Displaced Memories
The Poetics of Trauma
in Argentine Women's Writing

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Argentina (1976–2006):
State Terrorism, (Post) Exile, and the Politics of Oblivion

Argentina's seven years of military rule known as the "Proceso," or "Dirty War" (1976–1983), was a period of repression and institutionalized violence that ended with approximately 30,000 deaths and disappearances. Political instability and the implementation of state violence were not new for Argentines in 1976, since both had characterized the history of the country in the twentieth century. There were military coups in 1930 and 1943, and, since the 1955 military coup that overthrew Juan Domingo Perón's Populist government and sent him to exile, consecutive military juntas controlled Argentina's politics. In 1973, Perón returned from Spain to Argentina with his second wife, Isabel Martínez de Perón, a return that satisfied neither the leftist Peronists nor their radical youth Montoneros, nor his right-wing sympathizers. In fact, the day of "el retorno" ("the return") of Perón, right-wing and paramilitary Peronists opened fire on the leftist Juventudes Peronistas (Peronist Youth) with an unofficial balance of "13 dead and 365 wounded."6

Since the beginning of the decade, two main guerrilla groups were operating throughout Argentina: the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army) and the aforementioned Montoneros, both of which chose armed struggle to change the unequal social conditions and were particularly active during the first years of the decade. When Perón came to power as an ultraconservative seventy-eight-year-old, he refused to accept Montoneros as a part of his political family and referred to them as "germs" that were "contaminating" the movement.7 This rupture with the Peronist leftist faction aggravated the political instability of the country. Furthermore, the governmental reaction against
these guerrilla groups was bloody and ruthless, especially after Perón’s death. In 1974, his widow and his secretary, José López Rega—also known as “el Brujo” (“the Sorcerer”)—succeeded him and launched an overwhelming campaign against the ERP and Montoneros. By the end of 1973, López Rega and Chief of Federal Police Alberto Vila had founded the AAA, or Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, an unofficial extension of the repressive forces of the State that began to implement the kidnapping, torture, and forced disappearance of guerrilla members.4

With López Rega serving as the right hand of “Isabelita,” the violence against the guerrillas increased, especially by the implementation of a stage of siege. According to Frank Graziano, “five thousand troops were mobilized in Operation Independence to quash the one hundred twenty guerrillas of the ERP, this disproportionate display of force providing an index to the repression forthcoming under the dictatorship to follow.” Operation Independence was ruthless in Tucumán, where the disappearance of people was instituted as a killing method and the first clandestine concentration camps were created. As Pilar Calveiro has rightly asserted, “... the disappearance of people, as a technology of power, and its institutional partner, the extermination-concentration camp, appeared while the so-called democratic institutions were in effect and within the Peronist administration of Isabel Martinez.”5 One year after Perón’s death, there were 503 victims of political violence, of whom 54 were policemen, 22 military men, and the rest, 427, were political activists related to the guerrillas.

By the time the military coup took place on March 24, 1976, Argentina’s economy had collapsed, violence was ubiquitous, and “Isabelita” and “el Brujo” had no support left. The military, headed by General Jorge Rafael Videla, Admiral Emilio Massera, and General Orlando R. Agosti, each representing one military arm, was ready to take the reins of government and systematize state repression in a more organized and discreet way, providing Argentina’s public with the façade of peace and order for which a large number of citizens were longing. For forty-five years, the military had “saved” the country from chaos numerous times. By 1976, there was no political party that had not supported military intervention before—Radicals, Conservatives, Peronists, and Socialists.6 This was the first time, however, that the three arms of the military were united with a thorough governmental plan to rule the country.

It is important to understand that the military had been granted unlimited powers during Isabelita’s term and, by March 1976, did not need a coup d’etat to defeat the guerrillas that were already decimated. The military’s plan was much more ambitious than that of the alleged “war against subversion.” Through violence, they attempted to restructure the economy, labor relations, education, and international relations; they forbade all political parties, shut down the parliament, restructured the Judiciary, forbade freedom of speech and censored all media; finally, they eliminated all political, economic, and religious dissidents from positions of power and replaced them with their supporters.7 The military junta named this plan the “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional” (Process of National Reorganization). According to the statements of the Junta, the Proceso had as a main goal to restore “Western, Christian civilization” and to eliminate “subversion” from Argentina, which was the scenario for “World War III” between East (Communism) and West (Christian civilization).8 The term “subversive” not only referred to the armed guerrillas that by 1976 were almost eradicated, but to any Argentine who could be suspected of disagreement with the regime. The following statement from General Ibérico Manuel Saint-Jean shows clearly the overwhelming possibilities of being a victim of repression: “First, we are going to kill all of the subversives; then their collaborators; then their sympathizers; then the indifferent; and finally, the timid.”9 Another statement, this one from General Jorge Rafael Videla, portrays the extent to which the military was ready to repress all areas of social relations beyond the armed guerrillas: There remain other dimensions of the subversion, such as the possible infiltration in labor unions, student organizations, political parties, and even public administration. This is a reason for a systematic cleansing operation.

The killing method in this “war against subversion” was characterized by disappearances and concentration camps. As mentioned before, both disappearances and the first concentration camps were repressive practices during the rule of Isabelita and López Rega. The military coup of 1976 made, however, the disappearance of people in concentration camps the practice par excellence, executed not by paramilitary groups but directly by the military.10 The junta implemented, in a very rationalized and centralized manner, the forced disappearance of persons, which consisted of the kidnapping, torture in clandestine detention centers or concentration camps, and, very often, execution of people suspected to be “subversives,” most of them in their twenties and thirties.11 As a matter of fact, the word διαπεραστο became part of the everyday vocabulary to describe a victim of the repression.12 The regime
never recognized their part in the disappearances and disregarded the thousands of writs of habeas corpus presented by the families “because the absence of victims’ bodies implied the absence of crimes and, in judicial terms, the absence of evidence essential to prosecution.”

Those “subversives” who were not held in clandestine prisons but within the official carceral system confronted their prison time with abject fear and, many times, without guarantees of survival. The progressive deterioration of rights since the state of siege of 1974 was immediately felt within the prison regime, which worsened relentlessly. By the time the Proceso began, “there was a concentrated effort to break the prisoners physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.” The political prisoners who were detained following legal procedures were joined, after March 1976, by those who were first kidnapped, tortured, and held in clandestine prisons, later to be transferred to an official prison and incarcerated without trial (the so-called “blanqueados,” or “white-washed”). According to Patricia Weiss Fagen, “persons accused of political crimes could be detained without charges under discretionary executive power (the Poder Ejecutivo [sic] Nacional, or PEN) for indeterminate lengths of time.”

The inmates’ most basic rights were abolished and the conditions at prison were unbearable: overcrowding, lack of proper alimentation, imposed lack of hygiene, absence of medical assistance, and so on. During 1977, all prisoners, including the women at the penal colony of Villa Devoto, were divided into three categories: G1 (unrecoverable), G2 (semirecoverable), and G3 (recoverable). Treatment worsened according to categories. For example, while male G5s at Rawson’s Prison could play soccer and read books, female G1s at Villa Devoto “were locked in their cells most of the time, and could not share books, walk arm in arm, or embrace one another.” Furthermore, transfers from one prison to another were done without notifying the families. In some cases, a “legal” prisoner would become a desaparecido or would be executed or killed under the excuse that he tried to escape (intento de fuga). Between 1976 and 1980, at least eighty legal prisoners were assassinated.

The disturbing efficiency of this methodology of repression instilled fear and anxiety among the Argentine society. According to Calveiro, the physical destruction mostly targeted alleged “subversive” political organizations, such as Montoneros, still active during the first years of the regime. At the same time, however, repression reached an ample periphery of people associated, directly or indirectly, with the kidnappings or persecuted victims. Also, the abductions were often performed in front of other family members, neighbors, colleagues, or in the middle of the street while waiting for a bus or walking to school or work. Everyone could see commandos in civilian clothes taking someone away, someone whom they would probably never see again. These kidnappings impacted not only those engaged in “subversive” activities, but also other citizens disappeared by error, as Eduardo Luis Duhalde documents: “informes militares reservados, producidos en 1978, situaban en ‘no más del 25%’ el margen de error cometido. Brutal confesión: de 30,000 detenidos-desaparecidos, un 25%, es decir, alrededor de 7,500 personas fueron víctimas del error” (confidential military reports produced in 1978 suggested a “margin of error of 25%.” Brutal confession: of 30,000 detained-disappeared, 25%, that is, about 7,500 people, were error victims).

The clandestine but at the same time ubiquitous repression of the Proceso and its apparent irrationality and arbitrariness were “intended to humiliate, demoralize, and terrify a broad population beyond the particular persons detained for punishment.” Indeed, as Manuel Antonio Garretón asserts, “The Southern Cone military regimes, more than other dictatorships, were institutionalized systems that deliberately produced and spread fear.” This fear was intended to silence opposition and to abort every little sprout of dissent in the present and the future. It was a terror exercised upon the whole society that served to paralyze it. The concentration camps produced a disturbing number of victims and played a crucial role in both the destruction of all political opposition as well as the dissemination of terror. The camps were highly functional for the military project of creating a silent society and paving the road for the impunity and oblivion that would characterize the transition to democracy in the 1990s. General Videla himself made use of society’s silence for his defense of the Dirty War: “Una guerra fue reclamada y aceptada como respuesta válida por la mayoría del pueblo argentino, sin cuyo consenso no hubiera sido posible la obtención del triunfo” (The war was asked for and accepted by most of the Argentines, without whose consensus, triumph would have been impossible).

