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**The Psychosomatic Text:
Re-reading Psychoanalysis and Semiotics in *Como en la guerra*, or, The Sister(s) of Oedipus**

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[Ella] me dijo: estoy hecha para despertar en los otros un amor tan intenso y real que después no pueden con él y me abandonan. Bea sonrió un poco al copiar esta frase, una sonrisa triste, y me preguntó ¿alguna acotación? y yo dije que no porque no tenía ninguna.

—Valenzuela, *Como en la guerra*, 1st ed., 64

Re-Reading

Luisa Valenzuela's novel *Como en la guerra* (1977), which appeared improbably amidst the maelstrom of the newly installed military regime in Argentina, has received far less critical attention than her other novels, eclipsed in part due to its problematic publication history, to its

extraordinary complexity, and to the brilliance of her posterior and more readily available writings. But *Como en la guerra* is an equally brilliant text, raising complex questions about the relationship between identity, language, sexuality and politics, questions that lie at the core of much of Valenzuela's subsequent writing. I would thus like to give a triple sense to the idea of *re-reading* this highly self-reflexive novel. In the first place, belatedness and displaced reading mark the very structure of *Como en la guerra* as well as its publication history, so that we are in a sense forced into an atemporal reading of the text—something which even its earliest readers could not escape. Secondly, any act of reading and analysis of this novel must be marked by a deep sense of iterability and circularity, because the reader's analysis is always already undercut by the superfluous nature of the protagonist's own displaced acts of analysis within the novel. Through a set of proleptic frames both embedded within the novel and accidentally reproduced in its publication history, we are condemned to re-iterate, even as we disavow it, the role of Professors of Semiotics dabbling in psychoanalytical readings of the body of a text—and the text of a body—which resists any such appropriation. But then every reader, whether a Professor of Semiotics or not, must travel that circuit in the long run, must confront that totemic border formed by signs circulating incessantly around a prohibition, and this is clearly a position which the author and her readers inevitably share.

Indeed, such autotelic processes of re-reading and reformulation are a characteristic more generally of the works of the Generation of '72, where constant reframing insistently reveals the circularity of the exchange of signs, creating a fascinating if unsettling (and for that reason fruitful) short circuit between writer and readers. Moreover, iterative tropes of self-reading and self-rewriting are given a particular weight, and often become a structural feature of many works of these writers: witness Fernando Vallejo's collapse of autobiography into autopoiesis and Laura Restrepo's meta-*testimonio* form in which prosopopoeia is engulfed by a constant diegetic framing of the duplicity of representation. Valenzuela's own work shows compulsive traces of a deep process of reflection on the indeterminacy of writing, along with creative engagement with that

slippery interface between the body (with its drives, compulsions and fleshy materiality) and the socio-linguistic systems in which the human body is immersed and which mediate its power of action over other bodies. In the 1970s and '80s, these areas of interest were being actively explored and theorized in the fields of semiotics and poststructuralist psychoanalysis, especially in literature departments in US universities, and it is no accident that Valenzuela's writing, throughout this period, engages with the often contradictory points of encounter between these systems of thought, albeit mischievously, parodying their formalities and confounding their categories. For early in her literary career, in 1969, Valenzuela won a Fulbright Commission scholarship to attend the International Writers Program in the University of Iowa, and subsequently spent time in New York, experiences which fundamentally marked her writing style, rendering it more ludic, non-linear and experimental (as seen in *El gato eficaz* [1972] written during this period). Travelling to Barcelona, Paris and Mexico in the 1970s, she "was reading Jacques Lacan's theories on language and the unconscious" (Valenzuela in Díaz, *Women and Power* 100), reflected in the close engagement with, and parody of, Lacanian theory in *Como en la guerra*. Subsequent books by Valenzuela are marked by her engagement with fervent debates within feminist literary theory of the late 1970s and '80s during her writer's residence at Columbia University and subsequently at CUNY. It is for this reason that, for reader and literary critic alike, a certain autotelic circuit occurs in reading much of Valenzuela's experimental writing, whereby the literary tools one might bring to a reading of her work are already pre-empted and discursively framed in ways that creatively disarm hierarchies of literary creation, secondary elaboration and interpretation. This disarming corresponds to her shuffling of various rhetorical frameworks which uphold (gendered) systems of social power. Hence, my own use of literary theory in this article is prompted by Valenzuela's complex challenge to her readers not to take the imbrication of language, gender and power at face value, while the proleptic structures of (psychoanalytical) interpretation that she *builds into her texts* force her readers, at every step, to reframe their own act of reading, whether theoretical or otherwise.

