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SPECTERS OF THE UNSPEAKABLE:
THE RHETORIC OF TORTURE IN GUATEMALAN LITERATURE, 1975-1985

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
Wm. Jarrod Brown

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Susan Carvalho, Professor of Hispanic Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2012

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

SPECTERS OF THE UNSPEAKABLE: THE RHETORIC OF TORTURE IN GUATEMALAN LITERATURE, 1975-1985

This dissertation examines the ways in which torture was imagined and narrated in Guatemalan literature during the Internal Armed Conflict. For nearly four decades, Guatemala suffered one of the longest and most violent wars in Latin America. During that time, it is estimated that more than 100,000 people were tortured at the hands of the Guatemalan military. Torture, as suggested by Ariel Dorman, is most fundamentally “a crime committed against the imagination” (8), disrupting and often dissolving the boundaries between fact and fiction, the real and the unreal. The Introduction and Chapter One of this study explore the destabilization of this boundary by examining the historical and theoretical context for torture in Guatemala. The ubiquity and normality of torture was so terrible that, for many, it became “unspeakable”—an atrocity that defied language. Chapters Two through Four study three different literary modes of countering the state’s rhetoric of torture, probing the possibility of narrating torture despite its seemingly unsayable nature. Examining works by Rigoberta Menchú (chapter two), Marco Antonio Flores and Arturo Arias (chapter three), and Rodrigo Rey Rosa (chapter four), and aided by current theories and studies of torture, this dissertation investigates the ways in which these Guatemalan authors have sought not only to re-present torture, but also to explore and sometimes question the possibility of bearing witness to that torture in literature.

KEYWORDS: Torture, Silence, Guatemala, Violence, Haunting.

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October 1, 2012
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SPECTERS OF THE UNSPEAKABLE:
THE RHETORIC OF TORTURE IN GUATEMALAN LITERATURE, 1975-1985

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Chapter One: Introduction: Specters of the Unspeakable

No more torture, but ... go on torturing just the same. (Colonel Marcel Bigeard)¹

Torture is banned absolutely by international law: “No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture” (*Convention against Torture* Art. 1). And though most will agree that torture has no place in modern liberal democracies, it continues to be practiced with alarming frequency. Indeed, torture has become the topic of heated debate in the United States, and recent years have witnessed a proliferation of articles, books, and editorials treating the theme of torture. Discussions of torture increased following September 11, 2001² when the war on terror once again raised questions concerning the lengths to which the United States was willing to go not only to find those responsible for the attacks, but also to prevent future acts of terrorism.³ The forced detention of those suspected of terrorism and the use of coercive interrogation to extract information have heightened the public’s awareness that such tactics continue to be practiced despite official assertions to the contrary. The debate was substantially amplified in 2004 after the release of the photos from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Images of Private Lynndie England standing beside Iraqi prisoners who had been stripped and bound flooded news channels and became the topic of much discussion. Her later

¹ Quoted in Rita Maran, *Torture: The Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War*.

² That is not to suggest, of course, that torture was not a topic of interest prior to September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, the last 10 years have witnessed a dramatic increase in publications dealing with torture, the vast majority of which examine the relationship between torture and law, as well as questions of how we might better “define” torture. For an excellent and succinct examination of the various types of torture as well as a philosophical analysis of the standard reasons for which states continue to use torture, see Tindale “The Logic of Torture.”

³ For a thorough and well-crafted treatment of the U.S. response to 9/11 and the subsequent creation of a “state of emergency” in which torture became not only possible, but necessary, see Parry 166-195.

statement that “[i]t was just for fun” (qtd in Parry) revealed the frequency with which such practices were performed, as well as the soldiers’ attitudes regarding violent interrogation. Of course, the immediate response of the U.S. government was that this had been an aberration, and that such actions run contrary to standard interrogation policies. Nevertheless, as John Parry has demonstrated in his book *Understanding Torture: Law, Violence, and Political Identity* (2010), we cannot conclude that such photos reveal random or aberrational violence (193).⁴ Instead they reflect a wider trend in detention and interrogation techniques and “sits on a continuum of violent state practices” (12). Clearly, the continued use of torture throughout the world should produce outrage. But it should not evoke wonder; it is not “special” (Parry 193). And we must be careful not to suggest that torture “is particularly horrible” or that it might be abolished with “better laws and better enforcement” (Parry 12). As Parry argues, “[t]his kind of argument treats torture as a separate, universally prohibited, egregious form of conduct that is categorically different from other forms of state violence” (12). To single torture out as particularly horrible runs the risk of treating its existence as aberrational and thus somehow contrary to the functions of state power.⁵ Rather than treating torture as “a separate, universally prohibited, egregious form of conduct” (Parry 12), it is much more accurate to explore the ways in which torture fits into a broader understanding of state

⁴ Drawing on U.S. reports about Abu Ghraib, Parry notes the marked similarity between what happened at Abu Ghraib and previous torture practices in Brazil and Vietnam. He claims, therefore, that “the guards did not make up all of their methods on the spot; they had a source—perhaps military intelligence personnel—for some of them. Thus, whether or not all of the abuses had a formal relationship to interrogation, one easily could conclude that many of them had some relationship to it” (193).

⁵ In fact, in his study, Parry highlights the relationship between torture and contemporary national and international law, suggesting that torture is consistent with liberal democracy and the modern notions of human rights. Regarding the problematic conception of torture as “aberrational,” Parry argues that “the control over people’s lives exercised by the modern state—including sometimes violent domination—is consistent with and perhaps even the fulfillment of rights discourse and liberal ideology” (96). For a more in-depth treatment of pervasive versus aberrational views of torture in the “war on terror,” see Parry 187 ff.

power and violence, specifically the ways in which it “relates to interrogation, detention and confinement, war, and the broader question of how much control governments have or should have over our bodies” (Parry 12). Conceiving of torture as it fits on a broader spectrum of state violence can grant us a more complete understanding as to how torture can be used against the enemies of the state.

My project will examine narratives that reflect the use of torture during the Internal Armed Conflict⁶ in Guatemala, exploring specifically its location on the larger continuum of state power and violence, as well as the methods employed by the victims of that violence in order to resist the state’s project of social control. For nearly four decades, Guatemala suffered one of the longest and most violent wars in Latin America. From 1960 until the signing of a “Firm and Lasting Peace” in 1996, war and violence ravaged the entire country.⁷ While the exact number of deaths remains uncertain, conservative estimates suggest that over the course of Guatemala’s 36-year armed conflict, more than 250,000 people were either killed or disappeared. During that same period, it is believed that over 100,000 people were abducted and tortured. In many instances, their bodies were marked and mutilated, presumably in order to extract information, but ultimately to serve as a reminder of what the government would do to those who opposed them. In some cases, citizens were dragged from their homes in the middle of the night; in others, they were abducted during broad daylight. Torture, rape,

⁶ The phrase “Internal Armed Conflict” is the most widely-accepted terminology for discussing the 36-year civil war in Guatemala. In order to denote that it was not a war per se—since much of the violence targeted guerrillas, revolutionaries, as well as the wider civilian population—“armed conflict” has been used by many to describe the violence. Other terms have been used, of course, including the term “dirty war”—which describes the situation in several Latin American countries in the 1970s and 1980s. For more information on this terminology, see Jonas (1991) and Sanford (2003).

⁷ Although the year 1960 is generally established as the beginning of the Internal Armed Conflict, it is certainly true that the violence began before then. Indeed, for many Guatemalans, the Intervention in 1954 remains a much more important date for marking the beginning of the violence.

and murder became part of daily life. Such violence produced a profound and ever-present sense of terror throughout the country. Torture and the implementation of severe pain became not only a standard practice with prisoners, but also spilled over into civil society.

This terror reached its high point in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Referred to simply as “La Violencia” (“The Violence”), the years 1978-1983 were a time of extreme violence and frequent acts of torture, not only in clandestine detention centers, but also in public spaces. It was during those years that the military implemented its scorched-earth campaigns, in which entire villages in the largely indigenous highlands of Guatemala were massacred and destroyed.⁸ It was later determined that the police and military had received not only aid, but also direct military training during that period (CEH, REMHI). Despite the incredibly sophisticated techniques of psychological torture adopted by the United States in the 1940s and 1950s—which were later published in the *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation* manual in 1963⁹—the training manuals produced by the U.S. for distribution in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s were decidedly violent and did not emphasize the more psychological (and presumably less coercive) interrogation techniques. These manuals, particularly the *Handling of Sources* manual that remained in use until 1991 (Parry 150), emphasized “motivation by fear, payment of bounties for enemy dead, beatings, false imprisonment, executions and the use of truth

⁸ For more specific information on the scorched earth massacres, see especially Ricardo Falla’s *Massacres in the Jungle: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975-1982*.

⁹ After World War II, CIA officials began gathering information regarding interrogation techniques abroad. Since they were “convinced that Russian and Chinese intelligence services had developed sophisticated tactics—such as brainwashing—that could undermine U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts” (Parry 142), the CIA also began research into more sophisticated interrogation methods, particularly psychological approaches (Parry 142). The *KUBARK* report included a section titled “The Non-Coercive Counterintelligence Interrogation,” and though it did not assume that all interrogation should be free of pain, it did assume that “indiscriminate use of force is irrational” (Parry 143). For more on the *KUBARK* report and its findings regarding the use of pain and coercion in torture, see Parry 141-145.

serum” (Werner E. Michel, qtd in Parry 150).¹⁰ As these spectacles of power moved from the prisons to the public spaces, torture became a public phenomenon, the goal of which was silence and social control.

¹⁰ Five Latin American countries received these manuals: Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Peru, and Guatemala (Parry 150). Regarding the distribution of these torture manuals in Latin America, Parry also notes that “[a]lthough there appears to have been a hiatus during the Carter administration, the manuals were available in 1977 by mail order” (Parry 150).

‘Un vacío colmado’: Violence and the Unspeakable in Guatemala

*...esa pura violencia que no puede ser dicha ni nombrada del todo, el exceso de realidad que colma el vacío y que nos desborda hasta vaciarnos.*¹¹

*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*¹²

The Guatemalan is, above all, silent.
(Pierro Gleijeses)

This project began to attain its final theoretical framework after I read two seemingly unrelated texts. The first was “La guerra de los nombres: Una historia de la rebelión, el genocidio y el ojo del poder soberano en Guatemala” (“The War of Names: A History of Rebellion, Genocide, and the Eye of Sovereign Power in Guatemala”), an article published in 2009 by Guatemalan sociologist Juan Carlos Mazariegos. The second was Elizabeth Loevlie’s *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett* (2003). In his article, Mazariegos explores questions of historical memory, focusing especially on reasons why the Internal Armed Conflict continues to evoke disagreement and debate. The primary difficulty in talking about the war, he suggests, is that we lack the language to name those horrific acts of violence and genocide. Indeed, he discusses at length the difficulty of narrating the violence. Drawing on the testimonies of various indigenous people who witnessed firsthand the massacres in the early 1980s, Mazariegos attempts to explore what many other critics refer to as the unsayable aspects of the war (17). Because the massacres were so horrific, they defied all efforts at narration, and thus he asserts that many Guatemalans have come to believe that their language is simply incapable of saying what happened during *La violencia*. Mazariegos’ exploration into this

¹¹ Mazariegos 34.

¹² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

impossibility concludes that a principal difficulty resides in language itself, arguing that in the naming of the violence in Guatemala we find “el vacío que desborda toda nuestra realidad” (“the void that overflows all of our reality” [15]). In other words, the combination of the extremity of the violence and our incapacity to talk about it creates not a void within society, but a void that “overflows reality.” That is, its pervasiveness is so extreme that society and the void become coterminous.¹³ And because the horrors of *La violencia* exceed our abilities to name them, the most frequent response to the “void” has been silence. He writes, “Ese vacío demanda silencio y olvido, nos pide deponer nuestra mirada: es la dificultad de nombrar el horror” (“That void demands silence and forgetfulness; it asks us to lay down our gaze: it is the difficulty of naming the horror” [15]). Our inability to see the true horror of the military’s crimes thus renders all attempts to narrate the violence problematic. He suggests that even those who have seen the violence firsthand—both the witnesses and the victims themselves—remain unable to narrate those experiences directly.

Thus Mazariegos argues that perhaps even more so than the violence itself, “es esta experiencia de la casi imposibilidad de nombrar la que nos rompe, nos escinde y nos fractura: lo más real de nuestra realidad es el horror, el exceso de una violencia sacra y mítica que da pie a la ignominia del genocidio Maya” (“it is this experience of the almost impossibility of naming that breaks us, splits us and fractures us; the most real of our reality is horror, the excess of a sacred and mythical violence that gives rise to the shame

¹³ Victoria Sanford reaffirms the violence of language in her book *Buried Secrets* (2004). She writes, “The language itself is a part of the genocide. The legacy of trauma is embedded in the language, just as it is embedded in other structures of the culture. The language is one of extremity, of surviving a violence so extreme that it falls into the category of what many have called ‘limit events’” (Sanford 18). For a treatment of limit events and their relation to violence and historical memory, see LaCapra *History and Memory after Auschwitz*.

of Mayan genocide” [15]). In other words, the essential reality of Guatemalan society during the war was horror. And thus in addition to the violence of the massacres and the very public nature of torture in Guatemala, the other face of the war was its normality—the moment when the exception became the norm. Mazariegos suggests that one of the most “unspeakable” aspects of the war was the moment not only when the generals and torturers sat down to eat a meal despite the carnage around them, but when the average citizen did so as well.¹⁴ The most frightening aspect of the unsayable horror was its daily—and seemingly ubiquitous—presence:

Lo más horroroso de ese horror puro es el testimonio intestimoniable que debe decir que, en ese instante en el que todo esto ocurría, la sociedad pudo tener cotidianidad, las familias podían sentarse a comer y a platicar a la mesa, los jóvenes pudieron seguir yendo al cine, tener novia o novio, hijos, etc.: éstos son los ojos de los muertos, los que ahora nos miran, los que ahora devuelven la Mirada a los que seguimos aquí, cargando sus nombres, sus historias... escuchando el testimonio de lo intestimoniable. (52)¹⁵

For most Guatemalans, he suggests, the immediate reaction to these specters—the “eyes of the dead” who continued to speak—was feigned blindness and silence. That silence, in many ways, arose not only of fear, but also because of frustrations in attempting to name the violence. In fact, Mazariegos suggests that in order to narrate the atrocities of the armed conflict, Guatemalans require a new type of language. To explore more precisely why these experiences escape our ability to name them, he draws on the theories of

¹⁴ At this point in his analysis, Mazariegos includes a brief excursus on Kierkegaard and the horror of the unspeakable (52). This prefigures the connection to my use of Elisabeth Loevlie and her concept of “literary silence,” which I include in the section below.

¹⁵ “The most horrifying of that pure horror is the untestimoniable testimony that must say that, in that instant in which all this was occurring, society was able to continue having its daily routine, families could sit down to eat and talk at the table, youth could continue going to the movies, could have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, children, etc.: those are the eyes of the dead, those who now look at us, those who now return the gaze to those of us who continue here, carrying their names, their stories... listening to the testimony of the untestimoniable.”

Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan.¹⁶ These theorists in particular reveal new ways to listen to and name that “exceso de realidad” (“excess of reality” [34]) that permeated Guatemalan society during the war. Because of the “unsayable” nature of the atrocities, attempts to narrate the violence of the war must necessarily resort to what Agamben refers to as a “non-language” (*Remnants* 39). Since language ultimately fails to name the horrors of torture and massacre in Guatemala, bearing witness is no longer a possibility (Agamben, *Remnants* 39). Naming the violence of the war must somehow seek to find a language that “no longer signifies” (*Remnants* 39).

Though Mazariegos does not address the literary representations of torture during the war, his treatment of the “intestimoniable” does provide important insight into how we might approach literature about the war. Most importantly, in addition to summarizing some of the theoretical difficulties in narrating violence, his article reveals the dangers of silence and posits the need to explore alternative forms of talking about the violence. According to Pierro Gleijeses, silence was the not only the easiest, but also the safest reaction to the violence of the state. He writes, “In this intolerant society, silence is the best defense. Silence permeates the political realm. . . . The silence flows into the social and the professional realm. . . . Just as the culture of fear is the keynote of the cacophony of the many Guatemalan cultures, so its effects—the silence, the servility, the mistrust—unite the Guatemalan people” (4). United in silence, however, Guatemalans were unable to resist the state’s mechanisms of terror, but rather became silent accomplices of the regime’s power. Of course, Mazariegos is not the only critic to draw attention to the role of silence in recent Guatemalan history. This emphasis on silence has been a popular

¹⁶ I draw on many of these same theorists throughout the course of my study. See especially Chapter 1.

rhetorical tool in Guatemala for decades. Indeed, I would argue that few concepts have been more seductive in discussing the violence in Guatemala. Not only authors, but also literary critics have frequently resorted to this idea of silence in order to note the “unsayable” nature of the violence of the war.¹⁷

¹⁷ See, for example, the collection *Voices from the Silence: Guatemalan Literature of Resistance* (1998), edited by Marc Zimmerman and Raúl Rojas.

Literary Silence: Language and the Non-Symbolic

There can be no pure opposition to power, only a recrafting of its terms from resources invariably impure. (Judith Butler)¹⁸

Despite its appeal, however, silence can be a problematic concept in situations of war and violence, which brings me to the second work that has greatly informed the theoretical framework of my current project: Elizabeth Loevlie's *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett* (2003). Loevlie's text wrestles with the most basic of questions: what is silence and how do we understand its relationship to language? Though a seemingly simple question, Loevlie posits that silence continues to challenge our imaginative capacities. What we often take to be "silence"—often presumed to denote "the absence of noise" (10) or "the opposite of language" (11)—does not exist. According to John Cage, silence as "absence" is impossible:

In fact, try as we may to make silence, we cannot. For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. (Cage 8)

Yet this conception of silence as "absence" continues to have great "seductive appeal" (Loevlie 10). Rather than leading to a rejection of the dualistic conception of silence as the opposite of language, the impossibility leads to a "*mystique* of silence. Although scientifically unfeasible, silence is poetically still a possible reality, still an ideal to be

¹⁸ Butler, qtd in Nelson, *Finger in the Wound* 41.

sought. It is still talked of, still dreamt of, still largely a romanticized notion” (Loevlie 10). Silence, she suggests, captivates our imaginations and stirs our desires.¹⁹

According to Loevlie, silence is seductive primarily because “it is seen as an alternative to what is increasingly experienced as an impoverished state of language” (12). What George Steiner, in 1961, termed the “retreat of the word” (qtd in Loevlie 12) has only been amplified with the advent of the digital age and the possibility of instant communication. Loevlie notes the frequent disappointment with such an overabundance of words: “The broadcasted word, the televised word, and the electronic word literally permeate the atmosphere. But rather than make language richer, this proliferation of words points towards an impoverished and simplified language” (12). The continued devaluation and simplicity of language is accompanied by an increasing acceptance of the value of the image. This tendency to posit silence as the other of language is described by Loevlie as the “Dream of Silence”:

By it I designate the tendency exactly to evoke silence as a beyond that is the realm of the unsayable, and to rely on silence as an unverifiable conclusion that leaves nothing more to be said. By calling it a Dream I hope to indicate that this silence cannot be verified or measured, but rather adheres to different categories of experience. The Dream of Silence transcends the silence sought in the silent chamber as it transcends a silence that can be positively indicated. More than anything it is a myth that enables us to accept the insufficiencies of language.

Thus silence is also attractive because it provides an alternative to our current reality. It posits the existence of a “beyond” in which our experiences make sense and gain purpose.²⁰ Any experience that challenges our linguistic ability to describe it—those

¹⁹ Loevlie writes, “As the other of language, silence can represent all our dreams and yearnings for a beyond not ruled by language” (14).

²⁰ Because of its ability to give meaning to reality, Loevlie draws attention to two sources of the “Dream of Silence” in the Western tradition which continue to augment its seductive appeal: Christianity and psychoanalysis. Regarding Christianity and its story of Creation and the Fall, Loevlie writes, “The Fall into sin was also the fall into language. In other words, man is forever doomed to speak in fallen language, a language that can never grasp God or the Absolute and that constantly distorts any immediate reality. This

moments that simply “can’t be put it into words”—are pushed into the beyond of language, into an almost mystical realm in which silence reigns. That would explain the fact that Guatemalans resorted to silence as a means of coping with the horrors of the war. As numerous firsthand accounts suggest, many Guatemalans found their experiences to be “unspeakable.” Victor Perera, in his study *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy* (1995), recalls hearing a woman named Marina speak of the violence. After her talk, Perera approached her and told her of his own experiences, to which she responded:

As a Guatemalan, you know that I could not tell them the full truth of what is being done to our people, for fear no one would believe me. How could I tell them of watching a soldier bayonet my aunt in the stomach, rip out her four-month-old fetus, and smash it against the house post? How could I speak to them of our children waking up screaming in the middle of the night, beyond comforting, and of our nightly prayers to God for justice in our land?” (qtd in Perera)

Marina’s experience had been so horrific that she considered it “unspeakable.” And thus she altered her story to make it “sayable” and acceptable to international ears. Marina, of course, refused to remain silent. She spoke the violence, even though she felt the need to alter the “truth” of her account in order to do so. Others, however, refused to speak, lamenting the failure of language to communicate the “truth” of such inexhaustible horror.

Yet there is a danger in rendering the violence of the war “unspeakable.” By pushing the non-symbolic into a realm that is beyond language, such notions of an

story consequently defines silence as congruent with the sense of plenitude, peace, and a continuous relationship with God that existed before the Fall” (13). The seductive appeal of silence in psychoanalysis’ emphasis on the pre-linguistic stage of the infant has a similar effect. Loevlie writes,

In the Imaginary the infant experiences a continuous relationship with the surroundings. Its reality is immediate, not organized, fragmented, or separated by means of symbols. The entry into language is experienced as a major loss and rupture [...] in that it fragments and discontinues the continuous sense of being. Silence is identified with the pleasure of immediacy, of wholeness that precedes reflexivity and language. (14)

Therefore, in addition to the continued disappointment with the proliferation of words and language, the association of silence with the pre-Fall or pre-Symbolic gives the Dream of Silence a powerful seductive appeal that is almost impossible to ignore.

unspeakable violence inevitably make all attempts to discuss the violence impossible. Though it is certainly true that silence provided citizens a sense of security and safety during the war, to suggest that violence was “unspeakable” had several major consequences. First, it granted violence a mythic quality that was beyond citizens’ capacities for comprehension. Violence as absolute other, incapable of being narrated, attained an almost sacred status. Idolizing the violence in such a way renders resistance ineffective and forecloses the possibility of seeking alternative forms of narration. Dualistic conceptions of silence and language are insufficient for many reasons, but primarily because they perpetuate the “Dream of Silence” and thus discount alternative forms of silence, namely “literary silence” (Loevlie 14). More specifically, Loevlie’s project—an attempt “to think an alternative silence that is not reducible to the other of discourse or text” (25)—has profound implications for how we conceive of the relationship between language and the non-symbolic. In my current project, of course, this opens up new ways of talking about the “non-symbolic” of torture and massacre in Guatemala. More broadly considered, however, Loevlie’s exploration of “literary silence” opens up countless possibilities for narrating those experience that initially appear to be “unspeakable,” whether they are religious, psychological, or otherwise.

Though I will explore her concept of “literary silence” in greater detail throughout my analysis in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, we should note briefly for now the conceptual difficulties in approaching a paradoxical notion such as “literary silence.” Following Maurice Blanchot and his suggestion that a world without literature would be recognized “not by its silence, but by the *absence of silence*” (Loevlie 26), Loevlie questions precisely how it is that literature produces silence. As Loevlie writes, “literature

somehow maintains silence; it is the paradoxical dwelling place of silence, the producer of silence, or the guardian of silence” (26). The idea that literature creates silence is baffling, but at the same time it opens up the possibility for a non-dualistic conception of the relation between silence and language. As Loevlie writes, “Silence is not the other of language, not in the gaps, not at the end of the text; it is the result of the text itself” (28). This non-dualistic concept of silence and language also implies a new relationship between the text and the non-symbolic. If “literary silence” does indeed arise as a dynamic within the text and is thus conceived “*as inside language, rather than outside it; as coming through literary language, rather than existing beside it*” (Loevlie 25, italics in original), then the primary result, for my purposes here, is that it opens up the possibility to conceive of a language that can speak the unspeakable. According to Loevlie, “literary silence is a concept that explores the literary text’s paradoxical, almost uncanny, ability to give voices to silence, to say the unsayable” (30). This concern with “saying the unsayable” will occupy the remainder of my project.

As I have already noted, the “Dream of Silence” was widely accepted during the Internal Armed Conflict. Nevertheless, though it was certainly true that many Guatemalans remained “united in silence,” others soon realized that not speaking about the violence was not an option. The horrors of torture and massacre had to be spoken, but as noted above, many continued to doubt their ability to narrate such atrocities. Thus within their narrations, the question of language and “unspeakability” took center stage. If torture was an “unsayable” or “unspeakable” horror, how should it be depicted in literature? How best to narrate the “silent non-symbolic” of torture?

The Silent Non-Symbolic of Torture: Plan and Chapter Distribution

This project will examine three distinct literary modes employed by Guatemalan authors in order to narrate the atrocities of the war. I have selected texts published between 1975 and 1985—“the most violent years of the war” (Doyle 59).²¹ The authors whose works I intend to analyze include Rigoberta Menchú’s *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), Marco Antonio Flores’ *Los compañeros* (1976), Arturo Arias’ *Después de las bombas* (1979), and Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s *El cuchillo del mendigo* (1985²²). Each of the literary texts that I examine in this study includes scenes that either depict an act of torture or narrate a story or event from the perspective of someone who is confronting the legacy of torture. In addition to being four of the most celebrated and widely read authors since the beginning of the 36-year civil war, these writers also distinguish themselves by presenting three very distinct modes of narrating torture and the non-symbolic, which I will treat in Chapters Two through Four. I suggest that these authors all engage in projects that explore not only the rhetorical potential of torture, but also the importance of bearing witness to it.

Chapter One lays the foundational and historical framework for the dissertation. In that chapter, I examine how acts of violence, specifically torture and massacre, were employed by the state in order to create a society of fear. By manipulating the visibility

²¹ This 10-year period (1975-1985) witnessed the most brutal cases of torture and massacre during the 36-year armed conflict. Indeed, during the years 1978-1983—referred to by most Guatemalans as simply “La violencia” (Sanford)—it is estimated that the Guatemalan army “eliminated” more than 200,000 civilians (Rubio) in an effort to deprive the guerrillas of civilian assistance. The military referred to this process as “quitarle el agua al pez” (“taking the water away from the fish”). Even though the violence continued throughout the 1980s, the year 1985 marks an important turning point in contemporary Guatemalan history. With the election of Vinicio Arévalo Cerezo, the Presidency returned to civilian hands, thereby beginning a process of democratization—including a new constitution that allowed for the separation of powers—that ultimately led to the end of the war and the signing of the Peace Accords roughly 10 years later.

²² This text was not published in Guatemala until 1986. Nevertheless, I include it here because even though it was not available in Guatemala until 1986, it had been written several years previously and its English translation (by Paul Bowles) had already been published by City Lights Books in 1985.

and invisibility of violence, torture and disappearance, the regime sought to establish itself as a sovereign power and silence all those who opposed it. In order to contextualize the question of violence and the role of the military in the country, the chapter begins with an in-depth treatment of the violence itself, focusing on the years of *La violencia*, but also including a discussion of the historical events leading up to and including the Intervention of 1954. From there, I turn to a more theoretical examination of torture, drawing heavily on the work of Elaine Scarry, John T. Parry, Jennifer Ballengee, and Paul Kahn. In that section, I discuss the relationship between torture and “escalation,” focusing specifically on the ways in which the imagining of pain can be manipulated by the state as a strategy for the production of power. Regarding the connection between violence and state power, I will also—both in the Introduction and throughout the dissertation as a whole—draw on other theorists where useful. I engage closely with the theoretical work of Michel Foucault on power, particularly his conceptions of discipline (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*) and governmentality (*Security, Territory, Population*). In addition, the writings of Giorgio Agamben (*The Remnants of Auschwitz, Homo Sacer*, and *The State of Exception*) have been helpful in framing questions of power and sovereignty, the relationship between the citizen and the state, and the role of shame in the formation of the subject. I also draw heavily on Judith Butler’s use of Foucault and psychoanalysis (*The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* and *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*) to explore the question of subject formation. My use of these theorists focuses not on their work as a whole, but rather on the ways in which they help to think through the relationship

between violence and state power, particularly the notion of torture as public spectacle and its role in the contemporary nation-state.

Though torture is typically conceived as a practice that occurs hidden from public view in the shadowy cells of detention centers, torture in Guatemala was often carried out in the town square. I denote the importance of these massacres in Guatemala, arguing that they constitute a form of public, collective torture designed to put the tortured body on display. As a result of these public massacres, the Guatemalan army's use of torture in its counterinsurgency campaign became common knowledge. The proliferation of rumors, coupled with the absence of official knowledge from the state, actually produced more uncertainty than certainty regarding the nature of the violence, spreading fear more than anything else. As the fear spread, people lost the ability to discern the difference between fact and fiction. In such an environment, everything—no matter how unbelievable—became a possibility. The boundaries between the real and the unreal faded and blurred. Torture—and the terror it produced—corrupted and infected society to such a degree that it became “normal,” penetrating the recesses of the Guatemalan psyche. Masked behind the normalcy of everyday life, torture crept below the surface, “just beyond view.” Torture's shadowy presence haunted the very fabric of Guatemalan society and soon became an “unspeakable” aspect of society itself. Silence became one of the best defenses against the state's strategies of social control.

But not all chose the path of “silence.” Many people began to speak out against the atrocities of the state, attempting to counter the state's rhetoric of torture by re-narrating the acts of terror in literature. In doing so, however, the question of the “unspeakability” of the violence remained a continual theme in their narratives. The

critical question for these authors was often the same question posed by Mazariegos: how do we name the “unnameable”? How do we speak a violence that so often escapes representation in language? In answering these question and in speaking out against the violence, various authors sought to play with the relationship between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, in order not only to re-present the violence, but also to explore the possibility of bearing witness to that violence.

Chapters Two through Four represent the main content chapters of the dissertation. In each of these chapters I discuss a different literary mode with respect to narrating torture. In the selected texts, I attend to the narrations of torture by focusing specifically on the relationship between language and the non-symbolic. Following Loevlie’s understanding of the “silent non-symbolic,” I analyze the literary texts themselves and the various modes employed to narrate torture in literature. Two main forms of narrative developed in the 1970s and 1980s as a literary response to the violence in Guatemala: *testimonio* and the “new novel.” Chapter Two begins the exploration of these literary responses to the state’s rhetoric of fear by treating the narrations of torture in *testimonio*. In *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America* (1997), Linda Craft notes that much of Guatemalan fiction during the war was quite expectedly characterized by testimonial techniques which sought to denounce the violence committed by the government. These testimonial techniques typically draw on very detailed representations and recollections of the atrocities committed, and their production increased dramatically during in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this chapter, I will focus my analysis on one of the most celebrated and also most polemical texts published during the war: Rigoberta Menchú’s *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así*

me nació la conciencia (1983). My primary goal is to analyze the strategies employed by Menchú to narrate the torture and death of her family members, arguing that the primary motivation informing her narrative of torture is political responsibility. That is, in order to move readers to denounce the injustices of the war and rebuild society, Menchú's narrative seeks above all else to make the violence perpetrated by the state visible to the world and thereby achieve a level of "denuncia política" (Lienhard 312). Instead of noting the difficulties and uncertainties of narrating torture in literature, Menchú assumes that language can narrate it. Her rhetoric of certainty, therefore, attempts to persuade international audiences of the state's abuses by focusing on and emphasizing the fullness of torture's meaning in the text.

Chapter Three then turns to the "new novel," specifically Marco Antonio Flores' *Los compañeros* (1976) and Arturo Arias' *Después de las bombas* (1979). Not only are these two works representative of larger trends in Guatemala, but also they are two of the most well known Guatemalan novelists, both nationally and internationally. According to Arturo Arias, the "new novel" rejects the collapsing of distance between signifier and signified, between text and historical reality, and instead takes language as its primary focus, questioning the extent to which language can describe reality and thus privileging signifiers that "float" relatively autonomously from historical reality ("Literary Production" 20). Employing diverse narrative techniques and incorporating the interplay of divergent narrative discourses, both Flores and Arias play with the relationship between language and referent so as to question our capacity for bearing witness to the horrors of the war. In the words of Arias, because language fails to communicate the "unspeakable" nature of the atrocities, "the novel's real protagonist" is language itself

(“Literary Production” 25). Therefore, unlike Menchú who focused upon details and certainty in her narration, the new novelists elevated doubt and ambiguity. Through a rhetoric of uncertainty, these authors undermine historical representation. The goal, according to Arias, is to push readers to seek truth and certainty beyond the text. Arias asserts that not only should readers question the state’s narrative, but they should also question the literary text itself. The rupture between text and reality ultimately seeks to produce a desire for justice and political responsibility. That desire cannot be met in the literary text, and when the desire for justice proves impossible, the object of desire must be continually replaced. This is why its characters often end up disillusioned. They give up on political responsibility, replacing revolution and resistance with sex and drugs. The distance formed between the literary text and the historical “truth”—in this case, the acts of torture and violence committed during the armed conflict—is established precisely so that it can be overcome. The reader can thereby make the absent meaning present. The reader, therefore, takes a much more active role than in *testimonio*, for it is the reader—and not the text—who must ultimately find the “meaning” of the war. In that sense, Arias claims that one of the primary goals of the Guatemalan new novel is to produce desire. Rather than producing a desire for justice or political responsibility, however, it produces endless desire: a desire for desire that culminates in ambivalence. As I will argue, this attempt to produce desire in the reader ends up eroticizing torture and violence.

Chapter Four then turns to Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s *El cuchillo del mendigo* (1985²³).

²³ Please note that this text was not published in Guatemala until 1986. Nevertheless, I include it here because even though it was not available in Guatemala until 1986, it had been written several years previously and its English translation (by Paul Bowles) had already been published by City Lights Books in 1985.

Over and against *testimonio* and the new novel, Rey Rosa strives to hold on to both certainty and uncertainty in narrating torture. Whereas Menchú emphasized only those elements that were certain and verifiable, Rey Rosa draws on dreams and nightmares in order to challenge the readers' conceptions of the real and the unreal. And unlike the new novelists who—despite their attempts to elevate uncertainty by ripping apart signifier and signified, thereby emphasizing language's inability to narrate the truth of the war—end up celebrating ambivalence and thus creating the possibility for torture's eroticization, Rey Rosa refuses to draw upon symbolic language or push the non-symbolic of torture beyond language. Rather, Rey Rosa preserves the uncertainty within the text. More specifically, I will argue that Rey Rosa, over and against previous attempts to narrate the violence of the war, seeks to mask the silent non-symbolic within language itself. In *El cuchillo del mendigo*, torture no longer has an immediate presence within the text as we saw with *testimonio*, where narrating torture became a means of presenting documented evidence for international audiences. Nor is torture a mediated absence, pushed beyond the text and language into a realm that cannot be reached by signifiers. Rather, Rey Rosa structures his descriptions of torture around a gap that cannot be named, but that nonetheless must be narrated. Rey Rosa does not seek to overwrite the uncertainty and irrationality of torture with documentary evidence; nor does he symbolize torture to the degree that we witnessed in the new novel. Rather, by destabilizing the boundaries between the real and the unreal, the certain and the uncertain, Rey Rosa is able to repeat—to recreate—the spectral fear of torture. Rey Rosa writes with a language that can speak the unspeakable, thereby proffering a new conception of the relationship between the text and the non-symbolic. As noted above, "Silence is not the other of

language, not in the gaps, not at the end of the text; it is the result of the text itself” (Loevlie 28). We see this non-dualistic concept of silence and language in Rey Rosa. Following Loevlie’s discussion of “literary silence” as a dynamic within the text—“*as inside language, rather than outside it; as coming through literary language, rather than existing beside it*” (Loevlie 25, italics in original)—I argue that Rey Rosa’s stories explore the ways in which a text might “give voices to silence, to say the unsayable” (Loevlie 30).

