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A Space of One's Own: Secondary Characters and the Politics of
Personal Memory in the Southern Cone Post-dictatorship Generation Novel

In a short vignette that appears as a complete scene within Chilean author Alejandro Zambra's *Formas de volver a casa* (2011), a slim and fragmentary novel that shifts between the protagonist's life in present-day Santiago and his memories of his involvement with a neighbor-girl, Claudia, who was the child of political dissidents during Pinochet's dictatorship, the narrator states:

Hoy inventé este chiste:
Cuando grande voy a ser un personaje secundario, le dice un niño a su padre.
Por qué.
Por qué qué.
Por qué quieres ser un personaje secundario
Porque la novela es tuya¹ (74).

Today I made up this joke:
"When I grow up I'm going to be a secondary character," a boy says to his father.
"Why?"
"Why what?"
"Why do you want to be a secondary character?"
"Because the novel is yours" (58).

¹ To open the essay, I include the citation from Zambra's original Spanish text here because the translator's punctuation choices influence the tone of the scene. Moving forward, in the interest of space and diverse readership, I quote solely from the English translations of both novels.

The notion that one can be a secondary character within a personal story that one lives, but nevertheless does not own, is a familiar sentiment throughout the novel. As the unnamed narrator struggles to write about his childhood during the dictatorship, he is haunted by the feeling that he doesn't have the right to narrate memories that belong to his parents' generation. A similar predicament preoccupies the narrator-protagonist of Argentine writer Patricio Pron's *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia* (2011), a novel that features the homecoming of a copiously self-medicated expat son to his father's deathbed in Argentina. Rather than offering a sense of closure, the process of combing through his father's papers slowly leads to fissures of repressed memories from Argentina's dictatorship years leaking through, and he comes to understand, despite his significant discomfort and better judgment, that he's attempting to write the story of a disappeared friend of his father—assembled from archives preserved in his father's study—and in doing so writes the story of his own family he has been avoiding for years.

Both Zambra and Pron were born in 1975, two years after the fall of Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular government, often cited in terms of literary production as the date that marks the decline of the Latin American boom's² modernist writing; hence both are firmly part of a group that Uruguayan literary scholar Ana Ros refers to as the “post-dictatorship generation” (4), the second generation of artists and writers to narrate the aftermath of the Southern Cone dictatorships, whose work engages with the dialogue surrounding memory in a way that is unique from that of its antecedents. In particular, this paper will begin by tracking a trend of reticence on the part of second-generation narrators in dredging up stories of the dictatorships in *Formas de volver a casa* and *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia*, a trend I

² I follow Idelber Avelar's use of this date as a mark of transition in his study of postdictatorial literature in *The Untimely Present*.

argue is correlated with a culture of forgetting that fragments and obscures collective memory, which Maurice Halbwachs coined to denote memory “requiring the support of a group delimited in time and space” (84). Collective memory is distinct from personal memory in that a person need not have necessarily experienced an event firsthand to participate in acts of remembering that are mediated by culture, family, nation, or setting. In the case of the post-dictatorship generation, when the space and time in which collective memory unfolds is compromised by the priorities of the nation-state to silence the past in the name of stability, this essay observes its effect on the next generation and how that effect is expressed in contemporary literary production.

Since the transition to democracy in the 1980s and '90s, the neoliberal policies that worked quickly to sweep under the rug any lingering signs of the recent past included both policy decisions that granted amnesty to the human rights violators during the dictatorships and the complicated treatment of sites of memory—both those of repression and resistance, as I elucidate in the following section—within the public space. As Andreas Huyssen’s statement that “memory and forgetting pervade real public space, the world of objects, and the urban world we live in” (Draper 3) suggests, the politics of forgetting and policing the past are inextricable from contemporary experience in Southern Cone cities. In contrast to the authors producing literature in the immediate aftermath of dictatorships, whose work has been interpreted as an exercise in mourning via the ruins that leave a trail in the urban space, in order to “remind us that the present ... is a product of past catastrophe” despite the neoliberal market’s desire to institute a perpetual present (Avelar 3), for the post-dictatorship generation the question of what counts as ruins is influenced by their subject positions and formative experiences. As Bieke Willem points out in his analysis of Zambra’s novels, “for the child that Zambra was in 1988, the major

detention center in Santiago, the National Stadium, was nothing more than a football field³ (34), referring to a scene in *Formas de volver* in which second-generation characters discuss pleasurable memories unfolding in a space that the previous generation associated with state-sponsored torture.

