A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 18, Num. 1 (Fall 2020): 57-78

The First Steps Towards Reconciliation: Memory Work, Critical Consciousness, and Emancipation in Renato Cisneros's *La distancia que nos separa*

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The best-selling book in the 2015 Lima International Book Fair—the most prominent literary event in Peru—was *La distancia que nos separa* (FIL Lima, 2015), a lengthy novel marketed as the fictional biography of one of the most famous yet divisive military figures in the country during the 1970s and 1980s: Army General Luis Federico "el Gaucho" Cisneros Vizquerra.[1] The novel was appealing to the Peruvian public due to el Gaucho's notability but also because Renato Cisneros, its author, is the son of the real General and a well-known television and radio personality. Beyond presenting intimate (albeit fictional) details about the lives of the two figures portrayed in the book, the protagonist-narrator's compulsive search for information about el Gaucho's life in *La distancia que nos separa* proposes a critical method to analyze the historical traumas experienced by the country during the last decades of the twentieth century, especially the armed conflict between the Government and the Shining Path in the 1980s and

[1] The nickname "el Gaucho," according to the novel, was given to a very young Luis Federico by the doctor who stitched his hand after he intentionally sliced it during a magic show in front of other children. The young patient's courage surprised the doctor who commented to his mother that he was a "gaucho" (2016, 36-38) in reference to the rough renegades who inhabited the Argentinean pampas in the 18th and 19th centuries. The origin of the real Gaucho's nickname may, however, be entirely different. In Peru, while "gaucho" is used to refer to any Argentinean, "el Gaucho" was raised as Peruvian, he was born in Buenos Aires (24).

1990s. The novel articulates this topical approach through the moral conundrums that its protagonist-narrator (an unnamed fictional version of the younger Cisneros) faces while trying to comprehensively analyze el Gaucho's most questionable personal and political decisions. How the protagonist-narrator confronts his father's moral shortcomings, thus, is presented as the model that must be followed by those Peruvians, mostly from the urban elites, whose indifference and racism exacerbated the plight of the conflict's more than 69,000 victims (most of whom were indigenous Quechua-speaking peasants from the highlands).[2]

La distancia que nos separa's call to perform a thorough historical analysis of all aspects of the conflict, even those which present parts of Peruvian society in a bad light, disrupts the dichotomy of narratives that prevail in the debates surrounding the period of violence. The novel distances itself from the "salvation memory" narrative that suggests that "human rights violations were committed by a few rogue elements in the armed forces" (Milton 2014, 9) while not completely subscribing to "[t]he 'human rights memory' narrative…[that] clearly allocates blame for the escalation of the violence to two competing forces—Shining Path and the state—yet tends to focus more on the violence committed by the state" (10). Instead, *La distancia que nos separa* proposes that this historical analysis take place in an environment that recognizes the efforts of the nation's police and military who fought for the country (represented by el Gaucho's dedication to his family and to public service) while also acknowledging the systematic abuses committed by agents of the government (paradoxically also represented by el Gaucho and his authoritative tendencies).

I argue here that the comprehensive historical approach proposed by the narrator marks an important shift in how Peruvian authors who belong to the political and social elites of the country tackle the traumas following the conflict. Moreover, and aided by Annette Kuhn's reflections on "memory work" and "critical consciousness" as well as by Jaqcues Rancière's ruminations on "emancipation," this essay subscribes to the idea that this kind of investigation is a reasonable and needed enterprise for understanding complex historical episodes such as the violent realities experienced in Peru in the last decades of the twentieth century. The objectivity needed to conduct this analysis appropriately is, however, quite difficult to attain, since a disconnection from long-standing emotional and social links is seldom possible. *La distancia que nos*

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[2] The estimated number of victims of the conflict is 69,280 (Reátegui et al. 2004, 17).Three out of four of the victims were indigenous peasants whose first language was Quechua (Reátegui et al. 2004, 23).

separa's narrator, nonetheless, struggles throughout the novel to separate himself from the attachments he has to his father and tries to perform a sweeping and reconciliatory analysis of his life, including his most morally problematic actions. Although he is not able to completely undo the ties that connect him with el Gaucho—and the novel winds up being a somewhat redeeming portrayal of the late General—the protagonist-narrator's critical examination of his father's most questionable decisions provides important insight into Peru's social dynamic. This is so because it constitutes a reflection on the circular nature of the political elites' historical complicity in the suffering of the country's indigenous population, which was caused by their indifference and racism. In his inquest, the narrator concludes that his father (and by association himself), as a notable member of the country's elites, played a duplicitous role in the social fragmentation of the country during the last decades of the previous century. Furthermore, he also recognizes that this complicity has a remote historical origin and that its cyclical nature causes it to be reaffirmed and reproduced across generations. Placing all responsibility for the recent political violence in Peru in el Gaucho's or the narrator's generations is, thus, a simplistic approach to complex social mechanisms such as the discriminatory system that repeatedly oppresses the country's indigenous/mestizo majority. Several additional historical factors need to be taken into consideration when discussing these social particularities because, as the protagonist-narrator states, they are based on "fallas de origen: úlceras que han estado durante siglos y generaciones sin que nadie haya hecho nada por cerrarlas" (2016, 63).

Acknowledging the existence of contributing factors beyond the contemporary Peruvian elites' indifference in the construction of the contemptuous social dynamic of the country certainly does not dismiss the negative effects that the ruling class's indifference had 0n the plight of the mostly indigenous victims of the armed conflict. Nonetheless, by providing this reflection, the protagonist-narrator suggests that it will not be possible for Peruvians to overcome the conflict's traumas without personally and collectively admitting that the human rights abuses committed during the 1980s and 1990s were not symptoms of the conflict. Instead, they must acknowledge that the conflict itself was a symptom of an intricate and deeply unequal social apparatus based on outdated colonial hierarchies and invigorated by the indifference that the urban elites have historically felt (and still feel) towards the indigenous and mestizo majorities of the country.

