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Restitution and Mourning in Latin American Postdictatorship

Idelber Avelar

The real city crumbles down in memory; now it is only an imprint beat up and chiseled for the dream, rough, ancient, with this thick air previous to the storm aggravating monuments and stone façades. . . . It is the same little city. But why does it return? What accounts does it come to settle, what recriminations does it fling, what bitter reproaches does it segregate? The dream is also this: a remembrance of what has not been lived, of that which unsuccessfully strove to leave a trace in us.

—Tununa Mercado, *Canon de alcoba*

In an article on what he called the “crisis of witnessing” unleashed by the Holocaust, Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst and cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, recalls a survivor who made

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the following statement: "We wanted to survive so as to live one day after Hitler, in order to be able to tell our story."¹ The survivor's crisis of witnessing emerges from the abyss between the irreducible imperative to tell and the distressing perception that language cannot fully convey that experience, that no particular listener manages to capture its true dimension or even listen attentively and sympathetically enough. If in the most basic sense the work of mourning can take place only through the telling of a story, the survivor's dilemma lies in the irresolvable incommensurability between experience and narrative: The very diegetic organization of the past monstrosity is perceived as either an intensification or a betrayal of one's suffering—or worse, of the suffering of another—and the survivor is caught in a symbolic paralysis. Whereas the accomplishment of mourning work presupposes the elaboration of a story about the past, the survivor of genocide faces an extreme instance of the modern decline in the transmissibility of experience, that banalization of language and standardization of life that preempts the didactic power of storytelling and places the latter in an acute, epochal crisis derived precisely from its divorce from experience.² In the case reported by Laub, the survivor's new, recomposed family was continually perceived as "unempathetic strangers, because of the 'otherness' she sense[d] in them, because of their refusal to substitute for, and completely fit into, the world of parents, brothers, and children that was so abruptly destroyed."³ The impossibility of replacing the lost object is reinforced by the presumed indifference of the surrogate object, which in turn heightens the feeling that the experience of loss cannot be translated into language.

The survivor thus confronts a deadlock in the restitutive function of mourning. All mourning demands restitution, not exactly because mourning wishes to restore the state prior to the loss—the mourner generally knows this is impossible and refuses to accept it only in extreme cases of fixation on the past conducive to radical melancholia⁴—but rather because

1. Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 63.

2. For the standard account of the decline in the transmissibility of experience and its links to the crisis of storytelling, see Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. and with an intro. by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 83–110.

3. Laub, "Truth and Testimony," 63. On the vicissitudes of witnessing after historical catastrophes, see also Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

4. I allude here to the classic Freudian distinction between mourning, in which the sepa-

mourning can run its course successfully only through a series of substitutive, metaphoric operations whereby the libido can reinvest new objects. The paralysis in mourning therefore indicates a breakdown in metaphor: The mourner perceives the uniqueness, the singularity, of the lost object as staunchly resisting any substitution, that is, any metaphorical transaction. In this essay, I will indicate why I conceive of this moment of resistance to metaphor not simply as a transitory, ultimately surmountable phase of mourning work but rather as the very locus where mourning becomes an affirmative practice with clear political consequences. Latin American post-dictatorial texts, and postcatastrophic literature in general, are challenged to subsume the stark, brute facticity of experience into a signifying chain in which such facticity perennially runs the risk of being turned into yet another trope. Mourning includes a necessary moment of confrontation with this risk and resistance to the very metaphoric structure of mourning work. In the pages ahead, I will examine how this problem manifests itself in the literature that followed the genocide carried out in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, I will look closely at a testimonial novel by Tununa Mercado, an Argentine exile, who returned to Argentina after the fall of the military regime only to find that the so-called redemocratization was conditional upon erasing and forgetting the experience of the victims.⁵

The literature produced in the aftermath of the recent Latin American dictatorships confronts the need not only to come to terms with the past but also to define its position in the new present ushered in by the military regimes: a global market in which every corner of social life has been commodified. An analysis of postdictatorship culture must proceed, therefore, with two parallel goals in mind: On the one hand, it must assess how, and under what conditions of possibility, postdictatorial literature engages the past; on the other hand, it must interrogate the status of the literary in a time

ration between the ego and the world can still be effected, and melancholia, in which the ego has been engulfed and becomes itself part of the lost object. See "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth, 1957), 14:237–58.

5. Speaking of Uruguay, Hugo Achugar has noted the *ethical* dilemma of postdictatorship: "A feeling of guilt arises from the fact that Uruguayan society knows . . . that it has come out of the dictatorial catastrophe without being able to clarify doubts and misgivings, or punish those responsible. . . . The bad conscience of an important part of the country has preferred to live with guilt rather than risk achieving justice" (*La balsa de la medusa: Ensayos sobre identidad, cultura y fin de siglo en Uruguay* [Montevideo: Trilce, 1992], 45). Mercado's *En estado de memoria* is a novel written against, and as an autopsy of, precisely such bad faith.

when literature faces a decline in its ability to transmit experience, when the breach between what has been lived and what can be narrated widens, during an epochal crisis certainly not unrelated to the foregoing commodification. If the dictatorships' *raison d'être* was the physical and symbolic elimination of all resistance to the implementation of market logic, how has the triumph of such a project determined the fate of historical memory in Latin America? How can one pose the task of mourning—which is always, in a sense, the task of *actively forgetting*—when all is immersed in *passive* forgetting, that brand of oblivion which ignores itself as such, never suspecting that it is the product of a powerful repressive operation? If the neoliberalism implemented in the aftermath of the dictatorships is founded on the passive forgetting of its barbaric origin, how can one, to use Walter Benjamin's expression, seize hold of that memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger,⁶ such danger being represented today by a commodification of material and cultural life that seems to preclude the very existence of memory?

Commodification negates memory because every new commodity inherently replaces previous commodities, sending them to the dustbin of history. The market operates according to a substitutive, metaphoric logic in which the past must be relegated to obsolescence. The erasure of the past *as past* is the cornerstone of all commodification—even when the past becomes yet another commodity, as in all retro fashions, revivals, and nostalgias for sale, which invariably attest to the market's ability to make the past present, thereby negating it as past by replacing everything that was defeated, unaccomplished, or mournful in it. In Benjaminian terms, the market transforms even the most brutal documents of barbarism into glittering testimonies of the richness of culture. Today, the transnational capitalism imposed in Latin America over the corpses of so many has taken this logic to the point where the relation between past and present is entirely circumscribed within that substitutive, metaphoric operation. The past is to be forgotten because the market demands that the new replace the old without leaving a remainder. By insisting on the inevitability of a remainder, the practice of mourning proves to be irreducible to a simple market logic of exchange, even if the goal of a successful mourning work turns out to be an act of substitution in its own right.

