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Critical Epistemologies from Latin America and Spain in the 21st Century

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Critical Epistemologies from Latin America and Spain in the 21st Century

According to sociocritical theories, every cultural text – including literary texts – functions as a site of social inscription. Literature, in this sense, is not merely a "reflection" of the social but a space in which social discourses are negotiated, transformed, and refracted. And yet, the relationship between the literary text and its extratextual world, i.e. its social, historical, and ideological "outside", is anything but linear, seamless, or innocent. As early as 1970, Mikhail Bakhtin formulated a crucial distinction between what is "given" (*dannoe*) and what is "created" (*sozdannoe*), drawing attention to the complex negotiations that unfold at the border between the self and the other. This threshold – the locus of the *dialogic* – is where meaning is not simply transmitted, but made, unmade, and remade. It is precisely within this dynamic that M.-Pierrette Malcuzynski extends Bakhtin's model by introducing the notion of the "projected" (*zadannoe*), a concept that draws attention to the anticipatory and constructive force of discourse. Resonating with Bakhtin's own emphasis on the dialogical and the heteroglossic, the "projected" elucidates the epistemological and ideological conditions that shape the literary field. In this way, the text becomes not only a receptacle of the social but a volatile site of epistemic possibility and contestation.

Following these conceptual frameworks, this special issue on "Critical Epistemologies from Latin America and Spain in the 21st Century" aims to examine the modalities through which the "given" is inscribed in the "created" and "projected". We explore how sociality enters into, is mediated by, and is reconfigured within artistic texts, and, equally crucially, how the "created" reshapes the social field. The literary text, in this view, is not a passive reflection of reality but an active, if unstable, agent in its very transformation.

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From this sociocritical perspective, literary analysis becomes the labour of restoring literature's social intelligibility. This entails tracing the discourses – political, ideological, affective – that constitute the text and its conditions of emergence. In doing so, the contributors to this dossier affirm the literary text's autonomy, not in the sense of isolation from the world, but as a site of singular articulation: a space in which social antagonisms are reworked, contested, and reframed.

At the same time, we insist upon the reciprocal movement between text and world. The text bears the marks of the world it inhabits, just as it intervenes in, refracts, and reconfigures that world. Social discourses do not arrive in the text in a pure or unmediated form; rather, it is shaped by the singular crises of the producing subject and by the broader structures of antagonism that traverse any given society. At this critical juncture, we must, following Marc Angenot (1998), resist the temptation to speak of "social discourse" in the singular. The notion of "the social discourse" implies a coherence and unity that does not hold. Polyphony and heteroglossia are not inherently democratic or inclusive. On the contrary, the concept itself – the social discourse – produces the illusion of a unified field, masking the antagonistic and contingent nature of discursive hegemony. What we encounter, in reality, is a temporary sedimentation of power: a dominant formation arising from the conflictual struggle among competing social discourses for symbolic legitimacy.

Central to this process is the inscription of ideology in literature and the implicated positionality of critics, scholars, and readers. As sociocritical thinkers such as Cros, Duchet, Malcuzynski, Chicharro Chamorro, Gómez Moriana, and Angenot – drawing on Bakhtin, Althusser, Kristeva, and Foucault – have argued, no utterance is ideologically neutral. The "said" is never innocent; it is always enmeshed in power. Even the writer who imagines themselves secluded in an "ivory tower" is always already entangled in matrices of meaning, cultural imaginaries, and representational codes (Bourdieu, 1998; Cros, 2002). The subject is not a free-floating agent of discourse but a product of it. This is the foundation of Edmond Cros's theory of the "cultural subject" (2002), conceived as an ideological mechanism through which individuals are interpellated into the symbolic order. Subjectivity, here, is not anterior to ideology but produced through it. The cultural subject thus designates both an "I" as discursive instance and a collective historical formation. Its visibility is most marked in its reliance on *doxa*: stereotypes, clichés, and socially sanctioned commonplaces. The subject does not choose identification; rather, it is the cultural model that positions the subject, that constitutes it through repetition and recognition. As Cros (2002) observes, the "I" cedes its place to the "they", and in doing so, identity is reconfigured, displaced and masked through subjectivity.

Hegemony, in this view, "makes" the world, but always from within a particular worldview. It represents only that which it already recognises as legitimate:

the epistemic coordinates of the dominant group, the "legitimate" language, the normative subject, the culturally sanctioned pathos. Thus, hegemony is not a possession of dominant groups, nor is it a synonym for ideology. Rather, it is a performative structure of dominance that privileges those with access to the means of mediation, allowing their discourses to circulate more widely and to sediment more powerfully. Hegemony, as the principle dictates, generates hegemony. Hegemonic formations function as tacit apparatuses that delineate the limits of the sayable and the thinkable. This is, in Foucauldian terms, the operation of the archive: that which structures the epistemic conditions of visibility, intelligibility, and articulation. Within this horizon, the literary text can be conceived as a counter-archive, one that exposes the conditions of its own production while simultaneously displacing, reframing, and destabilising them.

In this sense, representation operates not merely as visibility, but as erasure. As with the centre/periphery dichotomy, the monopoly of representational legitimacy within a cultural system occludes what lies beyond its sanctioned horizon. What remains outside – the "remainder," that is, the discourses of the "other," of linguistic, ethnic, sexual, or racial minorities, of non-Eurocentric perspectives, of ex-canonical or subaltern forms – is not simply overlooked but actively marginalised, silenced, or rendered unintelligible. The struggle for epistemic centrality is thus a constitutive feature of cultural production.

In this vein, M.-Pierrette Malcuzynski emphasizes the inevitable positionality that writers, readers, and critics adopt in relation to social discourses: "[o]n the very terrain of negotiation, neutrality is an incongruent sophism; there exist only positions taken and socialized genres, in the plural […] the subject itself is the product of interaction with other sociocultural subjects" (Malcuzynski, 1991, p. 157)[1]. Far from any form of scientific relativism, but simultaneously aware of her own "position-taking" as a woman scholar, Malcuzynski argues that by acknowledging the inevitably ideological nature of every word, one can express a form of social commitment and a will to analyse and intervene in discursive practices from a feminist perspective: "Rather than vainly attempting to forge a *new* language, I refer to a sociocritical politics that engages a responsible hermeneutics of cultural mediation […] capable of *decolonizing* […] the gender problematic imposed by patriarchy, in order to *de-marginalize* the feminine subject without neutralizing her position-taking" (Malcuzynski, 1995, p. 128).

From this position, social discourse is not a stable field but a dynamic, polyphonic space that Angenot (1998), Cros (2002), and Malcuzynski (2006, 2009) identify as a space of semio-ideological flux. Here, discourses shift, alternate, and displace one another. This is the ensemble in which not only the said, but the unsaid, the silenced, and the not-yet-sayable are determined. The

[1] All translations from Spanish are by the authors.

social murmur, then, is never entirely absent. Even in its faintest form, it remains traceable in the interstices of the text: in its silences, its hesitations, its margins.

In moments of crisis – what Becerra Mayor terms *events* (2013) – this murmur becomes more pronounced. Whether in times of socio-political economic collapse, political upheaval, or environmental catastrophe, the transition from one discursive order to another intensifies contradiction. In Bakhtinian terms, the border becomes more porous, and polyphony asserts itself more loudly. Indeed, as Becerra Mayor argues, the social murmur of the twenty-first century is not only audible but transformative. These *events*, understood as irruptions in the symbolic order, open new epistemic horizons and inaugurate new forms of collective and individual subjectivity. Emerging from this rupture is a new political literature, one that decisively distances itself from the postmodern "novel of non-ideology" (Becerra Mayor, 2013), which had been concerned largely with private dilemmas and severed from structural critique. This new literature is, by contrast, explicitly "critical and dissident". It asks how we come to be what we are – how our subjectivities, our imaginaries, and even our desires are formed. (Becerra Mayor, 2015, p. 14). Following Becerra Mayor's (2013, 2015) lead, we believe that recent social mobilisations across Latin America and Spain have precipitated a rupture in prevailing cultural paradigms.

Hence the high level of socio-discursive conflict. All social actors struggle to bring their experiences, values, and axioms – their worldview – to the centre of the epistemological horizon. Despite its categorisation as "the sublime", literature partakes in this conflict as a discursive practice that follows after all others. As Angenot (2015) affirms, "literature is that discourse which, present in the world, comes to take the floor and to work with *the words of the tribe* after the other discourses have said what they had to say, above all the discourses of certainty and identity" (pp. 270–271). Malcuzynski (1997–1998) even goes so far as to assert the indissolubility of the dual vector text/discourse, neither of which can be reduced (or rendered synonymous) to the other (p. 190). This nature of literary discourse leads it to inevitably reproduce discursive hegemony: every literary text – it has been said – is immersed in it and operates in relation to it. Yet it is precisely this conflictivity at both the personal (of the producing subject) and collective levels that makes literature, in addition to being a "supplement", a spoilsport (Angenot, 2015). The way in which sociality materialises in and through the literary text – that is, everything that is said, what is not said but can be said (the unsaid, the rejected), or what is said even though it exceeds the limits of discourse (the unsayable, such as archaisms or neologisms, to give an immediate example) – transfigures the discursivity on which it operates and – transfigured –reintroduces it into circulation within the given social discursive space (Malcuzynski, 2006). Was the shift to the grand modern paradigm not first gestated in the pages of books? (Rodríguez, 1974/1990).

In this evolving intellectual landscape, the literary field has undergone a significant discursive diversification. Anticapitalist, anti-modernist, and posthumanist paradigms have increasingly come to the fore, actively contesting the Eurocentric, masculine, and rationalist subject inherited from Enlightenment modernity. At the heart of this emergent discursivity lies the concept of *crisis*—not merely understood as a moment of breakdown, but rather as rupture, as epistemological aperture, as an occasion for unsettling the canonical and gesturing toward other ways of knowing and narrating. In this sense, *crisis* becomes a productive mode: a condition that enables the re-imagination of subjectivity, history, and cultural belonging.

The publishing industry plays a dual role in this transformation: it not only reproduces but also actively produces this discursive shift. There is a growing receptiveness to texts aligned with the frameworks of decolonial theory, fourth-wave feminism, ecocriticism, posthumanism, the affective turn, and postmemory studies. The thematic concerns of these works – developed in critical dialogue with contemporary socio-political movements – span a broad array of urgent issues: ecological devastation, economic precarity, Indigenous epistemologies, experiences of illness and maternity, gendered and racialised exclusions, and the reconfiguration of subjectivities beyond liberal individualism.

The contributions gathered in this dossier – "Critical Epistemologies from Latin America and Spain in the 21st Century" – engage precisely with such configurations of knowledge and power. They interrogate literature not as a closed system of aesthetic self-reference but as a privileged site for the production of counter-discourses, alternative archives, and epistemic dissent. These texts trace the ways in which literature participates in redefining the boundaries of the sayable and the thinkable, especially in the face of planetary crises, colonial legacies, and the violence of neoliberal modernity.

As M.-Pierrette Malcuzynski (2006) argues, any attempt to conceptualise transformation cannot rely on a reductive binary between power and knowledge. Rather, she writes:

> We all know that change cannot be approached in terms of a division between power and knowledge, but through a perspective that relates specifically the exercise of power to the acquisition of knowledge. This entails confronting the view that change is only visible *a posteriori*, once it has already occurred. Now, while it may be true that change can only be fully grasped through retrospective framing, I nevertheless believe that we must not only identify the factors that potentiate transformation, but also affirm that change itself can be recognised as such in the immediacy of its manifestation. It is only at this ethical level of cognitive 'responsibility' that a reterritorialisation becomes possible. (p. 36)

Malcuzynski's formulation is crucial to understanding the methodological commitments of the essays assembled here. Her insistence on the *immediacy* of

change – on its recognisability not only in hindsight but as it unfolds – foregrounds an ethics of attentiveness. This *cognitive responsibility* involves more than scholarly vigilance; it signals a theoretical and ethical imperative to respond to literary and discursive ruptures as they emerge, rather than merely historicising them retrospectively. The concept of *reterritorialisation* – evocative of Deleuzian philosophy – is thus reimagined as an ethical and politically situated act: one that engages literature as a vector for intervention, critique, and cultural re-inscription.

This special issue sets out to explore the epistemic and discursive reconfigurations currently underway in Spanish-speaking literary cultures. What does literature in the twenty-first century encode? Which marginalised voices are gaining traction at the centre? What are the new coordinates of hegemonic legitimacy? And how do these new forms reproduce or reshape the sociohistorical conditions from which they emerge? The contributions assembled here approach these questions from a variety of critical positions, grounded in their own situated conditions of production of meaning. Through our engagement with contemporary texts from across Latin America and Spain, we collectively seek to illuminate the contours of a field in transformation: one shaped by crisis, by resistance, and by the urgent need for new epistemologies.

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Beyond Postmodern Panfictionality: Spanish Metamodern Fiction after 15-M

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the relationship between the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M and metamodernism. It argues that metamodern fiction often critically challenges neoliberalism by reviewing its connection to post-15-M literature. This convergence will also contribute to a broader understanding of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction and its aesthetic strategies. The relationship between these two broad fields of study will be explored through a critical analysis of existing debates. We will suggest that this connection is particularly evident in a corpus of recent novels that invoke the materiality of the world for political, emancipatory purposes. This paper will conclude with a case study of a political metamodern novel: *Clavícula* [My Clavicle and Other Massive Misalignments] (2017) by Marta Sanz.

KEYWORDS
metamodernism; postmodernism; Spanish literature after 15-M; political literature

This paper argues that the notion of metamodernism can contribute to the discussion about literature after 15-M, which has been developed by scholars such as David Becerra Mayor (2021) and María Ayete Gil (2023). Metamodernism is a relatively new field of study that has gained theoretical and scholarly attention in recent years. This term attempts to describe how 21st-century Western culture is processing the legacies of modernism and postmodernism. Some authors have linked metamodernism with a right-wing political agenda, particularly with the rise of far-right populist parties and the notion of post-truth. This paper will attempt to show that, even if this connection is real and disturbing, metamodernism can be linked to a different kind of political fiction, too. This fiction is political because it places under scrutiny contemporary living conditions and questions the widespread narrative that neoliberalism is the best of all possible political systems. To prove this, this paper will focus on contemporary descriptions of the repoliticisation of Spanish literature, a movement that will be understood here, at least partially, as a consequence of the metamodern structure of feeling. While it can be considered

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problematic to use a conceptual framework originally written in English to analyse Spanish literature, we do not intend to uncritically apply this framework, metamodernism, to a new corpus of novels. Rather, this article intervenes in the ongoing discussion on metamodernism, adding theoretical references that have been conceived for the analysis of Spanish fiction specifically. The analysis will culminate in the case study of a contemporary novel that can be considered part of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M and the metamodern structure of feeling: *Clavícula* (2017)*,* by Marta Sanz.

1. Metamodernism: Going beyond postmodernism

During the nineties, different authors announced the end of postmodernism. Gradually, the end of postmodernity, or at least of postmodernism, became a consensus. The main theoreticians of postmodernism, such as Linda Hutcheon (2004b), Brian McHale (2015) and Ihab Hassan (2003) claimed that this movement was over. Their declarations attest to a collective loss of interest in the theoretical possibilities of postmodernism. Soon, monographs and papers that described new artistic movements, which could not be understood through postmodern poetics, started being published[1]. Mary Holland (2013, p. 15) considers that most of these authors agree on the reasons why postmodern hegemony ended: postmodern thought worked through negativity, opposing any consensus and showcasing the contingency of ideas that were once considered to be necessary. Thus, when postmodernism became the dominant cultural paradigm, it lost its meaning, as it could not oppose anything but itself. Moreover, its critical apparatus – grounded exclusively in the negation of previous systems and devoid of ethical or political alternatives – came to be seen as exasperating.

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the publication of theoretical works that tried to define the moment that came after postmodernism. Not all of these attempts shared the same scope: some tried to describe only an artistic or literary trend within the contemporary panorama, whereas others tried to theorise the cultural world as a whole. There was no consensus concerning the name that this cultural moment should receive[2]. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker joined this discussion in 2010, coining the term "metamodernism". It has become a popular choice to name the moment after postmodernity within different disciplines, such as philosophy (Corsa, 2018), media studies (Vermeulen & Wilkins, 2024), religious studies (Ceriello, 2022), and literary studies (Kersten & Wilbers, 2018). Vermeulen

[1] Mary Holland (2013, p. 14) and Noah Bunnel (2015, p. 1) have listed these attempts to describe the moment after postmodernism.

[2] Among these concepts, we find new sincerity (Kelly, 2016), digimodernism (Kirby, 2009), post-postmodernism (Pignagnoli, 2023), post-irony (Konstantinou, 2016), and, of course, metamodernism.

and van den Akker understand that metamodernism is the "structure of feeling" that follows postmodernism. They borrow the term "structure of feeling" from philosopher Raymond Williams, to name "a sentiment, or rather, still, a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down" (van den Akker et al., 2017, p. 7). Aesthetically, metamodernism is "characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010, n.p.). It manifests itself as an oscillation between modernist and postmodernist traits. This oscillation does not imply a synthesis or a "balance" between these two cultural moments; "rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles" (n.p.). On the one hand, postmodern codes are necessary to criticise Modern narratives; on the other hand, modernist codes allow artists to show enthusiasm and hope for better, even utopian, configurations of reality.

Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) link the beginning of metamodernism to the awakening of History. They consider that the exhaustion of postmodern codes is due to their inability to offer solutions for the many contemporary challenges that we need to respond to. Among these challenges, they mention the ecological crisis, the wars on terror, the Islamic terrorist attacks, the 2008 economic crisis, and the 2011 social mobilisations that followed it. In other words, the 21st century starts with many events that contradict Fukuyama's notion of the End of History: these events prove that history is not over and that there are many challenges that we need to address, through cultural production, too. Postmodern codes were unable to deal with these problems, as postmodern art could be political, but it could not engage with a particular political agenda. According to Linda Hutcheon (2004b, p. 3), "postmodernism works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import". That is to say, postmodern fiction reveals the contingency of discourses that were previously held as true and necessary. However, its irony and irreverence make postmodernism unfit for commitment to any political project.

As it was noted, metamodernism oscillates from this critical postmodern attitude towards a more engaged, utopian, modernist disposition. Literary-wise, this oscillation can be perceived in many different traits. Within the US canon, there is a consensus that metamodern fiction often employs postmodern techniques and resources with new aesthetic goals (Holland, 2013; McLaughlin, 2012; Timmer, 2010). For example, metafiction, which was typically used in postmodern literature to show the panfictionality of all discourse, to question the nature of reality and blur the boundaries between fiction and the real world, is employed in metamodern literature to connect with the readers and showcase the author's and the protagonists' sincerity.

Virginia Pignagnoli (2023) delves into this idea, borrowing Brian McHale's notion of "dominant". Pignagnoli (p. 4) defines the dominant as "an overarching

principle, a principle that for McHale is floating and depending on questions we aim at answering". According to McHale (2004), modernist dominant is epistemological – as modern texts ask questions such as "What is there to be known?" –, whereas postmodern dominant is ontological – as postmodern fiction poses questions such as "Which world is this?" (McHale, 2004, pp. 9–10). Pignagnoli adds to the debate by stating that post-postmodern (or metamodern) dominant is guided by concerns about communication, sincerity, and intersubjectivity. Metamodern fiction foregrounds questions such as: "What is to communicate? What is to communicate earnestly and sincerely? Is it possible to communicate earnestly through a text?" (Pignagnoli, 2023, p. 4). Many scholars seem to endorse this vision of metamodernism: for instance, Adam Kelly (2010, 2016) uses the term "new sincerity" to refer to metamodern fiction, whereas different authors have praised the interest that contemporary fiction takes in sincerity and truthfulness (Gibbons, 2017; Pignagnoli, 2019).

For instance, Alison Gibbons (2017, p. 118) considers that autofiction is a metamodern genre, as she understands that "the affective logic of contemporary autofiction is situational in that it narrativises the self, seeking to locate that self in a place, a time and a body. It also pertains to represent truth, however subjective that truth may be". She considers that this revalorization of sincerity allows contemporary authors to build a stronger sense of the self and to express truthfully their emotions, without fearing accusations of naïveté, as postmodern writers did. However, this subjective notion of truth might be problematic outside of the literary realm. Particularly, this revalorization of sincerity can be connected to the rise of post-truth within contemporary politics. *The Cambridge Dictionary* (n.d.) defines post-truth as "relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts". As Barney Warf explains, the notion of post-truth is linked with right-wing politics and neoliberalism: "Just as truth was essential to the creation of modern democracies, post-truth is vital to neoliberal capitalism" (Warf, 2023, chap. 1).

The connection between post-truth and metamodernism was suggested by different online articles (Colton, 2016; Gravemaker, 2017) and developed by Timotheus Vermeulen (2023) during his keynote lecture at the *Glocal Metamodernism* conference. Metamodernism has produced an epistemic shift, which implies that truth is no longer objective but based on personal feelings and experiences. Thus, metamodern fiction's concern with truth and sincerity can be linked with a right-wing political agenda and the notion of post-truth. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that metamodernism is transideological and should not be exclusively associated with the rise of the far right. Metamodernism, as it has been described here, is a structure of feeling that reacts to different historical and political events and tries to find solutions for them. Thus, metamodern fiction is often critical of neoliberalism and the systems of oppression it relies on. It is

necessary to examine the connection between metamodernism and political or engaged literature: to do so, this paper will focus on the repoliticisation of Spanish literature after 15-M and its relationship with metamodernism.

2. The repoliticisation of Spanish literature after 15-M

Different scholars have described a shift within contemporary Spanish literature and culture after 15-M (Ayete Gil, 2023; Becerra Mayor, 2021). The point of this paper is to showcase the connection between these descriptions of current Spanish fiction and Anglophone analyses of the moment after postmodernity.[3] Scholars writing about the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction do not refer to the debate of the end of postmodernism, but they participate in a similar discussion. They understand that the 2008 economic crisis and the Indignados movement marked the course of literary and cultural production because they proved the idea of the End of History wrong. From that moment on, it was obvious that neoliberalism was not a perfect system that would eventually bring wealth to society as a whole, but a deeply flawed political organisation that needed profound modifications. These changes in the mentality of most of the population had an impact on contemporary literature and culture.

In *Después del acontecimiento*, Becerra Mayor (2021) explains how this shift took place. He understands that the 15-M movement and the 2008 economic crisis "cracked the ideological unconscious [abrieron fisuras en el inconsciente ideológico]"[4] (Becerra Mayor, 2021, p. 25), borrowing terminology from Marxist literary scholar Juan Carlos Rodríguez. That is to say, these events were moments of rupture, of questioning power discourses and political and social configurations. The most important consequence of these ruptures is that "the political" was reconceptualised as a broad field for action, beyond the right to vote. To explain this new order of things, Becerra Mayor (2021) alludes to Rancière distinction between "policy" and "politics": during the Indignados movement, citizens claim their right to be an active part of public life and not limit their political interventions to the possibilities offered by neoliberal Western democracies.

In literature, these changes are particularly striking because of the literary production that came right before. Becerra Mayor (2013) describes this kind of fiction in *La novela de la no-ideología* [The Novel of Non-ideology]. He analyses Spanish literary production from 1989 until the beginning of the 21st century and concludes that it tended to reproduce dominant ideology. Most of the novels

[3] There are several studies that describe non-English fiction as metamodern (see Anttonen et al., 2024 and Krýsová, 2023), but here we use a theoretical corpus written in English that critically analyses mainly Anglophone literature. However, it is important to acknowledge the existence of previous studies that describe metamodern fiction in different literary traditions.

[4] All Englihs translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

that were published in that period did not depict political conflicts; the problems that characters faced were always individual, intimate, and psychological (p. 30). Literary production confirmed and reproduced unconsciously the idea of the End of History: in these novels, there were no political conflicts because they assumed that we already inhabited the best of possible systems (p. 32). In *Después del acontecimiento,* Becerra Mayor still theorises about this literary trend; he links the novel of non-ideology with postmodernity: "When we assume that the Grand Narratives have ceased to be operative in our way of conceiving and relating to the world, it is only possible to speak about the self [Cuando se asume que los grandes relatos han dejado de operar en nuestra forma de concebir el mundo y de relacionarnos con el mundo, entonces solo es posible hablar de yo]" (Becerra Mayor, 2021, p. 65). He refers to authors such as Perry Anderson and Mark Fisher, working in the field of political philosophy, to better understand this literary trend (pp. 62, 64). Spanish novels that were published in the nineties and the early 2000s reaffirm these thinkers' main hypotheses: capitalism is a system that presents itself as natural; thus, it is very difficult to find alternatives, to think of a world outside of capitalism.

However, after the 15-M movement, a new kind of fiction started being published. Many novels showed that problems that were once regarded as personal were in fact political (p. 26). These new fictions introduced different themes, such as the economic crisis, labour precarity, or tiredness (pp. 84, 85). The Indignados movement undermined old truth regimes that were regarded as natural, allowing the formulation of new political and social truths. In this new political, social, and cultural space, literature began to denounce the establishment and to imagine new possibilities for political and social organisation. Becerra Mayor (2021) regards his essay as an archive that collects political fiction published after the Indignados movement, and references novelists such as Marta Sanz, Cristina Morales, Edurne Portela, Sara Mesa, and Isaac Rosa, for example.

It would be bold to claim that the works of all of these writers are metamodern without examining them in depth. The term metamodernism is complex, as it builds up from already elaborate categories, namely modernism and postmodernism. However, some of the works that are part of post-15-M fiction can be considered to be metamodern. I will refer here to a corpus of works written, mainly, by women writers who are interested in depicting the body as a place where different oppressions intersect. The novels are often written in the first person and follow an autofictional pact. In her account of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction, María Ayete Gil (2023) dedicated a chapter, entitled "Cuerpo. Violencias y cicatrices" [Body. Violence and Scars], to this corpus of novels. These fictions were also the focus of my Ph.D. dissertation (Romero Polo, 2025), where I analysed six novels that could be considered to be a part of the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction and metamodernism. Novels such as *Leche condensada* [Condensed Milk] (2023),

by Aida González Rossi, *Panza de burro* [Dogs of Summer] (2020), by Andrea Abreu, *Clavícula* [My Clavicle and Other Massive Misalignments] (2017), by Marta Sanz, *Supersaurio* [Supersaurio. A Novel] (2022), by Meryem El Mehdati, *Vozdevieja* [Old Voice] (2019), by Elisa Victoria, *Las niñas prodigio* [The Child Prodigies] (2017), by Sabina Urraca and *La historia de los vertebrados* [The History of Vertebrates] (2023), by Mar García Puig, can be considered to be part of this literary trend.

The aforementioned novels are metamodern because, in order to introduce political questions, they often emphasise external, referential reality. They also pay attention to the characters' bodies and their materiality. These textual strategies can be regarded as ways to overcome postmodern panfictionality. They do not have perfect equivalents in the anglophone canon: as mentioned above, this paper does not intend to translate textual analyses from English literature to the Spanish context. However, different scholars (Gibbons et al., 2019; Kirby, 2009; Shields, 2010) have described a rising interest within contemporary culture in real stories and linked such interest to the waning of postmodernism. These authors understand the attention to reality and materiality as ways to overcome postmodern poetics. Postmodern literature blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction to showcase the panfictionality of all discourse, suggesting that cultural narratives are mediated by language and discourse. This blurring, whose main expression was metafiction, sometimes had political purposes, as it served to question patriarchal or colonial ideologies (Hutcheon, 2004a). However, metafiction was overused, and eventually it came to be perceived as a technique incapable of offering affirmative alternatives.

On the other hand, metamodern fiction refers to the reality outside of the text to underline that the problems faced by the protagonists are real and relevant. Gibbons et al. (2019) analyse two contemporary genres, true crime and autofiction, to understand how they go beyond postmodern panfictionality. These genres often rely on the production of a "reality effect", which "encourages readers to engage emotionally and empathetically with characters, on the one hand, and to reflect seriously on the crises that those characters experience and are subjected to – crises which resonate with, and are inescapable in, readers' sociocultural reality" (Gibbons et al., 2019, p. 180). Spanish political novels often put this reality effect at the service of political purposes, to signal that the protagonists' struggles are structural and affect real people in the real world. I will analyse a Spanish metamodern novel, *Clavícula* (2017), by Marta Sanz, to explain how this is achieved.

3. *Clavícula* (2017), by Marta Sanz: a case study

Clavícula (translated to English as *My Clavicle and Other Massive Misalignments* in 2025) is an autofictional work by Marta Sanz. Sanz is a prolific author who

started publishing in the early 2000s and has been mentioned to illustrate the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M (Ayete Gil, 2023, pp. 271–290; Becerra Mayor, 2021, p. 86;). *Clavícula* describes in the first person the physical and psychological pain that the narrator is suffering and her regrettable encounters with the medical system. The novel begins when she suddenly experiences an imprecise but persistent pain in her chest during a transatlantic flight and describes her multiple and changing symptoms throughout the following months. Her personal journey is intertwined with tales of many of her female friends who also undergo different diseases, sometimes experiencing unconventional symptoms. As humans, we are doomed to experience pain in solitude, but *Clavícula* tries to create a collective account of female physical suffering. It focuses on some problems and obstacles that women have to face, for instance, the protagonist and her friends often receive psychiatric treatment when there is no clear medical explanation for their discomfort.

The novel pays particular attention to economic and material conditions. The medical system is unable to comfort the protagonist, as it does not care for these structural problems. Particularly, the protagonist is tired of working, writing, and travelling to promote her literary works. However, she cannot stop, as her husband is unemployed and it is extremely difficult for him to find a new job. The protagonist explicitly comments on their financial situation: she mentions the exact amount that she makes through several months (2017, p. 184) and reflects on how much she spends on utilities and food (p. 67). She constantly reminds herself of her need to work, showcasing that, even if creative work has been considered capable of unburdening us from material concerns, contemporary authors often inhabit precarity.

In *Clavícula,* the reader also finds several documents that bring reality into the text. This is particularly revealing to comment on the metamodern move beyond the panfictionality in which the novel partakes. For instance, the protagonist narrates a trip to Colombia through the emails that she sent to her husband, which shape one of the chapters (Sanz, 2017, pp. 119–126). She also includes some pictures that she took during a bus trip to a conference where she was invited (pp. 70–82). She does not show enthusiasm for the opportunity of participating in a literary event but describes her feeling of exhaustion. Following our previous argument, it is irrelevant if the pictures were taken during that particular trip, or if her email address or the content of the messages have been edited. These documents show that there is a reality beyond the novel and that the problems that the protagonist suffers are real and important. Nowadays, intellectual labour, like many other professions, requires a frenetic life rhythm and leaves us sick and exhausted. Moreover, the medical system cannot offer us solace, as it unable to intervene in our living and material conditions.

This novel is a clear example of the overcoming of postmodern panfictionality in contemporary Spanish literature for political purposes. Many contemporary

novels try to convey a feeling of reality through different effects. For instance, they do so through the careful description of the body and the everyday (as it happens in *Vozdevieja* or *El Evangelio*, by Elisa Victoria), intertextuality (as in *La historia de los vertebrados,* by Mar García Puig), or the inclusion of references to pop culture and to the digital sphere (as it happens in *Panza de burro,* by Andrea Abreu, *Supersaurio,* by Meryem El Mehdati, or *Las niñas prodigio,* by Sabina Urraca). These techniques serve to bring referential reality within literary texts and to connect the fictional and textual worlds to the world the readers and the authors inhabit. They contribute to going beyond the sense of the unreality characteristic of postmodern texts. Thus, they can be understood as metamodern literary resources. Moreover, in all of these novels, this conveying of reality is tightly linked with political purposes and serves to critically depict contemporary society, as the novels address various issues, such as labour precarity, burnout, sexism, or xenophobia.

4. Conclusions

This paper has examined two distinct theoretical fields that attempt to describe contemporary fiction: metamodernism and post-15-M literature. Their intertwining has allowed us to better understand these concepts and the landscape of contemporary Spanish literature. Particularly, it has enhanced the analysis of a contemporary trend shaped by female authors who invoke materiality and extratextual reality to talk about political issues. Metamodern theory has allowed us to understand this literary device as a way to go beyond postmodern panfictionality. Contemporary fiction refers to the reality outside of the text through various devices – such as documentality and autofiction – not to blur the distinction between reality and fiction, as was the case with postmodern literature. On the contrary, this constant appeal to extratextual reality and the world's materiality serves to remind us of the need to find solutions for the multiple structural problems that late capitalism produces. The combination of these two fields of study has proven very fruitful and opens promising research paths. On the one hand, the role of materiality and extratextual reality in contemporary Spanish fiction could be studied thoroughly in a broader corpus of novels. On the other hand, there are surely other literary trends and genres that could be explored through the intersection between metamodernism and the repoliticisation of Spanish fiction after 15-M. More than offering an exhaustive explanation of the relationship between these two fields of study, this paper has raised a research question and outlined some partial answers, in the hope of opening a conversation that might shed light on the development of contemporary Spanish literature.