Bearing witness to torture and the violence of the Internal Armed Conflict remains a central concern in contemporary Guatemala. Those attempting to work through the legacy of torture and massacre continue to struggle with naming a violence that often seems indecipherable or unnamable. As the authors analyzed in this project grope for an adequate means of narrating, and thus confronting, what happened, they provide valuable insight into the difficulties involved in facing the specters of the unspeakable.

Chapter Two: A Rhetoric of Fear: The Shadowy Nature of Torture as Spectacle

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule.²⁴

And in the state of emergency which is not the exception but the rule, every possibility is a fact.²⁵

Over the course of Guatemala's 36-year civil war, it is estimated that over 100,000 people were abducted and tortured.²⁶ In many instances, their bodies were marked and mutilated, presumably in order to extract information, but ultimately to serve as a reminder of what the government would do to those who opposed them. Often the victim's body was later found by the side of the road, in a plaza or another public space—displayed publicly as a warning sign to the general population. Eduardo Galeano refers to the years following the intervention in 1954 as an “orgy of violence” (*Open Veins* 114). Regarding the very public nature of the violence, Galeano writes in graphic language:

All the men of the village of Cajón del Río were exterminated; those of Tituque had their intestines gouged out with knives; in Piedra Parada they were flayed alive; in Agua Blanca de Ipala they were burned alive after being shot in the legs. A rebellious peasant's head was stuck on a pole in the center of San Jorge's plaza. In Cerro Gordo the eyes of Jaime Velázquez were filled with pins. The body of Ricardo Miranda, thirty-eight holes in his head, and the head of Haroldo Silva were found beside the San Salvador highway. In Los Mixcos, Ernesto Chinchilla's tongue was cut out. In Ojo de Agua, the Oliva Aldana brothers, blindfolded and with hands tied behind backs, were pumped full of bullets. The head of José Guzmán was chopped into a mass of tiny pieces and scattered along the road. In San Lucas Sacatepéquez, the wells yielded corpses instead of water.

²⁴ Benjamin 257.

²⁵ Taussig, *Nervous System* 34.

²⁶ For a thorough discussion of the violence during the war, see Sanford, especially chapter 5. For a more sustained treatment of urban political movements, see Levenson-Estrada's *Trade Unionists Against Terror* (1994), Jonas' *The Battle for Guatemala* (1991), Fried's *Guatemala in Rebellion* (1983), and Galeano's *País ocupado* (1967). For discussions of urban state terror and its effects, see Figueroa Ibarra's *El recurso del miedo* (1991), Peralta's *Dialéctica del terror* (1981), and Corradi's *Fear at the Edge* (1992). For a comparative analysis of these movements throughout Latin America, see Escobar and Alvarez's edited volume *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America* (1992).

On the Miraflores plantation, the men greeted the dawn without hands or feet.
(*Open Veins* 114-15)

The effects of torture on the victims' bodies had numerous and varied consequences, but above all else torture functioned as a reminder and a witness to the regime's power. The public nature of the violence indicates the state's intention to create a spectacle that could be witnessed by large audiences. The bodies of citizens became a visible and public text upon which the state could inscribe its own message of fear.

In this chapter, I will explore the role that torture played during the Internal Armed Conflict in Guatemala. I will first outline the historical context, beginning with the events surrounding the Intervention in 1954 and then continuing with the period known simply as *La Violencia*. Crucial to this contextualization will be to show how pervasive the violence was in the country and the extent to which it was characterized by an ethos of terror. In the second section, I turn to a largely theoretical assessment of torture, drawing heavily from texts by John Parry, Jennifer Ballengee, Elaine Scarry, and Paul Kahn. In that section, I discuss the relationship between torture and "escalation," focusing specifically on the ways in which this relationship and the imagining of pain can be manipulated by the state as a strategy for the production of power. Though torture is typically conceived as a practice that occurs hidden from public view in the shadowy cells of detention centers, in Guatemala, torture was often carried out in the town square. The state's use of these public massacres distinguishes Guatemala from many other countries that suffered violent wars in the 1970s and 1980s. In the third section, I analyze the importance of these massacres in Guatemala, arguing that they constitute a form of public, collective torture that put the tortured body on display. As a result of these public massacres, the Guatemalan army's use of torture in its counterinsurgency campaign

became common knowledge. Yet despite the seemingly public nature of the massacres, the state denied all knowledge of the events. Out of fear, it became increasingly unlikely that anyone—in person or through the media—would speak out publicly against the violence. And thus, knowledge about the massacres spread only by rumor. The proliferation of rumors, when coupled with the absence of official knowledge from the state, actually produced more uncertainty than certainty regarding the nature of the violence, spreading fear more than anything else. In the fourth section, I thus provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of rumor and its role in spreading the state’s message of fear. As the fear spread, people lost the ability to discern the difference between what was fact and what was fiction. In such an environment, everything—no matter how unbelievable—became a possibility. The boundaries between the real and the unreal faded and blurred. The effect of this blurring on the citizens’ ability to witness to torture and other atrocities of the war cannot be underestimated. Torture—and the terror it produced—corrupted and infected society to such a degree that it became “normal.” As torture became a normal, everyday occurrence, a practice that was “tolerated” and accepted by society, it penetrated the recesses of the Guatemalan psyche and fragmented it. Even those citizens who had not experienced torture directly felt its oblique presence. Masked behind the normalcy of everyday life, torture crept below the surface, just beyond view. Torture’s shadowy presence haunted the very fabric of Guatemalan society.

In the Land of 'Even'

*In the murk, an eye watching, an eye knowing. Here you can't trust anyone.
(Taussig, Nervous System 21)*

The year 1954 proved to be one of the most decisive in the vast history of Guatemala.²⁷ This year not only marked the beginning of a period of extreme repression and state violence that would continue to haunt the memories of its citizens more than five decades later, but it also came to symbolize the loss of hope. The October Revolution of 1944, which began with demonstrations by university students and culminated in country-wide revolt, forced the resignation of General Jorge Ubico (1931-1944) and ushered in an era of great optimism. Mythologized as the Ten Years of Spring, the period 1944-1954 witnessed the democratic election of two presidents—Juan José Arévalo (1945-1951) and Col. Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954)—and sweeping economic and political reforms. A new constitution was drafted in 1945, establishing more open and democratic institutions and resulting in the legalization of unions, the implementation of a social security system, as well as decisive programs in education and literacy.²⁸

Arbenz, who often described himself as a “spiritual socialist,” was not a communist but was certainly sympathetic to the Communist party and its goals, particularly concerning agrarian reform. In 1952 Arbenz enacted Decree 900, “an agrarian reform law that expropriated all idle lands larger than 223 acres—reimbursing their owners with government bonds” (Volpendesta 19). This redistribution of unused lands to large numbers of indigenous families had an enormous impact on the United

²⁷ For an extraordinarily thorough treatment of the post-1954 Guatemalan history, see Jonas' *The Battle for Guatemala* (1991). Two other helpful works that document this period are Schleisinger's and Kinzer's *Bitter Fruit* (2005) and Gleijeses' *Shattered Hope* (1991).

²⁸ For a discussion of the social and political changes during the period 1944-1954, see especially Jonas.

Fruit Company (UFC), which at the time was Guatemala's largest landowner. Though the UFC was paid for the appropriated lands, unfortunately for the UFC, the compensation was calculated at "the recorded assessed value" of the expropriated lands (Foster 211). This backfired on the UFC, because for years they had "undervalued their land in order to keep tax payments down" (Foster 212). When Decree 900 was announced, the UFC immediately responded, indicating that their lands were worth much more than tax records showed. The enactment of Decree 900 meant that "the Arbenz government offered to pay United Fruit less than \$1 million for land they then claimed was worth almost \$16 million" (Foster 212). Frequently referred to as "El Pulpo" [the Octopus], the UFC had friends in numerous U.S. offices (e.g., U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles) and requested that the U.S. State Department intervene, alleging the agrarian reform was unconstitutional.²⁹ Cold War political pressures, coupled with numerous United States business interests, ultimately led to military action. In October 1953, the CIA launched Operation PBSUCCESS, a covert military operation with the express aim of overthrowing the Arbenz government. As REMHI notes, "In May 1954, with the conspiracy already in its advanced stages, the United States signed military aid pacts with Honduras and Nicaragua, whence it was already preparing to launch a military invasion of Guatemala" (*Never Again* 187). A CIA-backed invasion overthrew Arbenz in June 1954, triggering decades of repression and violence.

For more than five decades now, Guatemala has been characterized by an ethos of violence. It is the land of "even": "Chopping up a little girl is repugnant behavior *even* in

²⁹ For more information on the relationship between the UFC and the United States, see Jonas' *The Battle for Guatemala* (1991).

Guatemala. ... It was a fraudulent election *even* for Guatemala. Basest corruption *even* for Guatemala” (Goldman 165). Such an ethos has left a seemingly indelible mark on society, uniting its citizens not in resistance, but in an apparent silent complicity. In a country where the targets of state violence were often random, where citizens were abducted and disappeared apparently without cause, to speak out against the government would have been certain death. Not speaking out became one of the best defenses against future violence. People spoke of the violence only in hushed whispers, not knowing whom to trust and fearing that everyone was *una oreja* [an informant] working with the state.

Following the “definitive end of hostilities” (REMHI xvi) in 1994, the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico* (CEH) was created under UN sponsorship to investigate what had “really” occurred during the war.³⁰ The CEH report found that the vast majority of the violence was perpetrated by the Guatemalan army; it “assigns blame for fully 93 percent of the atrocities to the government forces and their allied paramilitary bands” (*Never Again* xvi). The army was an instrument whose “spectacles of terror” had one ultimate goal: social control. The Recovery of Historical Memory project³¹ notes that

³⁰ Of course, to suggest that 1994 marked the end of the violence is decidedly shortsighted and ignores the continuing violence in the country. In fact, after the signing of the peace accords, there arose a “parallel state” in Guatemala to continue the violence:

After the peace accord, the state’s security apparatus—death squads, intelligence units, police officers, military counter-insurgency forces—did not disappear but, rather, mutated into criminal organizations. Amounting to a parallel state, these illicit networks engage in arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion, human smuggling, black-market adoptions, and kidnapping for ransom. The networks also control an exploding drug trade. (Grann, “A Murder Foretold” 44)

The violence became so pervasive, in fact, that in 2012, the newly elected president of Guatemala proposed to legalize the drug trade with the hope of stemming the violence. Of course, to suggest that 1994 marked the “definitive end of the hostilities” also ignores the deep-felt psychological violence that continued long after the act itself. These psychological effects will be explored at length in the present chapter.

³¹ After the 1994 Oslo Agreement, the bishops of the Catholic Church in Guatemala began gathering data about the atrocities of the war. Their findings were published as a four-volume report entitled *Guatemala: Nunca Más*. This report is commonly referred to as the “Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica” [Recovery of Historical Memory], or REMHI for short. The four-volume publication was later translated into English

the methods employed by the military in order to establish control actually underwent a series of strategic stages:

During the sixties, in addition to combat between the guerrillas and the army, government violence targeted peasants in the eastern part of the country. In the seventies, state violence was particularly virulent in the cities. It was trained on leaders of social movements and sectors opposing the successive military regimes, in addition to the guerrilla infrastructure. In the early eighties, counterinsurgency policy took the form of state-sponsored terrorism featuring systematic, mass destruction, particularly of indigenous communities and organized peasant groups. (*Never Again* xxxii)

Violence as “selective repression” was systematically performed against very specific sectors of the population (*Never Again* xxxii). In this way, the regime sought to intimidate and silence those members of society who represented a threat to its sovereignty.

In Guatemala, this visible terror was typically paired with a type of violence considered by many to be much more devastating and insidious: disappearance.³² Alongside torture’s marking of individual bodies, disappearance offered a more “invisible” threat by which the regime could hide its role in the violence. The apex of power, as Michel Foucault suggests, is its invisibility. Foucault writes, “the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects” (*Discipline and Punish* 203). It is estimated that over 40,000 people were disappeared

and published as an annotated, one-volume report. Throughout most of the current project, I will draw from the Spanish version, in which case I will refer to it in the citation as “REMHI.” In a few instances, however, I cite the annotated English version, especially when its version is more succinct than the Spanish and thus better summarizes the point of the argument. In these instances, I will refer to it in the citation as “Never Again.”

³² For a thorough discussion of the role of forced disappearance in Guatemala and its effects on Guatemalan citizens, see Figueroa Ibarra.

during the 36-year civil conflict.³³ Victor Perera, a Guatemalan journalist and novelist who has written extensively about the war in Guatemala, pointedly remarks on the impossibility of comparing the number of disappeared in Guatemala to that of any other dictatorial regime:

In trying to gain perspective on Guatemala's violencia, I groped for historical parallels: Mexico in the twenties, Algeria prior to independence, Peru and its Maoist Shining Path guerrillas. None of them measure up. Even the 15,000 who disappeared during Argentina's seven-year "dirty war" are only a fraction of Guatemala's 40,000, which in 1989 made up—according to Americas Watch—45 percent of Latin America's total of disappeared and unaccounted for. (48-49)

In fact, the use of "desaparecer" as a transitive verb—to disappear someone—originated in Guatemala (Perera 9). Fear of being abducted and disappeared was omnipresent throughout the civil conflict. Yet it was not the disappearing that frightened so many; it was knowing what would happen once they had been disappeared. Disappearance and torture went hand in hand. The fear of being tortured pervaded Guatemalan society during the war.

³³ Most books and articles about Guatemala include great quantities of statistical data about the violence of the war. For more information on the violence, see especially C. Smith's *Guatemalan Indians and the State* (1990), Manz's *Refugees of a Hidden War* (1988), Lovell's *A Beauty that Hurts* (2000), and Carmack's *Harvest of Violence* (1988).

The Rhetoric of Torture: Pain, Escalation, and the “Logic of Choice”

Whether in the form of mass killings or the appearance of corpses bearing signs of torture, the horror was so massive and so flagrant that it defied the imagination. (Never Again 9)

In most cases, the fear of torture was a fear of pain. Indeed, according to the Convention against Torture, torture is defined primarily as the application of “severe pain or suffering” (Article 1).³⁴ The relation between torture and pain is explored by many critics, but the most-cited study continues to be Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1985). In this now classic text, Scarry examines in great detail the relationship between pain and torture, noting specifically the ways in which torture allows pain to be converted into power. Torture is a production, she argues, an imaginative process carried out for the unique purpose of creating “a fantastic illusion of power” (28). According to Scarry, the general structure of this creative process is threefold:

First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person’s body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person’s body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency. (27)

These three steps are not always sequential, of course, and to understand how they create “a fantastic illusion of power” (28), we must explore Scarry’s argument in greater depth.

³⁴ According to the Convention Against Torture, the complete definition of torture is as follows:

For the purposes of this Convention, the term "torture" means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions. (Art. 1)

In torture, Scarry argues, intense pain is always accompanied by interrogation in the form of the “question.” Torture therefore consists of the simultaneous pairing of physical and verbal acts, and the questions themselves are framed and presented as though they are the reason for the pain. There is a deep sense of urgency with which this drama unfolds, and thus it is often assumed that the purpose of torture is to extract information from the victim. Indeed, many films and novels present torture as if it were just that: a method for obtaining information. Yet such representations of torture are misleading, a point that Aristotle recognized more than 2000 years ago. He writes that torture as a means for obtaining information is profoundly unreliable, observing that “those under compulsion [of torture] are as likely to give false evidence as true, some being ready to endure everything rather than tell the truth, while others are equally ready to make false charges against the others” (*Art of Rhetoric* Lxv. 26, qtd in Ballengee 8). Indeed, numerous writers today bemoan the oft-repeated claim that torture remains a reliable method for extracting information from a prisoner. In his study of the relationship between torture and terror, for example, Paul Kahn, Professor of Law and the Humanities at Yale Law School, refuses to accept the notion that torture can be employed as a reliable means for finding the truth, instead expressing skepticism regarding what he calls “the epistemic value of torture” (Kahn 2).³⁵ In fact, according to Kahn, torture continues to be practiced not because of any trust in its ability to discover the truth, but rather because of the ways in which the state could continue to employ it in order to create truth (Kahn 26). Its fundamental purpose in contemporary use remains largely the same:

³⁵ That is not to suggest, of course, that there are not those who believe torture to be a justified means for extracting information. For a thorough treatment of the numerous issues surrounding the use of torture as a means to prevent terrorism, see especially the essays published in Levinson’s edited work, *Torture: A Collection* (2006).

Torture was used as a test of faith. Its product was understanding for both the victim and the torturer. The outcome of this performance was a truth established in the act itself. The victim would know whether for the sake of his beliefs he would suffer self-sacrifice, that is, martyrdom. The torturer, as well as the audience, would know whether sovereign power was real. In a world in which life offers a continual test of faith, torture is a form of inquiry designed to reach truth. (Kahn 26)

This ability to create truth signals a vital connection between torture and the imagining of political power. For that reason, we must approach torture not merely as a violation of the law, but rather as a practice that demonstrates a more profound political phenomenon, in which the relationship between individual citizens and sovereign power is imagined and revealed (Kahn 4). Though many recent publications on torture continue to employ the “ticking bomb” hypothesis, assuming that coercive measures will force the victim to reveal tactical information, such arguments fail to address the basic relationship between terror and torture.³⁶ In many cases torture continues to be practiced not for the purposes of interrogation, even though the “question” remains a central component of the act, but rather as a contest between the state and the victim:

Torture was deployed in a contest over the character of the sacred. That contest leads to the confession because we cannot know the meaning of the body as signifier until that final act of speech in which the victim names his god. Every act of torture is a competition between the power of the torturer to demand confession and the power of the victim to refuse and die as a martyr to his own sovereign. (Kahn 30)

This “confession” no longer serves to establish guilt, but it does continue to elicit the fundamental connection between torture, terror and sovereignty. Scarry concurs, suggesting that the pain of torture is so intense that the victim will say anything to make it stop. Because the specific information provided by the victim when put to “the

³⁶ For an example of the ticking bomb hypothesis, see Dershowitz.

question” remains unreliable, it would be a mistake to assume that the only purpose of the interrogation is to discover the truth or extract information.

According to Scarry, however, what is important is the fact that the victim answers. Any confession the prisoners make has little reference to the “real world” outside the pain.³⁷ The content of the answer is in most cases irrelevant. That they answer, however, shows the extent to which their reality has been reduced to the immediate now: pain. Everything beyond the pain of the body loses meaning, and the “disintegrating perception” of the prisoner causes the rest of the world to fade away (Scarry 30). The restriction and enclosure of the victim’s world thus creates an “invisible distance” between the torturer and the prisoner whereby each is placed at oppositional extremes of the pain/interrogation binary (Scarry 36). Whereas the prisoner experiences an “annihilating negation” in which his or her connections to the world are destroyed, the torturer and any other who witnesses the act experience “the absence of this annihilating negation” (Scarry 36).

Here we begin to see how pain becomes power. In the pairing of physical and linguistic acts, the centrality of the “question” allows the spatial play of negation and absence of negation to transform itself linguistically into a play between absence and presence of power:

These physical realities, an annihilating negation and an absence of negation, are therefore translated into verbal realities in order to make the invisible distance visible, in order to make what is taking place in terms of pain take place in terms of power, in order to shift what is occurring exclusively in the mode of sentience into the mode of self-extension and world. (36)

³⁷ Hence Scarry’s criticism of the word “betrayal” to describe the confession of the prisoner. She writes, “One cannot betray or be false to something that has ceased to exist and, in the most literal way possible, the created world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one’s self and one’s world, and that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist” (30).

One of the effects of torture is the imagining of a space in which the prisoner ceases to exist relationally.³⁸ Or rather, there is an attempt to re-school the prisoner by rendering all relationality unthinkable. As Scarry suggests, “Even the physical objects in his prison cell, the most immediate and concrete objects of consciousness, have been emptied of their content, have each become a mere sketch” (32). This occurs through a process that Scarry calls the “objectification of the prisoner’s world dissolution” (38). In this process, both the objects in the room—bathtubs, refrigerators, tables, etc.—and the room itself are converted into objects of pain.³⁹ According to Scarry, however, the crucial step in this process is not the conversion of these objects into weapons, but rather the moment in which the room and objects are then de-objectified through a process of unmaking. In other words, in becoming what they are not, i.e. weapons, these objects are unmade and

³⁸ The implications for a spatial analysis of the practice of torture should be obvious. Though an in-depth spatial analysis lies outside the scope of the present inquiry, it is interesting to note the parallels between Scarry’s tripartite treatment of torture and Henri Lefebvre’s theory of space. In his seminal *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre postulates that space is not only physically and mentally constructed, but also lived. His attempt to flesh out a theory of space includes three fields: “first, the *physical* – nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the *mental*, including logical and formal abstractions; and thirdly, the *social*” (11). He suggests that these three fields, which are typically considered separately, can come together in theory to denote a “logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias” (12). It is precisely these three fields which – throughout his treatment of the production of social space – come together as a conceptual triad: “spatial practice,” “representations of space,” and “representational spaces” (33). Stuart Elden provides a very succinct and cogent description of this triad:

The first of these takes space as physical form, *real* space, space that is generated and used. The second is the space of *savoir* (knowledge) and logic, of maps, mathematics, of space as the instrumental space of social engineers and urban planners. Space as mental construct, *imagined* space. The third sees space as produced and modified over time and through its use, spaces invested with symbolism and meaning, the space of *connaissance* (less formal or more local forms of knowledge), space as *real-and-imagined*. (n. pag.)

It is the conception of “spaces of representation” and the corresponding category of lived space which makes Lefebvre’s treatment so valuable in analyzing the purposes of torture. If torture seeks as its goal the transformation of pain into power, as Scarry claims, then that transformation must continue to be produced and reproduced long after the prisoner leaves the cell. That is, the space of torture must be maintained after the pain of the event has ceased. This process, I would suggest, is carried out by the witnessing audience. As the Guatemalan people witness the display of bodies in public, the occasions for further transformations of pain into power multiply exponentially. Torture then becomes a rhetorical practice whose effects extend well beyond the confines of the detention center.

³⁹ For a more detailed analysis of this process, see Scarry 40-41.

thus cease to exist as objects of everyday relationality for the victim. Scarry writes, “Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves [as non-weapons], and with them the fact of civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed” (41). As the object is converted into what it is not, the object itself ceases to exist; it is “unmade.” The continued unmaking results in the shrinking of the prisoner’s world. Her world becomes “a mere sketch” (Scarry 38), and she loses the imaginative capacity to form a positive, constructive relationship with her surroundings. For this reason, Ariel Dorfman suggests that torture is most fundamentally “a crime committed against the imagination” (8). Torture not only deprives the victim of her imaginative vision and thus her ability to interact with her surroundings, but it also deprives her of her ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Therefore, the unmaking of her world and her language has a drastic impact on her ability to comprehend what has happened, and thus robs her of her ability to give meaning to the event. No longer able to give meaning to her own torture, the victim becomes a body upon which the state can then write its own message.

The capacity of vision lost by the victim is thereby transferred to the torturer. Michel de Certeau confirms the epistemological and imaginative effects of the transformation of pain into power. He writes, “Torture is the technical procedure by which the tyrannical power acquires for itself this impalpable primary matter which it itself destroyed and which it lacks: authority, or, if one prefers, a capacity to make believe” (de Certeau, “Corps tortures, paroles capturées,” qtd in Cavanaugh 56). This capacity to “make believe” is one of the most lasting and insidious effects of torture. Pain

acquires not only spatial, but also epistemological significance. Thus the final step of the transformation has been achieved. Once the prisoner's immediate physical setting has been destroyed and ceases to exist as a possibility for social relationships, the torturer is able to "reach out, body forth, and destroy more distant and more numerous manifestations of civilization" (42). The loss of imaginative vision accompanies the victim even after he or she leaves the detention center, thereby infecting other members of society.

John Parry, in his study *Understanding Torture: Law, Violence, and Political Identity* (2010) describes the ways in which torture infects society itself. Torture, he suggests, exists on an ever-escalating continuum of pain. Even those who have not been tortured understand this continuum, and thus he notes the ways in which torture comes to incorporate a "logic of choice":

Once torture begins, the result is always the product of the victim's 'choice.' Victims who provide information have 'chosen' to talk. Yet these words ascribe agency and responsibility to a victim whose ordinary subjectivity is compromised or broken. If a victim resists, he or she will be tortured again—but again, the victim is responsible. According to the logic of torture, if the victim would only surrender to the torturer's domination, the pain would be over. By refusing to talk, the victim 'consents' to more torture. (205)

The most obvious conclusion regarding such a conception of torture concerns the ways in which intense pain can shape the victim's perception of responsibility and choice. Indeed, this is the focus of Scarry's study. The victim's refusal to cooperate can lead to greater pain, and thus many studies emphasize the relationship between pain and torture. Yet such a conception of the relationship between choice, consent, and responsibility in torture also reveals the ways in which pain itself might come to be irrelevant. Clearly, the victim's resistance can lead to greater pain. But this "escalation" is not only about

inflicting greater pain, but also “about beginning with a relatively milder amount of pain or coercion and with the possibility, even the expectation, of more” (Parry 205). Thus torture must be considered not only the application of “severe pain” but also as a practice that exists upon a continuum of pain: “it can include not just the most intensely painful practices but also all the practices that use pain to punish or gather information, damage the victim’s identity or worldview, or express the domination of the state and the torturer” (Parry 205). In other words, it is not only the pain itself that must be considered when discussing torture, but also the knowledge that the state is capable of inflicting that pain. Therefore, victims who “break” or confess at the beginning of inhumane treatment have been tortured “if they reasonably believe that progressively more painful treatment will follow” (Parry 205). It does not matter whether that treatment is only mildly coercive and does not involve the application of “severe pain.” Here we see one of the problems involved when torture is defined by international law as the implementation of “severe pain.” As Parry writes,

International law tries to establish that the purposeful infliction of severe pain, whether or not accompanied by the threat of escalation, is torture. But a practice that lasts only briefly and causes less than severe pain is also torture if it operates against a background (or threatened background) of total control and potential escalation, which, in turn, asserts the torturer’s (and state’s) dominance and unsettles or destroys the victim’s normative world. (Parry 205)

Following this conception of escalation, therefore, even the explanation of torture can be considered as torture if the person has reason to believe that such an explanation might become reality (Parry). Here we see the difficulties involved in “defining” torture according to international law. If “threats of coercion can be as effective as the real thing” (Parry 206), then attempts to categorize torture according to the degree of pain involved

become nonsensical, as do attempts to distinguish between pervasive and aberrational practices.

Because of its possibility of escalation, torture and its effects extend well beyond the tortured and the torturer. In situations of extreme crisis, when the state resorts to violence in order to enact social control, the act of policing pervades the fabric of society. As Parry writes, “The emergency means that anyone, whether or not defined in advance as an enemy or a friend, is always at risk, always subject, among other things, to being tortured or to being forced to torture. This ongoing political trauma forces new identities—or perhaps reinforces existing identities—on a much broader group than those already involved in torture” (215). Anyone can be abducted and questioned at any time. This means that in states of emergency, every citizen “is simultaneously defined as capable of torturing or being tortured” (212). Standard patterns of identity become so disrupted that political subjectivity is defined in a constant relationship to violence and torture. His treatment merits an extended quote:

If the state is always engaged in the process of shaping political identity and does so more violently in times of emergency—including by making its population potentially subject to being tortured or being forced to torture—then to the extent that the emergency becomes the norm, the use of violence (including torture) to shape identity will also become the norm or, at least, will emerge as a perpetual potential. This logic also means that when torture takes place, the new identities must include not just the fact of membership in a community that tortures but also recognition that one’s rights, freedoms, or material well-being rest partly on those acts of torture. (213)

In other words, in situations of extreme emergency, when the state employs violence and torture as a means of insuring order, the political identity of all citizens is constituted in a constant relationship with the escalating continuum of torture. Policing is inescapable, and thus everyday spaces—restaurants, public squares, and even people’s homes—

become potential sites of violence and abduction. As Anna Secor writes concerning policing and violence in Turkey, “the very ordinariness of these spaces is shot through with the possibility of a ‘check point,’ which may take the form of a request for papers, an interrogation, perhaps detention, maybe worse” (47). As society becomes saturated with the normality of torture—as the exception becomes the norm—all citizens become witnesses to the state’s use of torture and violence.⁴⁰

Parry’s treatment of the population as potential victim bears a striking relationship with Jennifer Ballengee’s conception of the “rhetoric of torture.” In her book *The Wound and the Witness* (2009), Ballengee examines literary depictions of torture in ancient Greek texts in order to understand the “persuasive potential” of torture and its continued use today, especially given the role the media plays in swaying public opinion (Ballengee 129).⁴¹ By focusing on torture’s representations in literature, she seeks to demonstrate that “the representation of torture functions as a rhetorical tool by combining bodily empathy with ethical and aesthetic judgment in order to persuade its audience” (1). As she argues, torture—including its representations in the media and in literature—not only has a profound and traumatic impact on the witness, but perhaps more importantly, torture only gains meaning in being witnessed. Torture, according to Ballengee, is polysemic. Torture has no definable or determinate meaning in itself and thus will always

⁴⁰ I use the term “state” in these instances to refer to the joint efforts of both the police and the military in the use of torture and violence. For a discussion of the ways in which the “State” recedes and disappears in times of exception, as well as a treatment of Law as “threshold,” see Secor 48-50.

⁴¹ Concerning the government’s use of the media to form public opinion, Ballengee writes, “Political regimes have also learned to use the news media, to great effect, in disseminating messages to the public—or, in the case of extremist or terrorist groups, to promote awareness of a particular cause. As groups vie for media time and attention, statements and images have become increasingly striking and often shocking. In recent years, we have seen increasing instances of torture, especially, staged before television cameras or news reporters in order to convey a message of power or intimidation” (130).

fail to send a particular or defined message.⁴² Ballengee's discussion of this point warrants an extended quote:

In sum, the sense of certainty conveyed by torture and its representation covers over the slipperiness of its message—the fact that it communicates either too little (since communication breaks down at the level of the materiality of the body) or too much (since the destructive quality of pain and the polysemy of the image may produce a range of possible meanings). This polysemy gives torture its unique rhetorical potential: the audience's response—illogical, empathetic, immediate—feels certain, yet that certainty or authority can be guided in a number of directions by the rhetorician, since the various elements involved in the representation of torture actually resist determinable meaning. (9)

The polysemy of torture reveals the importance of the witnessing audience since it is the witness herself, not the victim, who plays the final role in giving meaning to torture. In order to produce a determinate meaning, torture, and the scars it leaves, must become a public spectacle performed before a witnessing audience. To create the desired effect, “the mutilated body must be presented before an other or others; the ‘effectiveness’ of the torture depends, in part, upon the one who sees the inscription of pain upon the body and responds to it” (Ballengee 6-7). The witness then becomes “the key element in the ‘successful’ practice of torture in its political province” and remains fundamentally “complicit in the production of meaning that torture communicates” (Ballengee 1). Her conclusion bears remarkable similarity to Parry's suggestion that torture extends beyond the tortured/torturer binary to include the entire country. If it is true that torture relies more on “escalation” and the threat of pain than on pain itself—especially when “it operates against a background (or threatened background) of total control and potential

⁴² Regarding the polysemy of torture, Ballengee argues that torture and its representations “create uniquely fertile rhetorical situations because they combine three factors—the body, pain, and the image—that all *resist* linguistic signification” (7). We should note, however, that such a way of describing this difficulty, however, falls prey to the same dualistic conceptions of language which I presented in the Introduction. In other words, to suggest that these experiences “resist linguistic signification” forces them into a realm outside of language and renders them “unspeakable.” For an in-depth analysis of precisely how Ballengee understands their resistance to linguistic representation, see Ballengee 7-9.

escalation” (Parry 205)—then it is possible to see how the witnessing audience becomes the ultimate target of torture. As witnesses to torture, citizens learn “that progressively more painful treatment” is indeed possible (Parry 205), they become aware of the state’s ability to implement pain, and thus the state can insure the continued functioning of escalation and the “logic of consent” (Parry 205). The witnessing audience becomes complicit in torture precisely to the extent that they learn what will happen if they “choose” not to confess.⁴³ This was certainly the case in Guatemala, where torture and violence had become so commonplace that any violence on the part of the state seemed possible.

But who are the witnesses to torture? How does the perceived possibility of torture reach public, everyday spaces? After all, contemporary practices of torture are usually performed in secret, away from the prying eyes of citizens and the media. Kahn addresses the presumed “secrecy” of torture in his study on torture and terror. He agrees that several aspects of torture—including its visibility—have shifted over the past few centuries, and he outlines these changes in his study. Several centuries ago, he argues, torture was a public spectacle carried out for the goals of not only religious and political confession, but also terror.⁴⁴ As Kahn writes, “the sovereign deployed torture to instill a kind of terror. Statecraft rested on the production of terror, not consent. This was the age

⁴³ Because of the role of the witness in the production of meaning, torture and its representations offer insights into the workings of state power. Drawing on Foucault, Ballengee argues:

[T]he power of the state may be ‘written’ without words on the bodies of soldiers, prisoners, or civilians in the display of strategically placed bruises, wounds, and mutilations. In a manner similar to the public execution, torture—or the results of torture—presented to the public can convey an unspoken message for the regime that inflicts it. (Ballengee 5-6)

Later in this chapter, I will explore the particular nature of this “unspoken message” in Guatemala and the strategies employed by the Guatemalan state for spreading its message throughout society

⁴⁴ According to Kahn, it undoubtedly true that “the scaffold was the site of a kind of passion play whose end was the confession of faith” (25). But the prisoner’s confession, he suggests, not only established guilt, but also recognized and reinforced the power of the sovereign (23).

of the spectacle of the scaffold” (23). Eventually, as argued most famously by Michel Foucault, the scaffold was replaced with the modern penitentiary, with a corresponding substitution of pain with reform.⁴⁵

Since contemporary criminal justice systems no longer relied on the need for confession or the legitimization of violence as power, one might assume that there was no longer a need for torture. On the contrary, as Kahn asserts, the place of torture shifted. Even though criminal procedure had begun to doubt “the epistemic value of torture” (Kahn 2) and its relationship to public admissions of guilt, torture did not disappear entirely. Rather, contemporary practices of torture became more secretive. Kahn acknowledges this, noting that contemporary practices of torture occur “in places closed to public regard, under conditions of deniability, and by agents whose relationship to the state is likely to be ‘shadowy.’ The modern phenomenon of torture has the opaque presence of the ‘deniable’” (3). According to Kahn, however, though it is true that torture became “more secretive and hidden” (3), its use still had to become “known” in public. Narratives of torture must eventually reach the public in order to produce the terror necessary to strengthen the state’s hold on the population. Witnesses are fundamentally necessary to the workings of escalation and consent (Parry). And thus according to Kahn, there will always be some method by which the public can gain knowledge of the “deniable” acts of torture. As Kahn writes, torture “must be known but not seen; it must

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* remains one of the most cited books in discussing the relationship between power and the public display of torture. He writes, “The scaffold where the body of the tortured criminal had been exposed to the ritually manifested force of the sovereign, the punitive theatre in which the representation of punishment was permanently available to the social body, was replaced by a great enclosed, complex and hierarchized structure that was integrated into the very body of the state apparatus” (116-17). Foucault asserts that the spectacle of torture soon disappeared from public space. Power instead began to be concentrated in the hands of an administrative apparatus whose principles—the distribution of individuals in space and the absolute control of their activities—literally produced “docile bodies” that could be reintroduced into society (*Discipline and Punish* 130-131).

be spoken of but never speak itself. It is a political practice that cannot exist in public space. Nevertheless, to be effective the threat of torture must taint the public space. It is always just beyond view” (Kahn 3). In other words, there will always be a means of determining the extent to which countries still employ torture, even if those countries later deny those practices as aberrations.

Massacres: The Public Spectacle of Torture in Guatemala

The enemy is not destroyed in battle. You win over him by destroying his mind, his intelligence, and his will. (Military poster, Petén⁴⁶)

In a reality that has turned threatening, the boundaries between the real and the imagined are grossly distorted. (Never Again 11)

In Guatemala, this “tainting” of public space occurred in many different forms. It is certainly true, as noted above, that contemporary practices of torture have become more secretive and hidden, occurring “in places closed to public regard, under conditions of deniability, and by agents whose relationship to the state is likely to be ‘shadowy’” (Kahn 3). And though in other countries it might be difficult to analyze the precise means by which these “deniable” acts became public knowledge, this is not the case in Guatemala. Indeed, there is one key factor that comes to bear on our discussion of torture and that distinguishes the Guatemalan situation from what occurred in many other countries: the massacres.⁴⁷ An analysis of the numerous massacres in Guatemala will reveal not only that they served as a form of public, collective torture, but also how this public spectacle succeeded in disseminating the state’s message of fear.

The Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) indicates that there is evidence of 626 massacres in Guatemala that can be attributed to the Guatemalan military and security forces (CEH 3064).⁴⁸ The CEH defines a massacre as follows: “la

⁴⁶ Qtd. in Perera 52. Perera does not provide a date for the poster.

⁴⁷ I do not mean to suggest that state use of massacres was limited to Guatemala. The history of Latin America is replete with examples of violence on a massive scale. Consider, for example, the massacres in Tlatelolco (Mexico) and El Mozote (El Salvador). However, during the 1970s and 1980s – the period in which many other countries (such as Argentina and Chile) suffered similar wars – no other country experienced massacres on comparable scale.

⁴⁸ REMHI describes the general characteristics of the massacres as follows:

Las características generales de esas masacres fueron: 1) se desarrollaron en las zonas ‘rojas’ en las que el Ejército consideraba que la población estaba con la guerrilla; 2) en lugares donde no

ejecución arbitraria de más de cinco personas, realizada en un mismo lugar y como parte de un mismo operativo, cuando las víctimas se encontraban en un estado de indefensión absoluta o relativa” (“the arbitrary execution of more than five people, carried out in a single place and as part of a single operation, when the victims found themselves in a state of absolute or relative defenselessness” [CEH 3058]).⁴⁹ Though more than more than 95% of those 626 massacres occurred between 1978 and 1984 (CEH 3080), they occurred throughout the entire armed conflict and represented “la expresión más concentrada de la fuerza represiva del Estado” (“the most concentrated expression of the repressive force of the State” [CEH 3077]).

For our purposes here, we must note that these massacres, in addition to mass destruction and the elimination of witnesses, also represent 45% of the cases of torture during the war (CEH 3077). REMHI, noting the frequency and cruelty of the massacres, also refers to them as “collective torture”; the massacres served as “un mecanismo de tortura colectiva para buscar delaciones e información sobre los movimientos de la guerrilla y destruir la integridad de las comunidades” (“a mechanism of collective torture for seeking denunciations and information about guerrilla movements and for destroying

había infraestructuras importantes o intereses económicos de los grupos dominantes que pudieran ser dañadas por acciones de destrucción masiva; 3) después de sucesivos intentos de controlar luchas campesinas o cambiar la actitud de la población; 4) conllevaban la decisión de destruir hasta las últimas posibilidades de rearticulación comunitaria para evitar el ‘rebrote’; 5) producían una enorme cantidad de muertos de todos los grupos de población, destrucción de aldeas enteras y desplazamientos masivos; 6) no siguieron un modelo fijo en las estrategias de destrucción masiva, sino que fueron cambiando en función de los objetivos prioritarios de control del territorio y de la población. (REMHI II 2)

In addition to these general characteristics, REMHI denotes a typology of massacres, dividing them into 4 categories: “Ataque masivo indiscriminado” (50.5%), “Castigo y terror” (23%), “Planificación de las atrocidades” (6%), and “Terror selectivo” (20%). For a more detailed description of these types, see REMHI II 23-26.

⁴⁹ For a treatment of REMHI’s definition of massacre and the criteria used in its analysis of the massacres, see REMHI II 3.

the integrity of the communities” [REMHI II 16]).⁵⁰ Thus here we see the immense importance of the massacres for understanding the rhetoric of torture in Guatemala. Not simply limited to the detention centers and other “places closed to public regard” (Kahn 3), torture in Guatemala also occurred in the plaza and in places open to public view where it could be performed before a witnessing audience.

In the majority of the cases, according to REMHI, the public acts of torture were brutal. They were mass killings “sin ninguna relación con obtención de información” (“without any relation to obtaining information” [REMHI II 56]). As already noted, torture is not a reliable form of obtaining information, and following the manuals distributed by the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, the State clearly used torture for purposes other than interrogation. As public spectacles, the massacres and acts of torture served the primary goal of being a “terror ejemplificante” (REMHI II 9). This terror “tuvo un efecto paralizante en los sobrevivientes” (“had a paralyzing effect on the survivors” [REMHI 56]). By paralyzing them—both the tortured and the witnesses to torture—these acts served to “violentar la conciencia de sus familias y comunidades” (“*violentar* the conscience of their families and communities” [REMHI II 57]).⁵¹ This notion of “violentar” can have numerous meanings, including “to embarrass,” “to distort,” and “to rape.” Thus we should draw attention to the fact that torture is not simply a physical violence, but that it leaves a lasting impact on the individual and collective psyche by distorting the consciences of citizens. Described by REMHI as “asesinatos colectivos asociados a destrucción comunitaria” (“collective murders associated with

⁵⁰ “Junto con la quema y destrucción de las casas, las torturas y atrocidades masivas cometidas (56%) y las capturas de la población (52%) fueron los elementos más frecuentes que aparecieron en más de la mitad de las masacres analizadas” (REMHI II 15).

⁵¹ For more details on the relation between torture and “terror ejemplificante,” see REMHI II 49-64.

communal destruction” [II 3]), the massacres served as psychic distortion for the purpose of breaking down the consciences of survivors. As noted above, understanding torture on the continuum of state violence means we must consider not only the implementation of severe pain, but also the means by which the state made its ability to inflict such pain known to the public (Parry). Hence Parry’s suggestion that torture extends beyond the tortured/torturer binary to include the entire country. If it is true that torture relies more on “escalation” and the threat of pain than on pain itself—especially when “it operates against a background (or threatened background) of total control and potential escalation” (Parry 205)—then it is possible to see how the massacres targeted not only the victims themselves, but also the wider public. As witnesses to torture, citizens learn “that progressively more painful treatment” is indeed possible (Parry 205). Massacre as collective torture thus serves as a visible spectacle for fracturing society and spreading terror throughout the country.

Moreover, these were not random killings, but rather a systematic attempt to “terminar totalmente con determinadas comunidades” (“completely eliminate specific communities” [REMHI II 6]). According to REMHI, they obeyed a logic developed by the state to target certain sectors of the population (REMHI II 5). Yet even though the massacres were not random, there was no way of knowing which communities had been selected for extermination or which one would be next. The element of surprise was a critical factor in the majority of the massacres (REMHI II 8). The impossibility of knowing if an attack would come contributed significantly to the military’s attempt to

spread fear. Increased uncertainty regarding the cause and reasons for the massacres exacerbated the terror and infected the entire social fabric.⁵²

The importance of this uncertainty is critical, for it bears directly on my examination of the ways in which the Guatemalan state employed torture as a means of blurring the boundaries between what was known and what was unknown. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that many people remained unaware of the exact nature of the massacres and the potential danger. Despite the very public nature of the massacres, in many cases the massacres often retained “the opaque presence of the ‘deniable’” (Kahn 3). Even though torture had become a public spectacle, the details of the many massacres were not disseminated in a reliable manner to many sectors of Guatemalan society. And thus the massacres maintained a “shadowy” aspect similar to more secretive practices of torture. REMHI, for example, notes that despite the imminence of danger, many people remained where they were and took no action to avoid the military. Various factors influenced this lack of response: “la dificultad de creer en lo que está sucediendo (*eso no puede pasar aquí*),” “la falta de información clara y concreta,” “la credibilidad de la fuente que transmite la amenaza,” and “la difusión de rumores contradictorios que quitan fuerza a la indicación de salir huyendo” (“the difficulty in believing what was happening (*that cannot happen here*),” “the lack of clear and concrete information,” “the credibility of the source who transmits the threat,” and “the diffusion of contradictory rumors that weakens any indication to run away fleeing”[REMHI II 8, n. 10). Though carried out in

⁵² One particularly disastrous effect was the relocation of survivors. In some cases, survivors fled the site of the massacre out of fear: “Después de la masacre lo más frecuente fue que la gente huyera (40%) como forma de defender su vida, ya fuera a la montaña, al exilio o a otra comunidad” (REMHI II 20). In other cases, the Guatemalan military relocated survivors by force into camps that were called “model villages.” As a part of the army’s “Poles of Development Plan,” these villages were established by the army and rigorously controlled. For more on the model villages and poles of development, see Cultural Survival (1988) and AVANSCO (1992).

public, the massacres continued to function as a practice that was only partially known and partially seen. We can now suggest two conclusions concerning torture's visibility during the armed conflict. First, we can acknowledge that in many areas of Guatemala, torture did exist in public space. The massacres demonstrate this clearly. Yet we can also propose, and this is the most disconcerting point, that despite its existence in public space, something prevented it from doing more than "tainting" the public space. That is, despite the seemingly public nature of torture, its existence in public remained somehow ephemeral and "always just beyond view" (Kahn 3). Diana Taylor refers to this blurring of the visible and the invisible as "percepticide" (123). Though Taylor's project examines torture and disappearance in Argentina, her analysis helps to shed light on the repercussions of the atrocities committed in Guatemala. Taylor argues that the result of spectacles of terror is often "percepticide," which she defines as the population's act of self-blinding. As people were abducted in broad daylight, many citizens covered their eyes and refused to see. The visible aspects of state violence were thereby rendered invisible. Perhaps even more so than in Argentina, particularly given the large number of public massacres, the displays of tortured bodies were unavoidably visible throughout Guatemala. However, because of the factors noted above, the people had been trained to look away and to ignore the spectacle. Thus their response to the torture was feigned blindness. In a sense, the spectacle of torture disappeared. This play between visibility and invisibility will be critical for exploring the problematic and seemingly impossible nature of witnessing to torture.

As already noted, the Guatemalan military carried out massacres as public acts of torture designed to exercise power through the perception of terror (REMHI) and

escalation (Parry). The impact of this terror fundamentally altered the social imaginary and “llegó a reestructurar el tejido social, incluso familiar, en base a los objetivos militares, para eliminar cualquier tipo de oposición” (“succeeded in restructuring the social fabric, including the family, based on the military’s objectives to eliminate any type of opposition” [REMHI II viii]). But more than simply scaring and silencing the Guatemalan people into submission, this cultural production of terror succeeding in enabling the military to dictate the real. Massacre as public torture was “a crime committed against the imagination” (Dorfman 8). The very public display of the massacres, when coupled with the uncertainty regarding the reasons for their occurrence, led to a breakdown of the boundaries between reality and unreality. In order to understand how this occurred, we must examine in greater detail the effects of the massacres on the vision of Guatemalan citizens. More specifically, we must note the ways in which the state was able to control who and what could appear in the public sphere. According to Judith Butler,

One way a hegemonic understanding of politics is achieved is through circumscribing what will and will not be admissible as part of the public sphere itself. [...] To produce what will constitute the public sphere, however, it is necessary to control the way in which people see, how they hear, what they see. The constraints are not only on content [...] but on what ‘can’ be heard, read, seen, felt, and known. The public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths. Our capacity to feel and to apprehend hangs in the balance. (*Precarious* xx-xxi)

By limiting what can appear in public, the state trains its citizens to see only that which is “given to be visible” (Taylor). Therefore, in addition to affecting its citizens’ sense perceptions, we begin to see how, in countries ruled by violence and fear, “the state becomes the arbiter of what is real and what is not” (Cavanaugh 55). Rather than set firm

boundaries between the two, “it is more profitable for the state to leave those boundaries confused and ambiguous. Ambiguity and unknowing create anxiety, which in turn creates the demand for order which the state provides” (Cavanaugh 55). In Guatemala, the real and unreal—as well as the citizen’s ability to discern and narrate them—remained purposefully unfixed, ultimately allowing the state to justify its own existence. But this was only possible through the manipulation of the visible and invisible aspects of the massacres. The state’s fragmentation of reality affected the ways in which citizens could describe and make sense of the acts of violence. By altering the citizens’ perceptions of the “real,” the state’s discursive power developed a contrived rhetoric that became part of the identity of the individual citizen. Regarding this ability to manipulate “reality,” Judith Butler writes, “The public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown. The limits of the sayable, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as visible actors” (xvii). In the state’s production of violence, it is precisely this dimension of the “sayable” that is in question. Indeed, the state’s control of the media and access to “official” and reliable information during the war only heightened feelings of uncertainty. The state’s goal was to confuse citizens—to blur the lines between the known and the unknown, the certain and the uncertain—in order to undermine their ability to talk about the violence of the war. Therefore, in addition to destroying the imaginative and epistemological capacities of the victim, massacre as collective torture ultimately succeeds in problematizing the witnessing audience.

To see more precisely how this happens, we must return to Scarry’s description of torture, specifically regarding what is lost during the torture session. According to Scarry,

the most lasting effect of torture is the conversion of the prisoner's own body into an agent of pain. Each experience of the tortured and every object encountered become a means of turning the prisoner's body against itself, "forcing the body to feed on the body" (48).⁵³ This feeding on the body forces a divide between "self" and "body" (Scarry 49). As already noted, this breakdown results in social rejection and the inability to participate in the life of the community.⁵⁴ Yet I would suggest that the most insidious effect of this process is not merely the dismantling of social bodies, but rather the conversion of the tortured into other. The fragmentation of the tortured is explored in depth by Cavanaugh. He writes, "The feeling and reality of powerlessness in torture is so extreme that the subject is no longer subject but mere object. The ego is dissolved because it cannot sustain the processes necessary for self-preservation. In fact, death, the very negation of ego, becomes desirable" (40). This desire for death reveals the profundity of the fragmentation.⁵⁵ The ontological split into self and body often forces the prisoner to "renounce her psychological integrity as a coping mechanism, such that her words become those of another, dissociated from her self" (Cavanaugh 40). Indeed, torture victims become so fragmented that they are often incapable of narrating their experience afterwards (Lira). There is evidence to suggest, then, that one of the goals of

⁵³ Scarry explains, "the eyes are only access points for scorching light, the ears for brutal noises; eating, the act at once so incredible and so simple in which the world is literally taken into the body, is replaced by rituals of starvation involving either no food or food that nauseates; taste and smell, two whole sensory modes that have emerged to watch over the entry of the world into the body, are systematically abused with burns and cuts to the inside of nose and mouth, and with bug-infested or putrefying substances; normal needs like excretion and special wants like sexuality are made ongoing sources of outrage and repulsion" (48). This "turning" of the body back onto the body is also explored by Butler throughout her *Psychic Life of Power* (see especially her discussions of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Althusser).

⁵⁴ As I argue above, the society imagined by the torturer and the state – in which the prisoner is isolated and fragmented as a monad – is then reproduced once the prisoner is freed, resulting in the destruction of interpersonal relationships and the dismantling of social bodies. According to Elizabeth Lira and Eugenia Weinstein, psychologists who work with victims of torture in Chile, "The most important psychosocial damage that torture generates consists in the destruction or deterioration of collective links" (qtd in Cavanaugh 44-45).

⁵⁵ For more on the process of disintegration of the prisoner, see Lira and Weinstein "La tortura."

torture is to render it “unspeakable” (Cavanaugh 40). Cavanaugh comments on this fact, noting how “[t]he experiences are remembered vaguely, as those of another, repressed into a hidden corner of the fragmented self” (Cavanaugh 40). Because the experiences are repressed and rendered unspeakable, witnessing to those experiences becomes highly problematized. How does one bear witness to experiences of massacre or torture if these events occur at the “limits of the sayable” (Butler xvii)? How does one bear witness to what really happened during the armed conflict if the state has become the arbiter of what can be said and what can be shown (Butler xvii)?

The rendering of torture as “unspeakable” and the fragmentation of the tortured reveal not only the loss of the ability to narrate the act of torture, but also the inability to counter-imagine the state’s project. This inability to produce imaginatively an alternative to the state’s “rhetoric of torture” (Ballengee) brings about a corresponding ambivalence regarding the future of the self and society. This ambivalent relationship between citizens and the state is treated at length by Judith Butler in her book *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). In that work, Butler seeks to give “insight into how the boundaries of the social are instituted and maintained, not only at the expense of psychic life, but through binding psychic life into forms of melancholic ambivalence” (167-68). Butler’s argument draws heavily on Freud’s theories regarding melancholy:

Melancholia describes a process by which an originally external object is lost, or an ideal is lost, and the refusal to break the attachment to such an object or ideal leads to the withdrawal of the object into the ego, the replacement of the object by the ego, and the setting up of an inner world in which a critical agency is split off from the ego and proceeds to take the ego as its object. (*Psychic Life* 179)

Unlike mourning, in which the object can be declared lost, melancholia is the result of the loss of a loss: “the object is not only lost, but that loss itself is lost” (*Psychic Life* 183).

Because the loss cannot be recognized, the melancholic person will declare, “I have lost nothing” (*Psychic Life* 183). Such “unavowable loss” (*Psychic Life* 170) limits the melancholic’s ability to speak, producing an “unspeakability and unrepresentability” that hinders the process of grieving (*Psychic Life* 183).

The crux of Butler’s argument, for our purposes here, is her assertion that within a given society, “forms of social power emerge that regulate what losses will and will not be grieved” (*Psychic Life* 183). Its manipulation of the real and the unreal allows the state to control what can be perceived as a loss. Thus in regulating, and often impeding, the processes of mourning, the Guatemalan state plays a fundamental role in the formation of the subject. Its active participation in the formation of the super-ego—the “critical agency” of the individual—reveals a breakdown in what we typically consider to be a separation between the public and the private. Butler writes,

The ‘critical agency’ of the melancholic is at once a social and psychic instrument. This super-egoic conscience is not simply analogous to the state’s military power over its citizenry; the state cultivates melancholia among its citizenry precisely as a way of dissimulating and displacing its own ideal authority. This is not to suggest that conscience is a simple instantiation of the state; on the contrary, it is the vanishing point of the state’s authority, its psychic idealization, and, in that sense, its disappearance as an external object. The process of forming the subject is a process of rendering the terrorizing power of the state invisible—and effective—as the ideality of conscience. (*Psychic Life* 190-91)

The resulting confusion regarding whom to trust and what to believe produces a strong ambivalence with respect not only to the state, but to life itself. Perera suggests that in Guatemala this ambivalence is termed popularly as “*mala saña*,” which includes the “acceptance of the blackest proclivities in human nature [...] coupled with a brand of machismo that consists in going about your daily business unflinching and unmoved as the bullets fly about you and the country’s elite annihilate one another” (44). Butler

describes this same basic state as the “struggle that loss occasions between the desire to live and the desire to die” (*Psychic Life* 193). This confusion, she argues, may very well culminate in the desire for subjection at the hands of the state (*Psychic Life* 79), thereby rendering denunciation and counter-memory impossible.

The massacres carried out by the military produced a very particular meaning for the tortured body in Guatemala. Even though torture is by nature polysemic, we can now see the ways in which the state employed collective torture as a means of subduing possible witnesses and dismantling social bodies. Within the state’s strategic production of terror, these “docile bodies” (Foucault, Ballengee) aided in the production of fear and ambivalence. The critical question then becomes precisely how the regime’s message was disseminated throughout society. If it is true that the massacres obeyed a logic developed by the state to create “una forma de no dejar testigos de los hechos” (“a means of not leaving any witnesses to the events” [REMHI II 5]), how did the terror spread? If the goal was to leave no witnesses, how do we account for the rampant terror? In order to answer these questions, we must now turn to an examination of the phenomenon of rumor.

Rumors and the Specter of Torture

*The army wants the people to give them information that is untrue. The only thing that matters is that the people will say whatever the army wants them to say.*⁵⁶

Victor Perera offers the following analogy for Guatemalan state violence: you cannot kill a hundred birds with one stone, but you can easily kill one and scare the others away (47). In the words of Perera, you can “frighten them into silence” (47). Even when there were survivors of the massacres, the idea of denouncing the violence was unthinkable. As Perera observes, “Too many Guatemalans have become silent accomplices to terror. The difference between them and the ‘good Germans’ of World War II is that a Guatemalan *knows* the mere act of witnessing can cost you your life” (44). Though that is certainly true, we must acknowledge the fact that people did talk about the violence. Hence it is clear that the Guatemalan response was not total silence, but rather apparent silence. Though many people were unwilling to denounce the military publicly out of fear of retaliation, this did not preclude them from spreading rumors about what they seemingly “knew” and what they had heard. After all, the massacres were carried out in public. In some cases, there were survivors who were able to speak of what they had seen (REMHI; CEH). In other cases, village inhabitants were away when the massacres occurred and, upon returning to the village, they discovered the bodies of those who had been killed (REMHI).⁵⁷ Therefore, though REMHI suggests that one of the goals of the massacres was to leave no witnesses (REMHI II 5), it would be more

⁵⁶ Quoted in Sanford 180.

⁵⁷ Indeed, the public display of tortured bodies was a common sight during the war. Yet even when the bodies of loved ones were found, it was not always possible to mourn them according to custom. In some cases, “los cuerpos de las víctimas quedaron calcinados en las casas o fueron comidos por los animales. Sólo en contadas ocasiones pudieron ser enterrados por los sobrevivientes” (REMHI II 18). This impossibility of mourning will be an important theme throughout the present study.

appropriate to say that the goal was to problematize the notion of witness. By carrying out the massacres in public, the state created numerous opportunities for citizens to see the tortured body. By bringing the tortured bodies out of their shadowy confines of the detention centers and displaying them openly in the town plaza, the state managed to increase the production of rumors. As noted above, in order for escalation and the “logic of consent” to function, it was necessary to establish that “more and greater pain” was possible (Parry 205). If it is only “by means of the response of the witness to torture that torture conveys its message” (Ballengee 10), then we must concede the possibility that massacres create opportunities for witnessing and speaking about torture. The massacres, precisely because of their confusion of the boundaries between public and private, allowed torture to become a practice that haunted the social sphere.

In this section I will examine the notion of rumor and explore its implications for the diffusion of terror. More specifically, I will argue that the spreading of rumors, rather than allowing citizens an opportunity to work through their trauma and make sense of the violence, instead succeeds in furthering the state’s “terror ejemplificante” (REMHI II 9). The diffusion of rumors actually participates in the narrative of the state in several ways. Not only does it “establish a background (or threatened background) of total control and potential escalation” (Parry 205), it also perpetuates the blurring of the real and the unreal. As I will suggest, through rumor, massacre as collective torture becomes ghostly, haunting the psyches of Guatemalan citizens who never knew exactly what was happening. In order to see how this happened, we must draw attention to two important aspects of rumor in Guatemala. First, we must note the nature of rumor in general and discern how rumors would have been transmitted during a situation of such extreme

violence. And second, we must note more specifically the relationship between rumor and torture in Guatemala, highlighting especially what I will describe as the state's "rhetoric of fear."

Regarding the first aspect of rumor, we must stress that the very nature of rumor itself raises doubt concerning its reliability. In their study *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (2007), DiFonzo and Bordia define rumors as "unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk" (13). More than anything else, rumor concerns information that is not only "unverified," but also extremely important or "relevant." When official or formal information is unavailable, no matter the reasons for its absence, people compensate for such a lack through unofficial means. Rumor is therefore a process that is social and communal in nature (DiFonzo and Bordia 13).⁵⁸ It is a means for society to attempt to make sense of what is generally unknown.

During the Internal Armed Conflict, stories of violence paralyzed people through the resulting fear and confusion that the stories themselves created. Lack of access to verifiable information about what was really occurring in the country raised major uncertainties regarding the precise details and scope of the violence, including doubt concerning the perpetrators or agents of the violence. Many "knew" of the general acts of violence: "We all knew that civilians who went in there never left, or if they did, they were dead" (qtd in Sanford 124). In fact, numerous statements made by witnesses concerning the atrocities include similar statements: "We all knew..." Though many

⁵⁸ DiFonzo and Bordia are not alone in proposing a conception of rumor as compensation for lack of official discourse. See also Shibusani (1966) and Bauer and Gleicher (1953).

remained uncertain as to the details of the violence or the reasons behind it, the diffusion of rumors provided a means for people to gather glimpses of what was going on. But they were only glimpses, partial views of the real nature of the massacres. Hence we must draw attention to the uncertainty that is characteristic of rumor. Though it is true that rumors, regardless of their content, “allow human beings to cope with the uncertainties of life” (Rosnow and Fine 12), that does not mean that such coping erases uncertainty. Rumor does not produce certainty. Indeed, there are many situations in which rumors will become not only unreliable and unverifiable, but purposefully and necessarily untrue.

H. Taylor Buckner, in his “Theory of Rumor Transmission” (1965), attempts to answer the question of whether rumors become more or less accurate as they are passed on. In that essay, he notes that even those who are “careful and assiduous” in their readings of major studies of rumor transmission will “finish knowing neither whether rumors expand or contract, nor whether they become more or less accurate” (54). Indeed, he argues that the most important studies come to apparently “contradictory conclusions” (54). This leads him to propose that the truthfulness of a rumor remains unimportant in studying its transmission (55). Much more important in assessing the phenomenon of rumor is the fact that it is unconfirmed and nevertheless transmitted. What he seeks to explain more specifically is the factors that govern transmission, not only whether the rumor is passed on, but also how and to what extent it may be modified. This bears greatly on our discussion of rumor in Guatemala, and grants us insight into the possible mechanisms of rumor transmission during the war.

In order to determine a theory of rumor transmission, Buckner focuses his analysis on the orientation or situation of the individual who transmits the rumor,

examining specifically whether the individual is able to respond critically or uncritically to the rumor in question.⁵⁹ A “critical” response generally implies a previous knowledge regarding the rumor, either because the individual has experience with the subject matter or situation, or because the source of the rumor can be determined to be reliable based on past experience (Buckner 55-56). Given the above discussion of what was going on in Guatemala, very few people would have been able to exercise a critical ability regarding the rumors about the massacres. Indeed, it seems unlikely that citizens would have been able to discern the relevant from the irrelevant or “detect misinformation in the rumor and eliminate it” (Buckner 56). For our purposes here, this means that as the rumors spread, it is highly doubtful that they would have become more accurate. On the contrary, it seems more likely that citizens would have responded uncritically to the rumors about torture and massacre. Regarding the “uncritical set,” Buckner notes that “[c]ertain circumstances and emotions hamper or eliminate the possibility of exercising critical ability” (57). Fear, for example, especially a fear for one’s life, hampers this ability. Moreover, in situations in which the individual has no “advance knowledge” of the rumor, the surprise or unexpected nature of the rumor can also render the critical ability impotent, especially if the rumor concerns urgent action (Buckner 57). As indicated above, surprise was one of the key factors when the Guatemalan military carried out a massacre. The urgent action in such situations would have been to flee. But as REMHI discovered in its investigations, many people refused to flee (II 8). Buckner suggests that in these types of crisis situations where all are “interested and involved in the situation and seeking information,” it is possible for the “stable rumor channels” to be disrupted, which in turn

⁵⁹ Since the third orientation—“transmission set”—occurs only in laboratory experiments, I will focus only on Buckner’s treatment of the first two orientations: “critical set” and “uncritical set” (Buckner 55-57).

creates further confusion and makes it more difficult to determine the reliability of the rumor transmitter (57). Furthermore, in situations that are both uncertain and urgent, there often arises a “temporary lowering of critical standards until reliable information becomes available”, thereby increasing the likelihood of transmitting unverifiable information (Buckner 57). In such cases in which a critical ability cannot be exercised, the individual will either “speculate on the meaning of the rumor to fit it into his framework of ideas, prejudices, and attitudes,” “modify the rumor to give it a better Gestalt, to achieve a sense of closure,” “come up with an idiosyncratic version of the meaning of the rumor, which he then passes on,” “distort the rumor in a rational or non-rational direction, depending at least in part on his own psychic needs,” or “come up with an original message that seems to describe the situation” (Buckner 58). When considering the uncritical set, we see not only how the question of veracity or truthfulness has become irrelevant; we also see that despite the lack of verifiability, there is little doubt that the rumor will be transmitted.

Having assessed the general nature of rumor transmission in Guatemala, two hypotheses emerge. First, the sheer urgency and lack of knowledge regarding the violence in Guatemala would have rendered all responses to be “uncritical,” to use the terminology of Buckner. In other words, setting aside for a moment our specific examination of torture, we can assert that in Guatemala rumor would have been transmitted uncritically and without regard to its veracity. Generally speaking, we can now see that “stable rumor channels” would have been disrupted, thereby creating further confusion and lowering the community’s critical standards. Second, we can also understand how rumor would not have been a reliable means of “making sense” of the

violence. On the contrary, it seems much more likely that the spreading of rumors would have rendered any “working through” impotent. It was not always the case that the people lacked information regarding the massacres. Rather, in many instances the rumors provided too much information by producing numerous and alternative versions of events. Perera confirms this, writing that “in the absence of a reliable press, every kidnapping and assassination acquires four or five interpretations: the official government version, the left-wing and right-wing versions, and the versions convenient to the various private sectors” (46). Because of the lack of reliable information, different versions of events created conflicting discourses that precluded the people from gaining perspective regarding the violence. It is certainly true that at times the rumors reaffirmed one another, gathering legitimization in their commonalities. However, as suggested by Perera, it was more often the case that the rumors clashed completely, foreclosing the possibility of arriving at a common ground. For example, according to REMHI, there were multiple cases where communities received “rumores contradictorios” regarding the massacres, resulting in an impaired ability to “salir huyendo” (“run away fleeing” [REMHI II 8]).

More often than not, the increased rumors actually contributed to and increased the citizens’ uncertainty regarding the violence. The proliferation of divergent stories challenged the possibility of arriving at a reliable version of events and succeeded only in further perturbing the recipient, who was laden with the task of deciphering some hidden truth. This anxiety of the unknown became one of the state’s most potent weapons during the conflict. In addition to further intensifying the state’s fragmentation of reality, it also encouraged the public proclamation of clichés and stereotypes cultivated in the social imagination. If, as Foucault suggests, power cannot be understood as the forces of the

state, but rather the multiplicity of discourses, then we must acknowledge the intimate relationship between rumors and the construction of those discourses. Power is not only an institution or structure, but rather a complex and strategic discursive force, omnipresent within society. The implication, of course, is that the people who participated in the rumor mill eventually became complicit in their own subjectivity. Through incessant repetition the voices of rumor were eventually transformed into a masked acceptance of the violence as characteristic of daily social life. The terror not only paralyzed and perturbed; it also became a part of the psyche of individual citizens.

This relationship to the formation of the psyche brings us to the second aspect of rumor: its specific relation to torture. As I have noted above, torture created a rupture within the psyche not only of those being tortured, but also of those witnessing the torture. Massacre as collective torture functioned in a similar fashion. As rumors about the massacres spread, so did the rupture. Following Kahn and his assessment of the relation between torture and sovereignty, narratives of torture must eventually reach the public in order to produce the terror necessary to strengthen the state's hold on the population. There will always be some means by which the public can still gain knowledge of the "deniable" acts of torture. Torture must be "known but not seen; it must be spoken of but never speak itself. It is a political practice that cannot exist in public space. Nevertheless, to be effective the threat of torture must taint the public space. It is always just beyond view" (Kahn 3). The same can be said of the massacres, as collective torture. Despite the fact that the massacres were ostensibly public, the uncertainty created by the proliferation of rumors meant that they remained "always just beyond view" (Kahn). In Guatemala, torture was no longer a private phenomenon, but neither was it a

public practice. Rather torture existed in a space that defied both; it “tainted” the public space. Torture thus came to exist in that blurred space that was both public and private, real and unreal, present and absent. It existed only in the “in-between.”

Employing Avery Gordon’s terminology, we can see how torture had become a “seething presence” (17) in Guatemalan society; torture was a ghost. Torture haunted society by challenging “the distinctions between the fictive and the factual, and between the imaginary and the real” (Gordon 14). Moreover, the proliferation of rumor allowed torture to blur received social, political, and epistemological boundaries. It existed only in that in-between space that defied standard dualistic conceptions of the social and the individual, the public and the private. Defying such categorizations, torture became one of those processes by which the “organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves” (Gordon 19). Through the proliferation of rumor and the constant disruption of the boundaries between the known and the unknown—between torture as public and torture as private, and between torture as presence and torture as absence—torture became a spectral presence that haunted the social sphere. Borrowing Gordon’s terminology, we can assert that the specter of torture was one of “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view” (Gordon xvi). Through rumor, the uncertainty of the spectacle of torture continued to be reenacted and re-performed even after the massacre had been carried out or the prisoner had been freed.

The proliferation of rumors thus allowed the destructive effects of torture to extend and infect the very fabric of society.

One result of the spectrality of Guatemalan torture was that the state further solidified its role as “the arbiter of what [was] real and what [was] not” (Cavanaugh 55). The real and unreal—as well as the citizen’s ability to discern and narrate them—remained purposefully unfixed. The resultant confusion and ambiguity allowed the state to justify its continued intervention. As I have suggested, the anxiety of the unknown created a psychological need to make sense of what cannot be officially “known.” But how does one “make sense” of torture? Torture—as a practice that blurs not only the boundaries of the private and the public, but also the very boundaries between the real and the unreal—corrupted the citizens’ ability to distinguish between the certain and the uncertain. As Weschler writes,

All torn and twisted and broken, with so much of the brokenness concentrated around this notion of knowledge, of *knowing*: ‘You can’t possibly know what it was like.’ ‘We didn’t know, we didn’t realize.’ The torturer’s ‘I know everything about you.’ The victim’s ‘I don’t even know what I said, what I did.’ (171)

This distortion of knowledge actually precludes any effort to make sense of torture. Indeed, not only does it not make sense, torture—and the terror it produces—“makes a mockery of sense-making” (Gordon 80). But it does so “not because terror is senseless but, on the contrary, because it is itself so involved with knowledge-making” (Gordon 80). The confusion between fact and fiction wreaked havoc on the social imaginations of citizens. Shifting continually between “unbelievable facts and potent fictions” (Gordon 80), the terror of torture “makes epistemological doubt itself a form of domination” (Gordon 80). Here we see the connection to my previous argument that torture actually creates truth (Kahn). Torture, as a very specific form of knowledge-making, produces a

form of understanding directly related to the ways in which we imagine political power. Torture is not merely a violation of the law, but rather a practice that reveals a more profound political phenomenon, in which the relationship between individual citizens and sovereign power is both imagined and revealed (Kahn 4).

Thus we can now see how the proliferation of rumors about torture helped render citizens complicit in what I call the state's "rhetoric of fear." By fragmenting the tortured and forcing her to become other, torture became a practice of individualization that had "the effect of disciplining the society into isolated monads easily made to serve the regime's purposes" (Cavanaugh 45). Both the tortured and those who spread rumors about the torture became "walking signifiers of the regime's power, spreading fear among others who might be tempted to defy the state" (Cavanaugh 45). As one witness to the massacres states, "Mataron a varios – mujeres embarazadas, ancianos, ancianas –, nadie vio exactamente cuántos eran, nadie contó por el miedo" ("They killed many – pregnant women, elderly men, elderly women –, nobody saw exactly how many there were, nobody counted out of fear" [REMHI II 4]). As the "haunting quality" of torture spread throughout society, fear impeded witness. Therefore, though I thoroughly agree with Dorman's assessment that torture not only corrupts "those directly involved in the terrible contact between two bodies," but also "corrupts the whole social fabric" (9), we must qualify his assertion that it does so by prescribing "a silencing of what has been happening between those two bodies" (9). After all, the proliferation of rumors was far from "silent," if by silence we mean the absence of speech. Rumors do not spread to the extent they did during the war without speech. And yet Dorfman is not the only critic to suggest the term "silent." As noted above, numerous other critics and authors in

Guatemala employed the adjective in their assessment of the violence.⁶⁰ Why is it that critics continue to employ the term “silent” to describe Guatemalans during the Armed Conflict? To answer this question, we must re-examine the relationship between the concepts of witness and silence.

⁶⁰ Others who employ the term “silence” are Victor Perera, Arturo Arias, Victor Montejo, Ricardo Falla, Victoria Sanford, and David Volpendesta, among others. In her examination of the exhumations of mass graves in Guatemala, Sanford acknowledges that these “silences” are not very silent:

The process of the exhumations also begs the question ‘how silent are silences?’ Mass graves of massacre victims are referred to as clandestine cemeteries. [...] These clandestine cemeteries were hidden in that they were silenced, but survivors, witnesses, and most community members know the locations of these graves. Thus, they are truly clandestine only in the official negation of their existence and the silence imposed on communities. (17)

Though Sanford poses the question about silence, she does not answer it, nor does she investigate the term itself in any depth.