Indeed, as much as market logic tends to transform the past into a *tabula rasa*, no substitution will ever smoothly even up, for it will always,

6. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 255.

invariably, leave precisely that remainder. The anachronistic, obsolete commodity, the recycled gadget, and the museum piece are all forms of survival of what has been abandoned in the market.⁷ In incessantly producing the new and discarding the old, the market also creates an array of leftovers that point toward the past, as if demanding restitution for what has been lost. Whereas the hegemonic political discourses in Latin America would “put a final stop” to “the fixation on the past,” the vanquished, those who were defeated so that today’s market could be implemented, cannot afford to live in oblivion. Postdictatorial literature bears witness to this will to reminisce. In different forms, it draws the present’s attention to everything that was left unaccomplished in the past, recalling the present to its status as a product of a past catastrophe, of the past as a catastrophe. As such, postdictatorial literature has an *untimely* vocation in the Nietzschean sense, “acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.”⁸ In the very market that submits the past to the immediacy of the present, mournful literature will search for those fragments and ruins—remainders of the market’s substitutive operation—that can trigger the untimely eruption of the past in the present.

The imperative to mourn is the postdictatorial imperative par excellence. Engaging a mournful memory that attempts to overcome the trauma represented by the dictatorships, postdictatorial literature carries the seeds of a messianic energy that, like the Benjaminian angel of history, looks back at the past pile of debris, ruins, and defeats in an effort to redeem them, while, at the same time, it is pushed forward by the forces of “progress” and “modernization.” There is a *belatedness* proper to this endeavor, for it establishes a salvific relation with an object irrevocably lost. This is an engagement that cannot but be perpetually catching up with its own inadequacy, that is aware that all witnessing is a retrospective construction that must elaborate its legitimacy discursively, in the midst of a linguistic war in

7. Speaking of the renewed popularity enjoyed by museums in postmodernity, Andreas Huyssen notes: “The need for auratic objects, for permanent embodiments, for the experience of the out-of-the-ordinary, seems indisputably a key factor of our museumphilia. Objects that have lasted through the ages are by that very virtue located outside of the destructive circulation of commodities destined for the garbage heap” (*Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* [New York: Routledge, 1995], 33). The museum could then be understood as a place of restitution: In the museum, that which has become anachronistic in the market is restituted to contemporaneity precisely as a sign of the past.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 60.

which the most powerful voice is forgetfulness. Opposing the temporality of the market, where the production of new use-values must update or modernize, eliminate or discard some remnant of the past, mourning always includes a moment of clinging to the past in the hope of saving it. To recall the famous Marxian dichotomy, mourning does not deal with use-values—there is no “use” for an epitaph or a memorial, they dwell outside all utility—and will necessarily include a moment of suspension of exchange-value, for the object of mourning is invariably affirmed as unique, resistant to any transaction, substitution, or exchange.⁹ Hence the contention that in mourning work, use- and exchange-values are suspended by a third form of value not contemplated by Marx, namely, what one might call *memory-value*, an antivalue, to be sure, given that what is most proper to it is to resist any interchange.

Yet the opposition between mourning and exchange must itself be complicated in a number of ways. Of course, mourning's ultimate horizon is a relationship of exchange: As the libido reinvests a new object, the “accomplished mourning work” will carry out that metaphoric operation whereby the lost object is subsumed under the surrogate object. The horizon of perfection for mourning is thus a metaphoric not unlike the transparency of the market. Mourning, however, resists its own accomplishment and opposes its own conclusion: “This is what mourning is, the history of its refusal.”¹⁰ It is in this sense, then, that one speaks of the interminability of mourning work: Mourning always and necessarily poses itself as an unrealizable task. If no incorporation of the lost object, no idealization of the other, will ever take effect without leaving behind an unassimilable residue, there will always remain a dimension in mourning work that will prove irreducible to the metaphoric operation underlying the market.

Mercado's *En estado de memoria* [In state of memory]¹¹ addresses

9. It should be noted that as far as Marx is concerned, what may appear to be a symmetrical dichotomy between use and exchange is in fact a critical operation in which only the latter has a real epistemic status. As Fredric Jameson notes, “[use-value] is ‘always-already’ if anything ever was: the minute commodities begin to speak . . . they have already become exchange-values. Use value is one of those lateral or marginal concepts which keeps moving to the edge of your field of vision as you displace its centre around the field, always a step ahead of you, never susceptible of being fixed or held” (“Marx's Purloined Letter,” *New Left Review* 209 [1995]: 92).

10. Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 55.

11. Tununa Mercado, *En estado de memoria* (Buenos Aires: Ada Korn, 1990). Hereafter, references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text. Mercado's first book, *Celebrar a la mujer como una pascua*, was published in 1967 and received an honorary

precisely this dimension of value that is not reducible to exchange. Mercado's text narrates a series of events, from the protagonist's exile in France (1967–1970), during General Onganía's dictatorship in Argentina, and later in Mexico (1974–1986), during the nightmarish period known as *proceso*, to her return to Argentina after the restoration of democracy. The background for Mercado's protagonist is the most violent period of modern Argentine history, during which some twenty thousand people disappeared or were killed. Beginning with the repression of the Peronist labor movement and the purging of progressive university professors after the coup of 1966, followed by the resurgence of popular struggles in 1969, the ephemeral restoration of democracy in 1973, and the recrudescence of paramilitary violence preceding the coup of 1976, the topic of exile was central to Argentine culture for almost twenty years. Contemplating the dictatorship's heritage after redemocratization, the country was forced to confront the problem of mourning in a way rarely seen before. In addition to being a sophisticated reflection on mourning and trauma, *En estado de memoria* should also be understood as a political intervention in this context.

