carta a tu tío, y tú te asignas el rol del destinatario por una especie de justicia familiar. O al menos de intérprete. ¿Es eso?  
 —Claro—dije victorioso—. Simple como el sol. (195-196; ellipsis in orig.)

The narrator refers to an actual letter, one Moisés sent from exile in Caracas to his brother in Argentina, after members of their family are disappeared during Argentina’s Dirty War. In the letter, Moisés reaffirms his belief in the necessity of revolution, but expresses a devastating sense of hopelessness. The narrator knows nothing of the letter until many years later, after his father’s death, although Moisés wrote the letter while his son was visiting in Lechería. As with the revelation of Moisés’ Alzheimer’s, the discovery

of the letter is destabilizing and discomfiting for the narrator because its contents—along with the fact that the narrator previously had no idea that his father had written it—alters the narrator’s understanding of his father’s character and spirit. In this way, the letter—an artifact from the past that shows up in the present—also calls the narrator to action.

The exchange between Victoria and the narrator reveals the narrator’s decision to take on the role of interpreter and translator, while also signaling familial—and generational—confusion. The narrator wants to call his book *La carta del padre*, even though the letter, as sent, went from brother to brother, not from father to son. His insistence suggests that he sees his father always as his father, even when his father is in another role as brother or uncle. When Victoria asks whether the narrator has taken on the role of recipient in order to bring about a kind of familial justice, the narrator responds affirmatively, though it is not entirely clear what kind of justice he wants. In an attempt to clarify further the intentions of his work, the narrator assures Victoria that the letter is real: “Es lo único que no me inventé de todo el asunto” (196). But Victoria corrects even this: “Ya sé, pero no es tuya de tu padre—dijo—. Es la carta de Moisés” (196). The letter is real, but it isn’t the narrator’s, and it’s not from his father-as-father. Rather, it’s from the man named Moisés, and the narrator’s role in this exchange is not as son per se, but as interpreter. Victoria’s questions, while initially intrusive, also help the narrator to make sense of his private burdens. Their conversation negotiates the subtleties of language, and it exemplifies the work of postmemory: interpretation and translation.

Given the description of the narrator’s book project, it is possible that *Bosque quemado* itself is the book, although this is never made clear. In any case, the title of the narrator’s book, *La carta del padre*, introduces an alternate title for *Bosque quemado*.

These two titles signal different things, but they have a supplementary relationship to each other. “La carta del padre” refers to a material object written and sent in the past that shows up in the present. “The letter” and the concern over sender and recipient also recall Jacques Derrida’s notion of *destinerrance*, the idea that a letter never truly arrives at its destination (qtd. in Miller: 33).<sup>16</sup> J. Hillis Miller notes that this is in part because the letter itself, rather than the sender, “creates the recipient, unpredictably, incalculably, by chance or even by error” (43). In *Bosque quemado*, the letter was not necessarily intended for the son—he comes to possess it by a combination of chance and error—but he is nevertheless its recipient. The reference to “la carta” in the novel’s secondary title is a material representation of the legacy of trauma, and its *destinerrant* journey to the son hints at the unpredictable manifestations of that legacy in the present. Moisés’ son, along with María in Caracas and Victoria and Manuela in Santiago, are all recipients of, or inheritors to, those letters: to their fathers’ legacies and the legacy of dictatorship and repression.<sup>17</sup>

The notion of *destinerrance* also sheds light on the question of the recipient-translator’s autonomy, or a lack thereof, with regard to the original material. Miller writes that, over time, Derrida “redirected [the figure of *destinerrance*] toward a claim that each valid piece of writing or any utterance is not an *autonomous* speech act. It is, rather, a response to the demand made on the writer or speaker by the wholly other, which

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<sup>16</sup> I will refer here Derrida’s *destinerrance* as elucidated by J. Hillis Miller in *For Derrida*, 28-54.

<sup>17</sup> Early in the novel, the narrator describes Manuela is one of “los felices”; he explains, “Son felices, y yo los admiro por esta felicidad, sabiendo que en parte ella me fue negada o que algo en mi entorno no tiende hacia la felicidad” (31). In the interview with *Paula*, Brodsky expands on this definition, indicating that “los felices,” who are slightly younger than Brodsky and his protagonist, hold a particular place within the broader political (and postmemorial) landscape in Chile: “Es que creo que esos felices, esas parejas que ahora tienen unos 30 años y que están empezando a pujar su propio mundo, están creando fantasmas tanto o más tremendos que los que uno cargó. Nosotros cargamos con la falta de expectativas y ellos cargan con una sobredosis de expectativas feroz: de sí mismos, del país, de olvidarse de lo pasado, de ser sanos, de pensar positivo y andan obsesionados por el éxito, la estabilidad, la corrección, la ambición de instalarse, cuajar, encajar, toda esa cosa ‘pro.’ Pero eso tiene una pared, no sé cuál, pero con la que van a chocar.”

changes radically the direction in which he is headed” (46, emphasis mine). In *Bosque quemado*, the letter from Moisés functions as a demand on the son, one that shakes him from his malaise and thus has the potential to radically change his “direction.” The son’s book project, his own “valid piece of writing,” is not “an autonomous speech [or written] act,” but rather “a response” to that demand. In this view, the letter not only stands in for the legacy of trauma, but for the demands imposed by that legacy, particularly, here, the demand made on the son’s generation to confront the legacies of Pinochet’s dictatorship. The work of postmemory, then, is a response to those demands, rather than a wholly autonomous act. One of the challenges of this demand for confrontation is its unpredictability and volatility (the idea that the letter could arrive to anyone at any point), and translation vis-à-vis postmemory is a formal response, unfolding in negotiation with the dense materiality—with the letters—of the past, but with potentially radical ramifications for the future.

As a material object that accrues new meanings over time, “la carta del padre” is on the same order as the film reels in Caracas, Orimoto’s still photograph, and the narrator’s undeveloped negatives. Each of these objects has the power both to intervene in and disrupt the present. Reading the letter as an example of *destinerrance*, however, also directs our attention to the ways in which each of the objects in the novel makes a kind of demand, calling for an engagement in the work of postmemory and, thus, of translation. The film reel, the still photograph, the negatives, and the nascent book project intervene in the narrator’s life—and, in a formal sense, in the novel itself—evoking the malleability of memory, the weight of inheritance, and the translative possibilities bound up in postmemory and interpretation. Similarly, the letter recalls the past events that have

so profoundly influenced the course of the narrator's life and epitomizes the objects—and the attendant postmemorial work—that will both demand and mediate his attention to that past going forward. These disruptions not only mark the intensely disruptive patterns of dictatorship and repression, they also represent the echoes of that disruption, the continual—and sometimes surprising—demands made on the present by the past. The story the narrator finally tells, via “la carta del padre,” is a translation that recognizes the legacy of the past and attempts to make sense of that legacy in the present and for the future.

With the connotations of “La carta del padre” in mind, we turn our attention to “Bosque quemado,” the novel's actual title. In the novel, “bosque quemado” is used as a metaphor for the mind of an Alzheimer's patient: “algunos árboles y ramas humeantes” linger after the devastation of Alzheimer's, itself “un incendio que arrasó con recuerdos, referencias, memoria, todo” (122). As a metaphor, “bosque quemado” translates the abstract, clinical effects of Alzheimer's into a stunning, and poignant, visual image, standing in for the loss of memory. It is the central theme of the novel and its most forceful instance of disruption. In that sense, it supplements the other material objects in the novel; as a counterpart to “la carta del padre,” the loss of memory, too, is a missive that the son is forced to interpret, even though he is neither a unique nor final destination for that missive. The loss of memory (or a damaged memory) makes a demand as compelling as the one made by memory itself, perhaps even more so as recollection slips away and translation steps in to take its place. Like Barthes' *punctum*, these disruptions invite interpretation, but also call those interpretations into question. And in the context of postmemory and translation, the material objects are not just disruptions, but demands,



calling not for a single response to the effects of trauma, but for multiple responses over time—not for reconciliation or resolution, but translation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Wandering Translations: Memory, Forgetting, and the City in Sergio Chejfec's *Los planetas***

*Los planetas*, Sergio Chejfec's 1999 novel, is in many ways a novel about walking and wandering—in particular, about walking and wandering the city of Buenos Aires.<sup>18</sup> It takes as its point of departure the disappearance (and probable death) of the narrator's childhood friend, M, in the 1970s, during Argentina's Dirty War. M and the narrator, whom we know only as S, spent much of their childhood and adolescence wandering Buenos Aires together. In the present, as S tries to make sense of his loss, he wanders the city of Buenos Aires alone.<sup>19</sup> The novel unfolds in layers, and the various scenes of walking and wandering weave together the past and the present in a way that enriches the multi-layered tapestry of the story overall.

The novel has a primary narrative thread—M's disappearance and probable death, followed by S's attempt to make sense of that loss in the present (including his attempt to publish a book, which he briefly considers publishing under M's name)—but it is intercut

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<sup>18</sup> For more on walking in Chejfec's novels, as well as the relationship between city and memory, see Berg, "Memoria y Experiencia" 115-121.

<sup>19</sup> There is a reference to the use of the initials early in the novel: "M de Miguel, o de Mauricio; también podría decir de Daniel, ya que, como sabemos, detrás de las letras puede haber cualquier nombre" (18). The suggestion here is that the initials are random (although the narrator S is likely linked to the author Sergio), and yet "S and M" are striking in their evocation of sadism and masochism. I am not sure what to make of this association, although the processes of grief and coming to terms with loss, of remembering and forgetting, can indeed be both sadistic and masochistic, an infliction of pain on oneself and on others.

with anecdotes and fables that distract from and complicate that main thread, sometimes even obscuring it. If the first layer of the novel is the primary narrative thread, the second layer concerns S and M's shared childhood; the two boys wandered the city together as children and young adolescents and told each other stories. This layer is haziest because it is recounted to us as memory, and it mixes with the third layer, which is the boys' stories and fables, told mainly by M, which often feature S and M as the main characters. These stories are quite surreal and full of fantastic occurrences; nevertheless, because the names and even tone are similar to the rest of the novel, these stories often mix in with S's "real" memories of his childhood experiences with M. In addition, while S is the novel's narrator, in the third layer of fable and story, M's voice sometimes takes over. As one anecdote after another plays out over the geography of Buenos Aires, the city becomes a site where the past overlaps with the present. The events in the novel unfold out of order, not in a linear or chronological fashion, and so the temporality of the novel is nonlinear and even disorienting. As in *Bosque quemado*, *Los planetas* moves seamlessly back and forth in time, sometimes marking those changes with little more than a paragraph or page break. We read a scene that takes place in the present, realizing only later, after we've read an anecdote from S and M's childhood, that it clearly echoes an event from the past.

In what follows, I examine the ways in which S carries his memories of M with him as he moves across the space of the city, and I argue that the city is a point of contact for the past and the present; there, S navigates between the two and explores the contours of his loss.<sup>20</sup> Because the city provides the space for this contact between the past and

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<sup>20</sup> With regard to the city, Berg writes, "la ciudad cuenta también un relato de identidad y despojo, y registra la compleja relación entre la memoria histórica y el olvido" ("Memoria y Experiencia" 120). He

present, it emerges as a site of temporal translation. In this sense, Chejfec's novel draws a connection between temporal translation, space, and memory, in which the movements of memory back and forth in time—the ability to draw connections with the past or to imagine the effect of the past and present on the future—is intimately tied to space. These spaces are literal and figurative. In a literal sense, S and M's friendship, as well as their relationship to the events of the Dirty War, is intimately tied to Buenos Aires and, more broadly, to Argentina. The spaces are also figurative: the carving out of space for memory, leaving room in one's life and mind for the effects of grief and loss. Even if the distance between the past and the present is fundamentally unbridgeable, S uses the space of the city as a way to negotiate that distance; it is the site in which the past and the present are closest to each other.

The confusing chronology of the novel serves to underscore the backward- and forward-looking nature of temporal translation: the scenes that take place in the present clearly descend from "prior models," to invoke Benjamin's terms, and yet, when we finally encounter the prior model, later in the novel, we understand it better in light of its "translation" into the present, that is, in light of a new version, another unfolding. As we are forced to piece together meaning in a nonlinear fashion, we see the connection between the space of the city and the effects of translation over time: how the city contains all of these moments and is changed and unchanged by them. As a site of translation, the city is the place where an event occurs and then passes into memory only to repeat, in a different, yet related (and supplementary) way, at another time. S's walks

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concludes: "Si las calles de una ciudad están preñadas de un pasado inconcluso que nunca termina de decir lo que tiene que decir y el escribir es un acto de cercanía y vecindad con el otro, la historia que cuenta *Los planetas* de Sergio Chejfec bien podría pensarse como un acto de redención política: el futuro de un pasado que aún no ha terminado" (121).

in this city are translations, too, and they call our attention to the connection between translation and movement. S moves through the city in order to bring himself into contact with M, to find the places that most clearly prompt his memory or recall his friendship. In this way, the city also brings the living into contact with the dead.<sup>21</sup>

Toward the middle of the novel, S remarks: “Nadie imaginaba que al cabo de los años estas caminatas terminarían así, adoptando la forma de palabras puestas sobre papel” (149). Here, S signals that his walks, alone and with M, have been translated into words. These walks took place in Buenos Aires, but converted into language, they take place in the pages of the novel. In this sense, the space of the novel—its pages, but also the literary space it creates—mimics the space of the city: it becomes a site over which some kind of translative process unfolds.

As noted in the introduction, Ross Chambers’ *Untimely Interventions* describes the form and function of testimonial and witnessing writing in what Chambers calls “aftermath society.” Certainly, the contemporary Argentine society that has emerged in the years since the end of the Dirty War is an aftermath society. Though Argentina has done a good deal of work on the national level to recognize the trauma of the Dirty War, it is nevertheless plagued, as other aftermath societies are, by the problem of how to integrate an acknowledgment of that past trauma into the politics of the present. Here, then, we can recall Chambers’ notion of “surviving trauma,” with its emphasis on the idea that, in an aftermath society, “one has not survived [trauma] so much as one is (still) surviving it” (xxii). Although Chejfec’s novel is not strictly testimonial—it is a novel, and it does not purport to offer a strict recounting of any set of circumstances in

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<sup>21</sup> Berg also draws a lovely connection between urban space and time: “Bajo la mirada del que está extasiado, el espacio urbano puede construirse como una alegoría de tiempos superpuestos” (“Sergio Chejfec” 129).

particular—it carries some of the characteristics of the kind of writing Chambers describes. S acts as a witness, in the fictional context of the novel, but also more broadly, as a representative of those who have experienced similar losses. M has died, but S survives, and his survival follows Chambers’ description, especially in the sense that the pain of losing M survives into the present. Indeed, in describing aftermath society and culture, Chambers is careful to note a strange temporality: “a strange dedifferentiation of the received categories that divide time into past, present, and future and make cause and consequences indistinguishable” (xxii). This “dedifferentiation” between past, present, and future and between cause and consequence is an apt description for Chejfec’s novel, in both its form and content. S feels the effects of this dedifferentiated time acutely, and his particular experience is different than the way this dedifferentiation plays out in a more general, societal sense. That difference points to a distinction between the formal management of trauma on the national level, via days of remembrance, public memorials, museum exhibits, etc., and personal, individual efforts to grapple with the effects of trauma and loss in one’s daily life. In other words, the nation is still surviving trauma, and individual people are still surviving trauma, and the two experiences are related, but fundamentally distinct. Part of what Chejfec’s novel explores is the persistence of trauma at the personal level, a persistence that often manifests itself in unexpected ways.

The strictest understanding of postmemory—as a term for the experience of “those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth”—does not apply to *Los planetas*, nor does the slightly looser definition I employed in my analysis of *Bosque quemado*, as a term for those who grapple with the past through a generational remove. After all, M is S’s best friend—his peer—and his disappearance and presumed

death is not anomalous among their cohort. But Chejfec's protagonist (and, indeed, the novel itself, which was published in 1999) grapples with the legacy of trauma through a deep temporal remove, one in which the past is seemingly inaccessible. It is the novel's emphasis on this temporal distance—and on the figurative translations that seek to negotiate that distance—along with its concern for the persistence of trauma in an aftermath society that evoke the questions of postmemory. If postmemory is itself a form of translation, a figure that negotiates the afterlife of trauma, then Chejfec's novel attends to that negotiation, too.

By emphasizing that S and M's walks have taken the form of words on paper, Chejfec's novel acknowledges another translation and, in this case, a transcription. The words on the page are written for a reader, and the repetition of walking, from the literal to the figurative, suggests a metaphor of walking into the reader's purview. The movement in the novel, from place to place, or back and forth in time, is also a movement out of the novel, toward the reader. As explained in the introduction, the metaphor of "relay" is common in witnessing writing. According to Chambers, the tropes of relay, portability, reporting, and fostering "describe the witnessing writer as a mediating agent," particularly between the dead and the living (37). If we understand the writer as a mediating agent, Chambers explains, then, "writing is an act of agencing by means of which the hauntedness characteristic of the writer's consciousness is transferred or carried over as a haunting of the reader's consciousness . . ." (37). As I said in the introduction, the metaphors of relay, portability, reporting, and fostering resonate with translation in general; in this vein, translation, too, is an act of agencing, as writing is.

In Chejfec's novel, where translation and writing are specifically associated with movement—with walking, in particular—then walking, too, becomes an act of agencing. For S, the city is a mediating agent, and his movement through the city repeatedly brings him into contact with the past, particularly with his memories of M and thus with his sense of loss. But S is himself a mediating agent, a witness and “agencer”; in this capacity, he “transfers” or “carries over”—that is, translates—the “haunting” that characterizes his own consciousness onto the reader's consciousness. He offers up to us the space of the novel, as a site in which we might bring ourselves into contact with the traumatic events, and the accompanying losses, that S describes. Thus, I propose that Chejfec's novel foregrounds double acts of relay or translation: the space of the city is a site of translation, and the space of the novel becomes a site of translation, too, for us as readers. Here, it's worth recalling that Chambers uses “agencing” in part to posit “an intersubjective writing/reading relationship that is *other* than that of ‘reader’ to ‘writer,’” one that is focused less on “authorial subjectivity” than on “instrumentality,” that is, in directing the reader's attention toward the trauma that has been rendered “culturally obscene” (36-37). Chejfec's novel is fiction, rather than testimony, but by constructing the space of the novel as a site for translation and encounter, the novel invites the reader to engage in a way that is “instrumental,” at least insofar as it directs the reader's attention toward the persistence of trauma and loss.

Indeed, Chambers' key claim is that witnessing texts are “indexical”: “their characteristic form of ‘aboutness’ is indicative, ‘pointing’ to an X that the culture's conventional means of representation are powerless, or at least inadequate, to reference, precisely because it lies at a point of supposedly distant extremity with respect to what



the culture regards as its normal, and thus central, concerns” (xvi). I want to point out two things here. First, witnessing texts are noteworthy for conveying not just their story, but what their story is “about.” For Chambers, this comes primarily via the figurative. He writes that witnessing writing is “not so much directly representational (i.e. mimetic) as it is figural, and that its mode, therefore, is neither historical nor fictional (the two incontrovertibly representational discursive modes) but symbolic—symbolic in the sense that it produces complex indexical signs . . .” (13-14). And he adds, “the instrumentality of indexical signs lies in an address that both *attracts* attention and *redirects* it, diverting it in the direction of a ‘something’ that the sign does not describe but only indicates . . .” (14). As readers, we are invited to interpret those figurative moments, to see them not for what they are, but for what they represent. As I mentioned in the introduction, these invitations to interpretation are often driven by what Chambers calls “generic catachresis,” a recourse to what is generally considered to be “inappropriate” or “improper” in order to produce the anxiety or apprehension that witnessing writing seeks to effect (31). These moments of catachresis can be at the level of genre (substituting one genre for another in a way that seems odd or inappropriate) or via figuration or trope, though again the emphasis is on the inappropriate (42). Generic catachresis may also result in the creation of a “new idiom” (Chambers takes the phrase from Lyotard) because the traumatic event being described requires a mode of expression that is beyond the capacity of modes already in existence (104). As I explained in the introduction, W.J.T. Mitchell’s “textual heterogeneity” is similar to generic catachresis—the gesturing toward trauma via hybrid or catachrestic forms.

Second, Chambers frames indexicality in terms of distance: the trauma that witnessing texts recall are distant to, or far away from, the everyday and the normal. This point is itself figurative, and it calls up a spatial metaphor that resonates with the distances that S traverses in *Los planetas*. The reference to distance also gestures subtly toward a temporal metaphor: trauma is not just displaced in space but in time, what happened was long ago. As S walks the city of Buenos Aires, he seeks to bridge that temporal distance, not only for himself, but for the reader. Chambers adds that, because of this distance, witnessing texts often produce in their readers a sense of anxiety or apprehension: “The apprehension that is produced—I mean it in the double sense of the word: something that is *feared* is simultaneously *grasped*—is, in my opinion, the characteristic cultural effect of witnessing practices, an effect that can sometimes . . . be reinterpreted as uncanny mimeticism, the transportation into the other scene . . .” (xv). Distance, once negotiated in a figurative sense, results in feelings of anxiety that come as a direct result of that negotiation; the feeling of having been transported (again that reference to movement, to carrying) across that distance is an unnerving one.

As I discussed in the introduction, Chambers notes that a photograph can be a tool for negotiating these figurative distances, not only between the story and what it’s “about,” but between the cultural norm and the distant extremity of trauma. Chambers describes the photograph as an “invitation,” “first to look, and then to see” (9). As such, the photograph “captures” and then “diverts” the viewers’s attention, “transferring” and translating it from whatever is depicted in the photograph “toward a concern that’s not directly represented” a concern that is “more (and other)” than whatever is directly represented (9-11). *Los planetas* opens with a photograph, and references to the visual

recur over the course of the novel, but it is overall less concerned with photographs and visual materials than Brodsky's novel. Instead, we might say that the structure of the novel is itself photographic; over the course of the novel, the text repeatedly captures the reader's attention and diverts it, via various figurative strategies. Perhaps most significantly, it also transfers the fundamental tragedy of the novel—M's literal capture and diversion—onto the reader, translating it and metaphorizing it into an invitation to see more and other than the sparseness of its events. It translates M's disappearance into an occurrence that implies more and other than it signifies.

Chambers' argument points to the ways in which witnessing texts—and I think *Los planetas* falls into this category—offer via content the effects they seek to produce as part of their form. *Los planetas* tells a story of walking that also functions as a metaphor for (i.e. is about) the potential effect it might have on the reader, that of carrying her toward the trauma and loss it describes. It tells the story of S's attempt to bridge the distance between the past and the present as a way of potentially bridging the distance between the reader's present and a traumatic and violent past. It is a very figurative novel, sometimes even an obscure one, and as such, it invites interpretation. For example, it recounts fables that allegorize events in M and S's life, and in this way, we are invited to consider whether the events in the novel reflect something outside the novel. This is not, of course, to say that the novel is only figurative or that its only purpose is to be about something else (or even that it has a purpose at all), but rather to say that the novel conceives of space in a way that invites, quite beautifully, a particular kind of engagement on the part of the reader. As I said in the introduction, part of the appeal of Chambers' "relay" is the way in which it points not only to what can be "picked up" by

the reader, but to the very “precarious” nature of that “pick-up”; as Chambers notes, “a relay can be fumbled, dropped, or otherwise misperformed” (37-38). While Chejfec’s novel invites the reader’s engagement or interpretation, there is no guarantee that the reader will engage or interpret; nor is there any guarantee that the reader will make the appropriate figurative leaps. But that very precariousness is also part of what makes interpretation possible and significant; if there were only a single, essential meaning, interpretation would be unnecessary. Translation, too, depends on an element of precariousness, as does postmemory. As Benjamin points out, the very translatability of a text or an idea indicates that it holds “a specific significance,” something that makes it worthy of translation (“Task” 254), and yet the process of translation may nevertheless be fumbled or misperformed—though that is also what makes it interesting and necessary.

In the analysis that follows, I want to move back and forth between a close-reading of some of the most translative moments in the novel and a reflection on the way these moments (and movements) either summon a translative effort from the reader—the redirection that Chambers describes—or suggest something more broadly about the translative nature of integrating trauma and loss long after the trauma has ended, a concern that is also postmemorial. Because I am arguing that these temporal translations are grounded in a specific space, I want first to briefly review some of the ways in which the categories at play here—translation, witnessing or testimony, and narrative—may be described according to an aesthetic of space.

As I explained in the introduction, translation, testimony, and narrative have all been described in terms of space and, in particular, as spaces situated at a border or limit. Brett Levinson describes translation as “an issue of the frontier,” as a process that “never

ends because every act of translation returns to the translator to the limit, to the borderland or intersection . . .” (24). These repeated returns to the border “expose” the translator to the very limits of his task. In a similar vein, Michael Levine invokes the frontier to suggest that testimonies that bear witness to trauma are, in some sense, “trapped at the frontier of speech and silence, as though the ‘knowledge’ they seek to give birth to were caught in the act of transmission . . .” (11). W. J. T. Mitchell extends the metaphor of the frontier to narrative more broadly, though he is particularly concerned with the relationship between narrative and memory; for Mitchell, narrative involves the “construct[ion] of a region . . . a terrain crisscrossed by numerous internal borders, fringes, seams, and frontiers” (190). In all three formulations, translation, witnessing texts, and narrative are situated at a border or limit. And just as Levinson asserts that translation is a never-ending process, Levine argues that the “knowledge” to which witnessing texts “give birth” is “articulable and indeed only audible in the mode of repetition” (11). Moreover, Levine sees “repetition as a movement that is never one with itself,” concluding that “what comes together and insists in the mode of repetition . . . are both a drive to return obsessively to the same place and a driving desperate search for someplace different—for an uncanny difference that might emerge in the place of the same” (11-12). The “repetition” in Levine recalls Chambers’ “relay”; both scholars refer to movement with regard to witnessing writing, which makes them a particularly apt lens for an examination of S’s walking. In *Los planetas*, S’s movements are those of the translator, and thus he is constantly exposed to the limits of the task he’s set for himself. Indeed, their very repetition also belies a kind of desperation, a desire to return obsessively to the same in the hope that something different might ultimately emerge.

In addition, Levine's uses the term "belated witnessing" to describe the process of becoming "a witness to the witness," a process that "opens a space in which the impact of that testimony is given a chance to register as if for the first time" (21). The "as if for the first time" is echoed in Chambers' description of the "singularity" that a "figural event" requires in order to successfully catch and engage the attention of a reader. S is a witness, and via relay and translation, he offers the reader the possibility of becoming a witness to the witness. The space of the city in the novel stands in for the literary space that the novel opens up for the reader, a space in which the impact of S's story is given the chance to register in a singular way, as if for the first time. And if the reader does allow the impact of S's story to register—if s/he does not fumble the relay—then something will have "happened," as in Levinson's framing: the reader will have been "exposed to the finitude of his own common sense . . . forced to interpret or phrase the articulation, to add an unfamiliar element to his field of understanding, thus to shift that field . . ."

(Levinson 27). Indeed, if S walks not to assimilate his grief, but to translate his grief into something manageable, then we as readers are invited to do something similar, to witness S's grief—a grief that, perhaps, reveals the limits of our own knowledge—but also to translate it into our own "field of understanding," thereby shifting the field. That translation is not an assimilation, nor a gesture toward the universal, but a recognition and a reinscription: we are invited to recognize in S's grief something that resonates with our own experience and so to recognize something in common, but nevertheless different.

As I noted above, *Los planetas* is particularly focused on space, but the translations that take place across that space are primarily temporal ones, translations between the past and the present. As in *Bosque quemado*, these temporal translations are

underscored by a formal sense of dislocation (though the sense of dislocation and disorientation is more profound here): the novel moves back and forth in time quite frequently, marking those shifts only in very subtle ways, often with little more than a paragraph or section break. Moreover, some of the novel's repetitions emerge in conjunction with this strange temporality; we might encounter a scene that takes place in the present early in the novel, only to find a similar scene many pages later that takes place in the past. We realize, then, that the scene in the present is an echo of the past, even though we encounter it first in our reading. In what follows, I will do two longer readings of the first two scenes in the novel; I argue that these scenes present a "double beginning" and foreground the novel's photographic logic, along with its idiosyncratic spatiality and sense of time. Then, I will read several shorter scenes—two from the middle and two from the end—that describe in more detail S and M's practice of walking in the past and present, focusing on the translative quality of these movements and their relationship to trauma, grief, and loss.

The first two scenes, from the very beginning of the novel, present two separate beginnings, as if the novel begins and then restarts. The first scene is the first beginning, the novel's opening. It begins by describing a series of dreams. These are Grino's dreams, a man who turns out to be a minor character, appearing only occasionally in the rest of the book. However, by beginning with Grino, Chejfec establishes the novel's layers. Grino's appearances are a kind of meta-layer, a step back from the primary events of the novel and into its inner workings. In a single long paragraph, we learn that Grino has been dreaming of a woman he calls Sela and that Sela herself reminds him of a

photograph of schoolgirls swimming that he recalls seeing in an illustrated magazine when he was a boy.

This opening paragraph is rather peculiar, and in terms of content and plot, it has little to do with the rest of the novel. However, I want to focus briefly on the way Grino describes the photograph of the swimming schoolgirls:

De niño había observado esas revistas ilustradas, las había contemplado hasta sentir las como algo consustancial a sí mismo; las fotografías con la hilera de cuerpos en primer plano sobre un fondo impreciso de oscuridad, donde se presumía que había personas pero bien podían ser solo gradas, o incluso directamente nada. Como tampoco se veía el agua, las escolares parecían en pleno ritual, con sus manos juntas apuntando hacia abajo como si invocaran a un dios sumergido; por añadidura el título de la foto decía “Las niñas agradecen un sano desarrollo.” (16)

The reference to a photograph, a moment of ekphrasis, is also an instance of “generic catachresis” (Chambers) or “textual heterogeneity” (Mitchell, *Picture*); the photograph points to a “different level of discourse” (Mitchell, *Picture* 190), to something that inherently lies beyond the text itself. It signals, from the very beginning, a limit of the novel/text as a mode of expression, an effect that Chejfec himself has referred to as an “efecto desestabilizador,” a concept that I discuss in the introduction. Thus, it is significant that Grino is described as contemplating the photograph for so long that he begins to feel that it is “consustancial a sí mismo”—of the same substance. The “consustancial” here recalls the Christian doctrine of “consubstantiation,” the idea that, in communion, the body and blood of Christ are present alongside the bread and the wine (in contrast to transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine are fully transformed into the body and the blood). The “alongside” evokes translation in the sense of difference and supplementarity, an unfolding that is related to—but also distinct from—the source material. Chejfec’s use of the word consubstantiation, in this sense, is also catachrestic,



gesturing very subtly toward a structure of redemption, a surprising—and intriguing—move in a text that otherwise eludes redemption, foregrounding repeated translations rather than release or transcendence. In addition, the “consustancial” indicates the degree to which Grino has been affected, even seized, by this photo, a sensation that is reminiscent of Chambers’ description of witnessing writing’s capacity for capturing and unmooring its readers. This description posits a relationship between a photograph and viewer that is potentially destabilizing: the sense of being of the same substance and yet separate.

In *The Ground of the Image*, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the relationship between an image and its viewer in terms that speak to Grino’s particular set of circumstances, but also recall Chambers’ description of witnessing writing’s potential impact, a form of “uncanny mimeticism” with the capacity for “transportation into the other scene” (xvi). Nancy writes, “The image touches me, and, thus touched and drawn by it and into it, I get involved, not to say mixed up in it. There is no image without my too being in its image, but also without passing into it, as long as I look at it, that is, as long as I show it *consideration*, maintain my regard for it” (7). In Grino’s case, he has been touched by the image, has gotten involved—as an adult, he can still recall it in precise detail. He is also “in its image”—he and the photos are “consustancial”—and it is as if he has been transported, but without actually passing into it; he continues to “look at it,” and after so many viewings, to “maintain” his “regard for it.”