The approach taken towards the conflict by *La distancia que nos separa* is rather innovative in the novelistic tradition associated with the years of violence because it

demonstrates a slight but important deviation in how, in the mid-2010s, the Peruvian elites were dealing with the social responsibility attributed to them by the *Informe final* of the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación del Perú (henceforth referred to as CVR), the ad hoc government organization that investigated the human rights abuses committed during the conflict (2003). Accepting this responsibility and trying to make symbolic reparations to achieve a virtual "reconciliation" with the victims of the conflict has been a constant in narrative works thematically associated with the conflict and published soon after the appearance of the *Informe final.* Gustavo Faverón Patriau places the publication of Alonso Cueto's *La hora azul* (2005), a novel about a powerful *limeño* lawyer named Adrián Ormache who searches and fosters a personal relationship with an indigenous woman who was kidnapped and raped by his military office father during the years of violence, as the beginning of the "periodo de elaboración de ficciones ideológicamente afines a la doctrina reconciliadora avanzada por el *Informe final*" (2007, 73).[3] The process of reconciliation proposed by *La hora azul* is articulated through Adrián's efforts to learn more about the story of his father's victim because, in that way, the novel "sostiene que el conocimiento de la verdad, entendida como una 'revelación', puede transformar a las subjetividades e iniciar así un proceso de reconciliación nacional" between the indigenous communities that endured most of the violence and the elites that allowed this violence to grow to grotesque levels (Vich 2009, 235).

La distancia que nos separa attempts to espouse a similar ideological doctrine of reconciliation to the one advanced by Cueto's novel. In her critical comparison of *La distancia que nos separa* and *Los rendidos: sobre el don de perdonar* (2015), the hard-to-define book by José Carlos Agüero (the son of Sendero Luminoso militants), Lorena de la Paz Amaro proposes that both volumes "abordan el problema de la herencia familiar desde un presente en que, a pesar del informe [de la CVR][…], sigue vigente la pregunta y el dolor por las consecuencias del conflicto armado" (2017, 97).[4] Beyond making evident the fact that the conflict is still part of the Peruvian psyche, and like *La hora azul,* the books by Cisneros and Agüero accept the responsibility of previous generations in the conflict. Cisneros's work, however, questions how the previous crop of Peruvian authors from the country's elites deal in their works with the legacy left by this responsibility. Instead of only searching for the "truth" of the conflict to be able to

[3] Other novels that share *La hora azul*'s commitment to the CVR's ideological project include *Abril rojo* (2006) by Santiago Roncagliolo, Daniel Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* (2007), and *Un lugar llamado Oreja de perro* (2008) by Iván Thays (Dickson 2013, 64).

[4] Agüero presents his book as a collection of "relatos cortos, a media carrera entre reflexiones y apuntes biográficos de una época de violencia" (2015, 13).

make symbolic reparations—like Adrián does with his father's victim in *La hora azul*—*La distancia que nos separa* suggests that before any reparations (symbolic or otherwise) take place, the country's elites need to critically look inwards to truly understand their nature and the role of their indifference and contempt in the conflict and in the social fragmentation that chronically affects the country.

A systematic, intimate approach like the one suggested by the novel's protagonist-narrator is, nonetheless, a rather difficult, problematic, and radical endeavor since it would be highly unlikely for the Peruvian elites to adopt any type of political practice that would put any part of their social power at risk. Despite this difficulty, and perhaps because of it, dissecting the protagonist-narrator's recollections about his father provides us with incisive insights about how the conflict is currently remembered by the ruling classes in Lima who experienced, but did not endure, the violence. Within the narrative action of the novel, therefore, el Gaucho's interactions can be read here as an effigy of the Peruvian government during the last decades of the twentieth century. As the symbolic representation of the State, el Gaucho feels the need to protect his family and country from all threats. And yet, he is also dismissive and uninterested in nurturing an affective and meaningful relationship with one of his children (the protagonist-narrator)—the one who needed support, as did the thousands of victims of the conflict, the one who needed the most attention, the one who suffered the most from his father's contemptuous behavior. El Gaucho and his son, as the state and the victims of the conflict, are in need of symbolic reunification or, in the discursive context of post-conflict Peru, reconciliation.

The protagonist-narrator's obsessive interest in reconciling with his father, expounded in frequent contemplations where the character questions his own perceptions of el Gaucho, certainly is a laudable enterprise. It reflects, after all, a desire to analyze his origins through the methodical analysis of his father's life. Nevertheless, when one considers that his efforts to symbolically reconnect with el Gaucho—similar to the social reconciliation efforts put in place in Peru after the end of the conflict—are heavily influenced by the circular complicity that both characters inherited from previous generations, the perception of the narrator's efforts changes and leaves us with the impression that they are insufficient to achieve true reconciliation. This notion is further evidenced by the fact that the character does not challenge the General's, and thus the State's, moral integrity. The insufficiency of these efforts can be appreciated in the motivations the narrator proposes for beginning his inquiries into his father's life by admitting that:

> Si quiero entender a mi padre debo identificar nuestros puntos de intersección, iluminar las zonas oscuras, buscar el contraste, resolver los acertijos que con el tiempo fui abandonando. *Si consigo entender quién fue él antes que yo naciera, quizá podré entender quién soy ahora que está muerto.* Es en esas dos titánicas preguntas que se sostiene el enigma que me obsesiona: Quién era él antes de mí. Quién soy yo después de él. Ese es mi objetivo sumario: *reunir* a esos hombres intermedios. (2016, 63, emphasis added)

The protagonist-narrator's interest in learning more about his father, then, is not an effort to vindicate or condemn el Gaucho's memory. It is, instead, a compulsive enterprise that the protagonist-narrator takes on to make sense of his own "authentic" self. This emphasis in authenticity is not unique to this novel and, as a matter of fact, it is a trend that, according to Aníbal González, can be seen in the works of several "Millennial" Latin American writers who, like the younger Cisneros, perform a stylistic return to realism to show "a radical skepticism about postmodern artifices in literature, the arts, and the cybernetic media, and a vehement desire to neutralize the powers of simulacra" (2018, 4).[5] But the way the protagonist-narrator of *La distancia que nos separa* executes this search for authenticity is particularly striking when one considers the contextual specificities of the novel and the relevance of its characters—representatives of the Peruvian elites and, thus, inheritors and executors of its complex circular complicity in the racial mechanisms that solidify the subaltern position of the mestizo/indigenous majority.