The novel begins with a most disturbing scene: A man named Cindal writhes in pain in a psychiatrist's waiting room, crying out that he has an ulcer. His is one of many somatizations of psychic disturbances to appear in a book in which the line between physical and psychic pain is patiently called into question. The doctor's answer illustrates the relationship between experience and certain established bodies of knowledge. Cindal does not have an appointment, and even though other patients in the room, the narrator-protagonist included, are willing to give up their appointments for him, the doctor does not receive him, even after he begs for the ultimate humiliation: "Please, intern me!" Michel Foucault reminds us that the modern clinic emerged when the symptom began to signify the disease without a remainder. The being of the disease could now be entirely stated in its truth, for the sovereignty of medical consciousness had transformed the symptom into a sign, in a process that is not, needless to say, deprived of violence: "But to look in order to know, to show in order to teach, is not

mention at Cuba's Casa de las Américas Award. Her second book, *Canon de alcoba*, is a series of richly allegorical stories that give testimony to some of Mercado's major concerns: the question of writing in times of defeat, the impact of exile on memory, and the status of the dead among the living. *La letra de lo mínimo* (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 1994) is a collection of minimalist texts and travel notes written while visiting the United States. Most recently, she has published *La madriguera* (Buenos Aires: Tusquets, 1996), her childhood memoirs, in which the past appears as a mobile and multilayered labyrinth revolving around a lost object.

this a tacit form of violence, all the more abusive for its silence, upon a sick body that demands to be comforted, not displayed? Can pain be a spectacle?"¹² As hope for alleviation leads to an offering of one's own body as a legible sign, Cindal announces a series of gestures later repeated by the protagonist, who receives her first lesson in the role of silence within structures of power/knowledge: "Time has been perfecting this tomblike analytic silence toward those who seek immediate answers to their desperation. Cindal hung himself that same night" (8).

The novel then sets out to relate the protagonist's "dependency on doctors of all sorts, including dentists, gynecologists, and above all witch-doctors, shamans, and 'masters'" (12). In this grouping, psychoanalysis is not one practice among others, for the impossibility of establishing a lasting analytic scene is decisive: "In strictly therapeutic terms, I have always been spared psychoanalysis. To tell the truth, I could never resort to an individual clinical treatment in which I offered, horizontally, my unconscious materials: for economic reasons, I always had to be in group therapies, where I effortlessly whisked my anguish and my vulnerability away from my mates' eyes and perhaps from the psychiatrist's sagacity" (11). Besides the theoretical sophistication, the difference between psychoanalysis and all the other therapeutic practices the protagonist has undergone resides in this individual relationship, a precondition for the journey that distinguishes the talking cure: transference. The entire narrative hangs on the related problems of transference, translation, vicariousness, and substitution.¹³ Early on, the protagonist mentions the "immense capacity to transfer that characterizes" her (11–12). In a series of events, she is forced to occupy the position of a surrogate, for example, in her job as a ghostwriter, in which she composes texts later signed by others, reduced to being "a tutelary phantom over someone else's sentence" (25). She also has a long history of inheriting other people's clothes, the definitive metaphor of her vicariousness.¹⁴ These clothes, "left as inheritance or memory of a friend who has

12. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1973), 84.

13. For an exploration of the links between transference and translation, especially regarding autobiography and the singularity of a signature in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, see Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

14. The protagonist's vicarious nature has been noted by Jean Franco in "Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private," in *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*, ed. George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 78–80.

just died" (52), represent those friends, as if clothes had turned into the privileged locus where the dead hang around. Since these objects still, in a way, belong to the dead, "one dares not throw or give them away" (53). The inability to discard the clothes causes in the protagonist an interruption in transference, emblemized in the image of clothes hanging forever useless in a closet from which one fears to remove them.

Reading *En estado de memoria*, one has the sense that psychoanalysis is the locus where all these impasses can be theorized at a higher level. But for economic reasons, for the sheer incompetence of certain analysts, or for a crushing silence that overtakes her on the only occasion when the opportunity does present itself, transference remains a symptom rather than a therapeutic strategy. For example, when she arrives in France as an exile, she puts her hope in an Argentine psychoanalyst who has promised to recommend her for therapy sessions with a Swiss colleague in Geneva, located only an hour away from her temporary home in Besançon. She remarks: "The assumption that I could have an existence as a *case* soothed me" (13). In Mercado's novel, the process of endowing the Other with that position of knowledge—a formal knowledge in which she could have an existence as a *case*—becomes central to the protagonist, the particular nature of that knowledge at any given moment being a matter of relative indifference. Drug treatments, self-help therapies, homeopathy, group endeavors, and even psychoanalysis are nothing more than different forms in which this fundamental lack is objectified in a subject-supposed-to-know. What differentiates psychoanalysis is, of course, its awareness that this process of transference is the fundamental enactment of the truth of the unconscious.¹⁵ But the protagonist has to reach that insight through other means, and much of her transformation is embodied in her *transferring* that subject-supposed-to-know from these various external instances to her own practice of *writing*. By the time she completes the cycle narrated by the novel, *she still does not know; an other* knows in her place. Her trajectory does not lead to a harmonious reconciliation with the truth

15. Jacques Lacan, in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), takes aim at a common misunderstanding of the nature of transference (which he associates with the puritanism of American ego psychology), namely, the notion that links transference with illusion and error, leading up to the fallacy of a supposedly desirable intervention of the analyst to "correct" it through "an alliance with the healthy part of the subject's ego" (130–31). Lacan advances the concept of transference as the repetition of a missed encounter, an *event* that *takes place*, "the enactment of the reality of the unconscious" (146), rather than a manipulable means for correcting delusions.

of her unconscious but instead concludes with the emergence of a practice, namely writing, in which her ignorance can be articulated. The moment analogous to the psychoanalytic moment of rupture of transference—that moment when the subject recognizes that the Other “does not have it” either—takes place in the emergence of writing as a privileged theater for the unconscious.

In *En estado de memoria*, the protagonist learns only after she comes to terms with this ignorance. A crucial moment takes place when she returns to Argentina and seeks aid from an old friend who now operates a “therapeutic altar with Freudian psychoanalysis, Zen Buddhism, and Taoism” (59). It soon becomes clear that the protagonist and the pseudoshaman speak entirely different languages:

She began to list work “opportunities” like someone reading the classifieds page, not without first asking me, in a mysterious and complicit tone, intending that I revealed some sort of concealed vice, *what I really wanted to do in Argentina, what interested me the most, what was it that disquieted me, incited me, but truly*, she said, *what is it you want to do*, marking the question in such a way that no doubt could remain as to its seriousness. . . .

With a lot of effort and after an immersion in my soul as in a confessional, I said that what interested me was to write, *fundamentally to write*, I said, feeling unfortunate and miserable, on the verge of tears and wishing I could flee as soon as possible. . . .