Speaking “Silence”: Bearing Witness to the Impossibility of Bearing Witness

[I]t is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence. (Butler xvii-xix)

A tree, for example, is not just a tree. (Sanford 143)

To be sure, rumor about torture took many forms during the war; but none of them was “silence,” if by silence we mean the absence of speech. Nonetheless, there is something very attractive about the term that has continually warranted its use in various circles.⁶¹ Dorfman writes that torture “obliges us to be deaf and blind and mute. Or we could not go on living. With that incessant awareness of the incessant horror, we could not go on living” (Dorfman 9). However, it is contradictory to pair terms such as “deaf and blind and mute” with “incessant awareness” (Dorfman 9). If one is deaf, blind, and mute, how does he or she become incessantly aware? It is true that torture forces people “to make believe that nothing, in fact, has been happening, it necessitates that we lie to ourselves about what is being done not far from where we talk, while we munch a chocolate bar, smile at a lover, read a book, listen to a concerto, exercise in the morning” (Dorfman 9). But that is far different from suggesting it renders us “deaf and blind and mute.” Rather than speaking about torture in such terms, I suggest that it is much more theoretically fruitful to re-examine what we mean by “speech” or “vision.” Torture, by inhibiting and re-shaping the ability of both victim and witness to see, became “a crime against the imagination” (Dorfman 8). But it did so not by rendering the witness silent, but rather by normalizing torture and proliferating speech about it to the point that words

⁶¹ See my discussion above for a treatment of this attraction and what Loevlie calls the seductive appeal of the “Dream of Silence.”

no longer signified. As rumors of torture and massacre become part of everyday life, torture became the norm. It became accepted as a normal part of everyday life. Imre Kertész, a Hungarian concentration camp survivor who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002, writes about this notion of accepting violence, stating that what is new about Auschwitz is not mass murder,

sino la eliminación continua de seres humanos, practicada durante años y décadas de forma metódica, y convertida así en sistema mientras transcurren a su lado la vida normal y cotidiana, la educación de los hijos, los paseos amorosos, la hora con el médico, las ambiciones profesionales y otros deseos, los anhelos civiles, las melancolías crepusculares, el crecimiento, los éxitos o los fracasos, etcétera. Esto, sumado al hecho de habituarse a la situación, de acostumbrarse al miedo, junto con la resignación, la indiferencia y hasta el aburrimiento, es un invento nuevo e incluso muy reciente. Lo nuevo en él, para ser concreto, es lo siguiente: está aceptado. (Kertész)⁶²

As I have argued throughout this chapter, this “acceptance” of the violence—and of torture more specifically—is one of the defining qualities of the war in Guatemala. More than that, I would argue, the production of this “acceptance” can actually be seen as one of the state’s goals. The ways in which the massacres were carried out, the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the unreal and between the known and the unknown, the lack of official knowledge, and the state’s encouragement of rumors—especially if the information spread is “untrue” (Sanford 180)—all these factors indicate a strategy on the part of the state to defeat its enemy by “destroying his mind, his intelligence, and his will” (Military poster, Petén⁶³). This strategy trained the Guatemalan people to see torture as normal. Concerning the normalization of torture, the CEH concludes:

⁶² “but the continuous elimination of human beings carried out methodically for years and decades, and thus converted into a system in which, in the meantime, daily and quotidian life unfolds normally: children are educated, amorous walks taken, an hour with the doctor, professional ambitions and other desires, civil aspirations, crepuscular melancholy, success, failure, etc. This, in addition to the fact of getting used to the situation, accustomed to fear and resignation, indifference and even boredom, is a new and even very recent invention. What is new in it, to be precise, is the following: it is accepted.”

⁶³ Qtd. in Perera 52. Perera does not provide a date for the poster.

[E]l uso sistemático de la tortura implicó dos consecuencias colectivas fundamentales. En primer lugar, se formó y entrenó a expertos en las formas más eficientes y aberrantes de aplicar dolor sobre un ser humano para quebrarlo física y espiritualmente. En segundo lugar, la tortura se convirtió en algo ‘normal’ dentro del trabajo rutinario de las estructuras militares y policiales del Estado, sobre todo entre los integrantes de Inteligencia, tolerado por la sociedad y los funcionarios judiciales. (CEH 55)⁶⁴

As torture became a normal, everyday occurrence, a practice that was “tolerated” and accepted by society, it penetrated the recesses of the Guatemalan psyche and fragmented it.⁶⁵ Even those citizens who had not experienced torture directly felt its oblique presence. Masked behind the normalcy of everyday life, torture trafficked below the surface, “just beyond view.”

The uncertainties propagated by rumor not only blurred the boundaries between the real and the unreal, abrogating “our capacity to imagine” (Dorfman 8); they also blurred the boundaries between what we consider “speech” and what we consider “silence.” Indeed, throughout this study I will be investigating whether and to what extent speech and writing about torture can produce a form of silence. Is there such a thing as “literary silence” when speaking about torture? That is, despite the proliferation of narratives detailing the practices of torture, torture had become a phenomenon that in many ways defied language. If torture is polysemic and fails to send a particular or determinable meaning (Ballengee 9), then rumors of torture merely exacerbate that

⁶⁴ “The systematic use of torture implied two fundamental collective consequences. In the first place, it formed and trained experts in the most efficient and aberrant forms of applying pain to a human being in order to break him physically and spiritually. In the second place, torture became something “normal” within the routine work of the military and police structures of the State, above all among the members of the Intelligence, tolerated by society and the judicial employees.”

⁶⁵ Taussig discusses this same notion, referring to it as “the normality of the abnormal” (*Nervous System* 17). He describes the effect upon the psyche as a doubling “in which one moves in bursts between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into panic or shocked into disorientation by an event, a rumor, a sight, something said, or not said—something that even while it requires the normal in order to make its impact, destroys it” (*Nervous System* 18). The confusion between the normal and the abnormal parallels and supports my above discussion of the distortion between the certain and the uncertain, the known and the unknown.

failure, multiplying the possibilities of its message ad infinitum. Not only did practices like torture cease to signify; other everyday objects took on new and terrifying meanings. Torture—and the terror it produced—crept into the chains of signification of everyday life, converting everyday objects into objects of terror and violence. Everything became a potential weapon. Sanford writes,

This living memory of terror can reinvolve the physical and psychological pain of past acts of violence in unexpected moments. A tree, for example, is not just a tree. A river, not just a river. At a given moment, a tree is a reminder of the baby whose head was smashed against a tree by a soldier. The tree, and the memory of the baby it invokes, in turn reinvolve a chain of memories of terror, including witnessing the murder of a husband or brother who was tied to another tree and beaten to death—perhaps on the same day or perhaps years later. (143)

The fact that such incidences were common occurrences forced citizens to internalize this “living memory of terror” (143). Terror soon became “a part of the psyche and identity of the individual, the community, and the nation” (Sanford 146). In numerous cases, local citizens were forced to participate themselves in the murders and massacres of other community members (CEH 50, 3068). According to the REMHI report, “Forced participation in atrocities meant that violence became the norm and its source was internalized; this redefined social values and the very meaning of community” (*Never Again* 23). Citizens could look at their own hands and know that they had been instruments of torture. The CEH suggests that this was one of “los daños más drásticos del enfrentamiento” (50). When not only trees but you yourself can invoke the memory of torture, then the state’s “rhetoric of fear” has succeeded. Normalized and omnipresent in the psyches of Guatemalan citizens, torture contaminated everything, not only language but life itself. To borrow Gordon’s terminology, everything “conjured” the ghosts of torture (22). Its spectral presence haunted the entire social sphere.

As I have argued, any examination of torture must acknowledge its rhetorical nature and the importance of the witnessing audience. Yet precisely because of the distortions and blurrings examined above, the narratives that people told—not only about the violence and torture, but also about themselves—were rendered problematic. To explore torture as a “ghostly haunt” (Gordon) necessarily involves a mediation between standard conceptions of fact and fiction.⁶⁶ As Gordon writes about sociology, its “dominant disciplinary methods and theoretical assumptions constantly struggle against the fictive” (25). By “fictive,” she means not only literature, but the complications bound up with social life: “the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence” (25). Such is the case in Guatemala. The narratives that Guatemalan citizens told (and continue to tell) about themselves and their suffering necessarily occupy an in-between space, a gap that defies and blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal. The “seething presence” of torture in language renders all speech problematic. If a “tree” is no longer a “tree,” but rather the “tree where a loved one was tortured and killed” then, linguistically speaking, torture infected not only everyday life, but also the chain of signifiers that governed the production of meaning. When torture corrupts and infects language itself, we begin to see the complications inherent in “witnessing” to torture.

Giorgio Agamben explores the paradoxical nature of bearing witness in his book *The Remnants of Auschwitz* (2002), noting the problematic nature of the term “witness.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ For a more sustained treatment of haunting as mediation, see my discussion of Gordon in the Introduction to the present study.

⁶⁷ Though being a witness can signify a third party who testifies at a trial (*testis*), in situations such as that of Guatemala, in which one acts as a witness to scenes of violence or torture, more often than not, that witness is a survivor (*superstes*) who “has lived something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it” (Agamben 17). For more on the nature of the term witness, see Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz*.

In Agamben's analysis, there is an aporia present in all cases of bearing witness, which reveals the general senselessness of bearing witness: "Those who have not lived through the experience will never know; those who have will never tell; not really, not completely.... The past belongs to the dead" (Elie Wiesel, qtd. in *Remnants* 33). In other words, in all cases of witnessing—not just bearing witness to torture—there will inevitably be gaps and aporias that cannot be "witnessed." In his analysis of Auschwitz, Agamben asserts that bearing witness remains an "ontological paradox" (*Remnants* 131). In order to acknowledge this paradox, we must understand that to bear witness faithfully means that language "must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness" (*Remnants* 39). Any testimony that seeks to explore the gaps and disjunctions of society must acknowledge the gaps. Faithful testimony, he concludes, must occur at "the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness" (39). Agamben calls this the "non-place of articulation" (*Remnants* 130). Borrowing from Agamben, we can see that in order to reflect the "ghostly haunts" of Guatemalan society, witnesses must learn to bear witness to their incapacity to speak. In order to bear witness to the "impossibility of bearing witness," their language must become a "non-language" (Agamben *Remnants* 39).

Writing "non-language," I would argue, is akin to writing silence. On the one hand, silence can be written as a semantic void, representing resistance through sheer survival. The mere existence of a non-speaking character in a text can be interpreted as evidence of the state's inability to disappear that person completely. Her bodily presence might therefore be understood to represent a haunting reminder of the limit of the state's power and, therefore, a potential form of resistance. On the other hand, it can be argued

that the idea of sheer survival—and the resultant conception of silence as semantic void—presents a problematic conception of the relationship between violence and language. Agamben explores this problematic, noting that over and against conceptions of sovereign power as “to make die” and biopower as “to make live,” the “most specific trait of twentieth-century biopolitics” is “to make survive” (155). In this sense, survival, even the survival of a victim or witness, can only partially be considered resistance, since sheer survival remains one of the ultimate goals of the state’s production of power. Just as subjects are constituted and produced through various structures of society, to survive is to be produced by the structures of power as a survivor. According to Agamben, “[b]iopower’s supreme ambition is to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, *zoē* and *bios*, the inhuman and the human—survival” (156). This separation corresponds to the ontological split described by Scarry. A person who merely survives—and who does not speak in the face of the atrocities—has become inhuman, thereby confirming the efficacy of the state’s program of desubjectification. This form of silence, more akin to a “semantic void,” can resist the structures of power only in an evidentiary function which participates in, and therefore threatens to repeat, the state’s project of silencing. I would assert that the situation in Guatemala reveals these strategies and that one of the key activities of the numerous military regimes is not the production of life or death, but rather “a mutable and virtually infinite survival” (Agamben 155) that remains ambivalent in its desire for subjection. By training the people to accept torture as normal, by confusing what was real with what was not, the state’s rhetoric of fear exercised a strict control over the citizens’ ability to mourn for those who had died. The acceptance of torture and death as normal, coupled with the

impossibility of witness, corrupted citizens' capacity to mourn for those who had been lost. Indeed, it affected their ability to recognize the loss itself. As Judith Butler suggests, the impossibility to mourn greatly affects one's ability to resist state violence. She writes, "it is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence" (Butler xvii-xix). It is this tangled relationship between torture, witness, language, mourning, and power which I seek to explore in the present study.

In what follows, I will examine the degrees to which Guatemalan authors explore the "unarchivability" of testimony and the role of the witness (Agamben 158).⁶⁸ To bear witness to torture, I suggest, is to attempt to speak a lacuna, to speak of those boundaries between the real and the unreal. Fiction allows us to explore this "unreality principle" (Gordon 81) in very fruitful ways. As Taussig confirms:

All societies live by fictions taken as real. What distinguishes cultures of terror is that the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise philosophical problem of representation—reality and illusion, certainty and doubt—becomes infinitely more than a 'merely' philosophical problem of epistemology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction. It becomes a high-powered medium of domination. (*Shamanism* 121).

As rumors proliferated and questions of representation ceased to be "a 'merely' philosophical problem" (Taussig, *Shamanism* 121), Guatemalan authors began to explore

⁶⁸ As Agamben writes, the true authority of witness depends not on a factual truth, a conformity between something said and a fact or between memory and what happened, but rather on the immemorial relation between the unsayable and the sayable, between the outside and the inside of language. *The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—that is, in his or her being a subject.* Testimony thus guarantees not the factual truth of the statement safeguarded in the archive, but rather its unarchivability, its exteriority with respect to the archive. (158, italics in original)

The distinction between the living being and the speaking being (and Agamben's use of testimony as a means of refusing to separate the two) presents a unique opportunity for examining the violence and repression in Guatemala.

these issues in literature. In order to explore this “impossibility of witness,” I will be examining literature produced during the war.

As the war progressed in Guatemala, authors sought in various ways to narrate torture inarticulately, to frustrate and distance the reader in such a way that they might bear witness to the “impossibility of bearing witness” (Agamben *Remnants* 39). Some authors, such as Rigoberta Menchú, denounce the violence of the war by narrating the violence almost mimetically, yet they allude to cultural secrets to which the reader does not have access.⁶⁹ Others, such as Arturo Arias and Marco Antonio Flores, play with language and the complexity of the text (e.g. multiple viewpoints, structural fragmentation, interior monologue, inverted chronologies) in order to involve the reader more actively in constructing the meaning of the text and challenge representation.⁷⁰ Still others, such as Rodrigo Rey Rosa, fragment their texts in such a way that the violence is not re-presented so much as it is re-staged and repeated within language itself. In each chapter of the present study, I will analyze the scenes of torture in the novel in question, examining its techniques for re-narrating the state’s practices during the war. Focusing specifically on the text’s rhetoric of torture and locating that rhetoric within the text as a whole, I will highlight two key factors: the relationship between the physical and linguistic components of torture and the certainty or doubt elicited by that relationship.

In the end, I will argue that any discourse that attempts to reveal and resist the atrocities carried out by the military regimes must not only be aware of the military’s rhetoric of fear—of the play between visibility and invisibility, reality and unreality; it must also employ the same tactics of play in its own narrative. In the same way that the

⁶⁹ I will discuss Rigoberta Menchú and the significance of *testimonio* in chapter two of the present study.

⁷⁰ In chapter three, I will analyze the Guatemalan new novel, focusing specifically on Arias’ *Después de las bombas* (1979) and Flores’ *Los compañeros* (1976).

regime's spectacles of violence were "given-to-be-invisible", only those authors who seek to bear witness to the "impossibility of bearing witness" (Agamben *Remnants* 39) can succeed in challenging the state's narrative and resisting its control of the socio-political imaginary.

Chapter Three: A Rhetoric of Certainty: Re-Presentations of Torture in *I, Rigoberta*

Menchú

[T]he uncertainty of the testimony produced by torture robes itself in the certainty of the experience of the physical body.⁷¹

When Rigoberta Menchú won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, the world turned its attention to questions of torture, violence, and human rights abuses in Guatemala. Her story quickly became known worldwide, captivating audiences with her denunciations of the atrocities of the war. By that time, however, her testimony *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) had already received ample attention in various circles and had alerted both scholars and activists to the plight of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala during the years of the Internal Armed Conflict.⁷² Menchú first started gaining international attention near the end of 1981. Having fled Guatemala the previous year in order to seek safety in Mexico, she was known then only as the daughter of Vicente Menchú, a Maya activist who had been killed on January 31, 1980 when the Guatemalan military destroyed the Spanish embassy during protests of human rights violations in the country (Arias, “Rigoberta” 5). In response to the escalation of the military’s counterinsurgency campaigns in 1980, many Guatemalans, including Menchú, fled to Mexico. Some of these refugees formed Guatemalan opposition groups that sought international recognition by launching a media campaign in which representatives “toured the United States and Europe in order to alert the world to the ruthlessness and viciousness of the Guatemalan regime” (Arias, “Rigoberta” 6).

⁷¹ Ballengee 8.

⁷² This text was originally published in Barcelona in 1983. Unless otherwise noted, throughout this chapter I will be citing from the English translation *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984).

Menchú quickly attracted the attention of numerous international audiences. Cécile Rousseau, a French-Canadian who was working with the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA), “first noticed her innate ability to tell a good story and seduce her audience” orally (Arias, “Rigoberta” 6). Given Menchú’s talent for narrating the events of her life, Rousseau then contacted Arturo Taracena, the representative for the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor—EGP) in France, to inform him that Elisabeth Burgos-Debray “was looking for someone with her characteristics to do an interview” for a project she was researching (Arias, “Rigoberta” 6). Though she was at first reluctant to interview Menchú, realizing that “such projects depend to a large extent on the quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee” (xiv) and recognizing that she had “never studied Maya-Quiché culture” and had never worked in Guatemala (xix), Burgos-Debray ultimately agreed to do so.

Menchú, it would seem, was also reluctant to speak to Burgos (Brittin 103), but Taracena and the Comité de Unidad Campesina (Committee for Campesino Unity—CUC) persuaded her to collaborate (Brittin 103). In January of 1982, Menchú was finally introduced to Burgos-Debray at her home in Paris (Burgos 54). Her presence there, according to Burgos, “had to do not with an anthropological project but with a political one” (54). The intention had been to produce and publish an interview with Menchú in order to inform public opinion regarding the abuses committed during the war, particularly those related to Guatemala’s indigenous communities. Nevertheless, Burgos-Debray soon realized that the project had developed into much more than that, and the

final text also included passages on “her customs, her vision of the world . . . , and, above all, her identity” (Burgos 56).⁷³

Since its publication in 1983, Menchú’s *testimonio* has sparked numerous debates worldwide. It continues to elicit dialogue and controversy today, not only on the general issues regarding the philosophical nature of representation, but also on the controversy surrounding Menchú’s narration of the specific acts of violence of the war (Stoll). Yet despite the thousands of pages published on Menchú’s *testimonio* over the last few decades, no study has drawn attention to the scenes of torture in the work and their significance in Menchú’s role as a witness to the atrocities of the war. In what follows, I argue that Menchú’s rhetoric of torture seeks to create an empathetic certainty in readers that will invoke a reaction against the violence of the state. Her descriptions are not a “horror story” (Craft); much less are they “hallucinatory” or “symbolic” (Beverley). Rather, I argue that Menchú’s rhetoric of torture relies heavily on the re-presentation of detail in order to convey a sense of certainty regarding the torture and death of her family. Emphasizing what was known and certain about torture, Menchú is able to cover over the “slipperiness” of torture’s meaning (Ballengee) and assign it a determinable signification. As I noted in the previous chapter, the polysemy of torture gives it a “unique rhetorical potential: the audience’s response—illogical, empathetic, immediate—feels certain, yet that certainty or authority can be guided in a number of directions by the rhetorician, since the various elements involved in the representation of torture actually resist determinable meaning” (Ballengee 9). The certainty created by Menchú is guided in one primary direction: to move international readers to action. But, as I will argue, she

⁷³ For a more detailed account of the process of developing the book, as well as the problems concerning representation, authorship, and royalties which arose after its publication, see Burgos 54-62. See also Arias, “Rigoberta” 5-7.

is only able to do this by focusing on the visible and verifiable aspects of torture, thereby producing a documentary-like assessment of the torture and death of her brother and mother. However, in order to address the specific details of Menchú's narration and their bearing on her rhetoric of torture, it is first necessary to address the numerous controversies surrounding the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, specifically the issues of representation and referentiality.

The Controversies Surrounding I, Rigoberta Menchú

Maybe the truth is unknowable, because the milieu is too ambiguous and fraught with repression to have confidence in any particular version.⁷⁴

The major controversies surrounding *I, Rigoberta Menchú* emerged following the publication of David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999), more than 15 years after the initial publication of Menchú's text.⁷⁵ Stoll's book is massive, treating not only the historical material covered in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, but also the events surrounding the book's "construction," her winning of the Nobel Prize, and the situation in the region of Chimal in the 1990s. But it was not the publication of the book that ignited what is now referred to simply as "The Controversy," but rather an article published by Larry Rohter on the front page of the *New York Times* on December 15, 1998.⁷⁶ In that article, Rohter's characterization of Stoll's findings made it seem as though Menchú was a liar (Rohter), something which Stoll never really charged, but which quickly became the international perception of Stoll's argument. Indeed, as Pratt affirms, "Many journalistic commentaries appear to be based not on a reading of the book at all but on media reports, or a look at the early chapters" (Pratt 38). Sklodowska confirms this, noting that the controversy was "impelled by ad hominem attacks and fraught with sensationalism" ("Poetics of Remembering" 251). Even before it was

⁷⁴ Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú* 63.

⁷⁵ Stoll's book presents the findings of his investigations for his doctoral dissertation in anthropology at Stanford University. The impact of Stoll's book has varied from discipline to discipline, depending on the focus of the investigation (i.e., studies of gender, investigations into subaltern studies, etc.). Because of the immensity of the text, I will be limiting myself to the controversies that bear directly on the question of torture and its representation.

⁷⁶ For an excellent and reasonably comprehensive treatment of the controversy, see *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001), edited by Arturo Arias. The edited volume contains over 30 essays and articles by prominent journalists, critics and scholars, including a previously unpublished article by Stoll.

officially released, Stoll's work became the focus of attention for a large international audience. The reactions among critics and journalists varied, and the ensuing "media barrage" (Pratt 29) spread rampantly as numerous periodicals covered the story on the front page of their publications.⁷⁷ Menchú's popularity—having won the Nobel Peace Prize less than seven years previously—demanded such a reaction, and the entire world read with rapt attention as the controversy unfolded. For Stoll's book was much more than simply an attack on Menchú's character; the political ramifications of Stoll's findings were also considerable. As Arias notes, because she was frequently the guest of numerous presidents and prime ministers, the controversy was "a source of concern not only to obscure academics, but also to heads of state themselves" (*The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* 52).⁷⁸ To understand the import of Stoll's text and its implication for reading the torture scenes in Menchú's *testimonio*, we must look more closely at "The Controversy," specifically the questions that arise concerning the historical accuracies of her testimony and the rhetorical strategies she employs to narrate the violence of the war.

The primary issue in the controversy concerns the historical accuracy of Menchú's narration. Stoll's investigation began "when a routine atrocity check ... failed to corroborate the immolation of her brother and other captives in the Chajul plaza" (Stoll 8). According to Menchú, her brother and numerous other captives had been burned alive in the Chajul plaza in September 1979. Stoll's investigations, however, soon revealed significant contradictions between Menchú's version of the violence in Chajul and that of her neighbors. Drawing on documentary evidence and human rights reports in order to

⁷⁷ For a summary of the reactions to Stoll's findings, see Arias, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* 51-57.

⁷⁸ Menchú was "on friendly terms with the president of France, who has given her the highest medal in his country, the king of Spain, the prime minister of Sweden, and the secretary-general of the United Nations" (Arias, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* 52). Hence the controversy was of great import politically as well.

demonstrate the extent to which Menchú falsified, or at the very least exaggerated, the torture and death of her brother Petrocinio, Stoll soon started to ask himself the question: “What if much of Rigoberta’s story is not true?” (viii). His *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* describes in great depth the contradictions he discovered and his attempt to wrestle with the implications of Menchú’s claims.

Yet even before the publication of David Stoll’s book in 1999, Menchú’s text had received critical attention from various sectors regarding the issue of representation.⁷⁹ Because of the highly controversial events surrounding its compilation, editing, and publication, it immediately drew fire, leading numerous critics to ask whether they were reading the words of Burgos-Debray or Menchú.⁸⁰ Burgos-Debray has been candid in acknowledging her role in the editing and compilation, the process of which she has had to defend repeatedly over the last few decades.⁸¹ Despite her assertions that she tried to remove herself from the text and allow it to stay in “the form of a monologue” (xx), she has been honest in describing her attempts to fix grammatical errors and to maintain the chronology of the narrative.⁸² Nevertheless, her frankness did not diminish the number of

⁷⁹ The secondary sources are vast and at times overwhelming, and I cannot hope to include an exhaustive discussion of those texts here. What follows is a summary of some of the most popular and most cited texts on Menchú as they pertain to my current project.

⁸⁰ Regarding the doubts over whether we are reading the words of Menchú or Burgos-Debray, Stoll writes, “As soon as the book appeared, skeptics wondered how an unschooled peasant, illiterate and monolingual until a few years before, could be so fluent with concepts like class, ethnicity, culture, identity, and revolution” (*Rigoberta Menchú* xiii). As I note below, Stoll later withdrew his critique after gaining access to the taped interviews.

⁸¹ For a discussion of Burgos-Debray’s role in preparing the text for publication, see her “Introduction” to the text. For a more extensive defense of her involvement in the production of the work and the controversies after its publication, see her “The Story of a Testimonio” (1999).

⁸² According to Menchú, she had only been speaking Spanish for three years when she first met with Burgos in 1982 and still committed numerous grammatical errors. Burgos-Debray corrected these mistakes, specifically “the gender mistakes which inevitably occur when someone had just learned to speak a foreign language. It would have been artificial to leave them uncorrected and it would have made Menchú look ‘picturesque’” (xx-xxi).

attacks, and until the publication of Stoll's book in 1999, the majority of the discussion surrounding Menchú's text concerned the questions of representation and mediation.

Such issues are not unique to this particular text. Indeed, the emergence of *testimonio* in Guatemala⁸³ reflected a wider trend across Latin America in the 1970s and 80s.⁸⁴ The widespread violence in Latin America during that time gave rise to the need to bear witness to the atrocities and make them known to international audiences. Hence the importance of the extraliterary elements involved in the construction of the text, and their relationship to debates concerning memory and social justice.⁸⁵ Indeed, it is clear that the *testimonios* that emerged in the 80s in Guatemala constitute responses to an extremely aggressive repression. The primary reason for their appearance during the war, of course,

⁸³ For a more complete list of the development of the testimonial tradition in Guatemala, see Zimmerman, "Testimonio in Guatemala." In that essay, he mentions two texts that emerged well before the 1980s: Manuel Galich's *Del pánico al ataque* (1949) and Rubén Barreda Avila's *Guaridas infernales* (1960), but the focus is upon those texts that emerged in the 1980s. In addition to Menchú's work, he also discusses several *testimonios* that emerged shortly before or just after the publication of Menchú's text, including Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán's *Son of Tecún Umán* (1981) and *Campesino* (1985), Miguel Ángel Albizures' *Tiempo de sudor y lucha* (1987), and Victor Monetjo's *Testimony* (1987). One of the most discussed *testimonios* from Guatemala, besides that of Menchú, is Mario Payeras' *Días de la selva* (1980).

⁸⁴ Despite the enormous popularity of *testimonio* and its general acceptance into the academic canon, this genre continues to escape easy definition or categorization (Pratt). The canonization of the genre became more clearly defined in 1970 when *Casa de las Américas* in Cuba first incorporated *testimonio* as one of the categories for their annual literary contest (Sklodowska, *Testimonio hispanoamericano* 55-68). Since then, however, there has been no lack of debate regarding the precise definitions and conceptions of this category of writing. The most widely cited definition of the genre comes from John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman. In their *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (1990), a text that more than twenty years after its publication continues to be one of the most popular studies on *testimonio*, the genre they define as follows:

The general form of the testimonio is a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode (e.g., the experience of being prisoner). Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a testimonio generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist. (173)

Despite the widespread acceptance of their definition, however, numerous critics continue to disagree, and some even question whether *testimonio* should be defined as a separate genre at all. As Pratt affirms, "we still lack well-developed theoretical frameworks for specifying what *testimonio* is, how it should be read, produced, taught" (42). The debates are thought-provoking and challenging, yet any attempt to proffer a "well-developed theoretical framework" would take me beyond the scope of the present study. Hence my analysis will focus less on the critical process and more on the textual product.

⁸⁵ Indeed, Nance suggests that *testimonio* "is not only a text. It is a project of social justice in which text is an instrument" (Nance 19).

was to make the violence perpetrated by the state visible to the world and thereby achieve a level of “denuncia política” (Lienhard 312). The linguistic roots of the term *testimonio* clearly indicate its relationship with testifying to, or being a witness to, the violence, and thereby to making it visible to the world outside Guatemala. According to Victor Perera, Guatemala’s civil war remains one of the most underreported conflicts of the 20th century. He suggests that after the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, “a curtain of silence descended over Guatemala. The country and its war . . . have remained largely invisible, even to North Americans who defy the State Department’s negative travel advisories and fly to the Mayan ruins of Tikal or visit the artisans’ markets of Atitlán and Chichicastenango” (11). The idea of “making visible” designates a political message and is clearly dependent upon a certain conception of the relationship between presence and absence. Regarding the issue of presence and absence in *testimonio*, Norma Klahn discusses the relationship between a novel’s anthropological and fictional elements in what she terms the “*ficción de lo verificable*” (“fiction of the verifiable” [241]). This type of fiction, of course, includes above all *testimonio*, the “*novela testimonio*” (to borrow the term employed by Miguel Barnet) and popular autobiographies. Klahn suggests that we must judge these works “no por su referencia sino por su presencia” (“not by their reference but rather by their presence” [241]). By this “presence,” she means the ways in which the literary freedoms of testimony can be employed to make the truth known to the reader. Her commentary merits attention when discussing the place and reputation of *testimonio* and truth in Guatemalan literature. The relation between reference and representation entails, more than anything, an investigation of presence, particularly a questioning of the presence of specific details and knowledge in the text.

This presence has great import in discussing the extraliterary dimensions of Menchú's text, for it can lead us to doubt the voice of the narrator. That is, who is narrating the events in question: Menchú or Burgos-Debray? Following Gayatri Spivak's now famous assertion that First World intellectuals often construct representations of the Other that continue the project of colonialism, many critics derided Burgos-Debray for her role in the compilation of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Advocates of the authenticity model of *testimonio*—which rejects “excessive editorial work as a subversion of the genre: it sullies the witness's ‘presence;’ it distorts *testimonio*'s ‘claim to the real’” (Brooks 182)—have repeatedly criticized Burgos-Debray with charges of ethnographic interference. Others, however, have defended Burgos-Debray, noting that she provided a means by which Menchú could speak out, “without at all undermining the ultimate authority of Menchú herself as a specially privileged subaltern who can indeed speak” (Zimmerman 55). Alice Brittin, one of the most ardent defenders of Burgos-Debray, argues that Menchú ultimately succeeds in speaking for herself. In her article “Close Encounters of the Third World Kind: Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*” (1995), Brittin concludes that “though Menchú's discourse was definitely mediated by Elisabeth Burgos, it would be misleading to say that it was either manipulated, exploited, or controlled by her” (104).⁸⁶ Citing an interview with Menchú that she and Kenya Dworkin published in 1993, Brittin reveals that Menchú and the CUC actually participated in editing the final transcription of the interviews and had

⁸⁶ To suggest that Menchú was manipulated by Burgos-Debray ignores the performative aspects of *testimonio* and the interview process in general. As Beverly and Zimmerman affirm, “In the creation of the testimonial text, control of representation does not flow one way: someone like Rigoberta Menchú is also in a sense manipulating and exploiting her interlocutor in order to have her story reach an international audience, something which, as a political activist, she sees in quite utilitarian terms” (Beverly and Zimmerman 177). For more on the performative aspects of *testimonio*, see my treatment of Brooks below.

the final say in what was published in the “finished product,” altering several passages and removing other ones entirely (Brittin 104).⁸⁷ Beverly remarks that, despite the role that Burgos-Debray played in editing and sometimes rearranging the chapters, there remains little doubt that “the individual diegetic units are wholly composed by Menchú, and depend on her narrative skills” (Beverly, 165-66, qtd in Zimmerman 57). Though Burgos-Debray has yet to publish the tapes of her interviews with Menchú, she has granted access to some critics, including Stoll. Notwithstanding minor corrections and organizational decisions, Stoll confirms that the published text was not altered significantly by Burgos-Debray. He writes:

Now that I have been able to listen to the eighteen hours, I am pleased to report that they bear out my earlier conclusion, as well as the most recent of Menchú’s own statements, that this is indeed her story. In view of Burgos’s explanation that she shifted Menchú’s episodes to maintain chronology, what most surprised me about the tapes is how closely Burgos ended up following them in the book. (“Interview” n. pag.)

Thus we can see that, even though the question of representation must be addressed, several scholars—including Stoll, who has been one of the most vocal critics—argue quite forcefully that what we have in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is indeed Menchú’s story. If

⁸⁷Even though an analysis of the role of the CUC in the process of compiling *I, Rigoberta Menchú* would lead us away from the focus of this chapter, it is, nonetheless, an interesting point of contention for some critics. The CUC emerged between 1976 and 1978 in response to the escalating violence against the indigenous populations of Guatemala. Jonas describes the CUC as “a national peasant organization, including both peasants and agricultural workers, both Indians and poor ladinos, but led primarily by Indians—almost by definition a ‘subversive’ organization, from the viewpoint of the ruling coalition” (127). Hence there is reason to suspect, as critics such as Dinesh D’Souza have, whether Menchú is merely “a mouthpiece for a sophisticated left-wing critique of Western society, all the more devastating because it issues not from a French scholar-activist but from a seemingly authentic Third World source” (D’Souza 72). Yet we must remember that Menchú was politically active long before her interview with Burgos-Debray, and while she may have been persuaded to carry out the interview, at no time has she given the impression that she was forced to do so. Menchú continually stresses her interest in producing the *testimonio*, stating that “it was very important to give this as a memory, and this idea was what most compelled me to do it, and I threw myself into the project with a lot of strong emotion” (Brittin and Dworkin, qtd in Brittin 105). In that same interview Menchú states that this desire to share her memory actually “determined the way in which the book was done” (Brittin and Dworkin, qtd in Brittin 105), thus reaffirming her own role in the editing and compilation of the text. For more details, see Brittin.

the notion of representation ceases to be a major issue, then we must return to the notion of referentiality, specifically the question posed earlier: are the specifics of Menchú's story as important as its foundations? What, if any, is the significance of Stoll's exposure of the contradictions in Menchú's narrative?⁸⁸

In order to explore the question of referentiality and historical inaccuracies, we must first briefly note the intended readership of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. After all, the questions of readership and audience directly relate to the composition of a text and the rhetorical devices employed. Zimmerman notes that the underlying purpose of the entire process of producing *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was influenced by "the clear political intent that her story reach millions who would otherwise not know of, or not experience through empathy, the moving events that emerge in the resulting text" (Zimmerman 56). Indeed, the fact that the text was first published in Barcelona (1983) and then translated into English the following year in New York and London indicates that the intended readership was the world beyond Guatemala's borders. Furthermore, because of

⁸⁸ Stoll is quick to point out that his argument is not limited to revealing historical inaccuracies about how Menchú's brother died, and that the contradictions of her narrative have more profound political consequences. More broadly conceived, his work had several goals:

to analyze how political violence reached Uspantán; to defy romantic prejudices about indigenous communities and guerrilla warfare; to prove that rebel movements originated in the urban middle class; to explain why they did not develop roots among indigenous peoples; and to analyze how the academic world constructs the sacred, to the detriment of the scientific spirit. (Fernández García 69).