Most of the novel's plot is devoted to the narrator's personal recollections about el Gaucho's life and to abstruse reflections about some of his domestic and public actions. The predominance of personal memories in the protagonist-narrator's quest for "authenticity" indicates that he is looking inward to create his own revised version of his father and to create a new understanding of the role that el Gaucho played in his life and in the life of the country during the last decades of the twentieth century. Anamnestically gaining new knowledge, an approach Annette Kuhn conceptualizes as "memory work," has the potential to produce positive affective and analytical results because "[a]s a practice that begins with the practitioner's own material—her memories, her photographs—…[it] offers a route to a *critical consciousness* that embraces the heart as well as the intellect, one that resonates, in feeling and thinking ways, across the individual and the collective, the personal and the political" (2009, 9, emphasis added).

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[5] The protagonist-narrator confirms this preference when he states that *La distancia que nos separa* is "[u]na novela no biográfica. No histórica. No documental. Una novela consciente de que la realidad ocurre una sola vez y que cualquier reproducción que se haga de ella está condenada a la adulteración, a la distorsión, al simulacro" (2016, 14).

Achieving the all-encompassing "critical consciousness" that Kuhn identifies as a potential outcome of "memory work" is the protagonist-narrator's main objective as he begins his re-construction of el Gaucho. The character makes his desire to reach a critical perspective of his father evident when, using the second person, he asks himself the following questions:

> ¿Dónde están los auténticos relatos y fotografías de los pasajes desgarradores y aberrantes que no forman parte de la historia autorizada de tu padre, pero que son tan o más importantes en la edificación de su identidad que los momentos gloriosos y triunfales? ¿Dónde está el álbum de negativos, de hechos velados, vergonzosos o infames que también sucedieron pero que nadie se molesta en describir? (2016, 62)

Learning about the negative aspects of el Gaucho's life is therefore part of the "memory work" the protagonist-narrator is willing to perform in order to create a better understanding of his father's domestic and public persona. The character decides to engage with these uncomfortable facts about el Gaucho because, as he admits, "eso que [le] han dicho durante tantos años respecto de la biografía de [s]u padre no [le] convence más. O peor: …lo que [s]u propio padre decía sobre su biografía ha dejado de parecer[le] confiable. [Porque] [l]as mismas versiones que siempre sonaron certeras, suficientes, se vuelven confusas, contradictorias, no encajan […]" (2016, 61).

A striking characteristic of the character's decision to intentionally disregard other parties' accounts of el Gaucho's life, including el Gaucho himself, is that these sources of information appear to be, at first glance, decidedly reliable. Who would know better about el Gaucho's life than el Gaucho himself and those closest to him (his own child and family)? The easiest and most uncomplicated answer to this question would be "nobody" but, as Kuhn points out while outlining "memory work" and its processes, these sources should, in fact, be highly questioned because "[p]eople who live in families make every effort to keep certain things concealed from the rest of the world, and at times from each other as well" (2002, 2). Moreover, Kuhn problematizes the perceivable reliability of familiar accounts further by stating that "[s]ometimes family secrets are so deeply buried that they elude the conscious awareness even of those most closely involved" and that "[f]amily secrets are the other side of the family's public face, of the stories families tell themselves, and the world, about themselves" (2002, 2). Challenging the accounts that a family tells about itself—"esas fábulas domésticas cuya única finalidad es labrar una mitología…que [ya] no…alcanza para responder las calladas, monumentales e inhóspitas preguntas que…estrujan [el] cerebro [del narrador]" (2016, 61-62) as the protagonist of *La distancia que nos separa* calls them—is

thus a primordial requisite to reach that "critical consciousness" that "memory work" prescribes.

The protagonist-narrator's wanton disregard for the outside voices that have been feeding him stories about el Gaucho, beyond confirming his subscription to "memory work" (and to the "critical consciousness" it implies), brings an important procedural and theoretical matter to light: now that he is no longer going to rely on what others have said and thought about his father, how is he going to mold his own version of el Gaucho? Where is he going to find the knowledge he needs to rebuild his perception of his father? Although the character does seek some documentary evidence about el Gaucho's actions (through his inquiries in the Army Archives), the protagonist-narrator's main inquisitive concern is to uncover the emotional and sentimental sides of his father, namely el Gaucho's subjective dimensions, especially during the most questionable moments in his domestic and public endeavors.[6] This interest is born from the fact that he and el Gaucho had a precarious relationship marked by a significant emotional distance, the same distance referred to in the title of the novel and made evident throughout its narrative action. Since el Gaucho has been dead for several years, however, shortening this distance can only be achieved through symbolic and affective means and, thus, the protagonist-narrator can only rely on his own memories of el Gaucho to obtain this new knowledge and understanding he so desperately desires.