My desire was not any other: *to write*, I had said with the inflection of someone who makes herself pardoned for a fault; *to write*, I whispered, and this startled her; writing does not look like a labor decision, but she wanted to take me to a pragmatic terrain, telling me about people who prepared texts for marketing campaigns, or show biz promoters who worked for dealers. I did not understand. How was it possible that my confession could only lead her to such hypotheses about my person? (60–61)

This is the first time the protagonist is confronted with this particular kind of postdictatorial comforting and reassurance, the typical postcatastrophic phenomena represented by the rhetoric of self-help and adaptation.¹⁶ Indi-

16. For an instance of psychologizing, adaptive self-help in postdictatorships, see the episode in Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*, in which Julia Gandini is subjected to a “virtual lobotomy,” whereby guilt and regret for her activist past are implanted into her brain (*La ciudad ausente* [Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1992], 94–95). I have addressed Piglia's

vidualizing all problems as matters of personal achievement, creating well-programmed subjects who intervene in the polis at best as consumers, the discourse of adaptation separates politics from experience and imposes a comforting compliance with the new market order: "To ask someone if they are well adapted is a commonplace of a whole social class eager to be tranquilized" (130). It is during the search for an alternative to this adaptive, conformist psychology that the protagonist's writing opens up to the insistence of the unconscious, embodied in the insistence of unresolved mourning.

The confrontation with the recent Argentine political unconscious includes a critique of certain mythologies of identity that flourished during exile:

The attachment to the country we'd left conditioned all our lives; there were those who could not overcome the sum of losses and spent the entire day thinking of their neighborhood, idealizing practices that one could not see why they should be considered paradigmatic of a paradise lost; the Argentine substance being missed was embodied in mythologies of scarce interest. Seen from today . . . that "iconography" and the little cults to objects that then ruled fantasies, if judged beyond emotions, turn out to be a meaningless patrimony, with no intellectual or imaginary value. (33)

The text unveils the fundamental fallacy of all identitarian rhetoric by relating the predicament of many Argentine exiles who mystify an Argentine being and cling to national icons while away from home, only to complain after their return that those wonderful Mexican tortillas and chili cannot be found in Buenos Aires. The most ideological facets of exile coalesce in these fetishes of an identity that is, by definition, alienated. These little objects, meaningless in themselves, appear as substitutive, compensatory fictions for a political practice no longer available. "The reproduction of the void was the state proper to exile" (109). What distinguishes *En estado de memoria* is its insistence on mourning this void—by reflexively, symbolically incorporating it into its critical horizon—instead of merely providing a comforting surrogate to replenish the absence left by defeat.

The protagonist experiences exile as something that seems to oc-

novel as a postdictatorial battleground of memories in "Cómo respiran los ausentes: La narrativa de Ricardo Piglia," *MLN* 110 (1985): 416–32, and in "Alegorías de lo apócrifo: Ricardo Piglia, duelo y traducción," in *Valoración múltiple sobre Ricardo Piglia*, ed. Jorge Fornet (Havana: Casa de las Américas, forthcoming).

copy no particular place in time, as in a voided intermission that leaves no traces: "Time takes place in a beyond, elsewhere, you hear it in the silences of the night, but you sever it, you don't want to perceive it because you suppose that homelessness will end, that it is a parenthesis that does not count on any becoming. . . . Provisional, time goes from week to week on a train of successive stops" (29). This parenthesis surely proves to be illusory, since time *has* elapsed. Its weight, however, makes itself felt only retrospectively, after the return, emerging already as a belatedly perceived loss. The hitherto unnoticed destructive action of time is now retrospectively grasped, forcing many exiles into a spurious narrativization of something that cannot be narrativized. To use Benjamin's phrase, they resort to "the whore called 'Once upon a time'"¹⁷ in order to cushion the distressing impact of the past. Speaking of the intolerable question, "Have you adapted yet?" Mercado's protagonist affirms: "The question is insignificant, but rarely does one have the strength to counter it with an *ex abrupto* or a refusal to answer, and all exiles . . . have had to begin by saying, 'Well, at first my folks and I etc. etc. etc.,' dividing in temporal fringes something which, being so dramatic, did not admit any slicing. And each one made up a story: There was a before, of flawed integration, then an improvement" (130). Mercado exposes here the pacifying function of historicism, that narrative of progressive amelioration which implies that "there will be a future time of adaptation in which everything will be ordered in a satisfactory manner" (130). Remaining on guard against a narcotic belief in progress that can generate only a paralyzing optimism, the protagonist reaches a dead end: If the resolution of mourning depends on the elaboration of a narrative, what is to be done when all available narrative models rely on the premise of a gradual adaptation that cannot but repress and silence the work of mourning?

Mercado offers her critical melancholia as an antidote to the optimistic progressivism underlying these narratives of exile, but she is able to keep that melancholia from degenerating into a merely apocalyptic discourse. Just as she refuses to narrate the past in progressivist, historicist fashion, she also refuses all apocalyptic approaches to the future. Mercado distances herself from the "once upon a time," the one-thing-leads-to-another, gradualist narration of the past, because she remains open to everything that, in the past, was silenced by that grand narrative: the fragmentary, the unaccomplished, the contingent, the uncanny, the aleatory—in short, the remainders of what was defeated in the past. And it is the expect-

17. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 262.

tation triggered by these elements, the demand for restitution that emanates from them, that prevents the future from congealing into an eschatological apocalypse—the other temptation for postdictatorial literature, besides the contented adaptation to the present. The unexpected, the wholly other, with which the protagonist strives to have it out, cannot be mastered in any finalist narrative. While the relation to the past attempts to do justice to that which does not fit the progressivist model of historicism, the relation to the future takes the form of an expectation that cannot be domesticated into a telos, a gesture toward what is yet to come that refuses to confine the future to a predetermined content, be it salvation or doom. In the protagonist's words, "To predict outcomes also constitutes a neurosis of destiny" (73). As she learns to bypass this neurosis, the future begins to take the form of a radical *outside* beyond all salvational or apocalyptic certainties.