Yet there is a third sense in which this is a re-reading. Those of us who first read *Como en la guerra* in the 1980s were probably unsettled by a novel that describes itself in the original blurb as a *rompecabezas*, with the veiled violence which that term implies. We noted with discomfort the irony surrounding its male protagonist, the Professor of Semiotics, and his flirtatious interest in Jacques Lacan as we ourselves were perhaps struggling with the appropriation of Lacan by feminist theory of the late 1970s and 1980s. We saw that the novel moved in obscure ways between semiotics, psychoanalysis and politics, and some highly insightful first analyses of these configurations were produced, particularly by Sharon Magnarelli who, in 1988, carefully elucidated the sexual politics of the male protagonist's construction of the woman he "psychoanalyses" as mythical Other.¹ A second wave of interpretation appeared in the late 1990s, with Avery Gordon's surprise use of this novel at the centre of her theory of ghosts and haunting in the sociological imagination (*Ghostly Matters*), and Emily Tomlinson's sophisticated comparative reading ("Rewriting Fictions of Power"), which put the text into dialogue with Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* and Marta Traba's *Conversación al sur*.² For at least a decade, however, there has been a dearth of fresh critical readings of this text and, surprisingly, virtually no critical response to its republication in 2001 by Casa de las Américas. The growing body of critical collections on Valenzuela tended to ignore it as well: Gwendolyn Díaz's and María Inés Lagos-Pope's *La palabra en vilo*, which appeared in 1996, contained no contribution on this novel apart from brief mention of it in Magnarelli's overview essay on Valenzuela's metonymies of "writing the body" ("Luisa

¹ Magnarelli, *Reflections/Refractions*. Other interpretations from this first wave include Hicks, "That Which Resists", republished in Hicks, *Border Writing*, which cleverly elucidates the Freudian parodies in the novel together with a series of five other "referential codes"; Cordones-Cook, who explains the text in terms of the dispersion of the monological bourgeois subject articulated and disarticulated around Lacanian psychoanalysis; Hoepfner, who investigates the text's displacement/rewriting of the Lacanian theory of identity; and Martínez, who gives an involved poststructuralist account of the play of writing in the text's specular processes.

² Gordon's account mixes extensive plot summary and quotation with elucidation of some of the sociological themes that relate the text to psychoanalysis and politics in Argentina. In this second wave, there is also Donald Shaw's quizzical trawl through the novel, written with some scepticism as to its worth.

Valenzuela: cuerpos que se escriben”), while the later 2002 collection, *Luisa Valenzuela sin máscara* (Díaz), concentrated on her writing from *Simetrías* onwards.

Yet the novel continues to niggle, hovering silently behind Valenzuela’s more recent textual production, setting itself up as somehow paradigmatic for understanding her work more generally, as well as the broader concerns of her generation. Indeed Valenzuela said as much, with regard to her own work, at the time of the novel’s republication, in a prefatory piece in *Casa de las Américas*:

Desde mi personal posicionamiento en el mapa del lenguaje, la escritura es una búsqueda. Por eso *Como en la guerra* podría ser considerada mi novela paradigmática, porque encara la búsqueda de frente. No me resultó nada fácil. A cada página me dispuse (sin quererlo) a espiar tras la cortina del Secreto, y fui descubriendo con posterior aterramiento que sólo hay oscuridad del otro lado. (Valenzuela, “Siete aproximaciones al Secreto” 94)

Valenzuela subsequently declared the three novels *Hay que sonreír* (1966), *Como en la guerra* (1977) and the much commented *Novela negra con argentinos* (1990) to be a “trilogía de los bajos fondos de tres ciudades y de los bajos fondos propios del ser humano” (Díaz & Lagos-Pope 46). Indeed *Trilogía de los bajos fondos*, was the title chosen for the publication of these three novels as a single volume, effectively the third edition of *Como en la guerra*, which appeared in Mexico in 2004. Given this, together with some of the complex ways in which feminist theory’s use of psychoanalysis has evolved since the 1980s, it seems necessary now to return to this paradigmatic text in order to confront its displaced, atemporal haunting with the theoretical revenants that populate the temporal gap implied both in its analytical structure and in its displacement of the intimacies of the reading process. To do so, I have chosen here to re-read *Como en la guerra* through Judith Butler’s re-reading of Sophocles’ Oedipal trilogy, as set out in her book-length essay *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. This text roughly coincides with the second Spanish edition of *Como en la guerra* in 2001, and I hope here to draw the parallels between Valenzuela’s critique of psychoanalysis and Butler’s displacement of the Lacanian symbolic in the switching of circuits between Oedipus and Antigone.