How is it possible, however, for someone to learn something he does not know by re-analyzing and re-interpreting information that he already owns? Obtaining new knowledge from information that one possesses may sound incoherent, fruitless, or futile. Nonetheless, Jacques Rancière's reflections on "emancipation" are useful to understand how such mechanisms can be possible and even preferable in situations in which, as in the case of *La distancia que nos separa,* learners possess the will to gain knowledge without the influence of outside "intelligences." While problematizing the controversial 1818 pedagogical experiment conducted by Joseph Jacotot, where his Dutch students who did not speak French learned the language only by interacting with a bilingual (Flemish/French) edition of Fenelón's *Télémaque* (*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 1991, 2-3), Rancière concludes that "one can teach what one doesn't know if the student is emancipated, that is to say, if he is obliged to use his own intelligence" (*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 1991, 15). Furthermore, the French philosopher also proposes that,

[6] The real Renato Cisneros admits that: "no quería firmar un reportaje periodístico, sino dejar que se su imaginación completara los vacíos de su memoria para imaginar quién había sido [el Gaucho]" (2017, "Renato Cisneros publica").

> [t]o emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself, that is to say, conscious of the true power of the human mind… [and that] [t]he ignorant person will learn by himself what the master doesn't know if the master believes he can and obliges him to realize his capacity: a circle of *power* homologous to the circle of powerlessness that ties the student to the explication of the old method (to be called from now on, simply, the Old Master. (*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 1991*,*15)

By engaging in "memory work" to rebuild his perception of el Gaucho, the protagonist-narrator in *La distancia que nos separa* replaces the Old Master and his intelligence (his father and the stories that he and others tell about the General) with new ones: himself and his own memories. In symbolic terms, the efforts of the novel's narrator to reconsider the memories he has of his father's actions appear as a productive and meaningful undertaking because, through them, the character is questioning (but not changing) the information he has received about his father and is avoiding any type of manipulation and mediation of his memories. He is, thus, suggesting that the only way to understand his father, and by extension the social complexity of Peru's recent violent past, is to spring into action and challenge each one of the dominant narratives that prevail in the country regarding the armed conflict. In the theatrical terms used by Rancière, the narrator seeks to stop being a member of the silent public and to become an "emancipated spectator," that is to say, part of an audience formed by "*active* interpreters of the spectacle offered to them" (Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* 2011*,* 13, emphasis added).

The call for emancipation that *La distancia que nos separa*'s narrator proposes, like his initial desire to symbolically reconcile with his father, is here read as a commendable and needed initiative within the context of the Peruvian political violence of the last part of the twentieth century. Rancière points out that "the word 'emancipation' means: the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look" (*The Emancipated Spectator* 2011*,* 19) and, in Peru, "those who [only] look" at the country's social and moral shortcomings far outnumber "those who act" and engage in critical efforts to address them. To hold an emancipated perspective of Peru's recent history, therefore, is a noteworthy venture because it implies the adoption of a self-reflexive approach that could yield positive changes in how the Peruvian elites, of which the protagonist and el Gaucho are members, understand their harmful role in the chronic social fragmentation that affects the country.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist-narrator conducts his "memory work" regarding el Gaucho's life—and by extension his emancipatory process—according to

two parallel tracks: one devoted to his domestic dimension as patriarch of the Cisneros clan, and another, more extensive one dedicated to the character's public persona. In the first track, and following his self-imposed mandate to see even the negative aspects of his father's life, the protagonist-narrator reflects on his emotionally distant relationship with el Gaucho as well as on the General's checkered romantic life. The main point of concern advanced by the narrator when discussing his sentimental links with his father has to do with the fact that, despite having continuous interactions, they never became emotionally close. They were "amigos pero esa clase de amigos que no profundizan en sus sentimientos" (2016, 263). The protagonist attributes this distance to several factors but the most relevant for the him is that el Gaucho singled him out, one of six children, and instilled in him a sense of fear and discipline that would consolidate his domestic authority. This search for consolidation took several forms during the years and was built on the premise that el Gaucho never allowed the character to "exponer [sus ideas] ni discutir sus decisiones tajantes". Moreover, the General's desire for complete control of the narrator included the practice of constantly "[m]enosprecia[r] [sus] argumentos y […] obliga[rlo] persistentemente a reconocerlo como autoridad máxima, desarrollando una rara ortodoxia de castigos ejemplares" (2016, 47) that ranged from repeatedly writing the same phrase to physical violence (2016, 44-45).[7]

What bothers the protagonist most about his relationship with his father is not the physical punishment. It is, instead, the fact that el Gaucho focused his disciplinary efforts on him and not on any of his other siblings (2016, 48). Although the relationships that the General had with his other children were not void of conflict, including vivid confrontations with daughter Melania and son Fermín (2016, 129-40), the narrator feels that el Gaucho reserved a special type of contempt for him. This personal and exclusive disregard isolated the protagonist and did not allow him to meet the real Gaucho because, even though the General "no se callaba para el resto […] sí se callaba para [él]" (2016, 261). The protagonist-narrator's desolation also features a tinge of resentment towards his siblings. These feelings are apparent from the novel's dedication, "*A mis hermanos, que tuvieron un padre que se llamaba como el mío*" (2016, 9), as well as in several phrases uttered by the narrator such as: "El padre de mis hermanos no fue mi padre. Se llamaba igual solamente" (2016, 48). The resentment he feels turns into envy when the character, through his practice of "memory work," reflects upon

[7] The narrator states that el Gaucho used to give him as many smacks on the head ("coscorrones") as points he missed in an exam (2016, 44).

the relationship that el Gaucho had with Fermín, his oldest son. After several tense situations, including Fermín's involvement with radical political groups, the two Cisneros were able to reconnect and to forge "una amistad adulta, quizá con deudas pero ya sin roles que cumplir" (2016, 139). The friendship that the General and Fermín were able to establish, and that the narrator exceedingly but hopelessly longs for, included outings to bars and clubs and daring car races in the night. Yet, what the protagonist envies is not the pleasant moments his brother spent with el Gaucho. It is that, through their friendship, "se sentían por fin del mismo lado" (2016, 139). In other words, what the protagonist-narrator longs for is not the opportunity to do more activities with his father but to be able to identify with him in order to be "on the same side." This desire is decidedly telling when one considers that, in this specific interpretative instance, the narrator, due to his condition as the most unattended child in the Cisneros clan, is an imperfect metonymical representation of the subaltern populations that experience the blunt of the political violence in Peru. Wanting to be "on the same side" as el Gaucho, who once again represents the Peruvian state, serves, then, as a symbolic confirmation that the oppressed majorities who suffered the most during the conflict are not passive in their quest for reconciliation. They are aware, like the narrator, of the existence of affective links with the segments that hold most of the country's power and are open to rekindle them in the construction of a more egalitarian Peruvian identity. They are also cognizant, however, of the difficulty of this process.