As the way collective memory is inscribed on cities of their childhoods becomes increasingly more contested and fragmented, these authors must rely more readily on hazy formative experience and the previous generation to conjure a period of time that Southern Cone nation-states have striven to erase from the public imagination. This paper, then, aims to offer one possible answer to the question: How do contemporary post-dictatorship generation writers locate a space from which to speak about memories that are both collective and personal—formative experiences that have defined them, yet create anxiety about their right to represent them? What narrative tools do they employ, and how do those tools represent forms of memory?

Because my examination of this topic is specifically interested in the way writers contend with a “culture of forgetting” that is mapped onto time and space, I define my use of this term in the following section through a very brief discussion of the way in which state agendas in the Southern Cone have striven to create and enforce a perpetual present through suppression of the recent past in the public imagination and the contemporary urban spaces of Southern Cone cities. Beginning here enables me to better understand the environments in which this generation of authors came of age, in order to both contextualize their need to revive the past, and examine their unique narrative strategies that become necessary in speaking from such a space. Then, turning to both literary texts, I analyze the way a new generation of writers’ work responds to and contends with this act to obscure the past through three patterns I note in the works of

³ All translations from Willem’s Spanish are my own.

Zambra and Pron, that of: reluctant narration, meditation on experiences of the Southern Cone city and nation-state, and the fragmentation of time and space within the novel, each of which I define and elaborate upon in its corresponding section.

A Culture of Forgetting in the Postdictatorial City: Historical Context and Theoretical Framework

The prevailing priority throughout Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay during the return to democracy has been one characterized by the gaze of the nation-state fixed firmly, relentlessly, on the future, often at the expense of atoning for the past. In order to offer context for the character of this period as it relates to memory, I briefly analyze the discourse surrounding the transition into democracy in the Southern Cone to illustrate a clear trend that emerges. In Chile, the rhetoric associated with the transition following the 1978 Amnesty Law, absolving the state of human rights abuses, called for “forgetting the errors of the past, reconciling ourselves to the present, and advancing together united in a process of modernization and national development” (Gómez-Barris 3). In Uruguay, the 1986 *Ley de Caducidad* established, in the words of then Uruguayan president Julio María Sanguinetti, that “the bottom line is that either we’re going to look to the future or to the past” (Weschler 189), while then Argentine president Carlos Menem declared in 1995 that “the Argentine people are tired of hearing about the Dirty War”—as the Argentine military dictatorship is often referred—and charged the media with “keeping this horrible memory alive” (Feitlowitz 198). A clear dichotomy between keeping memory “alive” and future stability and prosperity for each nation pervaded public discourse. As a result, the question of where evidence of the recent past is inscribed on the physical urban space has come under increased scrutiny.

Discussion of the management of memory by the state has been well documented, and investigations of what becomes of former sites of repression are as relevant to examine as how and where memorials to the disappeared are erected. Particularly egregious transformations, such as the renovation of Uruguay's Punta Carretas prison—a center of detention and torture within a residential neighborhood—into a shopping mall in 1994, reveal “a blind jump into the future that negates the national past” (Ruetalo 39). Meanwhile, discussion of how memorials or museums of memory profit off the market of past atrocities in a way that benefits the tourism industry has fallen under increased scrutiny. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, for instance, refuse to support the erection of a state-funded memorial in the name of their disappeared children precisely because in their eyes it would “release the state from its responsibility to hold individuals accountable for past violations” (Bilbija and Payne 13). Such examples of the way in which collective memory has been managed and dispensed by the state in the cities where atrocities of the dictatorships unfolded illustrates that “the relationship between space and memory is never innocent” (Achugar 207).

What is the correlation between the obfuscation of memory within public space and literature? There is a precedent in postdictatorial Southern Cone literature, which has been well documented by literary scholars such as Nelly Richard, that it is the task of culture to create “residual zones” that interrupt the perpetual present of the neoliberal market through the fragmentation that occurs in the periphery. Richard explains that one of the demands of cultural production is to create fissures in the monolingual discourse on memory, by asking:

How to manifest the value of the experience if the consensus's and market's lines of force have standardized subjectivities and technologized speech, making its expressions monochord, so that it is increasingly harder for the irreducible uniqueness of the personal event to dislocate the passive uniformity of the series?" (27)