Misreading the Symbolic

The epigraph which I chose for this article points, I think, to a spectacular moment of misreading, of missed analysis and critical blindness by the protagonist of the novel, Professor of Semiotics and part-time analyst, possibly named AZ. The “sonrisa triste” of this passage hints at a shared experience *between women* who are otherwise conventionally figured as “rivals”: the unnamed guerrilla-turned-prostitute who is the object of AZ’s analytical/sexual attentions, and his homely wife Beatriz. This shared experience of *déréliction* (Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* 70), which underpins (and undercuts) the mythification of woman as Other, goes to the heart of the displacement of symbolic configurations at the centre of the story. If *déréliction* “is a kind of fulsome abandonment, a form of melancholia without an object, a grief that is potentially overwhelming, without parameters, knowledge, or term” (Summers-Bremner 98)—if, in a sense, it is the enforced feminine *embodiment* of lack within the symbolic—, then its trace lingers in all of the specular relationships at work within *Como en la guerra*. For what hangs over this novel, as it hangs over so much of Valenzuela’s work, is what we might term the curse of the father, following Butler’s careful relay of Lacan through Sophocles:

The curse of the father is in fact how Lacan defines the symbolic, that obligation of the progeny to carry on in their own aberrant directions his very words. The words of the father, the inaugurating utterances of the symbolic curse connect his children in one stroke. These words become the circuit within which her desire takes form, and though she is entangled in these words, even hopelessly, they do not quite capture her. [...] Is it not precisely the limits of kinship that are registered as the insupportability of [Antigone's] desire, which turns desire towards death? (Butler 54)

Derived from Oedipus, the symbolic order inaugurated by the father's prohibition, by his curse, seems to flounder, as we shall see, in its attempt to capture Antigone, Oedipus' daughter but also, crucially, his sister.

Como en la guerra was written between 1973 and 1975 (Valenzuela, “Siete aproximaciones al Secreto” 91), but like everything else, it got caught up in the maelstrom of the *coup d'état* of 1976. Abduction, torture and murder had begun well before the *coup* finally settled the political deadlock

amongst the Peronists, with José López Rega's clandestine murder squads of the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina operating from at least 1974. Although Valenzuela and her publisher managed to bring the novel out in Buenos Aires in 1977, several changes had to be made to pre-empt censorship. The most drastic of these was the omission of a kind of fictional prologue entitled "Página cero" which graphically recounts the torture of the novel's protagonist and sets up a clear political frame for what may otherwise appear to be "merely" a psychoanalytically inspired story about the lack underpinning desire and the fantasies of fulfilment with which human beings invest desire. The entry for "Página cero" still remained in the index, however, so the discerning reader might have been able to intuit (self-)censorship and interpret the truncated simile of the title in its latent political sense. The suppressed prologue was published two years later in the English translation of the novel, *He Who Searches*,³ but did not appear in a Spanish-language version of the text for some 24 years until the 2001 Casa de las Américas edition. It radically shifts the metaphorical ground of the novel by creating a frame, which, in hindsight, reverberates throughout the displaced power structures that populate the text's interpersonal relationships:

—Yo no fui. No sé nada, les juro que nunca tuve nada con ella.

—Se te vio entrar a altas horas de la noche en su casa. En Barcelona. Dos veces por semana durante varios meses. ¡Cantá!

Una mano enorme se acerca a su cara para estallar. No, no, no, no en una bofetada, sino en caricia sobre su frente. Eso en épocas de chico, no ahora mientras aprende entre rejas el oficio de adulto. [...]

Violado por un caño de revólver. Este triste destino parece ser el mío. Y grito de dolor, nunca de miedo. [...] Está muerto mi cuerpo por debajo de las cejas, muerto mucho antes de que el tipo me sacuda el revólver en las tripas y se ría mientras dice ahora aprieto el gatillo. AHORAAPRIETOELGATILLO resuena en todas partes [...]. (*Como en la guerra*, 2nd ed., 9-10)

Although by no means intentional, the broken, displaced reading across time and languages which this publication history imposed on anyone

³ Valenzuela, *Strange Things Happen Here: Twenty-Six Short Stories and a Novel [He Who Searches]*.

trying to read the text in Spanish, obliged to have recourse to the English translation (if available) to “complete” the sense, in some ways mirrored and performed the thematization of a “broken” political reading of a “senseless” text which the protagonist himself undertakes, perhaps in the instant before his brutal murder at the hands of his torturers. The precarious shuttling between presence and absence of mastery over the text’s systems of signification, together with the text’s slippage between political and libidinal frames, is aptly represented in the paradoxical absence-presence of a page numbered “zero” which retrospectively generates the rest of the text as temporal flashback or inversion of cause and effect.

The main “events” of the novel can be easily summarized. This Argentine Professor of Semiotics in Barcelona believes that he recognizes a former acquaintance from Argentina in a possible prostitute. He decides that he must investigate the cause of her turn to prostitution “para saber fehacientemente si aquello que la impulsó a hacer la vida que hace y aquello que la obliga a escribir con compulsión (grafomanía) responden a una misma causa o son un mismo efecto” (21).⁴ Adopting different disguises including transvestism, he visits her at 3am every night to try his hand at amateur “Lacanian” psychoanalysis. AZ discovers her aforementioned graphomania, and the analysis gets confounded with occasional sexual acts. His wife, Beatriz, helps him to transcribe the recordings he makes of her conversations, and even helps with his disguises. Abruptly, the woman disappears, leaving AZ to confront his increasing entanglement with her and his fantasy projections of femininity. The novel then enters an hallucinatory world, possibly an extended dream, or perhaps the delirium produced under the torture described in “Página cero”. In these sections, AZ travels first to Mexico, undertakes a Mazatec purification ritual which degrades into the counter-cultural icon of María Sabina, the well known Mexican *curandera* who in the 1960s introduced New Age Westerners to the hallucinatory mushrooms used in the Mazatec mushroom ritual known as the *velada* (María Sabina, Wasson, & Rhodes; see also “María Sabina”).