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La Transición in Spanish Theatre: Memory, Disenchantment, and Critical Reassessment

ABSTRACT
As the 50th anniversary of the Spanish Transition approaches, it is essential to examine how theatre has engaged with this transformative period in Spain's recent history. While the early years of democracy were marked by an urgent, testimonial approach to dramatising political change, subsequent theatrical representations have increasingly shifted toward critical reassessments, often shaped by memory and disenchantment. This article analyses the portrayal of the Transition in four plays written by playwrights from different generations: Buero Vallejo, Medina Vicario, Alfonso Plou/Julio Salvatierra and María Velasco. Through a comparative analysis, this study explores how these works reflect the evolving perception of the Transition, tracing a trajectory from immediate chronicle to retrospective critique.

KEYWORDS
Spanish Transition; contemporary Spanish theatre; memory; critique

This year, 2025, marks five decades since the beginning of the Spanish Transition, a process initiated after Franco's death in 1975 that signified the shift from dictatorship to democracy, profoundly transforming the country's political and social landscape. This period was characterised by a collective effort towards dialogue and consensus, led by key figures who laid the foundations of the current democratic system. Although the Transition resulted in the consolidation of a parliamentary democracy governed by the rule of law, the process was fraught with tensions and conflicts, including the persistence of Francoist factions, the activities of armed groups, and complex political negotiations. Over the years, this historical phase has been subject to extensive analysis and reassessment across various disciplines – including political and social sciences, literature, and the arts – contributing to deeper understanding of its achievements, contradictions, and unresolved challenges.

On the eve of this anniversary, this study aims to examine how the Transition has been represented in contemporary Spanish theatre and how its stage treatment

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has evolved over time. Drawing on sociocritical theory, which posits that every cultural text encodes the social and acts as a mechanism that selectively absorbs and integrates fragments of social discourse (Angenot, 2015), I argue that theatre, by virtue of its dialogic nature and immediacy, offers a unique space for audiences to engage with their own memory and the political tensions of their time in an especially tangible manner. From this perspective, dramaturgy not only reconstructs the memory of the Transition but also engages in a dialogue with the present, reworking the "extra-textual" and reconfiguring its meaning in relation to contemporary debates. The stage thus becomes a liminal space, where the historical and the fictional coexist in tension, enabling a critical reformulation of hegemonic discourses surrounding the transitional period.

The examination of the Transition's theatrical representation allows one to observe how different generations of playwrights have engaged with this historical process, whether as a moment of reconciliation, as a complex period marked by both progress and setbacks, or as an episode whose impact remains subject to an ongoing critical reassessment. In line with Angenot's (2010) assertion that discursive hegemony sets the boundaries of what is thinkable and sayable, thereby shaping the narrative frameworks through which the Transition is interpreted, I argue that theatre, as an artistic practice, has the capacity to challenge these boundaries and generate polyphonic spaces that contest the dominant perspectives.

Rather than attempting an exhaustive survey, this study seeks to analyse how the Transition has been thematized in Spanish theatre through four plays by playwrights from different generations[1]. This limited but representative corpus illustrates the diversity of dramatic approaches to the Transition, shaped both by the authors' personal trajectories and by the sociohistorical context in which the plays emerged[2]. By focusing on these works, I aim to identify patterns in the dramaturgical evolution of this historical episode and assess its representation in relation to public debates at various moments. As Malcuzynski (1997–1998) suggests with the concept of *monitoring*, every literary text not only absorbs social discourse but also transforms and reintroduces it into circulation, thereby shaping the ways in which a society represents itself. From this perspective, theatre about the Transition operates within a discursive space where memory is continuously

[1] For studies that focus on theatre produced during the Transition and examine its institutional, aesthetic, and cultural dynamics, see García Lorenzo (1978–1980), Ruiz Ramón (1982), Rodríguez Solás (2024), among others. While this line of research is essential for understanding the broader theatrical landscape of the period, it falls outside the scope of the present study.

[2] It is worth noting that the website *Transición española. Representaciones en cine, literatura, teatro y televisión* [Representations in Film, Literature, Theatre and Television], Alicante, BVMC, 2021) compiles a comprehensive list of 77 plays that deal with this topic. However, this otherwise exhaustive catalogue does not include *La cola del difunto*, which is part of the corpus analysed in this study.

reconfigured, offering insights into how the past remains in dialogue with the present.

During the Spanish political Transition, few playwrights sought to depict on stage the instability and social tension that characterised that period, offering an immediate commentary on the political conflicts of the time. Antonio Buero Vallejo stands out as a notable exception, with *Jueces en la noche: Misterio profano en dos partes* [Judges in the Night: A Profane Mystery in Two Parts] (the Teatro Lara in Madrid, 1979) emerging as one of the first theatrical pieces to address the contemporary political situation directly and without euphemism. Despite receiving a predominantly unfavourable critical reception[3], the play deserves particular attention for its ability to capture the climate of ideological conflicts, pervasive tension, and the persistent threat of political violence that defined the Transition. In this sense, the theatrical stage functions as a space for reflection on the contradictions of regime change. Given the timing of its composition and premiere, the play possesses an immediate topicality. As Sánchez (2003, p. 323) observes, within the sociopolitical context of the time, the political dimension of the piece abandons the metaphorical or distanced concealment characteristic of Buero's earlier works, opting instead for direct expression. However, this shift towards a more direct dramaturgy does not entail an abandonment of the playwright's poetics. As Trecca (2016, p. 150) notes, in the democratic era, Buero Vallejo's work evolves towards a poetics of memory in which the past, reinterpreted through individual subjectivity, becomes a permanent presence in all possible futures, since the future cannot be imagined from oblivion.

The action of *Jueces en la noche* is set in the early years of the Transition, in a Madrid marked by latent violence, where radicalised youth, armed security forces, and a society in search of political reorganization coexist. The play presents a mosaic of characters representing various spheres of power – politicians, clergy, military figures, financiers, and extremists – whose interactions reveal the ideological tensions of the period. Their dialogues reference key historical events, including protests against Spain's entry into NATO, terrorist attacks, and the persistence of immovable sectors within power structures. What occurs particularly significant is the portrayal of far-right groups who, through violence, sought to justify the possibility of authoritarian restoration, thus evoking fears of a coup d'état.

Within this atmosphere of uncertainty and conflict, the personal story of Juan Luis Palacios unfolds, who embodies the phenomenon of political defection,

[3] Cf. De Paco 2018, who analyses the critical reception of Buero Vallejo's play. The study highlights both the negative reviews – which accuse the author of failing to renew himself or of reverting to the past – and the positive appraisals, which value his ethical consistency, commitment to social reality, and expressive boldness in a context free from censorship.

a hallmark of the Transition. A former Francoist minister, he successfully reinvents himself as a deputy in the new democratic system. However, his past continues to haunt him through remorse and nightmares that destabilize his apparent adaptation. The play's dramatic structure reinforces this internal struggle through a non-linear composition in which dreamlike sequences, memories, and real events intertwine, generating a fragmented perception of time that underscores the weight of historical memory on the protagonists. As Ricoeur (2000) explains, memory is not merely an act of recollection but a narrative construction that imbues the present with meaning through the reinterpretation of the past. In this sense, the play not only illustrates how memory and guilt shape individual identity but also serves as a critique of Spanish society, which faces the challenge of coming to terms with its past without having undergone a comprehensive process of truth, memory, and justice.

In this regard, a central symbolic element is the presence of three musicians who embody the victims of Francoist repression and act as metaphorical judges, confronting the protagonist with the reality of his actions. Their metatheatrical function introduces a critical dimension regarding the politics of silence and oblivion that characterised the Transition. As Azcue (2002, pp. 85–86) notes, their presence underscores the ongoing struggle between memory and historical amnesia, a key debate in post-Francoist Spain. The play thus highlights the impossibility of constructing a democracy on the foundations of forgetfulness and the denial of historical accountability.

Beyond its engagement with personal and collective trauma, *Jueces en la noche* also encodes the strategies of tension employed by certain sectors to justify an authoritarian regression. Violence is not merely presented as a latent threat but as a deliberate mechanism of destabilization. In this regard, the play aligns with studies that emphasize the manipulation of fear as a tactic to influence the trajectory of democratic evolution. As Narcisi (2024, p. 180) argues, the Transition was not merely a process of institutional change but also a period in which the fragility of the new system became evident. Far from endorsing an idyllic reconciliation narrative, Buero's play reveals how past perpetrators were not only exonerated but, in many cases, remained in power, while terrorism exploited the prevailing instability to assert its presence.

In sum, *Jueces en la noche* not only offers a dramatic portrayal of Spain's political Transition but also exposes the inherent contradictions of the process through a theatrical discourse that oscillates between the testimonial and the symbolic. Buero Vallejo's play stands as a theatrical testimony to the political and social discourses of the era, encompassing perspectives from the far-right to anarchists, as well as more moderate voices and those aligned with the interests of the Church and financial power. Moreover, the play sheds light on the resistance strategies, the attempts to perpetuate the old regime, and the moral

dilemmas associated with historical memory in the new democratic context. His work interrogates the hegemony of the official narrative, creating space for the silenced voices of history. As Narcisi (2024, p. 180) observes, this is not simply a bipartisan view of the conflict but an intermediate stance that denounces both the impunity of the past and the instrumentalization of memory in the present. In this sense, *Jueces en la noche* develops a poetics of memory as an open-ended process, where the uncertainties of the present become a contested space. The play ultimately raises a fundamental question for the future: Is democracy possible without justice?

Theatrical works that revisit the Spanish Transition from a temporal and generational distance offer even more varied interpretations of the process. This is evident in the work of playwrights whose youth coincided with that period of socio-political change. Among them, Miguel Medina Vicario stands out, as he was only 29 years old at the time of Franco's death-considerably younger than playwrights such as Antonio Buero Vallejo, who was 59. Seventeen years later, in 1992, Medina Vicario wrote and premiered (under the auspices of the Instituto del Teatro y de las Artes Escénicas in Gijón) *La cola del difunto: Auto premonitorio y algo sacramental* [The Tail of the Deceased: A Premonitory and Somewhat Sacramental Auto], a play that revisits the historical moment of the Transition and the socio-cultural processes it set in motion.

The dramatic construction of *La cola del difunto* shares notable similarities with *Jueces en la noche*. While Buero Vallejo's play alternates between reality and dreamlike sequences, blending concrete characters with abstract and symbolic figures such as the musicians, *La cola del difunto* intertwines the political and social with the fantastic, the allegorical, and the metatheatrical. In both works, temporal structure plays a crucial role in shaping meaning. However, whereas *Jueces en la noche* juxtaposes past and present – where characters interpret their present in light of their past – *La cola del difunto* introduces a premonitory dream that, from the perspective of the present, projects the protagonists' future.

The play's action unfolds on the day of Franco's death, and its title alludes to the long queue of citizens who came to bid farewell to the dictator's corpse. The protagonist, Concha, has been raised in a conservative environment, unlike her friends – Domingo, a painter; Mario, a journalist with literary ambitions; Amelia, a labour lawyer; and Rosa, a leftist party member – who celebrate Franco's death and the onset of the Transition. In this setting, where mourning and jubilation coexist, the fantastic element disrupts the narrative: through computer-generated effects or perhaps a miracle, the action leaps across different time periods.

The first of these temporal jumps transports one to the 1980s, amid the *Movida madrileña* [Madrid scene]. In a bar, the friends attend a performance of a play by Mario, featuring a dialogue between two puppets. This marionette exchange provides an ironic lens on Spain's recent history, explicitly referencing key events

of the Transition: the Moncloa Pacts, the legalization of the Communist Party, Spain's international opening, the 1981 coup attempt, and Felipe González's 1982 electoral victory. Subsequent time jumps fragmentarily portray episodes from the protagonists' lives, embedding their personal trajectories within the broader socio-cultural shifts of 1980s and early 1990s Spain. The premonitory dream extends into 1992, the year *La cola del difunto* premiered, coinciding with Spain's international rise: Madrid was named European Capital of Culture, Seville hosted the Universal Exposition, Barcelona held the Olympic Games, and the fifth centenary of the Discovery of America was commemorated. Medina Vicario's play explicitly references the latter two events, which serve as a backdrop for the characters' evolving realities. These moments encapsulate the transition from modern to postmodern cultural logic, as Spain, in just a few years, moved from an era of political struggle to one marked by depoliticization and consumerist spectacle. While the early years of democracy inspired collective enthusiasm, the rapid transformation soon bred disillusionment. This process aligns with Jameson's (1991) analysis that the shift from modernity to postmodernity entails a loss of historical depth, an inclination toward simulation, and the erosion of political commitment – elements Medina Vicario poignantly reflects through his characters.

The play illustrates how the revolutionary ideals of the young protagonists – Domingo, Mario, Rosa, and Amelia, former clandestine Communist Party militants – are quickly supplanted by the values of the new *episteme*: the erosion of political convictions, the rise of consumerism, the pursuit of individual success, and hedonism. Mario, who adapts to this new reality faster than the others, encapsulates this transformation, declaring: "Luchamos para lograr eso… y ahora tenemos derecho a disfrutarlo" [We fought for this... and now we have the right to enjoy it] (Medina Vicario, 1993, p. 89)[4]. This inclination to reclaim the lost years fosters moral and ideological disarmament, enabling statements like Domingo's at his exhibition's opening: "Los hombres no pertenecen a ningún dios, ni la sociedad pertenece a ninguna política, afortunadamente" [Men belong to no god, nor does society belong to any politics, fortunately] (p. 100). This political, social, and even existential nihilism emerges as the culmination of a process in which aspirations for structural transformation have dissolved into a logic of pragmatism and complacency.

In this sense, *La cola del difunto* functions as a generational testimony that expose the contradictions of the Spanish Transition: the initial utopian drive versus subsequent political disaffection, the struggle for systemic change versus the consolidation of a neoliberal order rooted in individualism, and the imperative of historical memory versus the amnesia imposed by the whirlwind of the present.

[4] All English translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

Thus, *La cola del difunto* serves as a critical reflection on the Transition, exposing its unresolved tensions and questioning the extent of genuine transformation. With an ironic and disenchanted gaze, Medina Vicario interrogates the nature of the political shift, revealing how old power structures, rather than disappearing, have merely adapted to new circumstances. Ultimately, the play leaves the audience with a fundamental question: Was the Transition a true break with the past, or merely a reconfiguration of power in different forms?

Questions concerning the fate of the revolutionaries of the 1970s and the enduring myth of the Transition as the foundational moment of Spanish democracy have been revisited by playwrights from younger generations. Among them, those who experienced the Transition during childhood or adolescence occupy a distinctive position – having intuited the significance of events yet lacking the capacity to fully grasp their implications. Others, born into an already consolidated democratic system, have only encountered this period through external narratives and testimonies.

Within this framework, *Transición* [Transition] (2013) by Alfonso Plou and Julio Salvatierra constitutes a paradigmatic case. Premiered by the Teatro María Guerrero more than three decades after the events it portrays, the play dramatizes the passage from dictatorship to democracy, with particular emphasis on the figure of Adolfo Suárez, Spain's Prime Minister from 1976 to 1981. However, the authors do not seek to produce documentary or biographical theatre. According to the play's director, Santiago Sánchez, *Transición* offers a contemporary reflection on that political process, leaving open the question of whether the Transition was an exemplary model or, conversely, whether the concessions made during its development have contributed to present-day crises. Through its reconstruction of the past, the play endeavours to reinterpret historical events in order to comprehend the present – a purpose encapsulated in one character's observation: "Igual lo que tenemos ahora es consecuencia de lo que se hizo, ¿no?" [Perhaps what we have now is a consequence of what was done, isn't it?] (Plou & Salvatierra, 2013, p. 95).

Formally, the play unfolds with rapid shifts between temporal and spatial settings, alternating between realism and psychological introspection. The audience is presented with key episodes of the Transition, recreated through dialogue, audiovisual projections, and period songs. These historical reenactments are juxtaposed with a contemporary televised debate, in which apologetic and critical perspectives on Spain's sociopolitical transformation are placed in dialogue. Finally, some scenes take place in a psychiatric clinic, where a patient named Adolfo believes himself to be the former Prime Minister. His memory loss – an allusion to Adolfo Suárez's battle with Alzheimer's in the later years of his life – serves as a powerful metaphor for Spain's collective amnesia: an allegory of the forgotten agreements and renunciations that shaped the Transition.

From Jameson's (1991) perspective, this historical forgetfulness is not merely an accidental consequence but a structural effect of postmodernity, wherein the fragmentation of historical time and the saturation of competing narratives erode the critical consciousness of the past.

In this sense, *Transición* does not merely revisit history but invites audiences to interrogate the legacy of the Transition within the context of contemporary political crises. Through humour and satire, the play challenges spectators to rethink the Transition's impact on present-day reality, avoiding unambiguous conclusions while raising pressing questions about the nature and consequences of Spain's democratic process. Its metatheatrical dimension further reinforces its critical stance. As in other theatrical works addressing this period, the stage becomes a space for reflection, in which history is presented as an open and ongoing process, subject to multiple interpretations and resignifications.

Ultimately, *Transición* illustrates how new generations of playwrights have approached Spain's democratic transition not as a closed chapter but as a process that continues to shape contemporary reality. By problematising the memory of that period and its political legacy, the play situates itself at the intersection of history and the present, prompting audiences to examine the nature of Spain's democratic system and the persistence of structures inherited from Francoism. The fundamental question it poses is not merely whether the Transition was exemplary or flawed, but rather to what extent its limitations and contradictions continue to shape contemporary Spain.

The same year that *Transición* premiered, the same Teatro Maria Guerrero staged *La ceremonia de la confusión* [The Ceremony of Confusion], a play by María Velasco, a young playwright born in 1984. Unlike Plou and Salvatierra's approach, which centres on key events and historical figures of the Transition, Velasco adopts a fictionalised perspective that critically revisits this period, posing a central question: what became of the revolutionaries of the 1970s and 1980s? One of the play's most striking aspects is its hybrid structure, in which theatre merges with other genres, abandoning formal rigidity. The piece oscillates between comedy and drama, irony and reflection, incorporating elements of *esperpento* [grotesque] within a contemporary framework. Additionally, the integration of 1980s music – featuring emblematic songs of the era – infuses the production with a musical dimension that resonates across generations, appealing both to those who directly experienced *La Movida* and to younger audiences fascinated by its aesthetic and cultural legacy.

La ceremonia de la confusión establishes a dialogue between contemporary Spain and the late 1970s, a time of hope and change. The narrative begins with the death of a musician who embodied the spirit of a generation, prompting a reunion of former friends, survivors of *La Movida madrileña*, who confront their own contradictions. In this funeral parlour that turned the stage into the place

of confrontation, various perspectives emerge: Olga clings to a time that is fading away; Fabio has changed so much that he barely recognises himself; Roberta, a trans woman in constant search of identity, continues to redefine herself. Amid old quarrels and forgotten romances, the characters decide to transform the funeral into an irreverent event that defies convention, turning it into a true "ceremony of confusion". The farewell to the deceased becomes a farewell to an entire era, a ceremony where solemnity dissolves into the grotesque.

Far from being a mere nostalgic evocation, *La ceremonia de la confusión* critically reexamines the Transition and its aftermath. While the end of Francoism ushered in an era of newfound freedoms, the play suggests that this legacy has not been effectively safeguarded and that it is now imperative to reassess it. Velasco dismantles the mythologizing narratives surrounding *La Movida*, rejecting its romanticization as a movement of political resistance. As Fabio ironically remarks: "Sexo, droga y rock and roll, pero… […] El Generalísimo murió de viejo. Así que no me vengas con que si la lucha y las libertades… […] Se fumaron miles de canutos, nos corrimos juergas pantagruélicas. Eso es todo". [Sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but... [...] The Generalissimo died of old age. So don't come at me with talk of struggle and freedoms... [...] We smoked thousands of joints, we had epic parties. That's all.]. Roberta, in an even more caustic tone, reduces her participation in the movement to "mucho botellón" [a lot of drinking sessions] (Velasco, 2013a, pp. 64–65).

This critique is also embodied in Pau, the young partner of the deceased. His position is that of both witness and generational bridge. Initially captivated by the rebellious ethos of those who lived through *La Movida*, he soon realises that he must forge his own path. Pau represents Velasco's generation – a cohort that, as he states, feels condemned to "militar en la nada" [militate in nothingness] (p. 67) His coming-of-age trajectory distances him from inherited myths, prompting him to seek new horizons: "¿Para cuándo el próximo deshielo? [...] Tengo la esperanza de ver el próximo gran cambio climático; la caída de las torres quintillizas; la extinción de los dinosaurios de nuestra era, los de dos patas, quiero decir. [...] ¿Para cuándo otra Movida?" [When will the next thaw come? […] I hope to witness the next great climate change; the fall of the quintuple towers; the extinction of the dinosaurs of our era – the two-legged ones, I mean. […] When will we have another *Movida*?] (p. 109). His words encapsulate the dialectic between the imposition of official memory and the emergence of narratives that seek to contest its meaning. His yearning for a "next thaw" and "another *Movida*" is not merely nostalgic; rather, it expresses an awareness that the dominant discourses of the past no longer suffice in the present.

Velasco (2013b, p. 23) herself acknowledges this ambivalence: "En la obra hay pinceladas de gerontofilia, incluso mitomanía (cualquier tiempo nos parece mejor, al igual que el país donde no se vive), pero también hay un reproche

zigzagueante a nuestros predecesores" [There are hints of gerontophilia in the play, even a kind of mythomania (we always think the past was better, just as we idealize countries we have never lived in), but there is also a zigzagging reproach towards our predecessors]. This reproach stems from a generational distance: the playwright did not experience *La Movida* firsthand but reconstructs it through *postmemory*, a concept that describes how subsequent generations engage with historical events they did not directly witness. Through this mechanism, *La ceremonia de la confusión* reveals the dissonance between mythical narratives and contemporary perceptions, a phenomenon that, following Angenot, is inscribed within the broader struggle for meaning in the discursive field.

From this perspective, Velasco does not idealise the past but problematises it. Her play exposes the tension between the aspirations of a generation and its contradictions, illustrating the impossibility to indefinitely cling to a bygone era. As Fox (2016, p. 131) observes, the work invites reflection on "el desajuste entre lo que esperábamos de nuestra vida y lo que hemos logrado, sobre lo irremediable del paso del tiempo y lo patético (en sentido etimológico) de quedarse vinculados a un pasado que juzgamos glorioso" [the discrepancy between what we expected from life and what we have actually achieved, on the inevitability of the passage of time, and on the *pathetic* (in the etymological sense) nature of remaining attached to a past we consider glorious]. In this sense, the play also serves as a meditation on decline and the transience of life. It is no coincidence that the characters gather in a funeral parlour – a space that symbolises not only the death of a friend but also the twilight of a generation. As one character wryly remarks, the funeral parlour is "el bar que nunca Cierra" [the bar that never closes] (Velasco, 2013a, p. 33) a striking image of a time frozen within its own mythology. However, through Roberta – whose search for identity remains open-ended – the play underscores the fluidity of selfhood and the necessity of continual reinvention. Pau, as the youngest character, embodies a paradoxical nostalgia: he is drawn to a vibrant era but resists succumbing to its self-destructive spiral.

In this sense, *La ceremonia de la confusión* does not merely revisit the past but gestures toward a future in which it is possible to transcend outdated structures and forge new forms of dissent. Pau's question – "When will we have another *Movida*?" – is not merely a melancholic evocation but an open challenge to the present. The play, therefore, projects an alternative horizon, operating as a laboratory of imaginaries in constant transformation. Through its deconstruction and reconfiguration of past discourses, Velasco maps the ideological and symbolic tensions that define our time.

The analysis of these four theatrical works highlights the diverse approaches through which different playwrights have represented the Spanish Transition over the past decades. These variations stem both from the historical moment of the texts' production and reception – which shapes the critical distance from the events

depicted – and from the generational background of their authors, whose collective experiences have influenced their perception of the period. As sociocriticism asserts, every cultural text constitutes a site of negotiation between *the given* and *the created* (Chicharro Chamorro, 2004). In the case of theatre addressing the Transition, this tension materializes in a continual reconfiguration of narratives about the past.

Plays written during the Transition itself, such as *Jueces en la noche* by Buero Vallejo, convey the urgency of immediate commentary on the prevailing climate of social unrest, addressing the threats of terrorism and the risk of a coup d'état. In these texts, theatre functions as a direct intervention in public debate, assuming an active role in shaping the ideological landscape of the time. Over the years, this representation has evolved: *La cola del difunto* by Medina Vicario, written in the 1990s, encapsulates the generational disillusionment provoked by the abrupt and radical nature of the changes – a sentiment often referred to as *mono de la transición* ("Transition withdrawal"), which serves as a counterpoint to the hegemonic discourse that established the Transition as an exemplary and model process. Following Angenot (2010), hegemonic discourse delineates the boundaries of what can be expressed, yet subsequent theatrical productions demonstrate that these limits are not static but subject to contestation and continuous resignification.

In the 21st century, theatrical representations of the Transition adopt a more distanced perspective and, in some cases, a greater degree of indulgence, though without abandoning critical reassessment. *Transición* and *La ceremonia de la confusión* intertwine inquiry, scepticism, and homage, employing a bittersweet tone that fuses humour with nostalgia. Both plays draw upon collective and emotional memory, incorporating musical and metafictional elements that not only revisit the period but also reinterpret it in the light of contemporary political, economic, and social conditions. In this regard, theatre depicting the Spanish Transition does not merely reactivate past discourses but also reconfigures them, contributing to the circulation of narratives within a given social space (Malcuzynski, 1997–1998, p. 192).

This dramaturgical trajectory underscores that theatre has served not only as testimony to political change but also as a forum for critical reflection on the legacies of the Transition. In a context of institutional crisis and ongoing debates about historical memory, these plays underscore that the Transition remains a contested terrain – both politically and theatrically. Echoing the assertion that literature and arts partake in social conflict as a discursive practice (Angenot, 2015), it can be argued that theatre about the Transition continues to expand the limits of the thinkable, challenging accepted narratives and recuperating voices that have remained at the margins of the official account.

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Modern Subject in a Countercultural Key: the "Child" in the Work of Valeria Correa Fiz

ABSTRACT
This article explores child cruelty in *Condición animal* [Animal Condition] by Valeria Correa Fiz as a device for dismantling the liberal humanist notion of the subject, through the lens of the ontology of precariousness (Butler) and the notion of human animality evoked in the title. The stories analysed depict violence as inherent to all material existence, including childhood – not to empower the child within the modern logic that equates violence with agency, but rather to deconstruct childhood itself and, with it, the very foundation of the modern subject. The epistemic uncertainty generated by this representation reorients subjectivity toward a corporeal and vulnerable existence, simultaneously capable of inflicting and suffering harm.

KEYWORDS
universal subject; childhood cruelty; human animality; bodily ontology

1. Introduction

This study shares posthumanism's aim of deconstructing the universal subject and the symbolic order that sustains it. However, it does not focus on the main areas of posthumanist interest – such as the feminine, the non-human, or artificial life – but rather on the child.

The impetus for this study is rooted in the current trend in Latin American literature, particularly among women writers (Mariana Enriquez, María Fernanda Ampuero, Jacinta Escudos), who place children at the center of their narratives. What distinguishes this literary corpus from the tradition of the child character as a vehicle for social critique and/or reflections on the human condition[1] is its focus on the arbitrariness of the modern construct of childhood, in the same way that

[1] With titles as diverse as *Periquillo Sarniento* (Fernández de Lizardi), *El llano en llamas* (Rulfo), *La rebelión de los niños* [Kids' Rebellion] (Peri Rossi), or Cortázar's short stories featuring the sick child as a metaphor for liberation from human limitations.

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femininity or masculinity are questioned. It echoes critiques such as that of Diana Marre (2013), who argues that childhood studies merge and conflate *children* as human beings with *childhood* as a set of sociocultural ideas (p. 11), or that of Gabriela Magistris (2018), who openly declares: "There are no 'real' children in child protection systems" (p. 14).

The latter critique refers to the "child-subject-of-rights", arguably the most evident example of such arbitrariness (Pietrak, 2020), particularly in contexts of poverty or sexual violence – contexts also reproduced in the narratives of Enriquez ("Chico sucio" [Dirty boy]) and Ampuero ("Subasta" [Auction]) with a clear deconstructive intention. Here, however, I wish to focus on childhood cruelty, which subverts the common perception of childhood as innocent and pure. By challenging the very core of the social order (much like the concept of perverse motherhood), it activates the uncanny – a Freudian notion of the strangely familiar – immediately prompting a reading within the framework of horror and the fantastic. This is also how Valeria Correa Fiz has been interpreted, although the author herself emphasizes, above all, the usefulness of such an approach for "portraying certain aspects of the political, social, and everyday life that interest me. The world is terrifying".

> The presence of horror in our world is so overwhelming that, at times, we fail to notice it. As I say in the story *Criaturas*: "Horror can also become a habit". That's how we live, unfortunately – tolerating injustice, corruption, poverty, and an endless list of miseries. (Gacinska, 2021).

For this reason, I propose to unravel childhood cruelty in Correa Fiz's short fiction not through the lens of the horror genre, but rather as "a habit", one that is entirely avoidable – provided that we rethink the cultural construction of the subject. To demonstrate this, I will first examine the historical and discursive condition of the "child" figure, with particular emphasis on the values ascribed to it in Western thought. Second, I will analyze the place this construct occupies within an anthropo(logo)centric – and fundamentally adult-centric – vision, as well as the *bios* (political life) / *zoē* (bare life) antinomy that underpins it (Agamben, 1998).

2. Innocent Childhood

As Valeria Llobet (2013, p. 212) states, childhood is nothing more than a word. Indeed, it is difficult to find this concept prior to the eighteenth century, at least not in the terms we accept today. A panoramic view of history reveals a biological existence of children as human offspring considered the property of the father, and thus susceptible to whatever fate he might impose upon them, including impunity for death (Antiquity) or abandonment (Middle Ages) if they were deemed of no value. In other cases, they often functioned as commodities in the sexual market of arranged marriages.

Visual art provides evidence that children were regarded as "miniature adults", held legally responsible for their actions. It was only after the thirteenth century that perceptions of childhood began to evolve, culminating in the Enlightenment with the establishment of childhood as a distinct social category with an independent identity. As Duran Strauch (2015, p. 3) notes, religious art after this period – particularly depictions of saints or the Christ Child – demonstrates that a concept of childhood (as distinct from adulthood) existed. However, abstract thought about childhood became more concrete with Rousseau, who asserted that man is born good, and society corrupts him.

An initial conceptualization of childhood (classical, Enlightenment-era) emerged alongside ideas of population control, obedience, and discipline. This framework, in addition to shaping psychiatry and pediatrics, informed an education system structured around the needs of the Industrial Revolution (Marre, 2013, p. 20) – or, more precisely, the new mechanisms of individual subjugation within the emerging paradigm of capitalist modernity. A second conceptualization, termed "romantic childhood," stemmed precisely from Rousseau's notion of the "noble savage", which linked childhood irrationality to innocence and vulnerability, situating these traits within the natural order. The naturalization of childhood as pure, in need of protection and love, also served as a pretext for redefining motherhood, imposing procreation, caregiving, and child-rearing as central to the construction of female identity (Badinter, 1980; among others).

This process of infantilization of childhood[2] gave rise to two key phenomena. First, it fueled the proliferation of disciplines that constructed an "ideology of childhood" (Cunningham, 1999), which framed it as "an unfinished, fragile, and vulnerable product […] an object of protection and care", while simultaneously portraying the child as "malleable and educable", thereby justifying "intense pedagogical and moral intervention" (Duran Strauch, 2015, p. 13). Ultimately, this led to the *sacramentalization* and *sentimentalization* of childhood, which intensified "as adult society became increasingly cold, urbanized, and alienated" (Cunningham, 1999).

Second, many authors (Cunningham, 1999; Duran Strauch, 2015; Magistris, 2018, among others) emphasize that romantic childhood is an ideal constructed on the basis of bourgeois children and serving bourgeois interests. At the time, this social class was engaged in consolidating a new order that required child governance to shape free yet controllable citizens through the internalization of social norms. As a result, this theorization diverged significantly from the reality of many children, whose experiences were never accounted for in this bourgeois conception of the "universal child". This exclusion remains the central critique

[2] Moreover, a larger period of life is infantilized by extending the transition to adulthood to the age of 18 through the distinction of adolescence (19th/20th century).

articulated by contemporary scientific and literary narratives on childhood in Latin America.

3. Toward a New Subject

Among these narratives is the short fiction of Valeria Correa Fiz. The Hispano-Argentine author initially gained recognition for her poetic work, although her popularity seems to stem more from her contributions to the short story genre, particularly *La condición animal* [Animal Condition] (2016; hereafter CA) and *Hubo un jardín* [There Was a Garden] (2022; hereafter HJ). This study focuses on selected stories from the first volume, specifically those most relevant to the present discussion. However, it is important to note that both collections largely depict less privileged childhoods that challenge the bourgeois conception of the child.