There is a rich tradition of discourse on literary works that immediately followed the dictatorships doing just this, as a seminal work on postdictatorial fiction by Idelber Avelar, argues, for instance, that such literature “engages in a mournful memory that attempts to overcome the trauma represented by the dictatorships” (3). I believe both Zambra’s and Pron’s texts also work to overcome trauma, voicing personal memories that break the monochord of state-sanctioned memory; however, in this case, their distance from the events of the dictatorships means that memories are often mediated through the previous generation, the contemporary city, and formative experience. At one point in *El espíritu de mis padres* Pron’s narrator quips, “I think we have something in common, since all of us born [in 1975 in Argentina] are the consolation prizes our parents gave themselves after failing to pull off the revolution” (179). Understanding one’s own subject position and very existence to have been created from within such a loaded political context surely influences how this generation conceives of and represents the period within their work. How and why and from what space these narrators achieve this occupies the focus of the close readings performed throughout this essay.

Reluctant Narrators and Secondary Characters

In her analysis of the way the post-dictatorship generation has internalized the traumas of the period of their formative years, Ros explains, “when instead of stories there are silences, voids, and symptoms ... the effects of the violent past seep into everyday life through... irrational fears, nostalgia, the sensation of always being at fault, enigmatic and contradictory perspectives” (10). She argues that many of the post-dictatorship generation treat the period of

state repression with either “indifference” or “massive identification,” and it is the tension between each of those subject positions that each of the literary texts that I study explore.

In *Formas de volver*, the metafictional⁴ form of the novel allows the reader to shift between the present narrative, flooded with memories from childhood, and the passages of novel the narrator writes that are derived from those memories. Zambra’s narrator certainly is one that falls into Ros’s category of “massive identification.” The reader often can observe the patterns of his thoughts constantly routing back to the dictatorship years. In the eyes of this narrator, the dictatorship is the lens through which he views every scenario, and as profound an effect as it’s clearly had on his development, the pattern of his feeling unequipped to speak of it is established early on.

At one point, the narrator’s girlfriend, Eme, shares her memory of playing hide-and-seek outside with neighborhood friends until it became dark, and realizing that the adults stopped calling for them. When the children find the adults huddled around the radio, she explains: “We kids understood, all of the sudden, that we weren’t so important. That there were unfathomable and serious things we couldn’t know or understand” (40). The narrator elaborates on Eme’s memory, hijacking the context to immediately link it both to the dictatorship and his own generation’s comparative impotence:

The novel belongs to our parents I thought then, I think now. That’s what we grew up believing ... While the adults killed or were killed, we drew pictures in a corner. While the country was falling to pieces, we were learning to talk, to walk, to fold napkins into the shape of boats, of airplanes. While the novel was happening, we played hide-and-seek, we played at disappearing (41).

⁴ Metafictional literature, which has become more commonplace in postmodern writing of the final quarter of the 20th century onward, often describes texts that self-consciously draw attention to themselves as constructed, interrogating the relationship between artifice and reality, fact and fiction. The metafictional form of both novels is discussed in depth in the final section of this essay.

What right, the narrator asks, does the generation of children who came of age during the dictatorship have to write novels about this period? He recognizes that it's easier for one to be politically engaged in hindsight, and this is the particular struggle that defines the narrator as he grapples with his parents' apolitical stance during the dictatorship, which he has come to view as complicity. When the narrator suggests to his mother that by not participating in politics during Pinochet's rule, his parents supported his dictatorship, his mother counters, "What do you know about those things? You hadn't even been born yet when Allende was in power. You were just a baby during those years" (109). His mother's argument illustrates that the narrator's paralysis in speaking plainly of this period of history is not entirely self-induced. Both the culture of forgetting that surrounds him and the previous generation negate the past as critical in the construction of his present, so it follows that the narrator would have anxiety about where a space exists that he can explore his own identity as it relates to recent history.

One of the ways in which this collective memory has become internalized is through inheriting the action (or inaction) of one's parents, and with it comes a sense of guilt and shame. Young people throughout the novel are comparing themselves, their families, their circumstances to what they see reflected around them. This fits with Ros's analysis. For this self-aware generation, "memory is no longer seen as static, but as an open-ended inclusive process that can be used to orient action in the present. Members of the post-dictatorship generation start questioning established institutionalized narratives. They explore subjects typically left aside, such as ...the role of 'bystanders'—those who thought of themselves ... as mere spectators of a conflict" (5).

