

(Re)Collecting Argentina's Recent Past: The Role of Literature

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Abstract (Re)collecting Argentina's recent conflictive past has been and continues to be an effort that involves the country's entire intellectual potential and energy. Writers of fiction, no less than the historians, politicians, sociologists, anthropologists and human rights activists, actively contributed to the demand to repeal the amnesty laws of the 1980s. That repeal and the setting up of formal procedures for the investigation and adjudication of the past's wrongdoing were finally achieved in 2003. Among the many intellectuals active in this political process is the Argentinean writer Cristina Feijóo. In her narrative, particularly her novel *Memorias del río inmóvil* (2001), she (re)presents Argentina's collective memory as it confronts the junta period and questions the availability of personal and social 'spaces' for those who survived torture, exile and persecution during the military dictatorship.

Keywords Cristina Feijóo, Argentina, *Memorias del río inmóvil*, Literature, Historical Narrative, Reconciliation and Adjudication of the Past

1. (Re)Collecting Argentina's Recent Past

Argentinean reconciliation process of the last thirty years has confirmed that structured procedures are needed for a nation to recover from political and social abuses of power and authority. The case of Argentina serves to confirm that the countless cases of state-organized and military-promoted infringements of basic rights that taint Latin American history do not vanish merely by the passing of time. Time does not heal all wounds. Acknowledgements of wrongdoings, as well as procedures for reconciliation are necessary for any possible political, social or cultural mending to take place. As this has unfortunately not always been the case, Argentina's collective memory, as that of much of the rest of the continent, is consumed by suspicion and skepticism, and the prevailing distrust is reflected in most social interactions, cultural encounters and personal relations. The time that has passed since the end of

Argentinean military rule (1976-1983), one of the most abusive dictatorships on the continent in recent times, has not proven to be enough to alleviate the pain and the feelings of injustice and abuse suffered by the Argentinean people.

Unfortunately, numerous contra productive measures, such as the passing of laws that pardoned military officials, were taken by the Argentinean government during the first years of restored democracy. These measures worked against the efforts aiming to document and expose the atrocities exercised by 'junta' rulers, while the early testimonial documentation collected in the *Nunca más* report (1984)¹, as well as sporadic efforts of national and international human rights organizations, and the contributions of national activist groups, such as the *Abuelas y Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (May Square Mothers and Grandmothers), all served to offer remedies to hasten the healing process that time alone could not advance.² Nevertheless, despite many steps taken to confront the past, the reconciliation process has become more enduring and manifold than was foreseen and is still underway.

2. Literature is History's other Archive

Throughout the last two decades politicians and social scientists have been the most recognized participants in the analysis of the many devastating consequences of Argentinean military rule. However, literature has also been important for the drawing up of the country's collective memory and of possible means of confronting that dark period. Short stories, the novel and narrative poetry have become popular instruments for weighing different alternatives of reconciliation and acclaimed international recognition. Recent publications of critical essay collections serve to demonstrate the growing and prolific field of analysis exercised in and outside Argentina.³ Hortiguera and

¹ Report of CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) 'Never again' (1984).

² These issues have been widely documented. See for example: *Ese infierno. Conversaciones de cinco mujeres sobrevivientes de la ESMA* (2001) and numerous publications by human rights organizations, such as the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (1984), and others.

³ See for example: *Umbrales y catástrofes: literatura argentina de los 90* (2003), *Literatura argentina de los años 90* (2003), *Polémicas por la patria*:

Rocha's 2007 collection of essays, *Argentinean Cultural Production During the Neoliberal Years (1989-2001)*, focuses on the role and place of literature and cinema during the years of Argentina's supposed prosperity under the Carlos Menem presidency (1989-1999), when the country enjoyed international recognition because of its economic growth. The editors set the stage for their thematic concerns by referring to Bourdieu's formulations about the struggle for the 'monopoly of literary legitimacy' (15). In her essay, Carolina Rocha observes that literary 'narratives of memory started circulating in the early 1990s.' [When] 'left wing writers concentrated on their literary production as a means of reclaiming a space of legitimacy in the field of cultural production' (39).⁴

Rocha's theorizing echoes Jorge Panesi's assertion that literature is history's other archive, as well as Fernando O. Reati's observation that fiction is an indispensable tool for the reconstruction of memory.⁵ She emphasizes the role of literature as a means or a tool for securing the transfer of past knowledge for the process of the continual upgrading of national identity. Furthermore, she stresses the need for the pluralizing of memory through the use of petite histories, describing this as positioning memory as a central tool to revisit the past.⁶ She views her own study of Argentinean literature as being a confrontation to the predominant Argentinean 'politics of oblivion' (40), while simultaneously confirming Reati's observation that 'history is really a novel' (1992:133) and that the past is continuously constructed and reformulated in the present.⁷ The narratives that are the subject of Rocha's study center the recovery of the Argentinean national past and this recovery can be interpreted as a resuscitated form of cultural nationalism, which Sophia McClennen characterizes as a 'position [that] typically maintains that there is a story that is being suppressed by official versions of cultural identity (43). [...] the narratives of memory, based on the local and the historical, have been spearheaded in Argentina by leftist writers, especially those who had been exiled. These writers, sought to provide alternative views of the past (39-40).