With Barthes in mind, we might say, too, that Grino has been not just touched, but “stung” by the photograph’s *punctum*. In the photograph, there is a line of girls against a dark backdrop. Grino assumes that there are more people beyond that first line of girls,

but he doesn't know: there could be just as easily a set of steps or even nothing at all. As a result of the dark background, the girls appear to be suspended in nothingness, since not even the water is visible, and Grino notes that in this setting, their actions—hands joining together and pointing toward the bottom of the frame—take on a ritualistic quality. If the *studium* is there in the caption—“Las niñas agradecen un sano desarrollo,” the *punctum* is there in Grino's reaction to the photo, first in his feeling that the girls are not merely swimmers, but participants in a ritual, their hands pointed downward “como si invocaran a un dios sumergido.” And, second, the *punctum* is revealed in his subtle sense that the darkness of the photo's background obscures not the water in which the girls float (an assumption he reasonably arrives at by engaging with the photo's *studium*), but nothing at all. As I noted in the previous chapter, the *punctum* not only pricks Grino, it serves as a reminder of his creatureliness, a point that squares with Nancy's distinction between being drawn into an image—that sense of the “consustancial”—and maintaining regard for the image—a reminder of one's creatureliness.

In Grino's musing over what might or might not be there in the dark backdrop of the photograph, this introductory paragraph sets up a contrast between assumption and knowledge—and their relationship to disappearance and memory—that in many ways guides S's particular sense of loss. Grino assumes, almost certainly correctly, that the girls in the photo's foreground are actually part of a larger group of girls and that they are all floating together in a swimming pool. But he can't be certain, simply because there's nothing more to see than what's there in front of him. His speculation that the girls might be suspended in nothingness is nonsensical, and the ritual he imagines them to be engaged in is pure imaginative invention. But by suggesting that something other than

our logical assumption could be true, however far-fetched, Chejfec introduces a critical distance between assumption and knowledge. Grino assumes, with near certainty, that the girls are in water, but he doesn't know this. In fact, it's the caption—text that is supplementary to the space of the photograph—that offers a confirmation of the assumption, although not even that provides certainty.<sup>22</sup> The interplay between image and text in this initial photograph recalls similar juxtapositions in *Bosque quemado*. As there, an element of instability emerges from the relationship between text and image, as well as from the relationship between the viewer, text, and image.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the relationship between Grino's photograph, which introduces the contrast between assumption and knowledge, and the topic of witnessing and postmemory. I use knowledge here in a general sense, but in the context of witnessing writing, it also alludes to Levine's definition of knowledge, as that to which testimony gives birth. If knowledge in this vein is associated with witnessing and testimony, then assumption—in the sense of both conjecture or speculation and in the sense of taking on responsibility—is linked with postmemory. Indeed, I refer to Grino's speculative musings on the photo as imaginative invention in part because it recalls Hirsch's emphasis on "imaginative investment and creation" in her definition for postmemory. The description of Grino's photograph, a moment of ekphrasis, formally underscores those themes, not only assumption and knowledge, but their relationship to

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<sup>22</sup> In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin writes, "What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value" (775), that is to foreground "one of its political functions" ("to renew from within . . . the world as it is") over its "economic function" (the "restoration" of certain subjects to "mass consumption") (775). The caption for this photograph does give it a social context, which perhaps moves it in the direction of political function. Later in the essay, Benjamin describes Epic Theater as an example of an "apparatus" that similarly serves the political over the economic, turning "consumers" into "producers—that is readers or spectators into collaborators" (777), a process that emerges through "interruption" (778). I discuss interruption with regard to the theater at greater length in chapter four.

the burdens associated with witnessing and the translation of memory, over time, into postmemory, a process that begins with knowledge and unfolds into assumption, again both as speculation and as the taking on of responsibility. Those are themes that S will pick up, as it were, once Grino's introduction ends and S's story begins.

Nancy describes the "force of the image" as a force that emerges through the "ground" or "underside" of the image; in the particular case of Grino's photograph, it seems to emerge through that dark background. Nancy explains:

through a process repeated innumerable times in painting, an image is detached from itself while also reframing itself as an image. . . . In this double operation, the ground disappears. It disappears in its essence as ground, which consists in its not appearing. One can thus say that it appears as what it is by disappearing. Disappearing as ground, it passes entirely into the image. But it does not appear for all that, and the image is not its manifestation, nor its phenomenon. It is the force of the image. . . . This force exerts its pressure "in the ground" of the image, or, rather, it is the pressure that the ground exerts on the surface—that is, under this force, in this impalpable non-place that is not merely the "support" but the *back* or *underside* of the image. (7-8)

In Grino's photograph, whatever was in the background—more girls, a set of steps, nothing at all—quite literally disappears into darkness; it can no longer be seen and thus, for Grino-as-viewer, it isn't there at all. But that darkness and disappearance also compose "the force of the image," rendering the schoolgirl swimmers ritualistic in their mannerisms and allowing Grino the feeling that he has become "consustancial" with the image. The dark background functions as the "impalpable non-place," the "back or underside of the image" that draws Grino in, as well as the readers of the novel, and it isn't surprising that this darkness is what stays with Grino when he recalls the photo as an adult. The use of "appear" and "disappear" in Nancy's description are striking here, given that disappearance is a central theme in Chejfec's novel and for the Argentine context, as one of the primary components of the Dirty War. S is haunted by M's disappearance, and

this hauntedness is the background to (and perhaps also the impetus for) the novel. It functions in the vein of Chambers' "spectral evidence,"<sup>23</sup> and the use of a photograph to introduce this idea is, as Chambers says, "more figural than directly representational" (xxvii). The darkness of the photograph evokes the haunting, uncanny sense of disappearance, and darkness and disappearance together act as Nancy's "force" to trigger Chambers' indexicality or redirection, transporting the reader (or offering the potential for transportation) toward the extreme site of trauma. In both content and form, the novel takes on the task of looking into the ground of an image, assuming that something is, or was, probably there in spite of its disappearance, while asserting the power of disappearance on the viewer.

As I discussed in the introduction, Chambers also describes the particular pull of a photograph as a force that is "double" (9). If, for Nancy, the "double operation" is the image "detached from itself while also reframing itself as an image," for Chambers, the image "enacts a double invitation to its audience of spectators, an invitation first to look and then to see" (9). As noted in the introduction and earlier in the chapter, Chambers explains that a photograph "implies" that there is "more (and other) to see," that its significance is "more (and other) than it actually represents" (9). The viewer is made to see that "more (and other)" via the photograph's capacity to "engage our attention" and then "to divert it" (9). When Grino looks at the photo (and when he recalls looking at the photo), he believes it to signify more than it actually represents. His attention is first engaged by the swimsuit-clad girls and then diverted to the mystery of the dark

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<sup>23</sup> This spectral evidence also works similarly to Nelly Richard's "residual," as I suggested in the introduction, the "modo en que lo secundario y lo no-integrado son capaces de desplazar la fuerza de la significación hacia los bordes más desfavorecidos de la escala de valores sociales y culturales, para cuestionar sus jerarquías discursivas desde posiciones laterales y centramientos híbridas" (*Residuos* 11).

background. By making Grino's recollection of the photo the first scene in the novel, Chejfec does something similar: he offers a double invitation in the way of a photograph. The introduction of the photograph also foregrounds the photographic structure of the novel; the reader's attention is engaged by one thing (something that turns out to be rather tangential to the plot) and then diverted to other things. As readers, we are ultimately led to see much more (and other) things than the initial presentation of the photo "gives us to look at." This tactic is also translative, a stylistic maneuver that captures the reader's attention and carries it over, allowing the reader to see and make sense of that "more (and other)."

This tactic—engagement and diversion—is particularly poignant and meaningful given both the novel's context and the events it describes. Diversion can be both a "positive" action, as it is here, in which the audience/reader is "led to see much more (and other)," but it can be (and is, in the context of the military junta) a "negative" action, a diversion of the audience/spectator's attention away from something horrific and traumatic. It is the latter kind of diversion, the negative kind, that witnessing writing (including *Los planetas*, I think) seeks to rectify. Thus, the novel's translative invitation is a very significant redirection, a redirection back toward something that is, as Chambers would say, routinely ignored (at best—and denied, at worst). If the military junta constantly asked its spectators to look, but not to see (a point about the nature and practice of atrocity that Chambers elucidates), Chejfec invites the reader to do the opposite—to look and then to see—with his narrator as guide. Indeed, Grino's relationship to the photo is the novel's first example of engagement and diversion, but

that relationship is replicated several times over, through the novel's content and form, as well as in its translative impact on the reader.

Nancy describes the relationship between an image and the thing it represents as a relationship characterized by distance, a description that parallels with Chambers' portrayal of the relationship between a past trauma and the aftermath society of the present and with postmemory's concern for generational distance. Thus, in addition to presenting to the viewer an opportunity for interpretation, the inclusion of the photo also underscores the sense of distance—between past and present, between living and dead—that is so crucial to the novel and that requires the translation and movement that S undertakes. Nancy writes: “What is distinct in being-there is being-image: it is not here but over there, in the distance, in a distance that is called ‘absence’ (by which one often wants to characterize the image) only in a very hasty manner” (9). Nancy's reference to absence is significant, since Chejfec's novel is about absence: both the absence of M and S's coming to terms with that absence. Nancy's language refocuses the relationship between absence and distance so that absence—here, M's absence—becomes like a “there” that is simply so far that it can't be seen (or, perhaps, a past “there” that is simply no longer present). In that case, S's walks become a means for approaching that distance, just as the novel provides a site for bridging those distances.

Indeed, Nancy continues:

The absence of the imaged subject is nothing other than an intense presence, receding into itself, gathering itself together in its intensity. Resemblance gathers together in force and gathers itself as a force of the *same*—the same differing in itself from itself: hence the enjoyment [*jouissance*] we take in it. We touch on the same and on this power that affirms this: I am indeed what I am, and I am this well beyond or well on this side of what I am for you, for your aims and your manipulations. We touch on the intensity of this withdrawal or this excess. Thus

*mimesis* encompasses *methexis*, a participation or a contagion through which the image seizes us. (9)

In the particular moment in which Grino recollects his dream of Sela and recalls the photo of the girl swimmers, he maintains a certain enjoyment, or *jouissance*, in these layers of remembrance (in fact, the dream of Sela has a kind of sexual overtone, as does his recollection of the way he engaged with the photo of the girls as a boy), although he is also unnerved. But Nancy's description is unnerving, too, possibly even destabilizing: the receding that is also a gathering, the heightened sense of self ("I indeed am what I am") as distanced from the imaged subject ("I am this well beyond or well on this side of what I am for you").<sup>24</sup> There is also a connection to translation: the reference to excess recalls both Levinson and Moreiras' descriptions of translation, and the push and pull of withdrawal and excess, in particular, has something in common with Levinson's description of translation as frontier, in which the impossibility of crossing the border requires some kind of withdrawal in order to have the opportunity to re-approach the border in a never-ending process. That *mimesis* can encompass *methexis* is vaguely threatening, particularly in the reference to contagion. The idea of being seized by the image is at once appealing and terrifying.

The way Chejfec's novel unfolds both mimics and seizes on the more unnerving, and destabilizing, side of the relationship between a thing and its image. Put more broadly, if memory is itself a kind of image (as Mitchell suggests), then *Los planetas* seizes on the unnerving relationship between a memory and the thing or person it recalls.

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<sup>24</sup> As I noted in the introduction, Mitchell suggests that perhaps our interest in turning the differences between two media (such as text and image) into "metaphysical oppositions" stems "from the basic relationship of the self (as a speaking and seeing subject) and the other (a seen and silent object)" (*Picture* 161-162). Both scholars, then, posit our engagement with images (and with distinguishing images from other media) as an engagement that is intertwined with our sense of self. For more, see Mitchell, *Picture* 161-163.



That sense of the unnerving and the unstable is the effect of this first beginning for the novel, with its presentation of a photograph as a metaphor for the attraction and redirection that the novel seeks to perform. The beginning is disorienting (and increasingly so as the novel goes on, since we don't know at the beginning how peripheral a character Grino will turn out to be), and this disorientation speaks to the destabilizing effects of images, absence and distance, and memory—motifs that recur over the subsequent pages of the novel. In what follows, the narrator is seized by memory, as a viewer is seized by the image, and in the novel, M—the imaged subject—is both absent and intensely present. This is true for S, who propels himself through the city as part of his desire to remember M, but also for the reader, who receives S's memories. As readers, we are brought into this cycle of withdrawal and excess, carried along with S through the distances that define M's absence in an attempt to bridge the present to the past.

Several lines later, the scene shifts abruptly, and we read the novel's second beginning. In another moment of generic catachresis, the change is described in cinematic terms—"Algo ocurre y el escenario se transforma" (16)—as if there's been a quick jump cut. This line also reads as a textual (re)direction for the reader, calling to the reader's attention to something new. As such, it stands out from the text in a way that's similar to a theater direction (part of the play or film as a text, but not read during the actual performance). This beginning effectively starts the novel's main plot, which makes the preceding scene with Grino seem more strange—and even random.

This second beginning starts with an explosion. The reader will learn the significance of the explosion in a page or two, but the initial description is of the blast

itself. In fact, the description distances itself from any particular subject or subjects, in a way that also distances the reader from understanding the significance of the explosion, at least at first. In the first sentence, the subject is the explosion: “La detonación se produce puntual” (16). The next sentence is written without a specific subject, using instead the “se impersonal”—“Uno puede imaginarse . . .”—as if to indicate that there were no witnesses, that its violence can only be imagined. The sentence continues to tell us that what we might be able to imagine is the sound of the explosion: “el estruendo de piedras partidas, ramas quebradas . . .” (16).<sup>25</sup> The narrator uses the “se impersonal” again—“se tiene la impresión”—in order to offer a distinction between “los cambios en la naturaleza” (changes wrought by nature) and the manmade violence of the explosion. Chejfec writes, “Muchas veces se tiene la impresión de que los cambios en la naturaleza no perduran;” but—and here is the first “I”—after the news of the explosion “presentí que un aspecto de aquellos cambios . . . desde este momento sería menos evidente, pero más implacable, que las transformaciones del paisaje” (17). At this point, we still don’t know what caused the explosion or why it occurred, but the implication seems to be that the effects of the explosion will be felt rather than observed. This observation underscores the horrific nature of this particular act of violence, in which the effects are devastating, but invisible.

The description continues without reference to specific subjects, who caused the explosion or why. We now have a sense of the nature of the explosion, particularly its sound, as well as its potential for profound effects. In the next paragraph, we learn where the explosion took place: “Era una llanura indolente, también intercambiable: hay

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<sup>25</sup> “Ramas quebradas” calls to mind “bosque quemado.” Both indicate and metaphorize intense disruption and destruction (explosion and Alzheimer’s, respectively), though of a very different order.

infinitos campos parecidos” (17). The narrator notes, once again, that there is almost no one around, no witnesses: “Sólo en la mente de los pobladores, en el recuerdo de los animales y en la memoria de esa gran extensión . . . quedó flotando, como un ruido impaciente por acabar, el estallido” (17). Here, remembrance and memory belong to animals and to the land, rather than to any particular person or group.

Finally, several lines later, we learn the cause of the explosion, its substance, and its effects. Chejfec’s description prolongs this moment of revelation in a way that heightens the anticipation for—and thus the importance of—this information. But delaying this knowledge also makes it so that the reader receives it in a way that mimics the way it would have been relayed to the general public. It happens in a deserted place, and there are no witnesses. The public finds out about it only later, after the news reports it, likely in accordance with what Chejfec describes as “una lógica que recurría a un orden desconocido para ponerse de manifiesto” (17). In fact, the explosion turns out to be an explosion of bodies, their remains scattered irrevocably across space: “Aquella noticia hablaba de restos humanos esparcidos por una extensa superficie. Hay una palabra que lo describe muy bien: regados. Miembros regados, repartidos, ordenados en círculos imaginarios desde el centro inequívoco, la explosión. . . . los cuerpos deshechos después de haber sufrido, separados en trozos y dispersos” (17). Once we learn that this explosion happens in order to get rid of human remains, the curious absence of any specific subject from the description, as well as its delayed revelation, makes sense: this is an act of violence that gets rid of subjects, that makes them disappear. And disappearance, like an explosion, is by its very definition an act that is felt, but not seen.

The description of this initial explosion establishes two important spaces for the novel. It occurs on a desolate plain “más allá de las afueras de la ciudad,” but the narrator reads about it while sitting on a city street (and so, as readers, we learn about the explosion in the same mode as the narrator). While most of the novel unfolds over the space of the city of Buenos Aires, in the same place where the narrator learns of the explosion, some of it takes places in the “afueras” or in one of the “infinitos campos parecidos.” The fact that the explosion occurs in a space where the narrator isn’t—in a place where nobody is, in fact—is important for the geographic and the historical setting of the novel. The narrator notes, “Pocas cosas hay en apariencia más gratuitas que detonar la intemperie, pero entonces lo macabre se disfrazaba de sinsentido o inocencia, también de cosa banal, reemplazando al verdadero rostro del terror” (17).<sup>26</sup> This description establishes that the explosion takes place not just outside the city, but also outside the present, in the “entonces” of the Argentine Dirty War, in a time when the detonation of an empty plain could be made to seem banal, a manipulation of terror into the mundane. In other words, there’s a shift in time here; the explosion took place in the “then” of the past and is being recounted in the present of the here and now.

These opening paragraphs establish the sense of ambiguity and disappearance that pervade the novel. The description of the explosion, in its slow unfolding, is confusing

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<sup>26</sup> Diana Taylor, in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War,”* refers to this process as “percepticide” (123). She explains that in order to be “‘good’ Argentines, people were forced to focus on the given-to-be-seen and ignore the atrocities given-to-be-invisible, taking place around them” (119). She adds, “The triumph of the atrocity was that it forced people to look away—a gesture that undid their sense of personal and communal cohesion even as it seemed to bracket them from their volatile surroundings” (122). And she adds that the regime denied Argentines the capacity to be witnesses: “The military spectacle made people pull back in fear, denial, and tacit complicity from the show of force. . . . The military violence could have been relatively invisible, as the term *disappearance* suggests. The fact that it wasn’t indicates that the population as a whole was the intended target, positioned by means of the spectacle. People had to deny what they saw and, by turning away, collude with the violence around them” (123). Chambers’ point about denial in aftermath society is all the more potent given that the Dirty War made denial a condition of people’s existence for the duration of the regime, a condition that surely persists into the present.

and mysterious, and by delaying our understanding of what's happening and why it's significant, we are made to read along with the narrator, as if we are following along "in real time" (a phrase that is telling in itself, since we do not usually think of novels as unfolding in real time). When we discover, on the following page, that our narrator believes this explosion to have disposed of the body of his kidnapped friend, M, we realize that this is a novel about an explosion that both causes a disappearance—M's body is literally made to disappear—and covers up a disappearance. Once M's body has been exploded, the facts of what happened to him can never really be known. Our sense of this information is relayed to us—transferred or carried over—via S's experience. His lack of knowledge becomes our lack of knowledge. We read through his eyes, and the understanding that we won't find out what really happened to M is a small echo of S's own horror at being unable to know M's fate. With Grino, we learn how to enter or engage with the novel; this initial description of the explosion is our first real invitation into the space of the novel, an indication of the way we'll traverse its grounds with S as our guide.

As content, the explosion is an example of the "negative" diversion that I mentioned earlier: it catches people's attention (it's mentioned as news, for example), but then, almost as a sleight of hand, diverts attention from the process of disappearance by clearing away any evidence of those disappearances.<sup>27</sup> In form, however, the explosion is indexical, a diversion in Chambers' more positive sense; it catches our attention, as readers, and then redirects it toward the more intangible effects of violence and loss. The explosion and the grieving that follows are the cause and effect of S's loss and his quest to put the pieces back together, in a figurative sense, becomes a metaphor for what it

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<sup>27</sup> Again, an affirmation of percepticide.

means to live in the wake of that loss. This is part of what the novel is “about,” and its confusing chronology and its lack of linearity ask the reader to engage in a process of piecing back together that mimics S’s own process.

If those first paragraphs are our entry into the space of the novel, the ones that immediately follow acquaint us with the novel’s peculiar sense of time. S assumes that his friend M, missing and presumed dead, was part of that explosion, although he notes “no tenía entonces, como no tengo ahora, forma de comprobar la presencia de M en la explosión” (18). But, he asserts, “tampoco estaba o estoy en condiciones de descartarla. Imaginarlo entre el grupo de muertos servía de poco, incluso no servía para nada; sin embargo era un pensamiento que se imponía una y otra vez a cualquier asociación” (19). The verb tenses here are interesting: the imperfect past, followed by the present indicative—“no tenía . . . no tengo” and “tampoco estaba o estoy”—set up these two temporal points, a (no doubt imperfect) past and the novel’s present. Indeed, S’s descriptions of the moment in which he read this news is filled with attempts to make sense of the relationship between the past and the present. He lifts his gaze from the newspaper to see a taxi in the street, and he notes, “no terminaba de frenar ni de moverse. Quise pensar en algo: así vamos por el tiempo, me dije, sin avanzar apenas” (18). Here, there’s a sense of suspended motion: the car continues to break at the same time it continues to move, moving without advancing. Likewise, we go through time, without necessarily moving forward. The novel’s timing is similar. Ultimately, we go from the first page to the last, but within the novel, time doesn’t always move forward.

Several lines later, S reflects on the relationship between the news, as it’s recorded in the newspaper, and the life (or lives) it intends to record:

Quiero decir que la vida proliferaba en hechos mientras las letras del diario ya eran algo detenido, que a su vez hablaba de un pasado a primera vista fatal, una cosa sobre la que no cabía abrigar esperanzas, etcetera. Mientras la vida aunada con el tiempo iba hacia adelante y se multiplicaba en sus infinitas ramificaciones y posibilidades, las noticias que cancelaban el pasado y nos dejaban sin esperanzas eran como la mueca cínica de lo porvenir, el llamado que nos advertía que lo blanco, por ejemplo, sería desde entonces bien oscuro. (18)

Here, S muses on a potential connection between “the news”—or what’s being recorded but has already passed—and the future; the news, inherently a record of a past event, also signals future changes, that something that’s been one way might, “from then on,” be another way. Even as time advances in “its infinite ramifications and possibilities,” the news (i.e. the actual events in the past) serves to limit those possibilities.

It’s interesting, too, that S refers this news as “el llamado”—the call, since both Chambers and Levine note that witnessing texts act in this way, as calls that reawaken or attune the reader to the trauma that’s being described. It’s only after these ruminations that S reveals his personal investment in the explosion, so the news itself awakens S not just to M’s death, but to his changed life, that from here on out, his will be a life marked by tragedy. And the news also signals to us, as readers, that this will be a novel about loss, that S is a witness (to M’s life and passing, if not to the actual explosion) and a survivor and that from here on out for us as readers, this will be a story of grief and loss. S describes the period of waiting between M’s kidnapping and the news of the explosion in a way that further complicates S’s thoughts about the past:

Entre el secuestro y la noticia había un lapso de varios días, era una interminable masa de tiempo, también insustancial y capaz de reproducirse sin término, que por esas crueles situaciones del destino, como a veces se dice, precisamente habría de encontrar en el diario de esa tarde la promesa de terminar, si no de completarse por lo menos de cesar, adquirir alguna forma y de esta manera quedar a la espera de un después. (18)

Before S learns of the explosion, time feels “interminable,” as if the waiting could go on forever. Again, S’s sense of this time is contradictory: it is at once “insustancial”—insubstantial, minimal—and “capaz de reproducirse sin término,” full of possibilities for endless reproductions. But the time between the kidnapping and the news of the explosion is actually just a few days, and in offering the news of the explosion, the newspaper intervenes, providing the possibility of an end to the waiting, signaling a transition from the “before” to the “after.” This ending—“la promesa de terminar”—becomes a kind of respite, “la espera de un después.” As painful as the news is, it at least presents S with the possibility of being released from the potentially greater pain of not knowing at all. These observations also speak to the ways in which a particular event can affect not just one’s approach to the future, but one’s perception of the past; S seems to realize only in retrospect that the time spent waiting, which felt interminable at the time, was only “un lapso de varios días.”

In this second beginning, we get both a description of the explosion and a description of S’s reaction to the explosion. In the former, we have an entry into the space of the novel; in the latter, we begin to get a sense of its time. Each is depicted using language that emphasizes proliferation and dispersion. Chejfec refers to the exploded bodies as “regados, repartidos, ordenados en círculos imaginarios desde el centro inequívoco”; they are “deshechos”; “separados en trozos y dispersos.” Similarly, Chejfec writes that life (in contrast to the news) “prolifera . . . en hechos” (18); he describes time marching forward, “se multiplicaba en sus infinitas ramificaciones y posibilidades,” “capaz de reproducirse sin término” (19). The references to proliferation and reproduction, to infinite ramifications are all examples of repetition, and they echo the



explosion, with its millions of pieces, scattering and dispersing. Here, the repetitions recall Levine's assertion that the knowledge that witnessing texts engender is "articulable and indeed only audible in the mode of repetition"—and, further, that this repetition is a movement that is "doubly driven" by the need to return to the same and by the "driving desperate search for someplace different" (11-12). It is as if the trauma of M's disappearance is, indeed, only articulable through this language of dispersal and repetition, as if the tragedy of losing him resists any other form but the scattered and the fragmented. S's own movements are repetitive, too, perhaps in response, a means of "attuning" himself to the nuances of his loss. He walks in order to pick up the pieces; here, the rhetoric of dispersal renders that figurative expression almost literal. Over and over again, he attempts to pick up the pieces in a way that is coherent and meaningful, and these attempts are translative, a return to the same ground in search of something different. As in translation, an excess persists; he might be able to achieve coherence, but that coherence is never sufficient, and so he begins again.

Moreover, the disjointed chronology of the novel makes for a temporality that is scattered and non-sequential, mirroring the explosion, with the pieces of S and M's story dispersed, out-of-order, over the course of the novel. In this way, the tragedy of the explosion is relayed to us as readers, forcing us to piece together the anecdotes in order to make sense of their meaning, in order to approach the sense of loss and grief that the novel is "about." And the novel itself, which offers S and M's story in pieces, through different accounts of the same theme, suggests the ways in which integrating the effects of trauma and loss sometimes demands this translative effort, a continual accounting for and recounting of new versions of the same old story.

The disjointed chronology of the novel is also a reflection of S's fragmented memories and his own disorganized sense of time. In Mitchell's framing, "the storehouse of memory" comprises images and text, as well as description and story (the double opening to the novel points to the visual and textual components of memory, with its reference to a photograph and to words on newsprint, both of which prompt recall and reflection) (*Picture* 194). "The classic memory technique" makes sense of those images and text by locating them in space and in time; the technique serves as "a way of reconstructing temporal orders by mapping them onto spatial configurations" (among these spatial configurations are "memory places") (*Picture* 192). S's narration is a "reconstruction" of "temporal order," and its disjointedness asks the reader to undertake a similar task. For S, this project is intimately linked with various "memory places," and his wandering is a kind of "mapping." However, the reader's reconstructive effort also demands a mapping process. Mitchell makes a distinction between story and description that links story with the temporal and description with the spatial. First, he defines "stories" as "a temporal sequence of events" (*Picture* 194). He adds that both stories and descriptions "can be withdrawn from the storehouse of memory[.]" but he explains that "descriptions . . . have an odd status in relation to the visual and spatial order from which they emerge" (*Picture* 194). This "odd status" stems from the fact that "[d]escription might be thought of as the moment in narration when the technology of memory threatens to collapse into the materiality of its means. Description typically 'stops' or arrests the temporal movement through narrative; it 'spreads the narrative in space,' according to Genette" (*Picture* 194). For Mitchell, these "stops" in the "temporal movement" present a narrative problem. He writes,

But the point of the spatial memory system is orderly, reliable movement through *time*. Description threatens the function of the system by stopping to look too closely and too long at its parts—those “places” with their “images” in the storehouse of memory. Memory, like description, is a technique which should be subordinate to free temporality: if memory becomes dominant, we find ourselves locked in the past; if description takes over, narrative temporality, progress toward an end, is endangered, and we become paralyzed in the endless proliferation of descriptive detail. (*Picture* 194)

The references to “system” and “technique” suggest that memory is a process oriented toward an end, at least in the way Mitchell frames it here. And if memory is indeed oriented toward a specific end—and it often is—then anything that causes the process to derail or delay is a problem, resulting in the sense of being “locked in the past,” “endangered,” and “paralyzed.” The reference to “the endless proliferation of descriptive detail” recalls S’s assertion that “la vida proliferaba en hechos” at the moment he reads the news of the explosion. In both these references, “proliferations” has an unsettling quality.

On the one hand, we might say that *Los planetas* is, in form, a kind of storehouse of memory; in particular, the novel represents a storehouse for S’s memories of M. It contains images and text, description and story, and S is constantly threatened by—or perhaps threatens with—description. S is frequently distracted by the degree to which the city evokes his past with M and thus calls up M’s absence. At these moments, S is himself “arrested”; he stops to look “too closely” and for “too long” at those places that most poignantly recall M and their friendship. In addition, the novel’s formal recourse to description effectively slows it down, “arresting its temporal movement” and allowing it to “spread in space,” thereby mimicking memory at its most “dominant,” the point at which it has taken over, as it has in S’s case, locking him in time and in grief. In this way,

the narrative relays this sense of arrested temporal movement to the reader, who is made to stop along with S as he detains himself at these sites of memory.

The issue here is not only memory per se but S's relationship to memory. Mitchell explains that both memory and description are typically "characterized as instrumental or 'servant' functions in the realms of textuality and mental life" (*Picture* 194). Thus, "Memory is a technology for gaining movement in and mastery over the subjective temporality of consciousness and the objective temporality of discursive performance. To lack memory is to be a slave of time, confined to space; to have memory is to use space as an instrument in the control of time and language" (*Picture* 194). S has an abundance of memory, and so he uses the space at his disposal. He walks in order to propel his memories through time, to carry them over and forward, to free himself from the stasis of description and push memory through time and into free temporality. If his task is to reclaim his mental life, his walking can be read as a technology of memory, a means toward that end.<sup>28</sup> Walking, here, is in tension with Mitchell's static description; it is also in tension with Nancy's "contagion," the means by which an image "seizes" us.

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<sup>28</sup> For Nancy, the significance and power of the image lies precisely in its superficiality and inherent lack of profundity. An image, after all, is two dimensional—a term we sometimes invoke disparagingly—but this two-dimensional form is precisely what makes the image powerful: "It is a totality that fits and coincides with itself. . . . In coming to the fore, it goes within. But its 'within' is not anything other than its 'fore': its ontological content is sur-face, ex-position, ex-expression" (9). Nancy adds, "the image never stops tightening and condensing into itself. That is why it is immobile, calm and flat in its presence, the coming-together and coinciding of an event and an eternity. The musical, choreographic, cinematographic, or kinetic image in general is no less immobile in this sense: it is the distension of a present of intensity, in which succession is also a simultaneity" (10). Again, the image is a contradiction; it "never stops tightening and condensing" and yet it is "immobile, calm, and flat in its presence." It is in this peculiar space that we find the coming together of an impossible coincidence, and this is unnerving: the event is, by definition, a specific moment in time, whereas eternity is all time; so again, the spatial distinction persists even as the temporal distinction collapses. The present both distends and intensifies, and succession—which is the opposite of simultaneous—nevertheless comes simultaneously. This description is in line with the form of the book, in which very little happens, and yet everything about S and M—their childhood together, M's disappearance, S's grief—unfolds. The vignettes come in succession, and yet they reveal a kind of simultaneity, too, in which the actual order of the events is not as important as the fact that they happened at all. In a way, the book narrates events that attempt to touch the eternity of loss; loss becomes the ever-distending backdrop of intensity to the events that unfold—or that have unfolded—in S's life, with and without M.

Descriptions and images both capture and engage, but the indexicality that Chambers describes also requires diversion, and walking offers a mode of diversion—of transport. In this vein, S does not aim to rid himself of memory; as Mitchell points out, lacking memory is also problematic, since it renders one a slave to time or confined to a space.<sup>29</sup> For S, memory is dominant and overwhelming, but he also needs it in order to locate himself in the present. Thus, his task is to avoid the paralysis of memory as dominant, while preserving memory as a technology for moving forward in his own mental life.