"La vida interior de los probadores" [The Inner Life of Fitting Rooms] serves as an inaugural story – not because it is the first in the collection, but because it critically examines the myth of children's innate goodness, a notion the author further emphasizes through the neuroatypical condition of the protagonist-narrator. He is described as "lo que se dice un buen muchacho" [what one would call a good boy] (CA, p. 31)[3], who, despite his disability, leads a life fully adapted to the social norm, much to his mother's pride: in the afternoons, he attends a special education school; at night, he works at a shopping mall cleaning the floors of the women's fashion department; and on weekends, he takes care of his cat and masturbates while watching Japanese pornography. The text provides no details regarding his exact age or specific disorder, yet he is portrayed as the son of a single mother from a disadvantaged social background, as suggested by his obligation to contribute his entire salary to the household economy. He is also depicted as a young man attending an adult high school while undergoing the full sexual awakening characteristic of early adolescence[4].

It is precisely this awakening that initiates a shift in narrative focalization, opening the door to the character's interior life, typographically marked by italics. While Quinn (2020) interprets this inner voice as the subconscious of "a sexually perverse and wild criminal" (p. 93), the present study proposes an alternative reading: this voice represents the profound essence of his being, concealed from the anthropo(logo)centric and adult-centric rationality of Western thought. In this way, the story challenges the abstraction of cultural constructs by juxtaposing

[3] All English translations are by the author.

[4] Regardless of whether he is a child in strictly chronological terms, he is clearly associated with the stereotypical view of intellectual disability as a form of eternal childhood, a perception also reflected in legal categories such as "legal incapacity" or "deprivation of legal capacity" (which, fortunately, have been reconsidered in recent decades).

them with the true nature of individuals in their diversity–including those who are not yet adults.

The mother undoubtedly embodies the first of these confronted realities, shaped by the discursive mechanisms that produce and reproduce meaning around childhood as an inherently defenseless state. She perceives her son as extremely vulnerable despite his physical strength, exposed to the cruelty of the outside world due to his condition.

> Mi madre me miró con esa cara de lástima que nos ponen las madres a todos nosotros. Me dijo: —No te preocupes si alguien te juzga mal, hijo. *Nadie te conoce; todos te imaginan sin saber lo que vales*. […] —Si hasta conseguiste un trabajo y de los de uniforme. —Me enseñó con orgullo el guardapolvo de ordenanza recién planchado. [My mother looked at me with that expression of pity that all mothers give us. She said: "Don't worry if someone judges you wrongly, son. *No one knows you; they all imagine you without knowing your worth*. [...] You even got a job, one that requires a uniform." She proudly showed me the freshly ironed work coat.] [emphasis added]. (CA, p. 33)

"No one knows you; they all imagine you" lends itself to a reconfiguration of its meaning in relation to childhood as a discursive construct – one defined independently of real individuals and their lived experiences, ultimately imagined and idealized. In this regard, it is worth mentioning Marre (2013, p. 19), who presents the findings of various studies in the field of childhood studies and concludes that children not only act according to adult-imposed norms but also develop their own patterns of knowledge, behavior, and emotions. These remain largely inaccessible to the adult world when analyzed through the traditional lens centered on socialization and/or cultural transmission.

This same statement, in fact, resurfaces at the end of the narrative, echoing once more and closing the diegesis with a final, definitive resonance.

> "Nadie te conoce, todos te imaginan", ahora sí podía escuchar su voz conmigo. "Qué por qué lo hice, en qué estaba pensando, que qué había en mi cabeza", me decía. ["Nobody knows you, they all imagine you," now I could hear her voice with me. "Why did I do it, what was I thinking, what was going through my mind?" she told me.] (CA, p. 41)

The sources cited by Marre (2013, p. 18) also reveal a fact that Western societies – some more than others – are well aware of yet prefer to taboo or pathologize, attributing it to so-called "bad families" (Llobet, 2013, p. 218): that those, whom we regard as innocent and defenseless, can be not only victims of violence but also its perpetrators, that cruelty and violence exist within the highly idealized realm of childhood.

In this context, the second part of the statement – "without knowing your worth" – opens an epistemic gap concerning real children. This is the truth the mother must confront, and with her, the readers. As previously mentioned, the

protagonist's sexual awakening drives the exploration of his inner life. This process begins on the day he discovers he is the only one in his class who has yet to have sexual relations with a girl, and he is subjected to mockery and humiliation by his peers. From that moment on, his episodes of masturbation become more frequent, occurring in different places and with increasing urgency; his sexual drive spirals out of control, and every effort to restrain it fails, yielding to a single obsessive thought: "*Que yo también podía ir con una chica*, me susurraba el Pterodáctilo hasta casi no dejarme pensar en otra cosa" [*That I too could be with a girl*, the Pterodactyl whispered to me, until it left almost no room for any other thought.] (CA, p. 34).

It is significant that the protagonist's inner life takes the form of a pterodactyl – a dinosaur he had seen in a science book, an animal form, in other words – as well as that its first appearance references Gregor Samsa. First, this evokes the message already noted by Marre: that cruelty, in its many forms (as an agent or as an object), is inherent to all human beings, without distinction: "el sistema podía ser cruel con los distintos o que nosotros podíamos ser muy crueles con nosotros mismos" [The system could be cruel to those who were different, or we could be very cruel to ourselves.] (CA, p. 35). In fact, having himself been the victim of psychological aggression, he ultimately perpetrates sexual violence against a girl, a customer in the shopping mall, in one of the fitting rooms. He pierces her with pins, replicating what he had observed in pornographic productions.

Second, this imagery allows the protagonist's animal condition to surface. Unlike Kafka's character, there is no metamorphosis in this narrative. Instead, there is a fusion between the animal and human elements, which humanist ontology had traditionally kept in a radical dichotomy: by the end of the story, the pterodactyl's voice – his animal consciousness – merges with the protagonist's own in a first-person plural narration. At this point, it is crucial to clarify that Correa Fiz does not conceptualize "the animal" in terms of "the bestial" – as Quinn (2020) suggests – but rather as the corporeal dimension of human beings. This dimension has been denigrated within the modern-capitalist order, reduced to its reproductive function, and thus effectively denied to children's bodies. As Foucault demonstrated throughout his intellectual trajectory, Modernity has never ceased its efforts to regulate children's bodily impulses – such as masturbation – through methods like imposing the asexual childhood model or enforcing confession. Both of these are strongly present in Correa Fiz's work, which, in a confessional style (Quinn, 2020, p. 92), narrates:

> Todos –hasta los más lerdos […] desde los quince que lo hacían. Muchos tenían una cita fija a la semana, como con el kinesiólogo o la logopeda, eso supe. Sus padres lo arreglaban todo, y mi madre –porque padre nunca tuve– ni siquiera sabía lo que yo hacía viendo a las japonesas y los pulpos. [Everyone – even the slowest ones... since they were fifteen, they had been doing it. Many had a fixed appointment every week, like with the physiotherapist or the speech therapist

> – that much I found out. Their parents arranged everything, and my mother – because I never had a father – had no idea what I was doing while watching the Japanese girls and the octopuses.] (CA, p. 32)

The other stories problematize this notion of the animal condition within the context of childhood cruelty and its social conditioning (friends, the system, culture). "Una casa en las afueras" [A House on the Outskirts] draws upon the trope of gang members, a figure widely represented in cultural productions. Violence – foreshadowed by numerous associations with this archetype of juvenile delinquency present in the narrative (CA, pp. 18, 20) – arrives one hurricane-ridden afternoon at the protagonist's home. She, an Argentine woman, is living her American dream on the outskirts of Miami until a group of young men violently intrude upon it with their initiation rite, which is not so different from Christian rituals. Stunned and horrified, she can do nothing but watch as the neophyte – his "manos blandas, como de estudiante, poco habituadas a las tareas manuals" [soft hands, like those of a student unaccustomed to manual labor,] trembling as he suppresses his gag reflex (CA, p. 26) – attempts to pierce the leg of her cat, Philip, hangs it, and then drinks the blood from that sacrificed body.

This scene leads Quinn (2020) to reflect on the human/inhuman divide and to argue that the story humanizes cats while animalizing gang members. In doing so, Quinn suggests, it alludes to the animal condition inherent in every human being, that which remains "hidden within culture" and whose ominous eruption – through the dehumanization and animalization of the human – challenges the dominant bourgeois rationality (pp. 89, 97).

Undoubtedly, this archetypal portrayal of youth violence distorts the pastoral conception of the child figure and, in turn, calls into question the very logic of the reality order forged by bourgeois rationality. The cognitive dissonance it generates and the unease it provokes open an oblique perspective on the entire set of cultural categories that had structured the protagonist's (and the readers') tedious bourgeois life. This is why she ultimately declares that nothing and no one was what they seemed to be (CA, p. 29).

Any attempt, like that of the Cuban shopkeeper, to reduce that disturbing presence to a reassuring "pathology" ("fucking kids", "garbage", "assholes," CA, p. 19; Llobet, 2013, p. 216) proves futile: the neophyte's bloodstained hands betray his privileged background, and his ability to hesitate preserves a trace of his humanity (CA, p. 27).

This discussion inevitably leads to a revision of the established human/inhuman/animal categories, which have been shaped by the biases of classical humanism, raising fundamental questions: What does it truly mean to be *human*? What does it mean to dehumanize or animalize? Is cruelty an inherent trait of the animal kingdom, as the verb "to animalize" in this context suggests, or is it rather

a characteristic of the human realm, as Hobbes once claimed? Ultimately, is there a definitive boundary between human and animal life?

These inquiries take on new meaning in light of the short story "Perros" [Dogs]. The very title introduces an epistemic ambiguity, referring to "dogs" in the plural when, in fact, only one dog appears in the narrative: Duque, named as such because "he had class" (CA, p. 82). Who, then, are these "dogs"? Are they the group of children demanding revenge for Fran's murder at the hands of the local mafia boss, Duque's owner, and who, like a "pack", await Matías's execution of the dog? The word "pack" once again attributes base human emotions to the animal world. Or does it refer to the two orphaned brothers who take in the abused and injured dog, with the three of them caring for each other in a shared recognition of their exposure as living beings, made vulnerable by their very corporeality?

These stories reveal an understanding of the corporeal dimension of human life. According to Butler (2004), every human being participates in life as an embodied existence, which entails exposure to vulnerability and loss. Contrary to rationalist traditions and their dualisms, we are socially constituted bodies, "attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (p. 20). It is precisely by virtue of this constitutive vulnerability of human existence that political organization emerges. As Fromm (1964) pointed out, biological community (*bios*) arises in response to what presents itself as the fundamental existential conflict: the recognition of the human being as the most vulnerable animal, the only one incapable of surviving alone.

However, as many scholars (including Foucault, Butler, and Agamben) have warned, this *bios politikos* degenerates into a *precarious bios* within the anthropo(logo)centric ontology of modernity, whose biopolitical projects impose a distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, reducing bodies deemed superfluous or expendable to their pure biological condition (*zoe*), to bare life.

In this regard, Butler's (2004, 2013) ontology of the body insists on the *material existence* shared by all living beings and, consequently, on the reciprocal and contiguous precarity that arises from it. She reclaims this vulnerability (along with the violence that engenders it) as the necessary point of departure for political life (2004, p. xii), asserting that all embodied existence is embedded in a network of interrelation and interdependence with other bodies. Thus, she rescues *zoe* as an ethical principle – the ultimate goal of a *bios politikos* oriented toward the recognition of vulnerability as a fundamental condition of all beings.

This reasoning ultimately leads her to a reassertion of human animality:

> we cannot understand human life without understanding that its modes are connected up with other forms of life by which it is distinguished and with which it is continuous. If we are moving toward a relational view, then it would follow that the human not only has a relation to animals

> (conceived as the other), but is itself implicated in its own animality. That animality is its own and not yet its own, which is why both animality and life constitute and exceed whatever we call the human. (Butler, 2013, p. 35)

This is how the concept of the animal condition is understood in Correa Fiz's eponymous volume. In these terms, the short story "Lo que queda en el aire" [What Remains in the Air] serves as the crowning piece of both the collection and the present analysis. At first glance, it appears to be the least unsettling of the stories – perhaps even sweet, insofar as it operates within the register of childhood innocence. However, it harbors significant degrees of violence. This is not subtle violence, yet it remains unnoticed precisely because it belongs to the realm of the familiar, to the fabric of ordinary life – one that we, too, most likely enacted in childhood: a familiar violence, though no less cruel for being so.

Above all, the story embodies an undeniable truth in light of Butler's ontology: the (omni)presence of death as a constitutive feature of life, an extreme vulnerability stemming from the simple fact that every living body is exposed to other living bodies.

This truth is distilled in the narrative through a short and, once again, seemingly unremarkable phrase: "me estremecí al ver cómo temblaba" [I shuddered at the sight of its trembling] (CA, p. 60). The trembling, fragile body in question belongs to a baby sparrow that two children rescue at their grandparents' country house, where they spend their summers. Sherry, as they name him, falls from the gap in the shutters onto the windowsill and is immediately picked up by the narrator's cousin. What culture interprets as an act of love or compassion – an expression of the purest childhood innocence – is, in reality, an encounter with death, an unintentional killing amid many intentional ones: fishing for frogs, hunting blood-red butterflies, stoning mice from the heights of a plum tree (CA, p. 57). Their grandfather does not conceal from them the fact that they have condemned the sparrow to death:

> —Al tocarlo lo hiciste huérfano —fueron las palabras del abuelo—, que los gorriones no son gallinas y repudian hasta sus hijos, si tienen olor a hombre. Así que mi primo Tomás era un hombre… ¿desde cuándo? [By touching it, you made it an orphan," said my grandfather. "Sparrows are not chickens – they reject even their own young if they carry the scent of a man." So my cousin Tomás was a man… since when?]. (CA, p. 59)

The foretold death occurs:

> Yo lo saqué de la caja y me tumbé boca arriba en la cama. Me puse a Sherry en el pecho – todavía me arrepiento – *Lo sentía latir como un segundo corazón*. Con el meñique le acariciaba la cabeza suave y lampiña. Los pitidos de hambre se fueron haciendo más espaciados hasta calmarse, hasta el sueño. Desperté de lado, con el sándwich de algodones vacío a la altura del cuello y Sherry, sin vida, debajo del hombro. [I took it out of the box and lay on my back in bed.

> I placed Sherry on my chest – I still regret it. *I could feel it beating like a second heart*. With my little finger, I gently stroked its soft, featherless head. Its hungry chirps grew fainter, stretching further apart, until they quieted, until sleep came. I woke up on my side, the cotton cradle empty at my neck, and Sherry – lifeless – beneath my shoulder.] [emphasis added]. (CA, p. 63)

Without a doubt, this scene evokes Butler's thought: the exposure of one body to another results in the death of one and the mourning of loss in the other. Moreover, in accordance with the American theorist, those who render others vulnerable can themselves be rendered vulnerable: the protagonists' bodies are also portrayed as fragile, constantly threatened by death in the countryside house. This is the law of living bodies, a shared condition – or *human animality* – that Correa Fiz conveys through the evocative image of the sparrow as the protagonist's "second heart", an image that is also featured on the cover of the 2016 edition.

However, unlike the other stories, here, childhood cruelty is barely perceptible – familiar, part of the realm of "habit". The narrative's distortion of reality shifts, in this case, to the formal aspect: "Lo que queda en el aire" initially suggests a fairy tale convention, only to immediately embrace fictional revisionism (or *cyborg writing*, in Haraway's 1991, p. 300 terms) in an explicit gesture of deconstructing these normative cultural texts. This affects the bucolic vision of childhood and the meaning-making industries that reinforced it, such as Disney with its "children's adaptations" of the grim tales of the Brothers Grimm (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937):

> Los veranos de mi infancia transcurrieron en el campo, en la casona de mis abuelos. Sé que imaginarán una vieja casa estilo Tudor con la fachada de enredadera, un piar amable de pájaros y el olor a pan recién horneado por la mañana. […] sé que imaginarán todo eso pero les advierto: no lo hagan. [The summers of my childhood unfolded in the countryside, in my grandparents' old house. I know you must be picturing a Tudor-style home, its façade covered in ivy, the gentle chirping of birds, and the scent of freshly baked bread in the morning. […] I know you must imagine all that, but I warn you – don't.] (CA, p. 55)

This *little countryside house* is inhabited by grandparents with the physiognomy of "ogros de cualquier cuento de los Grimm" [ogres from any Grimm tale,] who "nos besuqueaban y apretaban –igual que a los cerdos justo antes de sacrificarlos–" [covered us with kisses and squeezed us – just like pigs right before slaughter] and put them to work: there, "se era niño a tiempo parcial" [one was a child only part-time] (CA, pp. 56–57).

4. Conclusion

Thus, Correa Fiz does not construct fictional worlds where cruelty is sealed off, soundproofed from our consciences. As stated in the introduction, horror, according to her, is the most viable rhetorical strategy for rethinking the modern subject and the violence that defines their reality.

In this regard, she first deconstructs the ideal of childhood, thereby highlighting the arbitrariness not only of the liberal humanist notion of the subject but of all the categories that intersect it. Her narrative reveals that cruelty knows no age barriers: in the last story analyzed, the scent of a child is no different from that of a man. Elsewhere, she confirms this: "me puedo imaginar casi todas las cosas de este mundo –cualquier bajeza, violencia o cobardía de las que somos capaces los hombres–" [I can imagine almost everything in this world – any baseness, violence, or cowardice of which we humans are capable] (HJ). Given that these words are spoken by a child and refer to children, their deconstructive potential is amplified.

Thus, Correa Fiz challenges the notion of childhood as the last bastion of human innocence (Rousseau) and calls into question the social order upheld by the values of classical humanism and rationality. The epistemic uncertainty she seeks to provoke – *nothing is what it seems* – weaves through all these stories, brought into this discussion with a single purpose: to instill doubt because, as one of her characters asserts, it is the only thing that still makes us human.

Second, her work precisely invites doubt, and from there, it reconfigures the concept of the "subject" through the lens of cruelty – not as a "pathology" or a deviation from the humanist model but as a product of such a conception of the subject itself. The subject she proposes comes to recognize their corporeal and thus relational existence, exposed to other bodies/matter – capable of harming and being harmed. This is, therefore, a subject aware of their own animal condition, which is not understood as a "bestialization in the sense of a diminished or degraded human state". On the contrary, it "entails rethinking the dimension of the organic and inorganic in interrelations within which anyone recognizable as human may emerge" (Rucovsky, 2018; cf. Quinn, 2020).

Ultimately, it becomes clear that Correa Fiz's work translates into literature Butler's ethical-political commitment to an inclusive, *zoé*-centered community. The ontology of precariousness (Butler, 2004), which clearly underpins her work, confronts both the terrifying reality of violence and the comfortable trajectory of those who believe themselves to be on the side of *bios* – not *zoé* – without yet recognizing their own precarity.

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Sense of Place and Solastalgia: An Ecocritical Reading of *La seca* by Txani Rodríguez

ABSTRACT
Grounded in Glenn Albrecht's concept of *solastalgia* and *sense of place* theories, this article offers an ecocritical reading of Txani Rodríguez's *La seca* [The Blight] (2024). By applying Timothy Clark's ecocritical frameworks (2015, 2019), the analysis reveals how the novel transforms scientific abstractions (e.g., *la seca* disease, avocado monocultures) into visceral narratives of loss, bridging local and global ecological crises. The novel's polyphonic structure exposes the socio-economic asymmetries driving environmental degradation and models a nuanced ecological ethics that resists reductive activism. *La seca* thus enlarges eco-fiction by revealing solastalgia as both symptom and catalyst in Spain's rural Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS
environmental humanities; sense of place; solastalgia; Spanish novel; Txani Rodríguez

1. Introduction

As the global ecological crisis intensifies, contemporary literature has emerged as a vital medium for interrogating the intersection of affective experience and environmental ethics. In the western Mediterranean, climate disruptions have precipitated acute hydrological stress, reshaping water politics across Andalusia and galvanizing Spanish literary responses. Recent novels by authors such as Susana Martín Gijón (*Planeta*, 2022), Marta del Riego Anta (*Cordillera*, 2025), Jordi Colonques Bellmunt (*Carnívora*, 2025) and Manuel Rivas (*Detrás del cielo*, 2024) articulate collective anxieties about water scarcity and commodification, yet their approaches diverge generically, spanning thriller to telluric realism.

Within this corpus, Txani Rodríguez's *La seca* (2024) stands out for its nuanced portrayal of rural communities confronting ecological attrition. Despite Rodríguez's recognition (Euskadi Literature Prize in 2022), her work remains critically underexamined. This article pioneers an ecocritical reading of *La seca,* analyzing its intertwined themes of solastalgia and environmental memory through the lens of Anglo-American and Iberian ecocritical theory.

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Set in Andalusia's Los Alcornocales Natural Park, the novel centers on protagonist Nuria's return to her childhood village, where the blight *la seca* (a disease killing cork oaks) serves as both ecological reality and metaphor for irreversible loss. Through Nuria's reckoning with a transformed landscape, Rodríguez poses urgent questions: How does environmental grief manifest when home becomes unrecognizable? Can literature mediate between local knowledge and global systems driving collapse? By applying Lawrence Buell's framework of "sense of place" (2017) and Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia (2005), this study demonstrates how *La seca* bridges personal and planetary scales of crisis, while interrogating the novel's potential to act as a form of environmental witness.

Methodologically, the analysis combines close reading of sensory-rich passages with hermeneutic attention to the novel's polyphonic voices, selected for their thematic relevance to solastalgia and socio-environmental conflict.

2. Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism, defined by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. 18), has evolved into a multidisciplinary practice that engages ethics, aesthetics, and material politics (Buell, 2005; Clark, 2015). Although Anglo-American scholarship continues to dominate the field, this analysis foregrounds Iberian perspectives – particularly Carmen Flys Junquera's (2018) works on Mediterranean narratives – to examine how *La seca* reframes ecocritical debates through the lens of rural Andalusian precarity. In contrast to pastoral elegies or urban climate fiction, Rodríguez's novel centers the voices of *corcheros* (cork harvesters) and offers a critique of extractive economies – such as avocado monocultures and wind farms – that destabilize local ecosystems.

This study is underpinned by Greg Garrard's notion of transversal ecocritical praxis as articulated by Patrick D. Murphy (2013), which seeks to bridge theory and practice while emphasizing the interplay between local and global environmental dynamics. Particularly relevant is Murphy's (2009) focus on referentiality – literature's capacity to engage with material realities (p. 4) – which closely aligns with *La seca*'s portrayal of environmental memory and solastalgia. By rejecting universalizing frameworks, Murphy's approach draws attention to the novel's commitment to cultural-ecological specificity, such as the symbolic resonance of *la seca* as both ecological catastrophe and metaphor for communal trauma.

To further contextualize the analysis, it is essential to incorporate the notion of *sense of place*, a concept that enriches the ecocritical reading of *La seca*. As Goodbody and Flys Junquera (2016) observe in their introduction to Sense of Place: Transatlantic Perspectives (p. 11), "sense of place is a deceptively simple phrase" whose meaning becomes highly nuanced due to its use across disciplines such as geography, sociology, anthropology, literature, and the arts, each contributing distinct perspectives and concerns. From a phenomenological

standpoint – especially in the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty – place is regarded as foundational to human existence, since "to exist" is necessarily "to be somewhere". This ontological rootedness is further elaborated by Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (1992, pp. 165–175), who conceptualizes sense of place, or place attachment, as a symbolic relationship between people and physical environments, shaped over time by shared cultural practices and emotional meanings. While this attachment is grounded in the material features of a place, its full significance emerges through culturally mediated associations, often reflected in literature and the arts. The dual nature of the concept – at once objective and subjective – can be traced back to Romanticism and the classical idea of the *genius loci*, whereby nature was re-invested with intrinsic value through aesthetic and poetic representation (Flys Junquera et al., 2010, pp. 20–21; Goodbody & Flys Junquera, 2016, pp. 14–15).

Closely linked to sense of place is the concept of *environmental memory*, which Buell (2017, pp. 95–96) defines as the conscious or unconscious, accurate or distorted, individual or collective awareness of environments as lived experiences over time. This form of memory is crucial not only for understanding the historical transformation of specific landscapes, but also for examining how communities develop and maintain affective relationships with ecosystems. Within the framework of the Anthropocene – where human impact on the environment has reached global and intergenerational proportions – Buell emphasizes the need to cultivate shared notions of environmental memory that transcend individual lifespans. He further distinguishes four spatiotemporal layers in which such memory functions: biogeological, personal, collective or social, and national. *La seca* contributes to this dynamic through its intricate portrayal of memory as rooted in place, allowing the novel to articulate environmental trauma not as an abstract or distant issue but as a form of intimate, embodied loss.

Moreover, the novel's engagement with the concept of *solastalgia*, coined by Glenn Albrecht (2005, pp. 41–42), deepens its affective and psychological dimensions. Solastalgia refers to the emotional distress experienced when one remains in their home environment while witnessing its ecological degradation – a condition marked by a loss of identity, stability, and comfort. Unlike nostalgia, which is triggered by absence or spatial distance, solastalgia emerges from the unsettling experience of presence in a transformed and deteriorating landscape. Albrecht developed the term in the context of open-cut coal mining in Australia's Hunter Region, where communities faced severe mental health crises – including anxiety, depression, and rising suicide rates – under conditions of environmental injustice. As he contends, solastalgia holds universal relevance in any context where individuals observe the destruction of their environment while being rendered powerless by economic and political interests. In *La seca*, solastalgia is vividly narrated through Nuria's physical and emotional reactions to the decline

of her native landscape. Her unease, disorientation, and melancholia serve as manifestations of the rupture between memory and material reality. Albrecht's (2005) assertion that "loss of place leads to loss of sense of place experienced as the condition of solastalgia" (p. 46) resonates throughout the novel, anchoring its exploration of environmental grief.

Building upon these frameworks, it is important to recognize that fictional narratives possess a unique ability to render abstract environmental concerns into emotionally resonant and culturally situated experiences. Flys Junquera (2018) contends that literature can function as a catalyst for ecological awareness by activating the reader's ethical imagination and fostering affective engagement with ecological crises. Fiction does not simply represent environmental problems; rather, it reconfigures them through narrative, generating symbolic and emotional structures that mobilize readers and stimulate critical reflection. In a similar vein, Clark (2015) emphasizes the novel's capacity to engage with the complexities of the Anthropocene by dramatizing the entanglement of personal, political, and ecological dimensions. Unlike scientific discourse, the novel offers a form of immersive understanding that conveys how individuals and communities perceive, evade, or confront ecological realities in their everyday lives. Through this affective immersion, narrative fiction contributes to what Clark describes as "literature as public witness", a process through which scientific data and environmental abstractions are transformed into personal and sensory narratives. Consequently, the ecological novel not only documents environmental issues but actively participates in environmental activism through aesthetic, cognitive, and emotional channels.

Applied to *La seca*, these interrelated theoretical frameworks – ecocriticism, sense of place, environmental memory, solastalgia, and narrative fiction as public witness – reveal how Rodríguez intertwines Nuria's personal reckoning with broader socioenvironmental transformations. The novel ultimately functions as a form of environmental activism, documenting the fragility of rural life while resisting simplistic critiques of global capitalism. Instead of offering prescriptive solutions, it amplifies dialogic tensions – between tradition and adaptation, local knowledge and external pressure – thus mirroring Bakhtinian polyphony (Murphy, 2011) and underscoring literature's potential to engage ethically, politically, and emotionally with the lived realities of environmental change.

3. Landscapes of Loss: Memory, Solastalgia, and the Erosion of Rural Ecologies

Txani Rodríguez's *La seca* (2024) constructs a piercing narrative of ecological and generational rupture through protagonist Nuria's return to her childhood village in Los Alcornocales Natural Park, where the advancing *la seca* disease in cork oaks mirrors the disintegration of traditional environmental stewardship. The novel's

power emerges from its nuanced examination of how sustainable traditional livelihoods – particularly cork harvesting – are being supplanted by profitable but environmentally devastating avocado plantations, framing this transition through Lawrence Buell's concept of environmental memory (2017) and Glenn Albrecht's solastalgia (2005).

Rodríguez establishes Nuria's profound connection to the landscape through visceral, sensory descriptions, exemplifying Altman and Low (1992) theory of embodied place attachment while echoing the Romantic *genius loci* tradition (Goodbody & Flys Junquera, 2016). These meticulously crafted moments of ecological intimacy make the subsequent unraveling more devastating: as Nuria witnesses the blighted oaks and the displacement of traditional cork harvesters by industrial avocado operations, her dislocation crystallizes into what Albrecht identifies as solastalgia – the anguish of watching one's home environment become both ecologically and culturally unrecognizable.

The novel's sophistication lies in its multidimensional portrayal of this crisis; the mysterious *la seca* embodies Timothy Clark's (2015) "Anthropocene dissonance", where local ecological knowledge fractures under global market pressures. Rodríguez particularly highlights how the replacement of sustainable cork harvesting with water-intensive avocado farming – economically attractive but environmentally catastrophic – creates what Patrick Murphy (2009) terms a "referentiality gap", as generations of environmental wisdom become incompatible with extractive agricultural practices.

What begins as Nuria's personal grief expands into a collective portrait of cultural erosion, exemplified by secondary characters like Ezequiel, whose dementia manifests the landscape's affliction, and the olive-grove girl whose unexplained suicide underscores solastalgia's human cost. Even Nuria's eventual "comfort of belonging" resonates with ambiguity, representing not resolution but a precarious adaptation to irreversible change.

3.1. Sense of place and environmental memory

The notion of "sense of place", while ostensibly straightforward, reveals profound complexity when examined through interdisciplinary lenses. Goodbody and Flys Junquera (2016, p.11) aptly characterize it as a concept enriched by diverse academic traditions – from geography's spatial analyses to anthropology's cultural readings and literature's aesthetic interpretations. This multidimensional understanding finds its roots in phenomenological philosophy, where thinkers like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty established place as fundamental to human consciousness. Altman and Low's (1992) seminal work on place attachment further develops this foundation, demonstrating how physical environments become meaningful through symbolic relationships forged by shared cultural practices and accumulated emotional resonances. Buell's (2017) framework of environmental memory

provides essential theoretical scaffolding for understanding these dynamics, particularly in our current geological epoch. His conceptualization spans multiple scales of remembrance – from the intimate sphere of personal recollection to the vast temporalities of biogeological processes – while emphasizing how environments are experienced as layered palimpsests of meaning.

In Rodríguez's *La seca*, this theoretical perspective finds vivid narrative expression through protagonist Nuria's evolving relationship with her childhood landscape. The novel carefully constructs Nuria's environmental memory around sensory-rich experiences in Los Alcornocales, where her father worked as part of the traditional cork harvesting community. The river emerges as the emotional and ecological heart of these recollections, with Rodríguez employing precise physical details to convey its significance: "Se secó en la orilla, de pie, al sol. El agua fría del río la serenaba. Respiró hondo y se sintió parte de aquel lugar" [She dried herself on the shore, standing in the sun. The cold water of the river calmed her. She took a deep breath and felt like she was part of that place] (Rodríguez, 2024)[1]. This passage exemplifies Buell's concept of embodied environmental memory, where cognitive recognition ("felt like she was part of that place") emerges from direct sensory engagement (the sun's warmth, the water's chill) – a fusion of physical experience and emotional response that transforms space into place.

Rodríguez extends this portrayal through nuanced attention to how childhood environmental interactions shape adult perception. The young Nuria's consciousness of her surroundings focuses on immediate, tangible elements: the river's refreshing embrace, the palpable texture of stones beneath bare feet that gradually toughen over summer months:

> Notó un dolor familiar al pisar las piedras. Cuando terminaban los veranos, era capaz de caminar por la orilla sin problemas. Su estancia en el pueblo no se medía por el bronceado, sino por el curtido de las plantas de sus pies. [She felt a familiar pain when stepping on the stones. By the end of summer, she could walk along the shore with ease. Her time in the village wasn't measured by her tan, but by the toughening of the soles of her feet.]

These bodily experiences exemplify Altman & Low's (1992) theory of place attachment developing through repeated sensory engagement. As Nuria matures, her environmental awareness expands beyond this primal connection to encompass more complex ecological understandings. Where she once overlooked the migratory swifts traversing the Strait of Gibraltar, she now perceives their "ancient restlessness" as part of larger natural cycles, while also recognizing their role in local economies through birdwatching tourism:

[1] All quotes are taken from the electronic version of *La seca*, which does not include pagination. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from this novel. All English translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

> A esas horas de la mañana, cuando la sombra aún no se ha echado sobre el cauce, el agua se veía de color esmeralda. Por el cielo pasó lo que le pareció un bando de vencejos. A finales del verano, millones de aves migran desde Europa hasta África, y atraviesan para ello el Campo de Gibraltar. Nuria creía que los pájaros habían heredado una inquietud remota. De pequeña jamás se fijaba en las aves. El pueblo le gustaba por el río y porque sabía que en las montañas había muchos animales, pero los pájaros estaban excluidos de aquel inventario. Por eso le sorprendió saber que muchas personas viajaban hasta aquel lugar recóndito para observarlas. [At that time of the morning, before the shadows had crept over the riverbed, the water shimmered emerald green. Across the sky flew what appeared to Nuria to be a flock of swifts. At the end of summer, millions of birds migrate from Europe to Africa, passing through the Strait of Gibraltar. Nuria believed the birds had inherited some ancient restlessness. As a child, she had never paid attention to birds. She liked the village for the river and the knowledge that the mountains were home to many animals, but birds had been absent from that inventory. That was why it surprised her to learn that many people traveled to such a remote place just to observe them.]