In Mercado's text, the past is often embodied in dead objects that are cut off from the utility they once had, stored in always provisional containers, accumulating a spectral charge:

I opened [the trunks] upon my return to Argentina. Many weeks later I began to feel the effects: nightmares, sensation of emptiness, vertiges; the messages I received in opening them began to produce a lot of anxiety. I say it was the trunks, because the unconscious worked nonstop and acquired, so to speak, the form of a cave of the human species, with bottoms and backgrounds that escaped consciousness by throwing heavy artillery at it; trapped in the most elementary feelings of terror before the unexpected and the lived, I fruitlessly resisted the dominant image: an open box letting out a pullulating reality. (133–34)

The protagonist's boxes and *Recordatorio*, folders that catalog the experiences related to friends who were murdered during the dictatorship, elicit sinister, uncanny memories.¹⁸ These memories attest to how, in the novel, the past returns as the *Unheimlich* in the precise Freudian sense: something familiar, already lived and processed by consciousness but that can be reminisced only by triggering an unsettling, traumatic dimension that escapes consciousness as such. *En estado de memoria* portrays a mode of relating to the past that is perennially prey to this paradox: The past has be-

18. In similar fashion, see Mercado's *Canon de alcoba*: "Tired people, true computers of repression: years gathering clippings, assembling files, writing testimonies" (82). Again, the past emerges as a receptacle for uncanny memories that persistently recur.

come citable, but at the price of eluding the consciousness that attempts to master it. The novel depicts a wealth of objects, images, written texts, and memories that catalog the past; but whereas this catalog is meant to enhance the protagonist's familiarity and control over her past, she constantly finds herself to be an *effect* of an abundance of souvenirs. When she returns to Argentina, she visits the elementary school in Córdoba where she had studied as a child. It is a doleful building, like all empty schools. The sight brings back the memory of her first day as a student, when she arrived after all the other children were already lined up to go to class. Standing alone in the courtyard, as the teachers unsuccessfully looked for her name on their class rosters, she experienced the terror of not belonging and being alone in the intimidating emptiness of a school yard: "I am not on the lists, and this condition has been neither elating nor degrading; it has simply been constitutive" (137).

The protagonist's obsessive visits to Trotsky's house in Mexico represent the most spectral examples of the past's return in the novel. Trotsky's exile in Mexico epitomizes the fate of the Left in this century. As the fiercest enemy and victim of the disastrous bureaucratization of the worker's state in the Soviet Union, Trotsky remains the very emblem of defeat. Along with his admirer Walter Benjamin, who was also Jewish, Trotsky understood, as no one else could, how complicity and failure were the only historical options available. Refusing to compromise with the quietist theory of "socialism in one country"—the religious dogma with which Stalinism helped bury several revolutionary insurrections in the first half of the century—Trotsky was led to confront a succession of failures: exclusion from the Communist Party in 1927, exile in 1929, a series of visa denials throughout the 1930s, and finally his own murder at the hands of a Stalinist agent. Mercado's protagonist, who experiences historical defeat under similar circumstances, repeatedly visits Trotsky's house with her family and witnesses the spectral powers of the structure, its ability to return from a failed past to interpellate the present. The spectral past repeats itself in the present, but each repetition produces a unique, traumatic effect: "We'd leaf through the newspapers in several languages which announced the murder in large headlines; . . . we'd read it as one reads Shakespeare, knowing the outcome beforehand, but with an intense anguish, as though we had just found out about the news" (111). The recurrent visits to the house, the repetitive rituals, the return of ghosts that could not be conjured up except by a political practice now lost all contribute to the somatization of historical failure as a compulsion to repeat. The drama here is that the protagonist is forced to resolve indi-

vidually an impasse that can be only collectively addressed. Somatization becomes an allegory in the form of dreams: The protagonist's nine-year-old daughter begins to "*dream that we cannot leave Trotsky's house . . . we were all in Trotsky's house with the dog and we could not leave, that was the leitmotif and we then thought, before the vertigo engulfed us, that the sentence condensed the fate and history of the Left in the past forty years, our own history and fate*" (115). Trapped inside Trotsky's house, trapped inside Trotsky's fate and history, unable to escape the specter of the exiled Trotsky, abandoned and stabbed to death from behind, the protagonist contemplates how her historical defeats have become the stuff of symptomatic dreams for her children, heirs to the heap of disgraces handed down by the past. Like all heirs, they are disturbed by ghosts, and, like all heirs, they are in mourning.¹⁹ The privileged instance of repetition in *En estado de memoria* is a ghost of the past, which, inconjurable because only collective practice could exorcise it, is inherited in the present by her children as a historical burden, or as the very burden of history.

It is as heir to another historical defeat, that of the Spanish civil war, that the protagonist undertakes her most vicarious experience, a trip to Asturias, Spain, in the place of Ovidio Gondi, a socialist exile who had arrived in Mexico in 1939, at the age of twenty-seven. Unable to go back to Spain after Franco's death, he finds that he "could not bear, physically or mentally, the return to Asturias. In the world of memories, Asturias remains a sort of mythological territory" (79). The protagonist believes she would be able to "return in his place and tell him everything [she'd] seen, . . . give back to him something of his history" (81). Hers is a restitutive mission that assumes the secret agreement between the enslaved generations from the past and the present. Restoring Gondi's past is a way for her to confront the Argentine catastrophe. Once in Asturias, she is led by Gondi's only remaining friend on a search for former acquaintances that seems fruitless until an elderly woman, dressed in strict mourning, recognizes his name and reveals information about the fate of some activists, her husband included,

19. On the themes of inheritance, spectrality, mourning, and restitution, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Jameson's extensive discussion in "Marx's Purloined Letter." I have addressed the crucial role of Benjamin in the renewed dialogue between Jameson and Derrida in "El espectro en la temporalidad de lo mesiánico: Derrida y Jameson a propósito de la firma Marx," *Espec-tros y pensamiento utópico*, a special issue of *La invención y la herencia* [Santiago, Chile] (1995): 22–32.

who were executed by the fascist army. After recalling Gondi's father—"they shot him three years after the end of the war, now you imagine that" (83)—she finally produces an old, yellowish photo of a stretch of wasteland. Emerging from the ground is a cross with the word *PAX* printed on it. The old woman explains, "Right here on this field they were shot. They got mine with another thirty-five on the boats, June 24. . . . Franco did the same to the monument in the 1950s" (84). With the visit to Asturias, the protagonist begins to make the slow transition back to her own native soil. Again, the narrative progresses by substitutions; her position as a surrogate for a friend, as well as the trip's surrogate role for her return to Argentina, is based on a mutual destiny shared by Spanish and Argentine exiles.