⁴ All parenthetical references after quotations are from Valenzuela, *Como en la guerra*, 1st ed., unless otherwise stated.

AZ then travels south, through Chiapas, which is superimposed onto the 1970s guerrilla hotbeds of Misiones and Tucumán, where he meets a paradoxical group of theatrical revolutionaries who re-enact some displaced form of anthropophagism in their possible eating of a fat Western hippy woman who has brought various stereotypical New Age trinkets and talismans from India to the indigenous population of the area. Finally, AZ ends up in Buenos Aires, where there are endless queues of people waiting to file past the coffin of *la Santa*.⁵ AZ makes his way painfully and slowly towards the sarcophagus, but gets caught up with a group of militants who want to blow up the concrete structure surrounding it. He agrees to take part, and under constant machine-gun fire, he manages with great difficulty to insert the sticks of dynamite into the holes around the concrete building (Freudian dream-interpretation definitely intended). The dynamite is finally set off, and the structure explodes to reveal *Ella*—AZ is convinced that it is his *Ella*—suspended in her crystal tomb.

On the question of naming, it should be noted that neither of the principal characters has a stable name. The “name” AZ for the Professor of Semiotics, which is teasingly given us, of course evokes Roland Barthes’ *S/Z*, published in 1970, only three years before Valenzuela began to write this novel. But it also suggests a subject who exists in a relation of mastery to language, which means one that is both mastered by language and possessing mastery over language, a point which is the subject of much irony in the text. The woman is nameless in the novel, although curiously the 2001 edition named her in the blurb on the back as “Sabina”, and one critic goes so far as to call her “María Sabina” throughout his article with no hint of hesitation or irony (Hoepfner 10). The text itself, however, is quite clear in its rejection of the “trap” that the imposition of a name would represent: “¿Y si le pusiéramos a ella el nombre de María Sabina? ¿Si se lo transplantáramos, hiciéramos un injerto? Más fácil sería así sabiendo mencionarla, ubicándola en el espacio de estas páginas con la transcripción

⁵ Most critics speculate that this section of the text bears more than a passing resemblance to the events surrounding the lying-in-state of Eva Perón’s body.

de un nombre, pero no. Él debe seguir subiendo y no nos deja hacer trampa" [...] (144).

This *antinomic* desire in the text—the desire which counters the Name as Law—can perhaps serve as a useful entry point into the derelict world of Antigone.

Antigone's Claim: Crisis in the Representative Function

Butler's short text is a speculative examination of the puzzle that Antigone represents for philosophy, psychoanalysis and feminism. Antigone is born out of incest to a father, Oedipus, who is also her brother, having a sister, Ismene, who is also her aunt and her niece, and brothers Polyneices and Eteocles who are also uncles and nephews. She thus seems to trouble that boundary where kinship relations become reified as symbolic structures, a symbolic which, for Lacanians, is *not* the same as social norms, but is the rarefaction and idealization of kinship as an "enabling linguistic structure", i.e., the "sphere of norms and law that govern the accession to speech and speakability" (Butler 3). Lacan's structuralist legacy establishes the symbolic as the manifestation of an abstract and unmoveable set of structures which confer cultural intelligibility on certain forms of family and social organization and which disallow or render unintelligible other configurations. As Butler says of Antigone, "She points not to politics as a question of representation but to the political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed" (2).

Antigone's act of burying her brother Polyneices is a direct challenge to the Law of her uncle and king Creon, but unlike Hegel, Lacan and Irigaray, who in one form or another interpret Antigone's act as the primitive sway of kinship or blood ties—even of incestuous brotherly love—against the social law which must demand allegiance to the father, and hence ultimately as an unsustainable social position, Butler suggests that "Antigone figures the limits of intelligibility exposed at the limits of kinship" (23). Traditionally figured through the very etymology of her name as anti-generative (*anti-goni*), if not in fact degenerate, Antigone, and the death sentence which falls on her, comes to stand, then, for the refusal (of

the king, of the state, of the established order) to countenance forms of sociality that do not conform to the standard models by which the (Freudian) Oedipal drama is resolved. While not exactly setting up Antigone as a queer heroine, Butler engages the kinship trouble that surrounds Antigone, the instability of the subject positions available to her, as a way of challenging what she ultimately names as the curse of the symbolic order: “The symbolic might be understood as a certain kind of tomb that does not precisely extinguish that which nevertheless remains living and trapped within its terms” (44).