Only very recently has the idea of the imposition of fear as the cause of the depoliticization of Argentina’s society been questioned. Particularly, Hugo Vezzetti is very critical of reducing depoliticization to fear since, according to him, “it cannot be said that only fear was behind society’s silence—there were not only interested or even complicit silences, but also there was a rather extended discourse of support of the regime.”
thesis of the war against subversion." Although the fear factor is unquestionable for the depoliticization of society, Vezzetti's theory, as painful as it may be, deserves attention.

Lack of mobilization and/or silence were the strategies that many consciously or unconsciously used either to survive repression or to implicitly support the regime. Exile was the other option for those who were targets of persecution. Many Argentines, as many as 2.5 million, left the country from 1975 to 1982. Among these exiles were those who were able to flee Argentina before being detained and those who survived the concentration camps and were forced to leave after being released. Before the coup d'état, exile was an option provided by the Argentine constitution. In fact, still in 1975, political prisoners who were detained with no charges could opt to leave the country, as La Lopre explained in her recently published memoirs. Many prisoners would choose exile when they realized that the military coup was imminent. La Lopre also revealed that by January 1976, many of the petitions of new prisoners who wanted to leave the country were denied, at the same time that the Constitution was becoming letra muerta (dead words). Exiles were leaving Argentina within a supposedly democratic regime that offered them freedom in exchange for citizenship. Then, after March 1976, detainees were forced to choose between life and exile. Amy Kaminsky has described how clear the option of exile was for many activists from the Southern Cone in the 1970s:

Exile from Uruguay and Chile in 1973, like exile from Argentina in 1976, was pretty clear-cut. People involved in progressive politics, from labor unionists and sociology students to urban guerrillas, were targeted for detention, which most often meant disappearance, torture, and, in thousands of cases, death. As Mario Benedetti points out, there was little choice involved in going into exile. Large numbers of people were forced out of their homeland. Some escaped before getting caught; some were released to a precarious freedom after detention, interrogation, and often torture; some were taken from prison directly to an airport.

The three authors that I study in this book—Alicia Kozameh, Alicia Partnoy, and Nora Strejilevich—belong to the group of people who, after gaining a precarious freedom, were forced to leave the country. In an interview with María del Mar López-Cabralles, Alicia Kozameh states that she was detained in 1975; she first spent fourteen months in the police headquarters of Rosario (called el ótano), followed by a two-and-a-half-year sentence in the Córdoba Gendarmería. Devoto. Kozameh was exiled to the United States in 1980 and then returned to Argentina in 1984. She reveals, both in the English version of her book—Steps Under Water (1996)—and in its second Spanish edition (2002), that, as a result of the publication of Pasos bajo el agua in 1987, she had to leave Argentina again due to threats by the Buenos Aires police. Alicia Partnoy was disappeared for three months in the clandestine detention center in Bahía Blanca called La Escuela (The Little School). After three and a half months, she was transferred to the penal colony of Villa Floresta for six months and then to Villa Devoto. In 1979, she was forced into exile upon her liberation. Partnoy went to the United States and, in 1986, published The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival. In 1984, she had returned to Argentina, only temporarily, to testify for the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, or Argentine Commission for the Investigation of Disappearances (CONADEP). She currently resides in the United States. Nora Strejilevich was detained in July 1977 at the clandestine center of detention Club Atlético for about a week. When she was released under threats to her family and of a possible future detention, she left for exile. Strejilevich wandered through many different countries, finally establishing herself in Canada and then the United States. She also returned to Argentina in 1983 and in 1984 to testify for the CONADEP. As of this writing, Strejilevich is living in the United States. The three ex-detainees went into exile because they feared for their lives: they finished their odyssey in the United States and found academic positions at the university level; they returned to Argentina with the advent of democracy, but never stayed in their country. In their case, exile is not a metaphor; nor is it voluntary. Exile was the only option given by the repressors to survive. Although the three of them were exiled between 1977 and 1980, it took them years to write and publish their books. Kozameh and Partnoy published their work in 1987 and 1986 respectively, and Strejilevich in 1997. This delayed written response to the events may be related to the idea that the first stage of exile is imprinted by the trauma of the experience and the difficulty of adjustment.

Although the three authors are relatively well known in the United States, it has been very difficult for them to publish and be recognized as valid voices in their own country. Alicia Kozameh was able to print Pasos bajo el agua in 1987 with Editorial Contrapunto, a progressive but marginal press. In 2002, Alción published the second edition of the book in Argentina, adding a few chapters that the author had self-censored in the first edition. Her book was translated under the title Steeps Under Water (1996).

The lack of support for these works in Argentina constitutes what has been called “double exile: not only is the writer physically named, but his works are effectively proscribed as well. They are kept from his people, are not printed, or are limited to a small foreign press with a correspondingly small readership.” As Nora Strejilevich has suggested in her book-length essay, El arte de no olvidar, the fact that exile authors are not present in the national debate indicates that Argentina has not yet come to terms with its past. Furthermore, that the three authors stayed in the United States during the 80s, the 90s, and even the 2000s, is an indication of the difficulties that survivors faced during the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Actually, the politics of exclusion and oblivion began in the last few years of the dictatorship.

The most ruthless years of the repression were between 1976 and 1980. After 1980, some writers in exile, like Griselda Gambaro, returned to Argentina and joined the growing numbers of disenfranchised Argentines. The repression was still active, although by 1981, disappearances were not as ubiquitous, and many of the concentration camps were closed down. At about the same time, the economy was declining fast due to the overvalued peso, the rising foreign debt, and the declared bankruptcy of many of the country’s most important financial institutions. In fact, as Jo Fisher has explained, “It was the military’s economic record, not human rights, which became the focus for the first mass resistance to the rule of the juntas” in 1981. Since 1977, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo had marched every Thursday at 3:30 p.m. demanding information about their disappeared children, but it was not until 1980 that other sectors of society demonstrated interest in human rights, when the middle-class began to see the consequences of a rotting economy. “In the midst of the discontent the issue of the disappearances was, for the first time, being raised outside the narrow circle of human rights organizations. In August 1980, the newspaper Clarín had published an advertisement signed by personalities representing diverse sectors of Argentine society demanding information on the desaparecidos.”

The military’s reaction to this growing crisis was enacted on April 2, 1982, three days after a massive demonstration against the dictatorship, when General Leopoldo Galtieri decided to invade the Falkland Islands (known as Malvinas in Spanish), which had been the subject of dispute between Argentina and Great Britain since 1833. The invasion actually united the country and diverted attention to a common front, at least for the few months that the war lasted. Hugo Vezzetti has an intriguing theory regarding the reasons for the war. According to the author, besides trying to unite the country and divert attention from human rights violations, the military presented a relation between the Dirty War and the war against the British; first, they would have eliminated the “interior enemy” in the “war against subversion;” then, they would eliminate the external enemy, thus recuperating and salvaging national integrity.

However, the disastrous results against Great Britain and the deaths of hundreds of Argentinean soldiers created complete opposite results. What began as a clamor for the dead soldiers at the Falklands/Malvinas Islands transcended to the victims of the dictatorship—the disappeared. The crisis became uncontrollable and Galtieri stepped down in June 1982, leaving the presidency to General Reynaldo Bignone. His term lasted until Alfonso won the elections in October 1983 and was installed to the presidency on December 10 of the same year with 52 percent of the popular vote.

The Argentine transition from dictatorship to democracy has been a long and frustrating process that has left many open wounds, especially in those who suffered the repression of the dictatorship. Despite the massive efforts of human rights associations like the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of Plaza of Mayo), the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of Plaza of Mayo), H.I.J.O.S. (Hijas e Hijos por la Identidad); and the Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio or Daughters and Sons for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence, and the Comisión Argentina de Derechos Humanos (Argentine Commission of Human Rights), among others, to bring the criminals of the Proceso to justice, many of them, at this date, still enjoy freedom.

The first attempt at impunity, the Informe Final sobre la Lucha Antisubversiva (Final Document of the War against Subversion), promulgated during the last months of the dictatorship, aimed to justify the Dirty War and declared a self-amnesty for all of those involved in the repression.
sion. When Alfonsín came to power, he annulled this decree and constituted the CONADEP to investigate the violation of human rights ordered by the three military juntas of the Proceso. The commission’s exhaustive recollection of data, in which more than three hundred clandestine centers of detention were exposed and many members of the military and police were identified as kidnappers, torturers, and assassins, led to the trial of April 1985, which judged and finally condemned the members of the three military juntas of 1976 to 1983 to different sentences, from life imprisonment to a few years of incarceration.

Even though it is unquestionable that President Alfonsín and the CONADEP displayed a sincere effort to document the violations of human rights, prove the existence of clandestine detention centers, and identify many repressors, they also contributed to the creation of the so-called teoría de los dos demonios or “theory of the two evils.” This theory provides an analysis of the Dirty War based on a supposed symmetry between the violence of the guerrillas and that of the state. When Raúl Alfonsín created the CONADEP and announced the prosecution of the members of the juntas and guerrilla leaders, like Mario Firmenich, he instituted this theory, a move that was highly criticized by human rights organizations. The members of the CONADEP followed this polarization of the Dirty War by presenting the following first sentence of the prologue of Nunca más: “Durante la década del ‘70 la Argentina fue convulsionada por un terror que provenía tanto desde la extrema derecha como de la extrema izquierda” (During the 70s, Argentina was distressed by a terror that came both from the extreme right as well as the extreme left). Even though Nunca más openly denounces the atrocities of state terrorism and proves that many of the victims were not affiliated with the guerrillas, its opening statement emphasizes the military’s idea of Argentina being the stage of a war between two equally destructive forces—the state and subversion.