The protagonist's restitutive will must thus straddle, on the one hand, the convergence, even the apparent equivalence, between past and present desolation, and, on the other hand, the *Unheimlichkeit*, the unfamiliarity and strangeness of that which appears closest at hand. There is a remarkable play between these two movements in the novel. The accumulation of popular defeats throughout history becomes almost an allegorical household figure for her, while her own household items seem displaced, foreign, unwilling to fulfill the restitutive mission with which she endows them—to bear witness. Restitution, the major thrust behind her writing, is paralyzed, blocked, inevitably enmeshed with the utmost destitution: The restitutive effort realizes itself only when it does not refrain from accepting and embracing destitution. After she returns from exile, she experiences the disintegration of her sense of possession, caused by the perennially provisional state in which she has lived. She is overtaken by a sentence: "*Nothing that surrounds me belongs to me. And indeed, I'd look at the furniture, beds, books, and have a crystal clear, irrefutable understanding that nothing in the house was mine*" (118). But everything there *does* belong to her. As in the opening of old trunks that are full of memories, the uncanny manifests itself when the familiar suddenly begins to be inhabited by the strange and the sinister. The protagonist is split from her desire by the *Unheimlich* in such a way that her own possessions are symbolically torn away from her dwelling, estranged from it, as it were. "Dispossessed of this logic of appropriation common to humans" (117), she experiences the voiding of the very concept of the proper, in the inseparable senses of propriety and property, ontological identity and economic ownership.

En estado de memoria thus narrates the epochal crisis of the proper. The protagonist's inability to make the house she occupies her own signals a fundamental impossibility of dwelling that goes beyond the more literal

phenomenon of exile. To be sure, exile is an instance of a crisis in dwelling not solvable by a mere “return home.” If the very nature of dwelling is, as Martin Heidegger reflects, “always a staying with things,” a preservation that “safeguards each thing in its essence,”²⁰ the rupture of this being together with things dissolves the foundation that sustains dwelling. Homelessness appears in the novel not as a state in which the protagonist finds herself divorced from an abode that still exists elsewhere; it is, rather, a break in the very principle of dwelling, operative not only on the present but also on the past (estranging the protagonist from her own past, disseminating homelessness in the past) and on the future (preempting any utopian jointure in the future). Therefore, she must learn to come to terms with the breakup of dwelling as a *constitutive* condition. This is why the topic of exile, however crucial, does not bring about the crisis of the proper and the dissolution of dwelling, but is instead encompassed by them.²¹

The question of the proper is thematized again in a chapter entitled “Phenomenology,” in which the protagonist relates the experience of a collective reading of Hegel in Mexico. She had bought Hyppolite’s legendary translation and lengthy commentary in Paris, after putting the following question to a friend: If she had only a few francs to spend, and if she were forced to deprive herself of another book for the next thirty years, which should she buy? Thus begins the odyssey of what is at one moment conceived as a thirty-year journey through Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

We began to read and go through the thirty years with my Mexican friends. We’d read the French translation and almost simultaneously the Spanish Fondo de Cultura version. We’d read from both books and then go to the third, the Hyppolite. . . . None of us had any knowledge, we were as candid as unpredictably astute, because all of a sudden, with no competence to assimilate the text, each one believed she/he understood everything.

20. Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Basic Writings from “Being and Time” (1927) to “The Task of Thinking” (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977), 353, 351.

21. The metaphor of the house returns in “La casa está en orden,” an unpublished essay in which Mercado reflects on the “day after” in Argentina, from her shock at the proliferation of euphemisms for the military regime (the disappearance of the words *genocide* and *annihilation*, the replacement of *military dictatorship* with *Proceso*, the term chosen by the dictators), to the gradual victory of forgetting over memory in the laws known as “Due Obedience” and “Final Stop,” to the rearrangement of the literary sphere in postdictatorship according to the values imposed by the market.

The text would alternately escape us and hand itself to us; there were readings where we'd get into it and out of it like dolphins in the sea, rejoicing in these immersions and acrobatics, convinced that we'd seized the quintessence; but at times the elected fragment was like a rock of unapproachable cliffs on which we'd slip until falling on stupidity and emptiness. The reading was of *something else*, it was a sort of drug that elevated us and made us fly; sentence by sentence we would materially grab the words, and I don't know through what odd power these words, over and above the concept, seized in their pure saying, produced a deep agony in us. Those evenings we passed from one canyon to another on the great rock, and the substance we touched was the pain of discovering. We did not go beyond page fifty of the *Phenomenology*, not counting the trips to Hyppolite, but I believe those sessions were ceremonies of an intense revelation of the Spirit, a "philosophical" epiphany after which we were able to arrive, in unrepeatable fashion, at knowledge, at a knowledge. (144)

It is fitting that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is the text that occupies the protagonist in exile, a time when she weaves and knits more than she reads or writes. Her reading experience summarizes all the attempts to grasp truth at the very heart of error. In her predicament, as in the labor of the Hegelian negative, "the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it."²² In a sense, *En estado de memoria* narrates the protagonist's struggle to overcome the separation between truth and knowledge that founds the phenomenological scene. Such overcoming, as in Hegel's phenomenology, takes place only after she comes to perceive what happens outside her as a moment of her very essence—in Hegel's terminology, when the substance proves also to be a subject. To be sure, this incorporation of the outer into the inner, this digestion that is the very movement of the dialectic, finds itself interrupted in the novel. That the group abandons the *Phenomenology* on page fifty is thus another signal that the Spirit's journey, the great bildungsroman that one could claim to be the literary equivalent of Hegel's masterpiece, can no longer incorporate what resists it. This is due not to the readers' incompetence but rather to a fundamental change in one's relation with the objects of knowledge. If experience (*Erfahrung*) for Hegel is the "*dialectical* movement exercised

22. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.

by consciousness on itself that affects both its knowledge and its object,"²³ experience for Mercado's protagonist has been reduced to a schizoid group reading of the *Phenomenology* in which that dialectics is paralyzed, frozen by the irreconcilable separation between consciousness and the objectal world, the latter subjected to an order that defies the very possibility of any grasping by consciousness. If the *Phenomenology* presupposes that "it is the nature of truth to prevail when its time has come,"²⁴ this statement, for Hegel, does not belie a simple profession of faith in philosophy, circumstantial to the method elaborated in the text; it is, rather, the very heart of this method, the expression of its necessity. To Mercado's protagonist, it is not possible to believe that it is the nature of truth to prevail once its time has come. As in Adorno's assessment of a world that has known Auschwitz, truth's vocation is no longer to prevail on time but rather to be delayed, to be perennially deferred, out of joint with its time. This breach, which dialectics has always mastered, has become unbridgeable in the novel and has come to be the only locus the subject can occupy. The constitution of the subject in *En estado de memoria* thus takes place in the failure of the phenomenological enterprise, a failure that, far from being accidental, is the very expression of the catastrophe, the very manifestation of postdictatorial unresolved mourning.