In accordance with Rocha's observation on the role of exiled writers and their alternative presentation of the past, it

seems fitting to draw the reader's attention to the narratives of the well-regarded Argentinean writer, Cristina Feijóo.⁸ She seems to illustrate Rocha's ideas, as she has become one of the acute analysts of recent Argentinean history.⁹ In *Memorias del río inmóvil*, a novel that earned her the Clarín Literary Award in 2001, she reproduces the social, political and economic conditions of the nineties, and presents a version of the collective historical memory of Argentina's recent past. The themes of resistance, persecution, exile and alienation, together with images of disappeared individuals and adopted children are persistent in her text. However, Feijóo reveals these much discussed themes from a renewed perspective as she intertwines her narrative voices with information about the implications of the neo-liberal economic policies and consumerism of the nineties. Feijóo seems to urge an abandonment of the widespread feeling of resentment and disgust in Argentinean society, rooted in the years of oppression, and promote a possible reconciliation with the nation's past. Through her literary work, she participates in the rewriting of history, emphasizing that economic reality cannot be separated from the political or the social and that constructive dialogue between different social groups is essential.¹⁰ She looks for and seeks to promote a conciliatory process in Argentinean contemporary politics while at the same time acknowledging the significant void in the social fabric that is directly related to the time of Argentinean military rule. This void becomes particularly recognizable in a demographic sense within intellectual and political circles, and in Feijóo's novel this is presented as an identity crisis:

He and I represent that something is not right in this simulacrum of a country. In this city where we come across one another in restaurants, meetings, airplanes and on street corners. We observe each other from a bus to a bus, from one car to another – the torturer and the tortured. Each one absorbed in the activities of the day. [...] He is Floyt, my former militant comrade, the lost friend, frozen forever in the time of truths and I'm nobody, not for him nor for myself (111).¹¹

Feijóo, like critics and intellectuals from other disciplines,

literatura y crisis (2004), and *Lo que sobra y lo que falta en los últimos veinte años de la literatura argentina* (2004). Also see: www.madres.org.ar and www.abuelas.org.ar.

⁴ She borrows the term 'cultural memory' from Andreas Huyssen's theorizing on the theme of globalization, but 'the political site of memory practices is still national, not post-national or global' (39).

⁵ Panesi points out that: 'La literatura será siempre el otro archivo' (2003:24). Reati states: 'El interés es determinar cómo la novela argentina fabrica visiones contradictorias y a menudo en franca oposición, cómo se postula como una herramienta de construcción de la memoria, y cómo, en fin, plantea una forma de conocimiento histórico a través de sus versiones alternativas, desmitificadoras y auto-desmitificadoras' (1992:127).

⁶ Analysing the narrative production of the Argentinean writers Ana María Shua, Manuela Fingueret and Héctor Tizón from the 1990s (41), Rocha borrows the term from Rhonda Dahl Buchanan.

⁷ Reati; '... la historia es una verdadera novela. La historiografía recuenta hechos pero, al igual que la ficción, los organiza, selecciona y sintetiza imponiendo sobre su materia prima –los documentos– una interpretación...' 'El pasado es una construcción que se está reformulando sin cesar en el momento presente, y si bien el ayer deja huellas en el hoy, también se produce el fenómeno inverso por el cual el hoy determina el ayer' (1992:133-34).

⁸ Feijóo was born in 1944. Her first publication was a collection of short stories entitled *En celdas diferentes* (1992), which earned her the Swedish Cultural Award the following year. A number of her short stories have been published in anthologies; for example 'Como en las películas' in *Antología del cuento latinoamericano in Sweden* (1995) and 'Las cosas en orden' in *Redes de la memoria* (2001). Her most recent novels are *La casa operativa* (2007), *Afuera* (2008) and *Los puntos ciegos de Emilia* (2011). For more information see "La escritora perdida" in *Página 12*, 16 October, 2011, www.cristinafeijoo.com.ar and www.hetogenesis.se/Literatura/feijoo.htm

⁹ See also Portela (2008), who discusses: 'el corpus de testimonios que comenzaron a denunciar la brutal represión de la "guerra sucia" en los años ochenta, concretamente aquellos que lo hicieron desde el exilio...' (72).

¹⁰ See also María Teresa Medeiros-Lichem (in Hortiguera, 2007).

¹¹ Feijóo; 'Él y yo somos los símbolos de que algo no está bien en este simulacro de país. En esta ciudad donde nos cruzamos en restaurantes, en reuniones de consorcio, en algún avión, en los semáforos; nos miramos de remisa a remisa, de coche a coche, el que torturaba y el torturado. Cada uno absorto en su negocio del día. (111). [...] Él es Floyt, mi viejo compañero de militancia, el amigo perdido, congelado para siempre en un tiempo de verdades y yo no soy nadie, ni para él ni para mí' (111). For more information see Gardarsdóttir (2005).

confronts her distorted nation's past history as she organizes such themes as the recollection of historical facts, modifications of collective memory and the renovation of national identity in *Memorias del río inmóvil*.¹² However, to better situate Feijóo's novel within the framework of social commentary it is significant to observe that while historians, anthropologists and sociologists have occupied themselves with the rediscovery of actual facts, the literature has proved to be a productive tool for addressing the much-needed Argentinean political, social and cultural reconciliation from a more personal or intimate standpoint. In the case of literature written by women, a new sub-genre of the traditional historical novel, which I suggest is best identified with the term self-historical novel, implying a fictional text based on real-life experiences of recent conflictive historical events, has shown itself to be a preeminent medium for this reconstruction. The use of this sub-genre has promoted an impressive turnover in the categories of the so-called historical novel.¹³ Perhaps because the common definition of the historical novel as 'a text that centers its action on real or fictitious characters from the past', according to the dictionary of the Spanish Real Academia (1539), is being challenged.¹⁴ The term self-historical novel indicates that an interactive construction is undertaken and that the process involves the telling of a specific documented historical reality, as personally experienced and lived.