This theory, besides being based on false premises, contributed to the justification of the Dirty War and the subsequent amnesties for the criminals. The consequence of the spread of this theory was twofold—on the one hand, it justified the use of state violence; and on the other, it reinforced the depoliticization of the victims in order to avoid their characterization as terrorists. According to Vezzetti, a new signification of innocence was created for the victims of the dictatorship by which their innocence was not only juridical but also political. In this sense, the victims were separated from any political militancy thus making possible for society to deny both the political implications of the repression as well as society’s possible participation in and/or complicity with the dictatorship. This attitude toward the past of the victims actually strengthened the politics of silence imposed by the dictatorship and contributed even more to the depoliticization of the country. One of the consequences of this political vacuum was a series of measures taken by the state to perpetuate impunity and institutionalize oblivion.

During the 1985 trials against the juntas, the theory of the two evils took root and triggered a climate that escalated in instability and threatened to disable the new democracy. At the same time that the generals were judged, a multitude of denunciations against lower-ranking members of the military and police were formulated by families of the victims and survivors. These denunciations greatly unsettled both institutions, and the Congress, fearing new violent reactions, promulgated the Ley de Punto Final (Final Point Law) on Christmas Eve of 1986, establishing a deadline of three months to present denunciations and start new trials. After this point, no denunciation concerning the abuses of the Dirty War could be prosecuted.

Even though this law greatly protected those involved in the repressive actions of the Proceso, in April 1987 a military uprising known as los Carapintados (Painted Faces) demanded the end of all trials against members of the military. Alfonsín did put an end to the rebellion the same week; however, he had to acquiesce to the military’s terms. In July, he passed the Ley de Obediencia Debida (Law of Due Obedience), according to which the repressors who acted following orders were free of charges. Only a few maximum responsible members of each security force were deemed responsible and hundreds of crimes could not be prosecuted because they were perpetrated by those following orders.

The few members who were being judged were reprimed with an indictment that President Carlos Saúl Menem promulgated shortly after being elected in 1989. With this indictment, he pardoned almost two hundred members of the military and sixty-four former leftist militants, twelve of whom were disappeared. With this first indictment, Menem publicly embraced the theory of the two evils, “emphasizing the shared responsibility of the two armed parties locked in a spiral of violence.” In 1990, another indictment freed the small number of generals who were sentenced at the beginning of the democracy. In sum, between 1989 and 1990, four presidential decrees were promulgated through which all who were already sentenced or were being prosecuted were pardoned. Similarly notorious in this era was Menem’s support of the 1994 promotion of Juan Carlos Colón, a well-known ESMA repressor. The only
public resistance against the amnesties, indults, and institutionalized amnesia came from the relatives of the disappeared and the victims of the Dirty War, associated with human rights organizations like the aforementioned Madres and Abuelas.

Shortly after the indults, in 1994 and 1995, an avalanche of confessions from members of the military regarding the methodology of torture and assassination shocked the Argentine society. The most disturbing accounts were those of Captain Adolfo Scilingo who, in an interview with Horacio Verbitsky, described in detail the flights that the army performed to throw living prisoners into the ocean. Those seeking justice during the past twenty years hoped that these revelations would reopen the prosecution of the criminals. Unfortunately, as Fernando Reati has observed, the result was the opposite—the past could be “closed” now that everything has been said.

In the past few years, however, there have been several advances against the criminals of the Proceso. International prosecutors like Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón tried to extradite to and judge in Spain several repressors who participated in the disappearance of Spanish citizens, Captain Scilingo among them. Judge Garzón based his argument on principles of international justice, since forced disappearance and torture are crimes against humanity that could be judged outside the country where they were committed. Many of these judicial processes are still open, like that of Ricardo Miguel Cavallo, who was also tried in Spain.

The Argentine Congress furthered the movement for justice when, in 2003, they revoked the Final Point Law and the Law of Due Obedience. Then, in June 2005, the Argentine Supreme Court declared both laws unconstitutional, thus making possible prosecution against all the military and police personnel suspected to have taken part in the torture and disappearance of thousands of people. Finally, on September 20, 2006, during the trial of Miguel Etchecolatz, the court of La Plata used the term “genocide” to describe the crimes of kidnapping, torture, and homicides committed by the accused, who was sentenced to life imprisonment. This is the first time the term has been used to describe the methodology of repression, linking the accused individual to the exterminating plan orchestrated by the state. The sense of justice achieved during the trial of Miguel Etchecolatz was tainted, however, by the kidnapping and disappearance of Jorge Julio López on September 18, 2006, a day before giving his final testimony in the trial against the repressor. López, a seventy-six-year-old who was kidnapped and tortured by Etchecolatz, was one of the main witnesses in the hearing. His testimony of how the former police officer tortured him was essential to condemn the accused. His disappearance is a reminder of the power the repressors still hold and the impunity of many of their actions. Unfortunately, López’s disappearance is not an isolated incident. Human rights activists, lawyers involved in the prosecution of the criminals of the Proceso, and witnesses in the trials are constantly receiving threats.

It is highly significant that two of the texts that I study in this book have been published for the first time in Argentina in 2006: La Escuela by Alicia Pattacino and Una sola muerte numerosa by Nora Strejilevich. It is especially remarkable that La Escuela was officially presented at a ceremony celebrated at the Argentine Congress on October 12 of that year. These texts participate in the effort to keep the book of Argentine history open so justice can be done. The work of memory in the narratives that I explore in this book contributes to the negotiation between remembering and forgetting the difficult past, and interprets, from the authors’ different angles, the events that happened to them and affected at least three generations of Argentines: the young generation that was the main target of the repression, their families, their children, and the society that witnessed the horror and that is still negotiating a way to work through the trauma left by the repression. Memory, the memories of the three authors represented in this book, searches not for a single truth but rather the collective, fragmented, intertwined, and successive truths that could help to reconstruct the past and interpret it in order to understand the present.
2
Theoretical Foundations for the Study of Women's Prison Narratives

On (Women's) Prison Narratives

According to Joan Davies, the twentieth century—with its proliferation of totalitarian regimes that have persecuted, incarcerated, and sometimes even exterminated discordant and/or different voices—"has produced as many prisoners and prison writers as in the entire previous history of man." Most of the incarcerated authors have been prisoners of conscience whose texts contribute to an understanding of the "social and intellectual history of terror." Unfortunately, the history of terror did not end in the year 2000. We only need to contemplate the US occupation of Iraq, the inhumane modus operandi of the US prison in Guantánamo, the images of torture in Abu Ghraib, and the current crisis in the Middle East—just as a few examples—to realize that the twenty-first century has already been shaped in its first decade by dominant powers as another century of war and death, violence and repression, prisons, concentration camps, and genocide. When Davies suggests that "it is impossible to understand Occidental thought without recognizing the central significance of prison and banishment in its theoretical and literary composition," he touches upon a sore point since the Western history of politics is imprinted with the silence and exclusion of those who contested either the republic, the empire, the reign, the dictator, the democracy, or the people. In fact, prison, "the darkest region in the apparatus of justice," is so present in Western history that it has been not only the space of confinement and punishment for many intellectuals and writers, but also a metaphor employed throughout the history of literature. Prison has been established in the collective Western imagination as a space of suffering, bondage, darkness, and melancholy. Real and metaphorical prison spaces have nurtured the histories of repression and of literary imagination; present in our societies and literary traditions, carceral representations are part of our collective memory. As Victor Brombert asserts, "Prison haunts our civilization. Object of fear, it is also a subject of poetic reverie." In the case of incarcerated authors, the object of fear becomes a frightening reality, and the poetic reverie a tangible nightmare that inspires compelling texts in which prisoners try to make sense of such an experience.

Prison space is full of significations, a palimpsest upon which the pain of the confined body has been inscribed. At the same time, carceral space not only refers to "behind the bars," the stone walls, the electric fence, or the armed guards, but also to the ideological and discursive formations that are intrinsic to any space. In this sense, the conceptualization of space as an active entity, as constant performance, as a mechanism of repression, control, and discipline, as well as a practice of resistance, is integral to the interpretation of texts written in prison.

Space, then, is not conceived of as a fixed, immobile entity, a receptacle where objects and/or beings exist or are inserted, but as a strategy within the discourses of power and knowledge. These complex and fruitful interpretations of space will be most useful for the analysis of the multiple levels of spatial production that converge in the narratives at hand.

Prison and prison narratives have been primary sources of study for disciplines like anthropology, history, and sociology—Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison being the most influential work—and have also functioned as testimonials for human rights organizations like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. In the field of literary studies it is easy to find monographic and/or comparative studies about well-known writers who were in jail or concentration camps, like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Primo Levi, Jean Genet, or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Likewise, there is an extended corpus of literary and theoretical studies on testimonial literature of the Holocaust that deals specifically with the act of remembering, telling, and/or writing the experience. In the last few years, there has also been a growing interest in prison literature in the United States, possibly motivated by the disturbing escalation of the prison population, particularly among women.