Despite the fact that Stoll's book has received far more attention for pointing out historical inaccuracies than it has for anything else, Stoll suggested in the book itself that it would be a mistake to focus solely on what did or did not happen in Chimel. And he admits that "[t]here is no doubt about the most important points: that a dictatorship massacred thousands of indigenous peasants, that the victims included half of Rigoberta's immediate family, that she fled to Mexico to save her life, and that she joined a revolutionary movement to liberate her country" (viii). For Stoll, the central question is not so much the narrative truthfulness of her account, but her rationale concerning why the violence began in Chimel in the first place. At stake is less the historical accuracy than a more profound understanding of the nature of the violence. For Stoll, therefore, the most important point is to recognize why the violence was carried out in Chimel in order to see what is gained by Menchú's descriptions of the violence. My purposes here have a similar goal. My question is not about the historical inaccuracies themselves, but why Menchú felt the need to exaggerate in her account. That is, my focus is more on the rhetorical effect of those exaggerations than it is on the exaggerations themselves.

repression and censorship, the book was virtually impossible to find in Guatemala for nearly ten years after its publication. Thus there were multiple reasons that the initial readership was primarily foreign. The text did not reach a Latin American publisher until 1985 (Siglo XXI). Unlike the texts of major boom novelists whose translation into other languages, notably English, signaled their popularity and international acclaim as best-sellers, the early translation of Menchú's work into English reveals instead the "strategy to reach an international reading public with political clout who might express outrage when confronted with eyewitness accounts and with information regarding its own government's complicity in perpetuating the injustices" (Craft 46). Menchú was aware of the intended readership from the beginning, and this greatly affected her narration during the interviews. She had seen pamphlets about the lives and suffering of indigenous peoples in Latin America, and she did not want her story to be ignored. Regarding her experiences and the life of her community, Menchú asserts,

It's that it was going to make me enormously sad if that life ended up like any other pamphlet from Latin America, the way the lives of children, mothers, and old folks in Latin America have ended up. No one paid any attention to them. For me, it was very important to give this as a memory, and this idea was what most compelled me to do it, and I threw myself into the project with a lot of strong emotion. (Brittin and Dworkin, qtd in Brittin 105)

Her numerous dealings with international audiences had provided her with the experience necessary to craft her narrative in such a way that it would be rhetorically effective. Her goal was to make people pay attention.

Of course, the goal of reaching an international audience is not without complication. As Zimmerman notes, in the process of appealing to a primarily First World audience, Menchú "must choose which aspects of her culture she seeks to preserve, which to modify, transform, reject, which to stress at one moment, which to

stress at the next. By her life and narrative choices, she and her text come to embody this process” (69). In other words, she must determine what to disclose and what to keep secret. When considering the question of “secrets” within Menchú’s text, Doris Sommer’s article “Rigoberta’s Secrets” (1991) remains one of the most influential and most cited secondary texts on Menchú’s work.⁸⁹ In that article, Sommer marvels at the withholding of information in Menchú’s text and observes that her “refusal to tell secrets remains on the page after the editing is done” (32). For example, Menchú explains in her account, “I’m still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets” (247). Not only does there exist a “silence” in the text regarding certain aspects of her culture, but also that silence is spoken in order to maintain a distance between reader and writer.

Sommer examines these “secrets” in great detail. Drawing on Nietzsche’s treatment of the truth value of language and the rhetorical strategy of “troping” (36), Sommer notes that language “cannot absolutely affirm anything without acknowledging that any affirmation is based on a collective lie” (34). Because it remains impossible to determine any “categorical difference between one kind of writing and another” (33), readers must be aware that “the difference between truth and fiction, philosophy and literature, constatives and performatives, philosophical persuasion and literary troping is finally undecidable” (34). Hence Sommer concludes that Menchú’s strategy within the text must be more literary and rhetorical than it is “real” (36), suggesting that her refusal to divulge all of her secrets remains primarily “performative; it constructs metaleptically the apparent cause of the refusal: our craving to know. Before she denies us the

⁸⁹ For a contrasting interpretation of the secret in Menchú’s text, see Williams 95-97.

satisfaction of learning her secrets, we may not be aware of any desire to grasp them” (34). Furthermore, despite the aforementioned desire to cater to an international audience, “[t]he calculated result of Rigoberta’s gesture for sympathetic readers is, paradoxically, to exclude us from her circle of intimates” (36). According to Sommer, the goal of her “rather flamboyant refusal of information” (36) is to produce “a particular kind of distance akin to respect” in which readers are forced to acknowledge simply that “difference exists” and deter any “illusion of complete or stable knowledge” (36). In many cases, these secrets concern practices known only to the Quichés, such as ceremonies of birth, sowing, marriage, and death. In Menchú’s words, they are secrets that “no-one except we Indians must know” (13). Santiago Colás also notes this rhetorical use of distancing in the text, suggesting that Menchú employs a form of representation that purposefully dislocates and disjoins the “representative” and the “represented.”⁹⁰ Thus despite the convincing nature of Menchú’s voice and language, there is no desire to create an easy identification between reader and writer. According to Sommer, the “I” in Menchú’s text “neither presumes nor even invites us to identify with it. We are too foreign, and there is no pretense here of universal or essential human experience. That is why, at the end of a long narrative in which Rigoberta has told us so much, she reminds us that she has set limits which we must respect” (Sommer 39). Such a strategy frustrates the desires of readers who expect to come away from the text with a truth. As Zimmerman remarks, “our whole sense of truth becomes undermined and problematized,

⁹⁰ The relationship between distancing and representation is important. According to Colás, representation in Menchú’s text is an impossibility, a fiction that can only exist “to the extent that the transparency entailed by the concept is never achieved; and that a permanent dislocation exists between the representative and the represented” (Ernesto Lacau, qtd. in Colás 169). The dislocation is irreparable and prohibits “representative” access to Menchú’s history. This dislocation is what Doris Sommer refers to as Menchú’s “secrets.”

and there is nothing we can know with certainty” (Zimmerman 60). According to Zimmerman, the goal of this distancing is not, however, some “festishized privileging of ambiguity” (60), that is, a celebration of ambiguity and unknowing for the sake of philosophical abstraction. Rather, Menchú employs the rhetorical strategies of distancing and uncertainty in order to “protect the truth from distortion and manipulation” (Zimmerman 60). Having seen the ways in which international audiences manipulate and exploit the indigenous peoples of Latin America, Menchú chooses to keep her distance. We must ask ourselves, however, how Menchú hopes to reach an international audience and share her memory with readers (Brittin 105) if she continually distances them with her secrets. Are there other rhetorical strategies employed by Menchú that offset the secrets and their destabilization of the relationship between text and reader?⁹¹ Are there

⁹¹ Other critics have explored the destabilization between reader and writer. In addition to Sommer and Colás, Brooks argues that Burgos-Debray actually plays a strong role in fomenting that relationship, and points to the rhetorical strategies employed by Burgos-Debray in the introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Brooks proceeds to document those strategies, the goal of which was to stage that “trace of the real” and to produce “the sense (aesthetic and ideological) of the witness’s physical presence” (Brooks 187). Her interest is less in Rigoberta’s presence than in the strategies by which that presence was staged or performed. For example, in the introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Burgos-Debray describes in great detail the first time she met Menchú. Yet according to Brooks, this description is more “melodramatic scenario” than truth, and actually “has nothing to do with reality” (Brooks 188). Burgos-Debray’s first meeting with Menchú was actually very different from the scene described in the introduction (Brooks). Brooks argues that Burgos-Debray sought to portray the encounter with Menchú more literarily, as “the editor’s-first-encounter-with-the-Other,” a scenario that is found in numerous *testimonios*, not just *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. According to Brooks, in order to create the appropriate effect for the reader, this staged encounter is, and must always be, “calculatedly, and successfully, *unheimlich*” (Brooks 189). As Brooks remarks, “Menchú is certainly physically *there*. But her thereness, her ‘presence’ or ‘trace’ is generated not by mimesis—the journalistic imitation of ‘authentic reality’—but by poesis, by the mounting of a new, theatrical reality” (189). According to Brooks, this *unheimlich* presence becomes necessary when there is a presumed distance, particularly a sociocultural distance, between author and reader. According to Brooks, *testimonio* “is a performance-based, collaborative form of writing, grounded not in journalism or legal testimony but in *anthropology*—itself a collaborative, performance-based discipline” (182). Because of the performative nature of the genre, Brooks calls it “anthropological theatrics”:

The witness and the editor speak in words hidden from the reader/audience by a theatrical scrim or literary staging. As such, they cannot be taken at face value nor can the speaker be held responsible for them as fact-based or ‘serious’ statements. Rather than verifiable truth claims, the witness’s and editor’s words are *enactments* of broader truths—performances of the dialogical process by which truths originate. (Brooks 183)

other aspects of her text that make an identification between reader and writer more feasible?

I suggest that the answers to these questions can be found in Menchú's descriptions of her brother's and her mother's torture. At first sight, it would seem that Menchú's secretive privileging of the unknown and the uncertain reflects a general strategy in the text to distance readers and frustrate their access to the "truth." Not only would such a strategy avoid cultural and political exploitation, it would also in many ways recreate that feeling of uncertainty and unknowing produced by the state's rhetoric of fear and the lack of access to official information.⁹² But that is not the case. Menchú does not seek to recreate that feeling, but rather to counter it and thereby resist it. As noted in the first chapter, the state had successfully enacted a strategy that limited what could be seen or heard in public. This rhetoric of fear trained its citizens to see only that which is "given to be visible" (Taylor). Therefore, in addition to affecting its citizens' sense perceptions, the state had set itself up as "the arbiter of what [was] real and what [was] not" (Cavanaugh 55). Rather than set firm boundaries between the two, it was more profitable for the Guatemalan state "to leave those boundaries confused and ambiguous. Ambiguity and unknowing create anxiety, which in turn creates the demand for order which the state provides" (Cavanaugh 55). In Guatemala, the real and unreal—as well as the citizen's ability to discern and narrate them—remained purposefully unfixed, ultimately allowing the state to justify its own existence. In order for Menchú to resist the state's rhetoric of fear, she could not leave the boundaries unfixed. Thus any privileging

Brooks then proceeds to criticize critics like Beverley who, despite being aware of the performative nature of *testimonio* (see note above), are nonetheless "[s]educed by the notion of Menchú's ephemeral 'trace' on the *testimonio* page" (Brooks 188).

⁹² For my discussion of the state's rhetoric of fear as a strategy for social control, see Chapter One of the present study.

of the uncertain and unknowable was limited exclusively to those passages dealing with the cultural practices of her community, and does not apply to her narrations of torture. In fact, I argue that in order to offset the uncertainty produced by her secrets, Menchú employs a rhetoric of certainty in her narrations of torture that seeks to create an empathetic bond with readers and thus invoke a reaction against the violence of the state.

I demonstrate that Menchú's rhetoric of torture relies heavily not only on the representation of detail, but in some cases on the personalized and individualized exaggeration of it, in order to give a documentary-like assessment of the torture and death of her brother and mother. The use of sharp and vivid details, even when those details might contradict what really happened, aims to repair and offset any distancing created by her secrets. In those passages, the goal is exactly the opposite of her secrets: to overwrite doubt and unknowing and privilege her access to the "truth" about the torture. Those passages provide sufficient detail so that the reader attains a "complete" and "stable" knowledge, a truth that appears to be unmarred and undistorted.⁹³ This emphasis on detail highlights the importance of the historical veracity of her claims about the violence more generally, and the torture of her brother more specifically. All representations of violence and torture have a rhetorical purpose, and, therefore, are

⁹³ Here we can see a connection between Menchú's position and what Avery Gordon calls hypervisibility: Hypervisibility is a kind of obscenity of accuracy that abolishes the distinctions between 'permission and prohibition, presence and absence.' No shadows, no ghosts. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, everything is available and accessible for our consumption. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe that neither repression nor the return of the repressed, in the form of either improperly buried bodies or countervailing systems of value or difference, occurs with any meaningful result. (16) The failure of hypervisibility is to assume that nothing lies outside our gaze, that there are no gaps or fissures in the way we see the world: "no shadows, no ghosts." Everything can be seen, described, and put on view for the consumer, or in our situation, the reader. According to Gordon, many disciplines (her focus in this passage is on sociology) presume that "everything is on view" and "everything can be described" (13). Such a vision fails to move previous preoccupations with positivistic epistemologies and ontologies of the visible. As I will argue in this chapter, Menchú seems to subscribe to such a conception of the visible in her treatment of torture.

intended to invoke a particular response in the witnessing audience. In order to understand that persuasive function, we must now turn to the torture scenes in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

Recollecting Torture

*What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.*⁹⁴

Despite the lack of critical attention to the torture scenes in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, critics have nevertheless noticed the moral and legal imperatives that emanate from the text, drawing attention to the authority with which Menchú speaks about the violence in Guatemala and the need for something to be done. Linda Craft, for example, in her study of testimony and resistance literature in Central America, mentions the authority of Menchú's voice, and though she does not elaborate in detail, she appears to attribute that authority to Menchú's status as a firsthand witness to the torture and death of her family: "one by one, she witnessed the torture, rape, and murder of various members of her family" (1). Craft asserts that precisely because of that witness, her account grabs the attention of readers and renders them "morally obliged to pay attention" (Craft 12). But what happens if Menchú was not actually there, as Stoll has confirmed? Does that undermine Menchú's authority? After all, Stoll has shown in numerous points in the narrative, her story "is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be" (70). Even though she claims that she and the rest of her family were there to witness the death of her brother, her father "was professing ignorance about the fate of his son shortly before his own death" and Menchú could not have been there either (Stoll 70). So if she did not witness the events in Chajul, is the authority of her text undermined? Does the authority of her text reside in her status as "firsthand" witness?

⁹⁴ Abraham and Torok, *Shell and the Kernel*.

Many critics have chosen to dismiss Stoll's findings as essentially irrelevant, asserting that Menchú's representation remains much more important than the actual referentiality, the "literal truth" of her claims. According to Zimmerman, for example, the questions of Rigoberta's protective games, her possibly traumatized memory, her use of literary tropes, her fix on collective identity, and so forth—even her representativity of some or all of Guatemala's Indian groups—all help to explain possible deviations from 'what really happened.' (Zimmerman 68)

In other words, there are reasons to explain why Menchú told her story the way she did, and thus critics like Zimmerman are willing to forgive historical inaccuracies in Menchú's *testimonio*. Focusing more on the broad truth regarding what happened during the war, Zimmerman asserts that whatever doubts or suspicions have emerged about the specifics of Menchú's story, Stoll and those who defend him "have failed to shake its foundations: the atrocities, the murders, the losses, in the context of events about which many people know from a wide variety of printed and taped narratives" (Zimmerman 68).

I cannot underestimate the importance of Zimmerman's position and its bearing on my purposes in this project, for it raises critical questions concerning how many Guatemalans chose to narrate the violence of the Armed Conflict. As I suggested in the Introduction and in Chapter One, any discourse that attempts to reveal and resist the atrocities carried out by the military regimes must not only be aware of the military's rhetoric of fear—of the play between visibility and invisibility, reality and unreality—it must also employ the same tactics of play in its own narration of that violence. That is, these narratives must also "play" with the facts and manipulate language in order to bear witness to events that for many were unspeakable. Following this line of thought, is it not possible to defend Zimmerman and defend his claim that the specifics of Menchú's story are not as important as the fact that it is convincing, and that it succeeded in garnering international

attention and support for the victims of the violence? Indeed, given the prevalence of postmodern literary approaches as well as the current popularity of the “constructed” or “imagined” nature of concepts such as nation, community, gender, and sexuality, the factual veracity of Menchú’s narration might seem insignificant.

Even Stoll, despite his reputation for calling Menchú a “liar” and for directing the world’s attention to the historical inaccuracies of Menchú’s account, actually admits in his study that the contradictions are of little consequence. The fact that Petrocinio was probably not burned to death in the town plaza does not mean that others did not die in a similar fashion. Menchú’s story, “[e]xcept for the sensational details,” remains mostly true (Stoll 70). As Stoll affirms, “She is correct that the army brought prisoners to Chajul, claimed that they were guerrillas, and murdered them to intimidate the population. As best anyone can determine, they included her younger brother” (Stoll 70). Neither Menchú’s physical absence during her brother’s death nor the “sensational details” (Stoll 70) damage the moving nature of Menchú’s story. The question remains: why is Menchú’s narrative so forceful? I argue that we should not focus on the question of Menchú’s authority, nor on the correspondence between her descriptions and what really happened. Rather a key element in the authority of Menchú’s account lies in her presentation of torture and its meaning, specifically its evidentiary and rhetorical function. Menchú’s descriptions of the torture of her brother and mother provide textual evidence of the military’s actions, and represents her attempt to bear witness to the horrors of the war by seeking to re-present and “recollect” his torture and death for the reader.

Viewed by many as the climactic moment of the book, the chapter dealing with the death of Menchú's brother Petrocinio was "reprinted in magazines and read aloud at conferences, with the hall darkened except for a spotlight on the narrator" (Stoll 2).⁹⁵ Menchú opens her description of the death of her brother by highlighting his involvement in organizing the people against the military presence in the region.⁹⁶ Unlike the rest of her brothers who had fled to other parts of the country in order not "to expose the community to danger" and to protect their family from what the government considered to be a "bad influence," Petrocinio had elected to stay in the community (172). Menchú's father had gone into hiding because of his involvement with the CUC, and Menchú herself was working in the Department of Huehuetenango (173). According to Menchú, it was precisely because Petrocinio was the "secretary of the community" (172), however, that he remained behind.

According to Menchú's account, Petrocinio was kidnapped on September 9, 1979. From the very beginning of her description, Menchú notes the shocking nature of his abduction, torture, and death. For those who have not witnessed the atrocities of the war and the brutality of the Guatemalan military, Menchú warns that her narration may even appear to be "an unbelievable story" (173). As I have suggested, however, Menchú's goal in narrating these events was to convince international readers of the events described, not merely to suggest the possibility that they could have happened, but to prove that they

⁹⁵ The chapter "The Torture and Death of Her Little Brother, Burnt Alive in Front of Members of Their Families and the Community" is chapter XXIII in the Spanish version but chapter 24 in the English translation.

⁹⁶ In the Spanish edition, she says that he was kidnapped on September 9 but that his disappearance was not noted until November 9 (199). Clearly this is an error and has been corrected in the English translations. A few sentences later, Menchú notes that her mother contacted her as soon as she learned he was missing, after which she went home to be with her mother. Petrocinio had only been missing three days when Menchú arrived in September, clearly well before the erroneous November 9 date (174). It is odd that Vicente Menchú would make the same mistake in an interview with David Stoll (Stoll 66).

occurred precisely as she describes them. Menchú maintains that she and her family not only learned the exact details of his capture and torture, but that they were also witnesses to his brutal death. Her family, she states, “managed to find out how he died, what tortures they inflicted on him from start to finish” (173). Given my treatment in Chapter One of the prevalence of rumors, however, we must take caution and note the problematic nature of any type of “knowing” about the violence perpetrated by the military, especially concerning the massacres or torture. Menchú emphasis on the certainty of this “knowing”—that despite the seemingly unbelievable nature of the events, her account is historically accurate and verifiable—runs contrary to what we know about the nature of the rumors during the war and the impossibility of witnessing to the massacres.⁹⁷ We must bear this problematic in mind as we read her narration of the events surrounding her brother’s kidnapping, torture, and death. For example, Menchú states that after he was kidnapped, the girl and her mother who had been with Petrocinio at the time followed him and his abductors for two kilometers, to the army’s camp. Petrocinio was tied up and beaten as he walked. When he fell, they dragged him over rocks and fallen limbs, disfiguring his face (173). Menchú learned of these details secondhand, presumably from the women who had followed him during his abduction. Once Petrocinio arrived at the camp, his captors questioned him and tortured him to make him reveal the whereabouts of his family members (174). Menchú states that because of his unwillingness to reveal that information, he was “subjected to terrible, terrible pain” (174).

According to Menchú, the precise details of that torture were proclaimed publicly. Two weeks after his capture, the army announced that it would be carrying out a public

⁹⁷ For my treatment of the impossibility of witness, see Chapter One of the present study.

punishment of all the guerrillas imprisoned in their camp, including Petrocinio. The spectacle would be carried out on September 24 in Chajul, a town twenty-five kilometers from her home in Chimal. Rigoberta and her family only heard about the punishment the day before and travelled overnight to arrive in Chajul the following morning, just in time to see the prisoners being unloaded from an army truck. According to Menchú, her mother recognized Petrocinio at once. His head had been shaved and cut. His fingernails had been removed and his wounds were swollen from infection. But according to Menchú, she and her parents knew without a doubt that it was Petrocinio. After an officer admonished the crowd, warning them of the evils of communism, the prisoners' clothes were removed, and an officer proceeded to describe in detail each prisoner's wounds and how they had been inflicted. In Menchú's account, the officer explained all this so that the crowd could see what awaited anyone who associated with the communists. Menchú notes that the officer made continual reference to the issue of communism: "he must have repeated the word 'communist' a hundred times" (177). The insistence upon this point occurs multiple times in Menchú's narration. As readers, we can draw two conclusions. First, Menchú narrates the scene as if the military had an ostensible reason for abducting and torturing Petrocinio. Second, the military sought to use the public massacre as a means to frighten the masses. For the military, it would seem, Petrocinio's death was justified as a means of obtaining information about other communists and as a mechanism for preventing others from joining the communists' cause. In other words, Menchú states that the military understood its actions to be justified. Once this message had been announced to the public, the prisoners were then soaked in gasoline and set on fire, thus searing the message into the public memory.

The precision of Menchú's description of the events in the plaza was one of the details that initially raised suspicions during Stoll's investigations. As Stoll was questioning Domingo, an elder in the town of Chajul, he realized that one of his questions had caught the man off guard: "The army burned prisoners alive in the town plaza? Not here, he said" (Stoll 1). Domingo was the first of seven people in Chajul who told Stoll that no one had been burned publicly (Stoll 2). Stoll was initially unconcerned with such discrepancies; after all, he was "able to corroborate that the brother had died at Chajul, if not in the precise manner described" (8) by Menchú in her *testimonio*. He admits that "[g]iven the vagaries of memory and the translation of eyewitness accounts into secondhand ones, it is hardly surprising that there are conflicting versions" (69). Indeed, given the proliferation of rumors during the war and the evidence of multiple, contradictory narrations of the massacres, not only is it not surprising, it is expected. Stoll even acknowledges that his sources may have still been too frightened of the army to give a truthful account of what they had witnessed (69). Given these variables, Stoll initially accepted the possibility that Menchú's version was factual.

What he could not dismiss, however, was the fact that Petrocinio's father, during an interview in January 1980, only four months after the death of Petrocinio, "had yet to accept that his son was really dead" (Stoll 70). In that interview, Petrocinio's father and his delegation stated that they did not know with certainty if Petrocinio was alive or whether he had been among those killed in Chajul, and they could only confirm with any confidence that seven prisoners had died. Their identities remained unknown. Some maintained that they had been executed in front of the church; others "insisted that the seven were killed on the road into town ... then dumped in the plaza to dramatize one of

the army's antiguerrilla harangues" (Stoll 70). But the precise details were uncertain. Many attacked Stoll after the publication of his book, suggesting that the "inaccuracies" he discovered were due to the "vagaries of memory" or fear of discussing the military's violence with an American anthropologist. After all, even though he was conducting his research nearly ten years after the massacre in Chajul, the fear of the military remained quite strong. Yet the "vagaries of memory" and the fear of retaliation do not explain why Petrocinio's father could not confirm his son's death only four months after the massacre. Nor do they explain the fact that the accounts gathered by Stoll in the late 1980s and early 1990s—affirming that the seven were killed by the road and then carried to the plaza—were subsequently corroborated by human rights reports and by Mario Payeras of the EGP (Stoll 70). My goal is not to defend Stoll or his investigation into the violence.⁹⁸ Rather, my goal is to point out the numerous uncertainties involved. This confusion between the certainty and the uncertainty of what had actually happened in Chajul coincides with the army's practices of spreading confusion and fear, which I noted in Chapter One. Therefore, though I agree with Stoll that it is important to consider the possibility that Menchú was not "really" there and did not witness her brother's death "firsthand," what we must look at more closely is why she felt compelled to narrate the event as if she had been and what effect her account has on the reader. Though they may be "inaccurate," the details are important. The critical question is not only why she narrated her brother's torture and death as if she had been present, but also, why she did so in such a detailed manner. How do these historical inaccuracies affect our

⁹⁸ Nevertheless, I do agree with Stoll that it is unlikely Menchú's version is "historically accurate" given the numerous reports of uncertainty and the fact that only 4 months after the massacre in Chajul, Petrocinio's father denied knowledge of his son's death.

understanding of Menchú's rhetoric of torture? What purpose does the preponderance of details serve?

Most importantly, the details do not serve to present Menchú's narrative as "a horror story," as claimed by Craft (1). Nor are her descriptions "hallucinatory" or "symbolic" as stated by Beverley, according to whom the descriptions are so graphic as to appear unreal ("Margin" 33).⁹⁹ Horror stories—particularly those that employ "hallucinatory" or "symbolic" descriptions of violence that cannot be verified or affirmed with any conviction—generally aim to instill fear and uncertainty in the reader. Such strategies would not be able to offset the distancing produced by Menchú's secrets. On the contrary, such fear would further distance readers, an effect that, as noted above, Menchú hoped to avoid. It is certainly true that Menchú includes startlingly descriptive details in her account. In Menchú's own graphic language, she notes that her brother was "cut in various places. His head was shaved and slashed. He had no nails. He had no soles to his feet. The earlier wounds were suppurating from infection" (178). As readers, we can see the appalling nature of her brother's torture. The woman prisoner, who was also put on display, is also described in excruciating detail:

They had shaved her private parts. The nipple of one of her breasts was missing and her other breast was cut off. She had the marks of bites on different parts of her body. She was bitten all over, the *compañera*. She had no ears. All of them were missing part of the tongue or had had their tongues split apart. (178)

Clearly, these descriptions are appalling, and there is little doubt that her manner of informing the reader of the terrible nature of torture is graphic. In describing her brother's capture, Menchú says "They tied him up, they tied his testicles, my brother's sexual

⁹⁹ For example, Beverley characterizes the torture scenes as "magic realism" ("Margin" 33). He argues that the specificity and "excruciating detail" of her account serve to provide her narration "a hallucinatory and symbolic intensity different from the matter-of-fact narration one expects from testimonio. One could say this is a kind of testimonial expressionism or 'magic realism'" ("Margin" 33).

organs, they tied them behind with string and forced him to run. Well, he couldn't stand that, my little brother, he couldn't bear that awful pain and he cried out, he asked for mercy" (174). But though such passages are indeed violent, they are not "hallucinatory." In fact, when she describes the specific tortures Petrocinio underwent, the specificity and detail make her depictions seem exactly the opposite, that is, much more like "matter-of-fact narration":

My brother was tortured for more than sixteen days. They cut off his fingernails, they cut off his fingers, they cut off his skin, they burned parts of his skin. Many of the wounds, the first ones, swelled and were infected. ... They shaved his head, left just the skin, and also they cut the skin off his head and pulled it down on either side and cut off the fleshy part of his face. (174)

Granted, the detailed nature of this scene is so graphic that it might seem unreal. Yet the lack of adjectives and the scarce use of adverbs reveal an attempt to stick to the facts and avoid any literary devices that might push her narration into the "unreality" of horror.

Furthermore, just when the reader begins to be appalled and awestruck by the atrocities described, Menchú then inserts comments that reaffirm her status as a reporter and offset any possibility of a "hallucinatory" effect on the reader. Her attempt to define the term "well" is a clear example. Rigoberta states, "And they left him in a well, I don't know what it's called, a hole with water and a bit of mud in it, they left him naked there all night. There were a lot of corpses there in the hole with him and he couldn't stand the smell of all those corpses" (174). Her definition aims to give detail and specificity regarding Petrocinio's exact situation. Such a "matter-of-fact narration" precludes any possibility of a "hallucination" and seeks to convey a certainty for the reader. These descriptions render the representation of the corpses more empirical. This emphasis on

the empirical facts counters any possibility of uncertainty and stresses our complete access to and knowledge of the events surrounding Petrocinio's torture.

It further serves as a reminder that these events are speakable. Rather than assert the unsayable nature of her brother's death, Menchú overwrites any possible uncertainties with an emphasis on detail and fact. The straightforward nature of her narration presumes the possibility of narrating without difficulty the reality—what many would call the “non-symbolic”—of violence and torture. This form of mimetic emphasis on detail is described by Elizabeth Loevlie as a “recollection” (64). Drawing on Kierkegaard, Loevlie notes that there is a difference between “repetition” and “recollection”: ““Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward”” (Kierkegaard, qtd in Loevlie 64). In other words, “repetition” is a movement that not only “implies a re-peat, a re-make of what has been *into the present*,” but also “projects into a future, and therefore moves forwards” (64). For this reason, “repetition” should more properly be conceived of as an attempt to create something new, rather than the oft-perceived notion of repetition as replication or duplication. Loevlie explains, “Repetition is usually thought of as dealing with a certain ‘content’ that is repeated. Kierkegaard’s text challenges this more substantial understanding of repetition by insisting rather on movement. In other words, the more traditional notion of repetition is discarded in favor of a different, less intuitive understanding” (65). For Kierkegaard and thus for Loevlie, the “traditional notion of repetition”—since it attempts “to repeat something, a memory, an experience, a content” (Loevlie 64)—is more aptly described as “recollection” since it does not project a forward movement. Rather than bringing the past into the present and

then projecting it into the future as the creation of something new, it is as if recollection as a literary device attempted to bring the present—the reader—into the full presence and plenitude of the past event. Rather than moving forward, it moves backward.

We see the same recollection of graphic detail in her discussion of her mother's death. Once her mother had been tortured, Menchú narrates that the soldiers took her out to a place near the town and stood watch over her body as she died. Menchú states,

They left her there dying for four or five days, enduring the sun, the rain and the night. My mother was covered in worms, because in the mountains there is a fly which gets straight into any wound, and if the wound isn't tended in two days, there are worms where the fly has been. Since all my mother's wounds were open, there were worms in all of them. She was still alive. (199)

The description of the worms, clearly intended for an audience unfamiliar with this region of Guatemala, is intended to provide documentary evidence regarding her mother's death. But the manner and tone in which they are described contradict the intensity of Menchú's own experience of horror. Other critics have noted the "even tone" in her narrations. Zimmerman writes that "perhaps what most convinces readers about the truth of Menchú's narrative is her steady, even tone, as she speaks to Burgos-Debray out of a condition which would be absolutely traumatic and silencing for most of us" (53-54). That is, despite the horrors of what she witnessed in Guatemala, her voice projects a steadiness that belies her traumatic past.

In fact, at several points her descriptions are almost casual, in that she includes specific details almost as if they were an afterthought. For example, after the intense and graphic depictions of Petrocinio's torture, during which she also describes very vividly the deaths of twenty other men who were also tortured with Petrocinio, Menchú then adds, "also a woman. They had raped her and then tortured her" (174). Without access to

the taped interviews, there is no way to know how even Menchú's tone was as she described the scene, nor is there a means of knowing the inflection of her voice as she mentioned the additional woman. Nevertheless, the stark contrast between the lengthy descriptions of her brother's torture and the brief statement—"They had raped her and then tortured her"—is revealing. Rather than give further details at this point, the sentence appears as an afterthought. That is not to suggest that the woman's death was not terrible, nor that we as readers should not be moved by her rape and torture. Quite the contrary, what I am suggesting is that the simplicity of the sentence projects a steadiness and control that contrast sharply with the nature of the torture. Rather than present the scenes as horror, such simple, straightforward comments bear the task of communicating certainty and reliability. Though the graphic images in Menchú's narrative present the atrocities as "horrific," in the sense that they shock the reader by their violence, Menchú's depiction of them is not a "horror story" (Craft 1). Hers is not a "horror story" because the narrative does not instill fear in the reader. The above passages, intended to be read by an international audience in foreign countries far from the torture and massacre, have been stripped of such tactics.

Menchú's primary goal is to convince readers of the reliability of her narrative. That dependability forecloses any possibilities of uncertainty regarding the nature of her brother's and mother's torture.¹⁰⁰ Unlike the rumors, which were prevalent in Guatemala

¹⁰⁰ Though it is conceivable that Burgos-Debray removed any doubts or uncertainties from the final text, there is evidence to suggest that this is not the case. First, we see other moments where there are hesitations and pauses, indicated by ellipses or repetitions of words and phrases. Burgos-Debray did not remove these hesitations, so it is unlikely that she removed others. Also, as noted above, several critics have been granted access to the taped interviews and have noted that the final text does not diverge from the oral interviews. Indeed, Beverley, in his treatment of the narrative unity of the book, argues that the torture scenes in chapters 24 and 27 are among those "individual units [that] are wholly composed by Menchú and as such depend on her skills and intentionality as a narrator" ("Margin at the Center" 33). As readers, we can assume that these are Menchú's words.

at the time Menchú gave the interview, these passages, as well as countless others in Menchú's narrative, do not seek to notify the reader of impending violence. International readers do not need to be warned about the military's use of torture, nor must they be scared into fleeing from the army. On the contrary, Menchú's narrative seeks to expose the torture, violence, and terror that afflicted Guatemalan citizens. Unlike the rumors, which could serve as "horror stories," Menchú's narrative serves the opposite function. It presents denunciatory evidence against the military, with the primary goal of encouraging outrage. Menchú's rhetoric of certainty seeks to create an empathetic bond with readers and thus invoke a reaction against the violence of the state.

Menchú's account relies not only on the heavily detailed re-presentation of torture, but in some cases on the personalized exaggeration of it, in order to give a more detailed assessment of the torture and death of her brother and mother. Given the military's rhetoric of fear and the proliferation of generalized and unverifiable rumors regarding the massacres, it is understandable that Menchú would opt to individualize the generic stories of public torture and emphasize the specifics surrounding her brother's death.¹⁰¹ Despite Stoll's attempts to draw attention to the guerrillas' role in bringing about the escalation of violence in Chimal and surrounding regions, the prevalence of rumors would give reasonable justification for Menchú's inclusion of the attributed events. As Zimmerman notes, "Rigoberta's account of her brother's death represents countless stories, many of them with questionable details, about countless unquestionable massacres" (68). As one representation of those innumerable atrocities, Menchú seeks to give the torture a certainty that it did not have in the rumors. Even when Menchú's status

¹⁰¹ For more on the escalation of violence and the military's use of torture, as well as an analysis of the ways in which news of that violence spread throughout the country, see Chapter One of the present study.

as a firsthand witness has been put into doubt, the specificity of her narrative continues to evoke powerful reactions in the reader. The inclusion of sharp and vivid details—narrated as if her knowledge of the torture is without question—lends Menchú’s account both moral and legal authority, especially when presented to international readers.

Furthermore, her detailed narration of torture, even when its specifics might contradict what really happened, seeks to give her account a transparency for international readers. It aims to repair and offset any distancing created by her secrets. In the passages mentioned above, the goal is exactly the opposite of her cultural inaccessibility: to over-write doubt and unknowing and privilege her access to the “truth” about the torture. Her account provides sufficient detail so that the reader attains a complete and stable knowledge, a truth that appears to be unmarred and undistorted. This emphasis on detail highlights the importance of the historical veracity of her claims about the violence more generally, and the torture of her brother more specifically. Because “terror makes epistemological doubt itself a form of domination” (Gordon 80), one mode of resistance would be to rely on certainty and objectivity as a mode of countering the seemingly irrational “knowledge-making” of the state. Speaking of the political resistance of human rights organizations, Gordon observes,

Such an address must minimize the ambiguity, complicity, imagination, and surreality that necessarily characterize the theater of terror. It is obliged to communicate an unambiguous, unequivocal reality of pain and violence at the level of the ordinary individual body. (79)

Such representations of torture will therefore seek to entail “[c]learly defined moral boundaries, disclosure as truth, visible evidence of injury, accessible language, verifiable intent, impartiality, objectivity, [and] authenticated witnesses” (Gordon 79). We see all of these elements in Menchú’s account of her brother’s torture, with the possible exception

of her role as an “authenticated witness,” even though she does adamantly affirm that she saw the events firsthand. Menchú’s emphasis on the “disclosure of truth” and her objective attempts to communicate certainty—despite Stoll’s discovery that she was not actually present—give her narrative an authority equal to that of an “authenticated witness.” Clearly, Menchú’s goal is to make sense of a violence that can often seem irrational or surreal in order to erase “epistemological doubt” (Gordon 80). But even so, how can she make sense of torture, which, as I have noted, is polysemic and resists meaning?