On the other hand, it's possible to read memory as something other than a "technique" and the novel as something other than a "storehouse of memory." The novel is expansive enough to be both. While I'm not interested in arguing for one or the other, I do think that memory is often understood as nothing more than a technique, so by offering us both possibilities, the novel is already suggesting that memory can be something other than "just" a means to an end. And if memory is something other than technique or system, what might that something else look like? It's helpful here to think of proliferation in conjunction with the kinds of repetitive returns that Levinson and Levine describe, as well with Chambers' relay. With regard to Levine, in particular, we might see a technical version of memory "a drive to return obsessively to the same place," whereas the non-technical version becomes the other half of Levine's equation, "a driving desperate search for someplace different." In this sense, memory—and postmemory, too, to a certain degree—embodies possibility and is aligned with

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<sup>29</sup> Mitchell is making this argument with regard to slave narratives, and so the language of being a "slave to time" is particularly important. Slavery is not at issue here, of course, but there are elements of the Dirty War that recall the violence of slavery, for example, practices of torture that deprive its victims of sensory experience, i.e. knowledge of space *and* time. In some narratives of memory, the call to produce memories is particularly urgent because some other (usually political) force is calling to move past trauma in a way that threatens to efface, i.e. forget, the events that caused the trauma in the first place. S's task is perhaps less urgent, focused on a more personal kind of memory, though one that resonates in other ways with the national/collective and with that sense of urgency.

translation as a never-ending process and with relay as a process that prompts a relationship between witness and reader. Indeed, it seems to me this view of memory also recalls Moreiras' assertion that "translation is not the final horizon of thinking," where memory as a means to an end is not the final (or only) horizon of thinking.

S's walks are especially significant in light of that last assertion, since they represent a technology of memory, and they also gesture to something other than a teleological view of memory, toward (and even beyond) the never-ending iterations that translation implies. Put another way, walking is the means for diversion—toward the "more (and other)"—and a diversion in and of itself, a metaphoric rendering of those never-ending iterations. As I mentioned at the outset, S says that the walks are transcribed into words on the page, and they represent a translation from the literal to the figurative, relayed from the witness to the reader. They also one of the threads that is continuous between the past and the present, so if the explosion that opens the book suggests the trauma of a single event that irrevocably divides time into a before and an after, the walks mediate between the two, particularly within the space of the city.

Indeed, even after M disappears, S continues to walk and wander on his own, though he and Buenos Aires are marked by M's absence. In the immediate aftermath of M's death, S describes the connection between his friendship with M and the city itself.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> S and M as walkers recalls both the figure of the flâneur and the Situationist *dérive* (for more on either figure, see Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* and *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, and Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*"). In the South American context, the urban setting also recalls the trope of "the lettered city." None of these figures or archetypes seems quite right for S and M or for *Los planetas* more generally, which is interesting in itself—a suggestion that this particular context requires or even begets a different kind of walker and a different understanding of the city as setting. On the other hand, the specificity of the city here, and the sense of Buenos Aires as site of memory does recall several practices (both memorial and political) that have emerged in the wake of the Dirty War, including the practice of *escrache* (protesting outside the homes of military and political higher-ups, particularly those thought to be guilty who have not otherwise been brought to justice) and the laying of tiles in memory of the disappeared at various sites of significance throughout the city.

He says, “Rehenes de la geografía, nuestro pasado transcurre bajo el influjo de la ciudad. Esa ciudad antigua sigue siendo nuestro umbral. Una trama abigarrada de rectas y atajos, con ángulos abiertos hasta la exageración, de una amplitud inaudita, se impuso como el escenario de nuestros recorridos” (22). Here, S points out that his past is not only intimately tied to the geography of the city, but that he and M were its hostages. The city exerts a powerful force over his life—“se impuso” suggests a certain agency on the city’s part—but S also says that the city has changed in M’s absence. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of M’s disappearance, S describes the city in language that clearly mirrors the dispersion and chaos of the explosion: “El presente verdadero se alejaba y las cosas concretas de la ciudad . . . ahora se disolvían en un núcleo de desorden” (23). It’s as if the city itself is slowly exploding—or, perhaps, imploding. Whereas the city was an active force in the past, holding its inhabitants hostage, imposing itself as the stage upon which their lives unfolded, it can’t hold the present together. Indeed, this dissolution seems to bring S’s memories of M into relief: “Esta dispersión de la ciudad, que únicamente dejaba en pie las marcas que hablaban de nosotros dos, y por lo tanto poniendo más en evidencia la falta de M, me trastornó durante varios meses y también me dejó sin habla. Era otro el que podía hablar, no yo” (23). S’s descriptive language signals a shift in the nature of the city, from a dramatic, active city to a passive, receding one. In the past, the city “se impuso” as background to S and M’s wanderings—an active verb. The city holds S and M hostage; it is full of exaggerated angles, so big that its dimensions are exceptional. In contrast, in the months after M’s disappearance, its characteristics are passive ones: it disperses, leaving—“dejaba”—the traces of S and M together, a verb that indicates withdrawal, a revelation of the traces by default, rather than on purpose. The

contrast between imposing and leaving, between active and passive, is glaring. As a result of this slow dispersion, M's absence is made clearer, starker: what's left for M in a city that can't hold together the present is a city that carries all the signs and memories of the past—it's as if the city persists in its grip on the past, while the present drifts further and further from its center. It's important, too, to note the connection Chejfec makes between past, present, and speaking. Adrift in the present, S is almost unable to speak—the "otro" who can speak may be M or simply others, more broadly, other inhabitants of the city—but this sense of dissolution and dispersion leaves S unable to speak or bear witness, at least not in the days and months immediately following the news of M's death.

The space of the novel mirrors the city's relationship to the past and present. Its lack of linearity and its fragmented sense of time and memory, even its recurrence to fable, distract from the central narrative thread in a way that's reminiscent of the city's inability to hold onto the present. The "cosas concretas" of the novel often fade into the background, shifting the novel's focus toward the abstract. In this sense, the space of the novel, like the space of the city, resembles a "núcleo de desorden." As in the city, this formal dispersion and disorder redirects the reader's focus to M's absence and the traces of his memory. Moreover, by presenting the significance of the city for S and M's relationship early, before we've seen much of the city or of either character, Chejfec gives the reader information whose importance will become increasingly clear as the novel unfolds. As readers, we learn in the first few pages how crucial the city is to S and M's relationship, how much it influenced their lives (and subsequently M's death), and so we can watch for its reappearance in the pages that follow. Chejfec invokes the city strategically, presenting it as a trope and thus signaling its indexical function. Much,



much later, at the end of the novel, S underscores this point: recounting yet another stroll, he remarks “Yo pensaba en M, cuán distinta sería esa caminata si estuviera, del mismo modo como sería diferente la ciudad” (218).

The significance of Buenos Aires as a site of translation is sharpest in the many scenes of walking, most of which occur in the middle part of the novel. Although the novel moves between the three narrative threads mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (S in the present, S and M as children, the stories S and M tell each other), all three threads take place primarily in Buenos Aires (with several notable exceptions). Thus, even as the novel moves back and forth in time, the space stays more or less the same. In this sense, the city of Buenos Aires is very much a place that allows for “the connection of distinct worlds” (Levinson 24), particularly distinct temporal worlds. Moreover, the walking, insofar as it is a technology of memory, is often what propels the movement between those worlds so that S (and, in the past, M, too) carries these memories and stories with him as he traverses the city of Buenos Aires. The stories and memories are literally “translated,” in the sense of *translatio*, that is, they are carried across space as they are carried through time. As we see S reckon with these stories alone, on his own, we come to understand how even as S recounts these stories to us, the readers, for the first time (or, per Levine, “as if for the first time”), they clearly come from, and reflect, “prior models,” whether a specific earlier version, one once told by M, now recounted by S, or simply a prototype for the kind of stories one boy tells another. Further, because we understand these stories to have been told in the past as they are being told again in the novel’s present, we also see the stories carrying forward, via continuity and renewal, in the mode of Benjamin’s “afterlife.” In the past, M and S carry

them together; more poignantly, in the present, S carries them alone. Perhaps most crucially, we see how these stories and memories negotiate a permanent divide between a past in which S and M were together and a present (and future) in which M is gone. The sense of a permanent divide, here, is part of what lends the novel a postmemorial quality. We see these memories told and retold, consistently returning to the border between the past when M lived and the present in which he is he is dead. We know that the stories, no matter how beautiful or poignant, are fundamentally different in S's telling than they were in the past; they are changed by S's recounting of them in M's absence. S repeatedly makes an attempt to bear witness to the past in which M lived, but the attempt(s) will always be inadequate and incomplete.

About halfway through the book, S recounts an accidental meeting with Sito, a friend of his and M's from childhood. This meeting takes place in the novel's present, as part of the primary narrative thread, and S hasn't seen Sito in years, certainly not since M's disappearance. As with many of the descriptions of walking in the novel, the site of this encounter is specific to Buenos Aires. S gives us the precise corner for their meeting (at the corner of Tucumán and Reconquista) and seems genuinely moved by its randomness—he points out, “Un minuto antes o un minuto después todo habría sido diferente” (112); they wouldn't have seen each other at all. In fact, Sito's very name seems to play both with “sitio,” site, and with “cita,” date or appointment—an unlikely meeting at an unlikely spot. The two men decide to sit down together for a coffee, and after they finish, they leave and walk together for a time.

S recounts this walk in great detail, and at this point in the novel, we know that it is another iteration of the many walks he's taken through Buenos Aires. They walk down

Corrientes, one of the principal streets in Buenos Aires, which runs roughly east-west. The street is also the location of the “Obelisco,” the city’s obelisk which commemorates 400 years from the city’s founding. S tells us that they’re walking west on Corrientes as the sun is setting: “Un trazo ancho que subía, iluminado por el sol desde el final, el oeste, eso era Corrientes” (121). Clearly, then, the time of day, along with the precise location in the city, is significant; S says, “Nos faltaban pocas cuadras y algunos minutos para ver proyectada, sobre el pavimento cada vez más larga, la sombra del Obelisco” (122).

S recounts the conversation he and Sito have as they walk, and he notes that he is not being entirely honest with Sito about his life and work, though he suspects that Sito is also being deceptive. Then rather suddenly, in a way that echoes the abruptness of the transition from Grino to the news of the explosion, S’s narration changes tack. He begins to describe the weather, prefacing the description with a quasi-address to the reader: “Quien conozca el tiempo de Buenos Aires . . . podrá admirarse y dudar de lo que voy a decir, pero fue como ocurrió” (122). Even as he anticipates his readers’ doubt, there is a note of intimacy in his suggestion that some may share his familiarity with the city. He continues, “el cielo fue cubierto por una nube tan espesa que en un lapso muy breve pareció anochecer” (122), and he adds,

Era sencillo predecir la lluvia inminente; sin embargo todos sabían que no iba a llover. Ese cielo . . . parecía condenar a cualquier otro fenómeno del clima, cualquier otro estado del aire, a la caducidad. En ese momento todo el mundo creyó estar frente a un pasado abolido, sólo recuperado por alguna combinación insólita del azar: era un fenómeno admirable si de inmediato no se asociaba con lo milagroso. (122)

It lasted, he says, not more than 30 minutes and then “[d]espués de unos minutos el cielo se despejaría para que el sereno atardecer continúe con su progreso” (123). By that time, S says, he and Sito had reached the obelisk itself and, seemingly, the end of their

conversation, as well. Both seem to know that they won't likely see each other again, unless, perhaps, they cross paths again by chance; they use the weather as an excuse to part ways. S says, "mientras la oscuridad se desvanecía con tanta rapidez, Sito y yo nos despedimos con mayor premura" (123). As Sito hurries away, S stays for a moment at the Obelisk and thinks that M must have had a hand in their meeting: "Así fue mi encuentro con Sito: parecía un sueño de tan casual, y por ello me resultaba clara la intervención de M" (124).

This passage narrates one of S's many walks in the novel's present, and I evoke it, in part, for the specificity of its description of the city and its weather; it is yet another walk, a reiteration and translation of many walks before it. At the same time, it is singular, unique for being shared with Sito, whom S has not seen in years, and for the peculiar weather, the sudden darkness. S uses "insólito"—strange or even incredible—several times, first to note "lo insólito de encontrarnos" (112) and later to describe the crowd's reaction to the sudden change in weather: "todo el mundo creyó estar frente a un pasado abolido, solo recuperado por alguna combinación *insólita* del azar" (122, emphasis mine). S's meeting with Sito happens not just anywhere, but at a specific corner; they walk down a particular street, at a particularly noteworthy hour of the day, and are standing at a central and well-known spot—the Obelisk—when this bizarre darkness takes over and (as the darkness clears) when the time comes to say goodbye. Their meeting is clearly marked by its location—indeed, as S watches Sito leave, trying to "distinguir una cabeza" as he disappears into the crowd, he remarks that the very spot on which he stands is "acarici[ado]" by the shadow of the obelisk, now fully "alargada"

on the pavement.<sup>31</sup> The bizarre confluence of events—the chance encounter with Sito, the peculiar climate—leads S to feel clearly M’s “intervención,” as if something so strange, so marked by chance and randomness, could only be made to happen by some external force (124). Everything about the meeting is marked by their location in the city; it is also marked (perhaps even guided) by M’s absence. S reacts to this encounter in the same way the crowd reacts to the sudden darkness; he, too, feels himself to be “frente a un pasado abolido,” and his opportunity to recover it is made possible only by his “insólito” meeting with Sito. Indeed, M seems moved by Sito’s invitation to coffee, in part because their meeting evokes M’s absence and, he says, “sirvió para hacerme sentir que de M podía provenir algo bueno, y que ello no debía pertenecer necesariamente al pasado” (124). If the loss of M is part of the “pasado abolido,” the realization that M “no debía pertenecer necesariamente al pasado” is one of the “infinitas ramificaciones y posibilidades” that emerges in the wake of that loss. Sito represents a connection to the past, but his reappearance in S’s life allows S to imagine that his memories of M might play a different role in the future.

The references to the “insólito” and to chance underscore the impact that this encounter has for S; it’s no small thing that the meeting makes him consider the possibility that “algo bueno” could come from M or, even more notably, that there might be a way for M to belong in the present. But this moment also works for the reader in the

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<sup>31</sup> The Obelisk represents the nation in its official capacity, and it casts a long shadow. The fact that the suddenly cloudy weather temporarily obscures this shadow suggests that the “pasado abolido” that suddenly confronts S (and everyone else who is present) is one that’s been obscured by the national effort with regard to memory and coming to terms with the legacy of the Dirty War. My reading focuses on S’s personal confrontation with the past and with memory, but this personal confrontation has collective implications.

As if to strengthen this point, on one of the walks with M and M’s father, S notes: “Vimos, hacia el este perfecto, un sol sin sombras que se recostaba sobre ambas veredas de la calle” (150). The fact that S sees this “sol sin sombras” with M, in the past, suggests another correlation between shadow, memory, and the integration of that memory in the present.

mode of Chambers' "singularity" or Levine's "as if for the first time." If S's walks have now become, at least in the space of the novel, "conventionalized tropes," the "singularity" of this particular walk, especially given the chance encounter with Sito and the striking weather, causes the reader to pause, thereby allowing for the possibility of relay (Chambers 40). Or, as Levine explains it, this is a moment in which the "impact" of S's "testimony," his narration, is "given a chance to register as if for the first time" (21). For S, as for the reader, the constant walking is repetitive, but the possibility of the sort of realization that comes out of the meeting with Sito highlights the degree to which (as Levine puts it) an "obsessive return" to the same can also be a "driving desperate search for someplace different."

In this particular instance, the singularity of the encounter with Sito detains the reader in a way that is similar to Mitchell's assertion that description "'stops' or arrests the temporal movement through narrative." As all the place- and weather-related details indicate, this passage is rife with description, and it sometimes seems unnecessarily so (the street names, for example, are meaningful only for a reader who is intimately familiar with Buenos Aires). In this case, description arrests S and the reader, temporarily pausing the narrative's temporal movement. Indeed, even the weather deviates from the norm. This descriptive moment works in all the ways Mitchell describes—the narrative slows and "spreads in space"—yet rather than finding himself locked in time, S suddenly has a sense that something good could come from M, that M isn't necessarily only a part of the past. And it's not that S suddenly knows what that new kind of belonging is, only that he's had an encounter that allows him to believe in possibility and potentiality.

This, at least, is the impression an initial reading of the scene gives us, but its significance seems more striking in light of an anecdote that S recounts in the following chapter. In this chapter, S describes an incident from his youth in which M's father's car is stolen. M and the narrator were in "el tercer año del colegio" (141) and he says that the morning after he realized the car was gone, M's father "empezó a recorrer el Conurbano. Prometía no rendirse hasta encontrarlo" (141-2). S continues, "Algunos días M salía con él, y yo también en ciertas oportunidades los acompañé. Ibamos a vagabundear, según opinaba la madre" (142). In spite of this peculiar and ill-fated quest, the narrator recalls these wanderings fondly, and although we know, too, that M and S often walked and wandered on their own, S recounts this set of wanderings with particular warmth and poignancy: "resultaba tan improbable el éxito que la búsqueda, alejada del deber, adquiría rasgos de aventura, incluso de gratuidad; no hay nada mejor que un objetivo improbable para que la labor, en apariencia importante, parezca superflua" (142). He also remembers this particular set of walks as special for "la sensación de estar inaugurando, al compás de la caminata, esa proliferación de casas encaladas y manzanas regulares que se desplegaba a nuestro paso" (142). Indeed, this feeling is one he's never had again, "salvo en el recuerdo" (142).

As in the meeting with Sito, S ties the nature of this quest to the specific geography and topography of Buenos Aires, but the sense of space and possibility in the two descriptions is quite different: "dada la topografía bonaerense no se podía pensar en términos de profundidad, sino sólo de extensión—no nos internábamos en realidad en nada en particular, más bien atravesábamos una superficie sin mayores diferencias . . ." (142). It is clear that he recalls these walks with great affection and that, for once, Buenos

Aires, in its vastness, felt full of promise: “deseaba más y más cuabras por recorrer,” he says, “estaba feliz de tener la oportunidad de deambular sin fronteras, como si el Gran Buenos Aires fuera ciertamente el territorio de la vastedad” (143).

Once we know about this experience, it colors our understanding of the chance meeting and stroll with Sito. The long walks with M and M’s father are without limits in a joyful, even hopeful, way; in contrast, the short, specific nature of S’s walk with Sito seems more melancholy, a bleak translation of the earlier walks with M and M’s father. Whereas S and Sito walk in the city center, quite literally in the shadow of the capital and its monuments, the walks with M and M’s father take place in the outskirts, well beyond the radius of this shadow. The walk with Sito in the present lacks the sense of “proliferación”—of possibility and adventure, of beginning something for the first time—that characterized the long ago search through the suburbs. Indeed, the most exciting moment during the walk with Sito is the arrival of the storm clouds, a change in “el tiempo,” in the sense of both weather and time. This is not to say that the walk with Sito is somehow lesser; in fact, S says the walk with Sito is comforting to him and even cites it as part of the impetus to write his book. Until his encounter with Sito, S had had the idea in mind, but not the urge to write—he was stalled, not just mentally, but in terms of walking and movement, “a mitad de camino entre la dedicación y la renuncia” (115). The encounter with Sito “en relación con esto fue decisivo. Sito fue el instigador último” (115).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> S reiterates the influence of Sito several pages later: “Antes dije que la intervención de Sito fue decisivo para que escribiera todo esto. Ahora veo que, más allá de sus palabras, también fue importante al pagar los cafés. Puede parecer ridículo, inapropiado, probablemente se lo podría considerer de muchos modos, pero el gesto de Sito sirvió para hacerme sentir que de M podía provenir algo bueno, y que ello no debía pertenecer necesariamente al pasado. Por eso lo reitero cuando me parece oportuno, porque la invitación fue un gesto protector, no respondía a alguna cortesía mundana, era una actitud de amparo dirigida hacia atrás” (124.)



Of course, the fundamental difference between the two walks—and between the past wanderings in general and their translation into the present—is M’s disappearance and absence. *Los planetas* is a novel about absence, about the impossibility of recuperating what once was, about the unspeakable nature of loss. In this sense, translation negotiates, but cannot bridge, the difference between a past with M and a present, and future, without him. As in the process of translating, the translation—here, the reiterations of the walks—are fundamentally distinct from the original and always will be. S makes this point himself toward the very end of the novel: “el encuentro con Sito significó una brusca actualización. Pero la misma irradiación del impacto iluminó los imposibles; y la verdad es que llega el momento cuando la recuperación de los recuerdos se convierte en una senda plegada de dificultades” (226). The encounter with Sito helps S to see what is possible but also what isn’t possible: that any attempt to recover his memories and the past they represent will always fall short of its goal. As with the explosion, neither M nor the past in which he lived can be reassembled in a coherent whole.

It’s also worth noting the words S uses to describe what he found most joyful in his walks with M and M’s father. The walks acquired the characteristics of an adventure because the three of them know that success was “improbable.” It is precisely the near-impossibility of the goal—the walks are “alejada del deber”—that makes the walks so enjoyable. In marked contrast to the walk with Sito, the walks with M and his father are filled with a sense of beginning—“la sensación de estar inaugurando”—and this sense is tied directly to the steps they take; it unfolds at pace with them, as they walk. In addition, S again refers to “proliferación,” here of houses and blocks, but unlike the unnerving

proliferations that mark S's observations about time at the very beginning of the novel (as well as the arresting proliferations in Mitchell's explanation of description), these proliferations signal delight and possibility. Space, time, and memory all proliferate, and while this proliferation can be dizzying, resulting in feelings of precariousness or instability (as it does elsewhere in the novel), here, S's primary feeling is hopeful. There's a singularity to this moment, too, and it's striking that S recalls walking "sin fronteras," in a city that is "un territorio de la vastedad." For the brief period in which S experiences the city as borderless, there's also a sense that these perambulations are divorced from time, not subject to its restraints. Indeed, it is these qualities that lend the walking its singular sense of happiness and wonder. The reference to "inaugurando" suggests that when S walks with M and M's father, it's as if he's experiencing his neighborhood and greater Buenos Aires for the first time.

In retrospect, then, it seems as if part of what S loses when he loses M is this sense of delight and adventure, the capacity to experience something as if for the first time. With M, a sense of possibility implied hope for the future; in M's absence, possibility is more dangerous, even vaguely threatening. When S notes that his encounter with Sito makes him feel as if M "no debía pertenecer necesariamente al pasado," it's as if he's recaptured a glimmer of that first sense of possibility, as if he has reason to hope again. S's walking is as much an effort to recover these feelings as it is a technology of memory. We read about the walk with Sito first so that when we come to the description of the walks with M and M's father, we see how very different these past walks are from the present walks. We understand S's hopefulness better, at this late point in the novel, in light of his feelings of hopelessness, which have pervaded the novel up to this point. In

this way, Chejfec relays to the reader a sense of the fickle nature of trauma and its effects; one doesn't necessarily recover in a linear progression, but rather in fits and starts that are themselves subject to the vagaries of whatever is happening in the present.

In addition, it is worth again recalling Levine's assertion that the "knowledge" borne by the witness or imparted via testimony is "only audible in the mode of repetition." He adds in order to "attune ourselves" to this knowledge—to what he refers to as "that which perseverates at the very threshold of speech and silence"—we need to "view repetition" as "a movement that is never one with itself, as a *compulsion* that is not only internally divided but doubly driven." As I noted earlier, S's walking is a technology of memory and an effort at attunement in the mode of repetition; he walks for multiple reasons, even if those reasons are occasionally in conflict with each other. Indeed, Levine writes that that which "perseverates at the threshold of speech and silence" is also at "the limit of life and death." In addition to a renewed sense of possibility or promise, S is trying to listen for "the call" (Chambers), not in order to remember *per se*, but in order to receive something—perhaps something from M, or something in the way of what Levine calls "knowledge"—that lingers at this limit. Furthermore, by exposing the reader to these repetitions, Chejfec summons the reader to this border, inviting her to attune herself to this knowledge, too.

By way of conclusion, I want to invoke a comparison that S makes shortly after he describes those walks through the city with M and M's father in search of the stolen car. S compares the relationship of the universe and the solar system to the relationship the city of Buenos Aires and S and M's friendship. He says,

Esta preeminencia del universo es tan solo aparente, porque el sistema solar es categoría distintiva de aquel: sin universo no hay sistema solar,

pero sin sistema solar el universo es otro, distinto. Algo semejante podía decirse de la amistad entre ambos. La ciudad estaba atravesada por las líneas imaginarias de nuestros cuerpos en movimiento, trazos y dibujos incorporados a la geografía, pero ellas no habrían existido sin Buenos Aires, como evidentemente tampoco nuestra relación. (Y ahora, desde hace años, lo que falta son aquéllas.) (147)

Thus, S says that his friendship with M was marked by the city, that the city persists even in M's absence, but also that the city was marked by their friendship: in other words, in M's absence, and without the imaginary lines made by S and M's bodies in motion, the city of Buenos Aires continues to exist, of course, but is "other, different."

In suggesting that the city is a site of translation, as well as a space of memory and of loss, I want to suggest that the city is a place that registers these losses, is altered by them, but also allows them to pass into memory, and sometimes—perhaps inevitably—to be forgotten. The city contains the past, is marked by it, and yet is nevertheless fully present, primed for the future. In a paragraph toward the very end of the novel, S says that he's begun to walk again on Avenida Dorrego, near the house where M lived as a child. This is the last description of a walk, and as with his other walks, he describes the route carefully, using the streets of Buenos Aires as his landmarks: "A veces lo hacía desde Corrientes y otras desde Warnes, también tomaba Martínez Rozas" (226). "Incluso ahora," he continues, "frecuenté su cuadra donde, como dijera Sito, el tiempo no ha pasado" (226). The walk takes place in the present, but it conjures the past. It is this feeling—the sense that, on M's block, time seems not to have passed at all—that prompts one of the novel's final reflections. S says, "Y en todas las oportunidades verifiqué una nostalgia cada vez más diluida, el eco de una presencia paulatinamente más delgada" (226). Despite the sense that time hasn't passed, S notes a subtle contradiction: time moves forward, and the space registers its passage via a slow

fade or a weakened presence—and yet in that space, one continues to feel as if there has been no passage of time at all. The language here is that of diminishment and erasure: “diluida,” “delgada.” Moreover, “eco” signals a kind of sonic translation, as well as a method of relay; each echo is a diminished—though no less affective—version of the original call that nevertheless reaches the listener. Indeed, it’s via echo that this process of relay occurs, so that diminishment is intrinsic to the process.

It is in this space of ever-diminishing nostalgia that the city itself and the processes of remembering and forgetting come together. In the same way that the city manages both to register and to ignore the passage of time, S seems to imply that remembering is always tinged with forgetting. Memories persist in a way that ignores the passage of time, but they are inevitably diluted over time, and this dilution reveals the passage of time. In language that further evokes the process of diminishment, S notes that on Avenida Dorrego’s walls, “el sudor de nuestros cuerpos, el espesor de nuestras voces y las intenciones de nuestras miradas, todo eso se ha borrado, sólo existe bajo la forma de rastros cada vez más débiles” (227). Then, he muses:

Y si este es el futuro para todas las cosas, si este es el futuro del pasado, ir mezclándose con las formas del olvido, distorsionando cada vez más la evocación hasta borrar las mismas huellas que dejamos y nos dejan, que son las que en definitiva nos mantienen en pie, me pregunto entonces por el verdadero papel nuestro. No me quejo de la remisión ni de la desagregación de los cuerpos y la memoria, de nosotros mismos y de lo que existe nuestro en los otros, operaciones a las que todos estamos condenados y no tiene sentido enfrentarse; sino más bien pienso que si esto pertenece, como parece, al orden natural de las cosas se necesitaría objetarlo con un nuevo argumento, con otras pruebas y con diferente tipo de acción. (227)

Here, forgetting is meaningful and inevitable. In thinking about the city as a site of translation, but also as a site of memory, I want to recall Benjamin’s words: that a translation is transparent, that it “gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as

reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself” (260). In a similar vein, perhaps, the city as a site of translation allows the past to shine through, but also allows the present and even the future, full as it is (and will be) of loss, to unfold in “harmony” with the past. I mean “harmony” not as an aestheticizing gesture, but as supplement or accompaniment, as a version that is related to, and develops out of, the original, but is fundamentally distinct. In this sense, we might see forgetting not as opposite to remembering, but as a sort of translation in and of itself, as a way of allowing memory to unfold as it does naturally—“al orden natural”—without demanding that it maintain absolute fidelity to the “original” event. As S points out, “la remission” and “la desagregación de los cuerpos y la memoria, de nosotros mismos y de lo que existe nuestro en los otros” is unavoidable and impossible to combat; instead, perhaps, as a “diferente tipo de acción,” we might see memory in conjunction with, as complementary and supplementary to, forgetting, as an openness to the inevitability of translation and transformation over time.

It seems, too, that this “diferente tipo de acción” is bound up in S’s assertion that “la recuperación de los recuerdos se convierte en una senda plegada de dificultades,” as well as his recognition that M “no debía pertenecer necesariamente al pasado.” At some point, “la recuperación de los recuerdos” becomes difficult because of that inevitable diminishment, and as S says, that diminishment is not worth combatting. In addition, the idea that M doesn’t necessarily belong only to the past makes sense in light of the inevitability of forgetting. If M only was part of the past, then S would forget him, or at least his memories of M would diminish substantially over time, and that would be a kind of betrayal. In contrast, the idea that M could continue to influence S’s life allows for that

inevitable forgetting to happen, but in a way that makes the progression toward forgetting something other than a failure or a betrayal. This idea has implications not only for memory, but for postmemory, lightening the burden not just for the immediate witness, but for the witnesses to the witness—for the generations that follow.

Chejfec himself has quite a bit to say about the relationship between memory and forgetting. In an interview with Pablo Makovsky from the now-defunct Argentine paper *El Ciudadano*, Chejfec outlines his ideas about memory and forgetting, arguing that the terms themselves are rich and complex and pointing to different meanings, not all of which are equal. Indeed, he says, “prefiero decir “No olvido” en lugar de “Recuerdo[.]” and Makovsky recalls that in *Los incompletos* (published after *Los planetas*, in 2004), “se lee que el recuerdo es un llamado del olvido.” In both of these assertions, Chejfec destabilizes the connection between memory and forgetting. His preference for “no olvido” over “recuerdo” implies a subtle distinction between the two phrases, suggesting that memory and forgetting are not precise opposites. The idea that “el recuerdo es un llamado del olvido” suggests that memory is in some way derived from forgetting, so that there is a kind of hierarchical relationship between the two (which would not be the case if they were simply opposites, which implies a more equal relationship).

Chejfec goes on to distinguish between two types of memory or remembering: involuntary memory, as elucidated in Proust, and the idea of memory as a cultural project of reconstruction, as elucidated in Sebald. He places these types on a kind of continuum and adds “estamos utilizando el recuerdo para una cantidad de cosas que requieren un arco muy amplio y contradictorio. Entonces, no es que sea un militante de la no utilización de la palabra recuerdo, pero en un punto recuerdo, como sustantivo del verbo,

parece ser una palabra incompleta, ineficaz . . . ” He goes on to explain that this abundance of meanings—the idea that it’s difficult to know exactly what one means by “remembering”—is why he prefers to frame the act of remembering in terms of forgetting: “porque puede querer decir tanto, que prefiero decir “No olvido cuando”, “No olvido que”: te da como una sensación más inmediata de la acción mental que estás realizando.” In essence, then, Chejfec is pointing out that to say “I don’t forget when” or “I don’t forget that” is simply more precise—a better appellation for the action itself—than “I remember.” Forgetting also resonates with echo and its diminishing returns in the sense that “I don’t forget” posits a lucid memory of an event that diminishes over time and is subsequently forgotten, whereas “I remember” is an act of reconstruction, a conjuring of the initial event. With regard to the latter, forgetting is then inevitable (though it can be forestalled), in the same way that an echo inevitably diminishes.

Chejfec continues with this riff on memory by explaining when he finds the theme of memory to be most useful:

más bien creo que la memoria es útil en la medida en que se constituye como escenario. Como un escenario donde se representan todas nuestras frustraciones, fracasos, sentimientos de víctimas y todo lo que somos. Pero no me interesa la memoria como una entidad positiva, que nos va a ayudar a recuperar el pasado, porque eso ya de por sí es bastante ambiguo. Porque uno muchas veces necesita recuperar una memoria para enterrarla.

The idea that memory is useful as an “escenario” resonates with the trajectory of *Los planetas*, in which the city as a site of memory is the “escenario” against which S examines his grief and meditates on his loss. Moreover, “la memoria como una entidad positiva” recalls Mitchell’s outline of memory as a technology or system, and the idea that we often “recuperar una memoria para enterrarla” speaks to the “senda plagada de dificultades” that Chejfec alludes to in the final pages of *Los planetas*. It’s not that



memory should never be used as “una entidad positiva,” but rather that when we view it only through that lens—as a means toward an end—we risk reaching that end and thus, presumably, doing away with what has been recovered. In contrast, forgetting (and not-forgetting) are not teleological.