When we first meet Zambra's narrator as a child, he is given the task of spying on Claudia's uncle Raúl, who she rarely sees. Only upon briefly reuniting with Claudia as an adult,

does the narrator learn that “Raúl” is actually Claudia’s father Roberto, a leftist dissident who has assumed the identity of his brother in order to escape the notice of the state and maintain contact with his family. Within the context of the narrator’s own staunchly apolitical family, his role as a spy for Claudia as a child is as close as he gets political involvement.

Similarly, when Claudia’s father departs for Buenos Aires as Raúl and returns to Santiago as himself, Roberto, Claudia’s mother encourages her daughters to pretend they haven’t seen him in a long time—presumably a charade to protect the family from the gaze of any agent of the state that may be observing the scene—but when Claudia realizes that on the same plane as her father there were people who had actually been in exile, she recalls “having felt a certain bitterness at seeing the families hug, crying in those long, legitimate embraces. For a moment she thought, and was immediately ashamed for thinking it, that the others were also faking” (97). Her own fears and pain are instantly rendered illegitimate by the greater suffering around her; her perspective, her voice, does not have a right to speak. In fact, it is only with the death of both her parents, that she finally feels she can tell her story, when, she explains that “instead of honoring their deaths I felt an imperative to talk, the wish to say: I. The vague, strange pleasure, even, of answering: ‘My name is Claudia and I’m thirty-three years old.’ ” (81). Through such scenes, the novel illustrates how the layers of mediation through which the post-dictatorship generation experiences their own memories—often in scenes in which they were not the principle actors, but “secondary characters,” children being instructed as to how to behave— so that members of this group must work through the past to establish a place where they can speak of their own stories in the present.

In contrast to the pattern of massive identification that emerges in Zambra’s novel, in *El espíritu de mis padres*, Patricio Pron’s narrator begins his journey as a member of the post-

dictatorship generation disinterested in Argentina and the dictatorship years of his youth, hence aligning himself with Ros's second group, "the indifferent." Like Zambra's metafictional novel, *El espíritu de mis padres* is narrated in fragmentary vignettes that begin firmly in the present, but start to trend further and further into memory as the narrator begins to go through his father's papers that bring him back to the dictatorship years. However, when we first meet the narrator, he's been living in Germany for eight years, reading and writing from inside of a national literature that is not Argentina's, presumably as a way to distance himself from formative years spent in a country he doesn't want to think about.

Following disconnected chapters that list both the different drugs the narrator has been prescribed and their side effects, as well as the few childhood memories he can locate in his muddled mind, the narrator notices upon returning home that his father has underlined a biblical passage of Paul's letter to Timothy that references having fought the "good fight." The narrator reflects on the significance of the quote to his father's life and considers how he would have like that epitaph for himself as well, before thinking "that I hadn't really fought, and that no one in my generation had fought; something or someone had already inflicted defeat on us and we drank or took pills or wasted time in a thousand and one ways as a mode of hastening an end" (34). Staying away from home, self-medicating has become a symptom of this attitude—a way of estrangement from the past and a family that serves as a remember of that past—because "you don't ever want to know certain things, because what you know belongs to you, and there are certain things you never want to own" (49).

As his father withers away in a hospital bed, Pron's narrator spends his days in his father's study, and—through his mother's encouragement—uncovers in his father's files documentation of the murder of a man named Alberto Burdisso, whose recent strange

disappearance his father has been tracking in the news. Eventually, the narrator's investigation will lead him to the fact that Alberto's sister Alicia, who had been a friend of the narrator's father in the '70s, was disappeared by the military during the Dirty War. The narrator comes to feel that his father's interest in tracking the case of the recent murder of Alberto (over an inheritance he learns) is linked to his father's inability to have stopped the disappearance and murder of Alicia decades ago. While his father was clearly tracking the information of these siblings to tell their story, Pron's narrator realizes that his father will not live to do so. It is only this fact that seems to grant the narrator the access and agency to begin to tell the story himself, as an act of narration on his father's behalf. Inevitably, telling what he thinks to be his father's story forces him to tell his own story⁵, to confront the personal and collective memories that have been repressed for years.

The question of finding his own subject position within the story, reconciling his place in a national history—from which he has fled for years—soon becomes a constant preoccupation of the narrator, as he muses:

How to describe what happened to my parents if they themselves hadn't been able to do so; how to tell a collective experience in an individual way; how to explain what happened to them without its looking like an attempt to turn them into the protagonists of a story that is collective; what place to occupy in that story (181).