In order to make sense of her brother’s and mother’s torture, Menchú has to give torture meaning. Only by giving the torture meaning can she hope to counteract the violence of the state. However, rather than attempt to create new signification for torture, Menchú accepts the reasoning provided by the army. We see this primarily in her assumption that torture serves the purpose of obtaining information. Regarding her brother’s torture, for example, Menchú asserts that “[o]nce he arrived in the camp they inflicted terrible tortures on him to make him tell where the guerrilla fighters were and where his family was” (174). Those subversives included not only his immediate family, but also, by extension, other members of the community, particularly the priests who might have played a role in the insurgency. In Menchú’s words,

What was he doing with the Bible, they wanted to know, why were the priests guerrillas? Straight away they talked of the Bible as if it were a subversive tract, they accused priests and nuns of being guerrillas. They asked him what relationship the priests had with the guerrillas, what relationship the whole community had with the guerrillas. (174)

According to Menchú, it was precisely because of his unwillingness to answer the soldiers’ questions or reveal information about the guerrillas that “they inflicted those

dreadful tortures on him. Day and night they subjected him to terrible, terrible pain” (174). Her descriptions of Petrocinio’s suffering serve to communicate the extent to which the military was willing to go in order to obtain information from the tortured. Indeed, Menchú continually stresses throughout the narrative that Petrocinio was kidnapped and tortured in order to gain information about the guerrillas in the region. In her account of Petrocinio’s death, for example, Menchú notes that the officer made continual reference to the issue of communism: “he must have repeated the word ‘communist’ a hundred times” (177). The insistence upon this point occurs multiple times in Menchú’s narration. As readers, we can see that the military had specific reasons for abducting and torturing Petrocinio. Once this message had been announced to the public, the prisoners were then soaked in gasoline and set on fire. For the military, it would seem, Petrocinio’s death was justified as a means of obtaining information about other communists and as a mechanism for preventing others from joining the communists’ cause. In other words, Menchú states that the military understood its actions to be justified.

We see the same underpinning at work in Menchú’s description of her mother’s torture. After the death of Vicente Menchú in the Spanish Embassy in 1980, Menchú’s mother stayed in her village, despite numerous suggestions that she try to escape the country (195). She was kidnapped three months later, on April 19, 1980 (195). The only difference in Menchú’s narration of her mother’s torture is that, unlike the earlier kidnapping and torture, in the chapter on her mother there is no extraliterary justification as to how Menchú learned of the numerous details. That is, whereas the torture and death of her brother had presumably become public knowledge on September 24 in Chajul, the

circumstances surrounding her mother's torture and death were never announced publicly. Nevertheless, Menchú notes that she learned "every detail of every step of the rape and torture suffered by [her] mother" (198), though she refuses "to reveal too many things because it will implicate some *compañeros* who are still doing their work very well" (198). Just as with her brother, however, Menchú suggests that her mother's capture is also designed to obtain information. She states that, as in the case of her brother, the purpose is to determine the whereabouts of her family and other members in the community who were supporting the guerrillas:

While they beat her, they asked here where we were, and said that if she made a confession, they'd let her go. But my mother knew very well that they did that so that they could torture her other children and would never let her go. She pretended she knew nothing. She defended every one of us until the end. (198)

In both of Menchú's narrations, torture has meaning. Despite her graphic representations of torture and the seeming senselessness of the violence, torture nevertheless has the strategic purpose of obtaining information.

Rather than denying the military's need for information, or challenging their claim that Petrocinio had access to useful intelligence, Menchú reaffirms the state's rationale by accentuating Petrocinio's status within the community. This emphasis may, in fact, explain one of the contradictions between Menchú's account of her brother's death and the information obtained by Stoll in his research. Menchú characterizes Petrocinio as "secretary of the community" (172), whereas Stoll heard him "remembered only as a youth who might have had a bit of schooling, not as a village catechist, secretary, or organizer" (66). If torture has the purpose of obtaining information—as Menchú implies—it stands to reason that the military would kidnap the "secretary of the community." If he were not involved, as suggested by Stoll, then his kidnapping and

torture would appear irrational at best. Rather than assert that her brother was wrongly captured and tortured, or suggest that her brother's torture was meaningless because he did not have access to information the army might want, Menchú reiterates that his torture and death was connected to the presumed presence of guerrillas and communists in the region. In other words, rather than privileging the unknown or the uncertain—which would allow the atrocities to remain shadowy and hidden, known only by those who had witnessed the torture directly—Menchú proclaims her message before an international audience. In doing so, she chooses to emphasize the excessiveness and injustice of his torture and his death, thereby exposing what happens to those Guatemalans who attempt to resist the state's campaigns. Petrocinio's death, though horrible, was nevertheless rational; his abduction and torture made sense.

Thus we can suggest that rather than being an irrational act, torture for Menchú remains an open and purposeful violation of the law.¹⁰² For Menchú, more complex notions of torture—either as a mechanism for producing state sovereignty (Kahn), a method of communicating torture's "logic of consent" (Parry), or a means of producing a "background (or threatened background) of total control and potential escalation" (Parry 205)—were of little consequence. When hundreds of thousands of people are disappearing or dying, debates surrounding the "epistemic value of torture" (Kahn 2) and escalation (Parry) are simply not a priority. Therefore, rather than privilege the unknowing and anxiety created by torture, Menchú turns the excessive use of pain into a

¹⁰² Regarding the notion of torture as a violation of contemporary national and international law, Parry actually suggests that torture is consistent with liberal democracy and the modern notions of human rights. Regarding the problematic conception of torture as "aberrational," Parry argues that "the control over people's lives exercised by the modern state—including sometimes violent domination—is consistent with and perhaps even the fulfillment of rights discourse and liberal ideology" (96). For a more in-depth treatment of pervasive versus aberrational views of torture in the "war on terror," see Parry 187 ff.

public and international demand for support. Her narrative—by communicating a rhetoric of certainty and giving torture meaning—provides prosecutorial evidence against the state’s campaign of terror. Thus her account takes on legal and political undertones. For years the state had been publicly denying its role in the torture and massacre of Guatemalan citizens. Menchú’s *testimonio* is precisely that, a testimony against the army’s human rights violations.

Therefore, not only does her narrative seek to produce certainty and “minimize the ambiguity, complicity, imagination, and surreality that necessarily characterize the theater of terror” (Gordon 79); as testimony, it must also produce evidence against that “theater of terror” and encourage readers to respond. Menchú has assured readers that her story is true, and has provided ample evidence regarding the excessiveness of the army’s campaign of terror. Now, she must move them to respond. In Menchú’s narrative, the communication of that expectation takes place at the level of an empathetic as opposed to a logical reaction. According to Ballengee, such an empathetic appeal is not uncommon in accounts of torture and actually reveals the “unique rhetorical potential” of representations of torture in literature (9).¹⁰³ She writes, “the audience’s response—illogical, empathetic, immediate—feels certain, yet that certainty or authority can be guided in a number of directions by the rhetorician, since the various elements involved in the representation of torture actually resist determinable meaning” (Ballengee 9). We have seen how Menchú gives torture a “determinable meaning” as evidence of the army’s

¹⁰³ Ballengee’s text does not discuss the representations of torture in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Her analysis limits itself primarily to ancient Greek texts such as *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Leukippe and Kleitophon*. Nevertheless, her conclusions remain relevant in discussing the use of torture in Guatemala. Indeed, in the epilogue to her book, Ballengee discusses the relationship between the ancient Greek texts and the more contemporary situations in the United States, especially the controversies surrounding the photos from Abu Ghraib prison and the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay (Ballengee 127-144).

excess. But that meaning must now be directed by Menchú towards a specific emotional and immediate reaction. As Ballengee notes, representations of torture can “fail at sending one particular and clear message” (Ballengee 10). The emotional nature of the torture scenes can evoke a strong emotional response, but that response must be guided and specified rhetorically. But in what direction is the certainty of Rigoberta’s representation guided? How does Menchú, as rhetorician, guide readers in their empathetic response to the torture of Petrocinio?

Despite the even tone of her narration, her account of her brother’s death actually concludes with a strongly emotional appeal to her readers. We first see this emotion textually in the repetition of certain words and phrases, which are intended to reveal Menchú’s difficulty in narrating the events. For example, as she narrates his death in the town square, she notes that “[e]veryone was weeping. I, I don’t know, every time I tell this story, I can’t hold back my tears, for me it’s a reality I can’t forget, even though it’s not easy to tell of it” (177). But these hesitations and repetitions evoke emotion and conviction, not doubt. Menchú hopes to provoke a reaction in readers and ignite moral outrage. The ultimate rhetorical goal of the representation of her brother’s torture is to guide the reader to action. Menchú does this by demonstrating how she and her family were moved to respond.

After the prisoners are soaked in gasoline and set on fire, the crowd responds. Menchú states that her immediate reaction, as a witness, was not to think about the death of her brother, but to “do something, even kill a soldier. At that moment I wanted to show my aggression” (179). Given such a reaction and her description of the scene, Menchú’s

narration serves the rhetorical function of justifying retaliatory violence against the slaughter of the helpless. For that is how she describes the prisoners:

Anyway, they lined up the tortured and poured petrol on them; and then the soldiers set fire to each one of them. Many of them begged for mercy. They looked half dead when they were lined up there, but when the bodies began to burn they began to plead for mercy. Some of them screamed, many of them leapt but uttered no sound – of course, that was because their breathing was cut off. (179)

The repetition of the term “mercy” in this passage evokes the victims’ helplessness.

By giving detailed descriptions of the military’s actions against the guerrillas, Menchú provides “evidence” of the military’s cruelty. She states, “I found it impossible to concentrate, seeing that this could be. You could only think that these were human beings and what pain those bodies had felt to arrive at that unrecognizable state” (178). Menchú conveys certainty to the reader by graphically and then emotionally re-presenting the experience of her brother’s body in pain. As Ballengee argues, “If a sense of certainty may be conveyed to a torture victim by means of his or her own pain, it stands to reason that the duress of the victim might have a similar effect upon any witnesses to the torture, as well, at least at the level of bodily empathy” (Ballengee 9). By noting how Petrocinio’s pain invoked a reaction in Menchú and her community, this passage also serves to invoke “bodily empathy” in the reader who also acts as the witnessing audience (Ballengee 9). As witness, then, the reader is called upon to act. Descriptions of the helplessness of the prisoners fulfill a very particular rhetorical function: to justify the people’s violent reaction to military coercion. In narrating the events as she does, Rigoberta encourages a moral judgment that will lead to confrontation.

We can now see the ways in which Menchú’s account of her brother’s abduction, torture, and death relies fundamentally upon what Ballengee calls the “rhetoric of torture

as power” (133). Her narration remains fundamentally political: to play the power of the people (and its militant representatives) off the power of the Guatemalan military.

Menchú’s rhetoric establishes a moral opposition between the people and the military in such a way as to invoke a confrontational response in the reader. But that moral response is empathetic, not logical. And thus the crowd’s empathetic reaction at the torture and death of the guerrillas serves the purpose of justifying a similar empathetic reaction in the reader. The textual representation of the torture forces readers to respond immediately and perhaps even violently. Menchú’s description of the crowd’s reaction, therefore, is designed to justify that reaction in the reader. If Menchú, her family, and her community felt obliged to respond with rage, our own violent responses as readers are therefore justified.

Not only is it justified, it is also expected. Indeed, since Menchú is catering to a primarily international audience, she further stresses her own community’s inability to confront effectively the military’s violence. She notes, “El capitán daba un panorama de todo el poder que tenían, la capacidad que tenían. Que nosotros como pueblo no teníamos la capacidad de enfrentar lo que ellos tenían” (“The captain gave an overview of all the power they had, the capacity they had. That we, the people, didn’t have the capacity to confront what they had” [178]).¹⁰⁴ Even though she says the military left the plaza once they saw the anger of the people and their willingness to fight (204-205), she is quick to point out that “if there’d been a confrontation with the army, the people would have been massacred” (179). The people of Guatemala need to confront the military, but that would only lead to their slaughter. The clear implication is that the international

¹⁰⁴ Menchú’s description of the crowd’s lack of power demonstrates Elaine Scarry’s discussion of the ways in which torture serves to establish a message of power to the victim. See especially pp. 46-51. I discuss this aspect of torture in Chapter One of the present study.

community, from its safer vantage point, must become involved in order to help the victimized Guatemalans.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Menchú sought to make torture a visible presence for her reader. If torture is a practice that is by its very nature polysemic and without determinable meaning (Ballengee), then any narration that seeks to elicit a political and legal response from the witnessing audience must rely on a rhetoric of presence and certainty in order to give that act of torture meaning. In order to eliminate any possibility of epistemological doubt or “surreality” (Gordon 79) regarding the nature of torture in her narrative, Menchú bears witness to its certainty and definability.¹⁰⁵ She relies on “recollection” (Loevlie 64) and objectivity as a mode of countering the irrational “knowledge-making” of the state. Rather than spreading rumors, Menchú personalizes and individualizes the torture so as to avoid any blurring of the boundaries between “reality” and “unreality.”¹⁰⁶ The real, as well as the citizen’s ability to discern and narrate it, which had been purposefully unfixed by the state’s use of terror, is reestablished in Menchú’s narrative. By drawing readers’ attention away from the “unreality” axis of the state’s project, Menchú seeks to piece back together a history and a society that had become fragmented and scattered. Hence the representation of torture in Menchú’s text is primarily about informing and documenting, and rests upon the assumption that bearing witness to torture is unproblematic. Any silences or gaps in knowledge are filled in with details and specifics in order to erase epistemological doubt and lend certainty to the narration. The “evidentiary function” (Ballengee 133) of her rhetoric forecloses doubt by de-emphasizing the language-destroying aspects of torture. By over-emphasizing the

¹⁰⁵ I will treat the notion of “bearing witness to uncertainty” in Chapter Three of the present study.

¹⁰⁶ Cavanaugh affirms that “rather than set firm boundaries between reality and unreality, it is more profitable for the state to leave those boundaries confused and ambiguous. Ambiguity and unknowing create anxiety, which in turn creates the demand for order which the state provides” (55). For more on this relationship, see Chapter One of the present study.

empirical materiality of the act and stressing those characteristics of torture that can be corroborated before an international audience, her rhetoric elides ambiguity in order to overwrite the polysemy of torture.

The success of Menchú's narrative in rallying international support cannot be overemphasized. Her narrative captivated international audiences by drawing attention to the suffering of Guatemalan citizens and moving readers to stand up against the Guatemalan military and its human rights abuses. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that her rhetoric of certainty did not take into account those aspects of uncertainty or unknowing produced by the state's rhetoric of fear. And as I argued above, in order to accomplish her goals of garnering support, it could not. In the words of Gordon:

Such an address must minimize the ambiguity, complicity, imagination, and surreality that necessarily characterize the theater of terror. It is obliged to communicate an unambiguous, unequivocal reality of pain and violence at the level of the ordinary individual body. Clearly defined moral boundaries, disclosure as truth, visible evidence of injury, accessible language, verifiable intent, impartiality, objectivity, authenticated witnesses, and so on are the means by which investigators make sense of and rationally communicate a patterned but irrational terror. (79)

Menchú went to great lengths to make torture a visible presence for her readers. This emphasis on visibility and disclosure, as well as the “[c]learly defined moral boundaries,” allow her rhetoric of torture to counter the state's attempts to silence and confuse. There is no place for ambiguity in her account. Over and against the state's project of haunting and unknowing, Menchú shouts a carefully constructed message of defiant and evidentiary certainty.

Chapter Four: A Rhetoric of Uncertainty: Eroticizing Torture in the Guatemalan

New Novel

The closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum..., the more evident it becomes ... how everything escapes representation, escapes its own double and its resemblance.
(Baudrillard)

*As a Guatemalan, you know that I could not tell them the full truth of what is being done to our people, for fear no one would believe me.*¹⁰⁷

The second major literary mode to emerge during the war in Guatemala was the new novel. The publication of Marco Antonio Flores' *Los compañeros* in 1976 sparked a wave of new fiction that sought innovative ways to narrate the violence of the war. Employing diverse narrative techniques in order to play with the relationship between language and referent, the authors of new novels sought to question society's capacity for bearing witness to the violence around them. Whereas *testimonio*'s emphasis on the visible aspects of violence signaled its commitment to a robustly empiricist epistemology and a profound reliance on a documentary-like "recollection" of torture, the new novel takes as its starting point the rejection of such empiricist modes of narration.¹⁰⁸ The new novel thus represents an entirely different mode of confronting state terror and its haunting effects on society. Even though there was certainly a deep rationality behind the

¹⁰⁷ Perera xiv.

¹⁰⁸ The shift from *testimonio* to *nueva novela* is a formal, not a chronological, shift, employed for the purposes of my argument. Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), which I analyzed in the previous chapter, appeared seven years after the publication of Flores' *Los compañeros* (1976).

Guatemalan state's control of society¹⁰⁹, it must be acknowledged, in the words of Avery Gordon, that

something crucial to its very *modus operandi*—the arbitrariness, the paralyzing blanket of fear, the macabre fascinations, the abundant absence of explanation, in short, the fundamental haunting quality of it—is lost when a rationalism of human behavior and social system is presumed to be the definitive measure of its disposition and spirit. And so too something crucial to what is needed to motivate the fight against it and succeed is missing. (Gordon 96-97)

The new novel emerged in the 1970s in Guatemala as a concerted attempt to deal with the “haunting quality” of state terror. The state’s ability to blur the lines between the known and the unknown had succeeded in penetrating the deepest layers of the Guatemalan psyche. As terror and the specters of torture continued to haunt daily life, those seeking to describe and expose the nature of the violence soon realized that the realm they sought to narrate required a new language and new narrative techniques that might more accurately depict the experience of trauma. Fundamental to their approach to violence was the belief that standard forms of language could not speak the horrors of the war. In order to explore the ways in which the new novel attempted to narrate torture, the present chapter will include an analysis of two key novels: *Los compañeros* (1976) by Marco Antonio Flores and *Después de las bombas* (1979) by Arturo Arias. Although these two novels have received critical and popular praise for their technical innovation and artistic quality, other Guatemalan new novels also merit study.¹¹⁰ As I suggested in the Introduction, what makes these two novels stand out is their highly developed psychological treatment of torture and its relationship to the formation of the Guatemalan subject.

¹⁰⁹ For my discussion of this, see Chapter Two of the present study.

¹¹⁰ Other Guatemalan new novels that have received critical attention include Mario Roberto Morales’ *Los demonios salvajes* (1978), Edwin Cifuentes’ *El pueblo y los atentados* (1979), and Arturo Arias’ *Itzam Na* (1982).

By the late 1970s, a growing emphasis on experimental techniques had emerged in Guatemala. Reflecting wider movements in the Latin American literary context, as well as dissatisfaction with the current artistic trends in their own country, Guatemalan authors broke with the traditional narrative forms of the Guatemalan literary canon. The criollista, costumbrista and realist styles, which had been popularized through writers such as Miguel Ángel Asturias and Mario Monteforte Toledo for decades, gave way in the 1970s to experimentation in both content and form. By abandoning the emphasis on old styles of realism, authors such as Flores and Arias sought out modes of narration that “would generate a new way of perceiving, of interpreting, and of sensing linguistic symbols on the part of the reader” (Arias, “Conciencia” 22).¹¹¹

Donald Shaw points out in his *Nueva narrativa hispanoamericana* that, beginning in the 1940s and continuing with the boom writers of the 1960s and 70s, Latin American writers expressed a growing mistrust in humanity’s ability to understand and depict reality (19). While novelists of the previous decades had been largely interested in documenting the economic, political and environmental landscape, by mid-century they began to question the simple correlation between reality and their sense-perceptions of that reality. Indeed, many novelists moved from the “*cuestionamiento* de la realidad convencional a la *negación* de la realidad, o al menos a la negación de la capacidad de dar razón unívoca de ella” (“*questioning* of conventional reality to the *negation* of reality, or at least to the negation of the capacity to give univocal reason to it” [Shaw 215]). The increasing emphasis on humanity’s inability to comprehend the universe gave rise to new emphases in literature. The new novel emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as the culmination

¹¹¹ For a more information on such self-proclaimed attempts to “kill Asturias” and the reliance on realism in narrative, see Morales, “Matemos a Miguel Ángel Asturias.”

of this rebellion against the confidence in humankind's ability to perceive and describe reality.¹¹²

This rebellion engendered a renewed attention to language (Shaw 217-18). Across Latin America, there emerged a polarization between authors who still believed in the possibility of comprehending the multiplicity of reality by means of the word, and those who rejected this possibility. No longer considered simply “como elemento estilístico o mero vehículo de expresión” (“as a stylistic element or mere vehicle of expression” [Shaw 217]), language was revealed to have “relaciones más secretas con lo real” [“more secretive relations with the real” [Shaw 217]]. By the 1970s in Guatemala, as elsewhere, the majority of new novelists rejected the mimetic function of language and heavily criticized the possibility of historical representation. Over and against the realist authors, the Guatemalan new novel challenged readers' conceptions of the real by placing “opposing perspectives and conflicting versions of reality within their textual discourse” (Millar 14). By producing these “alternative and oppositional representations of Guatemalan history” (Millar 14), these authors sought to subvert and thus undermine the very possibility of historical representation. This represented a strong contrast to Guatemalan texts published prior to 1976, which had given “readers identity through the exclusion of the ambiguities and connotations of language” and had suggested the transparency of narrated action and its transformation into “reality” (Arias, “Literary Production” 20). What the reader read was presumably what had really happened. In contrast, instead of attempting to depict the chaos of the armed conflict, the new novel allegorized it. By emphasizing the text's “voz persuasiva interior, que a modo de alegoría

¹¹² Shaw's text highlights several key characteristics of the new novel. See especially chapter 7 for a summary of those elements.

juega con variantes históricas posibles” (“interior persuasive voice, which by means of allegory plays with possible historical variants” [Arias, “Conciencia” 44]), authors sought to undermine the authoritative discourses of the past and foster a more active participation on the part of the reader. As Arias writes, in the new novel “[i]t is the readers who must produce the meaning of the text” (“Literary Production” 20). The underlying assumption, of course, was that the text could not access that meaning itself.

In its emphasis on the active participation of the reader, the new novel rejected the assumed correspondence between text and historical reality. Linguistically speaking, the rejection of the mimetic function of language involved a refusal to collapse the distance between signifier and signified; indeed, that gap became stretched and amplified. Taking language as its primary focus and highlighting the interplay of divergent narrative discourses, the new novel privileged signifiers that appeared to float relatively autonomously, instead of being tied to historical reality. This technique assumed a fundamental “impossibility of bearing witness” (Agamben *Remnants* 39) to reality in language, particularly when that reality was as horrific as it was in Guatemala during the Internal Armed Conflict. In other words, Guatemalan reality and the atrocities of *La violencia* had become unspeakable. As a result, the focus turned to language itself and the impossibility of reaching the non-symbolic. Language had become an impossibility, and thus all forms of violence—including torture—were rendered “unspeakable.”

At times, the novels emphasized the heterogeneous nature of language in Guatemala. Drawing on Bakhtin, Arias notes that in both the novel and in life, “every utterance is necessarily spoken in some ‘dialect,’ ‘jargon,’ or ‘speech’ [...] that carries and implies an attitude of those who speak in that way at a given time and in a given

milieu. The novelist's art is the orchestrating of a verbal 'polyphony' that is itself an index to social and ideological conflict" ("Literary Production" 17). At other moments, greater emphasis was placed on revealing the impossibility of understanding the reality of the armed conflict. The meaning of history had become difficult to determine; it was no longer useful to present a single vision of reality. Therefore, literature shifted its emphasis from "traducir la experiencia a través del lenguaje" ("translating experience through language" [Arias, "Nueva narrativa" 10]) to "vivir el lenguaje a través de la destrucción de las representaciones convencionales de la realidad" ("living language through the destruction of conventional representations of reality" [Arias, "Nueva narrativa" 10]). The goal was to indicate the impossibility of narrating the real. This distrust in the possibility of portraying reality signified a corresponding distrust in language itself. For that reason, language became "the novel's real protagonist" ("Literary Production" 25). For the new novelists, in order to illustrate the traumatic impossibility of narrating the violence of the war, "language must be destroyed, opened up, dissected, and understood for what it is" ("Literary Production" 25). Its meaning was purely derivative, constructed by readers as they attempted to piece together the kaleidoscopic and often contradictory images of the text, in the same way that they tried to find meaning in the chaos of Guatemalan society.

In addition to its aesthetic aspects, the new narrative in Guatemala remained deeply motivated by socio-political concerns.¹¹³ Because previous techniques had proven insufficient for depicting the violence of the armed conflict and the terror which was

¹¹³ This is not to suggest that this was not true elsewhere in Latin America. For a more in-depth analysis of these socio-political factors in relation to other movements in Guatemala, as well as a treatment of the link between failed attempts at modernization and the growth of new novel in literature, see Arias, "Literary Production and Political Crisis in Central America" (1991).

running rampant in all sectors of society, Guatemalan authors began to explore new ways to “echo the destruction of ... society, portray its social chaos, and pose the difficulty of apprehending the meaning of life itself when it is degraded by war and tragedy” (Arias, “Literary Production” 19). As life during the war became more unstable and uncertain, fiction began to accentuate the many contradictions and oppositions of society. The idea was that, by training readers to navigate the linguistic labyrinths of new fiction and to derive meaning from texts that initially seemed meaningless, these readers might also discover methods for coping with and perhaps even discerning meaning in the socio-political chaos that surrounded them.

Yet in granting more interpretive freedom to the reader, authors simultaneously hoped to limit the interpretive options to those of a “political nature” (Arias, “Literary Production” 20). Arias surmises: “It is as if the readers are privy to a brain-storm session in political strategy, in order to be able to determine what to do next. The novel displays all the possible scenarios and alternatives to the readers. But the readers have to make the choice” (“Literary Production” 20). The majority of Central American new novels were written by those who were “sympathetic to, or militants of the ‘New Left’” (Arias, “Literary Production” 20). As they reacted politically against the extremes of the 1950s communist party policies, their aesthetic choices mirrored their own political agendas, especially considering the fact that communist writers in the 1950s tended to write “realist texts with an authoritarian cast” (Arias, “Literary Production” 20).¹¹⁴ In giving freedom to the reader to participate imaginatively in the processes of political planning, authors sought to open up avenues of interaction and protest that had become impossible

¹¹⁴ Arias mentions the Salvadoran poet and novelist Roque Dalton as a case in point (“Literary Production” 20).

in the wider socio-political arena. Social chaos thereby stimulated experimentation regarding the relationship between author, text and reader (Arias, "Literary Production" 20). The literary text became "nothing less than a game of appearances" in which any possibility of deriving a simple or straightforward meaning has been lost; indeed, as the reader approaches the text, the best case scenario is that she will encounter "a series of fragmented variations like the images seen in a broken mirror" (Arias, "Literary Production" 25). From this fragmented presentation, the reader must attempt to construct meaning for herself:

The textual material passes before the eyes of the reader and he or she perceives the underlying oral nature of the writing, the phonetic fact of a voice preceding the writing of the text. While reading the written tale, the reader must at the same time call upon unwritten elements in order to construct semantic meaning. In this way, the narrator/reader relationship is altered. The text closes upon itself in the ambiguity and opacity of the systems of signs that confront and respond to one another ad infinitum. (Arias, "Literary Production" 25)

Arias draws on Bakhtin's conception of polyphony in order to emphasize the confusion of semantic levels and the rupture of "syntactic linearity" in the text (Arias, "Literary Production" 25). In accentuating the degree to which the "narrative signposts" have been repeatedly erected and obscured, Arias suggests that the new novel seeks to recreate the uncertainty of real life in Guatemala.¹¹⁵ Thus unlike *testimonio*, which sought to

¹¹⁵ Despite the numerous emphases on the plurality of meanings and the multiplicity of semantic references, however, the Guatemalan new novel is markedly uncomplicated regarding the tone or nature of the witnesses' response. In fact, in his discussion of the Guatemalan new novels published between 1976 and 1982, Seymour Menton suggests that there are essentially two basic categories: "the realist and the carnivalesque" (94). According to Menton, the categorization depends on the extent to which the individual novel relies on either despair or humor to communicate the chaos of society. The first category, "the realist," focuses on groups of young men who are "either committed to or disillusioned with the guerrilla movement of the 1960s" and therefore tend to be "essentially pessimistic" (Menton 94). The interpretive response evoked in the reader is often similarly negative and suspicious of attempts to resist state control. The carnivalesque new novels, on the other hand, rely much more heavily on satire and even humor, and they typically "culminate in the triumph of the individual picaresque hero against the archetypal dictator" (94). Yet I have chosen not to follow Menton's classification given that "realist" is an ambiguous and highly problematic term. In Guatemalan, the term "realist" is more frequently used to describe the previous fiction of Asturias and Monteforte Toledo.

overwrite uncertainty with evidence and an emphasis on detail, the new novel celebrates doubt and ambiguity by employing a rhetoric of uncertainty in the text. Readers, Arias claims, must actively participate in finding a way out of that uncertainty by determining the significance of an event for themselves (Arias, "Literary Production" 25).

This attempt to call upon "unwritten elements" in the reader reveals startling similarities with current conceptions of spectral criticism and, as noted above, further highlights the new novel's attempt to narrate the haunting qualities of society.¹¹⁶ When the text attempts to point beyond itself to "the subterranean and the absent," a haunting occurs whereby certain words and phrases take on "phantomatic status" (Punter 264).¹¹⁷ Clearly, authors of the new novel are aware of the state's attempts to blur the lines between the known and the unknown. Their explicit attempts to construct language games in their texts around "the absent" seek to reveal the ways in which the state haunted the Guatemalan psyche.

As I will argue throughout the remainder of this chapter, this emphasis on "the absent" reveals a very particular conception of the relationship between language and the

¹¹⁶ David Punter, in his treatment of current trends in spectral criticism, suggests that "the act of reading is of an uncanny nature" in that "any involvement with or in literature is inseparable from the phantom, the ghost" (260). Punter here draws on the work of Maurice Blanchot and reading as the "inevitable encounter with what is dead, with what is not yet dead, and with what ineffably fails to declare its status in relation to death, resurrection and the phantom" (Punter 259). Blanchot writes:

What makes the 'miracle' of reading more singular still, and has perhaps something to say for the significance of magic in general, is that here the rock and the tomb, besides containing the corpse-like void that has to be revived, represent the presence, albeit a hidden presence, of what will be revealed. To roll away the rock, to dynamite it, is indeed a miraculous undertaking; but it is one we are constantly performing in everyday conversation; at every hour of the day we converse with this Lazarus – dead for three days, or since the beginning of time – who, under his finely woven winding cloth and sustained by the most refined conventions, answers us and talks to us in the privacy of our hearts. (qtd. in Punter 259)

¹¹⁷ Punter further writes, "[N]o word can be understood in terms of its own claim to status, its own referent; often the words we use, the words we read, can only be paradoxically understood as responses to prior signals, more originary forms, forms that remain incomprehensible in themselves" (264). Hence the importance of language as the focal point in the new novel. Its language games and varied attempts to rupture the path between signifier and signified indicate the haunting nature of the texts.

non-symbolic. As I suggested in the Introduction, conceiving of the non-symbolic as “absent” and as the other of language is not uncommon in literature dealing with violence. Indeed, the new novel’s emphasis on the unspeakable and the corresponding attempt to “silence” violence within literature is not a new idea. In her study *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett* (2003), Elizabeth Loevlie notes that one of the main critical approaches to silence has been Holocaust literature (16), which would extend to other literatures of genocide, including Guatemala. It is not uncommon for Holocaust literature to draw on silence and absence as a means to designate the unsayable: “that which is inhuman or an unspeakable atrocity” (Loevlie 16). For many, therefore, in the face of such seemingly unnameable atrocities any attempt to speak the evils of genocide runs the risk of reducing the horrors to everyday language. Indeed, “[t]o suggest that it is possible to talk of the events of the Holocaust is often seen to imply that these events are explicable and that they can be made meaningful” (Loevlie 16-17). Over and against such attempts to explain Auschwitz, thinkers such as Theodor Adorno—who famously asserted, “No poetry after Auschwitz”—and Hannah Arendt have argued that that only proper response to such horrors is silence (Loevlie 16). The problem, according to Loevlie, is that much of the literature concerning this tradition continues to speak of silence negatively, relying on a dualistic conception of silence that retreats behind the defense of the unsayable.

As noted in the Introduction to the present study, silence is a seductive concept for many reasons. For thousands of years the “Dream of Silence” has captivated the imaginations and the desires of countless millions of people (Loevlie 13).¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, however, this type of silence—which is posited as “congruent with a sense

¹¹⁸ For a more sustained treatment of the “Dream of Silence,” see the Introduction to the present study.

of a ‘beyond’ of language, a realm that is free from discourse and linguistic ordering” (Loevlie 11)—ends up becoming the dualistic other of language. According to Loevlie, it is true that such a conception of silence can serve as a viable means of dealing with that which is “unsayable” and “can accept that which the verbal expression must dismiss as irrational or illogical” (11). Yet with respect to the new novel in Guatemala, positing the existence of a realm of experience that is beyond language often results in a dualistic conception of language and silence that create problematic consequences. Before I turn to the novels in question, we must explore Loevlie’s conception of simple and complex repetition (76-83).

After her treatment of the “now” in Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* and Abraham’s “act of faith” in *Fear and Trembling*, Loevlie proceeds to explore the distinction between what she terms “simple and complex repetition” (76).¹¹⁹ She begins by noting that simple repetition is “the standard or dominating movement by which the literary text deals with the non-symbolic, with that which it cannot express” (76). In language very similar to Arias’ discussion of the fragmentation and confusion inherent in the new novel, Loevlie suggests that simple repetition is a “relationship of frustration”:

It is the text’s relationship, one might say, to its own end, its defeat in face of the unsayable that it strives none the less to say. Caught in this frustration, the text must create a dynamic or a gesture by which it indirectly says: ‘out there, beyond me, is the truth of what I am trying to say.’ The intention is to indicate the silence of the non-symbolic as the negative other of the text. The text attempts to gesture towards this silence, hint at it, point its readers in a special direction, lead them outside itself. (76)

This frustration establishes a “limit” of the literary text beyond which it places the non-symbolic. By placing the non-symbolic beyond the text and thus beyond language, simple repetition gropes and gestures at the non-symbolic, thereby “creating a certain ‘logic’ or

¹¹⁹ For my treatment of “complex repetition,” see Chapter Four of the present study.

‘system’ that refers the reader to the beyond” (76). This dualistic conception of the relationship between silence and language continually repeats itself throughout the literary text.¹²⁰ The result of this repetition is to train the reader “to seek an ‘outside’ of the text where truth might be found. As the text affirms its own limit, it bestows existence to that which lies beyond the limit” (Loevlie 76). As Arias has suggested, that was the precise goal of the new novelists: to provide readers a “brain-storm session in political strategy” (“Literary Production” 20) that would move them to seek a political “truth” outside the text in “real” life.

In short, by placing the non-symbolic outside language, truth is also pushed beyond language and outside of the text. In the words of Loevlie, “[s]imple repetition is the text’s means of affirming the non-symbolic *negatively* as that which cannot be stated: the non-symbolic is what lies beyond me” (76-77). Much like negative theology in the Christian tradition— which approaches the silent non-symbolic of God by emphasizing God’s otherness and inaccessibility from theological discourse—“simple repetition, by insisting on the non-symbolic in its complete distance from language, is a negative affirmation of the non-symbolic” (Loevlie 77). According to Loevlie, the effect of this negative affirmation is “stabilatory”:

We might for a moment imagine that the text and its relationship to the non-symbolic behave in regards to each other like water and oil. In other words, their boundary is absolute, but fluid. Simple repetition ensures the stability of these two elements by continually reaffirming them as opposites, by making sure that no ‘reaction’ takes place that would destabilize the relation. (77)

¹²⁰ Loevlie describes this dualistic dynamic in the following manner:

It operates according to dualistic opposites such as inside-outside, within-beyond, present-absent, silent-speaking, me-other, etc. According to these dualisms, the text defines the text according to its inside (the actual text) and its outside (the non-symbolic), and consequently defines language in terms of an inside and an outside: the expressible versus the non-expressible. Simple repetition relies upon and keeps reproducing, *repeating*, this dualistic machinery that maintains the non-symbolic as the opposite of language. (77, italics in original)

Simple repetition ensures that the boundary between the text and the non-symbolic—and thus between the reader and the lost object—remains absolute. The new novel reaffirms this boundary by continually testing it and probing its stability. In the end, however, the “other of language” remains inaccessible.¹²¹ As I will suggest, the new novel celebrates this dualistic conception of language and silence, particularly regarding attempts to narrate violence and torture. And though many of the Guatemalan new novels explore the trauma of torture, none go so far in their examination of its psychological and linguistic effects as Flores and Arias. In an effort to reveal the ways in which these haunting elements emerge in the Guatemalan new novel, the remainder of this chapter will focus on Flores’ *Los compañeros* and Arias’ *Después de las bombas*.