To better grasp the pertinent timing of this new literary sub-genre, the self-historical novel, as an appropriate tool for reconciliation, Auli Leskinen's observation is relevant (218). She explains that women, more commonly than men, tend to write about autobiographical experiences and that in their texts they focus on individual personal lives as intertwined with and never separated from the memory of historical accounts. In the Argentinean case, numerous female novelists who favor the self-historical novel, such as Ana María Shua and Tununa Mercado, deserve our attention. However, a case in point is Liliana Heker and her search for a possible meeting point between fiction and historiography at the time of writing the novel *El fin de la historia* (1996).¹⁵ Heker emphasises that her projection of personal experiences during the dictatorship cannot be generalized and urges that the life of her central character, Leonora:

[...] is not that of all the real persons who survived the

horrors of the extermination camps, first and foremost because not all the survivors were the same. They weren't identical before, during, nor after being enclosed in these concentration camps, even though undoubtedly none of these lives were trivial, each one had to illuminate in a way the ferocity and the inhumanity of the military dictatorship. It was never my intention to tell all their stories, nor to construct an archetypal single character (1996:45).¹⁶

She draws attention to the fact that the process included acts of remembering, researching and interviewing people to ensure that; 'one day I would have a complete account of the facts that shaped my protagonist, without ruptures. Chronology of a life that I wanted to present and which today is the central axis of my novel' (1996:101).¹⁷ Heker is 'convinced that a novel is a microcosm' (1996:41)¹⁸ and that 'there exist repugnant private histories' [that] 'create their own defense mechanisms and disfigure their own faces' (1996:104).¹⁹ In her novel she does not intend to present a simple truth but opts for a comprehensive and complex one. She situates her fictional characters in known situations and, perhaps, lived experiences, within a documented reality already recorded within the official public accounts of historiography. Thus, just as Feijóo, Shua, Mercado and others of her generation, Heker represents real events, occurrences and recorded conflicts from the recent Argentinean past, while simultaneously interweaving into her texts a more personalized account. While she leaves her readers to search for explanations of recent conflicts, her narrator questions if survival instincts surpass any ideological convictions or moral beliefs? What are the writer's possibilities when representing historical accounts marked by blurred margins between the dominant and the dominated?²⁰

Whatever the manifold possible answers, Heker's pioneering novel sets the stage for later representations and revisits Argentinean past with exceptional precision and substantiates what her compatriot Hebe N. Campanella (2003) identifies as a conflictive bipolar positioning between 'a literary fiction and a historical account' (11).²¹

¹² In his article; 'Villa, el médico de la memoria' (2003), Panesi explains that: 'No hay, no hubo "literatura del proceso". Hubo, sí, literatura en ese totalitarismo que denominaron "proceso". No hay tampoco, y por las mismas razones, personajes novelísticos del proceso' (13). He further states: 'los archivos de la historia siempre están adulterados, o pueden ser destruidos. Se conserven o desaparezcan, la literatura será siempre el otro archivo' (24).

¹³ Mónica Flori (1995), prefers to identify this sub-genre with the term 'fictionalised auto-biography' when referring to 'own time testimonies' ['testimonios de esos [sus propios] tiempos'] (256).

¹⁴ RAE: 'un texto que desarrolla su acción en épocas pasadas, con personajes reales o ficticios' (1539).

¹⁵ For more, information see Ana María Shua's novel *El libro de los recuerdos* (1994), Tununa Mercado's novel *En estado de memoria* (1996), Nora Strejilevich's novel *Una sola muerte numerosa* (1997), Manuela Fingueret's novel *Hija del silencio* (1999), Norma Huidobro's novel *El lugar perdido* (2007), Sara Rosenberg's novel *Contraluz* (2008), Blanca Lema's novela *TaperWare* (2011) and others. Amongst Liliana Heker's other texts are: *Zona de clivaje* (1990) and *Las hermanas de Shakespeare* (1999).

¹⁶ Heker; '[...] no es igual a la de todas las personas reales que sobrevivieron al horror de un campo de exterminio, ante todo, porque esos sobrevivientes no son todos iguales, no lo han sido ni antes ni durante ni después de su permanencia en estos campos de exterminio, y aunque, sin duda, ninguna de esas vidas es trivial, aunque cada una ha de alumbrar a su modo la ferocidad, lo inhumano de la dictadura militar no fue mi propósito contarlas a todas ni tampoco erigir a un personaje en arquetipo' (1996:45).

¹⁷ Heker; 'un buen día, tuve completa la crónica de los hechos que hacían a mi protagonista; sin fisuras, el segmento de vida que quería contar y que hoy es el eje central de la novela' (1996:101).

¹⁸ Heker; 'convencida de que una novela es un microcosmos' (1996:41).

¹⁹ Heker; 'hay historias privadas, repugnantes' [que] 'generan sus propias defensas, desfiguran su verdadera cara' (1996:104).

²⁰ In *La reinvencción de la memoria* (1997) the editors discuss the issue of the recreation of past and memory referring to Le Geoff's theorizing. They emphasize his formulations regarding the importance of keeping human psychic's functions in mind when studying memory (26-27). They go on to observe; 'cómo la interrelación existente entre ficción, invención e imaginación pone en escena un juego entre imágenes y versiones que desaparecen y otras que comienzan a poseer relieve y cobrar nueva forma, y visualizamos la ficción como un tipo de invención, y el entretreído de ocultamiento y revelación son sus rasgos fundamentales' (Jitrik 1995:64) (27).

²¹ Campanella; 'una ficción literaria y un relato histórico' (11).