As similar sentiments begin to flood the pages of the novel, the reader senses Pron, and his generation of writers, approaching this topic with a share of apprehension and guilt, as if asking for access to speak about something that does not belong to them, yet something that has undeniably informed their formative years and the individuals they've become. In his analysis of the novel, Geoffrey Maguire channels Argentine sociologist Elizabeth Jelin to elucidate the

⁵ A scene from *Formas de volver* could be applied to comment directly on this aspect of narration, when Zambra's narrator states, "Although we might want to tell other people's stories, we always end up telling our own" (85).

danger of overlooking personal aspects of memory that may exist on the periphery of collective experience, as she argues against those who directly experienced the horrors of the dictatorship claiming a monopoly on memory. “This power can, in turn, stifle the mechanisms of the intergenerational transfer of memory, by the refusal to grant new generations the permission to reinterpret—in their own ways and from their own historical circumstances—the meaning of the experiences that are being transmitted” (Maguire 217). Clearly this is precisely the monopoly on memory to which both novels actively object. Through the exercise of writing, even if with initial discomfort, the subject-position of the post-dictatorship generation begins to become validated, its voice participating in memory creation with those that precede it, a trend I further analyze in subsequent sections.

Memory and the City

In light of the trend of reluctant narration noted in the previous section, I now turn to analysis of how post-dictatorship generation narrators relate to representations of the Southern Cone city and nation-state in each novel. I argue that the way each narrator moves through space and interprets his place within the postdictatorial landscape will be critical to his eventual creation of a perspective and voice from which he develops comfort in narrating personal memory.

The process of Zambra’s narrator finding a place in the city is initially an extension of the guilt he feels for his family’s bystander status during the dictatorship. He relentlessly reminds the reader he comes from a family with “no dead,” that his “friends had grown up reading the books that their dead parents or siblings had left behind in the house. But in my family there were no dead and there were no books” (85). Coupled with the lack of books and dead in his family, there

is also a persistent awareness on the part of the narrator that he lives in a neighborhood comprised of “absurd” place names that bear no local references: “Obviously, toward the end of the seventies some people had a lot of fun choosing names for the streets where the new families would later live—the families without history, who were willing or perhaps resigned to live in that fantasy world” (17). Claudia is quick to point out that her family lives in the neighborhood of the “real names”—after Chilean poets or diplomats—as if living in a space that acknowledges the local referent were synonymous with their political engagement, whereas the residence of the narrator’s family in the generic, globalized space exhibits nothing of Chilean national identity, something he clearly interprets and an indictment of their status on the sidelines of political engagement.

Following the Southern Cone military dictatorships, tension surrounding momentum behind shifts in nomenclature in the contemporary city was a preoccupation for many communities, a trend Magdalena Broquetas notes in Montevideo, Uruguay, as “the intersection between official initiatives and the momentum of local communities⁶” attempted to inscribe recent history onto public space (228). Such studies of communities appealing to municipal governments to shift street signs to honor disappeared citizens of particular neighborhoods serve as exceptions to the rule of whitewashing the recent past, and are evidence that when local efforts intervened, there were subtle ways urban spaces expressed memory in public space.

It is something akin to this initiative that Zambra’s narrator seems to crave as he struggles to comprehend his family’s non-action during the dictatorship years, and yearning to feel more connected to the city and its history. For this reason, he is constantly looking for new versions of the city that he can locate and live inside, which exist outside of the seemingly innocuous, but to

⁶ Translation mine.

his eyes problematic, environment in which he grew up. The very title of the novel refers to its opening scene, in which the narrator loses his parents as a child and finds his way home on his own, a pattern that is repeated in various scenarios throughout the narrative's trajectory.

In a later scene, the narrator spies on Claudia's father at her request, following him onto a city bus. As the bus travels outside of his suburb of Maipú and transverses all of Santiago, the child-narrator travels further from his home than he has ever ventured and his emphasis quickly shifts from the task of spying in favor of his awe in describing the city itself:

The powerful impression the city left on me is, in some way, the one that still rears up now and then: a formless space, open but also closed, with imprecise plazas that are almost always empty, and people walking along narrow sidewalks, gazing at the ground with a kind of deaf fervor, as if they could only move forward along a forced anonymity. (30)

The narrator's first look at the city of "real names" is one that catalogs a formless space of imprecision and anonymity. This initiation hints at aspects of the urban space that commemorate the dead and acknowledge the historical past in a way that the public space of his youth does not. Willem contends that while Santiago represents "the raw reality of the dictatorship, ... Maipú, more so than Santiago (*el centro*), serves as a reflection of the apolitical nature of the city's inhabitants" (36). It is as if in order to feel justified in believing that the dictatorship influenced his formative years and personal memories, in order to feel he can speak of it, the narrator must see history reflected, even nominally, in urban space; he must find urban streets that bear evidence of *something* having happened there, even if among only them are only empty plazas and people walking with forced anonymity. There is a seed of tension in this description that hints at the ruins of the past, gesturing toward a history his childhood neighborhood does not acknowledge.