This developmental trajectory mirrors Buell's observation that environmental memory dynamically incorporates new layers of comprehension while retaining foundational sensory impressions.

The novel's meticulous attention to sensory detail serves not merely as atmospheric backdrop but as narrative strategy to underscore the phenomenological depth of place attachment. When Nuria observes "las tortugas que descansaban en los salientes de las piedras o en los troncos retorcidos de las orillas banks" [turtles resting on the edges of rocks or the twisted trunks along the], or when morning light transforms the river into "shimmering emerald green" [el agua se veía de color esmeralda], these are not generic pastoral images but specific, lived experiences that accumulate to form what Buell terms "personal-scale environmental memory". Rodríguez particularly emphasizes how visual and tactile impressions intertwine to create lasting bonds – "el vuelo azulado de algún martín pescador" [the blue-tinged flight of a kingfisher] startles not just as visual spectacle but as embodied encounter, just as the river stones' familiar pain gives way to seasonal acclimatization. Through such passages, the novel demonstrates how environmental memory operates as both cognitive map and emotional register, where aesthetic appreciation and physical familiarity combine to create profound, if vulnerable, attachments to place.

3.2. Solastalgia

Nuria's profound connection to her ancestral landscape makes her transformation into a witness of its degradation particularly devastating. When excavators suddenly appear at the riverbank – their engines shattering the silence with "motores encendidos, golpes secos, corrimientos de tierra" [sharp blows, landslides] – her distress stems not just from the physical destruction but from the epistemological crisis it represents. The villagers' conflicting speculations about the machines' purpose – "Algunos dicen que es por los aguacates; otros por la

central hidroeléctrica" [Some say it's for the avocados; others for the hydroelectric plant] – mirror what Timothy Clark identifies as Anthropocene dissonance, where local knowledge becomes inadequate to interpret environmental trauma. Nuria's futile attempt to protest – cut short by the pragmatic question "With whom?" – encapsulates the powerlessnes at solastalgia's core, what Albrecht (2005) defines as the lived experience of "loved environment transformation" (p. 46).

The *la seca* blight becomes the novel's central metaphor for this existential dislocation. Rodríguez portrays the disease's progression with ecological precision: the fungus spreading "bajo sus pies, silencioso como la traición" [silently beneath their feet, like betrayal] attacking not just cork oaks but the entire ecosystem of rockroses and heathers. What renders this especially traumatic is the community's inability to determine its cause – whether drought, pollution, or climate change – transforming their once-familiar landscape into a source of ontological insecurity. The villagers' "expressions of defeat" gazing at the mountains capture solastalgia's collective dimension, where environmental loss erodes cultural identity and economic stability simultaneously.

Rodríguez extends this exploration through secondary characters whose psychological unraveling literalizes ecological trauma. Ezequiel, the deranged former cork harvester who wanders naked with an axe, embodies the violent dissociation between human and environment when he claims to suffer from "el mismo mal que afecta a los alcornoques" [the same evil that affects the cork oaks]. His son Montero's aggressive pivot to avocado farming – and subsequent violent outbursts – demonstrates how economic adaptation can exacerbate rather than alleviate solastalgia. Most tragically, the olive-grove girl's suicide epitomizes what Albrecht calls the "mental anguish" of environmental loss, her death signaling the ultimate severance between person and place.

Nuria's solastalgia manifests most acutely in her haunting premonition of cork harvesting's potential future – a sanitized tourist attraction completely disconnected from the living ecosystems that gave it meaning. She agonizes over the prospect of this deeply rooted practice being reduced to performative pageantry, stripped of both its ecological context and socioeconomic function. For Nuria, such commodification of environmental memory represents the ultimate severance between cultural tradition and the land that sustained it, where authentic relationships to place become packaged experiences for external consumption.

This existential fear finds its material counterpart in Andalusia's expanding avocado plantations, which embody a devastating paradox: their short-term economic promise relies precisely on the long-term ecological damage they inflict. Nuria perceives these monocultures as both symptom and accelerator of a self-reinforcing cycle – the very act of adapting to environmental degradation (through water-intensive crops) exacerbates the original displacement, trapping communities in an inescapable feedback loop of ecological and cultural loss.

Through these layered narratives, *La seca* demonstrates how solastalgia operates simultaneously across multiple registers: the phenomenological (Nuria's visceral grief over the deforested riverbanks), the economic (Montero's conflicted embrace of unsustainable agriculture), the cultural (the cork harvest's transformation into empty spectacle), and the intergenerational (Ezequiel's madness versus his son's precarious adaptation).

Rodríguez ultimately presents solastalgia not as individual pathology but as structural condition – what Albrecht might call the "psychic instability" of communities caught between global markets and local ecosystems. The novel's achievement lies in rendering this abstract concept through specific Andalusian textures: the crack of axes giving way to excavators' roar, the cork oak's decline mirrored in human unraveling, and most poignantly, in Nuria's realization that her childhood refuge has become "un paraje ajeno a sus recuerdos" [a landscape alien to her memories].

4. Polyphonic Ecologies: Literature as Witness and Catalyst in the Anthropocene

Nonetheless, throughout the novel, Nuria develops an environmental consciousness that integrates diverse perspectives and addresses the intersection of social, economic, and environmental issues. The protagonist ultimately refrains from making value judgments or adopting uncompromising ecological stances. This shift can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a tacit acknowledgment of the overwhelming complexity of issues that defy straightforward solutions, and on the other, as a sign of maturity reflected in her ability to refrain from imposing her perspective on others.

Nuria's transformation aligns with Carmen Flys Junquera's argument that literature fosters ecological empathy by dismantling rigid binaries – such as human/nature or progress/conservation – and embracing a dialogic approach to environmental crises (Flys Junquera, 2018, p. 185). Like the works analyzed by Flys Junquera, this novel resists didacticism, instead presenting a polyphony of voices – villagers, scientists, and the land itself – that complicate any singular narrative of sustainability. When a local complains that the park "está asfixiando al pueblo" [is suffocating the village], or when Milo, Nuria's friend, critiques wind farms as "el nuevo colonialismo energético rural" [a new rural energy colonialism], the novel echoes Flys Junquera's assertion that effective ecological storytelling must "provoke the reader through emotion" (p.182) while honoring the lived experiences of those most affected by environmental change.

By listening rather than lecturing, Nuria embodies what Flys Junquera, drawing on Val Plumwood, calls an "ethics of narrative openness" (p. 188) – one that recognizes non-human agency (the drought, the diseased cork oaks) as an active force in the story. The villagers' pragmatic concerns about unemployment

and restrictions mirror Flys Junquera's examples of literary works that refuse to romanticize nature at the expense of social justice, instead situating ecological crises within "networks of power and survival" (p. 190).

Finally, this novel exemplifies environmental activism, going beyond mere information to engage readers emotionally with the complexities of ecology, economy, and society. As Timothy Clark (2019) argues in *The Value of Ecocriticism*, novels uniquely explore how biases, personal experiences, cultural assumptions, and scientific insights intertwine in people's responses to environmental issues (pp. 78–80). Through its narrative structure, the novel transforms scientific abstractions into sensory representations and personal stories, making ecological challenges publicly relevant and emotionally resonant – a technique Flys Junquera (2018) praises as essential for overcoming the "numbness" induced by data overload (p. 186, citing Slovic & Slovic, 2015).

The novel also acts as a "public witness", documenting the effects of environmental change on rural communities. It portrays issues like the *seca* disease and the expansion of water-intensive avocado monocultures, highlighting the ethical dilemmas of sustainability and the socio-economic pressures behind ecological crises. As Clark (2015) notes in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, art in the Anthropocene reveals the interconnected systems of human and non-human life, making visible the hidden material dynamics of our daily interactions (pp. 175–194). This aligns with Flys Junquera's (2018) analysis of Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, where the land "speaks" through its degradation, demanding recognition as more than a passive backdrop (p. 192).

By focusing on Nuria's individual story while amplifying the voices of her community, the novel embodies Flys Junquera's vision of literature as a space for "holistic understanding" (p. 186). Its polyphonic structure fosters a dialogue that avoids simplistic solutions, urging readers to reflect on the complexity of these issues. In doing so, it becomes a transformative tool for environmental awareness – one that, as Flys Junquera asserts, "reanimates the silent world" (p. 194) by granting agency to both human and non-human actors.

5. Final Reflections: Witnessing Loss, Refusing Closure

In *La seca*, Rodríguez constructs a polyphonic narrative that does not aim to resolve the ecological crisis but rather exposes its intimate, historical, and contradictory dimensions. Far from presenting an idealized vision of nature, the novel reveals how sustainability policies – often promoted as technical and global solutions – can devastate community structures and traditional ways of life deeply embedded in the landscape. Through the use of pain, uncertainty, and helplessness as narrative forces, *La seca* becomes a testimony to rural life under siege by discourses that, in the name of green progress, reproduce new forms of dispossession.

However, the novel does not settle for denunciation, nor does it lapse into nostalgic lament. Its most compelling gesture lies in its ethical narrative stance – one grounded in listening, ambiguity, and the coexistence of discordant voices. Rather than offering a moralizing fable, *La seca* lucidly observes how affective ties to the land are eroded by extractive logics that commodify environmental memory. Its most radical move is not its critique, but its refusal to close the wound: Rodríguez dares to leave the landscape open, showing us that the uninhabitable is not always remote – it is often what once was home.

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The Deconstruction of Feminine Archetypes in Mariana Silva Yrigoyen's *Interior F*

ABSTRACT
This article investigates from a feminist perspective the process of the deconstruction of archetypal representations of women in *Interior F* (2002) by Mariana Silva Yrigoyen. The play establishes a hypertextual dialogue with classical mythology, through the figures of Cassandra and Electra, as well as with Federico García Lorca's *Yerma* (1991). *Interior F* not only denounces the social constructs that oppress female characters during Peru's internal armed conflict, but also seeks to reconstruct a new social and cultural model of women by empowering its protagonists and attributing to them qualities traditionally associated with men.

KEYWORDS
Peruvian theatre; feminism; deconstruction of the myth; feminine archetypes; Mariana Silva Yrigoyen; Federico García Lorca; infertility

1. Introduction

This study aims to analyse the intertextual value of *Interior F*[1], a drama by Mariana Silva Yrigoyen, especially with regard to the construction of the female character. Mariana Silva Yrigoyen is a Peruvian scriptwriter and playwright who represents a feminist perspective of theatre. She has written scripts for several series, soap operas, documentaries, and romantic comedies[2]. Her career as a playwright gained momentum in 2002 with the staging of *Interior F*, which, as the very author indicates, was her first major play (as cited in Wałach, 2023, p. 86). It voices a deep concern for the issues related to the situation of women in Latin America and particularly in Peru. In her subsequent works (*Sobre lobos* [About Wolves], 2013 and *Lo salvaje* [Wildness], 2018), the same preoccupations, i.e. domestic

[1] *Interior F* was first performed in 2002. As the text of the play has not been published, this study is based on a manuscript provided by the playwright.

[2] Highlights include the documentary *Zulen y yo* [Zulen and I], about Peruvian feminist Dora Mayer; and Peruvian blockbusters including the two-part *Locos de amor* [Crazy in Love] and the comedy *Encintados* [Impregnated], the latter of which won awards from the Peruvian Ministry of Culture and Ibermedia.

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violence, male domination in a patriarchal world, the subjugation of women to their partner's expectations, abandonment, and a desire to be a mother versus a forced abortion are reiterated. Frustrated motherhood is a constant in Silva Yrigoyen's theatre, becoming the backbone of *Lo salvaje*. Finally, the feminist character of the author's artistic creation is evident in *Bicentenaria* [Bicentennial] (2017), a performance in which two hundred women participated to give an account of over two-hundred-year history of perpetrating violence against women in Peru.

2. Intertextuality and the evocative force of myth in the process of deconstructing traditional archetypes

The presence of intertextual relations in *Interior F* is not an isolated case in Silva Yrigoyen's theatre[3], although intertextuality in this drama undoubtedly functions as the organising element of the dramatic structure. The term was coined in 1969 by Julia Kristeva who, in turn, drew on the concept of Bakhtinian dialogism. In her interpretation, Kristeva (2024) concludes that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (p. 64). This assumption gave an important impulse to the development of intertextual studies, generating a great diversity of definitions and reformulations (Duszak, 1998, p. 219; Gutiérrez Estupiñán, 1994, p. 144). In the literary field, Gerard Genette's (1997) invaluable theoretical contribution is worth mentioning. He coined the term *hypertextuality*, understood as "any relationship uniting a text B ([...] hypertext) to an earlier text A ([...] hypotext)" (p. 5) through a transformation. *Interior F* makes use of the configuring force of myth, understood as "the substrate of our civilization" (Lévy Strauss, 2021, p. 20). Mythical thinking is what explains phenomena, initially incomprehensible to a human being, which, over time, become archetypes. As Luisa Martínez Falero (2013) suggests, the rewriting of myth involves the decontextualisation and recontextualisation of archetypes or their constituent mythemes, enabling new interpretations of traditional figures within a specific textual corpus (p. 488). Eco (2023), in turn, maintains that understanding the cultural role of myth requires identifying the unconscious symbolisation underlying mythification, followed by the exposure of intentional persuasive mechanisms that obscure the true motivations behind its construction (p. 254). Demythification, in this sense, entails the dissolution of institutionalised archetypes (p. 249).

Taking all the above into consideration, it is hypothesised that *Interior F* aims to deconstruct traditional archetypes of women by adopting a feminist point of

[3] The author is drawn to indigenous culture, as well as to the symbolic power of the totem, which is especially visible in *Sobre lobos* and *Lo salvaje*.

view. In any case, the playwright's aim does not seem to be solely to denounce those social constructs that oppress women, but, above all, to be oriented towards a pragmatist perspective (Rorty, 2003, p. 252) that not only criticises the old paradigm, but also proposes an alternative future. Therefore, the aim of this study is to unveil the gender worldview present in patriarchy (Lagarde, 1997, p. 14), as well as the degree of transformation of the aforementioned feminine archetypes in order to provide a new social and cultural model of women. Following the theory of the different levels of myth (Herrero Cecilia, 2006, p. 63), we can conclude that *Interior F* maintains a hypertextual relationship with the mythical story of the Trojan War and a literary myth stemming from *Yerma* by Federico García Lorca. *Interior F* appears to align with the paradigm of a culture of use, or a culture of activity, which, as Nicolas Bourriaud (2005) argues, characterizes contemporary art. Through the appropriation and recontextualization of past cultural forms, the play redefines the female archetype. By taking the Trojan War as a point of reference, Silva Yrigoyen attempts to paint a bleak picture of one of the darkest periods in Peruvian history, that is, the times of Shining Path terrorism. According to the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (2003), between 1980 and 2000, around 69,280 people died or disappeared as a result of the internal conflict. Women, in particular, suffered systematic sexual violence and were forced into new social roles as heads of household amid displacement and poverty (Alvites Alvites & Alvites Sosa, 2007, p. 131). The second thematic axis revolves around the concepts of maternity, abortion, and infertility in the context of male domination.

3. Trojan War versus internal armed conflict in Peru (1980–2000): deconstructing the archetypes of Cassandra and Electra

Shining Path [PCP–SL] is a faction of the Communist Party of Peru, founded in 1969 by Abimael Guzmán (1934–2021), the ideologue of this revolutionary organisation of Marxist, Leninist and Maoist inspiration, which was endowed with a national doctrine known as the Gonzalo Thought (Spyra, 1996, p. 23). In 1980, Sendero Luminoso caused a long-lasting internal conflict by engaging in combat. From the 1980s onwards, the Shining Path gained ground, seizing new territories in order to encircle the cities of the Peruvian coast and spread panic among the inhabitants by means of terrorist attacks directed against all those institutions which, in their opinion, supported capitalism: the state authorities, the forces of law and order, as well as various national and foreign organisations and companies. Paradoxically, the communist struggle ended up reinforcing capitalism, as Federici (2012, p. 66) explains, because violence, integral to the process of primitive accumulation, produces displacement and saturates the labour market. This condition enables the subjugation of migrant populations, whose precarious status renders them especially vulnerable, while also limiting

women's opportunities for paid employment and sustaining their economic dependence on men.

The diegetic time in *Interior F* corresponds to the first two decades of the internal armed conflict. The terrorist era not only forms the backdrop for the drama but also interconnects the experiences of the four protagonists. In contrast to Attys, the three "presencias" [presences][4] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 1) of Cassandra, Electra, and Yerma are immersed in memories that are evoked in reverse order, to eventually return to the present in the final scene. The play thus takes the form of an extended subjective interiorisation that presents a chain of fragmented stories. These refer to the moments of maximum tension in the lives of the characters. Hence the occurrence of the title, which alludes to the inner world of the women.

The rewriting of the Trojan War myth establishes a special relationship between Cassandra and Electra by placing them on two opposing sides. Cassandra is the younger sister of one of the leaders of the Shining Path, responsible for numerous massacres of the civilian population, whereas Electra is the eldest daughter of a commander of the Peruvian Armed Forces who was assigned to eradicate terrorism. Taking into account the above, the hypertextual relationship shows a clear resemblance to the classical versions of the myth in which Paris, despite the warnings of his sister Cassandra, unleashes the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. As far as Silva Yrigoyen's Electra is concerned, the analogy between the girl's father and King Agamemnon should be emphasized: they both were assassinated, which made their daughters seek revenege.

3.1. The inside/outside dialectic and the family as an ideological apparatus

In *Interior F*, the division into two opposing camps seems to be enforced only by kinship relations, which explains the subordinate position of women, as well as the primary role of the family as an Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2003, p. 25) that reproduces the norms and prejudices of patriarchal society. As Kate Millett (2000) points out, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (p. 33). Male domination, as understood by Pierre Bourdieu (2000), underpins the social order, particularly in the attribution of roles and activities to each sex, consistently reinforcing the privileged status of men (p. 11). It is deeply rooted in Peruvian society, seen as an androcentric structure that uses symbolic violence (p. 28) to perpetuate women's inferiority and social exclusion. In Silva Yrigoyen's play the social construction of male and female bodies revolves around the dichotomy of outside/inside or, what amounts to the same thing, public/private. While men take on noble leadership roles, women's roles are limited to doing household chores or performing caring activities.

[4] All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

The textual material of the drama is composed of a series of monologues that often take the form of an interpellation to an absent character who is perceived as a reference figure in the lives of the protagonists. Not surprisingly, it is a male character (father, brother or boyfriend) who abandons his relatives or partner to start a new family or to carry out an important mission. Regardless of the reason for leaving home, the lack of a father figure leads to the total disintegration of the family. Females suffer physical abuse, economic hardship, or partial maternal deprivation due to their mother's depression or alcoholic illness. Electra's mother, for example, despite being well off, is emotionally affected by her husband's continuous infidelities. Meanwhile, Cassandra's mother's depressive state is caused by the terrorist activity of her son who "ha reventado el país con sus bombas" [has blown up the country with his bombs] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 3) and who has become "la pesadilla de esta ciudad" [the nightmare of this city] (pp. 15–16). In one of the attacks, he almost killed his own sister. Finally, Yerma's mother is an alcoholic, unable to raise a child alone or even to take care of herself. Yerma dreams that someday her father will come and rescue her from that house full of violence and abandonment.

In the three stories mentioned above, the same pattern can be observed, the only difference being that the characters belong to different social classes, which in the case of Cassandra and Yerma, both raised by single mothers, implies greater exposure to child abuse. The dismal economic situation of single mothers is due to the consequences of the internal armed conflict, during which discrimination and the gender pay gap are further aggravated. Violence in rural populations, perpetrated by both sides of the conflict, causes large waves of migration to coastal urban areas that are not prepared to receive such a large number of people. The displaced face problems of housing, unemployment, and extreme poverty (Montoya Rojas, 1997; Spyra, 1996, p. 33), as well as the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups who, lacking the resources to overcome the bureaucratic and legislative tangle, turn to the black market (Soto, 1991, pp. 12–16). The high unemployment rate in men of working age makes it impossible for women to access the labour market, which has a particular impact on the situation of single mothers, who are forced to seek protection from a man. In *Interior F*, Cassandra's mother's boyfriend is perceived as both an abuser and the breadwinner: "Casandra: No necesitamos más hombres en la casa. […] No me gusta Eduardo. […] Y yo no soy su apachurrita y no quiero que en las noches me dé besos por todas partes y me diga mi apachurrita, con su olor de vinagre" [Cassandra: We don't need men in the house anymore. [...] I don't like Eduardo. [...] And I'm not his baby girl and I don't want him to kiss me all over at night and call me his baby girl, with his vinegar smell.] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 7). In this way, the conviction is reiterated that marriage or informal relationship is a kind of economic alliance in which the man appropriates the woman in exchange for ensuring the subsistence of the family.

3.2. Essentialist definitions of masculinity and femininity

In the light of the above, *Interior F* presents the family as a place of oppression that reduces women's role to reproduction, care and housework. Since gender is socially constructed through relations of power, Bourdieu (2000) argues that masculinity functions as an unmarked universal norm, against which femininity is defined as its negative counterpart through a system of binary oppositions; an arrangement that, according to Braidotti (2004), implies the inferiority of women (p. 16). Several researchers and institutions (Beauvoir, 2016; Calvo, 2024; Cixous, 1995; Connell, 2020; Millet, 2000; MIMP, 2016; Ruiz Bravo, 1999;) study the attributes with which men and women are usually defined. *Interior F* scrupulously reflects this dialectic by contrasting the figure of Electra's father with that of her mother. The man is shown as an embodiment of virility. He is a national hero who risks his own life in defence of democratic government. He is almost always absent, but he watches over the safety and well-being of his family. Even the merits of Electra's father justify his dubious moral conduct, as the man does not even try to hide his extramarital affairs, which seems to complete his image of manhood. This moral duplicity is a mitigating factor reserved only for men. Electra's father is presented to us as a cultural subject (Cros, 2003, p. 12) who, by internalising patriarchal ideology, exhibits traditionally masculine traits: strength, intelligence, competence, efficiency, and aggressiveness. This vision of masculinity is in sharp contrast to the feminine imagery, characterised by passivity, seclusion in the private sphere, sacrifice, tenderness, fragility, ignorance, uselessness, and docility.

3.3. The deconstruction of the archetypes of Cassandra and Electra

Apart from the recontextualisation of the classical myths of Cassandra and Electra, it should be noted that these protagonists retain in *Interior F* some of the fundamental features of their mythological correlates. At this point, the reformulation of Cassandra's mythical curse is noteworthy. Although the protagonist is said to be a clairvoyant, her prophecies are ignored, so that she has no choice but to accept what the future holds for her. At various points in the play, Casandra has presentiments of what is going to happen to her brother, who was arrested in 1992 along with Abimael Guzmán and other members of the terrorist leadership. Guzmán's capture causes the ideological orphanhood (Santillán O'Shea, 2017, p. 9) of the organisation, which to this day is reduced to small fractions. This arrest is a milestone in the fight against terrorism, as it tips the balance in favour of the victory of the state authorities[5]. The news provokes great excitement among the protagonists, but the celebration is overshadowed

[5] This was an unexpected turn of events, even for the authorities themselves (Paredes, 2017, p. 22), given that in 1992 the possibility of the triumph of the social revolution in Peru was being considered (McClintock, 1994, p. 243; Montoya Rojas, 1997, p. 287).

by Casandra's premonition that a corruption and human rights violation scandal involving several officers of the Peruvian Armed Forces will soon be exposed. The various massacres perpetrated by the army and the Colina Group, a death squad responsible for multiple murders, kidnappings, and disappearances, including those that took place in La Cantuta and Barrios Altos, come to light[6].

Cassandra's prophecy is confirmed in the news that reveals the identity of the scapegoats, including Electra's father who, not wanting to take responsibility for his actions, commits suicide in prison. Electra does not believe the official version of events, as she suspects that her father has been betrayed and killed by the army, with the alleged involvement of his wife, who, moreover, soon marries a member of the current government. As we can see, up to this point the hypertext retains the essential elements of the classical versions of Sophocles or Euripides. Electra turns away from old friendships and, sacrificing her own psycho-physical well-being, vows to take her revenge on all those guilty of her father's death. In a speech to her younger brother, Electra confesses the following: "No soy más que el cadáver de tu hermana. […] He tenido que abandonar todo lo que yo era. Tuve que sacrificar, sacrificarme. […] Yo tenía que eliminar al opresor ¡porque fui la hija de un rey!" [I am nothing but your sister's corpse. [...] I have had to give up everything I used to be. I had to sacrifice, sacrifice myself. [...] I had to eliminate the oppressor because I was the daughter of a king!] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 19).

What differentiates this hypertext from the various versions of the classical myth (Sophocles; Euripides) is the form of revenge, as well as the person empowered to execute justice. In Sophocles' play, Electra is shown as a weak and passive woman who awaits the arrival of her brother Orestes so that he can exact revenge for the murder of Agamemnon[7], whereas in *Interior F*, it is Electra who gains access to the bank accounts of her mother and other corrupt politicians in order to expose them. It is then that she discovers that her father's name also figures in the web of corruption within the Fujimori regime. Regardless of the outcome, Electra assumes the typically masculine attributes of aggressiveness, strength, intelligence and, above all, efficiency. Likewise, Cassandra is shown as a successful journalist and an independent woman who does not bow to men. Both protagonists exemplify the ability to reinvent themselves and to actively shape their own futures, aligning them with the concept of the "third woman" (Liptovsky, 1999, p. 218) which reflects the evolving position of women within contemporary societies.

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[6] Alberto Fujimori and Vladimiro Montesinos evade responsibility for human rights violations by accusing a group of military officers who, after Fujimori's second presidential re-election, were acquitted of all charges under the amnesty law of 1995 (Quiroz Norris, 2013, p. 464).

[7] In Euripides' version, Electra plays a more active role, as she encourages her brother to take his revenge at the moment when he considers the possibility of leaving Clytemnestra alive so as not to bear the guilt of being a matricide.

4. Maternity versus abortion and infertility

There is a clear intertextual relationship between García Lorca's *Yerma* and Silva Yrigoyen's *Interior F*. It becomes evident from the very first lines of the latter as they reenact a dialogue between the protagonists of the former, Juan and his wife: "Juan: […] Cada año seré más viejo. / Yerma: Cada año… Tú y yo seguiremos aquí cada año…" ["Juan: […] I get older every year and that's all. / Yerma: Every year …Just the two of us year after year…" (García Lorca, 2006)] (García Lorca, 1991, p. 60). Meanwhile, in *Interior F*, these lines are pronounced by Yerma and taken up by all the protagonists: "Yerma: Cada año seré más vieja, pero seguiré aquí cada año. / Casandra: Cada año seré más vieja... / Electra: ...pero seguiré aquí cada año" [Yerma: Every year I get older, but I'll still be here every year / Cassandra: Every year I'll be older... / Electra: ...but I'll still be here every year...] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 1). This is not the only example of an unmarked quote in the Peruvian author's drama. In addition to the intertextual use of quotation, the two plays share the same symbolism with regard to the concept of sterility. In *Interior F*, infertility is expressed through dryness and its equivalents: barren womb, withered flesh, thirst, and stone walls; on the other hand, the main symbol of fertility is water, reinforced by the appearance of other terms, such as flowers or wind:

> Yerma: […] Yo no quiero quedarme seca. Después no. Después va a ser muy tarde. Yo pienso en el hoy. Yo no puedo pensar en mañana. No aquí. No en este país. Aquí está prohibida la palabra futuro y yo tengo sed y quiero agua [Yerma: [...] I don't want to become barren. Not any longer. It will be too late. I think about today. I can't think about tomorrow. Not here. Not in this country. Here the word future is forbidden and I am thirsty and I want water.] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 16)

Likewise, in both plays, sterility is perceived as a curse (García-Posada, 1991, p. 13). This is due, in Lorca's tragedy, to social repression, and the rigid Christian moral code, whereas in *Interior F*, it is one of the consequences of clandestine abortion, a widespread practice in Peru due to the criminalization of pregnancy termination.

According to the estimates presented by Sandoval Paredes (2005, p. 44) and Ferrando (2006, p. 29), at the beginning of the new millennium, more than 400,000 illegal abortions were performed in Peru each year (p. 44). Among the main causes of this practice, Romero Bidegaray (2002) highlights economic precariousness, instability in the couple's relationship, the threat of abandonment if the woman does not have an abortion, and the stigmatisation of single mothers[8].

[8] Despite the fact that abandonment is a crime defined in Article 150 of the Peruvian Penal Code, López Bravo (2021) points out that it is necessary to prove that the pregnant woman is in

Yerma in *Interior F* dreams of being an exemplary mother. However, when she becomes pregnant, she endures the accusations of her boyfriend who doubts his paternity. Finally, in order to keep her partner, Yerma undergoes an abortion, after which she feels sharp pangs of remorse for having killed her own child. A coerced abortion causes her deep guilt, as it feels like a loss of her femininity, given that motherhood is seen as a woman's primary social role (Beauvoir, 2016, p. 477).

5. Symbology of the mirror

Silva Yrigoyen insists on the need for women's empowerment through collective action. She plays with the need to recognise oneself in the other person through the symbolism of the mirror. This idea refers to the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, during which infants between the ages of six and eighteen months learn to recognize themselves in a mirror (Lacan, 2003, p. 108). Cassandra emphasizes the importance of self-assertion as a means to eliminate uncertainty and strengthen both love and self-respect: "Es tiempo de que me encuentre sola frente al espejo y busque mi propio amor" [It is high time I stood alone in front of the mirror and tried to find self-love.] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 22). However, the protagonists, having endured severe criticism throughout their lives, feel the need to assert themselves within the female collective. Hence the reply, "te espejo" [I mirror you] (Silva Yrigoyen, 2002, p. 23), pronounced by Yerma, which serves to underline the importance of being reflected in another woman who, according to Graciela Strada (2007), constitutes "un punto de amarre de su yo evanescente" [a mooring point of her evanescent self] (p. 157).

The action in *Interior F* is performed verbally as a kind of therapeutic process in which the protagonists not only become aware of their own emotions but also manage to let go of their past traumas. This process is followed by a spiritual cleansing ritual known as the blossoming bath, which is typical of Andean culture. The main function of this ritual is the purification of the soul, since "la flor es una imagen del 'centro' y, por consiguiente, una imagen arquetípica del alma" [The flower is an image of the "centre" and, therefore, an archetypal image of the soul.] (Cirlot, 1992, p. 207). Although the blossoming bath can take different forms, at its foundation lies the idea of spiritual regeneration (González Mariscal et al., 2022, p. 37).

6. Final considerations

As we have seen, *Interior F* is an example of analytical drama, whose communicative force is due to the existence of a network of hypertextual relations through which the playwright manages to dismantle and recontextualise the archetypes of

a critical situation without precisely determining the scope of this formulation (p. 6), which means that verdicts, in many cases, are not favourable for victims living in informal relationships.

Cassandra, Electra, and Yerma in order to denounce the symbolic violence with which patriarchy oppresses women in contemporary societies. Likewise, in the rewriting of these characters, Silva Yrigoyen uses traditionally masculine attributes to present a new image of women, neither free of aggressiveness, nor deprived of intelligence, independence, or efficiency. From the pragmatist perspective, the protagonists are depicted as strong and courageous women who, having learned a bitter lesson, free themselves from toxic relationships with men.

Mariana Silva Yrigoyen raises the issue of the helplessness of single mothers, child abuse, and the proliferation of high-risk clandestine abortions that women resort to, among other things, out of fear of being abandoned. The drama takes the form of an extensive interiorisation which favours the confluence of different symbols refering to Lorca's poetics. In this way, the playwright perceives the curse of infertility as a direct consequence of illegal and unsafe abortion, as well as of economic precariousness, which limits women's access to paid employment, and the stigmatization of single mothers. It should be noted that a coerced pregnancy termination can have serious consequences for a woman´s physical and psychological health. In many cases, women experience a profound sense of guilt, stemming from the inability to exercise the greatest social privilege historically reserved for them: motherhood.

Finally, the play's open ending, preceded by a dialogue that uses the metaphor of the mirror, highlights the need for women's empowerment. The drama raises the idea that women must assert themselves as social subjects. To this end, the protagonists of the drama undergo a spiritual cleansing ritual and support one another in reaffirming their identities.