Identifying with el Gaucho while searching for his "authentic self" also proves to be a problematic and burdensome enterprise for the protagonist-narrator. Beyond the logistical difficulties of reconciling with someone who is no longer present (difficulties that appear to be overcome through "memory work"), it is onerous for the narrator to establish a connection with someone with a history of so many morally questionable actions in his family life. In addition to reflecting upon how harshly his father treated him, the protagonist-narrator ruminates on the poor sentimental decisions made by el Gaucho. The most notable of these choices was to leave Lucila Mendiola, his first wife and the mother of three of his children, in order to start a new relationship with Cecilia Zaldívar, his mistress and the narrator's mother. The tragic events that marked this separation included a violent fight between Lucila and el Gaucho that had Melania, Estrella, and Fermín, the three children they had together, as witnesses (2016, 97-100). The trauma the three older Cisneros siblings experienced from this event completely destroyed the image they had of el Gaucho. But, while seeing them crying about his impending departure and despite feeling somewhat

"responsable del encono con el que sus hijos lo tratarán en adelante", the General left the house he shared with Lucila and his three children and would never return (2016, 99).

Disclosing this painful episode in the life of his father is, without a doubt, part of the narrator's initiative to achieve a comprehensive "critical consciousness" of el Gaucho. The events involving this dramatic separation paint the General as a selfish man who chose personal obsession over family and who was willing to do whatever it took to obtain his objectives. Nonetheless, the critical potency with which the protagonist-narrator begins his analysis of this painful episode abates as the character continues his "memory work" on the romantic relationships of el Gaucho. The narrator presents a slightly less abhorrent version of the General when he states the following: "Mi padre no era un coleccionista de mujeres […] No. Mi padre era un seductor selectivo, un cazador paciente, un donjuán machista, narciso y estratégico pero también errático y sentimental" (2016, 277). Despite still being critical, the narrator's memory of his father as a "seductor selectivo" seems modestly better, at least discursively, than being a "coleccionista de mujeres."

Engaging in "memory work" does not and should not be understood as an undertaking with the explicit purpose of questioning the moral standing of those involved in unpleasant family situations. Kuhn, in fact, states that the main purpose of revisiting the most embarrassing episodes of a clan is to "allow […] the deeper meanings of the family drama's mythic aspects to be reflected upon, confronted and understood at *all levels*" (2002, 7, emphasis added). Finding redemptive qualities in el Gaucho, then, is not something that the protagonist-narrator has to avoid in order to achieve a sense of "critical consciousness" about his father. But, considering that the General's description as a "seductor selectivo, un cazador paciente, un donjuán machista, narciso y estratégico" is presented by the narrator as a somewhat extenuatory quality, the unescapable influence of the cyclical complicity of the Peruvian elites in the critical integrity of the "memory work" being performed by the narrator has to be acknowledged.

As the protagonist-narrator unearths and discusses more embarrassing details about his father's romantic life, the influence of this complicity becomes more evident as his critical approach towards el Gaucho continues to erode. When discussing the affairs the General started with a flight attendant and several other women while he was already involved with Cecilia Zaldívar, for instance, the narrator does not condemn these transgressions as morally questionable. Instead, he attributes their occurrence to

the fact that "[al Gaucho] le gustaba amar así, entregándose […] [y] contra las leyes, aunque eso significara defraudar a las parejas oficiales de turno" (2016, 279). A further confirmation of the influence of this cyclical sense of collusion appears in the narrator's effort to explain (and perhaps somehow condone) the origins of the General's preference for difficult or even "illegal" love as he delves deeply in the tragic love story between el Gaucho and Beatriz "Betty" Abdulá. After they fostered a strong romance during their teenage years in Buenos Aires, the two lovers were forced to be apart when el Gaucho left Argentina to join the Peruvian Army and establish himself in Lima. This separation was supposed to be temporary but an obscure military rule that prohibited any Army officer from changing his marital status within the first five years of service destroyed the dreams the two characters had about having a life together (2016, 52-59). El Gaucho, nonetheless, never stopped caring about Betty and, as the narrator discovers, all of his father's later romances "se habían establecido teniéndola a ella en la mira: sea para sepultarla o resucistarla" (2016, 90).[8] The General's infatuation with Betty continued, in fact, decades after their original relationship. The narrator describes, for instance, how in 1979, more than thirty years after their breakup and despite being already with Cecilia, el Gaucho visited Betty in Buenos Aires and pursued her romantically once again (2016, 91). The protagonist-narrator attempts to make sense of this troubling episode by reflecting on how el Gaucho's "impulsiva conciencia romántica estaba habitada por un depredador machista: una vez que el objetivo estaba identificado y el territorio de operación demarcado, no cabían dudas morales. Se actuaba nomás" (2016, 91). The critical nature of this reflection is not difficult to grasp, and it could easily be explained as part of the narrator's process of emancipation. After all, he is admitting that his father's actions when re-pursuing Betty are in the margins of morality. This contemplation, however, also confirms the presence of the circular complicity carried throughout several generations in his family and, by extension, in the Peruvian social elites. This can be appreciated in the lines that precede the apparent condemnation of his father's acts during his 1979 visit to Buenos Aires:

> [El Gaucho] [n]o reconoció la brecha [entre él y Betty] [pues] [é]l funcionaba como su bisabuelo, el sacerdote Gregorio Cartagena, que había amado a Nicolasa tantísimos años atrás contraviniendo a la Iglesia; o como su abuelo, Luis Benjamín, que había engatusado a la mujer del presidente Castilla; o como

[8] In several moments of the novel, the narrator mentions that his mother became a stand-in for Betty. He mentions, for example, that "el Gaucho se había enamorado de Cecilia Zaldívar, una joven de veintidós años en quien creyó una reproducción física y espiritual de Beatriz" (2016, 90). The character also explains that his father was attracted to Cecilia because she "poseía un halo caritativo que le hacía recordar a Beatriz Abdulá" (2016,104).

> Fernán, su padre, que había enamorado a Esperanza en las tardes del Centro de Lima pasando por alto a su esposa legítima. Era un accionar de siglos. Un accionar imprudente, egoísta, aunque seguramente encantador. A [el Gaucho], como a aquellos tres, no le importaron las consecuencias. (2016, 91)[9]

The circular complicity is apparent in the discursive tactic deployed by the narrator to reduce el Gaucho's moral defects by attributing them to something he could not control: his heritage. Through this explanation, the protagonist-narrator tries to convince the reader that his father's moral flaws are not a part of his personal subjectivity. They are, instead, the evident and expected continuation of a long tradition of men who were "imprudentes" and "egoístas" but also "encantadores" in their romantic endeavors. In other words, they were mainly misunderstood lovers. Comparing el Gaucho's romantic behavior with that of his ancestors also allows the narrator to establish a hierarchy and to put his father at the top. Based on personality traits, this ranking has el Gaucho's father a step below the General. Because, at the moment of following his heart and leaving Lucila Mendiola, the military officer did not display "la cobardia de su padre. Porque su padre, Fernán, nunca se atrevió a dejar a su primera mujer, Hermelinda Diez Canseco, para irse con Esperanza Vizquerra [su madre], […] mantuvo dos hogares en paralelo […] y se sumió lentamente en una pesadilla en que lo ilegal y clandestino pasaba por natural y atmosférico" (2016, 99). In the mind of the narrator, therefore, el Gaucho is a better person than Fernán because, despite having affairs, he was brave enough to leave his first family and not lead two secret and parallel lives.[10]

The redeeming capacity implied in the separation of el Gaucho and Lucila is shadowed by the fact that the General was never legally married to Cecilia. He wanted her to be his wife and to not hide her like his father hid his mother (2016, 99) but he did not do so because Lucila never signed the divorce papers (2016, 121). To alleviate this improper truth, the narrator evokes, once again, the considerable influence exercised by the indifference and contempt inherited from previous generations. This

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[9] An introduction to el Gaucho's tumultuous genealogy is presented in Chapter 1 of the novel (2016, 13-20).

[10] If we were to think of this hierarchy as an ongoing transgenerational process, the narrator, as the next immediate generation in the Cisneros family, would be placed a step higher than el Gaucho. Since the character speaks little about his own romantic life, it is impossible to determine what actions this higher status would imply. At the beginning of the novel, however, the narrator discusses a recent breakup with his psychoanalyst and explains that he attributes it to the fact that he had become "terriblemente celoso" and that he had stopped "ser un novio para convertir[se] en un agente policiaco" (2016, 16). This admission suggests, therefore, that some of the controlling tendencies of his father are present in him.

becomes apparent when the character reflects upon how, for a considerable period of his life, he was not comfortable with his situation as el Gaucho's illegitimate son, a feeling that disappears as he investigates the intricacies of his parents' relationship. He admits, for instance, that he is now able to feel pride in words such as "*infidelidad—adulterio—bigamia—ilegitimidad*" (2016, 123). As a matter of fact, he says that these words "son [su] abolengo, […] son [su] patrimonio […], porque nombran […] aquello de lo que no puede escapar […] porque ha nutrido y elaborado [su] presencia en el mundo" (2016, 123-4).

Although the levels of influence exercised by the historical complicity of the elites vary throughout the novel, it is within it—like in Peruvian society itself—a constant presence. When analyzing el Gaucho's public persona, this influence appears to decrease as the narrator reflects upon the many questionable decisions that the General made while serving as Minister of the Interior during the last years of the Peruvian military dictatorship of the 1970s as well as Minister of War in the administration of Fernando Belaúnde in the early 1980s. At that time, el Gaucho became "el ministro más duro en años que ya eran de por sí duros" (2016, 133). The stubbornness that the character displays is seen in his repressive actions to subdue the protests against the military and to silence dissident voices. In 1976, for instance, el Gaucho "manda detener a cientos de trabajadores, obreros y dirigentes, y dispone la deportación de los que considera más nocivos" (2016, 162). Moreover, he declares a state of emergency, establishes a curfew in Lima, and closes publications whose editorial rhetoric he considers to be against the government (2016, 162). As the discontent with the military grows, the tense situation in the country reaches a chaotic point when the possibility of armed insurrection arises. In an effort to neutralize any rebellion, el Gaucho orders the military to occupy the campuses of several universities and the "detención de un centenar de dirigentes y otro tanto de políticos" while recognizing that the government has a policy of "represión selectiva" that targets those who defy the military's authority (2016, 167-8).