The constitution of the subject in Mercado's novel thus occurs in a site marked by a not knowing. In comparing the activities of reading and writing with that of weaving, the protagonist finds a resemblance in the solitude demanded by both. However, "in the textile there is a sort of happiness in nonexisting and nonbeing [*del no-ser y del no-estar*], while in the textual . . . you harvest only misfortune, not as a personal feeling, but as an expression of a fundamental nakedness: not knowing, not being able to fill the void, not encompassing the universal" (146). Again, writing becomes the emblem for the frustration of the phenomenological journey. In a sense, the failure to read Hegel represents for her the beginning of writing as the only practice coextensive with her destitution: One writes to experience the impossibility of filling the void and encompassing the universal. In a rather twisted form, Hegel is confirmed: She takes hold of truth in the very locus of error. In her state, the failure to grasp truth is the only possible form in which truth manifests itself. The inability to "encompass the universal," to finish the phenomenological itinerary, is the prerequisite for the emergence of a truth that only writing can articulate. Her understanding of "the misfor-

23. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 55.

24. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 44.

tune of writing," her coming to terms with it, already contains the entirety of Hegel's lesson, as if missing Hegel's point, failing to understand him, were today—after Auschwitz, after the dictatorial catastrophe—the only possible form of grasping him in his truth, in other words, as if the inability to make truth prevail in time were the very truth of our times.

The consequences of this painstaking (un)learning manifest themselves in two allegorical chapters, "Honeycombs" and "The Wall," the former in the middle and the latter at the end of the novel. Both chapters seem somewhat isolated, with no obvious relation to the novel in its totality. "Honeycombs" offers an allegorical representation of the unconscious, in which traditional images of depth (caves, rivers, geological layers) give way to a perforated surface modeled after a honeycomb. The protagonist is overtaken by "an irresistible biological desire to bite. Not biting with the teeth, but rather with some other general human device located not in the body but in the vague spaces of the so-called mind" (85). This desire stems from the fact that her whole visual universe is occupied by a line of identical cavities that are interconnected and absorbent, like a sponge or a honeycomb, a hallucination that begins to provide the very grid through which she grasps her reality. Her challenge is to comprehend this form, to which she refers as "the founding perforated surface" (91). The "cell effect," a symptom of a pathology that "refused to be described other than through a metaphor" (88), reduces her to "a minuscule and besieged being" (91). In her delirium, she takes the image of the honeycomb divided into cells as the expression of a plight that affects everybody and feels disappointed by "not finding anyone to echo [her] restlessness or sympathize with [her] urgency to understand what was happening" to her (88). The delusional paranoia erases the line between the literal and the figurative; the protagonist takes the cells in the honeycomb as the very structure of reality. Producing a deep anxiety, the "founding perforated surface all of a sudden becomes persecutory and uncontrollable" (91). The image signifies a profound breakdown in the protagonist's production of images. Her only therapeutic reply to the pathology is a gradual attempt to locate "some lost scene that may have configured the symptom" (92).

In this search "to situate the moment when the surface of the cell receives the sinister mark" (93), she comes across a particular word, *heaping* (*hacinamiento*), and an image in the photographs of concentration camps filed by her parents over forty years earlier: "Dead bodies piled up; bodies lined up in ditches . . . ; the bowels of a gas chamber exposed in a transversal cut" (93). The painstaking analysis of the symptoms leads her to the

understanding of her melancholia: At the root of her pathology is the burden of the unmourned dead, whose anonymous, absurd, arbitrary deaths cannot possibly be cathected and have thus been somatized through that belittling of the ego that is characteristic of melancholia.²⁵ In this context, the image of the Holocaust stands for death without burial, death without the possibility of mourning, death that sends the living to a world inhabited by ghosts. The confrontation with the “founding perforated surface” offers the frame for a symptom that had appeared earlier in the novel, when the protagonist is haunted by the image of “the dead, who entered through my eyes and left through my nape” (41). The entire restitutive mission of Mercado’s text is to offer a symbolic burial for the dead, finding in writing a practice in which the cathexis of this traumatic load can be worked out. The dead who have not been buried, who have been forced to, or allowed to, hang around the living as ghosts, cannot possibly be mourned. It is incumbent upon the living to retribute the dead to the realm of the dead and to liberate them from the uncertain condition of being unnamed, unrecognizable, and unmournable ghosts. To use an expression dear to Freud, the protagonist’s task is to transform a repetition into a memory.²⁶ Yet the restitution of the dead to

25. In *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), Juliana Schiesari unveils the rhetorical mechanisms through which the distinction between melancholia and mourning has been gendered, with the former being historically assigned to men precisely as a sign of their exceptionality (hence the mythical image of the melancholic genius, always a man), as opposed to the “*devaluing* of the historical reality of women’s disempowerment and of the ritual function that has traditionally been theirs in the West, that of mourning” (12). It is useful to contrast Mercado’s novel with Schiesari’s study, for Mercado’s protagonist speaks as a woman for whom mourning does not exclude that heightened self-awareness and creative impulse traditionally assigned to melancholia and historically gendered in the masculine. In other words, her mourning does not replace melancholia but rather establishes the conditions for a critical, self-reflexive, melancholic work of mourning, while all along speaking distinctively as a woman. The key for this possibility is, as I have been arguing, the relationship with the collective, which is perhaps absent or only dimly envisioned in the First World texts analyzed by Schiesari. It is in the relation with the collective that Mercado advances Schiesari’s call for “new symbolic orders,” in which “a radical affirmation of mourning” could take place and mourning would be understood “to be not just the undermining of the ego but a positive form of social and psychological reasoning” (267).