As he moves back and forth between these spaces, he starts to identify Santiago as a space in which he became politically conscious, while Maipú remains one of obfuscation and denial. This pattern emerges in the way the narrator describes his occasional returns to the suburbs to visit his parents as an adult:

I've spent days remembering the landscape of Maipú, comparing its image—a world of identical houses, red bricks and vinyl flooring—with the old streets where I've lived for years now, where each house is different from the next—uneven bricks, parquet floors—these noble streets that don't belong to me but that I travel with familiarity. Streets named after people, after real places, after battles lost and won, and not those fantastical streets, that false world where we grew up quickly. (50)

Despite the fact that Santiago has been his adopted home for years, slight tension can still be perceived in the way he describes it. By his own estimation, the city does not belong to him—no matter how long he's been there. So it is only tenuously his, in the same way that recent history is only tenuously his, and yet, it is only through inhabiting the city of “real names” that he is granted access to political consciousness, and with it, he enters the discourse surrounding memory of the dictatorship in his own voice. Narrating his personal memories and formative experiences requires first occupying the space of Santiago and then reentering the space of his childhood home with new eyes.

In *El espíritu de mis padres*, the journey of Pron's narrator is characterized by the fact that he must find not only his own space from which to speak in the city, but within Argentina as a whole, after having lived in Germany for eight years. In his initial description of his home country, his language echoes Zambra's innocuous non-place of Maipú. As Pron's narrator flies home to Argentina, he remembers a photograph of he and his father in the mountains of La Rioja, saying, “I traveled in that airplane back to a country that my father loved and that was also mine, a country that for me was just like the abyss he and I had posed in front of” (16). The entire nation of Argentina is, here, characterized as an empty “abyss,” a country of his father

loved, but to which he claims allegiance almost as a mere afterthought. For a narrator who has to qualify his reentrance in his birth nation in such a way, it's not surprising that it takes time for him to feel comfortable speaking his personal story and childhood memories from within it.

It is not until Pron's narrator begins going through his father's collected papers on Alberto Burdisso's disappearance and death that he starts to recall that he has personal memories in Argentina. He uncovers a photograph of the burial place of various members of the Burdisso family in El Trébol, a small town outside of Rosario, where Pron's narrator spent summers as a child. He explains, "When I saw that photograph, I jumped, because I knew that vault: I had hidden behind it and other similar tombs, playing hide-and-seek in the cemetery with my friends when there were no adults around" (131). This jump marks a shift in the text. Moving forward from this point, Pron's narrator can locate personal memories within the space of the cities where the action of the novel unfolds, both in El Trébol and what is presumably Rosario, though the city it is never named.⁷ He says, in a scene that follows, "I thought about how I'd lived in that city and how at some point it had been the place where I was supposedly going to remain, permanently tied down by an atavistic force that no one seemed able to explain but that affected many people who lived there" (141). The fact that he somehow has evaded a force that catches so many seems to be part of what influences him temporarily losing all his memories of home and his family, along with the physical place; by the same token, finding himself in the physical place is part of what allows his memories to surface again.

The experience of confronting a photograph of a place of personal memory seems to be what awakens him from the prescription drug-addled haze through which he had navigated the

⁷ Rosario is also the city where Patricio Pron was born, and—as I discuss in the following section—the metafictional form of the narrative gestures explicitly toward the autobiographical nature of aspects of the novel.

beginning of the novel, and he starts to actively recognize that he's using his own voice to tell the story of his family. From his vantage point, he reflects:

I hadn't returned to the country that my parents had wanted me to love, the one called Argentina, but rather to an imagined country, the one they had fought for and that had never existed. When I understood that, I also realized it hadn't been the pills that caused my inability to remember the events of my childhood, but rather those very events themselves that had provoked my desire to self-medicate and forget everything. (176)

The way that he is able to enter memory and home again is via the Argentina of his parents' ideals and all that their generation had tried to achieve. From this perspective, he no longer feels as if he were the "consolation prize" for his parents' failed revolution; rather, he sees himself as an inhabitant of an Argentina that exists as an ideal to continue to recognize on some level—albeit in a different form than revolution—and he begins to interpret his action in narrating his family's story as a continued effort to fight against the suppression of collective memory. It is the process of identification with specific spaces that grants him access to that ideal and to an imagined Argentina, and suddenly his participation in narrating feels relevant and timely, earned and important. He speaks from a space that previously remained inaccessible to him, but which he now fully inhabits.