After S’s call for “un diferente tipo de acción,” there is one more chapter, which reads as a coda. S writes: “Desde la ausencia de M no sólo yo, también varios otros, residimos en un presente plano, desagregado de la realidad, dentro de un territorio cuyas fronteras si existen son imprecisas, dependen de nuestros movimientos, y donde sin embargo la quietud es la única alternativa adecuada” (231). Once again, time—the present—is described using a spatial metaphor. This description sounds very much like Levinson’s description of translation as an issue of the frontier, and it recalls Chambers’ dedifferentiation of temporal categories. We can see S’s wandering as movements in the city across these imprecise boundaries, as well as symbolic of the unsteadiness of time in the aftermath of trauma. Even though we’ve reached the end of the novel, its atemporality is still crucial to S’s experience, as well to that of the reader. S’s grief has not diminished, even if it’s changed. “La quietud” is a kind of double-edged sword that affirms Levine’s doubly driven impulse: the listlessness of S’s wandering is also a search for calm.

In the final scene of the novel, S recounts a dream he’s had in which he and M are riding the commuter rail together, facing each other. In the dream, everything is symmetrical: “cada uno tiene a su izquierda un paisaje idéntico” (232). This sense of symmetry leads S to muse on the idea that he and M are at the “epicentro” of the “resto del planeta” (232). As the train pulls into the final station (which, in true dream fashion, is not really the final station, but another station disguised as the final station), it slows, a

movement that echoes the braking taxi at the beginning of the novel, stopping even as it continues to move forward. In this case, though, the train actually comes to a stop, and S writes that, once immobile, the train car “ha convertido en la promesa del próximo viaje” (233). In contrast to the taxi, which epitomizes the movement without going anywhere that characterizes so many of the movements in the novel, this train comes to a complete stop in order to signal the next journey; even if it’s across the same space (as it will be, since it’s a commuter car), it signals that the possibility of something new and different, perhaps the “algo bueno” that S alludes to after his encounter with Sito.

Similarly, in the final lines of the novel, S turns to M and says: “Esta ha sido nuestra mejor aventura.” M replies, smiling, “Sí, nuestra mejor aventura” (233). The lines literally end the novel, but they also signal a kind of ending that has been elusive for much of the novel. As the train prepares to depart on its next journey, we have some sense, too, that something between S and M has concluded, but that something else awaits. In this way, the ending is also a beginning. As readers, we are drawn in, we ride along with S, and at the novel’s end, we are redirected outward, beyond the space of the novel, toward the next adventure or the next translation.

These final paragraphs are structured by repetition, just as the rest of the novel has been. S and M see the same thing on either side of the train; as new passengers get on the train, they settle themselves on either side of S and M, equidistant from S and M’s center. The coda is kind of a microcosm of the novel. It repeats in miniature what has unfolded over the course of the novel, underscoring and reifying the motif of repetition. But with the train’s definitive stop—even knowing that it will start up again, and the journey will repeat—we have some sense of the ways in which repetition can also

give way to difference and, perhaps, to the ways in which memory can give way to forgetting. The novel begins with a meditation on the shape of S's grief in the wake of his loss, but then it ends on a note that, while not exactly hopeful, points outward toward the kind of hopefulness that S recalls from his walks with M and M's father. Even if "esta"—an ambiguous "this"—has been S and M's greatest adventure, there's a hint that another one is possible, even if it's lesser, diminished.

What, then, has been relayed to the reader? We have accompanied S through the pages of the novel, and the train stopped at its final station suggests that the end of the novel is also a disembarkment for the reader. Chejfec's novel has, I think, left the reader with some new knowledge, and in so doing, he has made us witnesses, too. This move turns S's private angst into something that is in some way shared, not as the same thing (since this would be a universalizing gesture), but by exposing us to the limits of S's grief, thereby allowing us, as readers, to "add an unfamiliar element to [our] field of understanding," as Levinson says, so that our knowledge of the world is richer, fuller, and more complex. This does not diminish S's grief, nor does it lessen the magnitude of his loss, but it means that S is no longer the only witness, but rather a witness among witnesses—a gesture toward the postmemorial that is also a gesture toward possibility. In this way, the possibility of more witnesses alleviates S's burden, allowing him to embrace the inevitability of forgetting without fear of greater losses.

## CHAPTER THREE

### (Un)Framing Translation: María Negroni's *La Anunciación* and the Recourse to

#### Excess

“The journey is one of the most persistent metaphors in literature; it is also one of the experiences in life that most resembles the creative process. I believe that a journey, even when it occurs within the painful framework of exile, is an invaluable gift. Travel dislocates, modifies the gaze, shatters the ego’s prejudices, which are so often frozen by personal and family history, and stimulates a break with received ideas. And so, in that way, it offers an opportunity to create oneself anew, reinventing the game of life, multiplying its possible meanings.”

--María Negroni, Interview with Mariela Dreyfus

“El arte es como la muerte. Irremediabilmente, uno se pierde en ellos.”

--María Negroni, *La Anunciación*

It is clear from the first pages of María Negroni’s *La Anunciación* that this is a novel that defies convention, embracing fluidity, circularity, and uncertainty over linearity and cohesion. The novel is narrated by a woman in exile in Rome; she is a former member of a leftist revolutionary cell in Argentina, and she has fled her country after the coup that precipitates the Dirty War, although it’s unclear how much time has passed since then. We know that her lover has been killed, along with several of her compatriots, and the novel’s first lines, along with much of the text that follows, are addressed to that lover, whom she calls Humboldt. Though we never learn his “nombre de pila,” the appellation stands out as an allusion to Alexander von Humboldt, a Prussian geographer and naturalist who traveled extensively in Latin America at the very end of

the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century. The travel writing from these expeditions was significant in terms of presenting a portrait of Latin America to a European audience; in *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt calls Humboldt “the single most influential interlocutor in the process of reimagining and redefinition that coincided with South America’s independence from Spain” (111). As the narrator’s interlocutor, Humboldt functions as a lens through which she views both her last months in Argentina and her time in exile, a figure who propels the narrator’s own quest to reimagine and redefine her sense of self and the profundity of her grief from the distant space of exile. Though this quest is ongoing, it begins at a similarly crucial historical moment—the failure of a revolutionary project and the onset of a crushing dictatorship.

The narrator is in Rome, though her past is in Buenos Aires, and within the first few pages, she is visited—perhaps as ghosts, perhaps in her dreams—by several of her friends who have died, Bose and Emma. Her strangest visitor is Athanasius, a monk who finds her on the streets of Rome and tells her that he is the founder of the first Museo del Mundo, a museum—founded in 1646—“que contiene o duplica el mundo” (18). In order to fill the museum, he seems to travel through time and space, which helps to ensure the accuracy of his collection; he explains that he usually works “in situ, desplazándome con la imaginación y así consigo que lo que junto coincida con el espacio eterno y el tiempo ubicuo de lo real” (20). He tells the narrator that he knows of her and her friends—particularly Emma—because he spent quite a bit of time in the landing of Emma’s apartment in Buenos Aires, on Calle Uruguay (20).

Already, then, we see fluidity in time and space, as well as between the living and the dead: a 17<sup>th</sup> century monk walks the streets of Rome in the late twentieth and early

twenty-first century of the novel's present, and he's also familiar with the Buenos Aires of several months or years prior. The narrator converses with the dead (possibly including Athanasius; it's not clear how we, as readers, as supposed to understand his presence in the novel), perhaps only in her dreams or perhaps as ghosts, but in ways that are vivid and tangible. More so than Brodsky, Chejfec, or Alarcón's novels, Negroni's is a novel that resists limits, in its content as well as its form. It slips easily between past and present, between Buenos Aires and Rome, as well as among different narrative voices and in and out of memory. Often, these shifts are marked by little more than a paragraph break. In addition, the novel makes recurrent references to a variety of media: painting especially, but also music, photography, and film. Its narrative threads are difficult to follow; it is a jumble of fragmented scenes and snippets of dialogue. Indeed, the novel is (dis)organized in such a way so that it is difficult even to summarize—to name its essential characters, plot points, or even its setting.

In his chapter on the *parergon* in *The Truth in Painting*, Jacques Derrida describes the relationship between the frame and the work it encloses—the *parergon* and the *ergon*—in Kant's *Critique*. Much of Derrida's analysis focuses on a note "appended" to a "General Remark" at the close of the second edition of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, where Kant uses the word "parergon" but also—by appending the note—offers "a *parergon* concerning a *parergon*" (55). Derrida is interested in Kant's use of the word in this note because it posits religion as *parergon* to reason: "Because reason is 'conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral need,' it has recourse to the *parergon*, to grace, to mystery, to miracles. It needs the supplementary work. This additive, to be sure,

is threatening. Its use is critical. It involves a risk and exacts a price the theory of which is elaborated” (56). Derrida goes on to explain,

The *Critique* presents itself as a work (*ergon*) with several sides, and as such it ought to allow itself to be centered and framed, to have its ground delimited by being marked out, with a frame, against a general background. But this frame is problematical. I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface between the two limits. (*Truth* 63)

In Negroni’s novel, too, the “frame is problematical,” insofar as it is a difficult novel to summarize, to know what is “essential,” what is “accessory,” and what—or where—the limit is between the two. Indeed, the novel resists limits in a way that suggests that the difficulty in discerning the essential from the accessory is in fact part of its “thing” or its frame—that the confusion with regard to content, subject, and narrative arc is simultaneously essential to the novel’s significance, but also irrelevant (or accessorial) to understanding its gist. In this way, the novel resists frames and framing, but is also about framing—taking framing into consideration by calling it into question.

Indeed, Derrida adds that

the whole analytic of aesthetic judgment forever assumes that one can distinguish rigorously between the intrinsic and the extrinsic. Aesthetic judgment *must* properly bear upon intrinsic beauty, not on finery and surrounds. Hence one must know—this is the fundamental presupposition, presupposing what is fundamental—how to determine the intrinsic—what is framed—and know what one is excluding as frame *and* outside-the-frame. (*Truth* 63)

In Negroni’s novel, then, it is difficult to distinguish between what is essential and what is accessory—the intrinsic from the extrinsic, the substance from its “surrounds”—and “the whole analytic of aesthetic judgment” is destabilized, as are any assumptions about

what should be included or excluded. Thus, as I mentioned above, the novel thematizes questions of inclusion and exclusion—i.e. where the frame takes place, where its limits are—via a refusal to frame, to decide definitively what can be reasonably included (or excluded) as essential.

In her reading of Derrida's take on the *parergon*, Ranjana Khanna writes that the frame not only thematizes a "mobility that suggests it could move beyond its immediate frame" but presents the viewer with "a visual doubling and echoing, suggesting the excess that always exceeds the frame" (32-33). She adds, "The frame may appear to exist on its own terms, permitting or excluding hospitality to its hostile excess, yet what persists in this photograph [a photograph of Jacques Derrida at age three, at the heart of her discussion] is the permeability of the frame, and its necessary acknowledgement of the other at its border, which both frames and unframes" (33). Khanna discusses the frame—as one type of the more general *parergon*—in order to think more broadly about hospitality, as well as about "how frames and borders are traversed in the pursuit of justice" (34).

We might understand the traversal of frames or borders as a mode of translation. The reference to excess in Khanna's formulation further underscores that association, recalling the references to excess that undergird both Levinson and Moreiras' discussions of translation, particularly Levinson's assertion that "The relation of tongues, or 'language as such,' by a logical necessity exceeds its translation, which thereby always falls short of its object" (24). As I have argued in the preceding chapters, in the context of trauma, part of what cannot be translated—what exceeds translation—is pain and loss, and translation acknowledges those limits, recognizing pain and loss without assimilating



them. In a way, *La Anunciación* is an extended meditation on grief; as such, it is particularly consumed with the effects of loss and the pain that attends loss. By resisting the frame, even as it is about framing, it foregrounds the excess that always exceeds the frame. As a novel, then, it resists the frame as means toward hospitality, as a way of opening itself up to (a potentially hostile) excess, embracing permeability as an aesthetic in service of that excess.

In addition to thematizing the frame via a stylistic refusal to frame, *La Anunciación* makes recurrent references to things that frame and are framed, particularly to visual framings—to painting and the museum. First, a museum is a kind of giant frame, one that houses examples of art of various genres (the example is itself one of Derrida's types of *parergons*) and presents them for public viewing in frames. Second, the Annunciation indicates both an event—the angel Gabriel's revelation to the Virgin Mary that she will carry and give birth to God's child—and a category of painting that depicts that event. In the novel, the narrator's friend Emma is obsessed with "copying"—the narrator contrasts this with "painting," which would seem to imply a more creative act—"todos los cuadros de la Anunciación que caían en sus manos" (24). Moreover, the room in Athanasius' Museo del Mundo that contains Emma's work, the room in which Emma, the narrator, and her friends figure most prominently, is also called *La Anunciación*. The title of the novel, then, presents a kind of "textual doubling" (rather than visual, as in Khanna's formulation, above) that both points to its own contents—the lives of the narrator, Emma, and her friends, as if the novel were, in some sense, that room in Athanasius' museum—and, in a moment of ekphrasis, offers a suggestion of that

which exceeds the textual frame by virtue of being visual.<sup>33</sup> Negroni's novel employs a kind of "textual heterogeneity," not only in its references to painting, but in its intermittent references to music, theater, and other literary texts.

Both Derrida and Khanna refer, not surprisingly, to visual media in their discussion of the frame: Derrida to painting and Khanna to photography and film, as well. In addition to describing the frame, Khanna describes "the cut," "an interruption of the frame by a supplement outside" (39). Khanna adds that the cut is not only an interruption, but "the cut of nonknowledge, of something that opens the possibility of knowledge but is not simply reducible to any currently existing knowledge formation or paradigm" (39). She writes,

While the frame is therefore all about stasis, capturing a moment or holding a particular instance hostage, it also exceeds itself, through what happens "off-frame," through the sound or voice complicating an image, or through the *punctum*, an apparently insignificant signifier piercing or wounding the viewer, as analyzed by Barthes. This piercing, for Barthes, is at first unlocatable, as if it responds to memories or nostalgia etched onto the body of the viewer, thus causing an interruption in the force field of the *studium*. This also introduces a different time frame, and a spectral presence that indicates being out-of-joint. Photographs in particular capture something irretrievably lost, allowing for the grasp of a real past in the present. (39)

Khanna's description of the cut, as well as her references to photography and Barthes' *punctum* recall several of the themes from the preceding chapters: the lovers' bodies as *punctum* in Brodsky's novel and Grino's photograph in Chejfec's, among others. *La Anunciación*, in its refusal of the frames that ordinarily structure a novel, presents itself as a kind of series of cuts, a series of interrupted scenes that have the effect of gesturing

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<sup>33</sup> Monica Ríos similarly asks, "¿No es este mismo libro, acaso, la pieza del museo de Athanasius o el volumen de la biblioteca borgiana que se construye dentro de otra Anunciación? Transformada en una pieza de colección, ¿no anuncia el fracaso de la historia?"

toward “nonknowledge,” toward that which happens “off-frame,” thereby exceeding the frame. Part of what is difficult about Negroni’s book is how hard it is to discern its *studium*, perhaps because the narrator seems to be particularly susceptible to wounding by various *puncta*. Indeed, Khanna’s references to the spectral and to being out-of-joint are particularly apt, given that most of the characters in the novel are ghosts and that nothing seems to be quite in-joint.

As I noted in the introduction, Hirsch’s conception of postmemory turns in some sense on the photograph, on its capacity “to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant” (*Family* 20). Negroni’s novel is more concerned with painting than with photography, but these visuals frequently serve, in some sense, to “bring the past back.” In this vein, the references to the visual and the specters of the disappeared, along with the temporal confusion and dislocation, raise the issue of postmemory. Here, the question of postmemory is underscored less by a generational remove—the narrator, her friends, and lover are all the same generation, as is Negroni herself—than by the temporal distance between the moment of trauma (the beginning of the Dirty War, the disappearance of the narrator’s lover and friend) and its legacy in the present. The narrator is alone in exile; if she is not the sole survivor among her group of friends and compatriots, she is one of the few survivors, and no one else seems to have joined her in Rome. As such, she is also the remaining witness to her friends’ disappearance, though not to the experience of disappearance itself, which will forever be inaccessible to her. Her status as exile and her distance from home underscores that inaccessibility, and part of what Athanasius grants her is access to all that she has lost. Indeed, her conversations with him and her visit to his Museo del Mundo are revelatory “cuts,” opening up

possibilities for understanding that have so far eluded her, gesturing, for example, toward Emma's final hours. As such, they mirror the negotiations of postmemory, an engagement with the stories and relics of the past as a means for better understanding one's place in the present. In this sense, the novel's "cuts," its gestures toward "nonknowledge," point not only to the excesses of grief and the ghosts of the past, but to the burdens and challenges of postmemory and of bearing witness.

In Negroni's novel, then, translation is interwoven into that series of cuts; as a process that is ongoing—never-ending in Levinson's terms—it presents a way of conceiving of the dynamism that undercuts the stasis of the frame. As a figure for describing the novel's constant movements across space, time, and form, translation represents the traversal of borders or frames, a means for attending to the temporal, spatial, and formal dislocations that structure the novel and stand in for the experience of grief. And yet by making it difficult—if not impossible—to distinguish between what is essential and what is accessory, the novel also models that which necessarily exceeds translation because, in a sense, everything in the novel is excessive (or, nothing is). This is confusing: the novel unfolds via a series of translations—*anecdote* and fragments that circulate through a variety of settings, time periods, and formal devices—even as it seeks to inhabit, even meditate on, the excess. In the same way that the novel thematizes framing and its attendant tropes via a refusal to frame, the novel also thematizes translation and its limits via a refusal to be clear about those limits; the novel calls attention to excess by translating excessively.

In what follows, I explore the novel's approach to framing through its representation of "history" and "art," particularly as these concepts are allied—in the

novel—with Humboldt and Emma respectively. I briefly outline Humboldt’s significance, before moving on to an in-depth analysis of Emma in terms of her approach to art, specifically her repeated recourse to, and paintings of, the biblical Annunciation. From there, I consider the way in which the depictions of the Annunciation in the novel (as biblical event and as an image that portrays that event) serve to parallel and elucidate the events of March 11, 1976—the evening on which Humboldt and Emma are arrested. Here, I present and analyze several different descriptions of March 11, 1976, over the course of the novel and discuss their correspondences with the Annunciation. I close the chapter with a consideration of the tension between memory and memorialization, a tension the novel explores through the figure of Athanasius’ “Museo del Mundo,” and I return to the question of art and history and their respective relationships to loss. Finally, I offer some brief concluding thoughts on witnessing and postmemory with regard to the novel’s style and form and its treatment of frames and borders.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator makes it clear that she is plagued by memory and by grief. Part of the novel’s trajectory is her attempt to get herself out from under those twin burdens, not to abandon them entirely, but to loosen their grip on her life. This endeavor—like most of the work associated with grief—is not fully achievable for the narrator; sometimes, she doesn’t even find it desirable. But insofar as she attempts to relieve herself of some of the burdens of memory, she is torn between two approaches, one represented by Humboldt, aligned with history, and the other by Emma, aligned with art. These two characters also signal two different relationships to frames and framing. In her previous life, in Argentina, the narrator was more closely allied with Humboldt; indeed, part of what drew her to him was his particular understanding of politics and

history and his fidelity to the cause, his adherence, as it were, to a specific framing of history and justice. In contrast, Emma—the artist and painter—is given to excess, consistently refusing those frames; as a kind of foil to Humboldt and to the narrator, she prefers to maintain an openness to possibility and the unexpected. The narrator wants to remain faithful to Humboldt—to his memory and to the cause he embraced—and yet she seems to recognize that that fidelity requires a kind of stasis, increasingly less tenable as time goes on. Emma’s approach, in contrast, offers the possibility of dynamism and of translation.

The allusion to Humboldt has a visual and aesthetic component, as well as a historical one, that stands in contrast to Emma’s openness to permeability and possibility. Alexander von Humboldt framed his travel writings as “views” or “tableaux,” a fact that Pratt calls attention to in *Imperial Eyes* (a book that is itself focused on seeing and the gaze).<sup>34</sup> She notes that, as a corrective to the “spiritually and esthetically deadening” style that was popular at the time, Humboldt aimed to “fuse the specificity of science with the esthetics of the sublime”—a task he accomplished by “interweaving visual and emotive language with classificatory and technical language . . .” (121). Humboldt’s approach is ekphrastic, an effort to make his readers see using that visual and emotive language, albeit through the medium of text. But unlike Emma, the historical Humboldt was deeply invested in frames and framing; though he was more invested in aesthetics than his contemporaries, he nevertheless sought to classify and specify. Moreover, his frames served, in part, to delimit Latin America as an object of study that occupied a very

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<sup>34</sup> Oscar Hemer uses a similar turn of phrase to describe Negroni’s novel as a “theatre of remembrance where decisive moments of the ‘70s are staged as vivid, tragic, absurd tableaux”; for more, see 459-63. Sierra, citing Idelber Avelar, similarly draws attention to the ways in which Negroni “emphasizes the memory-as-theater”; see 190-91.

concrete space within a rigid—and Eurocentric—understanding of history (Europe as essential, Latin America as accessory). As Pratt points out, his writings are responsible for introducing to Europe some of the most iconic images of Latin America as “primal,” “unclaimed,” and “timeless,” thereby helping to corroborate Latin America’s status as a continent ripe for colonization and imperialist invasion (although Pratt is also careful to point out that he is not entirely responsibly for the way those images were received and ultimately codified) (125-26).<sup>35</sup> In the context of the novel, Alexander von Humboldt’s recourse to classification and framing underscores the novel Humboldt’s adherence to strict principles and a concrete sense of morals. Emma’s refusal to frame takes on an extra resonance, too, a refusal of the very worldview to which the historical Humboldt subscribed. And while the narrator and her Humboldt’s revolutionary project is in part a rejection of the history that the historical Humboldt helped to create—of subservience to the U.S. and Europe and to imperialism—their project nevertheless operates according to a similar view of history, countering the logic of imperialism on its own terms, rather than imagining a new approach entirely. Emma’s approach to art—her resistance to classification and her embracing of the unknown—represents a complete departure from that view.

The novel Humboldt is the narrator’s interlocutor, but the historical Humboldt is her inverse, in some sense. The narrator, like Alexander von Humboldt, is writing about Latin America from Europe, but unlike Humboldt, the narrator is writing as a

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<sup>35</sup> In *Gendered Spaces*, Marta Sierra adds that among the “most relevant of [Humboldt’s] images is that of the desert land, the plain topography of which could be compared to the ocean; the Pampas as a sea will later become the image of America as a wasteland that legitimated territorial expansionism in Europe and aggressive modernization and internal colonization in Argentina . . .” (126).

marginalized figure twice over: she is a woman, writing from the space of exile.<sup>36</sup> Rather than frame and classify, the narrator refuses to delimit a particular time and space, to situate either home or exile or any particular account of an experience (such as the events of March 11, 1976) as her sole object of study. In *Gendered Spaces in Argentine Women's Literature*, Marta Sierra describes Negroni's work generally as akin to that of the narrator, at least in this particular sense; the "literary space" she constructs is "a complex and virtual chain of signifiers where the worlds of 'here' and 'there,' 'home' and 'abroad' are blended into paradoxical representations that question spatial and aesthetic dichotomies" (189). Sierra includes Negroni among a group of Argentine women poets whose work explores "paradoxical spaces" (160), a marked contrast to the classificatory aims of Alexander von Humboldt's work several centuries prior. Sierra takes the term from Gillian Rose, using it to refer to those spaces that "defy[ ] the construction of a fixed positionality and implying a politics of resistance and subjectivity" (160). Quoting Rose, she notes that these spaces are "multidimensional" and "paradoxical . . . spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map—centre and margin, inside and outside—are occupied simultaneously" (qtd. in Sierra 160). Paradoxical spaces, in other words, not only resist frames, but reside at a point of overlap and permeability. In the particular case of *La Anunciación*, Sierra describes the narrator and Emma as "reshap[ing] the history of male-dominated leftist groups in 1970s Argentina and their longstanding debate about the relationship between social and artistic engagement" (189). Sierra notes that this impulse is not, of course,

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<sup>36</sup> In a note, Sierra argues that the work of Luisa Futoransky (another Argentine poet, a little older than Negroni, whose work treats similar themes) "embodies a postmodern reading of mobility and location" and so "'reinvents' Paris and the Orient from the perspective of the woman writer's postmodern travelogue" in the same way that Humboldt's travel journals served as a "reinvention of America for European audiences" in the way Pratt describes (213n10); see 157-98.



exclusive to women writers, but rather that gender serves as lens through “which the landscape of social relations is reinterpreted through spatial categories” (158).<sup>37</sup> Khanna’s approach to frames and framing is similarly concerned with questions of gender—in particular, with women as “supplement”—and she calls for a more thorough understanding of “framing and hospitality in order to reach its supplement, allowing for a more succinct consideration of the political stakes of doing feminist work across borders” (33). In this context, Emma’s approach to painting, along with the narrator’s style of narration, suggest a refusal of framing that is in some sense gendered—not the exclusive province of women, but a reinterpretation that stands in opposition to a Humboldtian (and masculine) ordering of the world that requires classification and clear delineation. The resistance to framing—that is, the resistance to definitively distinguishing between what is included and what is excluded—is also a gesture in favor of hospitality and a resistance to the processes of “social exclusion” (Sierra 198) that have barred certain voices from history and politics.

Like Humboldt, Emma’s name is also an allusion, likely to Borges’ “Emma Zunz” (though there are, of course, other literary Emmas).<sup>38</sup> The narrator explicitly references the character at one point, in a moment of conversation with “mi Vida Privada,” one of a series of figures known only via aliases that double as allegory.<sup>39</sup> Vida

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<sup>37</sup> In “*Virgenes en Fuga*,” María Rosa Olivera-Williams describes Negroni’s first novel, *El sueño de Úrsula*, in similar terms, noting that Negroni’s interest in alinearity, anachronism, and “el viaje” represents an effort to “cuestiona[r] las construcciones de género y sexualidad y propone otras construcciones para lo feminine. . . .” Olivera-Williams points out, too, that this particular novel uses legend, rather than hagiography, “para crear el espacio de las mujeres y darles un lugar en el mundo” (286).

<sup>38</sup> Ellinor Broman also makes this connection, as does Mónica Ríos.

<sup>39</sup> The exact referents for these aliases/allegories is unclear. Broman, for example, describes them alternately as “nombres de guerra” (19) and as possibly representative of “las voces internas disidentes de la narradora” (20). Hemer sees them primarily as “interior voices,” (461), though he and Broman agree that “Nadie” is the alias of a militant revolutionary. Sierra also discusses the role of allegory in the novel; see 189-91.

Privada admonishes the narrator to try to free herself from the grip of memory, particularly memories of Humboldt; she asks, “¿hasta cuándo vas a seguir idealizando lo que no ocurrió? En vez de eso, te propongo que tomes fósforo para la memoria” (27). The suggestion here is that phosphorus will help the narrator remember things as they were, that neither she nor Humboldt was ever quite the revolutionary she thought they were, though the double meaning of fósforo—as memory aid and as match—also evokes an image of setting memory on fire. “Lo importante,” Vida Privada argues, “es . . . conciliar y reconciliar lo inconciliabile, cosa que nunca supiste hacer” (27). In the context of reconciling the irreconcilable, jogging one’s memory and setting it aflame aren’t quite so at odds. “Conciliar y reconciliar lo inconciliabile” is also an apt descriptor for the novel overall, which seems to take seriously the idea of conciliation and reconciliation as repeated actions, in spite of the apparent impossibility of resolution.

Another method Vida Privada offers is that of “visualización”: “Cada vez que se te aparece Humboldt, hacés *trash* y enseguida *empty trash*, y ves cómo se lo traga el tachito de la basura digital” (28). The computer reference suggests that this moment, at least, takes place several decades after the events in Argentina, although it’s not clear that all of the references to exile take place at such a temporal remove. The digital permanence of “empty trash” is also striking—in digital, hardly anything is really permanent, and a trace of the erased always persists. It is here that we find the reference to Emma Zunz:

Y eso lo hacés, sin parar, y sobre todo sin pensar, hasta que sentís que te volviste tímida y durísima, como si fueras Emma Zunz, y estás apta para decir: “Adiós, víctima mía, ahuecá, dejame en paz, hacete humo, voy a escribir tu historia como si fuera un prontuario, a disfrutar cada línea (nadie habla de sus sufrimientos, por grandes que sean, sin entusiasmo), trabajaré con tesón, nada de a los ponchazos, no voy a aflojar, te lo juro, te

mando un beso politico, una escalera con los huesos para que *no* bajes del cielo, mi mejor venganza es ésta, un cuaderno en Roma, ave Odio, ave Odio a las 8, cariño, adorada roca mía, ahora podés venir, mandarme cartas, podés incluso insinuarte en mis sueños y contarme algunos de tus cuentos moralistas y no me importará, te lo juro, no me importará, eah eah eah eah. . . . (28)

If Emma in the novel is a kind of foil to the narrator, particularly in the way she embraces art above history, the reference to Emma Zunz enriches this association. In the final lines of “Emma Zunz,” Borges writes, “La historia era increíble en efecto, pero se impuso a todos porque sustancialmente era cierto. Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también era el ultraje que había padecido; solo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios” (Borges 76). Here, Emma Zunz decides to exact revenge and devises a means of doing so—a plan and a cover story—that will fit within the limits of acceptable behavior. In the final lines, Borges indicates that the narrative Emma Zunz concocts as the rationale for her crime comes to feel true, even if it is not factually true. In Negroni’s novel, the narrator’s Vida Privada instructs her to do a similar thing: to construct a narrative for herself, in a “cuaderno en Roma,” with regard to her history with Humboldt and to use it until it feels true, until she no longer cares when Humboldt intrudes in her dreams or sends her letters and stories. In order to accomplish that task, the narrator will have to become, like Emma Zunz, “tímida y durísima.” In both cases, the facts become tangential to, or outside the frame of, the important thing, the coincidence of feeling with truth. The Emma in Negroni’s novel, too, is more concerned with feeling—particularly as a point of access to a deeper truth—than she is with particular circumstances or facts.

Indeed, Emma seems perpetually frustrated by the narrator and Humboldt’s particular concreteness, an inability to think in terms of fluidity rather than in terms of

categories. That concreteness also informs their politics: “‘Me aterran,’ decía, ‘la division del mundo en buenos y malos, la frase el fin justifica los medios, los decálogos del buen militante. . . . ¿Me podés explicar qué corno es el arte popular?’” (24). She responds similarly when the narrator tells her that Humboldt finds her “elitista,” that she should be painting “para el pueblo”: “Mirá, me chupa un huevo lo que piensa Humboldt. Cuando lo veas, podés decirle de mi parte que no pinto para nadie. A lo sumo, lo hago para el acto mismo de pintar, que concierne también la manera de gozar” (91). Where Humboldt demands that art be political, for the people—that this is the only kind of “good” art—Emma views painting as an end in its own right, as mode of enjoyment (and maybe even ecstasy) in and of itself. Humboldt insists on a kind of framing that turns art into a utilitarian, and categorizable, pursuit; Emma resists that framing. When the narrator insists that there must be “algún puente . . . entre lo bello y lo justo,” Emma is dismissive: “No lo sé y, la verdad, no me importa” (91). The “la verdad” here, usually just a figure of speech, seems crucial; Emma’s painting, her art, seeks a deeper truth than the easy categorizations of a superficial politics. The suggestion is not that all politics is inferior to art or that art and politics are inherently incompatible, but that art is compatible with a more complicated, fluid politics, a giving over of the self and a crossing of limits: “una transición, una entrega arrítmica que debe liberarse de su ensimismamiento, para acceder a esa aventura mayor que cruza los límites de lo sabido y ya no necesita de nada” (21-22). Against Humboldt’s frames and distinctions, Emma asserts an overlap and an equivalence: “. . . pintar *es* pensar” (91).