Directly stating that el Gaucho took steps to curtail the freedoms of the press is a clear indication of the critical stance that the protagonist-narrator—who, like the real younger Cisneros, is a journalist—is seeking to establish while engaging in the analysis of his father's life. This critical posture is further confirmed when the narrator indicates that, in the same interview where el Gaucho admits to the existence and enforcement of a "represión selectiva", the General "pide a los padres de familia cuidar a sus hijos, aunque sin precisar de quién: si del nuevo terrorismo urbano o del gobierno

militar" (2016, 168). Pointing out this imprecision in his father's warning, the protagonist-narrator indicates the danger that el Gaucho represents for the Peruvian population and verifies his intent to consider even his father's most negative traits in his pursuit of "critical consciousness." Considering both urban terrorism and the military government as threats to the safety of the country's population is not a discursive decision that the protagonist-narrator takes lightly. Especially when one keeps in mind that the character makes this contemplation retrospectively and knowing quite well the irreparable offscourings produced in Peru by instances of political violence. The rhetorical inexactitude the protagonist-narrator attributes to el Gaucho's warning places his father's political objectives, and symbolically those of the Peruvian military, on questionable grounds. It transforms the General's desire for complete and unquestionable control into an important contributing factor in the social fragmentation that would eventually steer the country into the chaos of the armed conflict.

Placing part of the responsibility for Peru's social fragmentation on the military government of the 1970s certainly is a positive step in the protagonist-narrator's process of "emancipation" because, as Rancière suggests, the character is linking an "intelligence" (the knowledge of his father's actions as Minister) with his "will" to know more about the meaning of these operations. Yet, when one considers that throughout the novel the character only seeks and interviews one of the victims of el Gaucho's repressive tactics, the presence of the traditional sentiment of superiority of the Peruvian elites becomes clear. While describing the conversation he had with the victim, an unidentified media editor who was kidnapped as a response to the publication of news unfavorable to the military regime, the protagonist-narrator admits that, "[m]ás que su testimonio [le] impresionó la manifestación de las huellas del trauma [del editor]: [pues] miraba a los lados a cada minuto como si alguien [los] espiara desde alguna mesa vecina, observaba a los mozos con desconfianza [y] reaccionaba de inmediato al ruido de un cuchillo caído contra el suelo" (2016, 167).

Although it could be argued that the editor's skittishness is a type of "intelligence" that the narrator could use as he becomes "emancipated," the fact that he only speaks with one unnamed victim who is a journalist like him, demonstrates the character's preference for "intelligences" that originate from individuals with social statuses similar to his. The presence of this complicity is further confirmed when the narrator admits that he was most impressed by the editor's behavior in the present and not by the instances of violence he endured in the past. Even with the intent to critically

approach the recent history of the country, the character (and thus the Peruvian elites) is still influenced by the sense of superiority traditionally used by the ruling classes to justify their complicity in the repression and suffering of the indigenous and mestizo majorities.

By presenting the news editor as the unique voice of el Gaucho's victims, the narrator inadvertently hints that the only oppressed individuals with whom he can identify are those with whom he has some type of social link (professional in this case). Those who do not share any trait with the elites, like the poor highland peasants who constituted the bulk of the victims of the political violence of the last century, are, thus, not to be considered. This social fragmentation is also present in the declining sense of outrage that the protagonist-narrator experiences when considering some of the opinions that el Gaucho propagated through the media about how to deal with the conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. Of the many pronouncements the character delivers regarding the hostilities between the Peruvian government and the Shining Path, the one that will be retrospectively highlighted, the one that "marcaría el resto de [la] vida [del Gaucho]" and of the narrator appears in the December 1982 issue of *Quehacer* magazine (2016, 204). In an interview published therein, the General explains that "uno de los grandes problemas [en la lucha contra Sendero es que] [u]no no sabe quiénes son y dónde están [pues] [t]odos tienen las mismas características de los hombres de la sierra" (2016, 204). This explanation, in addition to being an oversimplification, reaffirms the social misconceptions the Peruvian elites had about the conflict, misconceptions that were based on the historical racism and contempt they hold towards the indigenous and mestizo majorities of the country, and that would eventually justify their complicity in its many systematic human rights abuses. Yet the most controversial part of this interview is not this confirmation of the social unpreparedness with which the Peruvian ruling class approached the conflict in the early 1980s. It is, instead, el Gaucho's prescription for success in suppressing the threat posed by the Shining Path: "Para que las fuerzas policiales puedan tener éxito tendrían que comenzar a matar a senderistas y no senderistas porque es es la única forma como podrían asegurarse el éxito. Matan 60 personas y a lo mejor ahí hay 3 senderistas… y seguramente la policía dirá que los 60 eran senderistas" (2016, 205).

In the transcription of the interview presented in the novel, the protagonist-narrator also includes the answer to the follow-up question made by the reporter after el Gaucho gave his prescription for success:

—*¿Qué le parece esa alternativa, general? ¿Le gusta?*

> —Creo que sería la peor opción […] Creo que es muy necesario buscar cualquier otro tipo de solución antes de decidirnos por el ingreso de las Fuerzas Armadas porque nosotros vamos a asumir el control de la zona y vamos a actuar, nosotros somos profesionales de la guerra y estamos preparados para matar. (2016, 205)

Although the protagonist-narrator's outrage towards el Gaucho's oversimplified and haphazard formulas to deal with the terrorists of the Shining Path is discernable as his analysis commences, the inclusion of the second answer in the interview's transcription can easily be read as an effort to vindicate his father. This reading is also supported by the character's personal reflections regarding how the General's controversial opinions were taken in the political debates surrounding the conflict: "Nadie o casi nadie repararía en el transcurso de los años siguientes en la precisión que el Gaucho hizo respecto de la matanza indiscriminada le parecía 'la peor alternativa'" (2016, 206). Although he is correct in pointing out that el Gaucho's detractors solely focused on his cruel formula for success against the Shining Path and on his willingness to present the military as an institution that had killing as it unique objective, the political manipulation of the General's words does not condone the racism that is present in his comments regarding the "hombres de la sierra" involved in the conflict. It neither eliminates the appealing contemplations he gives later in the interview such as "[e]n una guerra no siempre mueren los culpables", "[l]amentablemente, hoy pueden caer muchos inocentes, pero eso es preferible a la matanza que podría venir mañana", or "¡[a] los terroristas hay que barrerlos, hay que matarlos sin asco! Después, a los que queden prisioneros, hay que sacarles información con cualquier procedimiento" (2016, 218).