Campanella sustains that the historical novel derives its meaning from the certainty of what is narrated, because 'if the reader does not find truth in the presentation of facts he/she will lose out on expected pleasures' (15).²² Campanella further observes that only by exchanging 'vida familiar' with 'vida histórica' is it possible to construct 'a complete truth' (27), and that 'the renovation of the historical novel in Latin America emerges as a reaction against literature from the seventies, highly self-centered, formalist [and] preoccupied with the problems of language' (29).²³ She explains that 'where fictitious elements of History meet the historicity of fiction that's where the historical novel emerges' (28) and that it's on this ever unstable equilibrium between what is truthful and trustworthy that the historical novel rests its renewed popularity.²⁴

However, when comparing the contemporary historical novel with its predecessors from the early twentieth century the former diverges from the conventional meaning to find a new place within the frame of contemporary discourses. The new historical novel introduces to its readership a fusion of genres, the most dominant of which are the novelistic and historic, while the self-historical novel adds real life experiences of recent conflictive historical events.²⁵ This new instrument of expression and art exploits the literary genre because the text corresponds to the conventions of the novelistic form while remaining based in historiography because it shares both theme and objectivity with the writing of history.²⁶

3. Contributions to Reconciliation

When these aforementioned representations of Argentinean cultural and political realities are questioned through Paul Ricoeur's theorizing, as presented in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), it appears evident that history 'remembers' some events at the expense of others. In Ricoeur's view, the reciprocal relationship between remembering and forgetting is constantly underway and affects both the perception of historical experience and the production of historical narrative. He reopens the inquiry of

the nature and truth of historical knowledge and shares that the underlying question has to do with how a memory can be of something absent. He explores whether historians, who can write a history of memory, can truly break with all dependence on memory, including memories that resist representation. As is the case with Feijóo's principal characters, he investigates the necessity of forgetting as a condition for the possibility of remembering, and asks if there can be something like happy forgetting in parallel to happy memory. These theoretical predicaments emerge in Feijóo's narration when her character Pinino discovers that: 'Ever since he can remember [...] silence and secrets have been destined to create for him an illusion of autonomy. Now, (when he discovers his mother's secret past) this connection has unexpectedly been broken and dozens of images jump at him, out of control' (168).²⁷

To better grasp the complexity of Feijóo's representation of Argentinean reality it becomes prudent to keep in mind that novelists, as is the case with Heker, Shua, Mercado and others, perceive reality –present or past– as a complicated, combined whole that is troublesome, ambiguous and contradictory, a reality that cannot be understood with certainty.²⁸ As a consequence they find themselves obliged to abandon the techniques and the language of realism, because it responds to the conception that reality is organized and that its meaning can be transmitted without ambiguity to paper. It is therefore important to recognize that the innovations of the self-historical novel are concerned with both novelistic structural characteristics and forms as instruments that represent a particular political or social reality. Thus, the relationship between the new historical novel at the beginning of the new millennium, as Campanella observes, and the classical historical novel from the early twentieth century is placed between the so-called new Latin American novel and contemporary historiography. It is therefore not surprising to discover that the new historical novel finds its place in the contemporary novelistic discourse because it does not share a traditional rhetoric. As a consequence, the new historical novel –including the self-historical novel as a new sub-genre– shares discursive narrative techniques unique to narrative fiction such as fragmented structure, non-linear narration, manifold and interchangeable narrators, and, special to the Latin American novelistic form at the dawn of the XXI century, renewed intellectualism and easily recognizable social criticism. Feijóo questions the referential concepts as used by the realists and promotes a focusing of attention on the writing as a constitutive means for attaining historiographical knowledge. The idea is that the writing of history should renounce positivist pretensions to emphasize an existing relation between narrative traditions, actual reality and

²² Campanella; 'si el lector no encuentra verdad en los hechos referidos perderá gran parte de su placer' (15).

²³ Campanella; 'una verdad completa' (27) y 'la renovación de la actual novela histórica en América latina ha sido provocada por una reacción contra la literature de los años 70, auto referencial, formalista, [y] preocupada por los problemas del lenguaje' (29).

²⁴ Campanella; 'En fin, donde se 'entrecruzan' lo ficcional de la Historia como escritura y la historicidad de la ficción entendida como refiguración del tiempo humano de su devenir, allí se halla la novela histórica, en ese punto de equilibrio siempre inestable de lo verdadero y lo verosímil' (28). For further information see Gardarsdóttir (2002). "Interview with the Argentinean critic and novelist María Rosa Lojo", published in www.revista.discurso.org, Cunha, Gloria da, *La narrativa histórica de escritoras latinoamericanas* (2004) and Gimbernat González, Ester, *Aventuras del desacuerdo: Novelistas Argentinas de los '80* (1992).

²⁵ Monica Scarano explains: 'Pensamos en la 'escritura' como una práctica fuertemente movilizadora que [...] continua transformando lenta y profundamente la memoria colectiva, permitiéndole rescatar del olvido y celebrar un evento memorable, al ponerlo en escena, inscribiéndolo con diferentes materiales y fijándolo, o por el contrario, demostrarlo y criticarlo, ocultando sus fisuras aún abiertas o, en el peor de los casos, encubrirlo o silenciarlo' (18).

²⁶ For further information see Celia Fernández Prieto (1996).

²⁷ Feijóo; 'Desde que recuerda, Pinino ha estado conectado a Julieta por una sutilísima red de medias palabras, silencios y secretos destinados a crearle una ilusión de autonomía. Ahora esa conexión se ha roto imprevisiblemente y decenas de figuras le brincan alrededor, fuera de control' (168).

²⁸ Writers like Ricardo Piglia, in *Respiración artificial* (1980), and Juan José Saer, in *Nadie nada nunca* (1980), initiate the process of questioning historical accounts of the Argentinean Dirty War (1976-1983) through literature.

historiography.