¹²¹ Loevlie writes, “We can conclude that simple repetition is a dynamic that repeatedly ensures and stabilizes the Dream of Silence as the other of language. It follows that it is a dynamic that precludes literary silence. If the non-symbolic is posited as the dualistic opposite of the text, silence becomes the beyond. Within such a schema literary silence cannot take place. Literary silence requires a certain shifting of the border between the text and the non-symbolic. [...] Only in the destabilization of this border can literary silence happen as the expression of the non-symbolic through literature. In other words, the dualistic system must somehow break down or dissolve in order for literary silence to occur. This destabilization describes the work of complex repetition, namely to transform or destabilize simple repetition and the stable conditions it has procured and thereby create the potential for literary silence” (78).

The Founding Text of the Guatemalan New Novel

The quintessential work of the Guatemalan new narrative is Marco Antonio Flores' *Los compañeros* (1976). Called the “texto fundador de la nueva novela guatemalteca” (“the founding text of the Guatemalan new novel” [Hernández]), *Los compañeros* became an instant phenomenon in Guatemala. Critics outside Guatemala also have recognized the significance of its style and narrative voice. The Spanish author and literary critic Juan Maestre Alfonso, for example, goes so far as to suggest that the novel is “una de las mejores obras de la literatura latinoamericana actual” (“one of the best works of current Latin American literature”) and of the stature of works by García Márquez, Donoso and Vargas Llosa (18). While such a characterization of Flores' work may be exaggerated, there is no doubt that with this novel Flores successfully broke with the established literary tradition and founded a new movement in Guatemala.¹²²

The novel is structured around the narratives of four friends—El Bolo, Chucha Flaca, El Rata, and El Patojo—and one lover—Tatiana—who, despite the different trajectories of their lives, all find themselves traumatized and haunted by the violence of the war. The events depicted in the novel occur between 1942 and 1967, and though each chapter carries a specific date, the narration jumps with apparent randomness from the present to numerous and seemingly unrelated pasts. El Bolo, considered by many to be a semi-autobiographical representation of Flores himself, could easily be considered the most significant of the four protagonists. After all, five of the thirteen narrative sequences

¹²² Rivera remarks that the significance of this work lies in the fact that it marks the end of a “prolongado silencio” (59). He notes that after the novels of Asturias and Monteforte Toledo, “no se había escrito en ese país una obra que trascendiera los linderos locales. Las novelas aparecidas en un lapso de más de veinte años resultan excesivamente limitadas en cuanto a su interés temático y su calidad literaria” (59). In fact, he further suggests that this paucity of ground-breaking novels could be extended to apply to all of Central America, the only possible exception being Nicaragua's *Trágame tierra*, by Lizardo Chávez Alfaro (Rivera 59).

are dedicated to him (chapters 1, 4, 9, 11 and 13), more than to any other character, even though he is politically the least involved of the revolutionaries. His participation in the guerrilla movement is limited to a single trip to Cuba in 1962; other descriptions of his life are almost exclusively of a personal nature, focusing primarily on his relationship with his intrusive mother. Only at the end of the novel does El Bolo equate this tyranny at home with the terror of life in Guatemala:

No voy a volver nunca más, no voy a regresar nunca mi pinche guatemalita de la asunción, a meterme a ese hoyo que me destruye, que me ningunea, que me asfixia [...] no voy a regresar a casa de mi madre, al lado de mi madre, al país de mi madre, al país de mi padre que no existe, a mi país donde no puedes nunca estar solo ni ser libre, porque a todos conoces y todos te conocen y matan y te matan y tienes que huir que esconderte porque si no te desaparecen te encarcelan te matan te torturan te cortan los huevos te sacan los ojos te cortan la mano izquierda te cogen te violan asaltan tu casa te roban todo lo que hay adentro no te dejan vivir en paz [...] te dicen lo que tienes que hacer y lo que no [...] se meten contigo y te mortifican y te matan a pausas o de un tiro y allí está tu madre y está el tirano de turno y está la policía que en cualquier momento y por cualquier razón te ficha te persigue y te mata. (298-99)¹²³

The descriptions of his mother blend seamlessly with the violence and torture of a country that destroys and asphyxiates, echoing the extent to which trauma has permeated all levels of Guatemalan society. If the possibility of return has been foreclosed, he suggests, then the only remaining option is to flee. Interminable flight becomes one result of the impossibility of making sense of the violence. Just as the new novel seeks to amplify the distance between signifier and signified, so too must its characters seek an

¹²³ “I’ll never return to my wretched little Guatemala to sink back into that hole that destroys me, that despises me, that suffocates me. [...] I’ll never return to my mother’s side, to my mother’s country, to the country of my non-existent father, to my country where you can never be alone or free, because you know everybody and everybody knows you and you kill and are killed and you have to flee and go into hiding because otherwise they ‘disappear’ you they imprison you kill you torture you cut off your balls stab out your eyes cut off your left hand fuck you rape you attack your house steal everything that you possess never let you live in peace [...] tell you what to do and what not to do [...] meddle in your life and mortify you and kill you by degrees or with a bullet and where your mother is and the dictator of the day and the police who at any moment and for any reason put your name on file persecute you pursue and kill you” (231-32).

escape from the violence, creating space between themselves and the reality they can no longer bear. El Bolo himself thus becomes a signifier that floats endlessly from place to place, instead of being tied to the Guatemalan historical reality.

Chucha Flaca, the central character in three of the thirteen chapters (2, 5 and 12), is also seeking a way out of Guatemala. He has embezzled funds from the Communist party and has then defected from the revolution. Fearful of both the police and the revolutionaries, he flees to Mexico in 1967 to live in exile. His escape paints an extraordinarily dark picture of Guatemalan life and takes on deeply psychological implications: “Pero huiré. Me iré de aquí. Tengo que hacerlo. La muerte ronda todas mis pestañas. Seguiré huyendo como siempre: de mis padres, del colegio, de los maestros, de la facultad, de la policía, de mí” (“Yes I’ll flee. I’ll leave here. I’ve no choice. Death haunts my eyelids. I’ll go on fleeing as I’ve always done, from my parents, from the school, from the teachers, from the university, from the police, from myself” [31, 27]). In fleeing Guatemala, he attempts to escape even from himself. His ambivalence towards his own life reveals the success of the state’s program of social control. This same theme of “fleeing”—escaping one’s reality in search of something better—is repeated throughout the chapters on Chucha Flaca.

During his escape, Chucha Flaca is aided by El Rata, who has renounced his life as a revolutionary and is now—rather unhappily—married to Chayo, whom he considers a monster (188). El Rata is the focus of only two of the thirteen chapters (2 and 8).¹²⁴ He lives his life from paycheck to paycheck, spending beyond his means in order to satisfy Chayo whom he cannot stand because of her constant demands and nagging (165). Yet he spends what little cash he has on beer and women, in order to add some excitement to the

¹²⁴ Chapter 2 is shared between Chucha Flaca and El Rata.

banality of his life: “qué vida más aburrida la mía de la casa al trabajo del trabajo a la casa los sábados a ponerme bien a verga los domingos a aguantar las puteadas de mi mama y las trompas de la Chayo el lunes otra vez a la misma mierda” (“what a boring life I lead from home to work and back again getting drunk on Saturday suffering my mother’s endless tirades and Chayo’s sulks on Sunday then back to the same old shit on Monday” [182, 143-144]). The same theme of flight is repeated again with El Rata who, though he does not attempt to flee the country, does attempt to escape from the boredom of and dissatisfaction with his current life.¹²⁵ His recurring feelings of worthlessness and his continual self-beratings lead to multiple and varied attempts to replace his lost hopes and ideals with sex and alcohol.¹²⁶

The fourth major character is El Patojo, the central character in three of the thirteen chapters (3, 7 and 10). In all three chapters, El Patojo is being held in a detention center where he is tortured. The descriptions of his torture are gruesome and presented in great detail. Though it is true that the other characters reveal various dimensions of trauma, the camera is unrelenting in its portrayal of El Patojo. The reader is given extended looks into El Patojo’s thoughts and desires, more so than with any other character, and the hypervisibility of torture creates much more focused attention on his haunted psyche. Though he ultimately dies at the hands of his torturers, he does not give

¹²⁵ For a detailed treatment of the relationship between flight and notions of ambivalence, see Butler *The Psychic Life*, 174-79.

¹²⁶ Butler offers profound insight into a possible connection between El Rata’s self-beratings and the new novelists’ concern about language’s inability to describe Guatemalan society. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler suggests that the state can regulate citizens’ desires and the feelings of self-worth. Indeed, regarding the state’s “social power,” she writes, “The violence of social regulation is not to be found in its unilateral action, but in the circuitous route by which the psyche accuses itself of its own worthlessness” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 184). Butler further suggests that this worthlessness can lead to a “loss of speech” (184). Following Butler’s argument, we can see in both El Bolo and Chucha Flaca a “splitting of the ego into parts” and the creation of an internal “antagonism” that manifests itself in “self-beratements” (Butler). For more on the relationship between power, grief, and language, see *Psychic Life*, particularly the chapter on “Psychic Inceptions: Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage” (167-198).

up any information about the guerrilla movement and can die knowing that he has been faithful to his comrades.

Before analyzing the torture scenes in detail, however, it is crucial to emphasize the overwhelming agreement among critics concerning the novel's pessimistic tone, noting especially their conclusions regarding its political message. Attention to the pessimistic elements has led to two standard interpretations of the novel. Either the readers come away with an utter loss of hope for the future of Guatemala, and therefore experience intense feelings of apathy and indifference; or they cling to the idea that El Patojo's heroic martyrdom might offer a glimmer of hope in his noble and even herculean ability to withstand the state's escalating violence. As I will demonstrate, a close reading of the torture scenes will render both of these approaches¹²⁷ problematic and instead will present the reader with a third option: the production of unfulfilled desire.

¹²⁷ To date, critics have not framed the alternatives in this manner. The grouping of certain critics into group one and others into group two is my own reading. It should also be noted that, while it may appear that the novel has been well studied, the vast majority of the referenced secondary materials appeared in a single collection of essays in 2001. Several of these were previously published as reviews in the 1970s and 80s. Despite the seemingly large array of critics mentioned in my discussion, the novel has not been widely studied.

Loss and Language: The Flight into Nothingness

Given the extraordinarily negative nature of *Los compañeros*, as well as the seemingly indeterminate nature of language, the vast majority of critical attention to this novel has focused on its hopelessness. In her dissertation on the use of scatological terminology in the Guatemalan new novel, Ana Yolanda Contreras discusses how the narrative style and irreverent language in *Los compañeros* seek to “llevar a cabo una réplica de la destrucción de la sociedad guatemalteca, representar el caos social en que había caído el país, y las dificultades de encontrarle sentido a la existencia en medio de la degradación producida por la violencia y la muerte” (“carry out a replica of the destruction of Guatemalan society, represent the social chaos into which the country had fallen, and the difficulties in making sense of existence in the midst of the degradation produced by violence and death” [3]).¹²⁸ Both in its language and in its presentation of Guatemalan life, Contreras reads *Los compañeros* as a novel that is “irreverentemente desacralizante y radical” (“irreverently desacralizing and radical” [70]). Following this line of thought, the use of scatological language remains purely destructive, offering no possibility for the implementation of societal change. Thus according to Contreras, the only political meaning that could be derived from such a narrative would be the unfortunate loss of hope in the utopian dream (i).

Mario Roberto Morales agrees with such a pessimistic conclusion, not only regarding the current government, but also in terms of the possibility that the leftist position might transform society.¹²⁹ In his article, “Marco Antonio Flores y la nueva

¹²⁸ Her dissertation focuses on the works of three authors: Marco Antonio Flores, Arturo Arias, and Mario Roberto Morales.

¹²⁹ Morales is one the major contributors to the growth of the new novel in Guatemala, and his novel *Los demonios salvajes* (1978) is often included as one of the three most important representative pieces.

novela,” in which he discusses Flores’ tremendous impact on the emergence of the boom in Guatemala, Morales also notes the importance of deriving political conclusions from the Guatemalan new novels:

Aunque el uso del lenguaje varía sustancialmente en relación con el realismo social, la ‘nueva novela’ siguió preocupándose de la indagación antropológica, sociopolítica y cultural, pero con una diferencia: el realismo social efectuó esta búsqueda por medios más racionales y analíticos, y la ‘nueva novela’ por medios más obviamente intuitivos y poéticos” (34).¹³⁰

Yet, like Contreras, Morales interprets the results of this “indagación” (“investigation”) as completely ineffectual. The novel remains, for him, a “[n]ovela de la derrota interior, de los derrotados en su espiritualidad y moralidad” (“a novel about interior failure, about failures of one’s spirituality and morality” [33]). In addition to its portrayal of the violent excesses of the Guatemalan military and police, the novel also paints a startlingly pessimistic view of the Guatemalan left. The novel’s profound negativity portrays characters who are “escamados, cínicos, descreídos y, sobre todo, moralmente derrotados ante el fracaso militar del movimiento insurgente, que los arroja al exilio” (“suspicious, cynics, unbelievers, and, above all, morally defeated before the military failure of the insurgent movement, which casts them into exile” [Morales 33]). Widespread disillusionment with Guatemala’s leftist groups inspired a wave of “irreverent” writers who emerged after the failure of the late 1960s guerrilla movement. Hence Flores’ criticism from within the Guatemalan left produces a novel that, politically speaking, only succeeds in revealing the “submundo de la frustración política” (“underworld of

¹³⁰ “Even though the use of language varies substantially in relation to social realism, the ‘new novel’ continued to worry about anthropological, sociopolitical, and cultural investigation, but with a difference: social realism carried out this search through more rational and analytical means, and the ‘new novel’ through more obviously intuitive and poetic means”

political frustration” [34]). More than any other of the texts of *los irreverentes*,¹³¹ *Los compañeros* invited criticism from both leftists and the more conservative Guatemalan status quo.¹³² Flores’ bitter portrayals of his protagonists, clear analogies of the actors of the failed guerrilla movement, reflect only skepticism and indifference regarding the future hopes for change in Guatemala. Indeed, the overwhelming sense of apathy that characterizes the novel has led critics to suggest that *Los compañeros* proposes no constructive political solutions, but rather presents protagonists who are confronted with a nothingness in which the only remaining option is despair.¹³³

This despair is further exasperated by the problematic nature of language and its ability to describe historical reality. El Bolo remarks, “Tú no tienes ahora futuro, ni presente, ni pasado, eres un tonel lleno de palabras, de imágenes que no podrás borrar nunca, que te perseguirán siempre” (“Now it’s you who have no future, nor present, nor past, you’re a barrel of words, of images that you’ll never be able to erase, that will pursue you forever” [210, 165]). While El Bolo’s past, present and future have been lost,

¹³¹ Other members of “los irreverentes” include Ana María Rodas, Mario Roberto Morales, Manuel José Arce and Enrique Noriega. See Canel 1992.

¹³² His novel also brought commentary from those who criticized the problematic absence of any mention of the “Indian question” in the novel. See, for example, Zimmerman and Contreras. Méndez de Penedo seeks to explain such an omission, pointing out that this novel treats only the failures of the first phase of the guerrilla movement, thus the absence of “tres figuras protagónicas de la segunda fase de la lucha armada: el indio, la mujer y el cristiano comprometido” (36).

¹³³ Rafael Menjívar, in his article “Marco Antonio Flores, cronista de la desesperanza,” writes that despite the technical innovations and the “riqueza del juego idiomático” in the novel, the novel remains a “novela de desesperanza” (29). Readers perceive “amargura de un sector de una clase media que en la lucha no logró trascenderse ideológicamente y, ante el fracaso, se decide por el escepticismo, la apatía, ciertos oportunismos o por lo que vendría a ser un suicidio del alma” (Menjívar 29). Despite this “suicide of the soul,” Menjívar nevertheless hopes to mitigate the skepticism of *Los compañeros*, at least minimally, by suggesting that Flores’ criticism is limited to his own experience in the leftist movements of the 1960s, and is therefore not an absolute denunciation in principle of all revolutionaries:

Marco Antonio Flores no absolutiza a la hora de la crítica; queda claro, sin duda, que no todos sufrieron de los vicios y deformaciones—radicalismos e idealismos, en suma—que caracterizan a la parte sustancial de los personajes y a la parte de la historia guatemalteca de la que es cronista. Se restringe a una capa de la revolución—la suya, quizá—que no trascendió hace dos décadas el manual guerrillero, y que convirtió su sensibilidad en dogma y cambió su realidad por otra que no aceptaba ... un complejo aparato político-ideológico como base fundamental de cualquier lucha. (Menjívar 31)

words always remain with him. Yet, as noted above, they lose their traditional mimetic function, and instead take on a highly disjunctive and fragmented role. For critics like Mario Roberto Morales, the gap between signifier and signified remains untraversable and the text “cumple la función literaria de iniciar en Guatemala el camino del buceo verbal, entendido como elemento estructurador del texto, para expresar el país, su gente y sus hechos” (“fulfills the literary function of initiating in Guatemala the path of the verbal dive, understood as the structuring element of the text, in order to express the country, its people and its events” [“La nueva novela” 83]). This “buceo verbal” (“verbal dive”) is clearly visible in the novel, even from the opening chapter. El Bolo’s arrival at the Cuban airport is intercalated with various scenes from his past, focusing more often than not on his abandonment of his mother’s home. With each step down the stairs, the scene jumps temporally and he recalls his mother’s words as he left her home:

Me detuve en el primer escalón y respiré fuerte. Por poco me ahogo del chiflonazo caliente que me quemó hasta el diafragma: azotón de pulmones. Miré el horizonte [...] Puse el pie en el segundo escalón, entonces los sentí: apretados, por todos lados los pelados. Comencé a bajar la escalerilla. “Siempre te he vivido cantando *-¡puta, mariachi!*- que seás un hombre decente y que hagás algo para el futuro. No siempre voy a vivir yo – *¡gracias a dios!* – para mantenerte. Es necesario que busqués el camino del bien, esas juntas ... no te van a llevar a ninguna parte. (13)¹³⁴

Her words prove fittingly prophetic. On the last page of the novel, he gives up hope of returning or of continuing his journey. He will remain in that nowhere: “Aquí sentado me voy a quedar / Chupando / Oyendo los bongos” (“Here I’ll stay / Sitting / Drinking / Listening to the bongos” [299, 232]). When he finally sets foot on the “ultimo escalón de

¹³⁴ “On the first step I stopped and took a deep breath. A great blast of hot air burned right down to my diaphragm searing my lungs, nearly suffocating me. I surveyed the horizon [...] I put my foot on the second step, then I felt them: tight all over, the buggers. I started down the steps. ‘I’ve spent my entire life—sounds like the start of some bloody mariachi song—trying to get you to be a decent man and make something of yourself. I’m not always going to be here—Thank God!—to keep you. You have to find the right path. All those political meetings [...] aren’t going to get you anywhere” (13).

la escalerilla (interminable)” (“last tread of the (endless) steps” [16, 15]), the scene returns to his mother’s home and he mutters, “Qué largo es el pasillo” (“God, this corridor’s long” [16, 15]). As time shifts back and forth throughout the chapters on El Bolo, the parallel between the *escalerilla* and the *pasillo* becomes ever more focused. Though time has fragmented, the seemingly interminable nature of his life remains. El Bolo laments on multiple occasions that “la escalerilla es interminable” (15, 16), implying that his escape from Guatemala will have no end. Yet because he refuses to return to Guatemala, “ese hoyo que me destruye” (“that hole that destroys me” [298, 231]), his journey becomes an aimless transnational wandering. This loss of eschatological hope signals how pervasive the fragmentation of life has become. He is alone and without course in a world that lacks meaning. His attempts to piece together the fragments of his life, so as to derive meaning in such a fragmented world, cannot but appear pointless within the novel. There are no clear structural triggers that cause the temporal jumps, and no clear causal relationship is drawn between El Bolo’s present situation and the memories he recalls. As the path between signifier and signified diverges into nothingness, El Bolo realizes that there is no final destination; the path has become untraversable. The “buceo verbal,” like the stairs at the gate, goes on ad infinitum. Even when we appear to reach the “último escalón” (“last step”) of meaning, time jumps again and we are right back in the “buceo verbal.” The fragmentation of time and the continual search for meaning culminate in the final line of this initial chapter as everything begins again: “Comencé a subir la escalerilla” (“I started to climb the steps” [29, 25]).

The impossibility of deriving any meaning from reality reveals two difficulties: that reality has no meaning, and that even if it had meaning, language would be unable to signify it. Indeed, Gloria Hernández, in her introduction to *Los compañeros: texto fundador de la nueva novela guatemalteca*, writes:

Los cuestionamientos que permean la obra revelan una profunda inquietud por el confrontamiento con la nada y por la imposibilidad de justificar plenamente las decisiones que se deben tomar. El sentimiento que reflejan los personajes se asemeja mucho a la náusea sartreana que no es otra cosa que el reconocimiento de la pura contingencia del universo. (11)¹³⁵

Nevertheless, despite the “pure contingency of the universe,” there remains in Flores the desire for social justice. Hernández writes, “Flores cree que algún día llegará para Guatemala la hora de la justicia social, aunque no por los medios que la novela describe” (“Flores believes that some day the time of social justice will arrive, though not by the means described in the novel” [11]). Of course, that does not mean that the desire itself does not figure forth in the text. In fact, this desire manifests itself in several ways, the first of which concerns language itself.

Despite the clear disruption between signifier and signified—and the corresponding construction of the non-symbolic as the other of language and its relocation in a realm beyond language—the desire for language’s lingering ability to signify remains. I must stress “lingering” because the text seems to suggest that language does retain, at particular moments, the ability to create from the ruins of society a glimpse of its reconstruction. Even though the Guatemalan new novel sought to amplify the gap between signifier and signified, it also hoped to retain some form of political meaning,

¹³⁵ “The questionings that permeate the work reveal a profound restlessness because of the confrontation with nothingness and because of the impossibility of fully justifying the decisions that must be made. The feeling that the characters reflect compares strongly to the Sartrean nausea that is nothing other than the recognition of the pure contingency of the universe.”

not within but rather outside the text. Hence my previous discussion of Arias' emphasis on the text as a "brain-storm session in political strategy" and the need to retain political meaning, even when it would seem that language has lost all possibility of signification ("Literary Production" 20). Thus there are readers and critics who come away from the text with a renewed hope for the future of Guatemala. Because the reader is encouraged—like the characters themselves—to flee from current reality in search of new possibilities, the interpretive freedoms given to the reader are simultaneously multiplied and limited. The idea is that just because someone like El Bolo did not find justice and became lost in that "interminable corridor," that does not mean such justice is impossible. The suggestion, therefore, is that it may in fact be possible to come away from the text with glimmers of hope. For this reason, the first interpretation of the novel—the overwhelming emphasis on despair and the loss of hope—is often complemented by other more hopeful readings. But where do we find hope in a novel so focused on failure and destruction? Paradoxically, it is only upon examination of the torture scenes in the novel that critics begin to perceive the possibilities of an alternative political meaning.

The Negative Epistemic Value of Pain

The torture scenes in *Los compañeros* generate a more lasting impact on the reader than any of the other scenes depicted. Yet despite their very graphic nature, the chapters describing the torture of El Patojo have received extraordinarily little attention from critics. Even articles that purport to treat the violence in the novel make only occasional reference to them. Rivera, for example, makes only a passing comment during his summary of the novel's plot:

Unos sucumbirán en acción entre la metralla del ejército o de la policía; otros habrán de ser asesinados, expuestos al sadismo de los torturadores; otros, perseguidos constantemente, se exilarán o simplemente desertarán, huyendo de la muerte, psíquica y moralmente agotados. Esta es, de manera sintética, la trama de la novela. (60)¹³⁶

The most sustained critical treatment of these scenes can be found in a 2001 article by Elisa Nuila,¹³⁷ but her discussion limits itself to the function of the interior monologue and the ways in which the perspective shifts when El Patojo loses consciousness.¹³⁸ She

¹³⁶ "Some will die in action among the shrapnel of the army or the police; others end up murdered, exposed to the sadism of the torturers; others, continually pursued, will exile themselves or simply desert, fleeing from death, both psychically and morally exhausted. This is, in a synthetic manner, the plot of the novel."

¹³⁷ Note that this article (published in Hernández's book) is an extract from her doctoral thesis, which was published in Guatemala in 1996. I have tried to find a copy, but have been unable to do so.

¹³⁸ Nuila notes that the novel utilizes two basic types of interior monologue: "el monólogo interior indirecto narrado" and "el monólogo interior directo" (90). The first type is rarely used in the novel, "puesto que la intención del autor es dejar que sus personajes se manifiesten libremente, sin intermediarios" (94). Nevertheless, though it is only employed three times in the entire novel, all three occur in the torture scenes. Nuila suggests:

El narrador, en tercera persona, interviene para dar a conocer aspectos que, por las mismas circunstancias no nos los puede hacer saber el protagonista. En efecto, durante las sesiones de tortura, el Patojo perdía por algunos momentos la conciencia y es entonces cuando interviene el narrador, o bien, para describir las acciones de otros [...] No podía ser el Patojo quien nos informara puesto que él estaba desmayado. (94-95)

Despite Flores' exclusive use of this type of monologue in the torture scenes, Nuila does not suggest a reason for this, other than to conclude that "estamos frente a un narrador en tercera persona con actitud omnisciente" (95).

does not suggest what political meaning these scenes reveal about torture, nor does she discuss its use by the state during the war.¹³⁹

If, as suggested above, *Los compañeros* is a novel of violence, not just because of the content, but because of the ways in which it rips apart signifier and signified, then one might conclude that the torture of El Patojo, which contains the most violent scenes in the novel, would be even more violent in rending apart the path between signifier and signified. If, as Rivera suggests, there exists a “violencia en la misma verbalización” (“a violence in the verbalization itself” [61-62]), the goal is to provoke a violent reaction in the reader: “las palabras no sólo se leen, se escuchan, se sienten, rompen las barreras del texto escrito y crean su propia dimensión radicalizándose en el momento más inesperado. Esta es una cualidad poética, la de infundir a las palabras connotaciones múltiples y provocar asimismo multiplicidad de sensaciones en el lector” (62). It is precisely its ability to provoke a multiplicity of sensations in the reader that makes *Los compañeros* so violent, and that makes its rhetoric of torture so captivating. For the few critics who do treat the chapters concerning El Patojo, however, the linguistic violence and the rending apart of signifier and signified are ignored. For many, the scenes gain a political meaning and purchase, and of all the characters in the novel, El Patojo is the only one who has inspired a measure of hope in readers. Seymour Menton calls him the “purest of the novel’s revolutionaries” (95). Lancelot Cowie argues that, of all the characters in the novel, “sólo Patojo es el más firme y comprometido ideológicamente. No vacila en el

¹³⁹ Regarding the use of interior monologue, Flores reveals in an interview that his use of this technique was inspired by the phenomenon of *déjà-vu*:

Sobre esa sensación está asentada la estructura de la novela porque la idea de que eso ya me pasó, está ligada a través de la experiencia de la psicología a que algunas sensaciones que has vivido las volvés a vivir bajo diferentes circunstancias. Pero es una sensación que ya quedó establecida en tu subconsciente, de tal manera que cuando decís eso y ya me pasó es que esa sensación bajo otras circunstancias y otros hechos, de alguna manera, y te quedó grabada. (Hernández 189)

proceso revolucionario” (“only Patojo is the most ideologically firm and committed. He does not falter in the revolutionary process” [166]). According to such interpretations, El Patojo’s ability to withstand the intense pain of torture confers upon him a strength of character and an unflinching loyalty to the revolutionary cause. In fact, describing his death, Leona Nickless suggests that “a pesar de las circunstancias humillantes y su falta de sentido, la suya es una muerte noble y heroica puesto que permanece fiel a su compromiso” (“despite the humiliating circumstances and its lack of sense, his is a noble and heroic death since he remains faithful to his commitment” [133]). According to this second group of critics—those who see a glimmer of optimism in the novel—El Patojo provides readers with the hope that the revolutionary struggle has not been in vain.

Unfortunately, such readings remain largely superficial, trusting faithfully, and often blindly, not only in El Patojo’s own interior monologues and his perception of the situation, but also in other characters’ thoughts about his detainment and death. For example, Chucha Flaca clearly romanticizes El Patojo’s suffering:

Lo más jodido fue que no petateó de a vergazo, sino que herido se lo llevaron al cuarto cuerpo y allí lo morongasieron cuatro días seguidos hasta que lo hicieron reventar. ... Debe ser jodido que lo maten a uno a palos. Pero a cada quien lo suyo, aquél era huevudazo; debe haber aguantado como los machos hasta el final. Ojalá. Ninguna de las casas que él conocía cayó. (44-45, italics in original)¹⁴⁰

In suggesting that El Patojo held out against the torturers, Chucha Flaca idealizes his torture as an event that demonstrated not only El Patojo’s fidelity to the movement, but

¹⁴⁰ “The bugger is that he didn’t die straight away, he was wounded and taken to the 4th Precinct and there they tortured him for four days consecutively until they killed him. [...] It must be terrible to be beaten to death. But every man meets death his own way. He had balls. He must have resisted like a man right to the end. I hope so. None of the safe houses that he knew about fell” (38).

also his manhood.¹⁴¹ This, of course, assigns torture a meaning that, as we saw in chapter one of this study, is highly questionable. Even El Patojo romanticizes his own situation:

... entonces me escupieron con desprecio / comunista maldito, te vamos a matar, ¿oíste? / Nada me importaba, estaba cansado, hicieran lo que hicieran no me iban a sacar una sola palabra, si yo hubiera hablado caen todos los dirigentes de la Resistencia Central, pero no iban a sacarme nada. Gritaban, gesticulaban, buscaban, hurgaban, pero nunca supieron nada ... (231-32)¹⁴²

Implicit in his argument is the idea that the interrogators are torturing him solely in order to extract information; hence El Patojo can die victorious, knowing that he has not betrayed his comrades. The optimistic interpretations of his torture ultimately collapse, however, because in presenting El Patojo's capture and torture as having occurred for the purposes of interrogation, the text implies that even though El Patojo held out, others may not. This possibility is compounded in presenting El Patojo as noble or heroic. Other less heroic characters, such as Chucha Flaca or El Bolo, might well have given up the "los dirigentes de la Resistencia Central" (232).

In fact, a closer examination of the scenes—when coupled with a reading of theorists like Scarry, Kahn, Ballengee, and Parry and their more robust understanding of

¹⁴¹ These are found in one of the interior monologues of Chucha Flaca. His thoughts are actually intercalated with the conversation of El Rata:

Debe ser emocionante morir combatiendo, verá vos. Yo siempre me he imaginado cómo fue la muerte del Patojo. Según decía el comunicado de las FAR, aquél cayó combatiendo en la montaña / *que montaña, en el cuarto toro le dieron negra a puro vergazo* / después de haber caminado cinco días "los valientes combatientes se vieron obligados por la sed a salir a campo abierto para llegar pronto al [...] río". Así decía el boletín que leí. (44)

"It must be exciting to die in combat, don't you think? I've always imagined how the Lad died. According to the communiqué from the FAR he fell fighting in the mountains / *What bloody mountains? They beat him to death in the 4th Precinct* / after walking for days 'the valiant combatants were forced by conditions of extreme thirst to come into the open to reach [...] the river'. That's what the report that I read said" (38).

In contrasting the public information received by El Rata with that known by Chucha Flaca, the text insinuates that Chucha Flaca in fact knows the real story, thereby lending legitimacy to his version of events.

¹⁴² "... so they spat on me contemptuously / Bloody communist, we're going to kill you, do you hear? / I didn't care, I was exhausted, whatever they did they wouldn't get a word out of me, if I'd talked all the leaders of the Central Resistance would have fallen, but they would get nothing out of me. They shouted, gesticulated, sought, pried but they never got a thing" (181).

the way in which torture functions—reveals that if we describe his death as noble or heroic, we assign a very problematic meaning to the event. When El Patojo assumes that there is in fact a reason for his detainment and the ensuing sessions of torture, his revelation has two consequences. First, it lends legitimacy to the state’s narrative by assuming there is an epistemic value in pain (Kahn). Ignoring the more insidious nature of torture as truth production (Kahn), such a conception fails to realize that one of the primary goals of torture is not obtaining information (Scarry), but rather spreading terror and creating a perceived background of social control (Parry). Second, in his desperate search to find meaning for his torture, El Patojo succeeds only in establishing the ground for its eroticization. As the linguistic violence rips apart signifier and signified, pushing the non-symbolic of torture outside the text, this creates a strong ambiguity regarding torture and opens the possibility for substituting other meanings. I will examine these two consequences in turn.

First, regarding the nature of torture itself, when critics like Nickless suggest that “a pesar de las circunstancias humillantes y su falta de sentido, la suya es una muerte noble y heroica puesto que permanece fiel a su compromiso” (133), such a conclusion presents a contradictory “sense” of heroism and loyalty to Patojo’s death, which the humiliating circumstances and their “falta de sentido” seemingly preclude. How can one remain true to—or give political meaning to—a suffering that is seemingly without “meaning”? Furthermore, such a conclusion also presumes that there exists an “epistemic value” in torture (Kahn 2). As noted in Chapter One of the present study, the public “spectacle of torture” has been replaced in modernity with the penitentiary. Because criminal procedure had become “skeptical of the epistemic value of torture” and its

relationship to public admissions of guilt, the significance of torture shifted (Kahn 2).

Torture continued to be practiced not because of any trust in its ability to discover the truth, but rather because of the ways in which the state employed it in order to create truth (Kahn 3). Torture became a secret practice of truth production that haunted the social sphere:

The torture that survives occurs in places closed to public regard, under conditions of deniability, and by agents whose relationship to the state is likely to be ‘shadowy.’ The modern phenomenon of torture has the opaque presence of the ‘deniable.’ It must be known but not seen; it must be spoken of but never speak itself. It is a political practice that cannot exist in public space. Nevertheless, to be effective the threat of torture must taint the public space. It is always just beyond view. (Kahn 3)

Therefore, we must approach these scenes of torture in *Los compañeros* not as if they represent violations of the law, but rather as demonstrations of a more profound political phenomenon, in which the relationship between individual citizens and sovereign power is revealed (Kahn; Parry). As I have noted, torture continues to be practiced not for the purposes of interrogation, even though the “question” remains a central component of the act, but rather as a contest between the state and the victim:

Torture was deployed in a contest over the character of the sacred. That contest leads to the confession because we cannot know the meaning of the body as signifier until that final act of speech in which the victim names his god. Every act of torture is a competition between the power of the torturer to demand confession and the power of the victim to refuse and die as a martyr to his own sovereign. (Kahn 30)

Yet once the practice passes from public spectacle to the “shadowy” confines of detention centers, as it does in *Los compañeros*, the possibility for martyrdom disappears. Since the state controls the flow of knowledge, it also controls the meaning of the tortured body as signifier. As discussed in Chapter One, even though torture is by nature polysemic, tortured bodies in Guatemala are given a very particular meaning within the

state's strategic production of terror.¹⁴³ Whether we trust in the characters' ability to know if El Patojo actually held out against the torturers becomes irrelevant. The crucial factor is that their inability to understand the tortured body as a signifier within the state's narrative—which we witness in their assumption that he was detained for the purpose of extracting information—reaffirms the state's narrative and reveals the characters' inability to assign torture new meaning.¹⁴⁴ Hence El Patojo's body, over and against those critics who want to interpret his actions as noble or heroic, can no longer signify anything outside the narrative of the state. This narrative includes the state's project of creating a perceived background of social control in which escalation and the "logic of consent" (Parry) are the primary goals of torture. Moreover, being a hero backfires for two additional reasons regarding the citizens' ability to resist the violence of the state. First, it forecloses resistance by elevating death as the heroic option. Second, because all other characters in the novel assume they are not and will never be heroes, their survival means nothing. So what is the point in their continued fighting?