Even though Latin America has a solid tradition of authoritarian regimes and gloomy penitentiaries that have inspired many narratives, most of the critical works on prison texts deal with the European and American contexts.
Anglo-American world. Most of the studies on contemporary Hispanic prisons are not in the literary field but rather in anthropology, history, political science, psychology, and sociology. Due to the limited critical attention paid to prison texts, it seems that carceral narratives are conceived of as marginal to the canon and too explicitly political and dubiously literary. If this category of narratives tends to be ignored in Hispanic literary studies, women political prisoners’ accounts are even more typically dismissed. There are a relatively small number of studies on Hispanic women’s prison narratives. The most detailed study of women’s prison texts is Barbara Harlow’s *Barred Women, Writing, and Political Detention*, which focuses on texts from Egypt, Ireland, Palestine, the United States and El Salvador (including Ana Guadalupe Martínez’s *Las cárcel de clandestinos de El Salvador* and Nidia Díaz’s *Nunca estuve sola*). She bases her analysis on the political content of the prison texts and the contexts in which they were written, locating the prisoners “in their own social, cultural, institutional, and historical contexts,” demonstrating that political prisoners are not merely a phenomenon of the “Third World.”

Elisa D. Gelfand, in her study on women’s writing from French prisons, points out the steady repetition in literary studies of male incarcerated authors and criticizes the exclusion of women’s prison writing, arguing that the reasons for this exclusion “are in part not different from those that explain the more general underrepresentation of women in creative enterprise” — the abjection of the transcending woman writer, which in the case of incarcerated women is triple: as deviants, as female deviants, and as female deviant writers. The lack of a significant number of studies about women’s prison writing in the Hispanic world is, likewise, related to the exclusion of women from politics. This omission, in the end, is one of the reasons for the repression suffered by the female political prisoner, which is as extreme in Latin America as in the rest of the world. As Elizabeth Dore suggests in her introduction to *Gender Politics in Latin America*, “the gendering of power” has been a mechanism of exclusion for women in Latin America. Moreover, not only has this phenomenon systematically excluded women from the realm of politics, but it has also been reproduced in radical terms during extreme situations of political repression against women, for example, during imprisonment. In other words, the carceral system under authoritarian regimes reproduces, as a microcosm of power relations, gender differences in an even more dramatic way than in the world outside prison. According to Jean Franco, torture was possible in military reprisals due to the archaic forces of machismo, misogyny, and racism. Ximena Bunster-Burotto, in her article “Surviving Beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America,” agrees with Franco and asserts, “The military state understands itself to be run for the perpetuation and extension of the values of military, masculinity, power, and public authority to a greater extent than other patriarchal states.”

This double oppression raises important issues concerning women’s prison experiences and the process of writing, issues that I will explore in the following chapters. I agree with Davies’s idea that “prison writing is centrally about violence”; equally important, however, is the relation between violence and gender oppression. Moreover, the process of writing the experience reveals an attempt to reconstruct the female subject through a self-representation that fights against this double oppression. Writing becomes not only an act of resistance against political repression, but also a powerful affirmation of the female self that has been physically and psychologically abused.

Alcina Kozamah’s *Paso bajo el agua,* or *Steep Under Water* (1987; 1996; 2002), Alcina Partnayo’s *The Little School,* or *La Escuelita* (1986; 1998; 2006), and Nora Strejlevich’s *Una sola muerte numerosa,* or *A Single, Numberless Death* (1997; 2002; 2006), narrate the authors’ experiences as survivors of Argentina’s last dictatorship (1976–1983). Alcina Kozamah was first detained in 1975 for fourteen months in the police headquarters of Rosario (named *el sótano,* the basement) and then two-and-a-half years in the penal colony of Villa Devoto. Alcina Partnayo was kidnapped in 1977, held at the clandestine detention center called *La Escuelita* (the Little School) at Bahía Blanca, where she was disappeared for months, and then "legalized" and transferred to Villa Floresta, a penitentiary also in Bahía Blanca, where she was incarcerated for two more years. Nora Strejlevich was also kidnapped in 1977 along with her brother Gerardo, his girlfriend, and two cousins. They all were taken to the infamous clandestine center of detention called the *Club Atlético* in Buenos Aires. Strejlevich was released days later after being severely tortured, but the rest of her family members are still disappeared. The three authors suffered repression during the darkest years of the Proceso (1976–79), went to exile to the United States as soon as they obtained their visas, returned to Argentina at the beginning of the transition to democracy, and left again for the United States.

The common feature of the texts to be examined is that they involve the remembering and telling of a carceral experience lived by women...
under a repressive, military regime that actively participated in the violation of human rights, torture, and mass murder. They are also produced as works of memory while in exile.

**Mapping the Imprisoned and Tortured Body**

In their study of the colonial body in India, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick assert, "The mapping of the body was an essential and essentialist move in the power/knowledge configuration of the state." Through techniques imposed by the British Empire in all its ramifications (the law, the church, the school, the medical profession), the colonizers aimed to create a disciplined female body that obeyed British rule but was marked as definitively different from the British. Not surprisingly, Price and Shildrick's theory stems from Foucault's formulation of the docile body, which is both an intelligible and useful/manipulable body. They added, however, the important dimension of gender to the study of this docile body: "The interplay of power and knowledge produces differences in just such a way that the bodies of women are the ground on which male hegemony and, at least in part, the power of the state in the service of capitalism are elaborated." Price and Shildrick's interpretation of the construction of knowledge/power through the mapping of the female body is useful for the analysis of representations of female imprisonment.

Diana Taylor has studied, not so much from a Foucaultian perspective but rather from performative theory, the mapping of the female body during the Argentine dictatorship in her book, *Disappearing Acts.* According to Taylor, this mapping began with the portrayal of the first junta as "male, measured, mature, and responsible, as opposed to Isabelita, who was female, hysterical, unqualified, and out of control." This construction of the female self as weak and unreliable was complemented by the demonization of the political woman. Indeed, the dictatorship "simultaneously glorified the feminine—particularly in the image of the Patria, or Motherland—and targeted active women who resisted or transgressed their assigned role in the social drama." The "good woman" was the one who "supported the military's mission and encouraged it to exercise even more control over the public good." Many of those who did not embrace the dictatorship's ideas of womanhood ended up in torture chambers, concentration camps, or disappeared. Thus the mapping of the female body by a male hegemonic state is extreme when that state is a terrorist one. In this case, the act of mapping becomes the act of indelibly inscribing the power of repression onto the body through torture, imprisonment, and, often times, death.

There is a relationship between prison space and the female body, and between the body as space for pain—inflicted by torture and confinement—and the memory of that pain revealed through the scars of the body and the psyche. Writing about imprisonment and torture is mainly writing about the body because the pain inflicted on both body and mind is inextricable and leaves an indelible mark on the memory. According to Elizabeth Lira, "The human body is the bearer of individual memory." The body remembers caresses, glances, gestures, sounds, but also abuse, blows, electroshocks, isolation, incarceration. The body acquires a new relation to the world after being traumatized. Memory tries to minister to the body that has gone through imprisonment and torture and reconstitute the fragments. Thus women's writing becomes an act of erasure and reconstitution: erasure of the pain written on the body and reconstitution of the female self. The scars of imprisonment and torture reside on the body, and so do the self-inscriptions of resistance.

Memory that has been scarred by the space of prison recovers it as a space of domination demarcated by the bodies that occupy it. The imprisoned body is represented as incomplete, permanently liminal, and fragmented. Furthermore, it is a recodified body. As Foucault explains it, power codifies the body. The representational space of repression is designed to codify the female body and make it totally submissive; however, the carceral narrative's reproduction of the body subverts the conditions of total domination into a representation where both spaces for resistance as well as the body as space of resistance are possible.

The space of the female body and that of prison are intertwined in prison narratives. They are inextricably linked since the memory of imprisonment is inseparable from the scars left on the once incarcerated body. As Allen Feldman has articulated in relation to political prisoners in Northern Ireland, "The margins between prison and body were submerged and erased; the cell became the extended body of the prisoners, and their bodies became their temporary prisons." I agree with this statement since it intimates the ideological implications of carceral space. There is no delimitation between the walls of the cell and the imprisoned body; rather, the former impregnates the latter. In actuality,
the body becomes an extension of the cell since that space becomes a constitutive part of the inmate’s self-conception of her body. All the senses, which serve to situate the body in relation to space, are transformed by imprisonment: the darkness of the blindfold or, when there is no blindfold, the darkness of the cell, and the lack of horizon, affect the sight; the screams of other prisoners crying during torture, calling for water or food, leave a nightmarish echo on the hearing; the smell of her own and others’ blood, sweat, and vomit impregnates her nose; fear is the only thing she tastes in her mouth; the scars on the body after torture and the lack of human touch unless it is for pain, change the meaning of what it is to touch and be touched. The body can only relate to darkness, sounds of horror, the smell of death, the taste of fear, and pain. All of her senses during imprisonment are transformed, and, therefore, so is her relation to space.