As I noted earlier, the narrator describes Emma’s approach to painting—at least with regard to her versions of the Annunciation—as a form of copying: “Los copiaba con

furia, con hambre, como si el hecho de no tener que encontrar una forma para sus obsesiones, la llevara directo al centro de lo inaudible: su ilusión era pintar un cuadro que, *enteramente*, no le perteneciera” (24). Copying, here, is a kind of repetition, but one that is translative, too, in its acknowledgement of transformation and the crossing of boundaries. For Emma, copying is a means for separating production from ownership, akin to crafting an ideal translation; Emma is the one who puts paint to canvas, but the painting, in its contents or significance, is not hers. The language of this process is similar to that of meditation, the seeking of the imperceptible through repetition; it also resonates with Michael Levine’s description of bearing witness, which I outlined in the introduction, in which the “knowledge” accessible through witnessing “is articulable and indeed only audible in the mode of repetition,” a mode that is itself “both a drive to return obsessively to the same place and a driving desperate search for someplace different—for an uncanny difference that might emerge in the place of the same” (12).<sup>40</sup> Emma’s repeated recourse to the Annunciations is both an obsessive return to the same and a “driving desperate search for someplace different,” perhaps a kind of transcendence. But her recourse to the Annunciations is also a metaphor for the novel (and thus another instance of textual doubling), which returns repeatedly and obsessively to the same points

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<sup>40</sup> Khanna describes “nonknowledge” as “something that opens the possibility of knowledge but is not simply reducible to any currently existing knowledge formation or paradigm.” She adds, “It is nonknowledge that threatens borders” (39). In a similar vein, Levine describes the “knowledge” that is “given birth to” through “the act of bearing witness” (11). It is Levine’s sense of “knowledge” that is only articulable in the mode of repetition, and, as I noted in the introduction and in the previous chapter, Levine calls for an “attunement” to this knowledge so that it does not remain “stuck” or “caught in the act of transmission” (11-12), suggesting that we view “the act of witnessing . . . as a way of giving birth that is also at the same time a struggle to *unbind* fixed psychological energies, to re-open closed, static, and fatally repetitive cycles of compulsive return” (11). While Khanna’s nonknowledge and Levine’s knowledge are not precisely the same thing, both are concerned with dynamism in the face of stasis and an opening to possibility. In Negroni’s novel, Emma is perhaps more open to the possibility of “nonknowledge” as a kind of philosophical (or artistic) endeavor, whereas the narrator—as witness—perhaps is better described as seeking Levine’s “knowledge.” However, I am less concerned with the precise differences between the two terms than with what they have in common, i.e. the interest in dynamism, possibility, and an open to excess and/or to the other.

of memory—particularly the night of March 11, 1976—in search of a different kind of knowledge, an opening up to “otherness” (Levine 13) or to “excess” (Khanna). Indeed, Levine links “the act of bearing witness” with the “figure of birth trauma” (11), a particularly fitting connection for the Annunciation, which is the delivery of news of a birth to come. Emma’s Annunciations preview and signal the narrator’s own role as witness and the pain and labor that attends that role.

In addition to copying in pursuit of “lo inaudible,” Emma is fixated on the color blue. The narrator notes that Emma’s favorite painter is Filippo Lippi, both because Lippi “pintaba con su deseo” and because she’s enchanted by Lippi’s particular shade of blue (24). Emma’s approach to painting and to art is driven by desire, rather than by reason or teleology. The blue that Emma seeks is in contrast to “su pelo anaranjado” (24); the narrator describes her, at one point, as if she’s been “infected” with color: “ella misma una llamarada de fuego, una intensidad que ignora los límites entre lo visto y lo visible, y por eso, tal vez, puede intuir serenamente, como cuando el mundo no nos toca, que la verdad no es una, sino múltiple” (25). Again, Emma is aligned with fluidity; her very being radiates an intensity that resists the frames—the limits—between what is seen and what’s capable of being seen. Where the narrator and Humboldt seek a single truth, for Emma, truth is multiple, and her interest in multiplicity and in complexity is driven by serene intuition rather than the kind of single-minded quest for truth that characterizes the narrator and Humboldt’s revolutionary praxis.

According to Athanasius, the color blue is essential to the Annunciation. He explains that the Annunciation has three “misterios”—“la aparición, el saludo, y el coloquio del ángel”—and each mystery has a corresponding blue, “lapizlázuli en polvo,

carbonato de cobre, azul ultramarino” (154). The Annunciation may be depicted as taking place in a variety of locations—in a dark interior, in a courtyard, at the threshold between the two—and may select from a variety of symbols signaling purity, virtue, divinity (154). Upon receiving the blessing from the angel Gabriel, Athanasius notes, Mary vacillates between “*la perturbatio, la interrogatio y la obedientia*” (154-155). In Athanasius’ description, there are three sets of three: three blues, corresponding to the three mysteries of the Annunciation, which are then echoed by Mary’s three stages of reaction. What is striking about the language here is the way it could easily refer not only to a visitation from an angel, but to a visitation from secret police or other covert forces. This is particularly true of the three phrases corresponding to Mary’s vacillation—the confusion at the moment of arrest, followed by an interrogation and an ominous-sounding *obedientia*—but it applies equally well to the three mysteries—the appearance of the agents on one’s doorstep, a quick knock, a brief conversation, and a possible arrest. In the novel, the Annunciation has a double meaning and double tonality—the bearing of good news, but also bad. Levine’s reference to witnessing and birth trauma is particularly significant here, where the traditional sense of Annunciation—as news of Mary’s pregnancy and Christ’s coming birth—is replaced by a sense of the trauma to which witnessing seeks to give birth.

In Mary’s case, the *perturbatio* and the *interrogatio* demonstrate her fundamental humanity, whereas her *obedientia* signals her exceptional hospitality. Understandably, she feels terror and doubt before claiming obedience to the divine and embracing the promise of redemption; she literally hosts the divine, opening up her body (as well as her home) to the other, in spite of her fear. Mary slips from terror into ecstasy, and the line

between the two is very thin. Indeed, the alternate scenario—a visit from the secret police in Dirty War-era Argentina—ends in terror, rather than redemption. As the novel details Emma’s arrest, it depicts her state of mind as she herself vacillates between those two extremes; she opens her door as an act of hospitality, of hope, but that same act puts her in danger and subjects her to terror. In fact, Emma is arrested not for her own politics, but because she has a relationship to “el Abogado de Presos Políticos y Gremiales” (170)—so she doesn’t necessarily have reason to fear arrest, at least not to the same degree as Humboldt and the narrator. And yet, to recall Khanna’s terms, “the other at [the] border”—at the threshold between courtyard and interior or at one’s door in the middle of the night—may or may not be hostile, and hospitality is potentially dangerous. That moment at Emma’s threshold—Derrida’s “surface between the two limits,” the moment just before hope becomes terror—is the space that the novel seeks to inhabit, a blurring of lines that Emma seems to embody. In this brief moment, it is not clear whether hope is parergon to terror or whether terror is parergon to hope. The novel seeks not to resolve this tension—nor to endorse it—but to settle into this uncomfortable space of uncertainty.<sup>41</sup>

Over the course of the novel, we see a return to this association between the biblical Annunciation and the possibility of visitation and arrest, as both the moment of the Annunciation and the color blue are often linked with the events of March 11, 1976—the night of Emma and Humboldt’s arrest and disappearance. Indeed, Emma’s repeated recourse to the Annunciations underscores the narrator’s repeated recourse to the evening of March 11, suggesting that in both cases, the impulse to return to the same subject is

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<sup>41</sup> The vacillation between hope and horror also recalls W.J.T. Mitchell’s use of “hope” and “fear” to designate phases two and three, respectively, of ekphrastic realization (*Picture* 152-155). I discuss this in more detail later in the chapter, as well as in chapter four.



translative, and the constant return to the same is driven by the desperate search for someplace different. In Emma's case, she returns to the Annunciation in search of "lo inaudible," whereas the narrator returns to the events of March 11 in her role as witness. Her "someplace different" is, perhaps, a different understanding of—or relationship to—that history, as well as an effort to open herself up to the other and the possibility of new knowledge.

In an early recounting of the events of March 11, the narrator moves hour by hour through Emma's thoughts in the lead up to her arrest. At "las 3 de la tarde de un cierto día de marzo en el departamento de la calle Uruguay[.]" Emma thinks: "Mi ideal . . . sería pintar el cuadro de un cuadro, una Anunciación que no estuviera dentro de la realidad, sino dentro de la realidad de otra Anunciación" (54). Emma's painting within a painting is reminiscent of Khanna's "visual doubling and echoing," pointing toward "the excess that always exceeds the frame" (33). Here, as in Khanna's reading, the Annunciation—a "cuadro de un cuadro"—both "frames and unframes," and the reference to an Annunciation "dentro de la realidad de otra Anunciación" again invokes the novel itself, which both frames Emma's Annunciations and is unframed by them, in turn, through ekphrasis—through a pointing toward the visual that exceeds the textual frame of the novel. The content in this passage gestures toward the significance of the novel's form, and the emphasis is on permeability and the crossing of borders.

By 4, Emma's thoughts have shifted toward blue: ". . . apareció un azul. *Ese* azul. Su silencio perfecto. Cómo quisiera, pensó Emma, que este azul fuera un retrato, mi propio retrato inmóvil, y contemplarme en él, y que el retrato no esté muerto" (54). For Emma, blue, in its perfect silence, seems to reflect something she also seeks in herself

and by positing the blue as a “retrato,” Emma turns it into a framing device of sorts. The immobility here also recalls the “stasis” from Khanna’s description of the frame, “capturing a moment or holding a particular instance hostage, it also exceeds itself, through what happens ‘off-frame’ . . .” (39). That description that is particularly apt given that Emma is captured here, for the moment, just prior to the capture and arrest that occurs some hours later, “off-frame.” The stillness of this particular moment, this perfectly silent blue, is undercut—threatened—by the reader’s sense of everything else that is about to happen. The blue, then, is also a kind of *punctum*, a reminder of the disjointedness between the relative calm that this scene describes and its place within the larger narrative of memory and grief.

The references to blue, in these moments, serve also to highlight Emma’s disaffection from the narrator and Humboldt’s more rigorous politics. At 4:30, she begins to think about her relationship to the Movement: “Es difícil pintar, pensó, escuchando el rugido de la acción. Para mí, lo único que cuenta es lo que no puedo ver, atenerme al peso de este afán por hacer del azul un espejo, una visión muy pura” (54). In contrast to the concreteness and visibility of her friends’ political action, Emma finds significance in that which she cannot see—the more diffuse, the intangible. Again, she likens the blue to a framing device, this time a mirror. But not a mirror that reflects in the ordinary sense—not, that is, what can be seen, but something else, a vision of extraordinary pureness. The pureness here—and the weight of the work that undergirds Emma’s desire to find it—seems to exceed the more grounded political action of the Movement. Moreover, her interest in blue and its pureness suggests a connection with Mary and, in particular, with

Mary's hospitality; Emma remains open to the unknown, even as the members of the Movement close ranks.

The timeline marches on, and Emma's ruminations become more complex:

A las 5: En realidad, no soporto los actos, su violencia que entumece siempre, nos distrae del misterio que somos. Prefiero el arte, donde todo, siempre, remite a otra cosa (un azul a otro azul, y éste a otro), y, por eso, no se lo puede encuadrar, nunca podrá ser orgánico, como no pueden ser orgánicos una lluvia o un atardecer. No hay nada más incómodo para los poderosos, nada que los amenace tanto como esa libertad que empieza cuando termina lo que sabemos decir. Lo que más anhelo ahora es ponerme fuera del abrigo de las reglas y del peligro de la opinión. Me gustaría pintar cuadros más y más vacíos, y así aportar mi pequeña astilla a la hoguera que alumbró al mundo. (54-55)

Here, Emma distinguishes specifically between art and acts, or actions. Blue, in this case, becomes a symbol of the never-ending chain of references or recurrences that art embodies, an excess that cannot be “encuadrado,” or framed. The art that interests Emma is an art that defies coherence and establishes discontinuity, rather than a single, organic whole (in this sense, it parallels a Benjaminian conception of history that stands in opposition, perhaps, to Humboldt's sense of history). Whatever is captured in the previous references to blue—in a portrait, in a mirror—always refers to something else—to another blue, to a different moment—and so there is a dynamism undercutting those fleeting moments of stasis. Indeed, Emma's thinking here, particularly her desire to paint ever emptier paintings, seems to gesture toward an undoing of frames: the emptier the painting, the more the *studium* merges with the *punctum*, the finery with the surrounds. An empty painting evades and confuses aesthetic judgment, and it is that, she says, that most frightens “los poderosos”: a conception of “libertad” that takes as its point of departure an incoherence and permeability, a refusal of categories or limits, particularly as regards moral judgment. In addition, Emma's thinking illuminates Khanna's point

about acknowledging the other at the border; her desire to be “fuera”—outside—rules and opinions suggests something off-frame, a gesture toward “nonknowledge” beyond the borders, a kind of openness that is dangerous to the political practices of her peers but crucial to her understanding art.

The framing and unframing continues through the final hours of this brief timeline. At 6, Emma asks, “¿Y si la política fuera el sueño de que la realidad ocurra realmente?” (55). Here, she inverts dream and reality, blurring the lines between the two and asking which gives rise to politics. And finally, at 7, the hour before her arrest, “al borde del agotamiento: El arte es como la muerte. Irremediabilmente, uno se pierde en ellos” (55). Again, art in Emma’s understanding seems to refer to an infinity that resists framing—in this case, an infinity akin to death. The possibility of getting lost in either gives both a spatial quality, which makes it possible to imagine that either, or both, represent a kind of limit site in the mode of Levinson, i.e. as a site that gets returned to again and again, through the guise of translation. Emma returns constantly to the same images, symbols, and tropes—to the Annunciation, to blue—but in a way that gestures toward that which is off-frame, thereby emphasizing not the symbols themselves, but an openness to permeability and excess. Her willingness to repeat marks her work as translative, but so does that fundamental openness to the unknown and her resistance to framing. It is perhaps this openness that gets her killed—she refuses the enclosures that might offer protection and literally opens to the door to her captors. Emma seems to embody a radical form of acceptance or hospitality, one that, in its capacity to cut through the stasis of the frame, might lend itself to justice. And yet the very radicalness of her

approach—her openness to the hostile other—is seen as a threatening, even terrifying, to everyone around her, to her friends (and their politics) and to their enemies.

We revisit the timeline of Emma’s arrest nearly one hundred pages later, this time through Athanasius’ chronicling of the events of March 11, 1976. Athanasius refers to this night as “la Anunciación fallida” (153), which underscores the association between the biblical event and the arrest, even as it reveals the latter as a failed version of the former. Athanasius purports to have been in the landing of the apartment on Calle Uruguay on the night of March 11, and he is therefore witness to Emma’s arrest. By recounting the events of that evening to the narrator, he makes her a witness, as well, albeit a very “belated” one (to use Levine’s terms), and her understanding of the situation is mediated through the lens of Athanasius’ telling. Athanasius begins, as I noted briefly above, by explaining the Annunciation in general to the narrator, with its three mysteries, three blues, and the three stages of Mary’s reaction. When the narrator realizes that Athanasius is about to switch from an explanation of the Annunciation in religion and art to a description of Emma’s arrest, she uses “anunciar,” too: “De pronto, una sospecha me estremeció: el monje estaba haciendo tiempo para *anunciar*, esta vez él, algo terrible” (155, emphasis mine). This moment, then, is another instance of annunciation, here linked with witnessing. The terror and shuddering suspicion the narrator feels in this moment is an echo—a translation—of the terror Emma would have felt at the moment of her arrest. In fact, the revelation of the details of Emma’s arrest are crucial for the narrator—this moment is the one she returns to obsessively, her own translative limit—but (like Mary) she vacillates in the moment of the monk’s recounting. As her trembling

indicates, she is perturbed, and she immediately follows up with a question—a moment of *interrogatio*—that leaves her mouth “con rencor” (155).

For the narrator, any sense of *obedientia* takes at least the rest of the novel; the rest of the chapter intercuts Athansius’ recounting with the narrator’s own reflection, often directed toward Humboldt, and with scenes from her previous political life, in dialogue with la Vida Privada, el alma, and some of the other code-named members of her old cell. These two threads are given essentially equal weight, so that they frame and unframe each other, acting out the vacillation between history and art, between the knowledge borne of witnessing and the possibility of nonknowledge that remains off-frame. The narrative moves back and forth, in time and in content, cutting across frames, as the narrator keeps trying to return to that translative limit, to grasp the depth and breadth of that crucial moment, even as its full emotional weight continues to elude her.

The difficulties of bearing witness are dramatized here through the double-edged sword of terror and ecstasy, an association that Athanasius emphasizes in his recounting. The narrator wants to know what Athanasius knows, but she is also terrified of that knowledge. In Athanasius’ telling, Emma, at the moment of her arrest, recognizes that “el terror y la pena no son sino el reverso de la compasión y la entrega” and she begins to pray as a form of distraction: “No me dejes perder de vista, bajo ningún concepto y en ninguna circunstancia, que la violencia es fascista, siempre. Y ayúdame a ser como Lippi, que pintó con mi azul preferido y además era huérfano, como todo artista” (156).

“Entrega” here is perhaps a synonym for *obedientia*, and in the moment of her arrest, Emma models a giving over of herself to the unknown. The assertion that Lippi, like all artists, is an orphan suggests a kind of translative distancing from authority, and Emma’s

desire to be like him is a desire to think on her own terms, rather than according to someone else's instruction. Indeed, this moment echoes the point, in *Bosque quemado*, when the son becomes a "padre sin padres," a moment that is similarly characterized by the son's beginning to think in his own terms. It is that kind of thinking that permits Emma to recognize terror and suffering as the flipside of compassion and acceptance. Indeed, what Emma seems to achieve in that moment of recognition (at least according to Athanasius' telling) is a kind of ecstasy, similar to that which she seeks through art, that radical openness to the unknown. This openness is also central to the narrator's task of witnessing, a task that is painful but necessary. The narrator, too, seeks to distance herself from the rigid frames of her previous experiences, not to erase them completely (which would be impossible), but to find it within herself to think in her own terms—and to open herself to the knowledge that comes with bearing witness to Emma and Humboldt's disappearance and death. She works to overcome her terror in order to receive Athanasius' revelations, moving in pursuit of the kind of radical acceptance that Emma sought. Indeed, what Emma accesses through her art—through her copies of the Annunciation and her search for the perfect blue—is a profound intimacy, an exceptional hospitality, that allows for a permeability between frames. Art, in Emma's sense, implies the traversal of borders, and as such, it is also a kind of translative mode, one that wrestles with excess as part of an exercise in undercutting the stasis of the frame. The narrator, as the surviving witness, seeks a similar kind of intimacy or hospitality. She is perhaps initially less well-equipped to operate as Emma did, in that translative mode, but her return to the limit site—represented by the events of March 11, 1976—is also the continued and repeated exposure to the other, an effort to bear witness not only to the

facts of what unfolded that night, but to open herself to the intimacy of the emotional burdens of the past.

In the final pages of the novel, we yet see another moment of annunciation, but this time the narrator visits Athanasius, rather than the other way around. On this visit, the narrator notes that she never understood why Emma was so fixated on the Annunciation, to which Athanasius responds in another series of threes: “la Anunciación es un intercambio de caritas. Alguien que es orador, embajador, *siderius nuntius*, llega y dice: ‘Virgen, mi Dama, apresúrate, responde, pronuncia el Verbo.’ Y ella se levanta, corre, abre” (217). There’s the arrival, the message, and Mary’s response. The “alguien” is also three—speaker, ambassador, messenger—and he calls for Mary to do three things, to hurry up, respond, and give the Word. Mary responds more or less in kind, the last of which is an “opening” that speaks to both the *obedientia* and the “entrega” mentioned previously. This opening, Athanasius explains, is “el momento en que lo eterno entra en el tiempo, la inmensidad en la medida, el Creador en la criatura, lo infigurable en la figura, lo inenarrable en el discurso, lo inexplicable en la palabra, la Gloria en la confusión . . . ¿No le parece estupendo?” (217). In other words, the Annunciation—that scenario that so captivated Emma—is the coming together of the infinite and the finite, the immeasurable and the quantifiable; that which cannot be contained meets with the containable. In terms of translation, this moment would be the meeting of the translatable with its excess, a kind of framing of the unframeable—a moment of permeability come to fruition. Indeed, Athanasius says (to a still skeptical narrator), “Anunciación . . . también sugiere Enunciación . . . hay un saludo” (218). The phonetic association of annunciation with enunciation is obvious, but the suggestion here is also that the significance of the



annunciation (understood not only religiously, but as a moment of radical permeability) is not only in the moment itself, but in the continued (re)articulation of that moment—that is, in its translation. Moreover, recalling Levine’s assertion that witness testimonies are “trapped at the very frontier of speech and silence” (11) and that the knowledge such testimonies engender “is articulable and indeed only audible in the mode of repetition” (12), Athanasius’ equivalence of annunciation with enunciation has implications for the narrator’s role as witness. If Emma’s obsessive return to the figure of the Annunciation represents an attempt to attune herself to the kind of *obedientia* or “entrega” that moment represents, then the narrator’s obsessive return to the moment of Emma and Humboldt’s arrest is similarly a return to the frontier of speech and silence, an attempt to attune herself and—perhaps more crucially—to articulate and enunciate the knowledge (or nonknowledge) produced in that moment.

It is on this visit, too, that the narrator has a chance to visit Athanasius’ Sala de la Anunciación, and as they enter this room in Athanasius’ Museo, he draws an explicit connection between memory and the contents of the museum: “‘A lo mejor . . . todas estas Anunciaciones son una y salieron de la memoria de Emma al instante mismo de su muerte’” (218). The narrator considers, too, that even Athanasius—her guide and messenger—is a figment of imagination and memory: “‘A lo mejor, pensé, también él había salido de la memoria de Emma al momento de su muerte. Él y sus tesoros confiscados’” (218).<sup>42</sup> The Museo is a framing device—a memory palace, or “storehouse of memory” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 194)—a literal collection of images and “tesoros

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<sup>42</sup> “Tesoros confiscados” calls to mind the reference in Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” to the “cultural treasures” that “a historical materialist views . . . with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (391-2).

confiscados,” with each room devoted to recalling and preserving a particular moment in time.

The Museo del Mundo and its contents signals a tension between memory and memorialization. The images in Athanasius’ museum may have come directly from Emma’s memory, but by virtue of having been arranged in the museum, they are afforded a specific narrative and classification, in relation to each other and in relation to all of the other items in the museum. On the way to the Sala de la Anunciación, the narrator and Athanasius pass through a number of other rooms, devoted (among other things) to collections of maps, ancestors, toys, “los Cuartos de Artistas y las Obsesiones Felices,” mythological gods, and—most noteworthy for the narrator—“las Cosas que tocan lo absoluto” (218). The narrator notes that the collection makes for a “repertorio monstruoso y clasificado de las fantasías humanas . . . Un espectáculo insólito hecho de realidad y ficción, donde las imágenes se hacían y rehacían en regiones inexistentes, irrefutable sin embargo para la vista” (218). The collection represents the coming together of reality and fiction, the nonexistent made irrefutable by virtue of being viewable; these compositions and groupings indicate the suggestive power of both conscientious arrangement (a kind of memorialization) and seeing with one’s own eyes (recourse to experience and memory).

In *Picture Theory*, W. J. T. Mitchell notes that memory has alternately been construed as public and as private: public when conceived of as “artificial” technique, as in the case of “ancient memory systems” (of which the memory palace is one), and private in “the modern sense of memory” which “treats it as something like a natural faculty, an aspect of private consciousness” (193). These conceptions are two different ways of framing memory, though Mitchell notes that the “difference between ‘artificial’

and ‘natural’ memory was regarded as quite permeable by the ancient rhetoricians” (193). More significantly, Mitchell adds “the difference between public and private recollection . . . is exactly what is under most pressure in autobiographical narratives whose function is to bear witness to a collective, historical experience” (193). Athanasius’ Museo del Mundo, with its recourse to memory and to memorialization, seems to embody the tension between the private and the public, even as it seeks to render permeable the division between the two. The narrator’s visit to the museum and her reaction to the collection suggests precisely that pressure that comes with bearing witness, and she comes to the museum in part because it represents an external presentation of the memories and anxieties she has carried internally; the museum becomes a storehouse not from which memory is extracted, but into which certain memories are interred. Most museums are not tied so intimately to the experience of single person—in fact, just the opposite: their function tends to be tied to conveying an experience generally and in common—so the intimacy of this particular visit, the correspondence of the Sala de la Anunciación to Emma’s private memories, suggests not only the permeability of Athanasius’ Museo, but the permeability that marks the novel overall, pointing toward what the museum includes, but also excludes.<sup>43</sup>

As I explained in the previous chapter, Mitchell points to the “odd status” of description with regard to the visual and spatial ordering of memory: “Description threatens the function of the [spatial memory] system by stopping to look too closely and too long at its parts—those ‘places’ with their ‘images’ in the storehouse of memory” (194). “Threaten” implies danger, and there might indeed be a threat to the narrator—the

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<sup>43</sup> Mónica Ríos writes, “En cierta manera, la tesis sobre la memoria de *La Anunciación* vuelve sobre la idea de que la única manera de acceder al pasado es cuando ya no nos pertenece, sólo para enroscarlo en una vuelta más y lanzarlo al museo (o biblioteca) como una nueva matriz atemporal.”

possibility that she might never leave—if she looks too closely and for too long at the versions of the Annunciation on the walls of the Museo del Mundo. If, as Mitchell writes, “the point of the spatial memory system is orderly, reliable movement through *time*[,]” then the Museo, like all museums, runs the risk of suspending or slowing that movement by fixating on—and memorializing—a specific interpretation or reading of history. The narrator seems to recognize that danger. When Athanasius suggests that perhaps all of Emma’s Annunciations flew out of her memory at the moment of her death, the narrator protests: “‘No creo,’ dije simplemente, ‘porque eso negaría el tiempo cronológico, al punto de anular la Historia’” (218). The risk for the narrator, as she sees it, is not only of suspending movement through time, but of destroying History.

And yet that concern with memorializing seems to have already occurred to Athanasius. His response elucidates the relationship between art and history, a tension that is at the heart of the novel and that the Museo embodies: “‘Ah, mi querida, tiene usted mucho que aprender todavía. La Historia es una carga perenne, pero el enigma de la creación la excede. El único deber de un artista es intimar con el universo’” (218-9). Athanasius’ response suggests that the narrator’s concern is misplaced, that her obsession with History, capital H, is with the same rigid ordering that has defined her world (and political) views up to this point—and to which Emma’s engagement with art stands in opposition. Indeed, Athanasius’ response to the narrator also seems to allude to a distinction between historicism—an “additive,” homogenous time that marches on inexorably—and a Benjaminian conception of history, one that is “constructive,” rather than additive, a history subject to disruption by “la creación [que] la excede” (Benjamin, “Concept” 396). In an interesting contrast with Mitchell’s description, Benjamin, in

describing materialist historiography, notes that “Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well” (“Concept” 396). While the Museo functions as a storehouse of memory—and therefore poses the risk of stopping and looking too closely and for too long—it also offers the possibility that those moments of “arrest” might prove productive, an opportunity for the intimacy and proximity to “el universo” that is the responsibility of the artist. We might similarly read the paintings on the walls of the museum in multiple ways: as examples of an Art, capital A, analogous to History—paintings as description, framed portraits—or as art that lends itself to unframing, to thinking that might lead to a kind of radical openness and permeability.

In the pages that follow, Athanasius takes the narrator through a series of reflections on art as “la contracara de la Historia” (219). He describes painting as a process in which “hay que atravesar muchas puertas”—a traversal of frames. Among these “puertas” are “la del desasimiento, la del despojo, la del apuro, la de la oposición o dualidad, la de la tentación de seducir, la que confunde deseo y asombro y sobre todo, la del cansancio” (219). The description is intriguing in part because it’s not clear whether these qualities accrue or are cast off in succession, though Athanasius notes that “Sólo alguien muy cansado, como Emma, podía atravesarse a sí misma hasta quedar borrada de la realidad y así acceder a la memoria del mundo que es la sombra donde estalla, eternamente, la presencia” (219). The reference to Emma as someone “muy cansado” suggests not only that she has crossed through that final doorway, but that she has acquired its quality—and that the final endeavor is the crossing through of oneself, a total undoing of frames—a limitlessness, even—that leads to that kind of profound intimacy or radical openness that seems to have been Emma’s aspiration. In the references to memory

and to presence, though, there seems also to be a pathway for the narrator in her role as witness, a suggestion that the memories she holds ought not to detain her or to require her guardianship (as description would, and as her memories of Emma, Humboldt, and the others so far have) but to persist instead in the “memoria del mundo,” a kind of general storehouse—so that she might, in turn, be able to distance herself from a linear and static relationship to the past.

Athanasius seems to confirm this sense of non-linearity several lines later: “Los tiempos antiguos y los que vendrán, en todas formas de desastre, confluyen en esta forma almendrada” (220). These convergences are crucial, he says, because “Si no fuera así, querría decir que la artista se quedó pegada a su temor, que no supo soltar su pasado ni remontarse a él, porque el futuro no es más que el pasado, visto desde la posición de un vuelo” (220). That sense of being attached to fear, of not knowing now to overcome one’s past, is precisely the narrator’s condition. Athanasius’ solution is abstract, but it nevertheless suggests that art offers a way out from the relentlessness of history. Art offers a different way of thinking the relationship between past, present, and future. This approach is difficult; not even Emma “pudo llegar a captar la inmensa luz de esa paradoja[,]” only “la fiebre de un comienzo” (220). But her obsessive copying of the Annunciations did lead toward something—or, rather, nothing: to a “vacío” and an “Ausencia, borrándola de toda tradición, de toda pertenencia, con lo cual se abrió camino hacia el Libro” (220). That erasure from tradition and belonging is also, in its way, a total refusal of frames, an openness to the complete unknown.

In the final paragraphs of this section, Athanasius moves toward describing death generally—and Emma’s death in particular—in ways that seem excessive, embracing

death as a “viaje hacia la gracia” (221). Athanasius’ language here is moving, but also troubling, hinting at death as redemptive and Emma’s death as self-sacrificial, in service to her own desire for radical ecstasy. To some degree, this move “toward grace” recalls Derrida’s definition of the *parergon*, his assertion that “Because reason is ‘conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral need,’ it has recourse to the *parergon*, to grace, to mystery, to miracles” (*Truth* 56). The back and forth between art and history is also a back and forth between religion and reason, where religion is not necessarily religiosity—redemption and sacrifice—but an attempt at articulating mystery or grace. If the novel is in some sense a meditation on excess, an attempt at approaching the translative limit (for which “gracia” is perhaps one possible metaphor, of many), then these paragraphs perhaps represent the apex of that approach, the novel at its most excessive. Of all the strands in the novel, death itself is the most “unframeable,” so these lines are an attempt to lend substance to the essentially ephemeral—a moment, we might say, in which reason, “conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral need,” has recourse to grace and to mystery. As I noted at the outset of the chapter, part of the novel’s thematization of translation and excess comes via a refusal to conform to, or be clear about, limits; as such, these paragraphs expose the reader to excess, testing the reader through a textual (and ekphrastic) representation of the narrator’s experience in the Museo del Mundo. There’s something to these meditations, some possibility for productive and constructive bursts of understanding, but if we stop to look too closely or for too long, their significance starts to collapse.

Athanasius describes death as follows: “Es caída, abandono de sí, entrada en esa poderosa espiral que, en el exceso y la disposición total, nos trae al fondo de nosotros

mismos. En esa incandescencia, la sombra tiene luz, la luz sombra. La duplicidad del sentido es, quizá, nuestro paraíso más alto. Pero hay que merecerlo, hay que saber llegar a él sin detenerse en las anécdotas que constituyen, supuestamente, la vida” (221). Significant portions of this description—the falling, the abandonment of the self—resonate with the earlier allusions to *obedientia*. But there’s also a way in which these lines paint life itself as a storehouse, comprised of memory and anecdote, for which the Museo is both representation and metaphor. Whether the “paraíso más alto” is paradise in a Judeo-Christian sense or something more abstract, this passage points to a total permeability, “la duplicidad del sentido”—a melding of excess and dispossession, light and shadow. Athanasius means for this explanation to be comforting; he tells the narrator that Emma already understood this, that “el momento en que decidió buscar sólo el azul, el paraíso ya estaba en ella” (221). Moreover, this understanding softens the pain of death: “Su muerte, como la mía, como la suya, no pueden tener la menor importancia desde esta perspectiva . . .” (221).

