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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 purpose, 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 selected⁴, 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 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 include 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 (Frieria, 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 book⁷. 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 prepararse 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 violence⁸. 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 symptom, 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, plenty 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 transformation⁹ 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 (Frieria, 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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