Hence, when the contemporary Argentinean historical novel is examined, both those most easily referred to as traditional and those identified as self-historical, it is worth keeping in mind a particular Latin American aspect of the genre because, as Heker points out, the ‘innocence of the creator’ (1996:41) does not exist. She emphasizes that writing about the military dictatorship has not been easy for anyone, because: ‘How to tell a traitor’s story? How to present a torturer by his own truth? With what other truths can he be confronted?’ (1996:103).²⁹ Interestingly, Heker’s alternative, in accordance with recent theorizing, such as expressed by Campanella, and in accordance with Linda Hutcheon and Hayden White, has been to present a multiplicity of existing realities, ‘[...] militant montoneros who did not speak out, who fought until death and others that collaborated to preserve their own lives’ (1996:41).³⁰

Thus, keeping the above in mind and considering the contemporary Argentinean context, *Memorias del río inmóvil* provides an interesting opportunity to study the theme of the new historical novel and the much demanded resistance to social segregation and Argentinean political reconciliation. On one hand, it is ‘a novel of the nineties with ties to the seventies’, as the author observed in an interview with the Argentinean newspaper *Clarín*,³¹ and, on the other, as Reati observes, it deals with:

*[...] the process of re-adaptation of those militants of the political left those after suffering in jail and exile have to reintegrate themselves into the light consumer world of the nineties. They become messengers of a past that seems only to exist in remote memories (2004:21).*³²

The novel is set in the dense urban spaces of Buenos Aires at the end of the 1990s, where neo-liberal economic values and political indifference are predominant. The narrative revolves around the daily lives of Rita and Juan, a middle aged, middle class, childless, professional couple. Their different perspectives are marked by memories from the military rule and the years of dictatorship. Feijóo has put her

characters into a particular context, explaining that: ‘My generation, which intended to change things, has something to say. Not many voices from this generation have been heard and even less so those of women’.³³ Rita, the protagonist, is a former militant and exiled activist who has returned to her homeland and Buenos Aires. Ever since her return she has equipped herself with a series of middle class social masks that have allowed her to reintegrate into daily life and the activities of contemporary Argentinean society. However, these masks—both hiding her past from others and shielding her from her own questioning—start breaking up when a supposedly disappeared *ex-compañero* from her militant youth reappears. Rita is unexpectedly drawn back into a past that she has made every effort to eliminate from her memory. Feijóo has explained that:

*The motivation that promoted the writing of the book was that I wanted to know what was going on in the lives of people in the nineties who had stayed together ever since both were active militants in the seventies. How two people that have been together for twenty-two years, one in jail and the other in exile, can continue together after having to abandon their dreams of youth to reintegrate themselves into society (Clarín, October 14, 2001:4).*³⁴

When researching the thematic concerns of the novel, it becomes evident that the stirring up of the still waters of everyday superficial city-life is initiated with the reappearance of a colleague who symbolically returns from death. The reciprocal relationship between remembering and forgetting is questioned and thereby complacency is interrupted. Floyt not only returns from the past but also emerges from the reigning collective obliviousness. Rita had shared militancy with him in the late seventies and she believed—just as her husband Juan and others had done—that, after being captured by the military, he had been killed and his body dismembered. This hypothesis seemed to have been confirmed by the fact that, for more than twenty years, no one ever saw or heard from him. But then suddenly he is there:

*The man at the harbor is in the same place. I see him [Rita observes] and a confusing remembering draws me to the depths of my memory. From the moment I first saw him I knew he was the link to an immediate ocean of meaning. It’s a troubling feeling that I forget the moment I leave him, but his presence restores that feeling every time I see him (19).*³⁵ I

²⁹ Heker; ‘¿Cómo contar a ese traidor, cómo contar a un torturador desde su propia verdad? ¿Con cuáles otras verdades confrontarlo?’ (1996:103).

³⁰ Heker; ‘a militantes montoneros que callaron o pelearon hasta la muerte y a otros que colaboraron para preservar su vida’ (1996:41).

Linda Hutcheon (1988) theorized the rewriting of history through fiction and discussed what she identified as ‘historiographic metafiction’. She argued that this narrative technique incorporated elements from literature, theory and history. Consecutively, Hayden White (1996) presented his formulations on historiography and emphasized that the distinction between the different genres had become ‘blurred’ and acclaimed the renovations of literature and history as promising because they permitted new alternative ways to present the past. White also discussed the loss of absolutes and certainties of knowledge, as historical truths and dependable realities are to him entangled with fiction and the result is an ‘intertext’ that offers new understanding and renewed interpretations. These conscious and elaborate distortions of history are White’s so-called ‘metahistories’ which promote multiple alternatives and possible versions of an occurrence or a specific incident.

³¹ Feijóo; ‘una novela de los 90, pero anclada en los 70’ (*Clarín* October 11th, 2001).

³² Reati; ‘[...] el tema del proceso de readaptación de aquellos militantes de izquierda que, tras sufrir la cárcel y el exilio, deben resignarse a vivir en un mundo light y consumista de los 90 convertidos en mensajeros de un pasado que ya sólo parece existir en sus recuerdos’ (21).

³³ Feijóo; ‘Mi generación, que trató de cambiar las cosas, tiene algo que decir. No se han escuchado muchas voces de ésta generación, sobre todo de mujeres’ (*Clarín*, October 14, 2001:4).

³⁴ Feijóo; ‘Lo que me movió a escribir el libro fue que yo quería saber qué pasaba en los 90 con una pareja que hubiera permanecido unida desde que ambos militaban en los 70. Cómo lograron seguir adelante en su vida dos personas que llevan 22 años juntos, uno de los cuales estuvo en la cárcel y la otra en el exilio, ambos tuvieron que ocultar sus sueños de juventud para reinsertarse en la sociedad’ (*Clarín*, October 14, 2001:4).