It seems to me that the terms with which Butler engages Antigone provide a productive way of thinking through the challenges posed by *Como en la guerra* from a contemporary theoretical perspective, but one which also engages with the retrospection which informs, *ex post facto*, the structure of the novel as an investigation into the cultural origins and myths which govern the field of gender relations and underpin the power structures derived from them. By this I do not wish to imply that *Ella* is Antigone in any simple sense; indeed, in many ways she is the reversal of Antigone, as I shall suggest later. But, like Antigone, *Ella* forces a crisis in the representative function at many different levels, one which opens up the contingent and mutable nature of those symbolic structures to which the Law of the Father confers intelligibility. For *Ella's* subject position is unstably written into the text even as she radically confounds AZ's blundering attempts to analyse her:

Porque aun teniéndola debidamente calibrada y tabulada y viviseccionada y anotada, clasificada, impresa, de nada serviría porque con ella de ejemplo jamás se podrá deducir una ley que la acompañe. ella no es la regla, es la excepción que ni siquiera hace el menor esfuerzo para confirmarla sino que la destruye. (97)

What AZ misses until the very end of the novel is the suppressed story of her militant past, her possible betrayal by her militant lover Alfredo Navoni—a character familiar to readers of *Cola de lagartija* and *Cambio de armas*—and her love/hate relationship to her twin sister and double, whom it is tempting, if only in terms of a structural parallel, to call Ismene. Ambiguously subject to the Father's Law in the form of the ambiguous father/brother/lover figure that is Alfredo Navoni, who has perhaps cursed

her to a living death through a possible betrayal, and at the very least a subject of *déréliction* in her abandonment in exile, she appears to have turned to that unstable subject/object position, both the margin and the precondition of normative patriarchal femininity, that is represented by prostitution. So, while not quite immersed in the “incestuous legacies that confound [Antigone's] position within kinship” (Butler 2), *Ella's* unstable subjectivity nevertheless poses a serious challenge to that Lacanian insistence that the symbolic is not the social, even as it *fatally* determines and structures the social. If the symbolic has the effect of reifying and freezing familial and social structures as norms, then it also governs the production of perversion, since the norm and its perversion are instituted as a necessary couple, the norm requiring its perversion in order to maintain and police its boundaries, the boundaries of the polity.

The weight of that fatal determination is perhaps represented enigmatically in the novel by the presence of a paternal genealogy, which, to quote Marx, “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,” from the Oedipal-paternal to the military machine. At a key moment of decision for AZ, after he has lost all physical trace of *Ella*, alone in an abandoned room surrounded by photographs of her, he remembers one of her many enigmatic texts, which takes the form of a parable concerning “los padres adoptivos invisibles”. While the precise meaning of this remains obscure, in the parable the city's inhabitants are urged in public posters to adopt an invisible father; these “hijos”, however, find themselves inhabited and tormented by something nameless which can never be forgotten, something that causes them inhuman levels of suffering. Meanwhile, the “padres invisibles” advance like a military procession that we mortals are powerless to prevent:

los padres invisibles desfilan marcialmente y nada podemos hacer nosotros los mortales para detener su paso. [...] a los hijos de padres adoptivos invisibles] les pesa [...] algo sin nombre y sin ninguna posibilidad de olvido. [...] se niegan para siempre a hablar de sus dolores aunque por la mueca que se les escapa por entre las manos que les tapan la cara sabemos que estos dolores son casi inhumanos.
(126)

The anti-generative movement implied by adopting an (invisible/symbolic) father (when it is usually parents who adopt children, not vice versa)

signals a destabilization of paternal function in which the symbolic father does not give the name/law to the child, but takes/steals the name, leaving his child in a state of *anomie*. Three paradigmatic “scenes” appear to be being alluded to here. The first is evident from the quotation above, and suggests militarism as a parade of martial fathers who steal the name/law. The second is suggestive of the psychoanalytical scene in which the child must “adopt” the psychoanalyst as a substitute parent (subsequently to be rejected during transference), and this is alluded to as AZ, who has been playing at being the psychoanalyst, asks himself “¿seré yo sin saberlo un padre invisible para ella? ¿la buscaré tan sólo para metérmela bajo un ala y echar vuelo?” (127). And the third scene is suggested by the “dolores casi inhumanos” which take us back to the primal scene which governs the entire text and whose reverberations structure and warp all the interpersonal relationships established in the text:

siento que están poco a poco rompiéndome por dentro, demoliendo mis escasas defensas. a veces cortan con un bisturí afiladísimo, a veces me desgarran con la mano arrancándome pedazos de carne. sólo me resta retorcerme en esta pieza ignota con el consuelo de saber que si es ella quien lo hace, también ella participa del dolor. cada tirón le duele, cada tajo. la destrucción no puede menos que alcanzarla y estamos juntos mientras pasan las horas y yo lucho contra el sueño aunque el desgarramiento me deja pocos minutos de respiro y a veces hasta pierda la conciencia. (127-28)

Here, AZ has to decide whether to accept the solitude embodying her loss, her dereliction, or whether to seek refuge in the adoption of some “padre invisible”, a course of action, which he ultimately rejects.