The final stop on the tour of the Museo returns the narrator again to the night of March 11, 1976. She spots a painting “cubierto de palabras,” hiding in “un rincón oscuro” (221). When she asks Athanasius about it, he tells her that the evening of March 11 is “la noche en que Emma entendió—o creyó entender—que el deseo, satisfecho parcialmente, relanza el Deseo” (221). Emma, who so admired Lippi for painting with his desire and who sought to reproduce that desire through her own art, came to understand something essential about the nature of “Desire” on the evening of her death—perhaps even because she understood that death was imminent. Athanasius tells the narrator that



the Annunciation that she's looking at (the last Annunciation in the novel) represents that understanding, in the form of images mixed with words:

la Virgen asume el lugar de la mancha. El ángel se hace moción transversal. Y las palabras recuperan su condición de imágenes. Así, el gran Libro de la Realidad es reemplazado por el gran Libro del Arte y el pequeño cielo del alma se prepara para ver aparecer la belleza terrible de lo divino. En otras palabras, está usted en presencia de una especie de caída de la memoria en sí misma, un dardo encendido sin dirección precisa pero tembloroso ya, dispuesto a no ser rescatado. (221)

In the novel, this is a particularly acute moment of ekphrasis; we read the textual description of images (the Virgin, the Angel, etc.) converted into text and then reconsidered as images, as “las palabras recuperan su condición de imágenes.”

It is interesting to consider this passage in light of Mitchell's description of the three phases of ekphrastic realization: indifference, hope, and fear (152-155). The indifference is connected to a sense that ekphrasis is impossible, an assertion that the novel seems both to reject and embrace, in its effort to frame translative excess, but also to gesture toward the excess that resists the frame. Perhaps more significantly, though, both ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear depend on an element of desire. Hope, for example, is the phase in which “we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: ‘to make us see’” (154). It requires “the desire to overcome the ‘impossibility’ of ekphrasis”; once that desire “is put into play, the possibilities and the hopes for verbal representation of visual representation become practically endless” (154). In contrast, ekphrastic fear is “the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually” (154).

In this final Annunciation, we might read the point at which “las palabras recuperan su condición de imágenes” as a point of hope, the moment at which Emma—or the reader, or both—is “made to see,” where Reality is replaced with an Art that is revelatory and ecstatic, even divine. The “caída” that follows—of memory into itself—echoes the “collapse” in Mitchell’s description of the figurative into the literal. Indeed, the ekphrastic fear here is also reminiscent of the earlier references to *obedientia*, a radical acceptance that could, depending on the circumstances, signal acquiescence to a hostile unknown (in the case of arrest) or an ecstatic embrace. In this final Annunciation, conceived on the night of Emma’s arrest, both possibilities are present. In the narrator’s reading, a reading that has haunted her since the night of her compatriots’ disappearance, the impossibility of rescue (“a no ser rescatado”) means certain death. Athanasius invites the narrator to consider a different interpretation, to understand the lack of a “dirección precisa” as oriented toward possibility, rather than doom. That invitation is an invitation to translate—not to forget the earlier interpretation or ignore the terrifying excess, but to envision, even if only momentarily, that “someplace different” has emerged in place of the same (even if, as Moreiras cautions us, that should not be the final horizon of our thinking). Part of the significance of Mitchell’s three phases is that they’re temporally oriented “moments,” in that they happen in turn and in time, but are not teleological. “Hope” is not redemptive, nor does “fear” constitute failure, and Mitchell argues that the “interplay of these three ‘moments’ of ekphrastic fascination . . . produce a pervasive sense of ambivalence . . .” (156). The narrator may approach Emma’s sense of desire—or Athanasius’ interpretation of that desire—and still maintain a fundamental ambivalence, one that stands in marked contrast to the rigidity of history and protocol she embraced as

a revolutionary. Indeed, that ambivalence is reproduced in the reader; we are no more meant to read Athanasius' narration as redemptive or definitive than the narrator is meant to understand it as such.

The final painting in the Sala de la Anunciación is not a painting at all, but a “muro vacío” (222), an allusion, perhaps, to Emma's professed desire, earlier in the novel, to paint “cuadros más y más vacíos” as a means of blurring the distinction between the framed and the unframed. In that moment, the narrator says, “el mundo se me escurría y, a la vez, me era devuelto íntegramente” (222); she feels fragility and coherence, stasis and dynamism, at the same time, a combination of hope and fear. Athanasius, in turn, begins to recite a series of lines that read as poetry or as prayer; toward the end, he says, “Algo florece en el borde iluminado de lo vivido y lo no vivido”—a sentiment that seems to describe the novel itself: a meditation on the excesses of grief, the “algo” that flourishes on the limit site of translation, the border between what is framed and what exceeds the frame.

I want to conclude by returning to Khanna's assertion that “The frame may appear to exist on its own terms, permitting or excluding hospitality to its hostile excess, yet what persists . . . is the permeability of the frame, and its necessary acknowledgement of the other at its border, which both frames and unframes” (33). Negroni's novel is about the politics of revolution and dictatorship in 1970s Argentina and all that attends it—arrest, disappearance, exile—and yet its attention to grief and its excesses frequently renders that politics and history diffuse to the point of abstraction. In its style, the novel seeks to adhere to Emma's approach to art more than to Humboldt's approach to history, a foregrounding of grief in its excess as a way of gesturing toward the politics at its

edges—that is, toward a politics that is definitively present, but “off-frame”—rather than the other way around, a foregrounding of politics and history as a way to get at the grief at their edges. As I noted earlier, this stylistic approach is partially a gendered one. We see the gendered elements in Sierra’s reading of the novel, as well as in Khanna’s assertion that both “Woman” and “Foreigner” may be understood as types of parergons and thus that “the political stakes of doing feminist work across borders” is enhanced by attention to framing, permeability, and “selective hospitality” (33-34)—enhanced, that is, by the possibility of translating across borders. Of course, Negroni also shares some of these stylistic elements with Brodsky, Chejfec, and Alarcón, who similarly dispense with concrete names, dates, and places (to varying degrees) as part of their attention to the private nuances and idiosyncrasies of grief. Nevertheless, Negroni’s novel seems particularly concerned with the “hostile excesses” lurking at its edges, and in both form and content, it seeks to enact the subtleties and consequences of permitting or excluding hospitality.

In so doing, the novel models an “acknowledgement” and an openness to the other at its borders, to the excesses of politics at the time of the Dirty War and to the long-term excesses of that politics, a gesture that signals a turn toward questions of witnessing and the postmemorial. A scene toward the end of the novel offers a glimpse of the former point, of the intensity and anxieties that characterize political involvement in the days and weeks just prior to the start of the Dirty War. In fact, this scene takes place on the evening on March 11, 1976, in a bar in Buenos Aires. That date is, of course, the evening on which Emma and Humboldt were arrested, a date of exceptional significance to the narrator and to the novel, but in the larger scope of Argentina’s history and politics,

it is a date several weeks before the coup (overthrowing Isabel Perón) on March 24 that signals the beginning of the Dirty War. Taking a wider view of the era, it is one of many days in the weeks before the coup filled with civil unrest and mass protest.

In a sense, then, this scene is yet another return to the evening of March 11, but it represents an entirely different perspective. Rather than the intense introspection of Emma or the narrator, the scene focuses on several of the code-named members of the narrator's revolutionary group—Nadie, la palabra casa, el ansia, el Avispa, lo desconocido—who sit arguing and debating with each other in the bar, while political chaos reigns outside. The television is on, and the conversation is periodically interrupted by “la voz del Líder,” (195) speaking in favor of law and order, promoting a “mano dura” and, if the political situation worsens, the death of “todas las personas necesarias para lograr la seguridad del país” (197). A young student papers the bar with Peronist fliers, while “las masas” (here, a kind of Greek chorus) spout well-worn revolutionary axioms: “la violencia de los oprimidos no es violencia, es justicia”; “El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido” (198-199). Nadie, et. al. discuss various elements of political philosophy and doctrine, from Perón's “*Actualización Política y Doctrinaria para la Toma del Pouvoir*” (196; the insertion of “pouvoir,” rather than “poder”—a translation from Spanish to French—hints at some degree of affectation) to the “Código Penal,” including its chapters on “la negación y retardo de la justicia,” which el Avispa has just begun to study (197). The revolutionaries also discuss their reasons for joining the movement: el ansia for “sus contenidos de la justicia social,” lo desconocido loves “las tomas de la Facultad” (201). La palabra casa can't stand “el sectarismo, la burocratización” and is instead fascinated by “la retaguardia” (201). Nadie, seemingly speaking for all of them says, “No

jodamos. . . . Hay grandeza en el sacrificio. . . . En esos momentos, se siente igual a un dios” (201). It seems reasonable that these motivations are genuine—or that they were at one time—and yet juxtaposed with both the chaos beyond the walls of the bar and the axioms of “las masas,” these sentiments ring a bit hollow. Indeed, that sense of hollowness, even naiveté, is underscored by our knowledge of what is happening off-frame: the action in the streets and—most significantly—the arrests of Emma and Humboldt later that evening. While it is not entirely clear what happens to the other members of the revolutionary cell, we do know that some of these figures make ghostly or dreamlike visits to the narrator in Rome, making it likely that many of them, too, are later arrested—that Nadie’s hypothetical sacrifice becomes reality.

That scene is one of a number of scenes in the novel in which various characters debate the intricacies of political philosophy that, over the course of the novel, come to seem increasingly reductive and rote, particularly in contrast with the musings of Emma and of Athanasius. These debates are representative of Humboldt’s sense of History, with its emphasis on the distinctions between philosophies and their partisans and a rigid understanding of what political action and affiliation entails. The members of the cell find themselves drawn to axiom and political truism, aligning themselves in opposition to the “mano dura” of the Líder, rather than leaving themselves open to possibility and desire, to the open-endedness of art, as Emma would. This scene in the bar illustrates that closing-off; the walls of the bar are borders, insulating the group members from the chaos and action unfolding in the streets. As at an international border, there is someone at the door checking “documentos,” protecting those inside from the hostile others outside. On a formal level, the presence of the televised voices and the chorus of “las masas”—a

rendering of the unidentified other—points toward the hostile excess beyond the frame, as does the invocation of March 11, 1976, but within the content of the scene itself, the possibility of permeability or hospitality is severely limited, as the characters do not seem open to anything other than their own opinions. Thus, this scene, another return to March 11, gestures toward the politics that exists not only beyond the walls of the bar, but toward the national politics at the edges of the novel. In addition, this scene contrasts starkly with Emma’s approach to art and by extension, with the novel’s approach to narrative—both of which emphasize permeability and a refusal to frame. Recalling Khanna’s questions about “how frames and borders are traversed in the pursuit of justice,” we might note that for all the references to “justice” in this scene, there is very little interest in the traversing of borders. That is perhaps a subtle indictment of the politics of that moment, though one recognizable only in hindsight.

Indeed, if the novel is concerned with the border between art and history—or religion and reason—and the possibility for traversing, or translating, between the two, it is also concerned with the relationship between the living and the dead. The narrator is regularly visited by ghosts, haunted by their spectral presence, and yet we know that the border between the living and the dead is definitive. The narrator routinely approaches that border—in her visits to Athanasius’ Museo del Mundo or via the constant return to the events of March 11, 1976—but there is always a sense that this particular crossing is impossible, that the only way to join Emma and Humboldt, or to find Emma’s radical acceptance, would be to die herself. Instead, the narrator is left to bear witness, not only to the excesses of politics in 1970s Argentina, but to the long and painful legacy of that politics, a legacy that turns toward the postmemorial, as the temporal remove deepens

and the narrator, already exiled from Argentina, becomes increasingly disconnected in time and space from the events of her youth. Indeed, the meditation on death and dying toward the end of the novel signal the ways in which witnessing necessarily involves a proximity to death. In attending to the burdens of the past, the narrator wrestles with how to be faithful to their legacy, and the question of *obedientia*, or of acceptance, is a question of radical openness to an other who is by now a ghost, to an excess that is haunting and spectral. As the narrator begins to distance herself from a static understanding of history and of the past and to recognize, instead, the dynamism that inevitably characterizes the relationship between past and present and even between living and dead, she faces the terror that comes with giving up that stasis (that is, in giving up the frame). But she also opens herself up to the possibilities inherent to translation, to the possibilities that come with a willingness to traverse the frame. Indeed, part of the work of postmemory demands a recognition that one's relationship to the past is dynamic, rather than static, a recognition that does not always come easily and—as for both Emma and the narrator in *La Anunciación*—sometimes comes at great cost. But an engagement with dynamism, an embracing of movement, of traversal, of translation, hints at a possibility of justice—a gesture toward *obedientia* or hospitality that is not closed off or final, but open and ongoing.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Staging Translation: Politics, Performance, and Postmemory in Daniel Alarcón's *At Night We Walk in Circles***

Theater and performance are essential themes in Daniel Alarcón's *At Night We Walk in Circles*, published in 2013. The novel tells the story of Nelson, a young actor who auditions to go on tour with Diciembre, a radical and experimental theater troupe originally founded during a period of political violence, repression, and censorship two decades prior, in the early 1980s. Diciembre is best known for its performances of a play called *The Idiot President*, which is a political satire, as its title suggests. It was written by Henry Nuñez, the company's lead actor and playwright, who was arrested for "incitement" in 1986, after just two performances (4). When the novel begins, Nelson has just won a role in a revival of *The Idiot President*, and Diciembre is set to go on tour again in the spring of 2001, reviving the play and the tour itself, which was cut short by Henry's arrest fifteen years before.<sup>44</sup>

These two contexts—the politically charged 1980s and the relatively calm and prosperous, though no less complicated, 2000s—are crucial to the arc of the novel. The revival of *The Idiot President* both commemorates the fear and urgency of the first tour

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<sup>44</sup> Alarcón published a short story called "The Idiot President" in the October 6, 2008, issue of *The New Yorker*. Many of the elements from the novel are also present in the short story, albeit with slightly different valences (the characterizations, for example, are a little different, but the character names are the same), but the plot differs significantly. The novel also has some parallels with "Second Lives," Alarcón's short story in the August 16, 2010, issue of *The New Yorker*, though these parallels are less significant.

and represents the troupe's attempt to reinvigorate itself in the present. In this way, the theatrical performances negotiate between the trauma of the past and the uncertainty of the present, and I use translation as a means for understanding what transpires between the first set of performances and the second, as a figure for attending to the violence that marks the first set and its long term resonances in the second. In this context, translation is also a lens for considering the relationship between memory and postmemory—and the effort to make sense of trauma and its legacy across a generational divide.

In addition to the two tours, the novel depicts—or stages—two other productions: Henry's staging of *The Idiot President* in prison, after he is arrested, and Nelson's decision to take on the "role" of Rogelio—Henry's long-dead lover from prison. In the latter performance, Nelson agrees to act as Rogelio in order to maintain—for the sake of Rogelio's mother, Anabel—the longstanding fiction that Rogelio is alive, but absent, living in the United States. Nelson stays behind, at the last stop on the tour, in T--, to perform for Anabel, living for the duration of the performance with her and with Noelia, Rogelio's sister. Through each of these stagings, theater and performance emerge as translative forces, forces that attend to the concerns of postmemory by negotiating between the trauma of the past and the uncertainty of the present. I argue that each of these stagings—the three performances of *The Idiot President*, as well as Nelson's performance as Rogelio—is a translation, the recreation of a theatrical work borne of one era or context so that it resonates in a new context, even as it carries the scars of the past. Each new performance of *The Idiot President* is another unfolding, another stage that marks the play's continued life. And in the case of the last performance, this idea extends beyond the context of the traditional theater venue and into a private home; as such, it is a

theatrical staging that attends to the private nuances of mourning, pushing at the bounds of what it means to revisit the past. In this way, the novel points to the relationship between artistic creation and its socio-political context, between art's capacity to interrupt and to mediate.

In general, I use the word “performance” to refer to the presentation or staging of an artistic work; within the context of *At Night We Walk in Circles*, that artistic work is most often a play—and, more specifically, *The Idiot President*. Nelson's performance of Rogelio complicates that definition, of course, since he is involved not in the presentation of a specific work, but of a specific character. He doesn't perform in a traditional theater venue either, but many of the performances of *The Idiot President* are in non-traditional venues, as well. Nevertheless, I consider Nelson's portrayal of Rogelio to be a performance in the sense that he presents himself to Anabel in this role and stages his production, as it were, within the confines of her (rather limited) world. With regard to theater and theatricality, I refer to Samuel Weber's work on “theater as medium”:

When an event or series of events *takes place* without reducing the place it [sic] ‘taken’ to a purely neutral site, then that place reveals itself to be a ‘stage,’ and those events become theatrical happenings. As the gerund here suggests . . . such happenings never take place once and for all but are ongoing. This in turn suggests that they can neither be contained within the place where they unfold nor entirely separated from it. They can be said, then, in a quite literal sense, to *come to pass*. They take place, which means in a particular place, and yet simultaneously also *pass away*—not simply to disappear but to happen somewhere *else*. Out of the dislocations of its repetitions emerges nothing more or less than the *singularity of the theatrical event*. (*Theatricality* 7)

Weber's discussion is relevant for several reasons. First, the “ongoing” nature of a “theatrical happening” is significant, particularly in terms of its “coming to pass” and also “passing away.” The conjunction of place and time, especially, resonates in the context of

trauma and postmemory in which trauma “comes to pass”—and is rooted in a particular place and time—and also “passes away” in the sense that its legacy endures and its effects persist, though not necessarily in precisely the same place or the same way—or to the same people. Indeed, this language suggests a kind of spatial translation that unfolds in time. In addition, and as I noted in the introduction (and throughout the dissertation), the tension between repetition and singularity is significant within the context of translation, as well as in the context of testimony and witnessing texts, which are driven by an impulse that is both a “return to the same” and “a search for someplace different (Levine 12).

As noted in the introduction and throughout the dissertation, I use translation here as a broad metaphor for negotiating the distances, literal and figurative, that emerge in the wake of political repression, with a particular focus on spatial or geographic distance and temporal or generational distance. These distances are, in turn, underscored by formal distance, including references to other, non-textual media. With regard to spatial distance, I use translation in the literal sense of *translatio*, or carrying across, to attend to the movement or carrying of ideas and people across borders, national and otherwise. I refer to Walter Benjamin’s thinking on translation and “afterlife” to suggest that translation mediates between the past—the moment of origin—and the present or future—the “stage of continued life.” In this way, translation is a temporal process, a carrying of ideas and meaning backwards and forwards through time. Finally, I use translation as a figure that points toward difference. If translation most commonly refers to transferring meaning from one language into another, a translation will be related to its source, of course, but also fundamentally distanced from it; the meaning transfers, but the two languages make

for inevitable differences. Here, translation is useful for negotiating formal distance—and difference.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider linguistic translation—the way we most commonly define translation—which requires attention to each of the above elements. When we do inter-linguistic translations, we account for the ways in which language’s resonances are informed by history and geography. Alarcón’s novel invokes this theme to a greater degree than the other novels do, I think, in part because it is written in English (unlike the other three novels), primarily for an English-speaking, North American audience, and yet it treats a Spanish-speaking, South American context and a South American landscape. While the novel is not an inter-linguistic translation (although it has been translated into Spanish), it self-consciously negotiates borders between culture, nation, and language.

*At Night We Walk in Circles* foregrounds each of the distances I have outlined above. The novel actually takes place in an unnamed South American country, though the setting closely resembles Peru’s geography, politics, and history. Diciembre’s tours—the first and the second—set the novel in motion, as the reader follows the troupe out of the coastal city and into the mountainous countryside. In addition, as I noted above, the book itself traverses two locales, painting a portrait of a Spanish-speaking, South American country for an English-speaking, primarily North American, audience. Furthermore, the novel treats multiple types of media. Most notably, the novel juxtaposes literature and performance, but it also presents another medium, that of journalism or reportage. It is narrated by an unnamed reporter who works for a magazine, and in this way, it is framed as a piece of journalism, with many of the dialogues between the reporter and various

characters presented as interviews from the reporter's files. Part of the novel's force comes from this heteroglossia, from the way it poses literature itself as a powerful tool for bringing together the disparate discourses of history, politics, and art.

The most significant distance in the novel, however, is the generational gap between the 1980s—a period Nelson's father referred to as “the anxious years” (3)—and the 2000s. Diciembre's own history, with its brief tour in the mid-80s and its revival tour in 2001, underscore these two historical periods; indeed, it's through the lens of the two tours that we come to understand the significance of all that has unfolded since the troupe's founding. An acquaintance with Peru's history is useful, too: the 1980s signals the height of the terror and violence of the Shining Path years, whereas the early 2000s indicate the end of Alberto Fujimori's presidency—an era marked by greater stability, though also by the imposition of neoliberal economic reforms and a continuation of human rights violations against the radical left. As in much of Latin America, the emphasis on neoliberalism and privatization persists even after Fujimori's departure, as does the emphasis on the value of the individual over collective action and politics. And, crucially, 2001 also marks the establishment of the two-year long Truth Commission, which was convened in order to investigate and report on the violence of the 1980s. In this sense, 2001 is an important year for the politics of memory and postmemory, the point at which the country officially seeks to grapple—from a generational remove—with its history of violence and internal conflict.

The Peruvian context is also interesting in terms of language and linguistic translation. Peru is a multilingual country; its inhabitants speak Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara, as well as other indigenous languages. The divide between the coastal city and

the mountainous countryside is also a linguistic divide, since many of the Quechua- and Aymara-speakers are in the highlands. Most of the villages that Diciembre visits on its tours would not be Spanish-speaking, at least not in the real Peru. The novel largely ignores this multilingualism (aided, in part, by the fact that the country is technically unnamed), choosing instead to foreground Spanish and English. The Peru that is presented, then, is a peculiarly homogenized Peru, an almost generically Hispanic setting. And yet this linguistic gesture does not necessarily indicate blindness on Alarcón's part; indeed, it has the effect of highlighting and then complicating some of the more common tropes related to Latin America, particularly those evoking revolution, nostalgia, and escape. Moreover, this vague, less nuanced version of Peru reflects a view of Peru from a distance, a view that is perhaps appropriate for Alarcón, who was born in Peru and has spent significant periods of time there, but has lived most of his life in the United States. There are enough details that the portrayal feels authentically Peruvian (or is recognizable as such), and yet it is a version of Peru that is more easily translated, rendered legible for an audience not intimately familiar with the country.

By beginning the second Diciembre tour in 2001, the novel stages by proxy that postmemorial engagement with the legacy of the past. The revival of *The Idiot President* both commemorates the fear and urgency of the first tour and represents the troupe's attempt—and the nation's attempt—to reinvigorate itself in the present. The novel's two primary geographies, the urban and the rural, further underscore this point, since the two regions were affected by the years of violence and repression in different ways; the violence was more extreme and immediate in the mountains—and its effects persist into the present. The troupe's decision to go on tour in the mountains has a different valence

in the 1980s than it does in 2001, but in each case, that trip into the mountains underscores the tensions between the two regions—tensions that were present during the violence in the 1980s and continue to complicate the attempt to come to terms with its legacy.

Translation, then, is a figure for negotiating these many distances, and as a metaphor, translation is particularly well-suited to the context of the theater and performance, in which any given performance of a play represents a kind of translation of its source material. A particular performance depends on both the play as text and on the interpretation of that text as it gets translated to the stage. In a similar vein, each performance of a play is fundamentally distinct; even if the content of the play stays the same from one performance to the next or from one series of performances to the next, each performance will inevitably be affected by changes in audience, in venue, in the performers' moods. In some cases, as here, the differences can be substantial: the significance of *The Idiot President* during the anxious years, for example, is quite different than when it's performed fifteen years later (a distinction registered not only through differences in the staging and interpretation, but through differences in the audience's response and engagement). Benjamin's "afterlife" resonates here, too, since plays are generally written with the understanding that they'll be performed beyond the influence of the playwright, perhaps even posthumously—that they will, in other words, have a life of their own. As such they will inevitably be adapted, modified, giving voice to the original *intentio*, but also allowing for a new *intentio*. Furthermore, as I noted at the outset, "theater as medium" has a translative quality in its negotiation of space and time, particularly a space and time connected to trauma and its legacy. At a meta-textual level,



by translating theater and performance into the space of the text, the novel implicates the reader in a kind of “participant observation,” where we as readers become spectators, too, wrapped up in these elements of performance.<sup>45</sup>

Translation and performance also intersect with each other in more nuanced and intangible ways. In *Benjamin’s –abilities*, Samuel Weber describes Benjamin’s interest in “citability” and “gesture,” particularly with regard to epic theater, though Weber extends the analysis to contemporary theater and theatricality more generally.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, Weber notes that Benjamin’s “What is Epic Theater?”—the essay from which these understandings of gesture and citability are arrived—was itself subject to revision and “transformation” (96).<sup>47</sup> Benjamin wrote an initial draft of the piece in 1931, set it aside, and returned to it later, publishing it anonymously in 1939, though Weber notes: “In the intervening period, parts of the original text were cited and reworked for other occasions and texts . . . ” (96). Thus, Weber links Benjamin’s own relationship to the essay and its argument to the nature of theater itself, with theater’s emphasis on “*gesture, interruption, and citability*” (96).

Weber explains that for Benjamin, epic theater is characterized by gesture, “which emerges in and through the process of interrupting action”—and “are therefore constituted by and as interruptions”—and by citation, that is by “making gestures citable” (98 - 100). Further, with regard to “citability,” Weber argues:

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<sup>45</sup> Amy Sara Carroll called my attention to this term and to its function in the text.

<sup>46</sup> In *Benjamin’s –abilities*, Weber’s discussion of citability, gesture, and interruption is strongly rooted in Benjamin’s “What is Epic Theater?” In *Theatricality as Medium*, Weber similarly refers to this lineage and context for the terms, but describes Benjamin’s citation and citability, gesture, and interruption in epic theater as well as in “theater in general today” (45). See, for example, 44-9.

<sup>47</sup> As noted above, there is a parallel here with the development of *At Night We Walk in Circles* in relationship to two earlier short stories, “The Idiot President” and “Second Lives.” While I would not call either of the short stories “an original text,” I do think the relationship between the novel and the preceding short stories could be characterized as one of citation, revision, and transformation.

The citability of gesture interrupts its immediate manifestation and constitutes it as interruption, which is to say, as something that cannot simply be seen, but that can give rise to *Nachdenken*, to after-thoughts. Such thoughts consider the “after,” the aftermath, the *citability* of the gesture as disjunctive and discontinuous. Through this disjunction, the essence of the gesture resides in its tendency to always come too late, and yet at the same time never to arrive fully; it belongs to the future, never simply to the present or to the past. (105)

Both gesture and its citability are noteworthy for their capacity for interruption—gesture as an interrupting action and citability as a kind of continued, and in some sense forward-looking, capacity for interruption. Here, that forward-looking capacity for interruption is also significant for its ability to produce after-thoughts in an undefined after-math; the “after” also easily recalls after-life. If the gesture, at the moment it is introduced, interrupts the immediate theatrical context, its citability also indicates the possibility that it might continue to be thought-provoking, even beyond the end of the theatrical performance.

The rhetoric, here, for describing the gesture and its citability resonates with translation, as I’ve defined it, as well as with trauma and its ongoing effects and the concerns of postmemory. These themes—trauma and its ongoing effects, postmemory—along with the references, above, to afterthoughts, aftermath, and afterlife also bring to mind Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwardsness. Michael Levine notes that this term is also sometimes translated as “belatedness,” and he quotes Laplanche and Pontalis’s definition in *Language of Psychoanalysis*, the idea that “experiences, impressions and memory traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness” (171). In this sense, the ongoing effects of trauma not only persist, they may be subsequently “revised to fit in

with fresh experiences,” a process that resonates with the various interpretations and productions—that is, translations—of *The Idiot President*, in which the play is revised (by actors and spectators both) in order to “fit in with” next settings and contexts.

With regard to translation, Weber writes that the citability of gesture “requires a different type of logic, in which identity and difference, repetition and transformation are not construed as mutually exclusive” (97). Identity and difference, repetition and transformation: these same terms are important to the work of translation. In translation, an original and its translation are similar, if not identical, but they are also fundamentally different. Translation is also concerned with repetition at the same time it is essentially predicated on transformation. Similarly, Weber notes, “The notion of experiment to which Benjamin, citing Brecht, here recurs also entails a certain iterability, but not one that involves the reproduction of the identical. Rather, the goal of the theatrical experiment is the instantaneous emergence of the singular, the incommensurable, the irreducibly different.” (108) Again, translation’s foundation in iterability without reproduction or identity intersects with Benjamin’s description of theatrical experiment. Taken together, theater produces “the singular, the incommensurable, the irreducibly different” in its guise as a translative endeavor.

With regard to trauma, I turn to Ross Chambers’ description, in *Untimely Interventions*, of “aftermath,” which he describes as “the state of perpetually surviving a trauma that is never over”—a state that, Chambers argues, “all who live on the planet” endure (43). Further, Chambers emphasizes that “the flashbacks and hallucinations that form part of the symptomatology of post-traumatic stress disorder and enact most vividly the copresence of past and present, there and here, are not exceptional events of

untimeliness; rather they are characteristic symptoms of a large state of pathology or out-of-jointness”—the state of aftermath (43). Here, Chambers’ untimeliness and out-of-jointness, along with flashbacks and hallucinations, recall Weber’s summary of the citability of gesture as “disjunctive and discontinuous.” The gesture, in the aftermath begotten by its citability, interrupts and erupts in ways parallel to the perpetual and untimely interruptions of traumatic effects in the aftermath of trauma. In this way, the gesture can be emblematic of trauma and its effects. Diana Taylor similarly draws a connection among trauma, performance, and repetition, “Trauma . . . is a durational performance, characterized by the nature of its repetitions”; repetitions here include “reiterated acts of showing, telling,” and Taylor explains that these actions characterize both “trauma and trauma-driven actions intended to channel and alleviate it” (“Telling Ruins” 19). In the context of the novel, as the plot moves back and forth between the anxious years and their aftermath, the various performances evoke trauma and its aftereffects, reiterating and retelling, but also forestalling the aftereffects of trauma, particularly in T--, as Rogelio’s brother and sister attempt to shield their mother from her son’s death.

It’s worth noting, too, as Weber writes, that for Benjamin “theater interrupts the announcements of everyday life to bring us a special message” (113). Or, said another way, theater as a kind of dialectical image, broadly understood, as “something to be read rather than merely seen . . . is construed by Benjamin as both disjunctive and medial in its structure—which is to say, as both actual and virtual as the same time. Such images become a point of convergence, which Benjamin here designates as “now.” This *now* coexists with the “time” from which it simultaneously sets itself apart” (49). Theater

interrupts, and it mediates; it is actual and virtual, representative of a “now,”—the *jetzeit*—even as it, like translation, looks forward and backward, mediating between the events of the past and their resonances—and repercussions—in the present. Indeed, trauma is itself an interruption, one made citable through its continued capacity for interruption, albeit in unpredictable ways. These interruptions point toward a Benjaminian conception of history, a history that is constructed by, and subject to, disruption. Theater and performance, as translative endeavors, offer a venue for framing and then mediating those continued—and repeated—interruptions, for attending, in other words, to the concerns of postmemory, as they continue to evolve over time and generational distance.

The temporal divide between the first tour and the second, as well as between the first incarnation of Diciembre and its revival, is made explicit from the first page of the novel.<sup>48</sup> The original company was founded by “a few radical students” “during the war” or “the anxious years” (3). Alarcón describes its founding members: “Their ranks were drawn, broadly speaking, from the following overlapping circles of youth: the longhairs, the working class, the sex-crazed, the poseurs, the provincials, the alcoholics, the emotionally needy, the rabble-rousers, the opportunists, the punks, the hangers-on, and the obsessed” (3). This list reads like a who’s who of the radical, the extreme, and the marginalized, and oddly (and despite Alarcón’s assertion that the troupe belongs to a tradition of people’s theater and street theater in the seventies and eighties), it evokes the

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<sup>48</sup> In an interview with Thessaly La Force of *Vogue* in October 2013, Alarcón says that *The Idiot President* is based on a play by a friend of his, who was “a founding member of a theater troupe called Septiembre.” The real Septiembre “helped create” Alarcón’s “fictional Diciembre.” Alarcón notes, too, a third friend “told me all kinds of stories about the plays that he had performed in the middle of nowhere. . . . But yeah, in the fervor of the seventies and the eighties, that did happen—there was this tradition of people’s theater and street theater.” The translation, as it were, from “Septiembre” to “Diciembre” is also a temporal shift; Diciembre, for example, evokes endings in a way that Septiembre doesn’t.

radicalism and an avant-gardism of a different era and a different place, particularly the urban student movements of the late 1960s of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. Indeed, the revolutionary movement in 1980s Peru is the Shining Path (as I noted earlier), a movement that was indigenous and Maoist and also very violent. *Diciembre*, then, is a bit of translation in space and in time, one that is disjointed and surprising in the Peruvian context, but again seems to underscore that view of Peru from a distance, a view that evokes (and possibly subverts—or at least plays with) many of the tropes associated with Latin American revolution and radicalism, perhaps signaling a nostalgia for a past other than the one that accords with history.