³⁵ Feijóo; ‘El hombre del puerto está en el mismo lugar. Lo veo y un recuerdo confuso me arrastra hacia las profundidades de la memoria. Desde la primera mirada supe que él es la válvula a un inmediato océano de sentido. Éste es un sentimiento desconcertante que olvido apenas me alejo del

don't know what to do about Floyt and I don't know what to do about myself. [...] He is Floyt, my ex-militant comrade, a lost friend, forever frozen in a remote time of truths and I'm nobody, not for him nor for myself (111).³⁶

The narration of *Memorias del río inmóvil*, therefore, revolves around remembering the people that participated on one side or the other in the armed conflict of the 1970s. Feijóo demonstrates how all are tied to and obsessed with this shared past which seems to hold a tighter grip on them the more they try to protect themselves from it. Therefore, through the exposure of the different roles assigned to the respective characters and their interactions with the protagonist, the Argentinean past becomes a microcosm of the *porteño* present. Feijóo has revealed that 'the idea is that the torturers and the tortured interact within the same spaces' (111), but emphasized that the novel is not an autobiography.³⁷ 'In Rita, she says, I wanted to project some of the experiences shared by the women of the militant movements',³⁸ and elsewhere she maintains that:

No, I am definitely not Rita. I would not say that this is an autobiographical novel because it is too difficult for me to work with my own biographical reality. Furthermore, I have to distance myself from my characters to be able to construct them (*Clarín*, October 14, 2001:3).³⁹

Despite Feijóo's declarations, Christian Kupchik observes that '[...] it is a personal story and the text is without doubt one of the best narrative documents set in our relatively recent history.'⁴⁰ Similarly, Edgar Valdés, from the Paraguayan newspaper *Última hora*, considers the novel to represent memories of an activist and a militant during the dictatorship in Argentina. Furthermore, he considers that the author has demonstrated: 'courage and an enormous nerve by sharing her experiences bluntly and without holding back'.⁴¹

In *Memorias del río inmóvil*, Feijóo constructs her narration around the questioning of available spaces in neo-liberal, consumerist post-dictatorship society by survivors of torture, exile and persecution during the dictatorship. 'We had to work hard, set goals for ourselves and go on, closing our eyes. There was no other way to

hombre, y que él renueva cada vez con su presencia' (19).

³⁶ Feijóo: 'No sé qué hacer con Floyt y no sé qué hacer conmigo. [...] Él es Floyt, mi viejo compañero de militancia, el amigo perdido, congelado para siempre en un tiempo de verdades y yo no soy nadie, ni para él ni para mí' (111).

³⁷ Feijóo: 'la idea es que torturadores y torturados estamos en los mismos ambientes' (47).

³⁸ Feijóo: 'En Rita quería proyectar una cierta faceta de las experiencias que compartieron las mujeres de la militancia' (*Clarín*, October 14, 2001).

³⁹ Feijóo: 'No, yo no soy Rita, definitivamente. No diría que es una novela autobiográfica, ya que a mí me resulta muy difícil trabajar con mi realidad biográfica. Es más, tengo que tomar distancia de los personajes para poder construirlos' (*Clarín*, October 14, 2001:3).

⁴⁰ Feijóo: 'es una historia personal y el texto es sin duda uno de los mejores documentos narrativos que toman como referencia nuestra historia relativamente reciente' (*Clarín*, October 19, 2001).

⁴¹ Feijóo: 'valor, y un enorme coraje de contar sin tapujos' (*Última hora*, 2002).

grow-up, to be respected [...] (103).⁴² Through the presentation of identity conflicts, she questions at what cost the much-needed social and psychological national re-integration can take place. In her novel, the personal represents the national and it becomes a mirror that reflects serious difficulties, while offering indications of a possible reconstruction. The protagonist struggles with her self-image and recreation of her identity, while simultaneously recognizing that 'now we [the ex-militants] don't exist' (290). Rita feels 'lost in a labyrinth' and realizes that she does not know 'whom to trust' (180).⁴³ She discovers that she lives isolated and abandoned in a marginalized sub-culture constantly on guard:

I look at myself, that is, I see what others see and I feel ashamed. [...] a professional forty something that eats low-fat foods, attends openings, buys the latest in books, gets her hair done every month, sweats in the gym and does not differ in anything from other forty something sharing the same income. Not in anything. Except that, it shouldn't be forgotten, she survived (110).⁴⁴

Contrary to Rita, her husband is submerged within the text as an inseparable shadow and a part of the same questioning, however alienated he appears in his own silent existence and space. His questioning is complementary to that of Rita:

I observe my pale skin, the hair, the abdomen and the feet of a guy that has to be me, but it's not. I am not. I have nothing to do with this cow dung salesman, this bold husband of that stranger that whispers over the phone in the other room. [...] I, Juan Agustín Morante, am under a huge pile of shit. Covered and buried, but still alive (197).⁴⁵

He shares with the reader that: 'Nothing is left of the socialist, Juan Morante.' Furthermore, that when emerged in his role as a salesman he has 'the face of [his] torturer' [and even] 'uses the same arguments' (197).⁴⁶ The couple's search for truth about who they really are implies confronting personal experiences set in particular historical

⁴² Feijóo: 'Hubo que trabajar duro, ponerse una meta y darle para adelante, cerrando los ojos. No había otra manera de crecer, de ser respetado' (103).

⁴³ Feijóo: '...ya no somos' (290). 'Estoy en un laberinto, y en un punto incierto de estos corredores me espera el horror' [...]. 'No sé en quién confiar' (180).

⁴⁴ Feijóo: 'Me veo, es decir veo lo que los otros ven y me lleno de vergüenza [...] una profesional cuarentona que se alimenta light, concurre a los estrenos de teatro, compra lo último en libros, se retoca el pelo todos los meses, suda en un gimnasio y no se diferencia en nada de cualquier otra cuarentona con los mismos ingresos. En nada, salvo que ella, claro, sobrevivió' (110). In *Bodies in crisis* (2010) the Argentinean critic Barbara Sutton discusses the oppressive power entailed in the normalizing of the female body, emphasizing its role to manipulate, subordinate and exclude: 'Human bodies apparently disappear under the neoliberal logic, just as the last military dictatorship in Argentina disappeared the real, material bodies of many people who opposed precisely the preview of that kind of socioeconomic organization' (39).