26. “We overcome the transference by pointing out to the patient that his feelings do not arise from the present situation and do not apply to the doctor, but that they are repeating something that happened to him earlier. In this way we oblige him to transform a repetition into a memory” (Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in *The Standard Edition*, 16:444).

the realm of the dead represents an ejection that, however crucial for the work of mourning, cannot but be perceived by the survivor as a betrayal, as though the completion of mourning were in fact a second killing of the dead. The transformation of the compulsive repetition into a *memory* can never be neatly differentiated from its submersion into the murky waters of forgetting. The protagonist learns that the reactivation of memory in post-dictatorship, if successful, cannot but create the conditions for a reflexive, active forgetting, and this is again conducive to melancholia.²⁷

Hence the impossibility of associating the recognition of the origin of the symptom, the primary traumatic kernel, with “cure,” whatever status one may confer on that word. Indeed, the chapter’s final sentence preempts any euphoric conclusion regarding the identification of the sinister mark: “This order installed by terror repels and at the same time devours; if one eludes it, it triumphs anyway, and the cavity wins the game” (94). If this is the outcome, what is the use of coming to terms with the symptom? What is the point of being able to identify a pathological process that cannot be reversed? Why formulate the task of restitution when the order of terror will keep the dead unnamed and unmourned? After all is said and done, where does *En estado de memoria* leave us? Is there a place for affirmation in Mercado’s text? Can one mourn affirmatively? And what could that affirmation be?

The novel’s final chapter, “The Wall,” does not exactly answer these questions, but it refers the reader to a scene in which they are posed anew. Returning to the highly allegorical style of “Honeycombs,” “The Wall” puts forth a certain spatial construction that superimposes a map of the city on a map of the protagonist’s melancholia. These two pieces are true treaties on the spatialization of affects, portraying an affective field embodied in allegorically charged images. Instead of the honeycomb cells, the final chapter presents a ubiquitous, immense gray wall, a “mantle spread over reality”

27. As Cathy Caruth points out in the preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “to cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of one’s story or both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy. Indeed, in Freud’s own early writings on trauma, the possibility of integrating the lost event into a series of associative memories, as part of the cure, was seen precisely as a way to permit the event to be forgotten” (vii). The protagonist of *En estado de memoria* is keenly aware of this paradox—the therapeutic remembrance of the trauma has the purpose of producing oblivion to it—and this awareness lies at the root of her melancholia. Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia thus receives another spin here: It is the postdictatorial *possibility* of a successful mourning work, not its impossibility, that generates melancholia.

(181). Knowing that she must eventually confront this wall, she begins to contemplate the space that separates her from it: “a wide and deep precipice . . . leaving a mysterious world out of my reach” (182). This “mysterious world” is nothing less than the outside, the civic life of the city, barred from the protagonist by the wall’s restraining action. She finds her way around the city by visiting cafés and old buildings, and by walking the streets, but the wall’s presence is felt everywhere, in prohibitions, borders, and no-trespassing zones, even if these are “only” psychic.

The protagonist’s confrontation with the wall is not to be taken as a conflict in military or militant terms. Defeating the postdictatorial wall, in the sense of eliminating it somehow to enjoy “freedom,” is out of the question for Mercado. The chapter narrates how the wall gradually fades away into the background, but again there is no reason for euphoria. Her “victory” over it, described in the last scene, when the wall surreptitiously slips down into a breach, triggers the process of mourning, understood as the beginning of the acceptance of loss, a process hitherto paralyzed. The wall thus also represents the repressive blockage that suspends mourning and forces it to remain unresolved. Not by chance, the moment of overcoming the wall coincides with a scene in which the protagonist writes as if she is groping for an unknown reality that offers formidable obstacles: “With small characters, awkward calligraphy, and from the upper left corner I began to write. The pen tore up the surface and advanced with an uncertain design, producing small blocks of text. . . . [A]s though conditioned by terror at the unlimited surface, it created zones of reserve, baits of reference where it could return in case it got lost” (196). As in a minuscule epic, a tale of war between a body and a disease, the fate of the protagonist’s affects, as well as her public presence in the city, are played out on the page. The repressive barrier stemming from the traumatic experience has been lifted, although not destroyed: “The wall . . . exposed to a hitherto unknown storm, constrained by the pit and dominated by a prolonged siege, literally began to fall upon the straight line of its base; it did not crumble like a building being shaken by an earthquake but filtered itself upon its founding line, as a sheet of paper vertically slipping into a breach” (196–97).

En estado de memoria is thus a prolegomenon to postdictatorial writing in that it narrates the conditions of possibility for writing after a catastrophe. The true story has not been told. Following the protagonist’s compelling refusal of all substitutive, compensatory mechanisms and her decision not to elude the abyss of depression and melancholia, the final scene announces writing as the locus where the confrontation with the pathology

can truly take place beyond the mere identification of the symptom, in a movement that is not simply a dive into the subject's interiority but a decisive reconnection with the outside. What might at first appear to be a highly introspective text ends with a gesture toward an unnamed, unknown outside that represents the only possibility of activating subjective memory along with a space for political intervention. One might refer to this outside as *the wholly other*, that alterity which is no longer a simple disguise for a repetition of the past traumatic kernel (in Mercado's terms, a new fold of the "founding perforated surface") but rather an otherness unrepresentable by the present, an untimely other that houses the possibility of memory and utopia. The wholly other announced by writing, the singular event as of yet unimaginable, becomes the only desirable mode of relationship with the future, beyond all finalist, teleologic, apocalyptic, and historicist cushions. In yet another apparent paradox, therefore, *En estado de memoria*, a novel obsessed with the impact of the past, reveals itself as a thoroughly future-oriented text. In addition to asking what future can be imagined after the dictatorships, however, it inquires into the mode, the modality, in which another relationship with the future can be established. This question remains, for Mercado, a *formal* question linked with the resolution of mourning.

En estado de memoria looks to the terrain from whence postdictatorial symptomatology emerges—the unresolved dilemma of mourning—to imply that only the resolution of mourning will open up a space for the production of desires that would not be mere symptoms of loss. The only locus of a non-aberrant postdictatorial desire would thus be the soil from which all aberrations grow, in a final Hegelian irony in this most un-Hegelian text. In other words, *En estado de memoria* proposes that the only position immune to the postdictatorial pathologies is the one that fully engages all pathology in its origins. In this sense, postdictatorship stages both a desire for mourning (the embrace of mourning as the arena where the fate of the postdictatorial affective field will be played out) and mourning for desire (the acceptance of the defeat of all the desires swept away by the dictatorship). Mercado's *En estado de memoria* makes the most emphatic case for the role of writing in the accomplishment of this task: Straddling the oppositions confronted by the protagonist and the postdictatorial affective field, writing is at once a solitary and collective, personal and anonymous, utopian and melancholic enterprise, much like the mourning it voices, and without the resolution of which postauthoritarian societies might face an unprecedented abyss of depression, barely masked underneath the triumphant neoliberal parade.