The narrator's efforts to vindicate his father by shifting his critical attention to the General's detractors extends to the personal attack he carries out against Salomón Bautista, a reporter from *Cuestionario* magazine. Beyond qualifying the journalist's criticisms of el Gaucho as "desmesuradas [y] retrecheras", the narrator counteracts Bautista's disparagement of his father not by presenting evidence to refute the accusations but by questioning his moral standing and even his physical appearance:

> Puedo imaginar al gordo Salomón Bautista refocilándose frente a las pesadas teclas de su máquina, ya bien en la tugurizada redacción de la revista en los altos de un predio del jirón Junín o en el cuartucho donde vivía en Barrios Altos, en el segundo piso de una casona cuyo primer nivel había sido tomado por prostitutas, drogadictos, rufianes y toda clase de gentes malogradas que alternaban con Bautista como su fuera uno de los suyos que le hablaban con sus voces aguardentosas desde una misma tiniebla que los hacía irreconocibles. (2016, 219)

The protagonist-narrator goes further with his imaginary account of how Bautista writes his articles against el Gaucho. He is described as "ensorbecido con su prosa, drogado por las irradiaciones de su genio oscuro y las evoluciones de su odio" (2016, 220) and the fantasy ends with the journalist "golpeándose la cabeza con el rodillo de la máquina" (2016, 221) in a stupor of rage. The fanciful tale provided by the protagonist-narrator about Bautista is perhaps a warranted emotional response to a personal attack made against a family member but, considering that there are not any details to redeem el Gaucho from Bautista's accusations, the narrator's tirade against the journalist ends up being a trivial and almost childish exercise.

The pettiness of the protagonist's defense highlights one of the main obstacles in Peru's road to reconciliation. The elites, strongly embracing the sense of superiority produced by centuries of racism and contempt toward the indigenous and mestizo majorities, disregard any criticism regarding their complicity during the recent political violence in Peru not because these denunciations lack merit but because they come from people who have been historically considered as inferior. In other words, although the evidence may not be on their side, the Peruvian elites maintain their perspectives regarding the armed conflict because the mostly indigenous and mestizo voices (from victims' groups and human right activists) that question their role during the violence come from "gentes malogradas" who, like Bautista, are at the same level of depravity as "prostitutas, drogadictos, [y] rufianes". On the other side of the discursive debate regarding the conflict, those who support what Cynthia Milton defines as the "'human rights memory' narrative" of the violence and underline the disastrous effects the elite's indifference produced among Andean populations (also influenced by many centuries of systematic racism), appear distrustful of any action taken by the Peruvian ruling class regarding the conflict or its history. Any efforts to articulate meaningful dialogue about the conflict needed to achieve reconciliation is, thus, undermined by the seemingly unsolvable combination of dismissiveness and distrust.[11]

It would be quite unfair, however, to state that the protagonist-narrator fully and unequivocally endorses the circular complicity advanced by the chronic racism and discrimination traditionally put forward by the Peruvian elites. His approach to the country and its society is, in fact, more nuanced. He critically admits, for instance, that

[11] A profound discussion on the nature of social dismissiveness in the Peruvian context appears in Guillermo Nugent's *El laberinto de la choledad: Páginas para entender la desigualdad* (2012). For an additional perspective on how distrust towards the elites is formed Andean communities, see Mary Weismantel's *Cholas and Pishtacos: Stories of Race and Sex in the Andes* (2001).

while participating in street protests against the corrupt Fujimori government of the 1990s, he learned that Peru "era un país de mierda, atrasado, desigual, donde miles se despreciaban y se disputaban las pocas oportunidades de surgir" (2016, 170). This is certainly an uncommon political recognition among the Peruvian elites. Yet, considering the statement is void of references to the systemic racism that causes this contempt and that the character does not appear to see his role in this unequal social structure, the comment confirms that the protagonist-narrator has only taken the first steps in his quest for "critical consciousness." Likewise, in symbolic terms, the questioning that the protagonist-narrator performs of some of his father's actions (such as the emotional distance he created between them and his "selective repression" as Minister of the Interior) only partially counteracts the tacit defense that the character does of el Gaucho in his exculpatory chronicle of how he left his first wife or in his inane tirade against Bautista.

That the narrator-protagonist of *La distancia que nos separa*'s analysis of el Gaucho's life is only partially effective cannot be read, however, as an utter failure in the novel's quest for reconciliation because, as Rancière reminds us, possessing the will to engage with more than one intelligence is a vital step in the process of "emancipation." The fact that the protagonist-narrator performs such a painful historical reevaluation of his father's life—though critically inconsistent—symbolically indicates an interest in analyzing Peru's recent history. Moreover, the partial success of the protagonist-narrator's critical approach also highlights a vital but rarely recognized factor in the thoroughly unequal Peruvian society: the seemingly unescapable psychic influence executed by the transgenerational sense of complicity of Peru's contemporary elites, even in individuals, like himself, whose political stances do not endorse the "salvation memory" narrative advanced by the most conservative sectors of the country's ruling class. Identifying the influence of this complicity in one of the most popular Peruvian novels published in the last few years makes evident that, in order to achieve reconciliation, the country's elites must acknowledge its existence and devise effective and meaningful ways to counteract its effects and to redress the historical wrongs committed against the indigenous and mestizo majorities. Only then will the social conditions for reconciliation be present in Peru.

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