These tropes continue to emerge throughout the description of the troupe. Alarcón adds,

The company . . . coalesced around the work of a few strident, though novice, playwrights, and quickly became known for their daring trips into the conflict zone, where they lived out their slogan—Theater for the people!—at no small risk to the safety of the actors. Such was the tenor of the era that while sacrifices of this sort were applauded by certain sectors of the public, many others condemned them, even equated them with terrorism. (4)

With that last line, Alarcón makes it clear that the troupe was more easily associated with the extreme and the radical—“equated . . . with terrorism”—because the socio-political circumstances and their attendant rhetoric tipped the scales in that direction. At the same time, the rhetoric here again evokes some of the avant-garde art and theater movements of the 1960s, such as Latin American Conceptualism (most prominent in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico) or Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (in Brazil). These movements took seriously the possibility of art “as a good tool for subversion” and, indeed, the significance—and necessity—of subversion more

broadly, as a means to “refresh society” (Camnitzer 19–20). Art in this vein foregrounded “ideas” over “forms,” a method that served “to connect the artist with this chosen public” and to engage that public, not only as viewer, but as participant (Camnitzer 20). The result, as Luis Camnitzer notes, was an amalgam of “art, politics, pedagogy, and poetry”—an artistic form dedicated to “agitation” and to “construction” (21). In this context, the moment was ripe not only for others to perceive Diciembre as “terrorist,” but for the members of the troupe themselves to see their art as subversive, agitative, and constructive—as politically engaged and capable of real change. Taken together, these circumstances also made the actors’ goals more risky, so that the significance of their work was heightened.

Among the troupe’s founding members are Henry—the company’s lead playwright—and Patalarga, Henry’s good friend and confidante. These two, along with Nelson, who joins the troupe’s revival in 2001, are the novel’s three main characters. From the very beginning, Alarcón highlights the generational gap between Nelson and Henry and Patalarga. At the time of Diciembre’s founding, Nelson “was just a boy” (3); similarly, Alarcón writes, “In 1983, *when Nelson was only five*, a few of Diciembre’s members were harassed by police in the town of Belén; a relatively minor affair, which nonetheless made the papers, prelude to a more serious case in Las Velas, where members of the local defense committee briefly held three actors captive . . .” (4, emphasis mine). At the moment in which Diciembre’s stakes were highest—its members were subject to police harassment and arrest—Alarcón and his narrator clearly point out that Nelson was a young child, with little access to, or awareness of, the tension and violence that mark Henry and Patalarga’s young adulthood.

In Diciembre's heyday, the extremity of the political circumstances have a effect on Diciembre's artistic expression, and art and politics are closely intertwined:

In its glory days at the end of the 1980s, Diciembre felt less like a theater collective and more like a movement: they staged marathon, all-night shows in the newly abandoned buildings and warehouses at the edges of the Old City. When there was no electricity—which was often—they rigged up lights from car batteries, or set candles about the stage; barring that, they performed in the dark, the spectral voices of the actors emerging from the limitless black. They became known for their pop reworkings of García Lorca, their stentorian readings of Brazilian soap opera scripts, their poetry nights that mocked the very idea of poetry. They celebrated on principle anything that kept audiences awake and laughing through what might have otherwise been the long, lonely hours of curfew. (6-7)

Again, the description of Diciembre's works evokes a 1960s avant-garde aesthetic. The troupe is forced into a special kind of creativity that was prevalent during that period, and each of the examples offered here represents an adaptation in response to the extraordinary circumstances, as well as a privileging of idea over form and a desire to engage and involve the audience (perhaps not always successful, but present as part of the ethos). In the absence of electricity, the shows might be performed in the dark, privileging the aural aspects of performance over the visual. García Lorca is reworked for a Latin American audience, and soap operas, normally geared toward a popular television audience, are read dramatically in front of a live audience. Poetry is read with an emphasis on subverting the form itself. These works signal an impulse toward agitation and toward construction (the play with light and dark here is particularly evocative); they are subversive, but they also give the troupe an opportunity to offer relief, even refuge, for its audiences—to create community in the midst of violence.

The description of “perform[ing] in the dark,” with “the spectral voices of the actors emerging from the limitless black” is an interesting complement to the description



of the soundless film in Roberto Brodsky's *Bosque quemado*. In Brodsky's novel, the film has images but no sound. Here, the inverse is true: during the blackouts, the performances have sound, but no visuals. In both cases, the moment of ekphrasis asks the reader to imagine what's there and what's not there. Similarly, what's not there—sound, lighting and visuals—gestures toward the violent and repressive socio-political circumstances that surround the artistic space, whether studio or theater. Part of what makes the soundless film powerful, in Brodsky's novel, is the possibility that its participants have disappeared along with the sound. When the newly hired actors in Caracas come to the studio to dub, they watch—and work with—the film in a space and moment apart from the one in which the project was originally conceived of and filmed. As an (unanticipated) audience, they are divorced in time and space from the film's socio-political context.

In Alarcón's novel, precisely the opposite is true. Although the visuals have “disappeared,” the actors are still present, as is the audience. Indeed, the presence of both, at the same time and in the same place, is what makes the performance significant: that the actors have chosen to perform in spite of the difficult circumstances and that the audience has chosen to attend. And yet, the moment, as Alarcón describes it, is similarly unnerving: “the spectral voices of the actors emerging from the limitless black.” In *On Creaturely Life*, Santner alludes to the spectral as “traces of life no longer there, which for that very reason seems to have acquired a more radical and disturbing quality of thereness whose impact is experienced as traumatic” (51).

Whereas in *Bosque quemado*, the actors are actually “no longer there,” in *At Night*, they are, they just appear (or seem) not to be. In *At Night*, then, the effect of the

spectral is virtual (since, in fact, the traces of life are still there), pointing toward the possibility of trauma and disappearance that the audience and actors have avoided, at least for the moment. In *Bosque quemado*, the effect is the reverse, where the actors seem—by virtue of their appearance on film—still to be present, while the absence of sound gestures toward the absence—and, most likely, the disappearance—of the actors.

Diana Taylor's work on performance and spectacle during the Dirty War in Argentina and the dictatorship in Chile speaks to the multiple valences and possibilities of performance, particularly with regard to disappearance. On the one hand, she suggests that public spectacle—such as that employed by the Argentine military junta during the Dirty War—could be used to force the spectator into collusion with military violence (*Disappearing Acts* 123). In contrast, in her essay on “Performing Ruins,” she notes that theater and performance can “make witnesses of the audience,” engaging them in a kind of participation that is not collusive, but oriented toward “transmission” and, thus, translation. It is this later valence that both the scene in Brodsky's novel and the scene in Alarcón's novel evoke, where the spectators are implicitly made witness to disappearance. Indeed, both scenes serve to offset the politics of the artistic work at hand from a state-driven, violent performance of politics.

It is interesting to think of these two related, albeit inverse, moments of ekphrasis in light of W.J.T. Mitchell's “three phases” of ekphrastic realization: ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope, and ekphrastic fear (*Picture* 152-155). Ekphrastic hope, the second phase, refers to “the phase when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: ‘to make us see’” (152). Mitchell adds: “Once the

desire to overcome the ‘impossibility’ of ekphrasis is put into play, the possibilities and the hopes for verbal representation of visual representation become practically endless. . . . The estrangement of the image/text division is overcome, and a sutured, synthetic form, a verbal icon or imagetext, arises in its place” (*Picture* 154). There is something in Mitchell’s description that resonates with the aims of the artistic projects in both Alarcón and Brodsky’s narrative: the emphasis, first, on hope, but also the idea of overcoming division, of the impossible made momentarily possible, all through the merging of two artistic forms, the verbal and the visual. It is also fitting, then, that the third phase, what comes after hope, is that of fear:

the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually. . . . It is the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than . . . a natural fact that can be relied on. (*Picture* 154)

In the context of both artistic projects, there’s a kind of hopefulness with regard to the project’s aims, the possibility that art—film in Brodsky’s novel, theater in Alarcón’s—can participate in political structure. The fear, then, is of the moment when art and politics might collapse—a fear that can lend art power, but also leaves room for the possibility that politics might intrude into art in frightening ways. In both Brodsky and Alarcón, the missing aural and visual elements signal that intrusion: the sound canisters go missing when the director of the film is forced to flee, and the lights go out because the city is in crisis and under siege. As Mitchell writes, the three phases of ekphrasis “produce a pervasive sense of ambivalence”; in Brodsky and Alarcón both, a similar

ambivalence emerges—at least in these moments—about the relationship between politics and art.

In fact, Weber’s analysis of Benjamin also hints at a kind of tension between hope and fear. Weber writes:

The mode of being that characterizes this disjunctive theater of the future, therefore, is . . . that of “possibility” both as potentiality and as alterity: the possibility of becoming other than what is currently present or presented. But this future is not that which one expects, which one hopes to foresee, to calculate or even to bring about. It is unforeseeable, unpredictable, unfathomable. . . . “It can happen this way, but it can also come about in an entirely different manner” (GS2, 525). (*-abilities* 105)

Here, I think the “potentiality,” “the possibility of becoming other than what is currently present” is hopeful, as is the “alterity,” but it is mixed with a degree of fear in its fundamental unpredictability and unfathomability, the idea that “in an entirely different manner” could turn out to be distasteful or frightening. Benjamin associates this particular mindset—“It can happen this way, but I can also come about in an entirely different matter”—with epic theater in particular, but I think it extends to theater and performance that seeks to engage with its audience, such as Diciembre’s performances do. What this formulation of potentiality and alterity underscores is the way in which hope and fear need not be at odds with each other: in other words, the way in which hope might need fear—and vice versa.

Part of what unfolds in the novel, then, is the mutable relationship between hope and fear, art and politics, over time and space. Even from a generational remove, Nelson and his peers imbue that particular historical moment with import and legend, albeit naively and even reductively so:

These shows were mythologized by theater students of Nelson’s generation; and, if one searched (as Nelson had) through the stands of

used books and magazines clogging the side streets of the Old City, it was possible to find mimeographed copies of Diciembre's programs, wrinkled and faded but bearing that unmistakable whiff of history, the kind one wishes to have been a part of. (6-7)

This latter point is a complex one, one that marks Nelson's generation as postmemorial: they eluded the violence themselves, mainly by virtue of having been born too late, but their own experiences are marked by the persistent legacy of that violence. And even knowing that the members of Diciembre occasionally risked their lives, that their cultural and political significance comes at the price of extreme violence and repression, Nelson's generation understands that those same circumstances give art a significance it is unlikely to have in peacetime. For Nelson and his cohort, the significance of those circumstances is also a call for translation, for a reworking of that legacy in a way that corresponds to the demands of the present—an opportunity, in other words, to recognize and to cite the gestures of their predecessors, but in the context of a new theatrical experiment. Their work would, perhaps, re-enact that violence past, even as it transforms it for the present moment, one newly obsessed with privatization and self-fulfillment.

After all, the end of the war ushers in a new, neoliberal era, and that clearly changes things for Diciembre. Alarcón writes, “Nearly a decade after the war's nominal end, Diciembre still functioned as a loose grouping of actors who occasionally even put on a show; often in a private home to which the audience came by invitation only. Paradoxically, now that travel outside the city was relatively safe, they hardly ever went to the interior” (8). This shift from the countryside back to the city signals a translation and a transformation; the war sends them into the countryside, at risk to their lives, impelled by a collectivist spirit to bring “theater to the people.” In peace, and as a

reflection of the new economic reforms, they recede not only into the city, but into private homes, where their art becomes exclusive, no longer accessible.

The change in political circumstances thus points to a change in the company's credo and goals: "in late 2000," some of the old members of the troupe suggest a "commemoration" of the troupes founding; Patalarga takes this a step further and suggests a tour. Henry, whose time in prison has made him reluctant to re-involve himself with theater, agrees to participate, but asks that the troupe find a new actor for the tour" (10). Commemoration—citing the significance of the first tour—is the rationale for the revival, and it is a sharp (though necessary and inevitable) contrast to the "Theater for the people!" slogan of the first run. Henry's request to find a new actor demonstrates the postmemorial stakes of this new tour, as well as his recognition that the revival must be an adaption, a "supplement," in Benjamin's words, or a transformation, rather than a reproduction (since that will surely fail, both artistically and logistically). And in choosing Nelson, who was (as we've already learned) just a boy during the anxious years, Henry gives the play new life, an "afterlife," leaving room for Nelson to carry his own circumstances, experiences, *intentions* into the world of the play, as well as into Diciembre's ethos.

Nevertheless, the revival, as a commemoration, is tinged with nostalgia for all involved, particularly since it's initially a group of troupe veterans who suggest it. It turns out that each of the three actors—Henry, Patalarga, and Nelson—agrees to the revival and the tour for his own reasons. Both veterans—Henry and Patalarga—cite the potentialities of the first tour as part of their reasons for agreeing to the second tour and as part of their rationale for believing that the second tour might somehow reimburse their

lives with a hope they abandoned years ago. Henry has a vague, fleeting notion that the revival might somehow “resurrect his career,” (11-12), but more importantly, he sees the tour as an opportunity to “enter the world of the play, and escape [his] life. [He wants] to leave the city and enter a universe where [they will all be] someone different” (77). Henry’s rationale suggests that he sees the tour not just as a means for escape, but as a world (or a universe) unto itself, a spatial context distinct from the one he normally inhabits. Patalarga’s aspirations are similar; he explains, “It was a way to be young again; to escape the city for a spell and relive times which, though difficult, constituted the central experiences of his otherwise uneventful life” (98). For Patalarga, escaping the city is also turn toward the past, a means for reliving and re-experiencing his youth. The association of the countryside with the past and, consequently, with a certain idealized notion of authenticity is another a common trope in Latin American literature. The use of that trope here both underscores it, but also subverts it: for the members of Diciembre, the city represents their point of origin, the routine and even monotony of their daily lives, whereas the countryside represents the adventure and dynamism of life on tour and chance to get out from under the bourgeois pretensions of urban dwelling and come into contact with some idealized—and ultimately false—sense of the country’s true nature, a desire to recapture an “origin” that never really was. Nelson, of course, is not looking for something he once had—after all, he’s hired for his lack of experience—but he is trying to leave disappointment and routine behind, “a breakup, a protracted tenure at an uninteresting job, the disappointing aftermath of a graduation both longed for and feared” (13)—the references to school and to a career also suggest a kind of neoliberal trajectory that he finds distasteful, though his rejection of them is also a rejection of aging and

maturation. In addition, he's affected by Diciembre's mythology and legacy, which he's been acquainted with since he was young. His interest in the tour, and in the countryside, is a translation of Henry and Patalarga's nostalgia, an idealization of the revolutionary past that's been inaccessible to him. Though none of the three can recover the past, this new tour nevertheless represents an opportunity for a translation, a repetition of the earlier tour that is also, inevitably, a transformation, a chance for each of them to make sense of their present in light of the scars of the past.

Even the itinerary for the revival tour—which closely mirrors that of the tour during the anxious years—serves to underscore the generational divide between the two tours and the nostalgia that infuses the commemoration:

They would leave the capital in April, head up into the mountains. As many shows as they could manage, perhaps six or seven a week. In most every town, they'd begin with a negotiation, for a space, for a time. They had contacts, and Diciembre was respected and fairly well known, even now. If the town was big enough, they'd stay awhile, until everyone had seen them perform. The circuit was sketched out, but subject to improvisation. (20)

The reference to improvisation resonates with the language of the theater, but also recalls the kinds of adaptations that would have been especially crucial to the first tour, a willingness to respond quickly to a suddenly dangerous situation or, conversely, an unexpectedly welcoming one. But the reference to negotiating for a space and a time signals a broader theme of the novel, the ongoing negotiations between artists and their surroundings (whether geographic, cultural, or political) and between the artists and their audience. On the revival tour, each performance explicitly makes that negotiation in miniature, seeking both context and audience. Their reputation precedes them, but



ultimately the actors on the revival tour will have to negotiate for their present configuration in the post-anxious years context.

Nelson's description of the towns the troupe will visit again evokes the trope of a certain idealized authenticity associated with the past and with the countryside:

Roughly: San Luis (where one of the traveling members of Diciembre had a cousin), a week and a half in the highlands above and around Corongo (where the same man was born and where his mother still lived), Canteras (where Henry Nuñez himself had lived from age 9 until he ran away to the capital at age fourteen), Concepción, then over the ridge to Belén, and into the valleys below. Posadas, El Arroyo, Surco Chico, up toward San Germán, and then the coast. A dozen smaller villages in between. An undeniably ambitious itinerary. The heart of the heart of the country. It was the tour Diciembre had intended to do, fifteen years earlier, until Henry's arrest scuttled those plans. (20-21)

The "heart of the heart of the country" is not only the countryside, but is also, in some sense, that idealized past, a space and time apart, marked by familial connections that are perhaps harder to come by in the present in the city.<sup>49</sup> This references to divided families and to migration from the countryside also recalls the anxious years and its effects, since many left in the wake of violence and repression. Nelson's mom's reaction to the itinerary underscores that fact, too, and gestures toward how different the sense of time and space has become in the wake of the Anxious Years: "The fact that one could even go to the interior still amazed her: during the war much of the country had been off-limits, far too dangerous for travel—but now her son would board a night bus and think nothing of it. It was astonishing" (21). The revival tour is in some sense a (futile) attempt to recover the original tour and the nostalgia associated with it, but the "ambition" here and the new ease of travel are also a reminder of all that has changed. Again, the new tour

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<sup>49</sup> Migration from the countryside to the city as a result of violence and war is an a central element of Alarcón's first novel, *Lost City Radio*; the titular radio show exists to reunite families who have been separated by the war and, in particular, by migration from country to city.

offers an opportunity for translation and transformation in light of the new socio-political circumstances.

*The Idiot President* itself presents a similar opportunity. It is a story of political violence and corruption, though the weight of that violence varies, according to how it's staged and, of course, to socio-political circumstance. The titular character is an "arrogant, self-absorbed head of state," who replaces "his manservant" each day. The play's only other character is Alejo, the president's son; Alejo is also the only character with a name. In the play, Alejo admits to the manservant that he has considered killing his father, the president, because his father is such a tyrant. After much badgering, the manservant responds to Alejo's concerns, finally admitting that perhaps Alejo is right, maybe the president should be killed. With this admission, Alejo accuses the manservant of treason and has him killed, thus requiring the president to hire another servant for the next day. We're given to understand that this exchange—Alejo's manipulation of the manservant—happens each day, that this is merely one episode of many, and so the play itself cites repetition and transformation as complementary rather than mutually exclusive; each manservant is, in some sense, the same (he never has a name), but also inevitably different, and each episode is a translation of the previous one, an expectation of repetition, with the hope of transformation. On Diciembre's first tour, it's not clear who played which part, though it seems possible that Henry, as lead actor, would have played Alejo. On the second tour, Henry plays the president, who is also the father; Patalarga plays the manservant; Nelson plays Alejo. On the revival tour, the play takes a postmemorial turn; it seems to be as much to be about the generational distance between father and son as it is about political history. The father shifts responsibility onto the son;

the father is mostly a figurehead, and the son becomes the villain and the instigator of violence, arranging a trap that will reveal the manservant's guilt, so that the father doesn't have to call for an execution himself.

As the narrator observes, "If one recalls the times, it's easy enough to understand why *The Idiot President* was so controversial during the war. The play debuted a few months after the inauguration of a new head of state, a young, charismatic but humourless man acutely lacking in confidence" (49). After Henry is arrested, he had argued that the play was not modeled after any particular president (49), but it's nevertheless written as part of, and as a commentary on, a particular set of circumstances. In Peruvian history, this reference is likely to President Fernando Terry, who took office just as the Shining Path was on the rise, though he largely ignored the violence during his time in office. But one need not know this particular history to understand the play as a challenge to authority; it calls attention to the abuse and manipulation of power, as well as to nepotism and deceit. Even in the novel's present, more than ten years after the end of the war, the play continues to pose a threat to authority, albeit in a different way. And long after those circumstances have passed, new audiences reinterpret the play for whatever the new circumstances allow. At the first stop on the tour, for example, in a town called San Luis, the mayor is reluctant to let the troupe stage the play because he doesn't like the title (97). Though he says he isn't "hostile to art, per se"—even this indicates a sense that art has the capacity to be culturally or politically powerful—"he described a number of killings that had taken place in the area since Diciembre's last visit in 1982, with a tone that implied the first event was somehow related to the others" (97). Even if Diciembre no longer holds the cachet it once did, something persists of its reputation and of the

traumatic era it recalls; more significantly, something of the political power of Diciembre's earlier work has been translated into the present. Indeed, the mayor's reaction to the troupe's arrival in San Luis suggests that the present peace is an uncertain, even tenuous, one. The scars of the anxious years are still there, even if they've faded, just as Diciembre's performances on the revival tour inevitably recall the urgency and political significance of its earlier performances, even if its sway has lessened.

In between the performances of the anxious years and the performances of the revival tour, we see another performance of "The Idiot President": Henry's staging of the play in *Collectors*, the prison to which he is confined after his arrest in 1986. Where the original and revival tours present a relatively linear relationship between the first set of performances and their reincarnation in the present, the performances in *Collectors* blur that line, offering a second—though no less important—context for art and its relationship to politics. The prison also represents a point of convergence for the various narrative threads: it's the place where Henry and Rogelio meet, and their relationship becomes the impetus for Nelson's extra-theatrical performance as Rogelio in the second half of the novel. In addition, Nelson's own arrest and imprisonment, at the very end of the novel, brings the story full circle; the novel is narrated by an unnamed journalist who has decided to report on the story of Nelson's rise and fall. As a point of convergence, the prison is both "disjunctive and medial" (Weber 49): it is set apart from the other spaces—and even temporalities—of the novel, even as it mediates the various narrative threads.

In fact, Nelson first hears of Henry when, as a young child, he catches a radio interview with Henry, where Henry recounts "a prison production of *The Idiot President*, with inmates in the starring roles" (5). During this interview, young Henry, still hopeful,

in a “firm, uncowed voice” says, “Criminals and delinquents have an intuitive understanding of a play about national politics” (5). Years later, at the auditions for the revival tour, Henry’s memories of the first tour are still intimately connected to his time in prison and to his relationship with Rogelio: “Still, this dialogue, these lines he’d written so many years before, even when recited by these inexpert actors, provoked in Henry an unexpected rush of sentiment: memories of hope, anger, and righteousness. The high drama of those days, the sense of vertigo; he pressed his eyes closed” (12). Again, there is a reference to an idealized past—hope, righteousness, high drama—although the association with prison surely undercuts that. Indeed, closing his eyes also flicks a switch, and Henry’s recollections switch to prison and to Rogelio:

In prison, Rogelio had taught him how to place a metal coil in the carved-out grooves of a brick, and how to use this contraption to warm up his meals. Before that simple lesson everything Henry ate had been cold. The prison was a frightful place, the most terrifying he’d ever been. He’d tried his hardest to forget it, but if there was anything about those times that had the ability to make him shudder still, it was the cold: his stay in prison, the fear, his despair, reduced to a temperature. Cold food. Cold hands. Cold cement floors. He remembered now how these coils had glowed bright and red, how Rogelio’s smile did too, and was surprised that these images still moved him so. (12)

The description here is intensely sensory and, especially, visual: the cold prison, the red hot of the coil, the brilliance of Rogelio’s smile. There’s a bit of ekphrastic hope here, too, in Henry’s surprise that the “images still moved him so.” Henry has no material images from prison and his time with Rogelio, no photographs (for example) that might serve, in Hirsch’s terms, as “instruments of remembrance.” Instead, Henry has only the images that compose his “storehouse of memory” (to recall Mitchell’s phrasing), and we can imagine that these images are precious and poignant to Henry.

Later, Henry is moved by recollections of the prison performance during rehearsals for the revival tour. Some are awful; he recalls, for example, “an image: in August 1986 he’d seen a man be kicked to death, or nearly to death, by a mob that formed unexpectedly at the door to Block Twelve” (70). This image occurs to him in light of a moment in the play, when the president kicks his servant. At one point, in rehearsals for the revival, Henry explains that the president is kicking the servant as a surrogate for kicking his son; in attempting to demonstrate this—the strength of the president’s anger at his son—Henry nearly kicks Patalarga for real. There’s a circular and translative effect here: Henry wrote the play with the kicking scene. Later, in prison, he recalls that scene when he sees a man kicked to death. Many years on, when it comes time to rehearse that scene again, before the revival tour, Henry recalls the kick from prison, and it generates a new incident: Henry nearly kicks Patalarga and risks injuring him. The translations here are backward and forward, and they negotiate between art and life, accruing new and different significances, relating to and reflecting on each other in turn. Henry re-considers the fictional play kick in light of having witnessed, in prison, the kind of real life violence the fictional kick is intended to mirror. Then there is a postmemorial turn, too, in which the prison kick begets (or almost begets) another act of violence, one to which Nelson is now witness.

But Henry’s memories of the performance in prison are generally good ones. As in both tours, he has to negotiate with Espejo, “the boss,” (71) for permission to stage the production (and so for venues, actors, and an audience)—a negotiation that echoes the San Luis mayor’s concern that theater might incite violence: “‘That’s what we get for taking terrorists,’ Espejo said, laughing. ‘We don’t do theater here’” (72). In expressing

concern for violence, Espejo also reifies Henry's sense of artistic purpose, his belief that theater and performance can be revolutionary. Ultimately, Espejo relents, but he wants to have a character named for him, and in the prison version, "Alejo,"—which, roughly, indicates distance—is changed to "Espejo,"—mirror—a change that puts distance and mirroring in tension with each other (73). Mirroring, ostensibly a straightforward reflection, is also an act of distancing and a means of impelling confrontation with one's self—issues that might be compounded in prison (a distancing from the outside world that may or may not result in self-reflection) and that could be elucidated through theater and performance at their most powerful. The renaming is even in tension with itself; Espejo cannot completely erase (or lose) Alejo. It is also worth noting that the renaming that occurs here is a renaming of the son, and the back and forth with Espejo that results in this renaming raises questions of lineage, authority, authorship—issues that the narrator in *Bosque quemado* also negotiates as he prepares to write his book. Espejo is a reflection of his father (the Idiot President, but also Espejo the prison boss), but also still distanced from him, his own character. This renaming and its attendant concerns further underscores the postmemorial nature of the play, in content and through its various translations.

Henry has no trouble recruiting inmates for the play, which speaks to the play's capacity for engagement and even transformation, despite its relatively simple premise.

The narrator explains:

That [recruiting], it turned out, was easy, and he had a theory as to why:  
Everyone wanted to be the president, because the president was the boss.  
Everyone wanted to be the servant, because like them, the servant dreamed of murdering the boss.

Everyone wanted to be the son, because it was the son who got to do the killing. And it was this character, Alejo, whose name was changed. He became Espejo. (74-75)

The inmates agree to participate precisely because of the reflections that the switch from Alejo to Espejo highlights. The inmates' desires for their own lives, apart from—or “alejado de”—prison get rewritten as a theatrical role, a reflection of—an “espejo de”—that underlying desire. In addition, the circularity that characterizes this description of their desires—everyone, at once, wants to be the boss, the person who dreams of murdering the boss, and the person who actually kills the boss—indicates the degree to which the play's characters are, in some way, three parts of the same whole, related to each other in ways similar to the relationship among the ego, the super-ego, and the id, for example. In some ways, the performance in prison strips the play of its context; there is a real difference, particularly with regard to the socio-political circumstances, between the boss (a kind of everyman) and the president (a singular authority). But, of course, as with the renaming, the prison performance can't erase that earlier context entirely, and the nuances that the play accrues in prison will go on to travel with the play once it leaves the prison's confines. The performance in the prison highlights the play's malleability and its translatability, a quality that Diciembre capitalizes on when it goes on to use the play for the revival tour, in a socio-political context distinct from the anxious years.

The performance in prison requires other translations, too; in addition to Alejo/Espejo, other elements of the play are changed for the new venue and context:

Henry had to write in extra parts to avoid disappointing some of the would-be actors. It was for his own safety—some of these men didn't take rejection very well. He added a chorus of citizens, to comment on the action. Ghosts of servants past to stalk across the stage in a fury, wearing costumes fashioned from old bed sheets. He even wrote a few lines for the president's wife, Nora, played with verve by Carmen, the block's most



fashionable transvestite. Things were going well. Someone from Diciembre alerted the press (how had this happened? Neither Henry nor Patalarga could recall), and after he'd done an interview or two, there was no turning back. Espejo even joined the enthusiasm. It would be good for their image, he was heard to say. (75)

The “chorus of citizens” writes an audience into the play itself, an act that highlights the play’s capacity for engaging with its audience and thus underscores its purpose and its genesis within Diciembre’s larger body of works. Most strikingly, however, the “ghosts of servants past” turns out to be prescient: shortly after Henry is released, in January 1987, “in response to an uprising by inmates, two of the more volatile sections of Collectors were razed, bombed, and burned by the army” (6). The narrator notes, “the men who’d made up the cast of *The Idiot President* died in the assault; some had the misfortune to be crushed beneath falling concrete walls” (6). Among these men is Rogelio. The play, from then on, is haunted by these ghosts.

It’s clear that Henry’s time in prison definitively alters the course of his life, as does the razing of parts of the prison shortly after his departure. The narrator—who is also a reporter—explains that, for Henry, “There were many things he’d forgotten, others he’d attempted to forget; but the day he was sent to Collectors, Henry told me, was the loneliest of his life. He realized that day that nothing he’d ever learned previously had any relevance anymore, and each step he took away from the gate and toward his new home was like walking into a tunnel, away from the light” (39). In a way, the destruction of the prison removes, for Henry, the usual elements of aftermath, or afterlife. The narrator says:

the tragedy had both broken him and simultaneously spared him the need to ever think about his incarceration again. No one who’d lived through it with him had survived. There was no one to visit, no one with whom to reminisce, no one to meet on the day of their release, and drive home,

feigning optimism. In the many years since, there were times when he'd almost managed to forget about the prison completely. Whenever he felt guilty (which was not infrequently, all things considered), Henry told himself that there was nothing wrong in forgetting; after all, he never really belonged there to begin with. (40-41)

The destruction of Collectors literally removes any ties to his time there, which has the effect of allowing him to “forget” (described without any of the grace of Chejfec’s “olvido”). There is no one, or nothing, to rupture the surface of his post-prison life, no one to recall the trauma (nor, by the same token, the joys) with him. And yet the scars of his time in prison persist in spite of the structural collapse; his is not a creaturely forgetting in the usual course of things. Without those reminders—or the possibility that someone from that time in his life could reappear at any time—Henry is simply unmoored from any point of reference for the devastating influence his prison time holds over the rest of his life, a relationship to the past that is strange and lonely. ,

Indeed, when Henry does return to the play, for the revival tour, he is haunted by the performance in the prison; the ghosts written for the prison performance move out of the play and into his waking life. After all, the play “had last been performed by men who’d died only a few months later” (70). Henry muses, “Perhaps the script itself was cursed. These men, these ghosts, hovered about the stage at every rehearsal, sat in the ragged seats of the Olympic to critique every line of dialogue. . . . It was impossible not to feel unsteady when confronted with this text. After all, the man who wrote it had lived another life, and that life was gone” (70).<sup>50</sup> The absence of any referents from his time in prison has the effect of destroying the man Henry was during that time—and perhaps prior to that time, as well—but clears the way for a kind of haunting and a need to find

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<sup>50</sup> These details, along with the parade of ghosts in the prison performance, recall *Macbeth*. The questions of inheritance that surround postmemory are often raised in relation to *Hamlet* (as in Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*), which make the *Macbeth* markers all the more complex and striking.

something that can help him reconstruct that part of himself. Henry's relationship to the past evokes a Benjaminian conception of history, a history structured by disruption (rather than by a linear or teleological flow) and haunted by the ghosts of the past, to which (re)construction is a response. It is into this context that theater emerges as a translative medium, negotiating the disjointed events of Henry's life, but also pointing a way forward. We can recall Weber's explanation of the theater as medium here: the theatrical event that takes place in prison "cannot be contained" by the prison, nor can it be "entirely separated from it" (*Theatricality* 7). Reviving *The Idiot President*, then, is a means of allowing that event to "pass away," "to happen somewhere else"—through new iterations and locales (7).