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The *(C)hueca* Writing of Claudia Rodríguez as Travesti Revenge

ABSTRACT
Claudia Rodríguez (Chile, 1968), writer, performer, and activist, is a key figure in the Latin American travesti movement. This paper examines her literary production, which emerged in the second decade of the 21st century through the self-publishing of her works in fanzine format: *Dramas pobres. Poesía travesti* [Poor Dramas. Transvestite Poetry] (2013); *Cuerpos para odiar. Poesía travesti* [Bodies to Hate. Transvestite Poetry] (2014a); *Manifiesto horrorista* [Horrorist Manifesto] (2014b); *Enferma del alma* [Sick at Heart] (2015); and *Para no morir tan sola. Escritura en pandemia* [So as not to Die so Alone. Writing in a Pandemic] (2022). Our focus will be on the hybrid and mestizo nature of her texts – not linear but fragmentary – and her incorporation of orality.

KEYWORDS
Claudia Rodríguez; travesti writing; Chilean literature

1. Resentment, Fury, and Revenge

Claudia Rodríguez (Chile, 1968), writer, performer, and activist, is a leading figure in the Latin American travesti movement. Her journey began in 1991 with the historic Homosexual Liberation Movement of Chile (MOVILH). In 2007, she earned a diploma in Gender Studies from the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities at the University of Chile, and a year later, she began her studies in Social Work at the Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano. In 2008, she collaborated in the collective volume *Las transexuales hablan. Cien historias en cien palabras* [Trans Women Speak: One Hundred Stories in One Hundred Words] (Bustamante Lobos et al., 2008). In 2011, she founded the first travesti theater company with the play *Historias travesties* and adapts his fanzine *Cuerpos para odiar* for the play of the same name in 2015. Her literary production began with self-published fanzines: *Dramas pobres. Poesía travesti* (2013); *Cuerpos para odiar. Poesía travesti* (2014a); *Manifiesto horrorista* (2014b); *Enferma del alma* (2015); and *Para no morir tan sola. Escritura en pandemia* (2022). Later, her works were published by Argentine and Spanish publishers: *Ciencia ficción*

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travesti [Transvestite Science Fiction] (Buenos Aires, 2023) and *Cuerpos para odiar* (Seville, 2024).

In various interviews (Medios, 2019; Orellana, 2019), as well as in her own publications, Claudia Rodríguez alludes to resentment from the very titles of her works: *Rucia*[1] *pero resentida. Poesía travesti* [*Blond but Resentful. Travesti Poetry*] (2019) and *Poesía travesti, resentía y furiosa* [*Travesti Poetry, Resentful and Furious*] (2021). In an interview with the Chilean digital media outlet *El Desconcierto*, she states that her writing emerged when she became aware of that resentment as, despite her activism, she was sidelined as a travesti in various LGBTI organizations led by homosexual men with certain privileges. From this experience arose her interest in problematizing travesti history (Rodríguez, 2018).

According to the *Dictionary of the Spanish Language DLE* (2014), [resentida] (resentful) is an adjective referring to a person who displays or harbors some resentment. In this sense, it is synonymous with [rencorosa] (spiteful), [despechada] (bitter), [amargada] (soured), [disgustada] (upset), [dolida] (hurt), [molesta] (annoyed), [ofendida] (offended) and [quejosa] (complaining). Similarly, it is used to describe someone who feels wronged by society or by life in general. This sense of spite or "ill will born in the spirit from disillusionment suffered in the pursuit of desires" (*DLE*, 2014) is what leads Marlene Wayar, when referring to Claudia Rodríguez, to speak of "The art of re-feeling" (2018, p. 29). Later, the Argentine essayist will link resentment and fury in the following terms:

> Furia trava[2] is already a concept and is part of a reality, one of the axes of the struggle. We come from poverty, from failure, and we are *resentful*. *Resentment* is our creative power. The issue is how we elaborate on it. This is about recognizing ourselves as vulnerable, that we are broken, with our phobias, with HIV, panic attacks, the hormones that abandoned us, the silicones, the liver in misery... There are a lot of intersecting vulnerabilities in each body and of impotence as well [emphasis added]. (Wayar, 2021, p. 179)

Thus, the way of confronting rage will be what gives "body to the Latin American travesti trans theory" (Wayar, 2018, p. 29). The travesti language will be revenge. Despite the Chilean writer's insistence on describing herself as resentful, we have opted for the adjective "chueca" to define her writing. *The Dictionary of Americanisms ASALE* (2010) suggests that it may come from the Nahuatl "xocue", which, according to Thouvenot (2015, p. 456), refers to someone who

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[1] Rucia is used in Chile to refer to blonde hair and also to a blonde person (*ASALE*, 2010). With the title *Rucia, pero resentida*, Claudia Rodríguez lashes out at the derogatory stereotype of the "dumb blonde" to transform it into a blonde who is not passive but active, aggressive.

[2] Trava is an apocope of travesty which, when reappropriated by the travestis themselves to designate themselves as such, is resemanticized and stripped of pejorative connotation. We will always use the term travesti/trava. For analogies and distinctions with other terms (transgender, transsexual, trans or trans*) see Mateo del Pino (2023, 233–281).

is "lame of the foot". This "lameness" connotes different meanings, depending on the Spanish-speaking countries, as collected from the term. Thus, "chueco" refers to something twisted, not straight; something poorly made, defective, or useless. Metaphorically, it is used to refer to someone who acts dishonestly, is disloyal, treacherous, or has a jealous and malicious gaze. It can also refer to an erroneous, deviated idea. Or it is used to indicate that a matter or business is illegal or has no prospects of legality; a confusing, shady, suspicious event, or even a false document. In the case of people, it is also used to designate someone with bowed legs, who has a limp, is left-handed, or manifests health problems, is sick, or frail; or someone who is upset, angry, or overwhelmed by something. Similarly, it denotes a thing that is damaged or broken, poorly fixed; a problem difficult to resolve. Specifically, it symbolizes an effeminate man. And it is precisely this last meaning that leads us to the adjective "hueco", which we have used to title these pages, in a kind of paronymy: *chueca* vs. *hueca*.

Radomiro Spotorno (1995) notes that in Chilean speech "hueco", as a term for a male homosexual, is a "metaphor that expresses old ideas of masculinity as the full, the complete, and femininity as the empty, the hollow" (p. 121), clearly alluding to the sex-gender binomial (man/woman and masculine/feminine), the biological order dimension, and the socio-cultural construction that assigns roles and stereotypes to each sex. Víctor Hugo Robles, taking up this meaning, titles his book on the history of the homosexual movement in Chile, *Bandera hueca*. In this way, he makes a reference to the performance he carried out on May 4, 1994, during a Congress of the Socialist Party and in the presence of France's First Lady, Danielle Mitterrand, by displaying a Chilean flag with a hole in its center, symbolizing the invisibility of lesbians, homosexuals, and trans people in Chile and demanding support for the fight against Article 365 of the Penal Code, which penalized with imprisonment consensual sexual relations between adult men (Robles, 2008, p. 10).

2. A crooked language

I claim my right to be a monster,
neither man nor woman,
neither XXY nor H2O.
[…]
I claim my right to be a monster
and for others to be the Normal.
[…]
Only my vital right to be a monster
[…]
Amen.
Susy Shock, *Yo, monstruo mío* (2011/2022, 55-57)[3].

[3] All translations from Spanish are by the author.

The travesti figure exemplifies very well this union or fusion between the hollow and the crooked, not only by referring both terms to sex-gender dissidence – "effeminate man", "male homosexual", as we saw above – but also to that social awareness that perceives someone as twisted, defective, and deviated. As lu ciccia[4] warns, deviation is a concept associated with "*atypical bodies or disorders of sexual development*" and refers to how the biomedical discourse classifies intersex bodies, although it also encompasses non-normative gender identities and sexualities [emphasis original] (2023, p. 264). For this reason, Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis: Pedro Lemebel and Francisco Casas (1987–1993) with their aesthetic and political project introduced in the Chilean landscape the figure of a poor travesti in a prostitution situation as a strategy for awareness and social transformation. In an interview with Luis Alberto Mansilla, when asked if Las Yeguas were reclaiming travesti with their actions, Lemebel responds firmly: "Travesti don't need to be reclaimed by apostles, just let them live as they are". However, he will state that in his work *Loco afán. Crónicas de Sidario* [*Crazy Desire*: *Chronicles of the AIDS Ward*] he expresses his concern for travestis: "the most discredited, beaten, and ridiculed of Latin American homosexuality" (Mansilla, 1996). In this way, he acknowledges the tremendous discrimination these people are subjected to.

In this context we locate Claudia Rodríguez and her literary production. Her beginnings in writing date back to 2007, when she took writing workshops with poet Diego Ramírez, and sometime later, she received a grant from the National Book Fund for emerging writers (FONDART, 2010). Her first texts, therefore, emerged linked to the workshop, where they were generically named "travesti poetry", which appears as a subtitle, labeling some of her works. However, the nature of these writings points more towards a hybrid, mestizo genre, not linear but fragmentary, much like orality itself. The format in which she publishes her work is the fanzine. From the first pages of *Dramas pobres* and *Enferma del alma*, it is evident that we are dealing with "a precarious, self-managed production that disobeys the omnipresent cultural industries, a production that can be derogatorily called a fanzine, a product of failure, without a publisher" (Rodríguez, 2013, 2015). However, in *Cuerpos para odiar*, she replaces the term fanzine with "LIBRILLA" (Rodríguez, 2014b; capitalization in the original), while maintaining the rest of the premises. In this way, the author highlights not only the handmade nature of the work but also the distribution, which is carried out through her social media, Instagram and Facebook. The sale of the copies is done from her home. This movement in the underground world of self-management, outside the editorial market, has allowed her to connect with other Argentine travestis companions such as Susy Shock, Camila Sosa Villada, and Marlene Wayar. As she herself describes it, it is an autonomous activism through writing (Curia, 2021).

[4] This is the original spelling of the author's first and last name.

In an interview with journalist Alejandra Gajardo, Claudia Rodríguez emphasizes that in her early years, publishers were not interested in her work. One of the responses she received was that her writing, her composition, was "poor, with spelling mistakes". In response to this, the author states that in the workshop she took with Ramírez, these flaws were "considered poetic in themselves" (Gajardo, 2022). Laura Haimovichi (2024) sees it as a "political gesture", as it "challenges spelling norms as a symbol of resistance and advocacy for those without a voice". "A New Language" (Enríquez, 2023, p. 14). These ideas connect with those of valeria flores[5], who reflects on language, its oppressive nature, but also its disruptive potential, elements that make us think of Claudia Rodríguez as a "deslenguada":

> The language of dissidence breathes through the pores of the enemy. Its somatic disturbance makes any pact of control explode. […] The deslenguada coins grafts of heteroglossia and synthesizes them into irreverent formats. It is stunned when groping. It wobbles and becomes agitated, but it does not want the terrible limitation of someone who lives only because they are authorized to do so. The bending of fantasies detonates with its mocking skepticism. It communes with the feline community that makes of the fall an artifice of beauty. It practices the mentalism of the butterfly. Breakage is a risky craft. (flores, 2010, p. 32)

Dolores Curia (2021) argues that "the error is proof of horror, a mark of segregation, a debt", a statement that will be corroborated by the writer herself: "I wrote without paying much attention to form. They were like vomits, things that happened to me and I just recorded them". This paronymy or resemblance between error and horror is not accidental, as it led Claudia Rodríguez, starting from the *Manifiesto Errorista* [Manifesto of Errorism], a collective action project published in *Reexistencias* [Re-existences] fanzine No. 3 (2011, pp. 31–32), to create her *Manifiesto Horrorista*. If the *Internacional Errorista* [International Errorist] (2011) took on "the fight against all forms of cultural, social, sexual, racial, spiritual, political, or economic control or domination", and called to join its ranks "for the worldwide liberation of error" (p. 31), Rodríguez reformulates some of these principles, embracing disqualification, as Susy Shock (2011/2022) did in "Yo, monstruo mío" (pp. 55–57) – a text that shows certain similarities – to rebel and re-signify herself.

> I am a travesti who practices a horrible poetry, I am a horrorist terrorist. I refuse to believe that it's a lie, that everything that makes me monstrous is not my identity. […] Being a horrorist is to assume oneself as a Trojan horse, a retrovirus, an overlap, a mestizo. The scandalous event is wanting to be an ordinary citizen.
> […]
> Horrorism is thinking of yourself before others think of you. (Rodríguez, 2014b)[6]

[5] This is the original spelling of the author's first and last name.

[6] We want to highlight the connection between terrorism, errorism, and horrorism in both manifestos. In the text of the International Errorist, it reads: "The concept of '(t)errorism' constructs an identity and a stereotype: the '(t)errorist enemy'; which makes visible the right to be 'suspected

In this way, Claudia Rodríguez, overcoming the barriers of illiteracy, in a strategy that we could call a narrative of resilience, turns writing into a powerful tool, one that fills "the concept of travesti with political power", as the author stated in the prologue-interview with Mariana Enríquez (2024, p. 22). To do this, she relies on orality, a key element of her discursive register, as the stories told to her by her travestis companions – anecdotes, tales, confessions – become written matter. Textual bodies that reflect "localized knowledge", emerging "from the traffic of spoken and uncensored bodies in the flesh" (flores, 2010, p. 34), with the purpose of recording memories, wounds, injustices, hatreds... that otherwise – as the writer refers to it – "would pass into oblivion" (Font, 2019). This is the true power of her trava language.

> Travesti orality, with its tones, its own words, its twists, has to do with seeking effects in the other through all the tricks and manipulations known to humankind, but always with a good dose of verisimilitude. Our language draws on the exaggeration of some things at the right point so that it creates a sensation, so that a sensation can be seen, because visually many differences are not easily noticed. […] Trava orality grabs onto everything that exists to handle it in a totally different way with the aim of producing an effect, especially in exaggeration, in humor, in every discussion. (Wayar, 2021, p. 196)

The same effect that Pedro Lemebel used, not in a mere attempt to caricature his characters, but with the intention of going further: "when attacked minorities use the caricature of themselves, it is to cross borders" (Mansilla, 1996). This is what can be observed in Claudia Rodríguez and in her polyphonic discursive register, echo of other voices and subjectivities to form a "nostredad trava" (Viola, 2021, p. 292) or "travestidad" (Wayar, 2021, p. 46). Writing as memory, archive of the trava word:

> Al tiempo supe que una travesti que le decían Miriam dejó la cagá una noche. Se curó raja y, cuando llegaron los pacos, ellos mismos le robaron toa la plata de la noche y vo sabí cómo es la esta, se puso chora y se la llevaron presa. El lunes vamos a tener que ir a verla a la cárcel de San Miguel. Así que le estamos juntando monedas pa cigarros y comía. ¿Con cuánto te poní vo? (Rodríguez, 2024, p. 80)[7]

3. *Cuerpos para odiar*[8]

This text discusses the self-managed fanzine *Cuerpos para odiar. Poesía travesti*, subtitled *Sobre nuestras muertes, las travestis, no sabemos escribir*

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of everything'" (2011, p. 32). In the case of Claudia Rodríguez, the travesti identity, considered more than suspicious, monstrous, is re-signified by reappropriating language, through and against the discourses/thoughts that attempt to repudiate her, paraphrasing Judith Butler (2002, p. 315).

[7] This text has not been translated so that its oral nature and use of Chilean speech can be appreciated.

[8] In the following pages I will cite the fanzines by Barrett's edition (2024), as it reaches a wider audience. Without specifying the year 2024.

[About our Deaths, We Transvestites, We do not Know How to Write], which was first photocopied and released in Chile in February 2014. The author referred to it as "LIBRILLA, a product of failure, without a publisher" (2014a, p. 2). This self-published fanzine led to the creation of a publication "managed" by the independent publisher Barret, located in Seville, which began in late 2016. Although the book cover is titled *Cuerpos para odiar* (2014), it includes almost all of Claudia Rodríguez's fanzines: *Cuerpos para odiar*, *Dramas pobres*, *Manifiesto horrorista*, and *Para no morir tan sola*. The only one excluded is *Enferma del alma*. Additionally, the book contains a prologue-interview by Mariana Enríquez (2024) titled "Todas íbamos a ser reinas" (pp. 15–40), who also edited the text. We should remember that Enríquez (2023) also wrote the prologue "Una nueva lengua" (pp. 9–14) for the Argentine publication *Ciencia ficción travesti*. The book also includes eight illustrations, on the cover, back cover, and flaps, by Nazario Luque (Sevilla, 1944), the father of Spanish underground comics, known for works such as *Anarcoma* (1977), featuring a travesti detective who roams the Ramblas of Barcelona. On the Facebook page of Barret (2024), it is revealed that these images were not created specifically for *Cuerpos para odiar* but come from the *Póker del Sexo* [Sex Poker] deck (1995), which includes forty illustrated cards by Luque.

This data helps illustrate the leap Claudia Rodríguez's work has made from being a handmade, self-managed process – production, printing, and distribution – to being managed by a publishing house. In this way, the "precario" fanzine becomes a "book" that obeys the cultural industry. With this change, the work loses the freshness of its format, as the original fanzine, made with few resources and therefore at a low cost, which recalls the revolutionary and countercultural pamphlet, sheds the collage, cutouts, different fonts, effects, styles and letter sizes, fragments in different positions – horizontal and vertical – drawings, and photos, etc., to submit itself to a carefully crafted orthotypography and occupy the ordered space of the blank page, where nothing disturbs the attention the text commands, privileging content over form.

One of the striking aspects of this work is the insistence on using the "perverse language, the one of infratext" (p. 85), which Claudia Rodríguez says she learned from Barby, known as "La Ponete Tú", for "speaking and murmuring a correct and glamorous Argentine language" (p. 85). This is the language of "unease and search for the unspoken, like a spy, a Chilean Mata Hari, a folkloric trafficker, a marginal witch, faithful to herself and to the travesti, transgender, transsexual *gang*" [emphasis added] (p. 85). A concept that the Chilean writer Martín Cerda used in his work *La palabra quebrada. Ensayo sobre el ensayo* (1982) to refer to the restoration of "experiential background", which, although achieved from context, also happens through what he calls the infratext (Cerda, 1982, p. 32). In this regard, poet Thomas Harris emphasizes that for Cerda, memory is "a form

of knowledge, as a re-cognition of our humanity, as a remaining memory of *the pack* and as an invocation of the most primal wisdom [...] Memory thus becomes the overcoming of the tear, of anger, of guilt, of shame, of trauma, in the end" [emphasis added] (Harris, 2009, p. 215). In Rodríguez's case, this pack implies territoriality, because, as she will acknowledge in *Dramas pobres*, when she speaks and writes, she always "implicitly, infratextually" tells the history of Chile (p. 141).

> I speak of being a migrant, in the same way that I speak of being born in a world with mountains, and, likewise, of the barren space that being a travesti implies, in the narratives of those born here who do not name us. [...] Being born here includes me, even though I am a travesti, even though they do not name us in the history of Chile. We are from here, from this territory. Even though they do not name us in the struggle of the poor, we have always been here. The travestis have been illiterate of the history of being born here. (Rodríguez, 2024, pp. 141–142)

This language of the infratext also refers to biographies, which the author believes are not given the proper importance (p. 141). A genre that, as her writing reveals, blends personal experience with the stories of others, in a kind of autobiographical memory, where the boundaries between others and herself blur, resulting in fragmented narratives or "writing of life". This is why the work, as a tribute and recognition, is dedicated, among others, to her mother and to the travestis friends "who have not written love letters" (p. 47), which, beyond gratitude, is a way to give them a voice and cede them the word (Aparicio, 2024). Manuel Alberca (2021) has called "consanguineous biographies" those written by children or partners who try to "wash the family's dirty laundry in the detergent of the blank sheet" (p. 127), showing hybrid texts that register a shared life. In the case of Claudia Rodríguez, resentment will be the trigger for her literary production, and revenge, as previously noted, will be her chueca and travesti writing.

That Claudia Rodríguez (2024), who stated on the first page of *Cuerpos para odiar*, "I was never a hope for anyone" (p. 49), as initially "babbling was her language" (p. 53), illiterate – something she repeats throughout the pages like a mantra – ends up taking ownership of words and rebelling. In this way, she constructs a powerful travesti poetics. Thus, in a process of learning, taking possession of the necessary tools, she acquires her own voice and letter, which materialize through the pages: "I don't know how to speak, but I'm not mute" (p. 60). "Learning to read and write was starting to fill me with fears" (p. 61). "They say I don't know how to tell stories and since I was diagnosed as incomprehensible, the city inside me went silent" (p. 63). "They say I don't know how to write" (p. 65). "Learning to read and write helps to know about sin" (p. 65). "Sometimes I drown in thinking seriously and I get pneumonia from not knowing how to write like people do" (p. 65). "I come from illiterate women whose histories do not exist" (p. 67). "Not knowing how to read or write made us bodies to be hated" (p. 73).

"Now, when I'm older, I can write these things and say I'm a travesti" (p. 82). "My theme is writing about the form and the things that, according to the world, were born damaged. Ripped, ugly, and monstrous writings, resentful like me" (p. 100). In *Dramas pobres*, the revenge is confirmed:

> They say I don't know how to speak, and they speak for me but against me because, according to them, it's my fault for being as foolish as I am. But they lie. It's their twisted way of seeing the world that sinks me, that humiliates me, that makes me sick and weak. They lie when they speak of the people, the hunger, and the cold, denying the travestis. When they speak, they always speak in their favor, for their benefit. They never lose, they always recover. They lie when they never imagine that a poor and resentful travesti like me could survive and resist. (p. 145)

Nonetheless, Claudia Rodríguez, overcoming the barriers of illiteracy, in a strategy we have called a narrative of resilience, turns her writing into a powerful tool, one that fills "the concept of travesti with political power", as was her desire (Enríquez, 2024, p. 22). And in doing so, she contributes to fleshing out Latin American travesti theory, joining those who have made it possible: Lohana Berkins, Marlene Wayar, Susy Shock, Camila Sosa Villada, among others.

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Two Mums and One Dad: Family Portrait in Pepa San Martín's *Rara*

ABSTRACT
Pepa San Martín's 2016 feature-length film debut *Rara* [Weird] is based on the true story of the Chilean Judge Karen Atala, who in 2004 lost custody of her daughters because of her sexual orientation. Rather than centring its plot on the legal matters of the case, San Martín's account concentrates on the worldview of one of the daughters, Sara, a 12-year-old girl who becomes tacitly aware of being different to the "norm" because of living with her mother and her partner. This study focuses on the questioning of the normative family that the film poses and examines the condition of "weirdness" experienced by Sara. Taking into account previous productions on lesbian motherhood and some fact-based Chilean cinematic narratives, this study argues how *Rara* responds to reformulations of the family unit on both sides of the screen.

KEYWORDS
Rara; Pepa San Martín; family; custody; lesbian motherhood

Two women sleeping
together have more than their sleep to defend.
Adrienne Rich, "The images"

1. Fighting the law

In 2004, Judge Karen Atala Riffo (1963) sued the Chilean State before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for discrimination after the Supreme Court of her country denied her custody of her three daughters. Atala, the first Chilean judge to publicly acknowledge her homosexuality, divorced her husband in 2002 and, months later, her female partner began living in her house along with Atala's three daughters. In early 2003, her ex-husband filed for custody, claiming that the mother's homosexuality was detrimental to the children. After years of waiting, in 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights concluded that the Chilean

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courts had violated Atala's rights by removing custody of her daughters due to her sexual orientation[1].

The *Karen Atala and Daughters v Chile* case greatly impacted public opinion within Chile. This opened a national and international debate around the recognition of the rights of queer people, sexual orientation in relation to the exercise of human rights, and the oppressive heteronormativity that prevails in judicial sentences concerning the traditional, nuclear, heterosexual family unit. As Beltrán y Puga (2011) states, the Atala case is part of the cultural debate of heteronormativity vs. contemporary diversity, since it questions whether the only legitimate family model that the legal system, and the Chilean one in particular, should recognize is that of the straight family (p. 224).

The case also had a social impact in a variety of contexts. Judith Butler's *Amicus Curiae*[2] presented for the case in 2011 gives a good account of the way the parental rights of a lesbian mother were violated. In her submission, Butler (2012) dismantles the axis that guides the sentence – Atala's sexual orientation as an argument to question her fitness as a mother – and concludes that discrimination based on sexual orientation "es un modo de regular o de negarle a alguien la posibilidad de vivir abierta y honestamente con su deseo y modo de amar. Este tipo de deseo no puede ser ni legislado ni proscrito – es parte de la diversidad y de la compleja gama humana de sexualidad y amor" [is a way of regulating or denying someone the possibility of living openly and honestly with their desire and way of loving. This type of desire can be neither legislated nor outlawed – it is part of the diversity and complex human range of sexuality and love] (p. 179)[3].

The case also caught the attention of Chilean filmmaker Pepa San Martín (1974), who remembers following Atala's legalistic battle in the media; a case, in her own words, that was quite emblematic in Chile and the press covered a lot (2016). Born in Curicó, San Martín began her film career as an assistant director on projects by Chilean *auteurs* such as José Luis Torres Leiva and Alejandro Fernández Almendras. In her first work as a director, the short film *La ducha* [The Shower] (2010), San Martín makes use of an 8-minute long take shot with a handheld camera to tell the end of a love story between two women who face the custody of their cat. Filmed practically inside a bathroom and with two actresses naked from the waist up, the intimacy of the sequence and the spontaneous dialogue anticipate the stark realism that will shape her directorial career. In her next short film, women will once again occupy the centre of the narrative. Released in 2012,

[1] For more information, see Atala Riffo and Daughters v. Chile: https://www.law.cornell.edu/gender-justice/resource/atala_riffo_and_daughters_v_chile

[2] Legal term referencing a "qualified person who is not a party to the action but gives information to the court on a question of law" (Gifis, 2024, p. 28).

[3] All English translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

Gleisdreieck was shot in Germany, where San Martín obtained an award grant at the Berlinale, and narrates a relationship between three mature women who happen to share their love for cherries. Her next project and feature-length film debut would be marked by a similar concern with lesbian-themed narratives. Co-written by Chilean director Alicia Scherson, *Rara* [Weird] is based on the story of Karen Atala, but rather than centring its plot on the legal matters of the case, San Martín's proposal concentrates on the worldview of one of the daughters, Sara, a 12-year-old girl who perceives the difference in living with her mother and her lesbian partner.

In "Batallas perdidas. Realismo, capitalismo e infancia en el cine latinoamericano contemporáneo", Urrutia Neno et al. (2023) identify a trend in Latin American cinema of the new millennium characterised by narratives featuring child protagonists that do not approach real-life cases in a literal way; on the contrary, these narratives present the true events in an ambiguous, indeterminate manner (p. 79). As seen in other Chilean films inspired by real events that have received significant media attention[4], San Martín's *Rara* takes the event as

> punto de partida para luego elaborar una mirada posible sobre él, organizar un tejido en el que las fisuras, los puntos sueltos –que tienden a deshilvanar la trama noticiosa (organizada por la prensa y por la opinión pública) – quedan en un primer plano latente, dotado de múltiples significantes. Es decir, se da cuenta centrífugamente de un evento (no se explicita, en muchos casos, el "basado en hechos reales") y sin embargo estamos frente a una ficción que interpreta, a partir de múltiples puntos de contacto, ese acontecimiento [a starting point and then develops a possible perspective on it, constructing a narrative fabric where fractures and loose threads – which tend to unravel the news story (as organised by the press and public opinion) – remain a latent foreground, endowed with multiple signifiers. In other words, an event is portrayed centrifugally (the "based on real events" is often not made explicit), and yet we are faced with a fiction that interprets that event through multiple points of contact.] (p. 80)

2. Film as a weapon

In a country that still has a long way to go in terms of gender equality[5], San Martín's film stands as a plea for LGBTQ rights. As a lesbian feminist and active advocate for social justice and equality, the Chilean filmmaker has stated that,

[4] The authors' selection of Chilean films includes Alejandro Torres' thriller *El Tila: Fragmentos de un psicópata* (Inside the Mind of a Psychopath, 2015), fact-based on a serial rapist and murderer, and *Blanquita* (2022), Fernando Guzzoni's film based on the 2003 child prostitution scandal known as the Spiniak Case, among other various examples.

[5] As Popescu (2023) observes, "while Chile's momentous passing of the same-sex marriage bill into law on 7 December 2021 marks a momentous milestone for an incredibly Roman Catholic and patriarchal country, it is important to continue acknowledging the future work that needs to be done to truly ensure equity and equality for all members of the LGBTQIA+ community in both private and public spheres" (p. 34).

focusing primarily on the gaze of a teenager, she sought to interpellate all types of audiences, especially the unconvinced ones (San Martín, 2020).

Even though *Rara* is a fictional account of a real-life case that obtained prominence in the Chilean press and shook the legal system, the situation it presents is not exclusive to the country. As Urrutia Neno (2020) notes, Chilean cinematic narratives like *Rara*, together with Pablo Larraín's fierce attack on the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests *El club* [The Club] (2015) or Fernando Guzzoni's *Jesús* (2016), based on a true crime perpetuated by four Chilean men who brutally killed a 25-year-old gay man, "appeal to a global imaginary as much as to a local one. Indeed, this tension between the local and the global is what has made these films successful in different film festivals around the world" (Urrutia Neno, 2020, pp. 143–144)[6].

San Martín, who lived her childhood and early adolescence under Pinochet's dictatorship, believes that "film is a valuable weapon for social transformation" (Zinegoak, 2020, p. 8), a way to channel through art what the state refuses to change. *Rara* carries out this message through a solid family portrait of two women and two daughters living in joyful harmony until the weight of heteropatriarchy is imposed, represented in this case by the complaint made by the biological mother's ex-husband.

The subject of lesbian motherhood has gained the attention of the visual media during the last two decades, thus becoming part of the 21st-century narrative. Television series like the American family drama *The Fosters* (Bradley Bredeweg & Peter Paige, 2013–2018) or *Moments in Love*, the third season of comedy-drama *Master of None* (Ansari et al., 2021), have made lesbian mothering representation accessible to broader audiences. In terms of feature films, queer director Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) "stands out as the first mainstream film to shine a light on lesbian parenting" (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2021, p. 6). However, Cholodenko's domestic drama, queer as it may be, has been criticised for focusing its narrative on the dilemma of the lesbian couple's children once they decide to know the identity of their mothers' sperm donor, as well as for promoting white normativity[7].

In the particular case of Chilean cinema, the appearance of lesbian subjects as main characters had already been explored in a diverse corpus of films by women directors, including Constanza Fernández's *Mapa para conversar* [A Map to Talk] (2012) or Marialy Rivas' *Joven y Alocada* [Young and Wild] (2012). Like San Martín, these female filmmakers demonstrate in their narratives "how political and social bodies are normatively organised around sexuality by the state, the

[6] *Rara* won the Jury Prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 2016 and received an Horizontes Latinos Award at the 64th edition of the San Sebastian Film Festival.

[7] For more discussion of the film, see, for example, Kennedy (2014, pp. 118–132).

church, and the school system" (Blanco, 2022, p. 87). *Rara* depicts a lesbian couple raising two daughters while pondering the way heteropatriarchal prejudices and stereotypes about sexual identity operate in law enforcement and provoke negative reactions in everyday life. The film, however, avoids the melodrama focused on a children's custody dispute; it is not in the courtroom, but in the domestic sphere, which alternates between the normative space of the paternal house and the all-female home built by her mother and her partner, where most of the film is set. *Rara*, thus, lingers on queer family life and how it is slowly, but irrefutably, separated into pieces.

3. Drawing two mums

Set in Viña del Mar, *Rara* opens with a long take of Sara (Julia Lübbert) walking through the school corridor in an over-the-shoulder follow-shot much in the cinematic style of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003). The shallow focus underlines Sara's abstraction, that of a teenager lost in her own world, while the rest of the boys and girls she passes by through the courtyard are involved in different activities. As she goes up the stairs to the gym, the camera remains at a low height to capture her body from the waist down. Even though she's wearing the school uniform, she is presented as an unusual teenager. Sara then approaches a group of friends who ask her to stay. "I have to go" [Me tengo que ir], she says, and the scene is abruptly interrupted to announce the film's title superimposed on a black screen: four lowercase letters that stand for the four women that integrate the non-normative family while an unruly animated "r" is inverted as a sign of nonconformity (Huerta, 2020, p. 17). The film's intentional dissidence is similarly present in the poster design, a shot of the four women sharing the mother's double bed, hugging in peaceful symmetry. They are all asleep except Sara, who has her eyes open as a significant sign of awareness.

Barraza (2024), who addresses San Martín's film from the perspective of female coming-of-age narratives – or *Bildungsfilm* – points out that

> Rara's opening scene is a starting point that invites us to reflect on the representation of the female adolescent's gaze in correlation with the cinematographic interstice, ellipsis, and editing in contemporary Chilean cinema. While the audiovisual montage is the result of a series of ellipses […] Sara's transit through her school, registered on a long take, makes visible a continuity regarding the transition from female childhood to adulthood. (pp. 215–216)

Sara's subjectivity is further accentuated in the next scene. As the opening title credits appear, a travelling shot follows a car driven by her mum's partner, Lía (Agustina Muñoz). Sitting next to her is Sara, whose face is shown in the rear-view mirror; her arm, with colourful bracelets, is out the window and plays with the wind. She has just had her braces removed; it is a new beginning. This scene, together with the pre-credit long take, makes Sara the centre of the story while

establishing San Martín's main purpose: to provide a study of an all-female family through the subjectivation of a teenager.