⁴⁵ Feijóo: '[...] observo la piel pálida, el vello, el abdomen, los pies de un tipo que debo ser yo, pero que no soy. No soy. Yo no tengo nada que ver con este vendedor de bosta, con el casi calvo marido de esta extraña que susurra en el teléfono de mi habitación. [...] Yo, Juan Agustín Morante, estoy debajo de una enorme montaña de mierda. Tapado y enterrado pero vivo aún' (197).

⁴⁶ Feijóo: 'Nada queda de Juan Morante, socialista'. [...] El vendedor tiene la cara de mi torturador en jefe. Usa además los mismos argumentos' (197).

circumstances. Finding out how to live and integrate into contemporary, segregated Argentinean society, given the models at hand, is reflected in Rita's obsession regarding Floyt, who 'is alive, but lost forever' (110).⁴⁷ Feijóo presents Juan and Rita as being 'out of place' in their everyday existence, and Floyt, the ghost who, Reati explains, is not conscious of his treason because he has lost his mind, as the perfect incarnation of the maximum condition of the survivors. As a representative figure of the thousands who disappeared but continue to exist in the collective Argentinean unconsciousness, Floyt is physically in the world but in reality he is not a part of it (25). He is living but lost. Feijóo speculates on the existential question of both being and simultaneously not being, and demonstrates how the contemporary *porteña* condition is reflected in the presentation of the binary opposition of forgetting and remembering, as well as, being present and absent at the same time.⁴⁸ She demonstrates how survivors and disappeared are living next door to each other, and the tortured living opposite the street from their torturers.

Simultaneously, Feijóo's presentations of Argentinean historical reality and local conditions have to be credible to complete the picture of Rita's personal life. She must, as Campanella points out (2003: 15), make sure that the contemporary reader finds pleasure in the text and that this pleasure measures against the credibility of the information shared. Interestingly, and to secure the validity of the novel, Feijóo actively engages in an act of intertwining a complex true-to-life scene of her characters, where real locations and known facts form a foundation for the events taking place. The story of Pinino, a teenage son of Rita's colleague from work, takes over part of the text. At first sight, Pinino seems the typical middle-class youngster. He wanders the streets, dreams of material well-being, is promiscuous and indifferent to political debates and discussions:

The only person who has always been present in his life has been Julieta, but Julieta doesn't have a personal dimension for Pinino. She is the centre and the universe revolves around her. Pinino doesn't have a father and doesn't remember that Julieta has ever made a comment about it. He himself didn't want to know. The two times that necessity urged him to ask, a feeling of uncertainty closed his mouth (168).⁴⁹

Pinino's eyes slowly open and contemporary Argentinean reality requires him to discover his origins as an adopted child from the time of the dictatorship and find out that his 'mother' served as a 'love-girl' to military personnel.

Similarly, he discovers that she had participated in the smuggling of children from the detention centers around the country and that he himself is one of those children. The woman he has admired as a fighting single mother had simply been a manipulated servant to the mandates of dictatorship. The mother-son confrontations that follow these discoveries, just as the couple's conflicts, serve as a symbolic demonstration of the debates needed between Argentinean social groups regarding the country's past. Hence, these are understood to contribute to Feijóo's timely observation about the urgent need for the loosening up of the existing segregation and predominant social silences.⁵⁰

It is interesting to discover that Feijóo never falls prey to the victimizing of her central characters.⁵¹ Rita is an educated intellectual, a politically aware social subject, truly traumatized and affected by her experiences, but she is also someone who acknowledges her responsibility to reconstruct her place in society. Feijóo elaborates a *self-historical novel* that presents an alternative instrument for the building of bridges between the time of the military dictatorship and the present. When Feijóo's personal history of activism, imprisonment and four years of exile is observed the novel appears as an autobiographical manifestation and a text in which personal experiences are intertwined with historical facts to create a tool to confront the social and political apathy dominating the daily lives of Argentinean citizens in the 1990s. Feijóo does not simply respond to her proposed objectives of criticizing and condemning the past or past decisions, but does so by questioning the conformity of the consumer-oriented *porteño* citizen of the nineties, -distant from his/her own past and tied up in a web of superficial vanities.

In her novel Feijóo presents a constructive model and new alternative as to how to confront Argentinean's recent past. She does so not simply questioning the past but pointing to the conformity of the present as her characters attempt to assimilate into the commodities of the consumerist society. Her characters are confronted with the fact that social and political unconsciousness can't mend wrongdoings, only formed procedures of reconciliation can. Pinino's efforts to grasp, understand and reconcile with his personal history become symbolic of the collective reconciliation mending process Feijóo suggests. She requests an active collaboration in her search for a means to eliminate the existing segregated indifference, founded on distrust, so predominant in Argentinean society at the turn of the century. She recaptures the past by rewriting personal histories and intertwining them with official history in order to reinvent the image of it and to initiate the rewriting of a renovated collective national history.

Rita, as the protagonist, questions her decisions and wonders 'what was it that I could have become if I had

⁴⁷ Feijóo; '...está vivo y, sin embargo, perdido para siempre' (110).

⁴⁸ In *Asedios a la memoria: La experiencia de psicólogos bajo las dictaduras militares en América del Sur* (2004) Horacio Riquelme U. discusses the consequences of organized violence and state run persecution and terrorism.

⁴⁹ Feijóo; 'La única persona que ha estado presente en su vida desde siempre ha sido Julieta, pero Julieta no tiene para Pinino la dimensión de una persona. Ella es un centro alrededor del cual gira el universo. Pinino no tiene padre y no recuerda que Julieta le haya hecho nunca un comentario; él tampoco había querido saber; las dos veces que la necesidad le puso la pregunta en la punta de la lengua, un presagio vago le cerró la boca' (168).