In the final pages of the novel, we see one last performance, a performance that takes place not in a theater, but in the real world, so to speak, a staging of the work of mourning in the wake of trauma. Toward the end of the tour, Henry realizes that they are close to the childhood home of Rogelio, and his childhood home is a place referred to only as T-- . He wants to go there in order, he says, "to close off the past, to make peace with it" (142). For Nelson, too, the decision to go to T-- is appealing; he's just learned that his lover and ex-girlfriend, Ixta, is pregnant and that she doesn't think the baby is his. Nelson is in love with her, but has the distinct impression that she's going to stay with—and perhaps marry—the baby's father. Nevertheless, Patalarga and Nelson don't know Henry's real reason for going to T--; he hasn't told them about Rogelio. In addition, T-- where the content of the novel intersects with the frame story; it turns out that the reporter is also from T--.

The narrator, in fact, describes the town in theatrical terms: “in shadow, as a backdrop for a series of events unfolding in strict adherence to the highlands’ acute surrealist mode . . . ” (148). Similarly, he describes the group’s decision to revise their itinerary as a decision “to improvise once more as they had on those first epic Diciembre tours, when they were younger” (148). These details set the stage for Nelson to take on the role of Rogelio and to perform that role for Anabel, Rogelio’s mother. Indeed, the series of events that unfold in T-- “take place” in Weber’s sense, that is “without reducing the place . . . taken to a purely neutral site” (7). In this way, “that place reveals itself to be a ‘stage,’ and those events become theatrical happenings” (7). It is fitting, then, that the narrator describes the town in theatrical terms, since it becomes the “backdrop” to this theatrical happening, and in some sense, the performance begins with the troupe’s arrival in town, even before Nelson agrees to play Rogelio. What happens in T-- stages the disruption of trauma and its aftermath, so that the elements of trauma are, in this elaborate production, both actual and virtual.

When they get to T--, Henry goes to the house of Rogelio’s mother, Anabel, who lives with her daughter, Noelia. There, he learns that Anabel and Noelia have no idea that Rogelio has died—or even that he was ever imprisoned. Instead, Rogelio’s brother, Jaime, has led them to believe that Rogelio has been living and working in the United States, in Los Angeles, since 1984; Jaime is responsible for Rogelio’s imprisonment (having recruited him to run drugs), so his lie obscures his own guilt. Thus, Rogelio’s death, which has been the central trauma in Henry’s life, is not even known to his mother and sister; Henry’s arrival introduces this trauma into their lives, even as it’s a citation of the trauma that’s haunted his own life for years. Henry’s appearance at Anabel and

Noelia's quite literally interrupts the fantasy that Jaime has constructed for them. And this interruption is so devastating that Henry initially backpedals, changing his story. He leaves Anabel's house thinking that T-- a place "where people died and were never mourned" (168). This encounter continues to set the stage for the trauma and mourning to come—first its postponement and then its inevitable arrival.

It's worth noting that Anabel's easy acceptance of Jaime's story is attributed, in the novel, to the context of T-- itself; the narrator explains:

the rows of padlocked houses are all the context one needs. In another place, it might strain credulity, but nothing could be more normal than Rogelio disappearing for seventeen years, and still being thought of as *alive*. . . . Time means something very different in a place like T--. As does distance. As does memory. Almost every family had a son who'd gone off into the world. Some sent money; some vanished without a trace. Until proof to the contrary was offered, they were all to be thought of as living. (172)

This description stands in marked, even jarring, contrast to the attitude toward disappearing men and women in the general context of dirty war and dictatorship, in which disappearance almost certainly means death (although "they were all to be thought of as living" resonates in some ways with the calls for "aparición con vida"). More significantly, however, this description of T-- further highlights it as a venue for a theatrical happening; it is not a neutral site at all, but a place in which it is possible for time, distance, and memory to unfold in ways that are utterly distinct from anywhere else. The "vanishing without a trace" is interesting, too; Henry, et al.'s arrival reintroduces the disruptive traces of history and memory.

While Henry visits with Anabel and Noelia, Nelson and Patalarga find a venue for their performance, and when Henry joins them, he reveals his history with Rogelio and his true reasons for coming to T—. Around the same time, Noelia calls Jaime and tells

him what's happened. He arrives in town during the performance of *The Idiot President* and then stays to confront Henry after the show; the two fight. The altercation is described as a kind of performance: Noelia, at first, reacts as if it were "all part of the play, an extra scene performed just for her, as if to reveal some special secret" (187). Henry seems unable to fight without seeing the interaction as a performance; he picks up the plastic knife, a prop from the play, and when he recalls the fight for the narrator, months later, he begins by describing "fight scenes in general. The fake kind" (189). When the reporter/narrator asks Henry if he "saw it all as a performance," he finds it hard to respond directly (190). It's as if, for Henry, theater and performance are always both is always both "actual and virtual," in Weber's sense, a virtuality that is iterative, translative, even spectral. Oddly, for Noelia, once she remembers she's not watching a performance (it's Henry's loud apology that snaps her from her reverie), she seems to see Henry less clearly or as somehow less real; she calls him a "strange man," whose voice is "ghostly" (188). Here, that ghostliness recalls Rogelio, whom Noelia has only recently learned is dead, at the same time that the entire scenario points, for Henry, both to the first tour—and his pre-Rogelio life—and to his time in prison. When we learn that Henry and Jaime have met—and even fought—once before, in *Collectors*, we see their altercation in T-- as a citation of their previous encounter in prison (183).

Jaime demands that Henry come back to the house the next morning, to apologize to Anabel, and it is this second visit that sets the stage for Nelson's involvement. When the three arrive at Anabel and Noelia's house, Anabel, who has dementia, immediately, and joyfully, mistakes Nelson for Rogelio. This scene is described in a way that suggests the beginning of a performance, even though the performance has, in some sense, already

begun, as Henry's prior visit and the altercation following *The Idiot President* have already set events in motion. As Henry, Nelson, and Patalarga follow Noelia into the courtyard, Jaime and Mrs. Anabel are already sitting together, "talking in whispers,"—much as the audience does in the last moment before the curtain goes up (214).

Moreover: "the members of Diciembre stepped out of the dark passage"—akin to backstage, behind the curtains—"and into the light" (this passage also reads rather like an allegorical description of birth, as if Nelson is being reborn as Rogelio) (214). Nelson "emerges" first, as "The morning sun shone directly into his eyes" (214). This, too, reads as if he is stepping onstage, where the bright lights of the theater blind him, making it difficult to see his audience. In fact, several pages later, the narrator describes the lights in precisely this way: "The sun in Nelson's eyes was like stage lights, I imagine" (216).

Nelson responds to Anabel's misrecognition affirmatively, though Patalarga notes in retrospect, when recounting the scene to the reporter, that he "saw him freeze. Just for a moment" (216). Nelson's appearance in Anabel's life is a foil to Henry's intrusion, a sudden interruption that repairs her illusions, and, indeed, Henry and Nelson have been foils to each other throughout the novel. Patalarga goes on to describe the reaction as a classic improvisation: "I guess they do these kinds of improvisation exercises all the time at the Conservatory, and maybe that explains why he responded the way he did. I don't think you could even call it a *decision*, because it wasn't. He just reacted. He went with it" (216). Nelson's response is perfect: "'Yes, Mama,' he said. 'I'm here'" (216). From there, the narrator notes, the rest of the elements necessary for this extended performance slip slowly, and carefully, into place:

And then something else happened, which tilted the scene once more. At the sound of Nelson's voice, Mrs. Anabel's certainty began to fade, as if

she were suddenly frightened by what she had conjured. Henry and Patalarga had stepped into the daylight, and perhaps this too gave her doubts. She squinted at this young man before her, the one she'd just called Rogelio, and couldn't recognize him. 'Is that you?' she said, and no one uttered another word until Nelson spoke again.

'Mama, it's me,' he said—he purred—repeated the words once and again, such that their sound and meaning began to soothe Mrs. Anabel. *Mama, it's me.* Nelson stood in the courtyard, chest out, face full of love. (216-217)

Nelson then goes on to spend the rest of the visit in character, answering Anabel's questions, thereby perpetuating Jaime's myth and repairing the damage from Henry's disruptive visit. Like Nelson's performance in *The Idiot President*, this performance also takes a postmemorial turn, staging the reunion between a mother and her seemingly long lost son. Indeed, it is worth noting that Nelson's immediate and impulsive response to the "demand" of Anabel's call (her "Rogelio!") is similar to that of the narrator in *Bosque quemado*. In both cases, the characters respond to a "demand" from a parent—from a parent who suffers from dementia and thus from loss of memory—in direct negotiation with the conditions of that demand, but also via improvisation and interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

Here, we can recall Weber's reading of Benjamin's gesture and citability in the context of interruption. Henry's first visit to Anabel's house is a gesture, one that interrupts the elaborate fantasy that Jaime has spun for Anabel and Noelia. As Weber argues, "such a gesture defines itself not merely in terms of what it is, but in terms of its potential extension, its virtual separation from itself"—in other words, "its *citability*" (*abilities* 111). While Jaime's version of Rogelio serves a protective function, one that allows Anabel to maintain hope and forestall fear, it cannot survive beyond the bounds of

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<sup>51</sup> Throughout the chapter, I have highlighted the father/son nature of Henry and Nelson's relationship, a relationship that is particularly significant in light of the postmemorial context and themes. However, there is also a homoerotic charge to their relationship, a charge that is emphasized through Nelson's assumption of the role of Henry's long-dead lover.



T--, and as Henry's visit indicates, it can barely survive within them. If we think of the entirety of what transpires in T-- as a kind of theater, Henry's first visit represents a critical interruption, a gesture with the potential for extension and for citability, signaling the interruptions that will likely come again in the future, at the national level and at the personal level. The convincingness of Nelson's performance, along with Anabel's own dementia, temporarily restores that illusion, but not for long—and not even continuously: the narrator notes later that Anabel is occasionally skeptical and that her skepticism “flar[es] up unexpectedly, once or twice a day” (217), that is, in moments unpredictable and disruptive. Weber explains, too, that Benjamin viewed the gesture in its citability as an act that “ex-poses the present not just to the future, but to its finitude” (*-abilities* 111). Henry's initial interruption to Anabel and Noelia's lives not only damages the illusion—as a theatrical gesture, it ex-poses their present to its finitude.<sup>52</sup> With this in mind, Nelson's performance as Rogelio can delay, but not prevent, the aftermath to come.

It is also important to note the ways in which Henry's initial gesture is both selfish and compassionate. He seeks out Rogelio's family to offer his condolences, but also to “unburden himself” (165); part of what he wants is closure for himself, even forgiveness.<sup>53</sup> Jaime's construction of Rogelio's alternate life as an immigrant to the U.S.

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<sup>52</sup> Henry's first visit to Anabel and Noelia's house “damages the illusion” of Jaime's lie (and, indeed, the more comforting effects of Anabel's dementia), an effect that recalls the Brechtian notion of destroying the basis of theater as an illusion, through the use of the gesture. The interest in damage and destruction in Brecht's theater stand in contrast to the novel's general readability—that is, in its interest in not significantly disrupting or damaging the reader's capacity to engage with the text (an effect I also discussed in the chapter on *Bosque quemado*). Nevertheless, the novel does employ a motif and even a thematization of disruption and rupture (as Brodsky's novel does) through, for example, its references to radical and avant-garde theater movements, the riots and destruction of the prison, Henry's visit to Anabel, and even dementia itself.

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Henry and Jaime's reactions to the loss of Rogelio suggest different modes of mourning, including Freud's emphasis in “Mourning and Melancholia” on distinguishing mourning from melancholia (where melancholia represents a fixation on the loss and mourning involves a healthy processing that leads to recovery) and Derrida's description, in “Mnemosyne,” of mourning as a kind of exposure to, and interiorization of, the other. In a way, both men exteriorize Rogelio, locating him somewhere else (Jaime

is similar. It is selfish in that he lies partly to protect himself from the consequences of his own role in Rogelio's death (since he involved Rogelio in the crime that led to his imprisonment), but there's also compassion in his desire to protect his mother and his sister from this trauma. If Henry had never come to T--, one imagines that Anabel might have gone on believing that Rogelio was alive and well up until her own death. In this way, Henry's interruption mimics the untimely interruptions of trauma, stymying Jaime's best efforts to subdue or forestall its effects. So while Henry's arrival in T—could set the stage for a kind of productive mourning, it's also a reminder of the stakes of that task, of revisiting and coming to terms with the violence of what's come before. Henry's arrival ushers in the trauma and its aftermath that Anabel has so far avoided. Eventually the illusion will shatter—Nelson will leave, and Anabel will be left to confront the loss of her son, at great cost.

It's presumably the complexity and ambiguity of this scenario that prompts the entire group to encourage Nelson's performance and Jaime (with some prompting from Noelia) to coerce him into staying. Nelson doesn't want to stay, but Jaime bullies him into it, though he does offer to pay Nelson, and Noelia promises comfortable accommodations. This, it turns out, is Diciembre's final set of negotiations, for a new venue and audience entirely. Later, Patalarga describes Nelson's acquiescence to Jaime as "a surrender, the way you might if you were being robbed at knifepoint" (221). After Henry and Patalarga have left, Jaime keeps him there both by agreeing to pay him even more money—well beyond what Nelson has ever earned as an actor—and, more

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does this in a very literal way), though Henry's interest in coming to T--, and his desire to "unburden himself," suggest, too, that he has carried Rogelio with him.

sinisterly, by taking his ID card, as if robbing his identity as Nelson and leaving him only with the ghosts of Rogelio.

For the most part, Nelson performs well. He studies family photos, listens carefully and takes notes as Noelia and Jaime recall happier times. The narrator notes that his first morning in T—becomes “the template for each of the mornings to come” (235): they have breakfast; they sit together in the courtyard, sometimes talking but mostly in silence. Mrs. Anabel naps; then Nelson goes for a walk before lunch. Even on that first day, though, there are moments where Nelson slips up, echoes of Henry’s first interruption. Rogelio could neither read nor write; Nelson does both in those first hours, an act that not only distinguishes him from Rogelio, but that calls attention to his metropolitan upbringing and further underscores the division between city and countryside. Indeed, Nelson continues to write, in spite of Noelia and Jaime’s cautions to be more careful; he keeps a journal throughout his time on the tour and in T--, a gesture oriented toward citation and iterability.

The narrator describes “the work of impersonating Rogelio, of convincing an elderly and senile woman of this identity” as “a task to be accomplished at the local rhythm, that is, slowly, carefully, making no hasty or unnecessary gestures”—nothing that would noticeably interrupt Anabel’s fragile surroundings, exposing her carefully constructed present to its finitude (235). In some ways, Anabel’s dementia makes the task easier; she never notices, for example, that Nelson is approximately half the age that Rogelio should be. In fact, when Nelson says that he is “still too young” for children, “time collapsed for Mrs. Anabel. If Rogelio was still young, then she must still be young too!” (237). This is “a pleasing confusion” (237), rather than a disruption. Nelson finds,

too, that he can answer many of Anabel's questions without careful thought, sometimes even vaguely nonsensically; as time goes on, he finds the "confidence to shift his answers—just slightly—to suit his mood" (243). He briefly "invent[s] an accent," but when it doesn't "take," he forgets it, and Anabel doesn't notice or mind (244).

Weber notes that part of what epic theater does is to erase the sacredness of the "podium," the "distinctive space or scene of epic theater" (*-abilities* 110). He writes: "The 'level playing field' that emerges in the 'filling up' of the orchestra pit . . . doesn't so much eliminate the difference between the human and the divine as confound the living with the dead. The actors now relate to the audience as the dead do to the living" (110-111). Moreover:

The possibility that epic theater seeks to demonstrate: that everything can happen differently, that what is, is not necessarily what *must* be or what *will* be *eternally*—this possibility means that the living cannot simply *separate* themselves from the dead, any more than the 'public' or 'audience' can separate itself entirely from the actors. Not because there is no separation, but because separability is everywhere, and because, being everywhere, it joins as much as it isolates: joins *in* isolating. (*-abilities* 111)

Weber evokes the difficulty of separating the living from the dead or the spectator from the actor in a more general theatrical context, too; in *Theatricality as Medium*, he explains, "The theatrical collective . . . remains marked by a certain disunity . . . This transforms the relation of the living to the dead by disrupting the place of each" (*Theatricality* 41). When Henry first interrupts Anabel's illusion, he begins to suggest "that everything can happen differently"—indeed, that things have happened differently. In this way, he sets the stage for a painful, but inevitable, revelation of trauma—for Anabel, gradually, to the cross "the separation from the dead" that Jaime's fantasy has, up to that point, established for her. For a time, Nelson's performance forestalls that

confrontation, and the way in which his performance confounds the living with the dead is a disavowal of death, not uncanny or haunting in the least, but rather delightful. But for Nelson this brief, somewhat dreamy, intermediate stage is isolating; the narrator refers to this time as a “state of suspended animation” and notes that “his life was going on without him” (244). Indeed, the narrator notes that this time in T--, a “lull in the action,” cannot even adequately fill the pages of the novel, not without “succumbing to the pace. . . . Thought slows, the need for conversation vanishes” (242). Thus, for a time, the narrative itself shifts back to the city, checking in with Ixta and with Nelson’s mother.

Nelson becomes “anxious to leave,” though he can’t because Jaime still has his ID and hasn’t yet returned to T—(258). Nevertheless, Nelson calls Ixta in the city, and although nothing happens immediately, it’s clear that this call is an interruption itself—Nelson’s contact with the rest of the world, with his real life, signaling the beginning of the end. Before Nelson’s final day as Rogelio, he has a dream about *The Idiot President*; in the dream, while on stage in the theater, Nelson finds Ixta in the audience: “(How? he wrote in his journal. *Wasn’t the theater dark? It was, and yet, I could see her.*) And just like that, he was free of the play. Volume dropped off. Henry and Patalarga went on without him, while Nelson tiptoed to the edge of the stage, and peered out into the dark (which was not so dark, in fact). It was her. It had to be” (262). In the same way that Nelson’s phone call with Ixta seems to precipitate the novel’s climax and denouement, in the dream, the site of Ixta releases him from the play, both the actual play—and the way it’s directed his life for the past few months—and his performance as Rogelio. There’s something, too, about the way he’s able to see in spite of the theater’s usual darkness that

breaks the fourth wall, allowing him, as actor, to confront the audience—in the same way his role as Rogelio has allowed Anabel to confront the dead.

Nelson's departure does not go smoothly, although the day begins without trouble. Nelson wakes up, spends some time with Anabel, and then goes to pack. This addles Anabel; she's clearly unsettled when Noelia returns from the market, her "face full of worry and her eyes rimmed with red" (263). When Anabel tells Noelia that Nelson is leaving, Noelia is unnerved, too, and when she calls out to Nelson, seeking an explanation, she calls him Nelson, rather than Rogelio. Although there have been small slip-ups, this one is on the order of Henry's visit; although Anabel can't make sense of the mistake immediately, she seems to know—as she did with Henry's appearance—that something is really wrong. "Who's Nelson?"—Anabel asks—"Why did you call Rogelio that?" (266). Noelia tries to calm Anabel and partially succeeds before she goes to talk with Nelson, telling him: "You can't just leave like that. You have to give her warning. You have to prepare her. It isn't fair" (268). Given the fantasy that's been constructed by Jaime and maintained by Nelson's performance, this statement is perhaps reasonable. But Jaime's lie, and Nelson's presence in T--, has been to forestall the revelation of trauma and tragedy, and though this is perhaps, as I've mentioned, motivated by compassion, no one can be eased into trauma. Had Anabel learned of Rogelio's death when it happened, she would have had no warning, no preparation. Nelson seems somehow to recognize that, or at least the absurdity of the situation; he responds: "Of course it's fair" (268).

While Noelia and Nelson are arguing, Anabel falls and hits her head. Nelson goes across the street (to the house of the reporter/narrator) to get help, then heads to the plaza, where he has a brief exchange with the owner of the newsstand—and then he gets on the

bus back to the city. After Nelson returns he tries to repair his relationship with Ixta—in the process, he runs into Mindo, and Mindo is killed, most likely by one of Jaime’s men who would have been looking for Nelson, in retribution for Nelson’s escape from T—. But Nelson is arrested and imprisoned for Mindo’s murder—this, it turns out, is why the reporter is telling Nelson’s story, his tragic fate that’s been hinted at over the course of the novel—and the final scene takes place back in prison, in *Collectors*, Nelson’s life again intersecting with, and echoing, Henry’s. We learn, too, that Anabel has died, that her death, unlike her son’s, has been mourned with a proper funeral.

In this final scene, the reporter goes to interview Nelson at Collector’s. At this point, we’ve heard direct quotation, via the reporter, from almost everyone involved in the story, save for Nelson. The reporter thinks Nelson is innocent, and we, too, as readers have been led to believe that. But Nelson cautions against that assumption:

“What if I did kill Mindo? Have you thought about that?”

There was something very cold in his voice.

“You didn’t.”

“What if I did? What if I were that kind of person?”

Nelson had been inside for thirty-odd months, studying this very sort of performed aggression. And he was good. He let the questions hang there. I knew it couldn’t be true, but then he shifted his gaze, and part of me wondered why I thought that, why I was so sure. I felt a chill.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s suppose.”

“So what do you think I would do to someone who was outside while I was in here, and had decided he had the right to tell my story? If I were the person capable of killing a man on a dark street?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Just think,” Nelson said. (370)

The reporter is clearly unnerved, and the conversation has the effect of evoking unreliability without quite asserting it. Indeed, Nelson’s not-quite-accusation of some sort of treachery on the reporter’s part is also a subtle allusion to Alejo/Espejo, who invites confidence and then betrays it. In the end, Nelson takes the reporter’s tape recorder, and

when the reporter asks if he's being robbed, Nelson simply says, "Let's just be clear about who's robbing whom" (371), and the reporter leaves, without his interview (or his recording equipment).

On the one hand, the narrator presents Nelson as performing again, here "performing aggression." But, on the other hand, Nelson raises two important questions, first questioning the reporter's right to tell his story and then asking who is robbing whom. These questions concern performance and narrative, political art in general, as well as reporting. In the novel, roles are taken on and dispelled; we imagine that Nelson is not "that kind of person" (though what if he were?) only because the novel has been constructed to make us believe that. Nelson's admonition is a caution, to the reporter as much as to any artist or storyteller, not to write only to confirm what he thinks he knows. In other words, the actor, along with the reporter or the storyteller, must seek to make the critical gestures that—to recall Weber's terms—ex-pose the present to its finitude.

As I noted in the introduction and in the chapter on *Los planetas*, in *The Ends of Literature*, Brett Levinson describes the relationship between text and reader in a way that resonates with Weber's explication of the relationship, in epic theater, between actors and audience. Levinson writes:

no sign or work is intrinsically literary or figurative: literariness lies not in the object but in the subject. Literature *happens*; it does so when the reader is exposed to the finitude of his own common sense (in a work of literature, often by tropes) and is thereby forced to interpret or phrase the articulation, to add an unfamiliar element to his field of understanding, thus to shift that field: not to know necessarily, but to learn or grow. (27)

When theater ex-poses the present to its finitude, that, too, is a kind of happening, a moment in which the audience is similarly forced to add an unfamiliar element to their field of understanding. And I would argue, too, that part of that happening is the "joining



*in* isolating” that Weber derives from Benjamin, a joining that takes place in response to the prevalence of separation, between living and dead, actor and spectator: a kind of making of community even out of the deeply, isolatingly, personal.

Nelson’s final admonition, then, echoes an implicit admonition of the novel, a caution against art that maintains a fiction or seeks to confirm what we (think we) already know. Instead, it affirms a theater—and an art more generally—that *happens*, that exposes the present to its finitude, that dismantles a fictional sense of totality or coherence. What Jaime’s fantasy version of Rogelio does is maintain a fiction, a particularly insidious fiction that seeks to hide trauma and its interruptions. There are moments, in both Diciembre’s first and second incarnation, that do this, as well, obscuring political and personal trauma, preventing the possibility of interruption (as both a hopeful and a fearful force). But there are moments, too, when the fictions are breached and the audience is engaged—the moment, on Diciembre’s first tour, perhaps, when the lights in the theater go out, and the voices of the actors turn spectral, the intrusion of the violence outside into the world of the theater. Or the performance in prison, when the actors see some essential element of themselves in the roles they’ve chosen to play. Similarly, Henry’s appearance in T--, though painful, begins to dismantle the elaborate fictions that Jaime’s lies have wrought. In this case, it is not necessarily Anabel who must mourn (though, arguably, she should have had the opportunity) or even the entirety of T-- with its rows of padlocked houses, but Henry himself, along with Jaime. For art to happen, it cannot be as a single, homogenous revolutionary project, but rather as a joining together of a lot of little isolations, particularly in the wake of trauma.

The admonition, here, is not only to the actor, the reporter, or the storyteller, but also to the reader. If the writer is encouraged not to write only to confirm what he thinks he knows, then we as readers—the audience to the novel, as it were—are reminded not to read only to confirm what we think we know. Indeed, Nelson’s final question—“Do you understand?”—is also a question for the reader, a chance to reconsider all that has come before in light of this final scene. We are invited to read so that literature happens to us and, more broadly, to encounter art that happens to us, to make room for the critical gestures that allow for an exposure to the finitude of our common sense. The final gesture of the novel, then, is ambiguous, but also translative, an invitation to interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

The persistence of memory as a cultural theme in Latin America has endured partly because it emerges out of a context in which the legacy of authoritarian violence and dictatorship survives into the present. Chile, Argentina, and Peru have all struggled—albeit to varying degrees—with how to confront this legacy, and in some cases, the efforts to come to terms with the years of violence have been subject to significant political and legal constraints—as is the case in Chile, for example, where the national emphasis on reconciliation and consensus continues. In these cases, memory—or the call to remember—emerges as a kind of moral imperative, and many of the literary responses to dictatorship and trauma produced in the immediate aftermath of the violence reflected that imperative and, indeed, took on an urgency of their own, filling the often startling gaps in the official record and providing a venue for voices that had been excluded from formal forums. In the years and decades that have followed, the urgency of that imperative has subsided, though the theme of memory endures. Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón's work attests to that endurance and, taken together, is exemplary of the variations and nuances inherent to memory, as well as to the ways in which literary responses to trauma and violence continue to be a powerful cultural force.

As I noted in chapter two, the counterpart to memory—though perhaps not its opposite—is forgetting. And, indeed, forgetting—in some capacity—figures into each of the four novels I have discussed. Each of the novels conveys some sense of the anxieties

that attend the possibility of forgetting, but those anxieties have shifted from a sense of moral failure—where failing to remember represents a kind of injustice—to a set of concerns associated with forgetting as a kind of inevitability in the long wake of trauma. The questions that emerge—and, indeed, the questions that these novels pose—are not about how to avoid or forestall forgetting, but what forgetting looks like, how it will unfold, what to do as (and after) it occurs. In Sergio Chejfec’s *Los planetas*, for example, S suggests that memory is always tinged with forgetting—that memory inevitably dilutes over time, as a matter of course. Negroni’s novel engages less directly with forgetting, but it evokes many of the same anxieties as Chejfec’s novel, particularly around the theme of witnessing and remembering; it depicts the excesses of memory and, in so doing, gestures toward the inevitability of forgetting. In both novels, forgetting is figured as adjacent or supplementary to remembering, even as a kind of release, at least insofar as it is a way to think beyond the most rigid exigencies of memory. The forgetting that emerges here is less a total erasure than a kind of prolonged echo, a diminishment and a fading out, rather than a disappearance.

Brodsky and Alarcón similarly thematize forgetting, albeit in a different way, in their references to Alzheimer’s and dementia. In their novels, forgetting is foregrounded as part of the degeneration of the body and of the mind, a part of the aging process; in this vein, forgetting is cruel and damaging, but it is nevertheless inevitable, not a failure. Indeed, the references to dementia in *Bosque quemado* and in *At Night We Walk in Circles* indicate a generational anxiety, a concern over how to care for the older generation as they age and how to understand the past once their first-person memories have disappeared—along with a sense of what it will mean to mourn their loss after they

are gone (a loss that is also very different than the deaths that marked the era of dictatorship, of people who were overwhelmingly young). The loss of memory, too, conjures a sense of fragility and even illusion. In this vein, the evocation of Alzheimer's and dementia also points toward a sense of creatureliness, that forgetting is frightening, in part, because it entails a diminishment of the self and thus an increased sense of vulnerability, particularly with regard to the other.

Of course, the emphasis, in Brodsky and Alarcón's novels, on forgetting as a generational concern also raises the task of postmemory—a call for a witness and an heir going forward. As I noted in chapter one, the loss of memory makes a demand as compelling as memory itself, perhaps even more so, and in both *Bosque quemado* and in *At Night We Walk in Circles*, the protagonists are forced to respond to a “demand” from a parent, a demand that is postmemorial—signaling a shift from one generation to the next that is also a passing on of responsibility. If the postmemorial task is a particular form of attention to the past, it is also a responsibility, and all four novels underscore the incredible weight of that responsibility, but also its possibilities. Indeed, that sense of possibility is precisely what I have tried to highlight by evoking translation. If translation is fundamentally a negotiation with a set of source materials—here, the dense materiality of the past—it is also an opportunity for regeneration and for afterlife. Postmemory, as a form of translation, is not an autonomous act (it is, rather, a response to a demand, to a call from the past, as I noted in chapter one), but it is interpretive, even improvisational, and given to possibility.

Each of the novels gestures, in some way, toward art produced under significant political pressure—the silent film, in *Bosque quemado*, is one such example, as is *The*

*Idiot President* in *At Night We Walk in Circles*; indeed, the use of ekphrasis in the novels not only underscores disruption, it often references artistic production that could—and did—engage directly with political circumstances in a way that proves more elusive in the present, when the exigencies seem much less clear and the possible effects much less powerful. I suggested, in the introduction, that Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón’s work forms part of a new generational response to the legacy of dictatorship. And though there are deep thematic resonances throughout their work—particularly in their engagement, through a translative lens, with the distances that emerge in the wake of trauma—there is also significant variance, particularly in style. Yet one of the most important commonalities is, I think, the way in which the novels wrestle with what it means to attend to politics through a literary lens—or, more broadly, through an artistic one—at a moment so removed from that period of crisis, a moment characterized by a far more fragmented sense of political purpose than the sense of purpose that imbued the politics of the previous generation. *Bosque quemado*, *Los planetas*, *La Anunciación*, and *At Night We Walk in Circles* ask, in turn, what it means to respond to the demands of the past, to bear witness, to construct powerful stories in the present. Said another way, the work of these four writers grapples with the question of how to produce literature and art that “happen” to the reader, viewer, and spectator (to once again recall Levinson’s terms), art that “shifts the field,” as it were, even when the field itself is not always clear. Translation steps in here, too, I think, and highlights a difficulty. Literature, and art more broadly, is translative; it looks to (and from) the forms of a particular past—here, a particularly traumatic past—and wrestles with evolving those forms—translating them for a new context, but doing so in a way that neither reproduces them nor effaces them

entirely. The difficulty lies in making use of those negotiations and engagements with the past, but doing so in a way that still manages to think toward afterlife. That process is a slippery one, and, indeed, translation again highlights possibility even as it acknowledges its own limits; the negotiations with the past are never complete, and there are fragments that can—and often should—resist integration into the present and future.

These are literary concerns, but they also reflect broader concerns about the nature of trauma and its persistent effects, about authoritarian violence and its ongoing legacy in the present. Literature has its own anxieties, but it also tends to—and elucidates—social and cultural anxieties, particularly those (as I said at the outset) that have eluded more traditional political or legal approaches to violence and its legacy. In this sense, literature’s significance—particularly in the context of dictatorship, state violence, and trauma—lies in its capacity to highlight and explore the nuances of these concerns and anxieties, to tease out their complexity, rather than to seek resolution. Literature does not offer a praxis but an alternative space or form—a site for encountering the difficult, the unfamiliar, or the unexpected in all their ambiguity and complexity. And insofar as literature manages to use that site to effectively convey those anxieties to a reader, it contains, also, the possibility of creating and fostering community. Brodsky, Chejfec, Negroni, and Alarcón’s work suggests that, perhaps, some of that community emerges by calling our attention to disruption as it exists in the world and then by subtly shifting our attention toward something else that has eluded our attention until now—toward that which has been ignored or left unsaid. We may fumble these relays—and, indeed, we often do—but the possibility is there, and we may return to

it, repeatedly, a return to the same that also, occasionally, allows for the emergence of something new.



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