Memory and Metafictional Fragmentation

Now that each of the narrators have found a place from which to speak about personal memory associated with the dictatorship years, I aim to provide analysis of the form each narrative takes on. Often the narrative style fragments space and time in ways that are reflective of mediated collective memories the post-dictatorship generation experiences colliding with personal memory. Elizabeth Jelin observes that "as time passes and it becomes possible to establish or conceive a temporal distance between past and present, alternative and even rival

interpretations of the recent past and its memories take the center stage of cultural and political debate. They become an unavoidable public issue” (“Public Memorialization in Perspective”). This seems to make room for new interpretations of the past, reading memory onto the present in ways that the previous generation was not equipped to see from their own limited subject positions.

The form of Zambra’s novel is diaphanous and fluid, shifting between the narrator’s current adult life and a story that he writes—which closely resembles that of his own childhood. It doesn’t take long for the reader to begin to lose the thread of what is fiction and what is life, what is the world the narrator represents through writing and what is the world the narrator is living. This fluidity between versions of events starts to cast doubt on which version is the “real” conversation, interaction, or memory. This pattern is complicated by the fact that there are full scenes that are repeated, over the course of the novel, crossing from the fictional world into the lived one.

In two consecutive chapters of the novel, Zambra’s narrator has the same conversation with his mother. In the first, within the chapter “Literature of the Parents,” the narrator has to convince his mother that it’s worth the risk upsetting his father by smoking a cigarette together in the laundry room in the middle of the night. Over the course of that cigarette, their conversation soon becomes more candid, full of small quotidian details in which his mother asks the narrator what it would have been like had he not left home so young. Later, the narrator proceeds to criticize his mother’s literary taste saying, “How is it possible for you to identify with characters from another social class, with problems that aren’t and could never be problems in your life, Mom?” and his mother tells him he should be “a little more tolerant” (64).

In the following chapter, “Literature of the Children,” a similar conversation unfolds, but this time the narrator’s mother volunteers that they smoke in the laundry room before the narrator can suggest it, and when he accuses his mother of identifying with those outside of her social class, he also accuses her of complicity with Pinochet’s dictatorship. “And Claudia?” his mother replies, “Is Claudia from your social class? What social class are you from now? She lived in Maipú, but she wasn’t from here. She looks more refined. You also look more refined than us. No one would say you were my son” (110). In this chapter, she doesn’t accuse her son of intolerance outright, but Zambra allows the mother character the verbal authority here to illustrate what can be perceived as her son’s selective tolerance, hypocrisy.

As Willem observes in this repeated scene, “the Chilean conflict can be reduced to a familiar matter, and this is exactly what Zambra writes: if the dictatorship has been a history of parents, the children narrate the post-dictatorship as they would the inheritance of their parents” (38). It is as if in the subtle shifts of details between scenes, Zambra allows for alternative versions of memory and experience to exist without canceling one another out or rendering one another invalid; each carry equal weight in the novel, and the fact that both can exist concurrently allows for the variety of personal memory. Because it remains unclear which scene is the fictional one and which is the lived, Zambra validates the individual experience, the personal memory, allowing multiple versions of a single event to share the space of the novel’s trajectory without disrupting the narrative itself.

In *El espíritu de mis padres*, a similar phenomenon occurs when in the context of the epilogue Patricio Pron, the author, closes with the lines, “While the events told in this book are mostly true, some are the result of the demands of fiction... When my father read the manuscript of this book, he thought it was important to make some observations that reflect his perspective

on the narrated events and correct certain errors” (211). The author then invites the reader to engage with the text his father has written on his blog, a piece of writing he claims “is the first example of the type of reactions this book is intended to provoke” (211). Chapter by chapter, Pron’s father is given liberty to comment on the representation of himself and his family’s story in the novel. Sometimes he corrects small details or disagrees with loaded metaphors (“I can’t accept that the children of that period—born to participants in the experience that mobilized a large part of a generation—were a consolation prize”), yet in closing, he says something akin to the importance of respecting the diversity of memory, admitting that while perhaps to “readers in Spain the contents of this novel will seem, from start to finish, merely a bold exercise of [Pron’s] imagination.” But, in Argentina, “the book will inevitably be commented on here and the objective facts in the text will be held up against reality.” He goes on to argue that while it’s fine for those outside of an Argentine context to read the book as if it were pure fiction, within the country it would be impossible to read it in such a way; even when the author and marketing of the book identify it as fiction, the story speaks of facts so entrenched in the contemporary consciousness and public life and space of Argentina, it can’t help but be analyzed as a personal story that speaks one truth, one perspective, regarding real events.