The film takes us inside the intimate sphere of the house through a hand-held camera that instinctively introduces the other components of the family: Sara's younger sister Cata (Emilia Ossandón) and their mother Paula (Mariana Loyola). As the scene progresses, they all eat pizza in a series of natural shots that exhibit a strong emphasis on the complicity between Paula and Lía while they express affection and confidence in their ability as mothers. But this domestic bliss will soon be put into question. The film does not take long to raise part of the conflict that begins to threaten the stability of the household. This first turning point in the plot arises in a subsequent scene with a drawing by Cata of the all-female family. After her mother has received a call from the school, a mild argument that Sara overhears begins between Lía, Paula and her mother (Coca Guazzini), who blames the couple for being naïve to ignore the conservative Chilean institutions. "No es necesario poner a prueba a todo el mundo" [It is not necessary to test everyone], she says, thus implying that, as far as possible, they should conform to conventional social norms instead of transgressing certain limits. Although Paula's mother appears rather tolerant, she speaks for the Chilean patriarchal ideology. She is quite aware that her daughter's household is outside the moral order, and the familial castle they have built to sustain a non-normative family may be made of sand.

The school system is once again pictured as a coercive space when Sara's best friend (Micaela Cristi) tells her that the headmaster called out a couple of girls for kissing in public. Furthermore, Sara has to deal with prejudice and stigma when her best friend unfoundedly assumes she may have her mother's sexual preferences. Though this senseless assumption is possibly due to the lack of access to accurate information about homosexuality, Sara becomes aware of problems related to her mother's sexual orientation and how they may affect her own identity. Her friend's internalised homophobia, which extends to the whole education system, led her to the realisation that being a lesbian is negatively regarded. That is why she feels the need to make it clear to her friend that she likes men. As the plot unfolds, this heterosexual orientation awareness is reinforced through Sara's gazes and comments about a boy from school she likes. It is that very same boy the one she comes across at a dinner out with her family. Sara's crush is leaving the restaurant with his mother, and they greet Paula, who unceremoniously introduces her to Lía as her partner. While the boy's mother reacts in a way that exudes an air of disapproval, Sara, in a meaningfully balanced static shot, remains seated in the centre of the table with her back to the scene, but listening attentively. As both Lía and Paula return to the table, they laugh about the conservative reaction. Sara, quite the contrary, gazes at her two mums with a serious expression and anguished eyes.

4. "No está bien porque a papá no le gusta"

Sara has been exposed to a relationship that consists of her mother living with her girlfriend, sharing the same bed, displaying affection in her presence, entertaining other lesbian women at home with music and drinks, and leaving the unwashed dishes for the next day. At first, when the conflict breaks out over the drawing of the two mums made by Cata, Sara decides to take on the role of her grandmother; thus, in an intimate bedroom scene between both sisters, she warns Cata about the danger that drawing both women together may pose. Significantly, Sara will take Cata's dissident family portrayal with her at the end of the film, when justice takes the father's side and both sisters must reluctantly abandon the maternal nest.

Sara also warns Cata about keeping secrets from her classmates that she has two mums, adding that "No está bien porque a papá no le gusta" [It's not right because Dad doesn't like it]. Trapped in a conflicting familial duality, Sara momentarily embraces the traditional model that the father figure provides, which reflects Chile's official attitudes towards sexuality and their "deep underlying conservatism" (Richards, 2020, p. 177). Thus, after a fight with her mother, in an attempt to get attention, she decides to throw her birthday party at her father's house, a domestic Elysium where everything is seemingly fine.

San Martín establishes the father (Daniel Muñoz) –a man in a suit and tie, with gelled back hair– as the guardian of normality. The iron bars surrounding his house are an image of the rigid morals that pervade the paternal realm, but, in the eyes of the law, these bars also foreshadow his legal status as father and Paula's punitive behaviour as a lesbian mother. He and his new wife Nicole (Sigrid Alegría), serve San Martín to subtly denounce the traditional familial structures ruled by patriarchal dynamics. Together, they make up a family portrait of shallowness and conventionality. Thus, when Sara begins to rebel against the adult world, her father does not hesitate to attribute her new personality to her ex-wife's environment and, more specifically, to her sexual orientation.

As mentioned before, Sara's diverging conduct is expressed through the subjective camera, which takes on her point of view multiple times. The film abounds with close-up shots of her character observing through different windows, both at school and home, as frames that separate Sara's internal experience from the external world. Likewise, the role of mirrors in the film reinforces her self-absorption while representing her fractured self.

Along with her sister, Sara inhabits a space of uncertainty that does not allow them to access that other territory where the adults speak, discuss and make decisions that affect them. Sara's weirdness, then, is that of a pre-pubescent girl transitioning to adolescence whose personal struggles with bodily appearance, first love and other issues turn her world into a strange place. Thus, once the bitter struggles over custody begin and the case is widely covered in the media, Sara confesses to her best friend that all she wants is "que todo vuelva a ser como

antes" [for everything to go back to the way it was before]. This longing not only implies her rejection of the changing process she is going through, but also that she does not want to take responsibility for the parental conflict.

Urrutia (2020) notes that Sara feels weird "not because her mother is a lesbian but because she herself is entering puberty. Her body is changing, and her desires and her vision are changing along with it" (pp. 146–147). The process of growth and transformation Sara is undergoing is unquestionable: she manipulates situations in her favour, runs away one night to see the boy she likes, steals some cigarettes from her mother, and feels that no one but her best friend understands her. Maguire and Randall (2018), in their approach to contemporary adolescent-focused films in Latin America, argue that, "as opposed to child protagonists, teens are often characterized by rebelliousness, a loss of innocence, experimentation, sexual-awakening and highly self-conscious behaviors" (p. 11). However, in our view, limiting Sara's conflict to her pubescent transition understates her own awareness of being different to the "norm" because of living with her mother and her partner. The character's weirdness also arises when her surroundings put into question the "normality" of her family situation. The domestic dynamics are shattered as she becomes tacitly aware that, for some people, her mother's behaviour is considered immoral.

On the other hand, although the film does not make a judgement about the characters' actions, San Martín challenges the heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear family model embodied by the father. In an attempt to respond to this condition of weirdness experienced by Sara, the director presents the paternal home as an antagonistic setting governed by a bourgeois and corseted order. Therefore, the film's multifaceted title also alludes to the family formed by Sara's father and his new wife, as well as to the strangeness both sisters feel when it is the legal framework that determines where they should live.

5. Closing remarks

Rara is a film about free women who are unprotected by the law. The abrupt ending, as it cuts to a black screen, is the manifestation of a dark legal system that needs to be questioned. Along with a number of other films, *Rara* responds "to social, political and cultural shifts in many countries of the world, redefinitions of the family unit, and an increase in social rights for gays, lesbians and transgender people (Shaw, 2013, p. 178). This explains the positive impact on human rights that San Martín's feature-length film debut has had in Chile and some other countries. To raise awareness about sexual diversity, equality, and integration, *Rara* has been included in sexual psychology textbooks like Arias Paris's *Ni medio heterosexual, ni medio sexual. Soy bisexual* [Neither Half Heterosexual nor Half Sexual. I Am Bisexual] (2020), and it has been used in educational worksheets such as the one developed by the Cineteca Nacional de Chile's Film School Program (Programa

Escuela al Cine) and the Audience Training for Children Program (Programa Educación y Cine) at the Cine Arte Normandie (Chile). Likewise, the film is part of several educational campaigns on respect for sexual diversity and same-sex parents, like the one developed by the Spanish Education League (2019).

Rara has also paved the way for audiences to embrace an unprejudiced model of the family unit on either side of the screen. Not without reason, the film's commercial premiere in Chile achieved the rating of suitable for family audiences, becoming the first production with lesbian protagonists to obtain this rating in the country (Zinegoak, 2020, p. 8). As San Martín states, the film attempts to be "a reflection of the society that we're building and where we want to take it" (San Martín, 2017). Sara, in the end, epitomises hope, even though the struggle for non-normative family constructions goes on.

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Old Masculinities, New Monstrosities: *Dientes rojos* (2021) by Jesús Cañadas and Its Reinterpretation of Noir and Supernatural Horror[1]

ABSTRACT
In *Dientes Rojos* [Red Teeth] (2021), Jesús Cañadas offers a reinterpretation of the noir genre and the monstruous figure in supernatural horror. This questioning aligns with two interrelated aspects in contemporary Hispanic prose, particularly the fiction produced by Latin American female authors: genre and gender subversion. Drawing on literary and audiovisual references from the noir and horror traditions, Cañadas crafts a feminist manifesto. This article explores how he achieves this, focusing on modern-day reinterpretations of the monster, both as a symbol of the oppressed and as an agent of resistance.

KEYWORDS
noir fiction; horror fiction; monster; feminism; genre subversion; gender subversion

1. Introduction

In his 2021 novel *Dientes rojos* [Red Teeth], Jesús Cañadas (Cádiz, 1980) – part of the wave of Spanish writers of the fantastic[2] that emerged in the early twenty-first century (Roas et al., 2017, pp. 203–214) – questions key elements of the noir genre and the monstrous figure, namely the hegemony of the male gaze in the former and the monster's original definition as a threatening other and the embodiment

[1] I would like to thank Ángela Rivera Izquierdo and Dale Knickerbocker for their linguistic help.

[2] By this term I refer to the genre defined, among others, by Vax (1963), Caillois (1965) or Todorov (1970), whose famous essay – *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* – was translated into English as *The Fantastic*. Among contemporary scholars of the fantastic in the Hispanic area, one must mention authors like David Roas, Elton Honores or Alejandra Amatto. In this article, though, I prefer to use the term *supernatural horror* for two reasons: firstly, because *horror* – as well as *Gothic* – is much more common in English-written essays than *fantastic* – which tends to be confused with *fantasy*, even with other non-mimetic genres – ; and most importantly, because I support the thesis that *horror* and *fantastic* point to two different genres. While *Dientes rojos* could be associated with both, it is the elements that elicit the *horror effect* which interest me the most in this text. For a clear distinction between horror and the fantastic, see Carrera Garrido (2024, pp. 27–31).

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of evil. Monstrosity, so common in supernatural horror, is here reinterpreted through its connection with a recurring feature in recent non-mimetic Hispanic literature: the gender perspective. Through this lens, women's concerns are brought to the fore, giving rise to an overtly feminist discourse. While this perspective has been incorporated into fiction predominantly by women writers – mainly in Latin America – Cañadas's approach is noteworthy for coming from a man and challenging traditionally masculine codes, especially those associated with the noir tradition (Abbott, 2002). In addition, the novel also intertextually engages with certain milestones of popular literary, film and television culture, from Lovecraft to Clive Barker's body horror, as well as noir films and series such as *Se7en* (Fincher, 1995) or *True Detective* (Pizzolato, 2014 –). This article examines how Cañadas succeeds in accomplishing this, assessing his contribution to the trend of thematic and ideological subversions that characterize contemporary fiction.

2. A Story Told in Two Voices

Dientes rojos is divided into two parts. The action is set in present-day Berlin, where the wounds of a troubled past can still be felt. Strangled by tourism and gentrification, the city remains split: on one side, an open and cosmopolitan society; on the other, a murky space brimming with poverty and violence. This is but one of the many dualities that run through the novel.

In the first part, detectives Lukas Kocaj and Otto Ritter lead the search for Rebecca Lilienthal, a teenager who has disappeared from a religious boarding school. Both protagonists are built on the antiheroic model established in Hammett's and Chandler's hard-boiled novels (Horsley, 2010, p. 137): cynical, alcoholic, xenophobic, aggressive, misogynistic. Initially, a contrast between them is suggested: Kocaj, the narrator, wishes to distance himself from his veteran partner, nicknamed *Tenaza* [Pincers]. Still, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that the same darkness dwells within him. His family situation as the son of an abusive father and the brutal events he faces ultimately lead to his downfall. His immersion in Berlin's underworld confronts him with nightmarish scenes, culminating in the discovery of Rebecca's mutilated corpse. It transpires that the girl had fallen victim to a nameless femicidal cult that worships a figure known as *The King* and which is made up of rapists and abusers from across the globe.

Defeated by his failure and tormented by personal demons – which even drive him to abuse a woman neighbor – Kocaj ends up taking his own life. His death, though, is not in vain: it serves as a ritual offering that allows the deceased Rebecca to escape the limbo she had been confined to after her death, the so-called *zona de fumadores* [smoking area]. It is from this point onward that *Dientes rojos* fully embraces supernatural horror, marking the beginning of its second part.

Much shorter than the first, this section is narrated by Rebecca, who returns from the Other Side retaining all the memories of her earthly existence, but also

bearing the grotesque appearance she had when buried. In this monstrous guise, she resumes the mission she had begun before her demise: to reach the King and confront him. To this end, she is accompanied by Ulrike, a former classmate; Babsi, a homeless woman who also fell victim to the cult; and, to the reader's surprise, Ritter. Unlike Kocaj, Ritter undergoes a character reversal that elicits a degree of sympathy as his backstory is revealed: his own daughter fell victim to the cult, and, like Rebecca, he is fixated on finding the King.

Thus begins a new descent into hell, whose climax brings us back to the boarding school. Here takes place a startling revelation: Rebecca's sacrifice was not perpetrated by cult members, but by a trio of women who, fed up with enduring male violence, decided to use her to gain access the King and kill him. These women are none other than the institution's Mother Superior, Babsi, and – shockingly – Rebecca's own mother. The girl's ritual death was the first step toward the throne; her return to life, the second. The third step, granting access to the royal chambers, involves a savage bloodbath. The Three Furies have already set it in motion by slaughtering the school's students. After also killing Ulrike and Otto, they finally offer themselves as sacrificial victims.

Horrified by the manipulation to which she has been subjected, but resigned to her terrible fate, Rebecca does not hesitate to complete the macabre ritual: after slitting her mother's throat, she is taken to the plane of reality where the King awaits her. There, she encounters the spirit of Kocaj, the tormented souls of countless women and, finally, the Monster himself. Unexpectedly, the King turns out to be a frail and cowardly individual. This is made evident when, after failing to persuade Rebecca to become his consort, he begins to plead for his life. She, however, never intended to kill the monster: defying her mother's will, she chooses to dethrone him and take the crown herself. From this renewed position of power, she will strive to fight against the mistreatment of women. The epilogue reveals Rebecca transformed into a true avenger, devoted to safeguarding other women.

3. *Dientes rojos* as an Inversion of Codes: The Monstrous Masculine Heroism

Gruesome and convoluted as it is, the story of *Dientes rojos* raises a provocative array of questions and inversions through two genres that coexist naturally in numerous works, as well as through a variety of references. One of these points to the adventures of Harry D'Amour, the occult detective imagined by Clive Barker in stories like "The Last Illusion" (1985) or *The Scarlet Gospels* (2015). The influence of the role-playing game *Kult* (1981), inspired by Barker's macabre scenarios, is also evident, and has been acknowledged by Cañadas himself[3].

[3] He mentions the game during the presentation, at Barcelona bookshop Gigamesh, of the 2023 re-edition of his novel *Los nombres muertos* (2013). There he speaks of *Dientes*

Alongside this reference, exemplary in its blend of crime and the supernatural, two others can be mentioned. One is Fincher's iconic film *Se7en*, the quintessential police investigation that descends into horror territory, albeit without fantastic elements. The other is H. P. Lovecraft's narrative fiction, particularly the stories in which interdimensional entities haunt humanity. The King embodies these figures as a monstrous being to whom human sacrifices are made. Cañadas's character not only recalls Lovecraft's, but also points to one of the latter's inspirations: Robert W. Chambers's short story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895).

The most obvious reference, nevertheless, is the American series *True Detective*, specifically its first season. Cañadas himself has been explicit about the major influence that Nic Pizzolatto's show had on the writing of *Dientes rojos*[4]. In fact, anyone familiar with the show will notice thematic and narrative similarities. As in the novel, the series' investigation revolves around ritual murders of young women, ostensibly sacrifices to a mysterious King. Moreover, Woody Harrelson's and Matthew McConaughey's characters mirror the paradigm embodied by Kocaj and Richter: two flawed, trauma-ridden and 'toxic' individuals. In both cases, the portrayal of such figures involves a critique – manifesting as a deep deconstruction of noir genre stereotypes, especially its forms of masculinity. Still, this critique unfolds differently in each work.

In *True Detective*, the script eventually grants its protagonists something akin to redemption (Linneman, 2017, p. 3). In *Dientes rojos*, by contrast, the fate of Kocaj and Richter takes a decidedly less forgiving path. Not only are they unable to prevent Rebecca's death or to stand up to the King's minions but, as the story progresses, they are increasingly dragged down into the dark abyss they were supposedly fighting against. In their descent – where the alleged heroes come close to becoming villains – it is the victim herself who steps in, taking over to complete what the detectives were incapable of.

Even though it is only thanks to Kocaj's sacrifice that Rebecca is able to escape the smoking area, and although the second part redeems Ritter to some extent, the novel presents a relentless portrait of both men. This is precisely where *Dientes rojos* diverges most notably from its US counterpart, daring to go further in questioning the generic and cultural patterns that serve as its foundation and becoming an unequivocally feminist statement. This is how author Elisa McCausland (2021) describes the novel in her foreword, emphasizing the "inversión de roles" [role inversion][5] (p. 19) it presents and referring to the story as "un relato que apuesta al

rojos as his "*Kult* novel" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuCQLF98Vmo&t=2826s&ab_channel=Librer%C3%ADaGigamesh (min. 47).

[4] He acknowledges it in most interviews and events about *Dientes rojos*; in the presentation of the book at Málaga bookshop Luces, for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeG3X9pkmVY&t=2149s&ab_channel=Librer%C3%ADaLuces (min. 5).

[5] All translations from Spanish are my own.

mismo tiempo por su deconstrucción" [a narrative that simultaneously wagers on its own deconstruction] (pp. 19–20). As she states:

> No falta […] en *Dientes rojos* un retrato crítico de las masculinidades que acostumbran a ser protagonistas de la literatura negra. Después de tender al lector el cebo de un aparente antagonismo entre dos policías de generaciones diferentes, Cañadas remueve todas nuestras certidumbres como lectores de *noir* al dejar claro con buen olfato que la evolución de la hombría tradicional en las nuevas masculinidades es, en muchas ocasiones, poco más que una sofisticación aparente, bajo la cual muy bien pueden agazaparse monstruos todavía más tóxicos que los albergados a cara descubierta por sus antecesores, ante los que se creen superiores. [*Dientes rojos* does not shy away from offering a critical portrait of the masculinities that tend to dominate noir fiction. After taunting the reader with the apparent antagonism between two policemen of different generations, Cañadas skillfully dismantles our certainties as noir readers. He highlights, with keen insight, that the evolution from traditional masculinity to new masculinities is often little more than a veneer of sophistication. Beneath this façade may lurk even more toxic monsters – hidden but no less dangerous than those openly embodied by their predecessors, to whom these new men consider themselves superior.] (pp. 17–18)

The word *monster* is indeed key. As noted, Cañadas's novel redefines the very notion of monstrosity. This redefinition moves in two opposing directions, assigning different values to the concept. Let us recall that the monster, in its basic meaning, is the *other*, the stranger, the external threat that disrupts the established order and incites fear by its mere presence (Cohen, 1996). This is how horror used to conceive it: as an antagonist. In a simplistic division of roles, the focal characters embody good and thus are tasked with combating the creature, the embodiment of evil (Losilla, 1993, p. 72). This perspective began to break down in the last third of the twentieth century, giving rise to narratives in which boundaries became blurred (pp. 139–160). In such stories, the hero is often revealed as a monster, and the former opposition evolves into a disturbing fusion, transforming both figures into two sides of the same coin. According to Leffler (2000):

> The most frightening element of the horror story is the main protagonist's, and thus indirectly the reader's or viewer's, encounter with the monster and the fact that this leads to a blurring of the distinctions between monster and protagonist, self and Other, good and evil […] [T]his monster is seldom an external monster, separate from the main human protagonist, but something that takes over from within, reshaping the human mind and body as the Other. (p. 162)

This is clearly the case with *Dientes rojos*. As McCausland summarizes, those who initially seemed to embody order – the law, literally – and the force opposing evil, ultimately reveal themselves to be only slightly less monstrous, ethically and ideologically, than those they claimed to fight. As for these others, Cañadas introduces another twist, also in line with the evolution of the monstrous figure in today's horror fiction.

In contrast to the familiar association between monstrosity and the supernatural, the last two decades have seen a growing number of stories in which monsters are, in fact, human, and it has become increasingly plausible, even commonplace, for them to occupy reality, stripped of any fantastic pretext or motivation (Díaz Olmedo, 2011, pp. 25–26). This is precisely what happens in *Dientes rojos*: despite the inclusion of supernatural events and creatures, such as the King, the reader never loses sight of the real-world parallels of the actions and behaviors depicted. Even one of the cult members is overt about his motivations, far from any otherworldly causes:

> Nadie nos obliga a hacer lo que hacemos […]. El Rey no nos posee. No hacemos nada para él, no sacrificamos a nadie en su honor. […] Ni siquiera nos habla. Solo nos observa. Se oculta entre las grietas del mundo y nos mira. […] Esto no lo hace ningún monstruo. Esto lo hacemos nosotros. […] Nadie me ha poseído. Lo hago porque me gusta. [No one forces us to do what we do […]. The King does not possess us. We do nothing for him, we sacrifice no one in his honor. […] He doesn't even speak to us. He merely watches. He hides in the cracks of the world and watches us. […] This is not the work of any monster. This is what we do. […] No one has possessed me. I do it because I like it.] (Cañadas, 2021, pp. 345–346)

The violence certainly goes beyond the King's supernatural power and is also behind Kocaj's downfall. The only difference is that, in his case, he takes no pleasure in it but experiences it as torment, born of his self-loathing. This is what he confesses to Rebecca in the King's realm:

> Yo no os odio, Rebecca. Yo solo me odio a mí. […] No sabía qué hacer con todo ese odio, nadie me ha enseñado a liberarlo de otra forma que no fuera la violencia. Siempre contra quien yo consideraba más débil, contra quien pensaba que no me la devolvería. […] Esas descargas de violencia espantaban al fracaso. Me hacían sentir poderoso. Vivo. [I do not hate you, Rebecca. I only hate myself. […] I didn't know what to do with all that hatred; no one ever taught me how to release it in any way other than through violence. Always against those I considered weaker, against those I thought wouldn't fight back. […] Those outbursts of violence chased away failure. They made me feel powerful. Alive.] (p. 360)

This is the closest the novel comes to empathizing with the circumstances of abusive monsters. Apart from that, its verdict is unrelenting, and, curiously enough, it doesn't apply solely to men. Monstrosity, understood as an actual threat and a morally and ideologically despicable behavior, also extends to women, in a different way, but with similar negative undertones. Let us not forget the identity of Rebecca's murderers: in their attempt to combat an undeniable scourge, they act with similar savagery. In this sense, *Dientes rojos* avoids simplistic approaches to violence and the stigmatization of sex or gender, complicating instead the answer to a thorny issue, whose resolution should not involve further bloodshed. As Ulrike says:

> Esto no se acabará matando al Rey. […] El arma para acabar con esa violencia de la que habláis es esta: un colegio. Un colegio que enseñe a las niñas a no someterse, a parar los pies a quienes

> intenten abusar de ellas. Un colegio que enseñe a los niños que no somos cosas que poseer, que no somos víctimas. [This won't end by killing the King. […] The weapon to put an end to the violence you speak of is this: a school. A school that teaches girls not to submit, to stand up to those who try to abuse them. A school that teaches boys that we are not things to be owned, that we are not victims.] (pp. 354–355)

There is a utopian undertone to Ulrike's discourse, the educational ideal to which many progressive thinkers aspire. This is, without doubt, the most mature and balanced goal, and, at the same time, the hardest to reach in the short term. At this point, an alternative kind of monstrosity emerges in Rebecca, rewriting the sort presented so far and imbuing the notion with positive, or rather subversive, connotations. It is in this sense that *Dientes rojos* aligns itself with the most prominent trends in contemporary non-mimetic fiction.

4. *Dientes rojos* as an Inversion of Codes: The Heroic Female Monstrosity

According to Moraña (2017):

> A veces lo monstruoso puede simbolizar la hegemonía que elimina y que niega; en otros escenarios, el monstruo representa lo contrario: la ira de los desplazados, los desaparecidos, los innombrables. En este caso, es enemigo de la impunidad, constituye la voz gutural de una conciencia acallada, pero acechante, que vuelve por sus fueros. [Sometimes the monstrous can symbolize a hegemony that obliterates and negates; in other scenarios, the monster represents the opposite: the rage of those displaced, disappeared, unnamable. In this case, it is the enemy of impunity, the guttural voice of a silenced yet vigilant conscience that returns to reclaim its rights.] (p. 43)

If in the first part of *Dientes Rojos* monstrosity is fraught with negative connotations, pointing to an oppressive order sustained even by those who allegedly work to dismantle it, in the second its meaning is significantly altered. At first, the monster goes from signifying the threatening, evil or horrifying to representing the different, the subaltern. Further on in the narrative, it even ceases to stand for this abused or mistreated other, emerging as an agent of resistance and opposition to the status quo that becomes emblematic of the more classic understanding of monstrosity. As Moraña (2017) argues, "el carácter potencialmente emancipatorio (cuestionador, deconstructor, reorganizador) de lo monstruoso no debe ser desestimado" [the potentially emancipatory (questioning, deconstructive, reorganizing) character of the monstrous should not be overlooked] (p. 88). It is from this perspective that Rebecca is reconceptualized in the novel's final pages. Her post-mortem appearance deviates significantly from the physical norm. Additionally, her mere presence as a resurrected being causes unease around her. These two aspects make her a monster, at least in Carroll's sense (1990, pp. 27–35). Yet beneath this initial layer another more abstract interpretation is possible, allowing us to see the reconceptualized monster described above. A dialogue between Babsi and Rebecca makes this explicit:

> Has dejado atrás la Rebecca que eras antes y te has convertido en otra cosa. ¿Sabes por qué? Porque la Rebecca de antes solo podía ser una de las princesas del Rey. Una prisionera, una víctima. Y tú ya no eres nada de todo eso […]. Tú has escapado, Rebecca. Y ahora eres lo contrario a la princesa, a la presa, a la víctima: eres un monstruo. Una gorgona. [You have left behind the Rebecca you once were and have become something else. Do you know why? Because the Rebecca of before could only ever be one of the King's princesses. A prisoner, a victim. And you are no longer any of that […]. You have escaped, Rebecca. And now you are the opposite of a princess, a prey, a victim: you are a monster. A Gorgon.] (Cañadas, 2021, p. 287)

The choice of the Gorgon as the avatar of the new Rebecca is more than telling, as it is one of the monsters most strongly linked to women since antiquity. Pedraza (1983) presents the most famous of these creatures, Medusa, as a negative double of Athena (pp. 178–179). Cohen (1996), for his part, says: "The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith […] or Gorgon" (p. 9). Such has been the meaning associated with this mythical being in Western cultures for centuries, from foundational myths to modern fiction. In fact, this association extends to almost all female monsters prior to the twenty-first century. All women are monsters insofar as they have historically been conceptualized as the great 'others' of society and, thus, as threatening. For Moraña (2017), such a connection "[p]arte de la interpretación del cuerpo femenino como un cuerpo carente, mutilado, que evidencia – como el cuerpo del monstruo – una desviación de la norma" [stems from the interpretation of the female body as a lacking, mutilated body that demonstrates – like the monster's body – a deviation from the norm] (p. 231). Furthermore, figuratively, "[e]l monstruo, como la mujer, es situado en el margen del sistema, al borde del abismo de la irrepresentabilidad: es lo desviado, anómalo e incomplete" [the monster, like the woman, is situated on the margins of the system, on the brink of the abyss of unrepresentability: it is the deviant, the anomalous, and the incomplete] (p. 229). Both views are, of course, the product of the male gaze. As José Miguel G. Cortés (1997) explains:

> [*L*]*a vagina dentada*, *la mantis religiosa*, *la mujer caníbal* son creaciones masculinas cuya función es mitigar los propios demonios, creaciones de hombres que ven a la mujer como amenaza, como lo *otro*, lo desconocido, el reflejo monstruoso que nos interroga y puede llegar a cuestionarnos y nuestra relación con el mundo y con el propio cuerpo. [*The vagina dentata*, *the praying mantis*, *the cannibal woman* are male creations whose function is to assuage their own demons – creations by men who see women as a threat, as the other, the unknown, the monstrous reflection that interrogates us and can challenge both our relationship to the world and to our own bodies.] (p. 91)

This is the same perspective adopted by many scholars when approaching horror fiction prior to the third millennium. Among them, Barbara Creed stands out. In her essay *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), she proposed a reevaluation of horror cinema by considering the misogynistic stances that, in her view, underlay

the monsters in several key films. Focusing on male viewers' revulsion at images of abjection[6] associated with femininity, she concluded that horror was rooted in patriarchal men's fear of women, especially those who transgress the boundaries imposed on them (and are punished for doing so).

Although widely criticized by later scholars, Creed's theorisation remains a valuable reference point in the representation of the woman monster in horror fiction. As suggested, and pointing to the seemingly increased feminist consciousness in today's Western world, the portrayal of the female monster as an antagonist – a force opposed to good and stability – has been supplanted by powerful depictions that actively challenge patriarchal views. These portrayals reimagine the creature as a being endowed with agency and, more significantly, capable of evoking empathy from audiences. This new paradigm features in numerous literary, cinematic, and theatrical works from recent decades. Notably, Creed herself decided to expand her essay in 2023 to include films illustrative of this trend, such as *Teeth* (Lichtenstein, 2007), *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Amirpour, 2014), and *The Girl with All the Gifts* (McCarthy, 2016). In these movies, Creed contends, "[t]he monstrous-feminine is a powerfully othered, hybrid figure – a terrorist – whose aim is to undermine or destroy the oppressive, exclusionary patriarchal order" (p. 192).

The same can be observed in the Hispanic scene across a significant number of literary works. Indeed, many present-day authors – again, predominantly female and Latin American – use the monstrous within the framework of non-mimetic fiction as a tool or, to paraphrase Moraña, as a *war machine* to confront injustice and assert their autonomy against a perceived tyrannical order. As Boccuti (2023) states, this represents "una reacción a una condición de opresión que ya no se puede tolerar más, la huida de un orden monstruoso a través de la creación de otro (des)orden, en el que, sin embargo, la monstruosidad parece ofrecer la posibilidad de constituirse como sujetos autónomos y reestablecer la justiciar" [a reaction to a condition of oppression that can no longer be tolerated, an escape from a monstrous order through the creation of another (dis)order, where monstrosity appears to offer the possibility of becoming autonomous subjects and reestablishing justice] (p. 247). This dynamic gives rise to works that, according to Álvarez Méndez (2023),

> subvierten las normativas y arquetipos patriarcales de lo femenino en respuesta a las imágenes de monstruosidad unidas desde antiguo a la mujer que han identificado a esta con lo amenazante

[6] Abjection has gained significant critical weigh both in gender and horror studies since Kristeva (1982) defined it as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4), and stated that menstrual blood, among other feminine fluids considered abject, embodies "the objective frailty of symbolic order" (p. 70).

> y lo incomprensible, que han otrificado su identidad durante siglos tomando lo femenino como un todo monstruoso y han consolidado una construcción social del género. [subvert patriarchal norms and archetypes of femininity in response to the longstanding images of monstrosity associated with women. These images have historically identified women with the threatening and the incomprehensible, othering their identity for centuries by framing femininity as an inherently monstrous whole, thus reinforcing a socially constructed notion of gender.] (p. 79)

This is exactly what happens in the second part of *Dientes rojos*, following Rebecca's rebirth as a Gorgon. Her metamorphosis, apart from symbolic, is terrifyingly literal. It is not, however, the ability to turn people into stone that characterizes her new self, but another feature frequently linked to the Gorgon: the *vagina dentata*. This myth, mentioned above as one of men's greatest fears about women – more specifically, about their sexuality (G. Cortés, 1997, p. 92) – does in fact emerge in Cañadas's novel. In a remarkably shocking episode, readers discover that Rebecca has developed this peculiar feature in her anatomy. The scene overflows with body horror, yet disgust is balanced by a fascination with the empowerment that the anatomical singularity represents. Far from threatening, it emerges as a legitimate defense mechanism through which the girl takes her final leap: from victim of a perverse monstrosity to an equally powerful force of confrontation[7]. The process culminates on the book's final page, where she, now established as a vigilante, delivers a rallying cry that encapsulates the scope of the inversion:

> Soy la mujer de mimbre, la gran cabrona, la espíritu santa. Soy la mujer del saco, la medusa que sostiene la cabeza cercenada de Teseo [*sic*].[8] Soy toda la violencia de la que os habéis apoderado y que ahora os devuelvo. Mi nombre es Rebecca y soy la Reina de Amarillo. Y no estoy sola. [I am the wicker woman, the great badass, the female holy spirit. I am the bogeywoman, the Medusa holding Theseus's [*sic*] severed head. I am all the violence that you have seized and that I now return to you. My name is Rebecca, and I am the Queen in Yellow. And I am not alone.] (Cañadas, 2021, p. 367)

5. Conclusions

One of the aspects that make *Dientes rojos* unique is that it was written by a man: a cisgender and heterosexual man, to be more precise[9]. In a context in which female

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[7] As a matter of fact, the novel's title can both refer to the teeth offered to the King and to the *vagina dentata* itself. For more information on this motif and its relation to the Gorgon myth see Koehler (2017).