Nevertheless, Felman’s quotation also anticipates a paradox in the relationship between the body and the cell that I will develop in my analyses of the texts but would like to forestall here due to its importance. The body is indeed an extension of the imprisonment or even an instrument of incarceration because the prisoner, especially the female prisoner, is limited by her own body. When the torturers focus the inscription of pain and humiliation on her sexuality, when she menstruates, when she feels the hands of the guards on her body, when she can see her bones through her skin, she is reminded of the limitations imposed by her physicality. That same body will still provide a space for practices of resistance, as small as they might be. Techniques of the body that will be explored in the following chapters are those that overcome the restrictions imposed on the body itself—sensorial development, particularly hearing and smelling, communication through body language, codified messages through symbolic objects, use of carceral space for resistance, and so on.

Prison space is reenacted in the narratives as a theater of domination but, again, also resistance. To be clear, prison is the locus where discourses of power are reproduced. In these narratives the politics of prison topography is intimately connected to that of torture. Torture is an act of a political nature aimed to break the individual through the infliction of extreme physical and/or psychological abuse. Whether it is physical or psychological torture, the language used in the narratives to describe it is that of fragmentation. Indeed, the writers use a unique language to refer to the female body under torture. The fragmentation and shattering of the captured and tortured female body is reflected in a language whose main trope is that of the synecdoche. This trope is used in every instance where torture is described in the texts. As I will elaborate through the analytical chapters, this fragmentation is related to the difficulty of narrating the destructive and traumatic moment of torture. The act of remembering such a painful moment, when the woman is left at the hands of the torturer, is one of the most challenging aspects of these texts. The reader infers the narrators’ struggle to represent torture without falling into the mechanical and affectless repetition of the legal testimonial discourse, to capture the traumatic moment for which the only witness of the pain is one’s memory, to overcome the recollection of the moment of powerlessness.

The challenge of representing torture is so difficult because it refers to a moment during which the tortured is under infinite distress, because “torture targets the individual’s identity . . . . Physical and psychological aggression during torture aims to generate a situation whereby the victim ‘feel at the mercy’ of others and experience depersonalization, fear of annihilation, and the destruction of their body image.” The experience of torture is on the limits of narratability because it is personal, unrepeatable, and, after all, pain cannot be shared. Only the victim knows how much pain she has suffered.

During torture the victim feels the utmost powerlessness. According to Idelber Avelar, “In that confined space [of torture] power can hardly be contested. This considerably magnifies the torturer’s power inside the chamber, and in spite of a number of heroic acts of resistance by tortured subjects, the struggle against torture is first and foremost a matter of winning a battle in the public sphere.” Writing is then the public sphere where torture is contested. As Avelar has anticipated, however, stemming from a critique to the well-known work by Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain,” the essential problem in narratives of trauma related to torture lies in how to recount the experience. In the aforementioned book, Scarry constructs a phenomenology of pain in which she argues that the body of the tortured is the locus of pain while the voice of the torturer is the locus of power. In the first chapter of her book, she explains that the person who is tortured is only body and loses her/his voice and all reference to that which s/he knew as “world” or “civilization.” Thus through torture, “the unmaking of the world” is produced; namely, there is a total loss of all referents that, before torture, constituted the civilized world. The only way that, according to Scarry, the tortured can recuperate his/her vision of the world is through narrativizing the experience, that is, through “the making of
the world.) Avelar, on the other hand, argues that torture, in reality, is a substantial part of civilization and, therefore, is not opposed to it. He criticizes the binary opposition between civilization and torture that Scarry creates. Moreover, Avelar points out that if, as Scarry argues, the voice is completely destroyed during torture, then the only option that is left is an impossible restoration of the pretraumatic subjectivity.

Because torture, instead of eliminating the voice of the tortured, makes her speak, it is when she speaks that she is destroyed: "Torture produces speech in order to produce silence. It produces language so as to manufacture the absence of language. . . . The dilemma of the tortured subject, then, is always one of representability. How can one speak of the unspeakable?" Avelar’s interpretation of the narrativization and representation of torture emphasizes the relationship between trauma and the testimonial act. I accept Avelar’s premise that the traumatic experience, due to its very nature, is impossible to represent in all its atrocity, but I agree more firmly with his insistence on the necessity to narrate it in order to begin the healing process through the testimonial act. Torture, that private act during which the only presences are those of the torturer and the tortured, eliminates the witness and, for that reason, the testimonies of the survivors are of the utmost importance, not so much to comfort the victim, but more so in order to create the conditions under which the healing functions of narrative might develop: "The modern technology of torture is the atrocity in its completely privatized form. The destruction of the possibility of witnessing heightens the sensation of guilt that terrorizes the survivor. The task of constructing narrativity must be understood, then, less as the elaboration of coherent, comforting sequence about the past . . . and more as the postulation of narrative as a possibility, that is, a virtual place of a witness." To narrate imprisonment and torture constitutes an exercise of memory through which a representation of those traumatic experiences imprinted on the body is brought into language. The narrative act intertwines pain and the reconstitution of the subject through the labors of memory. The fact that the three authors write their memories as exilic subjects is of vital importance since the experience of exile after imprisonment taints the memories of everything that happened before the abrupt disruption and separation from their country. Therefore, the texts are written not only from the perspective of a traumatized memory but also from a space of displacement and dislocation.

2 / THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

WRITING (FROM) EXILE

If in the previous chapter I have explained the historical conditions that led the three authors to exile, here I would like to offer some rumination on the theoretical implications of writing from and about exile. The term "exile" has been used and abused to define a wide range of experiences that extend from economic migrations to the seclusion of women in first-world societies. It has also served as a metaphor to describe the isolation of the self, alienation, separation, and loss. Amy Kaminsky, in the prologue to her book, After Exile, establishes a clear distinction between metaphorical exile and exile that is lived and experienced through the body as a consequence of political repression. The latter refers to the original meaning of the term, that of the Latin exilium, used by the Romans to define the expulsion of a person due to political reasons. Paul Tabori coined a modern definition of exile that, by now, has become the standard: "An exile is a person compelled to leave or remain outside his country of origin on account of well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion; a person who considers his exile temporary (even though it may last a lifetime), hoping to return to his fatherland when circumstances permit—but unable to do so as long as the factors that made him an exile persist." This definition of exile has been widely accepted, even though it is obviously androcentric ("he," "his," "fatherland"). It is a definition that leaves women’s experiences completely out of the equation. If we accept Kaminsky’s observation—and we do—that exile is experienced and lived through the body, we need to question Tabori’s phallocentric definition. The same female body that has been tortured or female is later displaced into an exile during which the body will still relate to space through its gendered self-conception.

As explained in the previous chapter, the three authors had to make an impossible choice: exile or death. Choosing exile was choosing life, but this does not mean that exile was a real option. As Clara E. Lida and Francisco Zapata have clarified, exile is "an involuntary exodus of groups of individuals who normally would not contemplate emigration, if it were not for the need to flee from violence or political repression and its consequences within their country of origin."

The romantic idea of exile as a temporary state during which the writer has the freedom to live his/her own life, write, and be a productive source of "truth" about what is happening in the country of origin versus the idea of the exile writer as a desolated shipwreck survivor,
have been the two prevalent critical interpretations of exile. Sophia McClenen has explained this as a "binary logic, where exile either produces creative freedom or it traps the writer in restrictive nostalgia." 46 This dichotomy is in part caused by the controversy generated by Julio Cortázar's reflections on the topic. Cortázar explained first that he opted to leave Argentina in 1951, and therefore did not consider himself an exile, until his work was censored in 1974, after which date he started to talk about "cultural exile." 47 Whether he was really an exile or not is of no importance here; what really matters is his interpretation of the condition of exile in relation to writers. According to him, writers should actually exploit the condition of exile as a creative force and talk about exile in positive terms: "I believe that we writers in exile have the means to transcend the uprooting and separation imposed upon us by the dictatorships. . . . [W]e must pose the problem of exile in a way that sees beyond its undeniably negative character, which is by turns terrible, inexorable, stereotyped, sterilizing. . . . I believe that now more than ever before it is necessary to change the negative sign of exile. . . . to a new awareness of reality, a reality based on positive rather than negative value." 48 Cortázar's proposition was highly criticized by other authors in exile, especially those who had personally suffered repression. Although it is indeed in exile where Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich are able to write, it would be erroneous to say that exile is represented as positive in their writings. The difference between these authors and Cortázar is that the latter never suffered imprisonment, torture, and the disappearance of his family circle and/or friends. When exile is imprinted by the experience of survival—which always indicates an encounter with death—and by the trauma of a sudden uprooting from the native country, exile only emphasizes the reality of that traumatic experience.

In her autobiographical essay "Too Many Names," Nora Strejilevich beautifully portrays the paradox of exile—in the midst of the most uprooting experience, the author turns to language to find a place to establish roots: "I began to write in exile, where language became my country." 49 Saul Sosnowski, following George Steiner, has also explained this process of finding in literature what is lacking in the new mapping of the exile's identity: "Little by little, artistic work becomes the only place of 'residence on earth' for writers; it becomes their house, or rather ship, since like sailors, they find there the place equidistant for all nostalgias." 50 The way that many writers, like Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich, represent exile echoes Said's definition of the concept: "It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted." 51 In the case at hand the essential sadness is intertwined with the experiences of repression suffered in Argentina and the loss of many loved ones due to that same repression. From the dislocation of exile the three writers tell their testimony about the experience of disappearance and imprisonment and the need to end impunity in Argentina. In this sense, the authors take advantage of their situation outside their own country, making the most of the condition of exile.