I follow Maguire’s reading that “factual inaccuracies and contrasting information presented in *El espíritu de mis padres*, which reflect the gaps and disputes in any mediated process of remembering, are not presented by Pron as attempts at advancing a definitive version of his father’s quest, but merely as a complementary way of approaching the situation as a whole” (216). The fact that multiple versions of events are allowed—sometimes his father’s blog frankly shifting or criticizing key details or events—is testament to the validity of multiple

personal memories from a variety of subject positions, even those within firmly situated within the post-dictatorship generation.

The form of Pron's text in itself seems to agree with this assessment. While the book begins with numbered chapters that imitate an ordered narrative that travels effortlessly from point A to point B, once Pron's narrator becomes engaged with the story of Burdisso and the papers in his father's study, this neat organizational strategy is called quickly retired. We begin the section with chapter 1 and 2, but suddenly it becomes clear that some numbered sections are missing as we move consecutively from chapter 4 to 5, 6, 7, then 9, and later from chapter 39 to 42 and 45. There is no way to tell the story straight, no way to privilege the imposition of causality or linearity over the multiplicity of experience and memory, so the form of the novel doesn't attempt to conform to terms that don't suit its content. Rather, its form is mimetic of the process of remembering—disjunctive, fragmented; scenes collide and coexist across time and space without canceling one another out. In the process of inviting direct criticism from the central subject represented in the novel, Pron seems to be asking, can we not allow for contradictory and personal memories of the recent past to coexist in the way we discuss and conceive it?

Conclusions

As the narrators of Zambra's and Pron's novels return to their birth country or city, each are forced to engage with the ruins of past experience that linger in physical space, often trails of concrete experience that have been ignored or repressed, whether by the nation-state or by their own impulses to protect themselves from the past. As this essay has aimed to illustrate, the process of identifying with one's right as a valid narrator is closely linked to the process of one

being able to locate himself in the real spaces of resistance, repression, or obfuscation—as the case may be—that defined his formative years. Throughout this process of self-identification in the past, each novel is preoccupied with a return to the family home, an essential step in carving out the space from which to speak that I’ve described throughout this essay.

The narrator of each novel also happens to be a writer, so it’s not entirely surprising that both are confronted not only with their formative memories upon returning home, but also with books they’ve written, within the space of the family living quarters. In *Formas de volver*, Zambra’s narrator explains:

I left home fifteen years ago, but I still feel a kind of strange pulse when I enter this room that used to be mine and now is a kind of storage room. At the back there’s a shelf full of DVDs and photo albums jumbled in the corner next to my books, the books that I’ve published. It strikes me as beautiful that they’re here, next to the family mementos. (62)

Similarly, in *El espíritu de mis padres*, Pron’s narrator enters his father’s study and takes in a quick inventory of the room: “On a loose sheet of paper I found a list of books my father had recently bought . . . an atlas of Argentina’s highways, a book about that music from the northeastern part of the country called chamamé and a book I’d written some time ago” (48). In both cases, there is something powerful about seeing their work as adults, their novels, sharing space with family memorabilia and miscellany. In a way, the mere fact that the narratives produced by the men they’ve become since they occupied these rooms can coexist beside preserved family clutter is testament to the fact that their own voices have as much a right to narrate the past as these objects do. In the space of the family home, the novels become yet another object added to the shelf of collected memories they share. Zambra’s narrator reaches a point of identification akin to this when he remarks, “I have always thought I didn’t have real childhood memories. That my history fit into a few lines. On a page maybe. I don’t think that anymore” (67). Ultimately, his memories are “real” because they are his own, independent of

any direct content or experience that may speak of the period of recent political history that has informed who he's become. With this statement, Zambra's narrator explicitly owns up to his personal memories, saying they too count as valid expressions of the period of state repression during which time he came into the world, regardless of his status as a member of the post-dictatorship generation.

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