Displacing Psychoanalysis

The redoubling of the psychoanalytical relation and the erotic sexual encounter in the scene of torture, mediated by the curse of the invisible fathers who fatally determine the present, powerfully suggests the critique of patriarchal systems, inhabited by these symbolic structures, which this novel is undertaking. Avery Gordon, in her chapter on *Como en la guerra*, gives an in depth sociological discussion of the role that the institutions and practices of psychoanalysis found themselves playing in Argentina during the dictatorship, a role which was keenly felt by the International Psychoanalytic Association in Paris in 1981 at a meeting

which convened French and Latin American psychoanalysts, where Jacques Derrida gave the opening address referring to the situation in Argentina:

The kinds of torture to which I refer sometimes appropriate what we'll call psycho-symbolic techniques, thereby involving the citizen-psychoanalyst, as such, as an active participant either on one side or the other, or perhaps even on both sides at once, of these abuses. In any case, *the psychoanalytic medium is traversed by this violence*. All intra-institutional relations, all clinical activity, and all its dealings with civil society and with the state are marked by it, directly or indirectly. There is no imaginable self-relation of the psychoanalytic there without these marks of internal and external violence. (Derrida, cit. Gordon, "Ghostly Matters" 95, translation also adapted from Derrida 341, my emphasis)

It is little wonder in this context that the psychoanalysis which AZ practises on *Ella* should be "traversed by this violence", in Derrida's words, and specifically the violence of torture, which from the opening of the novel sets the parameters for the *interrogation* of that interface between the body (as sensorium) and its sociality. Of course, Valenzuela was to take up this critique, begun in *Como en la guerra*, and build on it in the well known and widely commented collection of short stories she wrote towards the end of the dictatorship, *Cambio de armas* (1982).

Ella, like Antigone, thus stands at the point of destabilization of psychoanalytical law, and hence the very *structures* of social law. In fact, she unleashes a destabilizing force at the heart of the pseudo-erotic psychoanalytical encounter before "disappearing" within the text, so that it is indeed AZ who finds his subject position radically destabilized by incestuous legacies that seem to be re-activated within his highly symbolic, fantasized relationship to her: "Mañana volveremos a ser Madre. A dejarnos chupar. Convertidos en un Pecho Gigante. Y blanco" (97). Let us remember that one of the etymologies of Antigone's name, according to Robert Graves, is that she stands "in place of the mother" (cit. Butler 22). What does this displacement infer for the investigation into the myths and discourses structuring gender relations in general, and femininity in particular, in the novel? For at this point in the text, the woman disappears, becomes phantasmatic, mythical, perhaps intimating Irigaray's contention that "women are nowhere, touching everything, but never in touch with each other, lost in the air like ghosts. Dissolved, absent, empty, abandoned,

gone—gone away from themselves” (Irigaray, “The Poverty of Psychoanalysis” 91). All we are left with, discursively, is the male semiotician-*cum*-psychoanalyst’s fantasy of femininity, which grows into mythic proportions as he undertakes a transcontinental journey in search of her essence.

The parodic nature of this quest, both in mythical and psychoanalytical terms, is suggested by Emily Hicks in her brief discussion of two of the explicit psychoanalytical parodies within the text: Navoni’s “Wolfman” dream, which *Ella* dreams vicariously on Navoni’s behalf; and the totemic meal of the fat woman, both of which take place or originate in the revolutionary hotbed of “Formosa” (Tucumán, transposed onto a Mexican jungle).⁶ Here is Hicks’ interpretation of the latter scene:

In the episode involving Fatty [...], Valenzuela parodies Freud’s totemic meal, in which the band of sons commemorates the mythic killing of the primal father. In the totemic meal postulated by Freud, taboos are broken: there is the destruction of the totem figure and incest is allowed. [...] In *Como en la guerra*, the semiotician meets a group of men and women keeping a vigil for the death of a revolutionary. This parallels the commemoration of the death of the primal father. The group tells the semiotician about Fatty: in a ritualistic totemic meal, Fatty was covered with food by the group and eaten. By rewriting the totemic meal as the eating of a woman, the mother figure Fatty, Valenzuela has forced a provocative juxtaposition: the destruction of that which is desired. (Hicks, “That Which Resists”, *Border Writing* 73)

This episode occurs during “El viaje”, and takes the form of a titled inset-story, “La larga noche de los teatantes” (166) told to AZ by one of this revolutionary group whose dead leader might or might not be (the text tells us) the famous Mexican “Che Guevara”, Lucio Cabañas.⁷ Hicks’ reading of the dead revolutionary as the “primal father” does not, then, easily fit the Freudian story as set out in *Totem and Taboo*, since (whether Lucio Cabañas or not) he can hardly bear the role of the tyrannical father when he is explicitly referred to as “hermano” (165) in a struggle against a higher

⁶ Valenzuela explains the reason for substituting Formosa for Tucumán in “Siete aproximaciones al Secreto”.