[8] I would say this is a mistake, as Perseus, not Theseus, is the human *hero* in Medusa's myth. One must admit, though, that both were paladins of the patriarchal order, so it is possible that Cañadas was referring to the Minotaur's slayer, after all. The ideological meaning would remain, in any case, roughly the same.

[9] Cañadas himself acknowledges this status in the Málaga presentation, assuming his limitations when he started writing the novel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeG3X9pkmVY&t=2149s&ab_channel=Librer%C3%ADaLuces, min. 27). One of the reviewers who read this article, by the way, suggested I tackle the issue of new masculinities. *Dientes rojos*, though, only implicitly refers to this

authors systematically subvert – or at least reinterpret – the codes upon which the fantastic and horror have been constructed for centuries, it is significant that men writers seek to embrace the cause, and do so from similar perspectives. Cañadas's work goes even further. On the one hand, it incorporates into this questioning a genre like noir: unequivocally hypermasculine in its origins, women were seen in this genre either as objects or evil beings – *femme fatales* (Abbott, 2002, pp. 21–64). On the other hand, the novel contrasts two ways of understanding monstrosity. The first is primarily associated with abusive men, while the second pertains to women who revolt against oppression, leaving behind the traditional roles of princesses and victims. While the first type of monstrosity remains laden with negative and undeniably horrific values, the second stands as a transgressive alternative, rooted in a feminist reinterpretation of the meanings commonly attributed to monstrous women in Western narratives. The distribution and operation of each form of monstrosity leave no room for doubt in the book analyzed here.

Dientes rojos, in any case, is open to discussion. Although most reviews have been positive and appreciative of its critical component, there are also voices condemning the excessive violence of the story. Interestingly, some see it as a book that deeply despises men, while others describe it as a kind of masculine sadistic fantasy that perpetuates the view of women as objects of desire[10]. This last interpretation would clash with the author's intentions, as well as with the novel's alignment with the more subversive works of contemporary non-mimetic fiction written by women. Or might the same judgment be applied to those as well? The debate is open.

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topic: even if the author himself may represent the recent shift in male sensibilities, his depiction of masculinity focuses mainly on its toxic side. What would be interesting is to analyze how readers – especially women – approach Cañadas's resignification of female monstrosity and his understanding of *empowerment*, considering his gender identity: as the review mentioned in the next footnote indicates, there are some who question the scope of the deconstruction, and defend that the novel perpetuates certain stereotypes. If that were the case, Cañadas himself would unexpectedly become an example of the *phony evolution* McCausland described in the prologue. Such discussion might indeed be an appropriate complement to the present article.

[10] Here is one of them: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEGHow3VGCo. The reviewer says the book's women keep playing the roles of victim and sexual objects (min. 10). She does not mention Rebecca's transformation, though.

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Inexpressive, Fragmented or Untraceable Bodies in Ernesto Semán's *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China*[1]

ABSTRACT
This study aims to map the strategies of emancipation that some authors of the last 15 years set in motion in their works of fiction about the genocide of the Argentinean dictatorship. My intention is to delve into the aesthetic dimension of their political approaches, focusing on those creations that problematise what is thinkable, foreseeable or reasonable for the inexpressive, fragmented or untraceable bodies (Quintana, 2020) of both the disappeared and their perpetrators and relatives.
I will focus here on the particular case of the novel *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China* [I am a Brave Pilot of the New China] (2011) by Ernesto Semán. The plot alternates between three settings that form a conceptual kaleidoscope in which the bodies of the characters dislocate and renegotiate temporal and spatial obviousness –resorting to elements of non-mimetic literature – to make other forms of relationship with themselves and with others possible. For this porpuse, I will focus on the representation of the bodily, affective and experiential dimension of the protagonists and on the staging of an excess that, according to Rancière, seeks to destabilise the hegemonic order of representation, proposing displacements of the collective outline by crossing different logics.

KEYWORDS
Argentinian contemporary literature; autofiction; *hijos* literature

1. Introduction

The most recurrent literary formula in Latin America when telling about the traumatic consequences for the state violence victims is the autobiographical or autofictional narration. This article is a novel approach to the corpus of the *hijos* [children] of the Argentine Dictatorship, as it seeks to reflect on the centrality or not of the body – and, in relation to this, of emotions and vulnerability – in the narrative of the 1,5 generation: How is the corporeality of parents and children of

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the disappeared, as well as of the perpetrators, codified? Is it an abject representation or not (with reference to passions, sexual drives, wounds, illness, secretions...) and which is the articulation of gender in these narratives? Such thematic axes are fundamental, given that "[t]hese narratives are not only about events but also about bodily/emotional reactions to horror and atrocity" (Forcinito, 2023, p. 39).

In the case of the narrative of *hijos* in Argentina, we find voices that thematise the experience of state terror by authors of the second generation of post-memory or generation 1,5 as opposed to the testimony of the first generation (Arfuch, 2013; Pietrak, 2018)[2]. Central to these works is the issue of the restitution of the bodies of the disappeared or abducted children, and special attention is paid to the emptiness (of language, identity, meaning...) (Pietrak, 2018)[3]. Characteristic of their literary production is the variety of discourses when reflecting on trauma, different competing memories and identity(ies), resulting in a continuous search for new ways of expression. Some critics have noted, on the other hand, a generational split and a kind of anger or rebelliousness on the part of the youngest among the *hijos* (Gatti, 2008, p. 114). The material search for the disappeared father and/or mother in order to reconfigure their figure triggers the invention of the self of a subjectivity marked by disappearance and absence (Forné, 2018, p. 118).

Among the autobiographical/autofictional works selected[4], I can highlight six in which bodies play a particularly important role: *La trilogía de la casa de los conejos* [The Rabbit House Trilogy] by Alcoba, *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China* [I am a Brave Pilot of the new China] by Semán, *Aparecida* [Apparence] by Dillon and *Lo que aprendí de las bestias* [What I learned from the Beasts] by Carri. As can be deduced, only in a third part of the corpus as a whole does the body become an articulator of traumatic experiences and, at the same time, to a greater or lesser extent of political resistance, as we shall see below. This is not, therefore, a predominant approach.

As far as gender is concerned, in line with the development and expansion of feminisms in the so-called fourth wave, the female perspective and experience have become central to the narration of the traumatic experience of the dictatorship:

> in the context of a mass global movement of women, it has been argued that a good number of the emerging writers and artists of this generation are women. In *Oración*, Argentine writer María Moreno transforms the acronym HIJOS into HIJAS to refer to a group of female writers and artists in Argentina (Carri, Perez, Dillon, Quieto, Arias) who comprise a sort of "sororidad estética" ("aesthetic sorority") and whose work addresses the past without solemnity. These works are "más de ovejas negras que de mujeres en duelo". (Blejmar, 2023, p. 59)

[2] See systematisation of these concepts in Spiller et al. (2020).

[3] Indeed, one of the paradoxes we find in literary works by *hijos* is the insistence on affection related to the body when the body is what is actually missing.

[4] The corpus under study initially consisted of a total of 18 works (17 novels and one book of short stories).

We are dealing with works that focus on subjects who are markedly vulnerable, whose identities are considered powerless (Rancière, 2008/2010, p. 97): both in the case of the disappeared ones and in the case of their children, whose traumatic experience is codified in literary works by means of the most varied images and aesthetic resources, because "memory assumed in its conflictivity requires an aesthetic work of construction in which the writing itself, [and the different resources] accept the singularity of the events and the way in which they affected certain bodies" (Quintana, 2020, p. 426).

The reading framework for the present critical-discursive interpretation focused on the codification of corporeality is based, among others, on the theoretical proposals of Teresa Langle de Paz (2018), Gabriel Giorgi (2014) and Rita Segato (2006/2013). Following Jacques Rancière (2008/2010), this article aims to map some of the tactics of emancipation encoded in the body that some authors of the last twenty years – in this case Ernesto Semán – have taken up in their autobiographical or autofictional works on the genocide of the Argentinean dictatorship.

My starting hypothesis for this essay is that in the case of certain novels by second-generation authors it is possible to speak of "fictional interventions that destabilise and re-agendise the boundaries between the present and the absent, the real and the virtual" (Quintana, 2020, p. 427)[5], in many cases resorting to the body as the central motif. A body wounded by memory, sometimes marked by other types of violence in addition to that of the state. In any case, it is always a question of bodies affected by by a life experience that constructs knowledge. From Rosi Braidotti's (2022) perspective, we can read some of these works as examples of situated knowledge: thanks to their reproduction of concrete experiences in particular bodies they help to map power relations (p. 116), in some cases succeeding in fictionally and emotionally reversing the effects of the violence resulting from such power relations. Bodies are, from this perspective, above all relational and affective: they affect and are affected by their exchanges with other bodies. In this sense, I am interested in exploring the complex ways in which literature recreates the body´s paradoxical meanings.

My intention in these pages in particular is to delve into the aesthetic dimension of political approaches in Ernesto Semán's novel *Soy una bravo piloto de la nueva China* [I am a Brave Pilot of the New China] (2011), focusing on the way in which it problematises what is thinkable, foreseeable or reasonable for the inexpressive, fragmented or untraceable bodies (Quintana, 2020, pp. 407–415) of both the disappeared ones and their perpetrators and relatives. Thus, I will reflect on how in this fiction work with autobiographical elements the bodies of the

[5] Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

second generation are confronted and put into dialogue with those of the previous generation in an innovative way.

The novel's plot alternates between three settings ("The City"; "The Countryside" and "The Island") that form a conceptual kaleidoscope in which the bodies of the characters dislocate and renegotiate temporal and spatial obviousness – among others, by resorting to elements of non-mimetic literature – in order to make other forms of relationship possible with themselves and with others. I will focus here on the representation of the bodily, affective and experiential dimension of the protagonists – Rosa, Rubén, Luis Abdela and Capitán – and on the staging of an excess that seeks to destabilise the hegemonic order of representation, proposing displacements of the collective layout by means of crossing different logics.

For the purposes of this article, I will follow Teresa Langle de Paz's approach (2018), who proposes a paradigm shift with regard to the traditional concept of "agency". In her opinion, this should enclude the everyday life and the emotional sphere. Thus, she states as problematic that 'in the framework of the enlightened liberal intellectual tradition, "agency" is understood as individual freedom, and this constitutes an aprioristic condition for desired forms of autonomy. "Agency is thus a capacity to reverse everything that prevents one from having independent control over one's own life; to achieve a certain degree of well-being, to be a leader, to freely express what one wants to do and to be an "empowered" person in general" (pp. 218–219)[6]. In contrast, for Sabadell-Nieto and Segarra (2014), the community is the place where the individual can no longer be understood as indivisible and totally self-sufficient (p. 9). This highlights our vulnerability, as well as the link between the political aspect and the body and sexuality. Indeed, from this perspective neither the "self" nor the body have clear boundaries.

Langle de Paz (2018) also proposes that "it is in emotionality where numerous forms of overcoming, contradiction or subversion of the tyrannies of the social originate and manifest themselves" (p. 29), "through emotionality, in the relationality with other bodies and with the environment, which circulate and spread from one body to another" as also has been evidenced in Sara Ahmed's work (2015, p. 100). There are spheres of reality that are inaccessible from the logos so that, in this sense, it is worth bearing in mind that "the affective-emotional processes that are triggered in the inter-relationality of people with

[6] For reasons of space, it is not possible here to go deeper into the affect turn theories (see Calderón Puerta, 2021, pp. 188–191). Regarding critical articulations between these theoretical perspectives and the corpus of the memory literature see Gallardo and Saban (2021) or Macón (2022). Regarding the history of "emotional agency" concept, see for example Elaine Scarry (1987) and her "agency languages"..

social structures, other non-human beings and the material environment, cannot be completely measured or deciphered" (p. 23).

In *Soy un bravo piloto de la nueva China*, agency is approached in a similar way, that is, beyond the autonomy of the subject, as it focuses on everyday activity and the emotional exchange that takes place in the latter, aspects that traditionally escape historical analysis due to their volatile nature. In this way, this novel about Argentinean memory emphasises the relational and the porous limits of the self, through fictional characters who are decisively influenced by the emotions that circulates in their environment.

Semán's novel, first published in 2011, is a work of fiction with autobiographical elements, according to the writer himself (Friera, 2011). The plot focuses mainly on two events: the degenerative process of Rosa – Rubén's mother – as a result of cancer, and the disappearance of his father by the repressive forces of the dictatorship thirty years earlier. This last aspect is certainly inspired by the author's life, but it is not the only autobiographical element present in the work. A real photograph of his family is reproduced in the book[7]. In addition, the names of the parents in the fiction – Rosa and Luis Abdela – correspond to the aliases that Elías Semán and his wife used when they were in hiding.

Throughout the plot, three physical and temporal scenarios are presented in alternating chapters, with different narrative perspectives. I will now examine each of them in more detail.

2. "The City": the sick body

The literary text begins with the discovery by the protagonist and narrator, Rubén Abdela, of the supposedly lifeless body of his father, Luis, hanging in his living room. Here the ghostly, conditioning relationship between the living body of the son and that of the disappeared is posited: "So the legs of *the body* hanging in the centre of the room left a stretched shadow, which crawled across the floor to the wall and *stuck to my body*, to me who was standing there, neither entering nor closing the door" [emphasis added] (Semán, 2011, p. 13). We look here into the primordial scene of the story: the symbolic interrelation between two corporealities – an inert one and the other alive – in which the former "takes over" the latter emotionally to the point of making it impossible to move (also in life).

In the chapters entitled "The City", the action takes place in the present. Rubén is a geologist who has returned to Argentina from abroad to accompany his mother, who is chronically ill with cancer, in her last period of life. These chapters are narrated in the first person and focus on the intense emotional exchange among

[7] The narrator and *hijo*, Rubén Abdela, (2023, p. 74) says that it is "the only existing image of our family as a whole. The photo that had survived everything, including ourselves" (Semán, 2011, p. 185). So I do agree with Federico Cantoni's interpretation.

the narrator, Rosa and his brother Agustín. Their coexistence is motivated by the advanced stage of the woman's illness and, consequently, by her imperative need for care. The narrative, in fact, focuses above all on Rosa Abdela's sick and dying body:

> Mi mamá parecía mucho más chica y endeble de lo que yo recordaba. No estaba encorvada ni nada que se le pareciera. [...] La piel se había hecho algo más traslúcida, los ojos más grandes, el hueco de los ojos más grande aún. [...] El *cuerpo* debe cambiar cuando sabemos que nos vamos a morir, esa información circula como un anuncio o un recordatorio, para preparase de alguna manera. [My mum looked much smaller and flimsier than I remembered. She wasn't hunched over or anything like that. [...] Her skin had become a little more translucent, her eyes bigger, the hollow of her eyes even bigger. [...] The *body* must change when we know we are going to die, that information circulates like an announcement or a reminder, to prepare us in some way.] [emphasis added]. (Semán, 2011, p. 30)

Indeed, in many occasions the protagonist observes and describes in detail the progressive deterioration of his mother's body. In fact, the awareness of her imminent death turns the characters' coexistence into a process of farewell. A mourning that, on the other hand, remained unfinished in the case of the father, who disappeared during the dictatorship. This contrast is fundamental to discern the importance of the physical presence of the body of the loved ones before and after their death for the possibility of carrying out the mourning process, in Freud's terms (Butler, 2004). The porous agency of the self that Rubén will express is possible precisely by the intense maternal-filial exchange, the result of mutual vulnerability and interdependence.

In Semán's novel, this female body (already an old woman in the plot) is articulated as resistant, a fighter in the face of adversity in the past. But it is also – in a vital continuity – persevering and combative in the present time, when confronting the illness that is consuming it, and which at the same time reveals its extreme fragility:

> Me miraba desde ahí con los ojos redondos y grandes, dos huecos verdes y profundos recortados en un cutis amarillo verdoso, dentro de una cara en la que sólo se veían una sonrisa dentada y los huesos saltones que marcaban la complexión robusta de mi madre *sobre la carne de un sobreviviente*. [She looked at me with big round eyes, two deep green hollows cut into a greenish-yellow complexion, inside a face with only a toothy smile and the jutting bones that marked my mother's robust build *on the flesh of a survivor*] [emphasis added]. (Semán, 2011, p. 94)

Maternal corporeality is encoded in the text both as a largely vulnerable body (in the past because of her advanced state of pregnancy or current ailments), and at the same time as a body with enormous vital potential to endure, defy or work. Thus, while pregnant, she opposed the mandate of her political comrades to have an abortion and managed to get her way. When she was younger, she collected tobacco leaves in the fields in exhausting workdays. Similarly, during the terminal period of her cancer she struggles heroically with pain. It is precisely

in these fragments centred on the evolution of the mother's condition that the emotionality that circulates among the sick, dying body of the mother and the vital bodies of Rubén and his brother, who are clearly affected by the physical and emotional exchange with their mother, becomes central. This period together with his relatives will change the protagonist's life forever.

3. "The Countryside": alienated bodies

In the chapters entitled "The Countryside", the action takes place in the past, during the repression period. In them, the omniscient voice recovers the events surrounding the clandestine internment centre of the same name. It describes the actions of the group of repressors who carried out their genocidal activity in this centre, i.e. the detention, torture and murder of (alleged) left-wing activists. The third-person narration focuses here on the experience of one of the genocidaires, Capitán, and the particular relationship he establishes with one of the victims, Luis Abdela (Rubén's father).

In these parts of the novel there is a clear contrast between the inexpressive and fragmented bodies of the arrested people and the alienated body of Capitán. The former are recreated as corporealities of uncertain temporality (Giorgi, 2014), the object of the expressive violence of a repressive system (Segato, 2013). Hence, the human fragments that emerge in the river form part of a coded message addressed to society as a whole: "siempre hay algo que termina flotando en algún lado. […] En algún momento los restos van a salir a la superficie y van a andar por ahí, flotando, hasta quedarse en algún banco de arena, en alguna playa bonaerense" ["there is always something that ends up floating somewhere. [...] At some point the remains will come to the surface and will float around, until they end up on a sandbank, on a beach next to Buenos Aires]" (Semán, 2011, p. 117). Only Luis Abdela's body, Rubén's father, manages to partially escape the systematic violence: Capitán, for some strange reason that he himself does not understand, respects him to a certain extent.

The very absence of the kidnapped bodies and the silence surrounding them are messages of this communication of sovereignty (Segato, 2013) linked to an expressive violence[8]. The chapters of the novel set in "The Countryside" also include detailed descriptions of the humiliating treatment to the detainees and the lack of respect for their corpses. The procedures of torture and transfer of the lifeless bodies are described with a good amount of details on smells, spaces, colours, sounds, etc. The novel reveals and denounces this type of violence as part of the domination regime imposed by the military dictatorship, but it goes much

[8] In this regard, see Jorge Rafael Videla's famous speech https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbK85XGa7EE.

further. It reflects on what can happen as a result of the corporal and affective exchange between a repressive agent and the violated bodies:

> La peste de la carne quemada ya no le mareaba como al principio. Olor del pelo y la piel y la sangre, ácido y dulce [...]. *Sala de Interrogatorios Tácticos Número 1. Detenidos en tránsito*. [...] A veces, Capitán escuchaba su propia voz. Le había empezado a pasar por esa época o un poco antes, sobre todo en El Campo, pero no sólo allí. Decía algo, cualquier cosa, por ejemplo "zurdos de mierda" o "a ver cómo dejaron todo", *y su propia voz le llegaba desde afuera en lugar de por adentro, hablaba por otro*. [The stench of burnt flesh no longer made him dizzy as it did at first. Smell of hair and skin and blood, sour and sweet [...]. *Tactical Interrogation Room Number 1. Detainees in transit.* [...] Sometimes, Captain heard his own voice. It had started to happen to him around that time or a little earlier, mostly in El Campo, but not only there. He would say something, anything, for example "fucking lefties" or "let's see how they left everything", *and his own voice would come to him from the outside instead of from the inside, he would speak for someone else*] [second emphasis added]. (Semán, 2011, pp. 46–47)

As we can see in the previous quotation, it is striking how extremely cruel the sensoriality is articulated in the text. An inventory that does not leave the reader indifferent, just as it does not leave the genocidal character at the centre of the plot impassive. As a result of his own excesses, the agent gradually loses contact with his own body, which seems increasingly disjointed. In this way, Capitán enters a process of alienation in which his own actions increasingly escape his control and awareness. For example, he develops a total deafness that causes him to become mute. A gradual degeneration that potentially risks leading to madness, as it happened to other repressors portrayed in the literary text. Like Vieira, who "salía a correr a la medianoche por la ruta 3 completamente desnudo, gritando una serie de cosas incomprensibles" [went out at midnight to run along Route 3 completely naked, shouting a series of incomprehensible things]" (Semán, 2011, p. 205); or the Rabbit, a fellow at the detention centre who decides to commit suicide by putting an electric cooker in his bathtub. Here the persecutory question of the bodies of the disappeared as spectres, neither dead nor alive, does not appear. Their bodies do not return the violence they have received. Rather, we are faced with the way in which the repressed returns as a sympton, converted into hallucination.

4. "The Island": bodies facing each other

In the chapters entitled "The Island", on the other hand, the action takes place in what seems to be an indefinite future, on an island of indeterminate, changing shape, ruled by a strange couple (Rudolf and The Rubber Lady). As in the sections of "The City", the protagonist is Rubén Abdela, who also narrates his experience in the first person.

The island, lacking a name of its own, is presented as a dystopian space-time scenario: "Hay muchos basurales, regados de celulares, licuadoras, paredones

rotos, zapatillas casi sin uso, computadoras. Y cuerpos, claro. Un montón de cuerpos a intervalos regulares." [There are many rubbish dumps, planty of mobile phones, blenders, broken walls, almost unused trainers, computers. And *bodies*, of course. A lot of *bodies* at regular intervals] [emphasis added] (Semán, 2011, p. 19). This place is not subject to the laws of physics as we know them: the materiality of living things and the natural environment function outside the logic of the extradiegetic world. The recourse to non-mimetic narrative allows Semán to play with the potentiality of bodies in fiction.

Thus, Raquel, a former lover of Rubén, inhabits a body that, because of its unstable and unpredictable character, holds new possibilities: "Raquel no es un fantasma, ni una intriga, sino más bien *un desfase cronológico*, *alguien que ha terminado por encarnar la posibilidad de otro futuro*, la esperanza de que otro Rubén es posible" [Raquel is not a ghost, nor an intrigue, but rather *a chronological gap, someone who has ended up embodying the possibility of another future*, the hope that another Rubén is possible] [emphasis added] (p. 68). The mysterious woman is a "phantom" presence that returns and wonders, enabling the protagonist not only to return to a past that is theoretically closed, but above all to open up new options for himself and, therefore, for the future.

Raquel would then embody a temporal dislocation that has continuity in the scenario of the strange island. A geographical space in continuous transformation[9] that also allows the relationship with past time to be altered, since it even makes it possible "[q]ue los desaparecidos digan dónde están, que ellos digan algo. [Que digan] por qué no salieron corriendo [for the disappeared to say where they are, for them to say something." [Let them say] why they didn't run away] (p. 144). An environmental and social environment characterised by a dreamlike and unpredictable atmosphere, which puts an end to the usual, supposedly linear and unalterable chronology. Only in such a place can the return of those who are no longer there become possible.

The island could be read as a symbolic place for the isolated bodies of the kidnapped and murdered people. However, in Semán's novel it is also presented as a realm of emotional potentialities to be explored. Indeed, in such a dystopian yet utopian scenario, the (real? virtual?) encounter between perpetrator and victim takes place: the reincarnated bodies of Luis Abdela and Capitán engage in an unexpected dialogue about their shared experience during the period of state terrorism. They are forced to confront each other, as well as to discuss their terrible common past, raising a series of key questions for themselves but, above

[9] The island is constantly changing shape, and its inhabitants appear and disappear in unexpected ways. For example, the path Rubén takes to run in the morning changes its trajectory every day.

all, for the spectator of both, Rubén, who stands for a whole generation of children of the disappeared ones.

Thus, Capitán questions Luis Abdela about why he returned to Argentina, where he was killed, if he could not have done so. A question which, as the text points out, would be of equal interest to Rosa and her children. Abdela then turns the question back to Capitán, asking why he went to work in repression. The dialogic duel closes with the development of a certain empathy on both sides towards the opponent. This decisive encounter stages a physical and emotional exchange that would be, if not impossible, certainly highly unlikely in the extradiegetic world, but which instead exemplifies well the concept of the porous agency of the self to which I have been referring. The emotionality that is unleashed and contagious among these bodies fictionally contradicts a certain logic of the most common reading of state terrorism in Argentina, which stiffens the victimizer and the victim in fixed historical roles. This opens up the possibility of a symbolic re-reading of the violence of the past.

5. "Epilogue"

In the "Epilogue" – again in the setting of "The City", a transcript of the extradiegetic world – an astonished Rubén reads in a diary that Capitán has died at the hands of his son after the latter learns that his father was an active member of the repressive forces in the 1970s. This final section of the book also narrates the cremation of Rosa's corpse, as a rite of farewell and the closing of a whole process.

In the last pages, the protagonist finds the suspended body of his father, a situation that takes us back to the beginning of the novel: "Abrí el departamento empujando la puerta con el peso de mi *cuerpo* y sobre mi cara cayó la sombra de un *cuerpo* colgado en el centro del living" [I opened the flat by pushing the door with the weight of my *body* and on my face fell the shadow of a *body* hanging in the middle of the living room] [emphasis added] (Semán, 2011, p. 283). In effect, both corporealities meet (apparently) for the last time. But on this occasion Rubén has already become someone different. He has been transformed by the experience of taking care and saying goodbye to his mother, as well as having witnessed the dialectical and emotional exchange between Luis Abdela and Capitán in "The Island". Hence his reaction, in this case, is radically different:

> Estaba seguro y aterrado, el *cuerpo* que acaba de ver recortado contra el resplandor era el de mi padre, pero vestido apenas con una manta sucia y manchada de sangre. […] No me animaba a respirar ni a volver a mirar. Me llevó unos segundos revisar en mi cabeza lo que había pasado desde que empecé a subir las escaleras, y levantar la vista con tranquilidad mientras recuperaba la respiración. En el living *no había cuerpos ni padres ni hijos*, y por la ventana entraba toda la luz del día. [I was sure and terrified, the *body* I just saw silhouetted against the glare was my father's, but clad only in a dirty, blood-stained blanket. […] I couldn't bring myself to breathe or look again. It took me a few seconds to review in my head what had happened since I started up the stairs, and to look up calmly

> as I caught my breath. *There were no bodies or parents or children* in the living room, and all the daylight was coming in through the window] [emphasis added]. (Semán, 2011, p. 284)

At this point, the bodies belonging to two generations are finally separated. A decisive turning point thanks to a definitive farewell that closes the process of an unresolved grief, in Freud's terms (1917). The symbolic daylight coming through the window symbolises the beginning of a new life from that moment on.

6. Conclusions

in this article, in *Soy un bravo piloto...* the vulnerable and infringed corporeality of the protagonists is a central issue. However, their bodily interrelationship with others is no less so. In the novel's plot, this physical-affective interrelation is codified as a potential for a new articulation of the subject in the present, as well as of the possible (and multiple) re-readings of the past. In their everyday practices, the protagonists develop survival tactics – the "tricks of the weak" for Ludmer (1985) – that lead them to greater self-awareness, in the face of the alienation derived from the violence they had previously experienced.

Thus, throughout Semán's fiction, the body of the first-person narrator enters into an emotional dialogue with the dying and subsequently deceased body of his mother, on the one hand, and with that of his father's disappeared body, on the other. This spectral body, which symbolically hangs over Rubén, dominating and blocking him in his present, will disappear at the end of the novel, allowing life to continue, free of the burden of the past.

In contrast, in the fragments framed in the setting of "The Countryside", certain repressors end up alienated by their contact and emotional contamination with the bodies of their victims, in a kind of poetic justice. As for the dystopian setting of "The Island", it makes possible the theoretically impossible encounter of the protagonist with the reincarnated and virtual bodies – real and not real at the same time – of Luis Abdela (the disappeared father), Capitán (the repressor) and Raquel.

According to Quintana (2020), violence cuts ties among actors and social sectors and prevents their mutual affectation, "producing bodies fixed to certain roles and often stigmatised [...]. Bodies which, precisely in these forms of violence, are denied power, the capacity to refuse these identifications and become others" (pp. 429–430). Contrary to these principles, and as I have made clear, this partly autobiographical fiction recreates the interaction among bodies, emphasising the relational and the porous limits of the self. Indeed, the work focuses on the experience of characters who are decisively influenced by the emotion circulating in their environment, an aspect that allows them to activate certain mute technologies (De Certeau, 1996/2000), aimed at overcoming the tyranny of the social (in this case, the consequences of police and military violence). In the three fictional scenarios of the plot, the affective contamination among bodies entails

not only the internalisation of the vulnerability of the other, which opens us to empathy (Friera, 2011), but also articulates a type of agency that moves away from the dominant liberal model.

This novel thus proposes a fiction that breaks with the horizon of expectations regarding the problem of *hijos*, insofar as in the three alternating scenarios of the plot there is an exchange among the bodies and affections of its protagonists that are fundamental both to their personal development and to the events narrated. Such a corporal and affective exchange dislocates and rearticulates in a novel way the events of Argentina's violent past and their consequences. Firstly, thanks to impossible time leaps that make it possible to imagine a new relationship among the bodies of the first and second generations. Secondly, through affective relations between bodies that imply an inversion of vulnerability and entail a resignification of it, by resituating power relations (victim-perpetrator) and family relations (fathers-mothers-children) given in a new framework of intelligibility: the porous agency of the self (Langle de Paz, 2018). Surprisingly, the author resorts to elements of non-mimetic literature: a staging of an *excess* that manages to destabilise the hegemonic order of representation of the violence of the dictatorship.

This literary text proposes a certain common *sensorium*, which allows us to think, feel, speak *with* bodies in pain that co-implicate us in what has happened to them and with the violent past (Quintana, 2020, p. 430). They are bodies capable of confronting violence a second time in order to give it a new meaning, to demonstrate that human existence not only has continuity after experiencing violence, but that it is capable of reinterpreting and giving a new dimension to it. In this sense, the partially autobiographical writing proposed by Semán can be read as one of the possible practices of emotional and political re-appropriation of established ways –institutionalised or not – of thinking about the violent past and its effects on the present.

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Between Social Commitment and Distinction: The Life Writings of Elena Poniatowska

ABSTRACT
This article examines the life writing of Elena Poniatowska from a sociocritical perspective, with particular focus on the chronicles compiled in *Fuerte es el silencio* [Silence is Strong] (1980) and the novel *El amante polaco* [The Polish Lover] (2019, 2021). While these works appear to exhibit thematic discontinuity and ideological divergence, given that the social commitment embedded in the chronicles seems to contrast sharply with the homage paid to the last king of Poland in the author's most recent novel, ostensibly aligned with the tradition of canonical biography – both ultimately articulate "politics of recognizability" (Butler, 2009) and a reconfiguration of the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2010). The analysed life writing enables a critical interrogation of hierarchies and social norms as well as transformation of the hegemonic discursive order (Cros, 2002; Malcuzynski, 2006, 2009), while also probing the boundaries and possibilities of testimonial and auto/biographical literature (Anderson, 2011; Arfuch, 2002, 2018).

KEYWORDS
Fuerte es el silencio; *El amante polaco*; life writing; ideology; counter-hegemony

1. Introduction

The widely discussed and celebrated oeuvre of Elena Poniatowska has firmly established itself within the canon of Latin American, auto/biographical, and feminist literature. Her critical and popular success, sustained over decades, may be attributed not only to the subversive nature of her narrative – both thematically and formally – but also to her remarkable capacity to encode, interrogate and transform social discourses. Poniatowska's writing actively engages with the mechanisms of exclusion and the enduring logics of patriarchal, class-based power structures. In this respect, her work might be read not merely as literary production but as a discursive intervention – one that foregrounds the entanglement

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between literature, ideology, "sociability" and power structures[1], as analysed by sociocriticism. Among contemporary authors, Poniatowska distinguishes herself through her ability to combine a sophisticated artistic vision with theoretical and political reflection, particularly in her explorations of social exclusion, gender, identity, representation, and life writing.