The literature of exile is entwined to the country of origin through loss. Edward Said explained that connection as its predicated condition: "What is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both." 52 Nevertheless, contrary to common assumptions about the literature of exile, many times, as in the case of survivors, a nostalgic longing for the return does not exist since returning often means to face a country that has not resolved its traumatic past. 53 S. R. Wilson has already explained, in 1984, the anxiety that exile creates in survivors: "The nature of exile is not simply nostalgia, nor is it a romantic yearning to return. . . . Exile is the anxiety of living in distinct temporal and spatial conditions; exile is knowing you are alive because you left the country while others who could not or did not leave are in jail, 'disappeared' or dead." 54

Exile is either an implicit (Partnoy) or explicit (Kozameh and Strejilevich) presence in the works at hand. In any case, exile is the physical and psychological space from which the authors write. McClenen has noted regarding the authors Juan Goytisolo, Ariel Dorfman, and Cristina Peri Rossi that they "display great distrust in their ability to convey through words the intensity of the exile experience." 55 I find McClenen's explanation for this distrust paradigmatic for exiled writers, who "attempt to narrate aspects of their national history that are being silenced and censored by dictatorial regimes. The need to imagine and represent through language what one cannot experience through physical presence creates conflict in exile literature." 56

The conflict that McClenen sees in the authors she analyzes, which can be defined as the consequence of dislocation and displacement, is also present in the writings of Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich. In their writings, however, this conflict is combined with the portrayal of both the traumatizing experience of torture and imprisonment and the anguish of their loved ones in Argentina.
Testimonial writing is an important tool to understand the traumatic experiences of the past and the processes by which memory comes to terms with it. Memory is not the chronology of events fixed in the past, but rather what those events signify in our present. As Norbert Lechner and Pedro Güell have pointed out, the truth in memory is rooted not so much in the exactitude of the facts but rather in its narration and interpretation. Memory is a complex process that is constantly incorporating new meanings and interpretations of the past. Personal testimonies of the past always intertwine with present cultural discourses and private life experiences that imprint on the understanding of previous events and make their retrieval even more subjective. For this reason, it is fundamental to explore the concepts of memory and trauma and shed light onto the understanding of the trauma provoked by extreme experiences of violence and the ways by which human beings try to process them and express them in words.

The narratives I study in this book reveal problematic memories tainted by the trauma of imprisonment, torture, and loss. Writing is the vehicle of engagement with the loss of family, friends, political projects, and nation and of working through the experience of imprisonment, torture, and survival-exile. It is not my intention to psychoanalyze the authors, nor is it to reach a diagnosis about whether the act of writing has been therapeutic for them or not. My intention is to explore how their traumatic experiences of political violence are brought into representation through language. Therefore, in this introduction, I will develop the concepts related to interpretations of trauma that I believe are useful for the understanding of representations of memories of political violence.

A basic understanding of trauma is that it is a wound in the psyche caused by an event that is too extreme and too unexpected to be processed at the moment it happens. Judith Herman has suggested, "[T]raumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death." According to Dominick LaCapra, trauma is such a disruptive experience that it "disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered." The main problem that any scholar faces when studying representations of trauma in literature is that the concept itself has been the center of a long and heated debate since the very moment that it was born. Although trauma as a psychopathology (post-traumatic stress disorder-PTSD) was not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association until 1980, its manifestations and symptoms were objects of analysis for psychiatrists and psychoanalysts since the second half of the nineteenth century and were later studied in detail after World War I by Sigmund Freud and his disciples. Since then, trauma has been understood as an experience that is so extreme that its victim is incapacitated to understand it in a cognitive manner.

Sigmund Freud's theories of trauma are elusive and inconclusive but nonetheless fascinating, especially for literary and cultural critics. As Ruth Leys has explored in her excellent book, Trauma: A Genealogy, Freud began crafting his theories of trauma in his Studies on Hysteria and then, as a result of his work with veterans of World War I, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety. Freud's theories on trauma oscillate between what Leys has called "mimesis" and "antimimesis," and that oscillation is what has imprinted studies on trauma until the present. On the one hand, the mimetic dramatization theory emphasizes the psychoanalytic method of hypnosis as the only way to make the traumatic memory emerge by the experience of acting it out. On the other hand, the "diegesis," or verbalization, which is antimimetic, is the process by which the subject recounts the traumatic event not under hypnosis, but in full consciousness, providing a separation between the subject and the traumatic event. This separation, on which Freud insisted especially in his last works, has produced, when taken to an interpretative extreme, a "notion of trauma as purely an external cause or event that comes to an already constituted ego to shatter its autonomy and integrity." This notion, as I will explain shortly, has dominated postmodernist interpretations of trauma.

Trauma is such a polemical concept because of its very characteristics; trauma, as I noted earlier, is defined as a wound in the psyche that is provoked by an experience so extreme and unexpected that it cannot be remembered through the normal devices of memory. Due to the excessive emotions caused by the traumatic experience, the traumatized
subject cannot incorporate that experience into consciousness and as a consequence is haunted by intrusive traumatic dreams and flashbacks, along with other symptoms like emotional numbness, feelings of guilt, depression, and dissociation. Therefore, since the traumatic experience cannot be recovered through the usual mechanisms of memory, the center of the debate has revolved around how to recover traumatic memories in order to work through them and heal the traumatized subject and also how traumatic experiences can be brought into representation.66

In the last thirty years the focus of the analysis of trauma has been centered largely on the aftermaths of the Holocaust and other extreme war experiences (i.e., genocides in Africa and mass rapes during the Balkans War) and child abuse. Since the early nineties the predominant interpretation of trauma, both in the field of psychology and literary studies, stems from a postmodern paradigm according to which traumatic repetition is always literal and therefore outside representation. The concept of trauma is used by Cathy Caruth67 and other theorists such as Bessel A. Van der Kolk,68 Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman69 to support a performative theory of language that resists symbolization and unconscious elaboration. This theory, which is based on a deconstructivist rejection of language as representational, has been very successful in literary studies. Ruth Leys has asserted, however, that most of the postmodern, poststructuralist critics of trauma do not take into consideration Freud's concepts of repression and unconscious symbolic meaning that are associated with trauma.70 Indeed, Caruth contends that since trauma is outside representation and cannot be formulated by the subject, it does not belong to the subject who suffers it. In her introduction to the collaborative volume, Trauma: Explorations in Memory, Caruth explains this lack of location of trauma in the following terms: "the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event."71 In fact, this is one of the main ideas she develops in her book, Unclaimed Experience, that trauma is an external event that is not possessed by the subject but rather possesses the subject. According to Caruth, trauma returns as a literal repetition of the experience and, since it has not been mediated by the unconscious, as an unaltered true repetition of the event, that is, as historical truth.72 Leys summarizes Caruth's paradigm of trauma as follows:

a paradigm according to which the traumatic response is defined in terms not of repressed motives, disguised representations, and unconscious symbolic meanings, but the literal, unmediated impact of the event. On this interpretation, traumatic dreams are not autobiographically or subjectively mediated or owned by the individual; rather the "self"... is possessed by the traumatic dream, which thus bypasses all representation by impersonally memorializing and chronicling the historical truth of the traumatic origin.73

Leys criticizes the way in which Caruth appropriates Freud in order to validate her interpretation of trauma because not only does she reject the autobiographical nature of trauma that was so important for the Freudian interpretation, but also she insists (along with other authors like Laub and Felman) that because of the true historical nature of traumatic repetition, trauma can be transmitted to and lived by others who have not actually experienced the event that caused it. Leys emphasizes the problematic nature of such claims: "By eliminating the question of autobiographical-symbolic meaning, it makes manifest the mechanical- causal basis of much recent theorizing about trauma. When applied to the Vietnam veteran, the model implies that all participants in the war—whether victims... or perpetrators... are alike casualties of an external trauma that causes objective changes in the brain in ways that tend to eliminate the issue of moral meaning and ethical assessment."74 The ethical issues regarding the impersonal nature of the traumatic experience and the appropriation of trauma by those who have not experienced it have been discussed by other authors such as Dominick LaCapra and Amy Hungerford. LaCapra focuses his critique on the ethical implications that such a theory has in relation to the location of trauma: "... one encounters the dubious ideas that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a 'wound culture.'"75 Hungerford emphasizes the problematic implications that this lack of location of trauma has when she asserts that, according to Caruth's theory, "One who transmits trauma need not have experienced it originally."76 Furthermore, she expresses her concern about how, in Caruth's theory, "The experience of trauma can be cut free of the person to whom the trauma happens."77

In this book I contribute to an interpretation of trauma as a claimed experience that can be brought into representation by the traumatized subject through acts of symbolization in an attempt to deal with the difficult past. Thus instead of providing an interpretation of trauma that
considered writing a literal embodiment rather than a representation of the traumatic experience, I suggest an analysis of the symbolic uses of language that communicate the traces and/or symptoms of trauma. With this brief allusion to the debate on the concept of trauma, I want to prepare the reader for my approach to a notion that lately has been dominated by a poststructuralist interpretation with which I feel uncomfortable due to its diluted, nonreferential, unlocatable, and ethically challenged nature. I am aware that Caruth is probably the most quoted critic on literary studies regarding trauma, but I agree with Leys, LaCapra, and Hungerford about the problematic nature of her claims. Throughout this book I lean toward a return to an interpretation of trauma, according to which “the origin of trauma does not present itself as literal or material truth... but as psychical or ‘historical truth’ whose meaning has to be interpreted, reconstructed, and deciphered.”