⁷ Lucio Cabañas Barrientos (1938-74), a Mexican schoolteacher who became a revolutionary (non-Marxist), subsequently iconized as a hero for the Mexican left (“Lucio Cabañas”).

authority. Nevertheless, the displacement of the totemic meal onto the body of a fat Western hippy (her predilection for eating sandwiches and processed cheese suggests her likely origin, 169), invests this unintentional or disavowed meal with a twin focus: the female body which just “disappears” during the theatrical meal, leaving no trace of its (excessive) materiality (no blood, guts or bones); and the post-colonial struggle (as seen by revolutionary groups of the 1970s in Latin America) for cultural as well as political autonomy. In any case, to return to a quotation from Butler, the episode of the theatrical revolutionaries (“teatranes”) points, like Antigone, “not to politics as a question of representation but to that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed” (2).

In the former dream, recounted by the woman to AZ during the psychoanalytical sessions, and attributed to Navoni, “a man eats a wolf, becomes a Wolf Man, and then eats a dog and ducks” (Hicks 73). In the original Wolfman case, Freud, as is well known, initially attributed the Wolfman’s psychosis (manifested in his terrified dream of wolves waiting to eat him) to his observance of a primal scene, aged one-and-a-half, of his parents engaged in *coitus a tergo* (Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” 235). Further analysis led Freud to deduce a perversion of this fairly common “primal scene” via the (incestuous) seductive attentions with which the Wolfman’s older sister had regaled him when he was just over three, while she tormented him with the picture of a wolf from a picture book which would set him screaming furiously, “fearing that the wolf would come and gobble him up” (213). Hicks attributes the neurosis in the dream to AZ, hinting that it might explain his passive fantasies as expressed in his transvestism (*Border Writing* 74). However, the role of the (twin) sister(s) as a latent content underlying the dream of the revolutionary (if we read Navoni’s dream through Freud’s analysis), and his ultimate rejection/betrayal of the sister(s), leads us back to the suppressed political text which in fact frames the two dreams that are recounted:

los soñó en Formosa con delirio y fiebre, cumpliendo una misión que no tuvo éxito y que llevó a varios compañeros a la muerte (75) recuerdos remotos [...] de tiempos cuando ella y su hermana gemela, o ella-ella como quieran llamarlas (las dos tan idénticas [...]) peleaban por una misma causa [...] y hasta encontraban la

forma de tener esperanzas. Después no, ya no, atadas de pies y manos y humilladas. [...] La necesidad de olvidar para poder recomponerse. [...] O]lvidarse del amor de ese Alfredo Navoni sin preguntarse más si había sido o no el traidor que finalmente acabó delatándolos [...]. (82)

The Sister(s) of Oedipus

If, according to Claude Lévi Strauss, the incest taboo is not exclusively biological, nor exclusively cultural, but exists “at the threshold of culture” (cit. Butler 15-16), then Valenzuela’s disturbance of the “primary” symbolic structures which derive from it—in the dreams and episodes recounted above, but more fundamentally her account of their abuse by the terrorist state, as well as the battle for representability amongst those who would alter these sedimented and immutable “laws”—raises the same set of questions which Butler asks of Antigone, who is both the offspring and sister of Oedipus:

what will come of the inheritance of Oedipus when the rules that Oedipus blindly defies and institutes no longer carry the stability accorded to them by Lévi-Strauss and structural psychoanalysis? In other words, Antigone is one for whom symbolic positions have become incoherent, confounding as she does brother and father, emerging as she does not as a mother but [...] “in place of the mother.” [...] If the stability of the maternal place cannot be secured, and neither can the stability of the paternal, what happens to Oedipus and the interdiction for which he stands? What has Oedipus engendered? (22)

In a seminal passage placed between sections I and II of the novel, the narrator, whose voice appears at certain points in italics, indicates the pathos that AZ’s torture and death are rendered senseless by his inability to interpret the political dimensions of the psyche:

Claro que se cuidó muy bien de hablar de Navoni, de su hermana la capitana [...] o de la Organización. Si AZ conociera estos detalles podría interpretar los símbolos, descifrar el significado de los compañeros en la cárcel, conocer los secretos. Habría interpretado los odios de ella hacia su hermana mítica, su doble, y quizá habría sacado conclusiones. [...] Su posterior tortura (y posterior es la palabra) y hasta quizá su muerte, habrían tenido para él una razón de ser y eso es lo intolerable: la causa que justifica los efectos, la explicación racional infiltrándose en medio de toda la irracionalidad que implica la conducta humana. (92-93).