From a sociocritical perspective, every literary text functions as a historically situated discursive artefact. It is embedded in, and responsive to, diverse social discourse practices: a complex matrix of voices, positions, and tensions that constitute what may be said, thought, or imagined in a given conjuncture (Angenot, 1998; Malcuzynski, 1991, 2006, 2009). Poniatowska's narrative practice, deeply attuned to the lived experience of marginalised subjects – especially women, the poor, Indigenous communities, and political dissidents – exposes and challenges the tacit limits of hegemonic discourse. Her literature interrogates the conditions under which certain subjectivities and certain life experiences are rendered intelligible and others consigned to the margins of the unsayable.

As she herself acknowledges in the prologue to *El amante polaco* [The Polish Lover], "the life of [her] country absorbed all [her] strength"[2]. Consequently, in order to engage with Mexican reality from a distinctly social and political position, she often embeds her narratives within what Arfuch (2002) terms the "biographical space". In both her fiction and non-fiction, Poniatowska constructs and reconstructs life-narratives – memoirs, diaries, letters, autofictions, fictionalised biographies, chronicles, and testimonial novels based on oral autobiographical accounts – as she conceives history as genealogy and genealogy as testimony rooted in the narration of life experiences. She feels compelled to recreate the voices of the voiceless so as to establish her own voice. Since the publication of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* [Until I see You, My Jesus] (1969), she has consistently interrogated the strategic use of life-narratives in forging connections between discursive practices and the material, corporeal conditions of those who articulate them. In her literature, life writing becomes a political tool employed to codify the experience of marginalised subjectivities and vulnerable bodies, of pariahs (Arendt, 2004), defectors (Leibovici, 2011) and rebellious women (Varikas, 1995).

The act of recovering lives – primarily women's lives – that have been silenced, marginalised, or misrepresented has become a key challenge that Poniatowska has embraced from the outset of her literary career in the tumultuous 1960s. She chronicles the lives of working-class women, excluded on the basis of both

[1] In her article on Poniatowska's chronics – among others *Fuerte es el silencio* – Carmen Perilli refers to the Mexican author as a "chronicler of the alterity" that does not interpret it but (re) produces it in her texts, focusing on women as subjects in history (1996, p. 65). For more on the texts by Poniatowska that Perilli places in the "space of the chronicle" see Amar Sánchez (2013), Negrín (2019), Poot Herrera (1996).

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish and Polish are by the authors.

gender and class, while also paying tribute to numerous women artists and writers who endured the harsh constraints of male domination in the artistic and literary fields (Bourdieu, 1995): Angelina Beloff, Lupe Marín, Leonor Carrington, Tina Modotti, Frida Kahlo, Nahui Olin, Pita Amor, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Garro, among others. Building upon this dedication to narrating lives at the margins, Poniatowska's engagement with life-narratives – chronicles, biographies, and autobiographies – becomes central not merely as literary forms but as epistemological interventions into the question of what constitutes a "liveable life" (Butler, 2004, 2009).

Following the theoretical trajectories laid out by Malcuzynski (1991, 2006), and Chicharro Chamorro (2005, 2012), we understand Poniatowska's literary project as one that negotiates the "given," the "created," and the "projected". Her texts not only emerge from pre-existing social discourses – the "given" – but also actively reshape them – the "created" – while pointing toward alternative epistemologies and collective imaginaries – the "projected". This triadic movement, central to sociocritical analysis, underscores her capacity to make visible that which hegemonic discourse tends to obscure: the voices of those excluded from normative structures of representation and legibility.

Life writing, in her oeuvre transcends the inscription of the personal and emerges as a mode of contesting normative frameworks of intelligibility and worth. In presenting stories of those denied institutional recognition – Indigenous communities, the poor who are outside the social bracket, artists marginalised by politics or patriarchy, victims of sexual abuse – Poniatowska engages in what Judith Butler has termed the "politics of recognizability" (Butler, 2009), challenging the existing "distribution of sensible" (Rancière, 2010). These narratives not only restore agency to historically silenced subjects but also articulate alternative grammars of life, affirming the lived experiences of those who persist despite exclusion. The lives encoded in literature thus become a site of resistance: a means of inscribing recognition into spaces from which it has been violently erased. Through this literary recuperation, Poniatowska invites us to reconsider how value is assigned to human lives, and whose life-stories are deemed worth telling.

2. "I am what I am because of the thousands of voices I have listened to"[3]

In "La colonia Rubén Jaramillo" [Rubén Jaramillo Neighbourhood], the final of the five chronicles comprising *Fuerte es el silencio* [Silence is strong] (1980),

[3] Words spoken by Elena Poniatowska on 10 October 2012 during the opening speech of the conference *Nuevos Cronistas de Indias 2*, organised by the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA) and the Gabriel García Márquez Foundation for New Ibero-American Journalism (FNPI). (Poniatowska, 2012).

Elena Poniatowska projects her *alter ego*: a humble and silent secretary, wholly dedicated to recording the life and struggle of Güero Medrano, a guerrilla fighter and peasant leader who, in 1973, alongside thirty destitute families, occupied wasteland in Villa de las Flores near Cuernavaca. There, they constructed a settlement of makeshift dwellings fashioned from corrugated iron sheets and cardboard, devoid of electricity and potable water, yet fiercely defended as their own against the government, police, and army – defended, indeed, as one defends one's homeland. Poniatowska named the secretary of the Jaramillo neighbourhood after herself since, as she once confessed to Verónica Volkow, "[she] wanted to be [that] character" (Volkow, 1981, p. 41), placing in her mouth the following words: "I write down what I see, I pay close attention. I like to observe; I have always lived by paying attention. [...] Sometimes my eyes hurt, my temples ache, my body aches from being so alert" (Poniatowska, 2006, pp. 245, 259).

The chronicler herself assumes the role of an attentive observer, a witness with eyes and ears wide-open, who merely recounts what she sees and hears. Carlos Monsiváis wrote of Poniatowska: "She has mastered the art of seeing and hearing, and has brilliantly conveyed us what impatience and oppression have relegated to the shadows or to invisibility" (1981, pp. 3–4). It is precisely this ability that constitutes the political gesture of her literature – not through the direct representation of political ideas as its foundation or central theme, nor through the expression of specific ideological positions in her characters' words and actions, nor by aligning her work with any particular political stance.

Her literature is political in Rancière's sense, as it alters the parameters of our sensorium, making us see how power discourse naturalises and legitimises the hierarchical and violent distribution of bodies in the social order and, above all, by its capacity to incorporate the invisible sectors into the dominant order (cf. Rancière, 2010, pp. 37–38). Rancière insists that "the political" consists not only in "making what was unseen visible", but also in "in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as a mere expression of pleasure and pain is a shared feeling of a good or an evil" (Rancière, 2010, p. 38). Her literature is also political from a sociocritical standpoint, not merely because of its subject matter, as has been stated above, but because it intervenes in the discursive mechanisms that construct and legitimise hegemonic reality. Her texts expose the contingency and constructedness of hegemonic discourse – the ways in which it configures social hierarchies as natural, fixed, and self-evident, and ultimately, as the social discourse per se. By foregrounding marginalised lives and voices – those traditionally excluded from the "speakable" (Malcuzynski, 2006) – her work renders visible the processes through which certain forms of knowledge are authorised while others are dismissed as anecdotal, excessive, or incoherent. In doing so, she reveals that what counts as reality is itself a discursive production, one maintained through repetition, citation, and institutional power.

Hence, she does not merely codify the invisible sectors into the dominant order to represent them, but rather to make them heard, to amplify the countless voices "of those who have never had the right to anything, not even to be designated by name" (Poniatowska, 2006, p. 11): the voices of marginalised indigenous peasants who swell the slums of Mexico City, of the desperate peasants of Morelos and Guerrero reclaiming land, of the radicalised youth of 1968 risking their lives in the name of solidarity, of the mothers of the disappeared *guerrilleros* [guerrilla fighters]. The chronicler follows the daily wanderings of street vendors, domestic and urban workers, gathering evidence of those consigned to non-existence, recovering the life stories of those for whom life has been little more than "an unbroken endurance of being cast aside" (p. 11). These fragile, immediate experiences of the world are refracted through the dense prism of dominant ideology.

There are many narrative strategies employed in this book that highlight the disjunction between the institutionalised discourse of the Mexican Revolution – with its professed ideals of social justice and universal economic welfare – and the lived reality of the neglected majority, between the mask of the rule of law and the true face of the police and criminal state. Nowhere is this clearer than in the nuanced modulation of the chronicler's own voice. In "Diario de una huelga de hambre" [Diary of a Hunger Strike] and "Los desaparecidos" [The Disappeared], Poniatowska (2006) makes audible the ingenuous voice of the upper-class woman confronted by the values of her own class. She asks a guerrilla fighter whether he would not prefer to own a house, an ultra-thin wristwatch, or a cashmere sweater. Following the account of the hunger strike led by the mothers of the disappeared – some of whom could not even afford their return fare – she provides a meticulous description of her visit to a luxury department store, where she blends into the crowd, seduced by the allure of designer clothing. Meanwhile, as she interviews Paquita Calvo Zapata from the Frente Urbano Zapatista, she fantasises about being the victim of a guerrilla attack in the same department store, imagining projectiles tearing through "your Puritan shirt, your Vanity blouse, […] your Kiwi T-shirt" (p. 161).

As a bourgeois woman, she condemns violence of the *Guerrilleros*. As a bourgeois woman, she cannot befriend a *Guerriller*o or even greet him if he carries a weapon (as shown in her dialogue with the *Guerrillero* Benjamín Pérez Aragón, p. 169). As a bourgeois woman, she remains the guardian of order, unable to refrain from questioning what Rosario Ibarra, leader of the hunger strike of the "madwomen" in the Cathedral, says and does against the government – *her* government – claiming that it: "persecutes [...] its opponents, especially if they choose arms. I do not know of a single guerrilla movement that has ever been permitted to roam freely with the consent of the authorities!" (p. 84). And yet, the chronicler's vocation as devil's advocate soon runs out, and she

proceeds to catalogue, one by one, the crimes and atrocities committed by this very government: The kidnappings and the torture – even that of parents in front of their children, and of infants in front of their parents – the killings, and the concealment of the whereabouts of hundreds of victims – and declares: "One feels the urge to build a bomb: X kilos of trilite, X kilos of plastic, X kilos of sugar– because sugar accelerates combustion – or, simply, a few kilos of good Mexican dynamite to obliterate such insolence and arrogance" (p. 121).

It becomes thus evident that it is not merely a principle of sincerity that compels Poniatowska to make her upper-class identity visible – a bourgeois identity that, to paraphrase Gil de Biedma in *Moralidades*, engages in social literature out of bad conscience[4]: "my so-called social concerns […] come from who knows where to try to prove who knows what, to demonstrate what? To do what? Because what the devil do I want in life, other than to write?" (p. 165). For this *I* does not speak solely on its own behalf. The chronicler's assumed mask of bourgeois naivety is indisputably a tactical manoeuvre – an approach to her own class designed to scrutinise it more effectively, to interrogate its silence, its apathy, and its indifference: "Strong is the silence that we citizens maintain, whether out of negligence or induced resignation" (p. 12).

In "Ángeles de la ciudad" [Angels of the City] and "La colonia Rubén Jaramillo", the authorial *I* – the bourgeois *I* – ventures forth to encounter the *other*, "this people who are missing" (Deleuze, 1997, p. 4), and in doing so… it dissolves. It is as if, in seeking to render them visible – to make visible those millions of Mexicans whom "the dominant class has reduced to non-existence" (Poniatowska, 2006, p. 11) – in surrendering herself to a profound passion for them, she allows herself to be traversed by their voices. Linda Egan emphasises that Poniatowska does not "give voice to those who lack it" but rather "speaks with those who do have a voice – a speech that is rich, colourful, and forceful – but who, due to state terrorism, tend to remain silent until someone like Poniatowska hands them the microphone in the form of a book like *Fuerte es el silencio*" (2008, p. 104). The distinction is crucial. While the chronicles undoubtedly capture the nuance and the rich lexical diversity of popular language, its most significant aspect is not merely the preservation of a recovered orality. Rather, Poniatowska compels us to hear the voices of her innumerable characters, which, set in contrast with that of the chronicler herself, constitute, in Bakhtinian (Bajtín, 1986) terms, autonomous ideological perspectives. She allows us to hear the moans of anguish, the cries of hunger and suffering from the precarious, but also the muted murmur of growing distrust and anger among the *pariahs* who begin to mobilise, the voices of the perpetually marginalised heard during community assemblies, and those

[4] We refer here to the verses "out of bad conscience, writers / of social poetry" from "En el nombre de hoy" [In the Name of Today] (Gil de Biedma, 2010, p. 76).

that challenge her own – when it is still the voice of her class. Indeed – and here we follow Rancière's argument in *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010) – Poniatowska's chronicles make visible and transform into political subjects those whom society refuses to recognise as such. Rather than merely offering them space to express their condition – to voice their pain and suffering – she grants them the power to be seen and understood as agents of discourse, articulating their own arguments and asserting their own reasoning. Her literature thus functions as a counter-hegemonic practice in sociocritical terms, calling attention to the political operations of the hegemony that determine who is heard, who is seen, and who remains silenced and "unspeakable" (Malcuzynski, 2006). In this sense, Poniatowska not only gives narrative form to subaltern experiences but also strives to challenge the epistemic foundations of the social order, insisting that literature must participate in the struggle over what is thinkable, sayable, and imaginable, becoming a discursive space in which social conflicts are made visible, reworked, and contested.

3. From many voices, one self: auto/biographical subversion in *El amante polaco*

The novel *El amante polaco* [The Polish Lover], published in two volumes in 2019 and 2021, diverges from the first-person discourses codified in other works by Elena Poniatowska as tools of "the oppressed", insofar as it centres on the life of Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last king of Poland and the author's distinguished ancestor. Indeed, the task of studying Stanisław August's diaries, from which the text draws extensively, seems more characteristic of Georg Misch – regarded as the precursor of auto/biographical studies – than of Elena Poniatowska. It is noteworthy that the German philologist devoted his scholarly efforts to life narratives of historical figures who, in his view, shaped Western civilisation. In accordance with the tradition inaugurated by Misch, scholars of the canonical auto/biographical corpus, established in the mid-twentieth century, conceived of auto/biographies as "life-stories of great men" (Anderson, 2011)[5].

[5] As noted by Anderson (2011), Arfuch (2002, 2013), and Holroyd (2023), among others, canonical forms of life writing –such as autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, or intimate diaries – emerged in close association with the construction of the modern subject and the dominance of the bourgeoisie, a process that became particularly pronounced in the eighteenth century. According to scholarly consensus, this development finds its origins in *Les Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1782) and *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* by James Boswell (1791), which are regarded as paradigmatic models of modern autobiography and biography, respectively. As capitalism and the bourgeoisie consolidated their hegemony, a new sensibility and subjectivity emerged, bringing with them novel forms of life narration. Consequently, within the broader critical trend that interrogates canonical texts as instruments of power, particular attention has been given to the demystification of classical autobiography and biography as literary genres that have historically privileged white men from dominant social classes (Anderson, 2011; Arfuch, 2013).

The prologue appears to reinforce this initial hermeneutic suspicion; the author persistently emphasises, in the manner of canonical biographers, the decisive role played by the last Polish king in his country's history. We learn, for instance, that Poniatowski "proposed that […] all possible opportunities for growth be granted to creators and artists; for this reason, Poland is, at the heart of Europe, a furnace of talent and creativity in film, painting, engraving, sculpture, and literature (it is the only country with five Nobel Prize winners)" (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 11). And yet… Despite appearances, and as devoted readers of Elena Poniatowska may have intuited from the outset, this life-narrative profoundly subverts the conventions of a classical biography.

Thus, while at first glance it may seem that there exists a thematic discontinuity between Poniatowska's chronicles or testimonial novels and her exploration of the novelised biography in *El amante polaco*, a closer reading reveals a persistent thread: her ongoing concern with unravelling power structures and giving voice to those whose experiences have been ignored or distorted. In her chronicles from *Fuerte es el silencio*, this commitment manifests in her portrayal of marginalised communities – the vast numbers of the excluded arriving in Mexico City, expanding its areas of extreme poverty; the inhabitants of the Rubén Jaramillo neighbourhood; or the mothers of disappeared guerrilla fighters. In *El amante polaco*, this approach is reconfigured: although Stanisław August Poniatowski is the protagonist, the text does not celebrate him from a conventional biographical perspective but rather employs his figure as a backdrop against which the author explores her own life narrative: that of a survivor of gender-based violence and a single mother who resisted mechanisms of power and became a writer.

Indeed, by narrating both lives, the novel seeks to challenge the status quo and the dominant mechanisms of power. In the first instance, Stanisław August is depicted as a rebel who endeavours to oppose not only external adversaries – Catherine the Great of Russia and Frederick II of Prussia – but also internal ones, namely the Polish magnates, including those from his own kin, such as the Czartoryski clan to which his mother belonged. Furthermore, the king, according to Poniatowska, aspires to improve the living conditions of the Polish people and to provide his compatriots with educational opportunities that would enable them to combat social injustices and alter their destiny.

There is little need to elaborate on the gulf that separates this portrayal of the courageous and benevolent king – defender of the "humiliated and insulted" – from his actual stance towards the plight of the popular masses[6]. Undoubtedly,

[6] Adam Leszczyński (2020) states that Stanisław August was not in favor of freeing the peasants from serfdom and, during the work on the Constitution later known as the Constitution of 3rd of May (promulgated in 1791), emphasized that Poland, unlike the countries of Western Europe, "had not yet matured enough to grant freedom to the peasantry" (p. 281). What it meant to be "under

Poniatowska idealises her protagonist, though she does not attempt to obscure this idealisation beneath a veneer of supposed narrative impartiality, as is characteristic of mainstream biographies (cf. Podlubne, 2024, p. 51). However, this idealisation is not solely a product of her loyalty to lineage. For, if "all good biographies are intensely personal, since they are really accounts of the relationship between a writer and the subject", as Michael Holroyd (2011, p. 79) asserts, the bond that unites the Mexican writer with the last king of Poland is not confined to the evident ties of blood, but extends to the affinity she constructs by projecting onto Stanisław August her own vocation to give visibility – and voice – to the people. The "red princess" thus transforms this eminent ancestor of hers into her own double, thereby integrating him into the broader project of her writing – one that, by incorporating the lives and voices of the countless marginalised, unsettles the rigid social divisions dictated by class, wealth, and gender.

Likewise, *El amante polaco* acquires what Bakhtin (Bajtín, 1982) describes as a "biographical value": a concept that not only shapes the narration of another subject´s life but also structures one's own experience and narration of the self. In this sense, the novel dedicated to the life of Poland's last king attains such a dimension when it becomes a means of interpreting, envisioning, and giving form to the author's own life-narrative (p. 134). That is, the biography of the monarch unfolds alongside Poniatowska's own autobiographical writing; through this interplay, she engages with discourses of the self to construct a literary self-portrait – one that reflects the identity of an immigrant child, a refugee of the Second World War, a survivor of gender-based violence, a single mother, and, above all, a writer.

Moreover, the novel's temporal and narrative complexity shows Poniatowska's broader political project: to resist the closure imposed by dominant historiographical paradigms and to insist on the permeability of history, memory, and subjectivity. In drawing on her own transatlantic experience – caught between Europe and Latin America, aristocratic ancestry and left-wing commitment – she exposes the limits of fixed identity categories. Her self-portrait emerges not from a coherent narrative arc, but from a process of constant negotiation between disparate selves, historical (con)texts, and discursive traditions.

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the protection of the law and the national government", as guaranteed to the peasants by Article 4 of that Constitution, became clear when, that same year, 1791, peasant uprisings against serfdom erupted in the countryside. In the royal edict of August 2, we read: "With no small distress of our heart, we learn that in certain parts of our Commonwealth, there appear enemies of the common good, who, through audacity or a misguided understanding of governmental protection, become disobedient to their lords, refusing to fulfill their duties and render due tributes […]". For the reasons stated above, he ordered in all jurisdictions, "wherever they should perceive ongoing resistance, by means of military assistance, the peasants are to be kept in subjugation and obedience to their lords" (pp. 281–282).

Ultimately, *El amante polaco* can be read as a literary experiment that pushes the boundaries of both biographical and autobiographical writing. It reclaims both genres as a space not of reverence but of resistance, not of commemoration but of reflection. Through the dialogic interplay of past and present, individual and collective, noble lineage and marginal, embodied experience, Poniatowska reimagines life writing as a site of political engagement – a means of interrogating inherited histories and, simultaneously, of writing oneself into the dialogue with the fourth wave of feminism and the recent political movements. In the most harrowing passage of *El amante polaco*, we encounter the following autobiographical confession:

> I am young, I smile at all times, I laugh easily. One afternoon, in the middle of class, the Maestro rises menacingly – thin, his hair standing on end, a stick also visible through his trousers. "You are a peacock that has come to strut about in a henhouse", he hurls at me. […] I move towards the door. "Ah no, it is not that easy", he threatens. And I pay – for having climbed the stairs so hastily, for *The Four Seasons* by Vivaldi, which now turns its winter to shroud me, for the rooftop and for each step I now descend at full speed towards the exit. Once in the street, I do not understand; all I know is that, like him, the rooftop with its billowing sheet has struck me across the face. (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 222)

At that moment, the narrator did not comprehend what had just happened to her; she was incapable of comprehending how she had found herself in such a traumatic situation, nor did she know "what to do with (her)self from now on" (p. 234), particularly when she discovered that the violence she had endured had resulted in pregnancy. "I am alone. I do not know what love is. What has happened to me – the cot, the threat, the attack – has nothing to do with what I read in books or saw on the screen of the Vanguardias cinema" (p. 243). Above all, it bore no resemblance to the books of the Maestro, "impeccably written, filled with imagination, grace, and freshness" (Oviedo, 2005, p. 53)[7]. Yet the autobiographical subject also confesses to having failed to grasp other cultural conditions that, despite remaining unarticulated, profoundly shaped her existence and conduct. Hers is not an isolated case. No "I", as Judith Butler cautions, can give a full account of itself (Butler, 2005), for it cannot narrate a life story that is separate from the history of its social relations: "the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms. […] The 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence" (p. 8). Our ways of seeing and experiencing the world, Poniatowska

[7] In this way, in his *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana* [History of Latin American Literature] the Peruvian critic José Miguel Oviedo characterises the writing of Juan José Arreola. As the author of *Confabulario and Other Inventions* and one of the most significant Mexican writers of the 20th century, he is referred to as "Maestro" by the autobiographical *I* of the novel – a designation that Poniatowska repeatedly affirmed after the novel's publication.

seems to suggest in the same line of thought, are shaped by sociocultural norms that we have never actively chosen – just as she herself never chose to grow up in a heteropatriarchal society that allows "masters" to feel entitled to the bodies of their female students, inculcating in them limitless admiration and blind obedience. From the perspective of the present, the autobiographical *I* understands that patriarchal norms rendered the experience of her sexual abuse "unspeakable" (Malcuzynski, 2006) and "ungrievable" (Butler, 2004, 2009); hence, at the time, the narrator neither knew how to defend herself nor dared to share her experience with anyone.

From a sociocritical perspective, *El amante polaco* powerfully exemplifies how hegemonic discourse operates by delimiting not only what can be said, but also what can be known and even felt. The narrator´s inability to name her experience of sexual violence in the moment is not a sign of individual failure or naïveté, but rather the effect of her subjectivation within a patriarchal symbolic order that renders certain experiences illegible or incoherent. As Malcuzynski (1991, 2009) and Cros (2002) have argued, the hegemonic order constructs the "sayable" and the "thinkable" through a tacit politics of legitimacy, authorising particular modes of intelligibility while expelling others and other experiences to the realm of the inarticulable. Poniatowska's autobiographical subject thus inhabits what Angenot (1998) might call a discursive periphery: she subverts the the social field in which patriarchal violence is not only permitted, but also disavowed, concealed under the guise of pedagogical authority, artistic genius, or romantic idealism. The trauma she suffered in her youth was not merely physical, but also epistemic: she was dispossessed of language, and thus of social recognition and proper mourning (Butler, 2004, 2009). Literature, in this context, becomes a counter-discursive act, a retrospective "biographical space" in which the unsayable is reclaimed and reconfigured. By making visible the ideological apparatuses that produced silence and shame, Poniatowska not only gives narrative form to a formerly "unspeakable" event but also exposes the broader structures of domination – gendered, aesthetic, institutional – that rendered such events invisible and non-narratable in the first place. In this sense, *El amante polaco* exemplifies the political potency of life-writing, attributed to counter-hegemonic literature in sociocritical thought, understood as a site where the limits of hegemonic meaning are contested and redrawn.

Thus, the novel contains a reflection on the mechanisms of the cultural subject (Cros, 2002): through the narration of a life, an "authentic self" or a fully realised "authority over the self", one that exists outside or prior to culture and the very process of subjectivation, does not emerge. Nevertheless, *El amante polaco* does not deny agency to the subject; rather, the text invites us to engage critically with how a self is both produced and reproduced in discourse and what possibilities exist for appropriating social norms, or, at the very least, renegotiating them.

By the end of the first volume, the autobiographical *I* succeeds in renegotiating patriarchal rules and resisting the logic that has constituted her as a cultural subject. She chooses to leave behind innocence in order to confront the violence of the patriarchal world and the prejudices surrounding single mothers, prejudices deeply entrenched within her own social class. Despite the insistence of those around her to do otherwise, Elena Poniatowska resolves to raise her child alone and to become a writer. Indeed, the final lines of the first volume recreate the image of the author who remains inseparable from both her son, and her typewriter: "For Mane, the sound of the typewriter keys and their ring-ring every time I reach the end of a line is his lullaby. What upsets him most is when I say, 'I've finished, let's go out', and yet I continue typing. 'Mum, are you going to do this to me for the rest of my life?'" (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 271). And the rest belongs to the history of literature.

In the second volume of *El amante polaco*, Elena Poniatowska offers a self-reflective meditation on her literary and ideological trajectory. Here, she not only reaffirms her commitment to marginalised subjects and her practice of "daily denunciation", but also confronts the arduous and ongoing process of becoming aware of the dimensions and consequences of her own privilege. This analysis places Poniatowska's narrative within the framework of *critical epistemologies*: it stages both a critique of social hierarchies and a meta-reflection on the cultural forms and aesthetic decisions that sustain or contest them. Through a sociocritical lens, we see that Poniatowska does not depict herself as a stable, sovereign "I" but as a subject who is continually constituted and interpellated through systems of class, gender, cultural "distinction", on the one hand, and socio-political commitment, on the other. Her autobiographical voice – marked by irony, discomfort, and doubt – reveals the extent to which her perception of the world has been shaped by ideological structures of the hegemonic order that operate largely through *doxa*: those naturalised, unspoken assumptions that govern the relationship between self and other, centre and periphery, the visible and the unsayable. This becomes painfully evident in the following confession, where the litany of grievances voiced by the dispossessed disrupts not only her sense of self, but the very stability of the symbolic world she inhabits:

> I live deafened by the sound of the typewriter keys and by another, even more grating noise: the daily litany of grievances that blurs my vision. "They lied to me." "I haven't eaten." "I was assaulted." "They took everything from me." "I was raped." "I don't even have enough for the bus." "What house? What are you talking about, Elena?" "Did you really think I had a house?" "Did you think I had a job?" (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 383)

From the marked self-critical perspective of the present, the autobiographical subject exposes the dissonance between her own social experience – saturated by privilege – and the realities of those she seeks to give voice to in her writing. This moment does

not merely signal guilt or class anxiety; it represents a rupture within the subject's ideological formation, a confrontation with what Angenot (1998) calls the limits of the *sayable*. It is precisely this encounter with the unsayable – the experience of being interpellated by marginalised voices that the dominant discourse renders unintelligible and that are codified in her chronicles – that forces a reconfiguration of her own positionality, and subjectivity, within the discursive field.

In this regard, the figure of Alberto Beltrán, a graphic artist of humble origins, plays a pivotal role in this process of gaining self-awareness, as her friendship with him is increasingly marked by a growing sense of guilt. Through Beltrán, Poniatowska becomes conscious not only of the privileges she has enjoyed since childhood but also of her unspoken attachment to the lifestyle of *the haute bourgeoisie* and aristocracy, as well as to the artistic objects that adorn her family home: the paintings by Boldini and Canaletto, the Napoleonic ceramics, the Chinese trees…This tension between "inherited" taste and social commitment generates an identity conflict that manifests in the second volume of the novel through acute introspection and self-criticism. The narrator questions why she continues to feel these objects as "hers", while her mother and other relatives, alarmed by her increasing political engagement, ask whether she is "becoming a communist" (Poniatowska, 2022, p. 383).

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "distinction" provides a valuable interpretive lens for this internal conflict. As Bourdieu (1988, pp. 238–241) demonstrates, aesthetic preferences and symbolic investments are not merely matters of individual taste but are deeply structured by social class and the embodied dispositions of the "habitus". What Poniatowska articulates is a subject caught between two fields of value: one shaped by elite cultural refinement and another oriented toward solidarity, critique, and the political labour of bearing witness. The Canaletto paintings and the refined soirées of her youth, like her fascination with the history of the last king of Poland, persist as part of a symbolic legacy that inscribes her within a dominant class narrative – even as she successfully writes against it.

However, Poniatowska does not attempt to disavow this contradiction. On the contrary, she transforms it into a productive tension that informs her authorial posture. Rather than adopting the guise of disinterested observer, she writes from within contradiction, using the autobiographical mode to interrogate the very mechanisms that have shaped her own complicity and subversion. This is where her work acquires a new sociocritical dimension: her life-writing stages what Malcuzynski (1991) would term a "monitoring" of the subject's own discursive construction, while at the same time contributing to a broader contestation of hegemonic knowledge. Fully aware of her privilege, she employs life-writing to render social issues visible and, above all, to give voice to the *other*, thereby contributing significantly to a "new distribution of the sensible", in Jacques Rancière's (2010) terms. She succeeds in articulating an ethics and aesthetics

of alterity that challenge social hierarchies and norms, exploring the limits and possibilities of testimonial and auto/biographical literature.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of Elena Poniatowska's diverse experiments in life writing reveals not only the breadth of her literary contributions but also the depth of her critical engagement with the ideological structures that underpin contemporary society. Across genres – including testimonial fiction, journalistic chronicle, novelised biography, and autobiography – Poniatowska consistently mobilises literature as a site of epistemic inquiry and discursive resistance. Her testimonial works, particularly those collected in *Fuerte es el silencio*, offer a powerful response to systemic erasure by rendering visible and audible those whom dominant discourse deems irrelevant or illegible. Through a writing practice that merges journalistic rigour with radical empathy, she elevates the voices of domestic workers, Indigenous communities, political prisoners, disappeared persons, and women subjected to violence – voices that are often reduced to noise or rendered "unspeakable" within hegemonic formations.

What is also notable from a sociocritical perspective is that Poniatowska does not disavow her own class privilege; rather, she subjects it to sustained scrutiny. Her self-reflexivity does not function as confession or moral catharsis, but as a narrative tool (*Fuerte es el silencio*) or structural critique of the bourgeois habitus from which she emerges (*El amante polaco*). Her life-writing practice thus becomes a form of "monitoring", in Malcuzynski's (1991) sense: a critical examination of the conditions of discursive production. She writes not *from* the margins but *towards* them, seeking to realign the field of the sensible, to reconfigure who is seen and who might, or might not speak. In this regard, her self-positioning becomes part of a broader interrogation of how "cultural subjects" (Cros, 2002) are produced, interpellated, and differentially granted access to the discursive order.

This dynamic determines *El amante polaco*, where the boundary between biography and autobiography is deliberately blurred. In merging the life of the last king of Poland with her own narrative of gendered violence and political awakening, Poniatowska constructs a layered meditation on the workings of power, not only historical and institutional, but also intimate and embodied. The violated female body becomes, in this (con)text, both a site of inscription of power and resistance, a figure through which the author confronts the hegemonic order and the ideological contradictions of her formation. These contradictions – between inherited privilege and political solidarity, between aesthetic sensibility and class critique – are not resolved but rendered productive, enabling a form of writing that challenges the separation between the biographical and the autobiographical, the personal and the political, the historical and the intimate.

Thus, Poniatowska's writing exposes the apparatuses through which the hegemonic order delineates what is socially sayable and thinkable. As sociocritical theory, on the one hand, and Poniatowska´s literature, on the other, remind us, discursive hegemony does not merely operate by what it states, but by what it renders "unspeakable" through silencing, marginalisation, and symbolic erasure. Poniatowska's attention to "minor" voices – housemaids, street children, prisoners, disappeared persons, victims of gendered violence – resists this erasure, insisting on the political and aesthetic necessity of listening otherwise. Her texts thus become sites where the unsaid and the not-yet-said emerge as critical interruptions within the discursive field. Her work not only reproduces the hegemonic configurations of her (con)text to criticise them, but also intervenes in them, contesting the discursive norms that govern visibility, subjectivity, and recognition. In doing so, Poniatowska helps to articulate what we might call a counter-hegemonic epistemology – an aesthetics of disruption that demands we reconsider who may speak, whose experience counts, and how life-writing itself participates in the struggle over meaning.

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