Throughout this study a few key concepts related to trauma theory will be applied. Two of these concepts are “acting out” and “working through.” The book’s subject deals with trauma in these two different ways that do not necessarily annul each other. LaCapra has explained the relationship between acting out and working through in a manner that I find truly helpful for the analysis of cultural representations of traumatic events. According to LaCapra, “Acting out and working through... are interrelated modes of responding to loss or historical trauma.” In acting out one is “haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes.” The subject cannot differentiate past from present and is taken to the moment of the traumatic experience. That experience cannot be recounted as a narrative memory and inhibits the subject’s ability to come to terms with the past. Narrative memories or normally processed memories “are verbal, time-condensed, social and reconstructive in nature, while traumatic memories are often experienced as if the once overwhelming events were happening here and now. These hallucinatory, solitary and involuntary experiences consist of visual images, sensations and motor acts that engross the entire perceptual field.” According to Elizabeth Jelin, acting out presents a danger that is twofold: “the menace of an ‘excessive’ presence of the past in ritualized repetition and in the compulsion to act out, and the menace of a selective forgetting, a void that can be subject to manipulation by the self or by others.”

The other process that a traumatized subject might engage in is that of “working through.” This happens “[w]hen the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective.” Working through is the term used to express the process by which the subject establishes a difference between the present and the past and can recall the traumatic events through narrative. Although the process of working through may offset the impulse of acting out, it does not necessarily imply a cure for trauma. According to LaCapra, it is “a kind of countervailing force (not a totally different process, not even something leading to a cure)... In working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future.” Thus in order to transcend the re-living and acting out of the traumatic event, the subject needs to engage in elaboration and reincorporation of memories. This work of memory allows for a more meaningful understanding of the experience.

Sometimes the traumatized subject does not engage in working through because that would mean abandoning her/his performative relation to the experience. LaCapra has explained this issue with the concept “fidelity to trauma,” the “melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past.” This is especially true in those who lost close friends or family members as a result of the same traumatic experience, but who survived, like Nora Strejilevich or Alicia Partnoy. The reliving of the trauma works then as a “painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound.” A similar idea to that of “fidelity to trauma” has been developed by Avançado, who, in The Letter of Violence, emphasizes survivors’ resistance to engage in working through due to the vicarious nature of language. Since language is gregarious, survivors resist the transformation of experience into language, into metaphor: “The resistance to language” often observed in testimonies of survivors is not a simple resistance to all language but rather a particularly linguistic strategy whereby the proper name wages a war against the gregarious power of the sign, against the facile dilution of experience in metaphor, against the tranquilizing effect of all dictionaries.” In this sense, converting experience into language means losing its uniqueness and adapting it into something to which others may relate.

A very important point to keep in mind while reading my interpretations of the texts at hand is that acting out and working through may be two processes that the subject undertakes at the same time. According
to LaCapra, "Severely traumatized people may have different dimensions of the self engaged in acting out, working over, and working through which may not, to a greater or lesser extent, effectively communicate with one another." This means that while the author is capable of bringing into a narrative memory some of the events of the traumatic past, her writing will also engage in acting out the experiences that are impossible to formulate into a coherent narrative. In these instances, symbolization, tense implotion, tense confusion, and fragmentation impregnate the text.

When the subject engages in working through, mourning may begin. Herman has accurately observed, "The telling of the trauma story thus inevitably plunges the survivor into a profound grief." Once the subject recognizes his/her loss, this process begins. On trauma, loss, and grieving, I quote Herman at length for her accuracy in describing the process.

Trauma inevitably brings loss. Even those who are lucky enough to escape physically unscathed still lose the internal psychological structures of a self securely attached to others. Those who are physically harmed lose in addition their sense of bodily integrity. And those who lose important people in their lives face a new void in their relationships with friends, family, or community. Traumatic losses rupture the ordinary sequence of generations and defy the ordinary social conventions of bereavement.

Mourning in the context of trauma provoked by state terrorism and political repression needs to be understood as mourning for one’s body that has been shattered by torture, imprisonment, and the displacement of exile, mourning for the victims (family, friends, and comrades) who did not survive, and mourning for a political project that also died in the repression.

Freud differentiated mourning from melancholia on the basis of pathology. Mourning is different from melancholia in that the latter is considered a pathology by which the ego cannot complete the work of mourning and becomes poor and empty. While mourning can only happen when the lost loved object is separate and distinct from oneself, melancholy is a narcissistic reaction and occurs when a fantasy of omnipotence has taken place and the lost object is a mirror of one’s sense of power. In addition, according to Freud, "Melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction with mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious." The melancholic is incapable of establishing a separation between subject and object, therefore seizing him/her in the loss. In The Un timely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning, Avellar points out that the work of mourning is never complete. Indeed, the substitution of the lost object by a new loved one always "includes the persistence of an unmourned, unresolved remainder, which is the very index of the interminability of mourning."

Through mourning, the subject needs to substitute the lost object by a new one in which the libido can invest. Avellar has called this process "metaphoric operations." During these operations, mourning might be paralyzed by the realization that the new object cannot replace the old one; this is "resistance to metaphor" and is associated with the aforementioned fidelity to trauma.

Besides this resistance to the surrogate new object, mourning can also be sabotaged by the lack of completion of necessary rituals, such as proper burial, which in the case of the Argentine disappeared is impossible. In the case of Partnoy and Strejilevich, a symbolic ritual emerges through writing. Through their writing, they provide their disappeared family members and friends with the space for mourning. Writing is part of a mourning process by which language, representation, becomes the surrogate object that might replace the lost one (whether it is a family member, friends, comrades, or a political project). The idea of finding in writing a way of mourning has already been developed by Avelar in his study of Tununa Mercado’s En estado de memoria. According to the critic, Merca do’s book transforms repetition into memory, giving the dead a space to be mourned, "restitui[i]ng] the dead to the realm of the dead and liberati[i]ng] them from the uncertain condition of being unnamed, unrecognizable, unmournable ghosts."

This book addresses a particular kind of trauma, namely, the trauma provoked by state terrorism and a particular response to it—the narration of the witness. My analysis follows the traces left by consecutive traumatic experiences, all related to state terrorism: first, torture and imprisonment; second, liberation from prison into a country that is a vast prison of censorship, fear, and repression, third, the re-traumatizing experience of exile. The authors are both survivor-witnesses as well as political subjects who know that even though the past cannot be changed, its meaning and moral and political value in the present are of utmost importance for the future of their country. In the case of the three authors, their torture and imprisonment are part of the military's
political plan to annihilate opposition. Indeed, as anticipated in the previous chapter, most of the victims of the dictatorship had some sort of either political affiliation with a leftist group or sympathies for a project that aimed to change the unequal social conditions. Such is the case of Kozameh and Partnoy, affiliated to the ERP and the Peronist Youth, respectively. Strejilevich, although she was not officially affiliated with any political group, participated in campaigns for social equality. In this sense, the three authors' responses to the attempt to destroy their political projects are political. After being released, they continued their commitment to social justice, and their writings serve that end.

In this sense, the narratives of Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich contribute to the numerous testimonies of torture and violation of human rights perpetrated during those years in Argentina. These texts dialogue with the corpus of narratives that bear witness to the brutality not only of Argentinean, but of Latin American dictatorial regimes as well and that in academia are usually categorized as "testimonios." It is not my intention here to engage in the debates about the genre but rather to provide the reader with a brief explanation of how these texts relate to it. The word "testimonio" has well-known connotations in Latin American studies as works that not only document violations of human rights, genocide, and other political atrocities, but also aim to raise consciousness and provoke political and social change. In the case at hand, however, the narratives are not products of a "subalterna" that must speak through the voice of a scholar, as it is usual in testimonios, but rather the response of three highly educated women (Partnoy and Kozameh were writers before the experience) who faced horror and felt the imperative to tell the story.

The three texts in this study present narrators who engage in the process of denouncing repression as well as self-reconstruction and survival. For many witnesses, to write is to survive. Nora Strejilevich reflects as follows on this need to tell: "quien sale de un campo siente la necesidad de testificar para sobrevivir, dar testimonio es una forma de confrontar el horror otorgándole sentido al pasado, sino al futuro" (the person who comes out of a camp feels the need to give testimony in order to survive; giving testimony is a way to confront horror by projecting meaning not onto the past, but rather onto the future). Strejilevich has clearly emphasized the importance of giving testimonial literature the attention it deserves: "el testimonio no ha agotado su función social; orientar la reflexión de lo que pasó, de qué significa y cuál es el legado del genocidio" (testimony has not exhausted its social function; it guides the reflections about what happened, what it means, and what the legacy of genocide is). While testimonial writing has been extensively studied in the United States, Chile, and most Central American countries, testimony in Argentine academic circles has been neglected until very recently. For example, the works of Alicia Kozameh, Alicia Partnoy, and Nora Strejilevich have been studied in the United States and Germany, but barely at all in their own country. I believe that this lack of attention to testimonial writing in Argentina is in part related to the fact that the country's academic intelligencia has disregarded its value outside the juridical realm. The most recent beligerent critique against the genre has been formulated by Beatriz Sarlo, who considers that the subjectivity involved in the process of narrating the experience of repression makes of testimony a questionable source for both memory and history.