⁵⁰ For further information see for example: www.hijos-capital.org.ar

⁵¹ Argentinean writers such as Marta Traba, Luiza Valenzuela and Liliana Heker have dealt with the themes of political activism, participation in subversive fighting, persecution, torture, exile, etc. Isabel Allende, Cristina Peri Rossi, Gioconda Belli, together with countless others, have made their mark on Latin American literary history for similar thematic concerns.

selected something different long time ago?' (240).⁵² She has understood that the past will not be changed, and that she herself is responsible for her actions, her well-being and her future. She confronts her anger, frustration and hatred and, despite her sad tone of voice and doubts, there are constructive indications in all her actions and deeds. Indirectly, she demonstrates that the Argentinean people cannot continue to live in silence and segregation, even though the profound pain of the recent past does not, perhaps, allow for an absolute, once and for all, reconciliation. This study emphasizes that even though frustration and alienation have dominated so many people's lives during the last two decades, Feijóo's novel can be considered as a blueprint for the new generations, as represented in the Pinino character. She urges the young to take risks when promoting change and to challenge the conformity and priorities of a modern neo-liberal society.

While Reati (2004) emphasizes the role of the novel's protagonist as the passive victim and the dominant paralyzing representation of the Argentinean past, in this study the novel is understood to represent quite the contrary. It is seen to indicate an alternative way to confront national identity and offer a possible reconstruction of Argentinean collective memory. It is, however, merely a piece in the nation's historical puzzle, confirming Raúl Illescas' observation that:

*Memory is always conflictive, never linear nor simply accumulative. It is dynamic and based on a selection of constructed meanings of events from the past. Due to memory the past gains meaning from the elaboration of significance. [...] Considering memory as a construction in the present allows us to foresee conditions for future possibilities. Memory, therefore, offers an explicit relationship with the construction of identity (73).*⁵³

In Feijóo's representation of Buenos Aires, as a dwelling place for millions of people, special attention is given to the dominant sense of distrust and disagreement, as well as to a continuous personal insecurity. The author questions how thousands of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists are expected to solve the reigning conflicts on a personal level, while forgetting is promoted at the social and collective level. Simultaneously, however, the author urges that the analytical questioning of identity and well-being take place in the public eye, at political, cultural and social levels.

4. Conclusions

⁵² Feijóo; 'que es lo que yo podría haber sido si hubiera elegido otra cosa, hace mucho tiempo' (240).

⁵³ Illescas; 'La memoria –siempre conflictiva, nunca lineal ni meramente acumulativa– es dinámica y producto de una selección de construcciones de sentido de sucesos del pasado. Mediante la memoria el pasado cobra sentido a partir de la elaboración de significados. [...] Considerando la memoria entonces como una construcción de presente, este permite entrever las condiciones de posibilidad del futuro. La memoria plantea entonces una vinculación explícita con la construcción de la identidad' (73).

The thematic concerns of Cristina Feijóo's *Memorias del río inmóvil* (2001) demonstrate the author's emphasis on the need for individual and personal incentives as a force to promote reconciliation and secure a political stability. Feijóo's narration stirs still waters of the *Río de la Plata* of the 1990s because they offered the hybrid population of tortured and torturers, of returned exiled leftist and compromised followers of the military junta a false sense of calm. The principal characters, representing the multiplicity of the Argentinean public, no longer float in oblivion on the social surface but are actively working by the way of time. From a contemporary point of view, Feijóo recovers the sense and meaning of what made a whole generation become agitated and act upon social and political challenges. Simultaneously, she reveals that the victimization and marginalization of these social subjects has been abandoned, because public indifference prohibits the inevitable process of reconciliation. The novel confirms what Néstor García-Canclini observed regarding the 1990s, that it was 'a present without memory', and that the neo-liberal economic interests of the Menem era in reality did interfere with political and social activism and participation.⁵⁴ Through Rita and Juan's personal histories, set in a well-documented historical reality of the 1970s, as well as in the 1990s, a hidden history is recollected, stripping the characters and revealing their artificial identity as unaffected individuals at ease in present day Buenos Aires.

Feijóo recollects recorded conflicts from Argentinean recent past, that she knows from own experience, where the themes of resistance, persecution, exile and alienation, together with images of disappeared individuals and adopted children, are persistent in her text. She writes a captivating novel that scratches the wounds of the nation's past, while simultaneously urging determination in the process of confronting it and its related collective memory. As a social commentator and a novelist, she joins forces with other Argentinean intellectuals and adds arguments to the debate on possible political adjudication of the past and the much needed reform of Argentinean social identity. She contributes to the reconstruction of historical and social identity through highlighting alternative ways for reconciliation. Feijóo urges abandonment of the widespread feeling of resentment and disgust in Argentinean society, rooted in the years of oppression, and promotes compromise and understanding. Through her literary work, she participates in the rewriting of history. She reconfirms her optimism proposing a new social image in which her female protagonist, Rita, and Pinino, representing the socially awakening Argentinean youth committed to change, have abandoned their marginal position to actively participate in the social, cultural and political reformulation. Simultaneously, she emphasizes the need for each social subject's critical self-examination as a necessary preamble for the formation of social identity within the contemporary political context. Her claims confirm that Argentinean

⁵⁴ In *La globalización imaginada* (1999) and his more recent publications García-Canclini makes repeated references to the case of Argentina.

society is in need of its entire intellectual potential to confront its past and move forward. She calls attention to the fact that such a highly political endeavor as reforming identity is only possible through a reconciliation crossing both class and political lines.

Feijóo's contributions to making sense of Argentina's past continue to be the central elements of her more recent narrative, such as in the novels *La casa operativa* (2006) and *Afuera* (2008), where life in exile, political activism and state promoted abuses are the predominant themes. In these novels she continues to re-examine Argentinean history and confirms that literature is history's other archive. She verifies that fiction is an indispensable tool for the reconstruction of memory and commotion of official history as it 'remembers' some events at the expense of others. Feijóo's self-historical novels recapture a past that Argentineans need to come to terms with to create a new social identity as a nation.

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