What then of *Ella's*—and Antigone's—relationship to the polis, to polity, and ultimately to the political, especially “in time of war”?⁸ For to inhabit that liminal state, along with Ismene, of being Oedipus' sister as well as his daughter, is to inhabit the threshold of the social. To disobey the king's law directly, and to do so twice, is to interrogate fatefully the point where questions of kinship become questions of politics.

Antigone, of course, became a potent political symbol in the Argentina of the dictatorship and its aftermath. Her enactment of a burial for her brother Polyneices in the face of a state edict that the body should be ignored had obvious political overtones which allied her to the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* with their claim for justice and for the bodies of their disappeared relatives to be returned and publicly accounted for. Several cultural texts subsequently drew on this parallel, from the film *La amiga* (dir. Meerapfel) to Griselda Gambaro's play *Antígona furiosa*.⁹ It is of course Antigone's fate herself to be buried (alive), at least symbolically, in Sophocles' version: walled up in her cave, a living tomb, she takes her own life before Creon can reverse his order: “The symbolic might be understood as a certain kind of tomb that does not precisely extinguish that which nevertheless remains entrapped within its terms, a site where Antigone, already half-dead within the intelligible, is bound not to survive” (Butler 44). Curiously, it had also been Oedipus' fate to meet his death by being swallowed into the earth at Hippeios Colonus. Do Oedipus and his progeny, unstably sited at some shifting border between the omphalic realm of the chthonic gods, and the phallic realm of the polis, throw into crisis the very order they found? Indeed, this shift from the phallic to the omphalic is one which *Como en la guerra* engages explicitly, and can perhaps stand as the sign governing the text's movement from Lacanian psychoanalysis to the chthonic realms of mythical and cultural origins in “El viaje”: “todos

⁸ W.H. Auden's coding of (gay) love and politics as civil strife *In Time of War* would make for a fascinating triangulation of Valenzuela's and Butler's concerns. However, Valenzuela's decoy reference in the title of *Como en la guerra* is to a sonnet by Quevedo and a “*copla anónima*” (in fact penned by Anibal Ford). The “sources” are given in the novel's epigraphs, and allow Valenzuela to mask a war story as a love story, arguably inverting Auden's procedure.

⁹ See also Diana Taylor's *Disappearing Acts* (207ff), for a discussion of the significance of Antigone in this play and more generally in the period.

estamos así lacónicos de búsqueda, y yo prefiero concentrarme en ella, sacudir mis largos bigotes e irme husmeando en cuatro patas hasta dar con esa latitud que es su guarida. la zona onfálica” (107).

Finally, to state that the daughter of Oedipus is also the sister of Oedipus, is radically to disinvest the position of the feminine within the Oedipus complex, allowing perhaps, for experimental writers such as Valenzuela, different imaginative solutions to its conundrum. For, as Valenzuela says, “[Todos t]enemos poderes inimaginables. Sólo que ese saber nos atemoriza. Una tradición milenaria nos detiene y nos sugiere que ese saber se paga: más que el incesto, Edipo paga el haber develado el enigma” (Satinosky). If Antigone is the conundrum which loosens the knot of Oedipus, then maybe one solution is in fact, at the end of this novel, her reversal, the projection from the position of *Anti-goni*, the anti-generative, of a hypothetical *Anti-Anti-goni*. As Oedipus and then Antigone are swallowed into the earth, symbolically returning the Phallus to the Omphalos, our Anti-Anti-goni, *Ella*, is, in a reverse but parallel movement to Antigone’s political act of burial, *unburied* in a final, climactic explosion:

Las paredes de la fortaleza revientan como una gran cáscara y emerge brillante el corazón del fruto. [...] Y él cree volverla a ver después de tanto tiempo, allá arriba en lo alto sobre una tarima blanca, toda resplandeciente, irradiando una luz sorda pero intensísima, majestuosa en su ataúd de vidrio que es como un diamante. (195)

Valenzuela’s self-avowedly “paradigmatic” text within her *oeuvre* can, perhaps, also be seen as paradigmatic for the Generation of ’72 more broadly. While a number of Boom motifs remain—whether it be the invocation of absent symbolic fathers and the structures of meaning rendered spectral by the crisis in the paternal function (Rulfo), the ironic mythic/anthropological quest for origins (Carpentier), or the disturbance of (Freudian/Lévi-Straussian) taboos and nightmarishly self-replicating symbolic/social structures (Paz/García Márquez)—these are all now framed as the proleptic delirium of a Lacanian semiotician suffering the most unimaginable of acts of torture. Where García Márquez had both paid homage to and ironized structuralist anthropology and linguistics, Valenzuela does the same to their bastard Lacanian progeny while at the

same time framing her texts' relationship to the generational dynamics of the Boom. The complex, half-buried, anti-generational figure of Antigone—postulated, twisted and inverted in Valenzuela's *Ella*—comes in some sense, then, to stand for the complexities of a new generation of writers in whose work politics and representation no longer simply frame each other but become intertwined in fractal patterns which render fatally unstable the structural labyrinths of their forebears.

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