Just like Sarlo, Avelar has critically commented on the Southern Cone testimonies and those literary critics who have interpreted them at face value. In some cases, as in Jacobo Timerman's Present sin nombre, celda sin número or Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number, Avelar sees a reproduction of the language of the dictatorship. In other cases, as in Miguel Bonasso's Recuerdo de la muerte, he asserts that the testimony reproduces a dangerous dichotomy between the hero and the traitor; that is, between remaining true to who one was before the dictatorship or becoming a collaborationist as a result of torture and imprisonment. Avelar affirms that even though "the accumulation of facts provided by testimonial literature represented a crucial step not only to convince those who insisted in denying the obvious but also for the juridical battles that have taken place," still these testimonies cannot accurately represent the memory of the dictatorship. The main problem of testimonial writing, according to Avelar, is that the atrocities of the dictatorship were "piled up in a language that rarely asked questions about its own status." Also, he asserts that "most testimonial texts in the subcontinent, more often than not [were] fully confident that tomorrow the forces of justice would triumph." Although I agree in general with Avelar's theory, I consider the texts of Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich representatives of a work of memory that constantly underscores the difficulty of "piling up" the atrocities of the dictatorship and that by no means reproduces a triumphant discourse. Avelar includes only Partnoy's text in his list of testimonies but does not develop his theory regarding The Little School. I believe that my analysis of the three works will show that Avelar's postulation may be valid for Timerman and/or...
Bonasso, but not for the authors in this study. The factual discourse that Avelar perceives in those authors is absent in Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich. None of the three represent violence by a mimetic simulation of reality. On the contrary, they use literary, sometimes symbolic, discourse in order to make intelligible that which is unimaginable.

As witnesses' accounts, these three narratives communicate an urgency to denounce an unjust situation and demonstrate an attempt at raising the political and social consciousness of the reader. The three authors open their narratives with an introduction, a note, or a preface where they clarify their motives when publishing the book, the representative and collective nature of the voices reproduced in the narrative, and the veracity of the events they narrate.

Alicia Partnoy explains that she focuses on the reproduction of the voices of her disappeared friends to “[rendir] tributo a una generación de argentinos perdida en el intento de lograr justicia y cambio social” (pay tribute to a generation of Argentine lost in an attempt to bring social change and justice). The collective voice is then explained as an attempt at representing all the desaparecidos. Also, she lends herself credibility by explaining in the introduction her personal experience at the Little School in a strictly factual discourse and by introducing two appendices at the end of the narrative where she describes the building of the Little School and the guards and torturers. Nora Strejilevich summarizes the personal and collective nature of her testimony in the very title of her book—*Una sola muerte numerosa*. The death is both single, as in her disappeared brother's case, and collective, for all of those who died during the repression. In fact, the book opens with a poem that emphasizes this idea: “Cuando me robaron el nombre / fui una fui cien / fui miles / y no fui nadie” (When they stole my name / I was one I was hundred I was thousands / and I was nobody). Finally, Alicia Kozameh introduces a brief note where she clarifies that “estos relatos fueron escritos para que los episodios de que me ocupé sean conocidos” (these stories were written so that these events will be known) and that “lo sustancial de cada uno es verdadero, sucedió, lo vivío yo misma o lo vivieron otras compañeras y yo lo supe, aunque me reemplazó nombres o quizá detalles que para nada cambian, de hecho, la esencia de la cosa” (the substance of the story, of every episode, is real; it happened. Either I myself or other compañeras lived it. I have, however, replaced names or possibly details that in no way affect the essence of what occurred).

In all three of this study’s narratives, it is essential for the authors to warn the reader about the collective, truthful, and denunciatory account s/he is about to read. The representative value of these testimonies is implicit since, as Hugo Vezzetti has pointed out, paraphrasing Primo Levi and Giorgio Agamben, nobody returns to narrate their own death. The moral imperative to tell the individual and collective story is associated with the idea that the one who survives is the closest to the truth of what happened to the ones who did not. To answer the call of memory is then a way of paying tribute to those who did not survive. Therefore the testimony of a survivor is also a political imperative against those who deny the obvious and want to relegate the history of repression to oblivion. Ariel Dorfman has pointed out that during Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, “[a]n eternal present of fear is created, meant to purge the past that has led the person to rebellion and to eliminate the future toward which it led. It is not enough to suppress the adversary if you do not erase her memory and her ability to organize an alternative project.” Thus, the main goal of the witness is to remember the victims of political repression and to accuse those who perpetrated it.

**Warning to the reader**

*Mourning without solidarity is the beginning of madness."
—Eric L. Santner

The overwhelming experiences of violence suffered by the authors leave a trace of trauma in the narratives, a subject that I explore throughout this book. Without falling into the easy trap of a superficial transference of the traumatic experience, I would nonetheless like to warn the reader that these texts may also leave a scar on those who become immersed in them. For those of us who study these narratives, it is sometimes difficult to write about the violence and suffering rooted in the text. Often, the recognition of the horror embedded in the words results in nightmares or an unbearable moment of depression, disgust, or desperation that requires closing the book for the rest of the day. The reader of my work will have to face these disturbing moments as well: you will be witness to painful accounts, and to my sometimes frustrated effort to understand a narrative that is born from desolation. I would like the reader of this project to have one of those unbearable moments, to feel at least once the pain of the words, and even to have a couple of night-
Barbara Harlow explains the practice of writing and reading prison literature and the need for a committed reader in overtly political terms that I also find helpful to set the tone of my approach to the texts.

The literature of prison, composed in prison and from out of the prison experience, is... necessarily partisan, polemical, written as it is against those very structures of a dominant arbitration and a literary historical tradition that have served to legislate the political neutrality of the literateur and the literary critic alike. Reading prison writing must in turn demand a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature.149

The second part of this book is dedicated to the detailed analysis of the prison testimonies of Kozameh, Partnoy, and Strejilevich. In chapter 3—"Re-enacting Memory: Alicia Partnoy's _The Little School and La Escuela_"—I analyze the ways in which Alicia Partnoy tries to bring order to the chaotic world of disappearance and survival through the act of remembering, "tale-telling," and reconstructing her experiences of imminent death. This chapter focuses particularly on the dynamics in Partnoy's text between traumatic reenactments and attempts at working through trauma. The constant presence of death in the narrative also makes the analysis of survival an essential component of the chapter. Here, I propose that Partnoy's book, a book of grief, is the site honoring her loved ones who died without recognition. I read Partnoy's narrative as one marked by survival, analyzing the representation of the experiences at the Little School as an oscillation between a crisis of death and a crisis of life, both associated with the disappearance of most of her friends and her own survival. Accordingly, death is a constant presence in the text that imprints not only the telling of other inmates' experiences, but also her own encounters with it. Through my analysis, I claim that Partnoy's traumatic experiences at the Little School that surface in her writing are too presently felt and too unerasable to be expressed in a narrative memory. Therefore, I analyze the emergence of the traumatic reenactments in Partnoy's writing as the very possession of the act of writing by the traumatic reenactment of the events. And yet, _The Little School_ emphasizes also the creation of a hidden transcript generated at the clandestine prison. In contrast to the overwhelming presence of death, I analyze the portrayal of resistance and solidarity following James C. Scott's theories of power relations. Partnoy transcribes the tiny yet significant ways—from jokes to a shared piece of bread—that resistance takes form even within the prison.
bread—in which the captives at the Little School held on to their lives until the torturers took them away or until they were released. The reconstruction of these memories is an attempt at recuperating their voices with dignity, to convert the horrors and degradation of the disappearance into a dignified account of resistance. Finally, I draw a comparison between the first English edition of 1986 and the first Spanish edition of 2006 of Partnoy’s book based on a reflection on the imprint twenty years of fighting oblivion have left on the text.

In chapter 4—“Uncanny Returns: Representations of Trauma in Alicia Kozameh’s Pasos bajo el agua”—I interpret the symbolic uses of language and image in relation to the representation of traumatic memories of violence. I first analyze how Kozameh consciously fictionalizes her experiences and those of her fellow prisoners in an attempt to make them more intelligible. I reflect on the author’s definition of testimonial writing, according to which an effort to portray realistically some traumatic experiences can be more questionable than the fictionalized recreation of the same experiences. Kozameh’s narrative, due to its self-referentiality and self-consciousness, provides an excellent ground for analysis since it constantly questions the representation of traumatic events through language. In Pasos bajo el agua, writing is a challenging issue that is inextricably linked to the experience of returning and survival. The challenge of writing the experience is problematized by the same events that inspire the writing—imprisonment, torture, and exile. I analyze the unreal scenarios that Kozameh recreates in the book as a reflection on the need of fiction to portray the traumatic experience, an experience that is sometimes so extreme and surreal that it cannot be represented by a factual or realistic discourse. Likewise, the fragmented relatos that make up the book emphasize and mimic the disjointed nature of the trauma, which cannot be represented globally, and depict the difficult process of writing. I claim that writing and creativity are the means by which the book tries to resolve the memories that haunt its protagonist, though emphasizing that writing the literature of trauma is a cathartic act that does not necessarily bring hope or purification.

Chapter 5—“From Victim to Agent: Death, Devastation, and Dissent in Nora Strejilevich’s Una sola muerte numerosa”—addresses the book’s structure as a conversation with the dead and the significance of its title. I claim that the fragmented structure and the polyphony of voices in Una sola muerte numerosa is a reflection of both the impossibility of total recollection of traumatic memories as well as a strategy to represent the voices of those who either disappeared during the dictator-