As for the second major consequence of these passages—that is, concerning linguistic violence and the relegation of the non-symbolic of torture into a "beyond" that is outside the text—we must begin by noting El Patojo's desire to find meaning in his abduction and torture. Unlike the situations of other characters in the novel, who become lost in the chaotic and melancholic "buceo verbal" of Guatemalan society and who because of their interminable fleeing never find a "meaning" for their suffering or a glimpse of a better society, the romanticization of El Patojo's death and the elevation of

¹⁴³ Here I mean that bodies are essentially "polysemic" and only attain meaning within a specific context. As noted in chapter two of the present study, within the state's production of terror, bodies come to "signify" and gain specific meaning.

¹⁴⁴ These critics (and the novel, as we will see below) seem to be trying to justify the practice of torture; it seeks to give it a meaning that is highly problematic.

desire allow for the perceived possibility of closing the gap between signifier and signified. Therefore, despite the problematic conception of the purposes of torture by the novel's characters, the scenes nonetheless continue to be informative in what they reveal about El Patojo's psyche.

To begin, El Patojo believes that he has retained his capacity to think and reason: "Me van a volver a dar moronga. De ésta no salgo, de plano. ¿Por qué podré pensar todavía? Lo peor es que estoy completamente lúcido, la madeja de recuerdos está intacta, la película sigue rodando, tal vez en sentido contrario" ("They're going to torture me again. I shan't come out of this one alive. Why am I still able to think? The worst thing is I'm still lucid, the skein of memories is still intact, the film still running, although, perhaps, in reverse" [233, 182]). Yet it is clear that his psyche has fragmented. For example, if the linearity of time was ruptured in other chapters in the novel, here it is utterly destroyed. The torture scenes are punctuated continually by descriptions of various events in El Patojo's life, and it becomes clear that, despite his affirmations to the contrary, lucidity now escapes him. His confusion is apparent, and as he seeks to understand his current circumstances, he leaps mentally to two primary occasions: his birth and his first sexual experience.

The flashbacks to his own birth clearly reveal the psychological attempt to regress to his mother's womb. They also reaffirm my argument that the breach between language and the non-symbolic remains impassable. Indeed, the desire to regress to the womb represents a popular means of gesturing toward the "beyond" of language. As Loevlie notes, many who attempt to narrate their discontent with language will present the non-

symbolic in literature by drawing on psychoanalysis, specifically its emphasis on the pre-linguistic stage of the infant.¹⁴⁵ Loevlie writes,

In the Imaginary the infant experiences a continuous relationship with the surroundings. Its reality is immediate, not organized, fragmented, or separated by means of symbols. The entry into language is experienced as a major loss and rupture [...] in that it fragments and discontinues the continuous sense of being. Silence is identified with the pleasure of immediacy, of wholeness that precedes reflexivity and language. (14)

Therefore, El Patojo's desire to be somewhere "más cómoda" ("more comfortable" [139]) may reveal a deeper concern to return to the "pleasure of immediacy, of wholeness that precedes reflexivity and language" (Loevlie 14). As he is beaten and tortured, El Patojo returns to the womb because "[a]llí todo era tranquilidad, soledad y oscuridad eternal" ("There it was all peace, solitude and eternal soothing, calming, beneficent darkness" [67, 55]). More than anything, he desires to return to that "silencio" (67). During the torture session, when he begins to black out, he thinks: "[t]odo comenzó a ponerse negro, negro como su jeta y no dejaba de pegar y de insultarme / comuniste maldite / Todo negro, negro, hondo, hondo. Parecía que flotaba en un túnel de sonido" ("Everything began to go black, black like his mouth, he didn't stop hitting me and cursing me / Communist bastard / Everything black, black, deep, deep. I seemed to be floating in a tunnel of sound" [62, 51]). He remembers the feeling of uncertainty as he was pulled by forceps from the womb, his "globo de alabastro" ("alabaster sphere" [62, 51]). The violence of his death thus forces him to recall the violence of being born. But

¹⁴⁵ As noted above, another primary source of the "Dream of Silence" in the Western tradition is Christianity and its story of the Creation and the Fall. Loevlie writes,

The Fall into sin was also the fall into language. In other words, man is forever doomed to speak in fallen language, a language that can never grasp God or the Absolute and that constantly distorts any immediate reality. This story consequently defines silence as congruent with the sense of plenitude, peace, and a continuous relationship with God that existed before the Fall. (13)

Therefore, in addition to the continued disappointment with the proliferation of words and language, the association of silence with the pre-Fall or pre-Symbolic gives the Dream of Silence a powerful seductive appeal that is almost impossible to ignore.

the violence of his birth is also highly sexualized. The verb “eyacular” (“to ejaculate”) is used to describe the sudden release of calm as he leaves the womb (62). He hears “grititos de placer” (62). The amniotic fluid surrounding him is described like semen: “líquido viscoso, cremoso, blanco” (“viscous, creamy white liquid” [62]). These images make it difficult to discern whether he is referencing birth or sexual fulfillment. And thus the desire for his mother’s womb—for silence and the pre-symbolic peace and “pleasure of immediacy, of wholeness that precedes reflexivity and language” (Loevlie 14)—is gradually substituted with erotic desire.

This uncertainty is further complicated by the sexualized descriptions of the violence itself. The first chapter devoted to El Patojo opens with him receiving first a “culatazo en la frente” and then a “bofetón” that makes him bleed (59). Descriptions of this beating, however, soon become very sexual: “El vergazo lo zarandéó más de lo acostumbrado, sintió que la sangre bajaba bajaba por todo el canal intestinal y quemaba el recto, el colon; el hoyo del culo se cerró instintivamente: esfinterazo. Aguantaré” (“The blow made him stagger more than usual, he felt that the blood was going down down through his whole intestine, burning his rectum, his colon; his anus closed automatically sphincterised. I can take it” [60, 50]). The term *vergazo*, clearly derived from *verga* (“penis”), is now a popular term for a “beating” in Guatemala.¹⁴⁶ The sexual nature of the scene is amplified by the blood which runs down through his intestines and colon until it burns his rectum, culminating with El Patojo’s desire to close his sphincter: *esfinterazo*. To be a real man, his closed mouth must parallel his closed sphincter:

¹⁴⁶ It is claimed that during the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera, the secret police would cut the penises off bulls, and then fill the skins with sand or small pebbles. These *vergas* were then used as weapons by the police during torture sessions to beat the victims. Hence *vergear* became a popular term for punishing or beating someone, and is still used today.

“Aguantaré” (“I can take it” [60, 50]). Later, in another scene, El Patojo reflects that it seemed the soldier “[d]aba como si en ello le fuera el sexo, la vida, el alma” (“was hitting me as if all his sex, his life, his soul were in it” [51, 62]). From there he slips into the “túnel de sonido” (“tunnel of sound”) discussed earlier. The moves between pain, darkness, birth, and sex become an unbroken continuum of signification, with each eventually coming to signify the other.

In fact, the feelings of being tied hands and feet, of dragging himself toward the light (which also recalls the phrase used earlier for giving birth), of fear, and of holding on (*aguantar*) combine to stimulate recollections of his first sexual experience:

Traté de arrastrarme hacia las rejas, pero estaba amarrado de pies y manos, siempre esa sensación de estar atado de pies y manos, cuando traté de darle el primer beso sabía que estábamos solos, que no había nadie cerca, que la abuela se había ido a la iglesia y el abuelo al traspatio, que ella quería, sin embargo me sentía atado de pies y manos. Me arrastraba para llegar a la luz. Pero era mi prima (tus hijos serán como cerdos, con cabeza enorme y ojos saltones) y el temor me ataba, me inmovilizaba, me impedía tomarla, poseerla. Me puso las manos en los hombros insinuándose, la erección instantánea me detuvo, tenía que cogerla, no podía aguantar más, traté de estrujarle una chiche, levanté la mano con lentitud, pero no pude, la tenía atada, entonces me arrastré lentamente hacia las rejas de la celda. (64-65)¹⁴⁷

As the scene progresses, the distance between his birth, his first sexual experience, and his death by torture completely collapses.¹⁴⁸ Readers lose clarity regarding where one memory ends and the other begins. His mind and language can no longer distinguish one

¹⁴⁷ “I tried to drag myself towards the bars, but I was tied hand and foot, always that feeling of being tied hand and foot, when I gave her the first kiss I knew that we were alone, that there was nobody around, that her grandmother had gone to church and her grandfather was in the rear courtyard and that she wanted it, but still I felt tied hand and foot. I dragged myself to the light. But she was my cousin (your children will turn out like pigs, with big heads and bulging eyes) and fear tied me, immobilized me, stopped me from taking her, from possessing her. She put her hands on my shoulders flirting with me, my instant erection stopped me, I had to fuck her, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I tried to squeeze one of her tits, I lifted my hand slowly but it was tied, then I dragged myself slowly towards the bars of the cell” (53).

¹⁴⁸ Two lines later, he notes that his head feels “hueca”. It should be noted that for a Guatemalan reader, this use of the term “hueca”, especially when accompanied by such a highly erotic description, would take on another possible interpretation. In Guatemala, *hueco* is the most common derogatory term used to refer to homosexuals.

from the other, and thus the reader cannot discern where the torture ends and his birth begins, or where sex ends and torture begins. Thus language becomes confused. This is most clearly visible at the end of the chapter, where the episodes blend almost seamlessly:

¡Malditas tenazas que me sacaron de mi globo de alabastro! Ahora el vacío y este silencio que me aplasta los ojos y la garganta. No hay que hablar, no hay que decir nada, solo abrázame y bésame. Yo atado de pies y manos y sus ojos azules metiéndose hasta lo más hondo de mis nervios. Sentí todo su cuerpo pegado al mío, doliéndome, erectándome, excitándome, haciéndome correr la sangre, entonces rompí las ataduras y de mis muñecas comenzó a salir el sangrerío, los lazos abrieron surcos líquidos, el cuerpo me comenzó a doler, sobre todo el bajo vientre y los huevos. Me había ido al aire. La miré con vergüenza amishado, sin atreverme a decir nada, sin hacer nada, quieto, tieso, como mi pantalón que se empezaba a secar con todo y el semen. Ella no se dio cuenta de lo que había pasado. Sentí asco. Me moví para despejarme el pene del calzoncillo. El frío se metió por los barrotes de la celda y me desamarré los pies. Me paré. (67)¹⁴⁹

There are no clear transitions between one memory and another. Given the erotic nature of the scene, even the final verb of the passage (“Me paré”) can take on alternative interpretations. Either he stood up, or he became sexually aroused. Either interpretation is possible.¹⁵⁰ The point is that one description could just as easily describe either action. If torture is equated with sex, and if the violence of torture is tied to the violence of birth, then the allegorical mode of substituting one object for almost any other then becomes possible.

¹⁴⁹ “Damned forceps that force me from my alabaster sphere. Now the void and this silence that crushes my eyes and my throat. Don’t speak, you don’t need to say anything, just hold me in your arms and kiss me. Me, tied hand and foot and her blue eyes boring into the very depths of my nerves. I felt her whole body clinging to mine hurting me, exciting me, rousing me to erection, making my blood race, then I broke the bonds and blood began to gush from the liquid furrows that the ropes had cut into my wrists, my body began to ache, especially my lower belly and my balls. I had come. I looked at her timidly, ashamed, not daring to say a thing, doing nothing, quiet, stiff like my trousers on which the semen was beginning to dry. She didn’t realize what had happened. I felt disgusted. I moved to unstuck my penis from my underpants. The cold came through the bars of the cell and I untied my feet. I stood up” (55).

¹⁵⁰ We see this same verb used in a similar fashion in Arias’ description of torture. See below.

Of course, El Patojo's confusion makes sense following psychoanalytic conceptions of desire, according to which the continual substitution of one object of desire for another reveals an even deeper need to continue to desire. Desire, according to Lacan, remains a misrecognition of fullness. As noted above, the infant's entrance into language marks a profound rupture, for in the pre-linguistic stage, "the infant experiences a continuous relationship with the surroundings. Its reality is immediate, not organized, fragmented, or separated by means of symbols" (Loevlie 14). The passage into language is experienced as a loss of fullness since "it fragments and discontinues the continuous sense of being" (Loevlie 14) of the pre-symbolic. Because of this irreplaceable loss, we construct a fantasy version of fulfillment, and thus the desired object—as misrecognized fulfillment—bears no real relationship to the materiality of the object, but is rather an illusion. Thus desire is experienced most fundamentally as a lack. What we really desire, according to Lacan, is not the attainment of a particular object, but rather the persistence of desire. It is a "desire to desire," and thus desire is continually propelled by its own unfulfillment and impossibility. Because this desire is a construction of the psyche, it can be regulated (and manipulated) by cultural and sociopolitical ideologies. According to Judith Butler, in fact, the state plays an enormous role in regulating our desires, even to the point that we might come to desire our own wretchedness and subjection (*Psychic Life* 79). Butler writes that "a subject will attach to pain rather than not attach at all. For Freud, an infant forms a pleasure-giving attachment to any excitation that comes its way, even the most traumatic, which accounts for the formation of masochism and, for some, the production of abjection, rejection, wretchedness, and so on" (*Psychic Life* 61). Because the illusive original lost object may, in some situations, be replaced with pain

and even torture, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, we can see how El Patojo's might be excited and even aroused by his torture and subjection at the hands of the state. The confusion in the text regarding the objects of desire—and thus between signifier and signified—is understandable.

That it is understandable, however, does not imply that the confusion is unproblematic. After all, as I noted at the beginning of this section, numerous critics look optimistically upon El Patojo's "noble" and "heroic" death. What these critics fail to note, however, is the extent to which El Patojo might desire the state's use of violence. It is true that Flores' attempt to blend the descriptions together and thereby confuse the relationship between signifier and signified epitomizes one of the fundamental goals of the Guatemalan new novel, namely to reveal the failures of language to describe the horrific nature of the Guatemalan reality. The result of these confusions, however, is that in addition to being "unspeakable," torture becomes desirable.¹⁵¹ The equation of torture and sex, when coupled with the strong erotic nature of the language used by Flores, allows the reader to question whether El Patojo might desire his own torture and subjection. Textually, Flores does not offer a clear answer. The novel remains ambiguous, and in doing so, suggests that all are possibilities. The absence of a clearly defined object of desire creates a vacuum that El Patojo is unable to fill or understand. In creating this vacuum, Flores' novel makes a strong statement about the ambivalent nature of the relationship between state's use of violence and erotic desire. Clearly Flores' representation of the tortured body plays with the relationship between language and referent. In doing so, however, his rhetoric of torture can never succeed in wresting

¹⁵¹ We might go so far as to suggest that, psychoanalytically, it is desirable precisely because it is unspeakable. As its silent non-symbolic is pushed into a realm that is beyond (or perhaps, given the context, pre-) language, it becomes an increasingly seductive concept, much like silence.

control of language away from the state; rather, it only reaffirms and intensifies the uncertain nature of torture and its potential to create situations that “*resist* linguistic signification” (Ballengee 7, italics in original). As noted in Chapter One, the state’s use of torture during *La violencia* had as its goal the creation of ambiguity and unknowing. The military, through its use of torture and disappearance, established the boundaries of the social through a process that Judith Butler describes as “melancholic ambivalence” (*Psychic Life* 167-68). Unlike mourning, in which the object can be declared lost, melancholia is the result of the loss of a loss: “the object is not only lost, but that loss itself is lost” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 183). In Guatemala, this “unavowable loss” prevented the melancholic from knowing and speaking about that loss, thereby hindering the process of grieving. In regulating, and often impeding, the processes of mourning, the state played a fundamental role in the formation of its subjects. Its active participation in the formation of the individual’s critical agency created situations that not only resisted linguistic signification, also provoked a deep anxiety of the unknown. As noted earlier, such anxiety often creates the demand for an order that the state alone can provide (Cavanaugh). The resulting confusion regarding whom to trust and what to believe produces a strong ambivalence with respect not only to the state, but to life itself. This ambivalence or “*mala saña*” (Perera 44) is the “struggle that loss occasions between the desire to live and the desire to die” (*Psychic Life* 193). This confusion, Butler argues, may very well culminate in the desire for subjection at the hands of the state (*Psychic Life* 79), thereby rendering denunciation and counter-memory impossible.

In *Los compañeros*, we see the effects of the state’s project in the descriptions of El Bolo, Chucha Flaca and El Rata, but especially in the torture scenes of El Patojo.

Unfortunately, however, Patojo's continued confusion regarding the object of his desire reveals a strong ambivalence between life, death, and erotic stimulation. In the end, even though Flores' novel does attempt to counter-narrate the state's message of fear, its narration of torture succeeds only in eroticizing a practice that was always already intended to be a "striptease." It remains questionable, therefore, whether there is truly a model of political resistance in his novel and what role it can play in challenging the rhetoric of the state. Because of the overemphasis on uncertainty and doubt, at best, the message is ambivalent, in which case El Patojo's sovereign remains an unfulfilled and ambivalent "desire to desire." The production of ambivalence is merely a "simple repetition" of the state's own project.

Specters of Torture: Arturo Arias' Después de las bombas

*... sometimes in the dead of night, when libidinal fulfillments have their way, the ghost of the crypt comes back to haunt the cemetery guard, giving him strange and incomprehensible signals, making him perform bizarre acts, or subjecting him to unexpected sensations.*¹⁵²

*What does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and the invisible?*¹⁵³

We see a similar production of desire in Arturo Arias' *Después de las bombas* (1979). Undoubtedly one of the most important works of fiction to come out of Guatemala in the last 40 years, Arias' novel narrates the life of Máximo, a young aspiring writer whose life was permanently affected by the U.S. Intervention in 1954 and the bombing of the capital.¹⁵⁴ Not only did the Intervention greatly alter the future of the country as a whole, but it also resulted in the disappearance and presumed death of Máximo's father. The opening chapter of the novel follows Máximo's mother as she seeks refuge during the bombardment and worries over the fate of her husband. The second chapter, which begins after the bombs cease, describes Máximo as a child, wandering through the streets of Guatemala City and trying to avoid the puddles of blood and the piles of corpses, as he tries to find his father.

Máximo's journey, however, soon becomes not only a search for his father, but also for words. Máximo states, "Encontraré a mi padre a través de las palabras. Lo traeré de vuelta a la vida con las palabras" ("I'll find my father through words. I'll bring him back to life with words" [140, 167]). As he grows older, Máximo realizes that there was a

¹⁵² Abraham and Torok 130.

¹⁵³ Gordon 24.

¹⁵⁴ For more detailed information on these events, see Chapter One of the present study.

time “antes de las bombas” (“before the bombs”), but that no one will talk about it. His goal is “[d]evolverle las palabras al pueblo, llenar los espacios en blanco, los blancos” (“[t]o return words to the people, to fill in the blank spaces, the blanks” [117, 140]). In an interview, Arias notes the impact of these “espacios en blanco” (“blank spaces”) on the Guatemalan population, suggesting that the enforced silence during the war produced a profound existential crisis (qtd. in Volpendesta 19). As I noted in the Introduction, this enforced silence was widespread, and the dangers of speaking in public about politics created an atmosphere of silence. Confronted with this silence and “with an incomprehensible and absurd social existence,” Arias’ generation “dwelt in a prolonged state of political limbo” (Volpendesta 19). Volpendesta notes that Máximo embodies that “state of political limbo” in his continued use of a child’s rubber pacifier, which “signifies the subsumed political rage of his generation and its frustration at not being able to comprehend the source of its anger” (Volpendesta 19). The pacifier, according to Arias, stands as a symbol of “prolonged political innocence” (qtd. in Volpendesta 19). By his own admission, Arias purposefully creates symbols that “lend themselves to a multiplicity of interpretations, and therefore open themselves to multiple readings and to many points of view” (qtd in Volpendesta 19). According to Arias,

The sense was that since there was no knowledge of what had happened before and no context in which to apprehend ... reality—one is in a vacuum, in the middle of a tunnel without any light. All of that delays the process of the comprehension of reality. And there is the contradiction between the felt perceptions, which are intense, and the intellectual apprehension of that reality. (qtd in Volpendesta 19)¹⁵⁵

Máximo’s state of unknowing represents the trauma that affected all citizens during the war. The REMHI report, in its treatment of the effects of the culture of fear, notes that the

¹⁵⁵ This idea of being “in the middle of a tunnel without any light” reinforces the previous discussion of El Patojo’s regression to the birth canal in *Los compañeros*.

Guatemalan state succeeded in distorting “the boundaries between the real and the imagined” (11). As noted in Chapter One, state terror often purposefully sought to create such “blank spaces” in order to erode the citizens’ ability to discern what was real and what was unreal. As Cavanaugh argues, “Rather than set firm boundaries between reality and unreality, it is more profitable for the state to leave those boundaries confused and ambiguous. Ambiguity and unknowing create anxiety, which in turn creates the demand for order which the state provides” (Cavanaugh 55). In *Después de las bombas*, we see the effects that this ambiguity and uncertainty inscribe on the individual psyche.

Máximo’s life undoubtedly remains in a constant state of unknowing, and this aspect of his life, fueled by Arias’ own statements about the novel, continues to be emphasized by most critics. Zimmerman, for example, in discussing Máximo’s trauma, highlights the effect of the bombs on Máximo, noting specifically his “chronic case of hives” and continual use of a pacifier (Zimmerman 161). Notwithstanding the trauma experienced by Máximo and the silence surrounding what happened “antes de las bombas,” critics have failed to give due attention to one of the most shocking events in the novel: Máximo’s torture at the hands of the state. The scene is rather graphic, and in order to explore its significance fully, it first warrants an extended description of the violence involved.

The scene begins as Máximo and his love interest Karen are walking through Las Conchas park (89). Suddenly, they are confronted by six soldiers armed with machine guns, who demand to see their “huellas” (“ID’s” [91, 110]). The soldiers search the pockets of Máximo and Karen but do not find them. They suggest that a “registro más

enérgico” (“a more thorough search” [92, 112]) is necessary and demand that they remove their clothing. They tear off Máximo’s clothing and search him first:

...lo forzaron a abrir la boca mientras otro le metía dos dedos dentro de ella y sentía la náusea formándose y el hombre sacó la mano y salieron dos hilos de vómito por la orilla de su boca. Le levantaron la verga para ver si no tenía nada escondido y luego hicieron lo mismo con los testículos. Lo voltearon y dos le sostuvieron las nalgas abiertas mientras otro introducía sus dedos en el ano. No hay huellas, dijo. (93)¹⁵⁶

When they turn to Karen, Máximo protests and is beaten until he becomes quiet. When at last he looks up, he sees that they have begun to search her as well:

Le habían arrancado la blusa y otro buscaba el broche del brassiere. El temblor de ellos aumentaba y algunos sudaban casi tanto como él. El brassiere había caído y sus calzones iban hacia abajo y ella ya no gritaba ni pateaba. No hacía nada. Como una muñeca de trapo. La empujaron al suelo y le abrieron la boca mientras otro le metía los dedos hasta la garganta. Él veía que ella lloraba copiosamente pero no escuchaba ni un solo gemido, solamente el peso del pecho subiéndole y bajándole, le pellizcaban los senos y le daban vueltas y vueltas a su oreja postiza. Le levantaron las piernas al aire con uno de los hombres sentado sobre su panza y las siguieron levantando hasta que los pies casi tocaban las orejas. El hombre le introdujo los dedos en el ano, se sorprendió de no encontrar nada y trató otra vez. No hay huellas, dijo. (93-94)¹⁵⁷

It is imperative to note the public nature of this spectacle. There is no attempt on the part of the soldiers to hide what they are about to do. They are in a public park, and presumably, open to the gaze of all.

¹⁵⁶ “They ... forced him to open his mouth while another shoved his fingers down his throat and he felt the nausea rising and as the man removed his hand two streams of vomit appeared at the corners of his mouth. They lifted his penis to see if he had anything concealed there and the same with his testicles. They turned him around and two of them separated his buttocks while a third stuck his fingers into his anus. No ID he said” (113).

¹⁵⁷ “They had ripped her blouse off and another was fumbling for the fastener of her bra. They were trembling more and more and a few were sweating almost as much as he was. Her bra was on the ground and her panties were coming off but she had stopped shrieking and kicking. She did nothing. Like a rag doll. They pushed her to the ground and opened her mouth while one stuck his fingers deep inside. He saw that she was weeping, the tears streaming from her eyes but not a sob could be heard, only her chest rising and falling, they pinching her breasts and turning her artificial ear around and around. They raised her legs in the air with one of the men astride her belly and kept forcing them forward until her feet were almost touching her ears. The man stuck his fingers into her anus, and surprised not to find anything, tried again. No ID, he said” (113).

When one of the soldiers offers to continue by searching her vagina, he realizes that she is a virgin. They beat Máximo until he confesses that he is a virgin as well. Máximo and Karen are then forced to have sex. Just as we saw in the above discussion of the torture of El Patojo, despite the disturbing nature of the forced encounter, the language used is strongly erotic:

Abriéndole las piernas la sentaron gentilmente sobre el miembro que la esperaba, con cuidado para asegurarse que cada parte entrara donde debía. Uno de los hombres le sostenía la verga en posición de firmes. La empujaron a ella hacia abajo por los hombros y los muslos y ella se sumergió lentamente dando los más fuertes alaridos que había oído ninguno de ellos ... Cuando por fin él estaba completamente dentro de ella, ella se había desmayado... (95)¹⁵⁸

Unable to revive her, the soldiers turn them over “para que él terminara encima de ella” (“so that he would end up on top of her” [95, 115]). They strike him again and again to keep him moving: “Sacaron dos cachiporras más y empezaron a pegarle en la espalda, los muslos, las piernas, hombros y costillas. Él twistaba lleno de dolor y la excitación de ellos crecía con el ritmo de sus movimientos” (“They drew two more truncheons and began to beat him on the back, thighs, legs, shoulders, and ribs. He was twisting with pain and their excitement mounted with the acceleration of his movements” [95, 115]). The soldiers, as the primary witnesses to the torture, become sexually aroused. Their reaction, of course, accentuates the pornographic nature of the scene and its heavily erotic language.¹⁵⁹ When Máximo slows down or stops, they beat him to keep him

¹⁵⁸ “Opening her legs they sat her politely over the waiting member, carefully, to make sure the parts met properly. One of the men held the penis at attention. They let her down by the shoulders and thighs and she submerged slowly giving vent to the loudest howls any of them had ever heard, but he didn’t want to hear the screams, didn’t want to hear them. When finally he was all the way into her, she had fainted...” (115).

¹⁵⁹ In his discussion of the 2006 report on the mistreatment of detainees in Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, Kahn highlights the relationship between torture and sexual images. He writes that the detainees lost control of the meaning of their suffering. Instead of being forced to bear the image of the American sovereign, however, the power of the political was confused with a fantasy of the pornographic. These two forms of ecstatic power are deeply related. Has there ever been a war in which the enemy was not represented in a pornographic image? The grotesque character of the

“twisting.”¹⁶⁰ The last words in the scene (and chapter) belong to one of the soldiers: “Primer amor [...] No hay nada como él” (“First love [...] There’s nothing like it” [96, 116]).

Despite the graphically sexual nature of the experience, however, critics have often allegorized this torture scene. Zimmerman, for example, suggests that “the nightmarish forced sexual initiation in Arias’ book is perhaps the most dynamic expression he can give to the rape of values which comes with the new military regime” (162). For Máximo, of course, the scene is much more than a mere “rape of values,” and he cannot forget the experience, despite his repeated attempts to try. Indeed, textual evidence suggests that his torture has affected him even more profoundly than the bombs and the disappearance of his father. When the next chapter begins, three years have passed. We learn that Karen returned to the United States soon after her rape and torture and that she later died in a motorcycle accident. Despite the amount of time that has passed, however, her ghost continues to haunt him:

Máximo quisiera olvidar. Máximo no podía olvidar. Se le aparecía su cara en el aire, transparente, viéndolo. Pasaba donde menso se lo esperaba, hablándole quedito. Saldría él a jugar fut y allí estaría ella. Había estado en un funeral hacía un par de días. La había visto en la esquina de Libertad y Mentiras. Ciertamente se había aparecido en la casa de Amarena. Pero lo peor del caso. Empezaba a dominar las pocas, vergonzosas páginas que empezaba a escarabajar. ¿No acabaría nunca? (98)¹⁶¹

pornographic displaces with comedy the tragic character of martyrdom. Ridicule stands with torture as a form of degradation. Again, the point is to destroy the symbolic space of sacrifice by seizing the entire domain of the possible representation of bodily suffering. (Kahn 165-66)

The relationship between sex and the comic in Máximo’s later suggestion to kill the generals with laughter (Arias, *Después* 183) raises similar questions.

¹⁶⁰ When Máximo stops twisting, they beat him again: “Él gritaba no, no, y le decían que siguiera twisteando si no quería que le pegaran más. ¡Twist, twist, twist! El hombre dejó de pegarle y él siguió twisteando. ¡Twist, twist, twist! ¡Cómo estaba de moda el twist en esos días! ¡Twist, twist, twist!” (95-96).

¹⁶¹ “Máximo wanted to forget. Máximo wasn’t able to forget. Her face appeared to him in the air, transparent, looking at him. It came by in places where he least expected, talking softly to him. He went to play soccer and there it would be. He saw it as he went from bar to bar. He had attended a funeral a few days before. He saw her on the corner of Liberty and Lies. Of course, it had also appeared to him at

In this appearance of Karen's ghost, we see the ways in which past violence can continue to haunt the psyche. Gordon, in her study of ghosts and the sociological imagination, reveals the important sociopolitical aspects of such a haunting, when the "over-and-done-with has come alive" (Gordon xvi). The ghost, she suggests, "is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us" (Gordon 8). Ghosts make themselves known in order to bring us the message that "the gap between the personal and the social, public and private, objective and subjective is misleading in the first place" (Gordon 98). They appear in order to give evidence of a loss (Gordon 63).¹⁶²

It is interesting that her appearance occurs shortly after he has decided to start writing. Though he has decided to write, he cannot; the blankness of the pages terrifies him. He initially believes that his fear and inability to write stem from his lack of something to say. That is, presumably because he has not yet learned about the time "antes de las bombas", he lacks the requisite knowledge with which to fill in those "espacios in blanco." Hence the importance and often-cited significance of his journey in search of words. Máximo seeks to find the language that will fill in those blank spaces.

Amarena's house. But worst of all. It began taking over the few, abashed pages he was finally scribbling. Would it ever go away?" (118-119).

¹⁶² The relationship to Butler's treatment of the formation of the subject should be apparent. According to Butler, for the melancholic, "a loss suffered in the world becomes now the characteristic lack in the ego" (*Psychic Life* 187), a lack which must be continually reconstituted and reaffirmed. In this sense, we might interpret the ghost as "interpellation" (Butler *Psychic Life* 99) and therefore a "trace of alterity" (Butler *Psychic Life*, 196) that not only forms the subject as melancholic, but also threatens to undermine the coherence of the subject himself. For more on the subject as "reiteration" or "rearticulation," see Butler, *Psychic Life* 99.

As already noted, most interpretations of Arias' novel entail such an interpretation of his search, drawing attention to the theme of words and Máximo's conception of language as a means for resisting the state. According to Zimmerman, for example, the novel reaffirms a notion of revolution that highlights "the value and importance of literature as a counter or resistance discourse opposed to the discourse of power" (Zimmerman 163). He concludes that *Después de las bombas* "comes to constitute a mode of discursive opposition to the world created by the military state which arises with the intervention" (Zimmerman 161). According to such a view, the silence imposed by the state exists purely as a void or absence that can later be filled in order to resist.¹⁶³

Such a conception of silence, however—akin to a "semantic void" in which language does not exist—becomes highly problematic once we understand that the Guatemalan state did not merely silence its victims, but rather replaced their language with its own. As I suggested in Chapter One, through the proliferation of rumors and the very public nature of the violence, the state publicized its escalation of violence and thus provided multiple opportunities for the people to describe what they had witnessed. Rather than simply disappearing the violence and hiding it in the shadows of detention centers, in many cases, the acts of violence such as those described in *Después de las bombas* were performed in the open and in public spaces. Diana Taylor describes a similar situation in Argentina where "people were forced to focus on the given-to-be-seen and ignore the atrocities given-to-be-invisible, taking place around them. Signs indicated what the population was to see and not to see" (119). Taylor employs the term

¹⁶³ Volpendesta describes this silence as an absence of political voice, noting that it severely limited what could be said in public. He writes that "implicit in Máximo's declaration is the notion that language is the means to subvert the suffocating atmosphere of historical silence that the coup ... imposed upon the country, a silence that ... also polluted the normal, everyday discourse of the country's populace" (Volpendesta 19). See *Después de las bombas* 117, 141.

“percepticide” to describe this “self-blinding of the general population” wherein certain acts of violence were “given-to-be-seen” and others were “given-to-be-invisible” (Taylor 119). In Guatemala, as I argued in Chapter One, citizens did not cease talking about the violence, but rather the stories and descriptions of torture increased. This proliferation, however, only further confused the citizens’ ability to distinguish between what was real and what was not. In fact, as I noted, the state used a combination of strategies such as disappearance and torture that were “specifically designed to break down the distinctions between visibility and invisibility, certainty and doubt, life and death” (Gordon 126) in order to produce a society of ghosts and force the population to participate actively in the production of its narrations/fictions. In playing with the relationship between the presence and absence of violence, the state successfully realized a blurring and “merging of the visible and the invisible” (Gordon 24) that rendered all speech acts (rumors) simultaneously “silent,” and all violence both visible and “un-visible.”¹⁶⁴ The appearance of Karen’s ghost thus suggests a more profound crisis, a recognition that the “blankness” of the pages is not so much an absence of words, but rather the seething presence of a violence that has penetrated the very fabric of existence. To live in such a haunted society is to live “in the vestiges of your own shadow, in the gray shades of an everyday life charged with a phantom reality” (Gordon 124). Hence the appearance of Karen’s face represents an opportunity for challenging that “phantom reality” and reexamining the distinctions between “there and not there” (Gordon 6).

Yet Máximo continually refuses to acknowledge the ghost’s “seething presence.”

Though he is haunted by Karen’s face, he tries to ignore it. He sees the ghost, but he

¹⁶⁴ I borrow the concept of violence as “un-visible” from Gordon’s discussion of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as representing the “unvisibility of the hypervisible” (17).

refuses to let it speak. Her specter continues to haunt him, however, refusing to go away: “[l]a cara negándose a desaparecer” (“[t]he face refusing to disappear” [101, 122]). His continued refusal to acknowledge her ghost reveals his possible inability to deal with what happened to him in the park. Rather than writing about his own torture and rape, Máximo continues to obsess about the Intervention in 1954: “Quería saber cómo había sido el mundo antes de las bombas. Sí, eso. Sabía, poco le interesaba más que eso. Bueno, una que otra cosita, tal vez. / Estaba aquel otro rostro” (“He wanted to know what the world was like before the bombs. There, that was it? Now he knew, few things interested him more than that. Well, one or two other small matters, maybe. / There was that other face” [106, 127]). Karen’s face relentlessly pursues him, and he is unable to “sacar eso de la cabeza” (“get it out of [his] head” [106, 127]). His hope, his desire, is that by writing about the bombs, he will finally be able to “destruir el rostro que lo perseguía, que no lo dejaba en paz” (“make the face that pursues him, that gives him no peace, vanish” [101, 121]). As I noted in Chapter One, it is certainly true that the Intervention forever altered the history of Guatemala, marking the country’s transition into the time “después de las bombas” (“after the bombs”). Thus Máximo is right to be concerned about it. But Karen’s face did not begin to haunt him until after their shared experience in the park. Though Máximo had been traumatized by the bombings and the loss of his father, he was not haunted by them. Haunting can be differentiated from trauma because a haunting produces a “something-to-be-done” (Gordon xvi).¹⁶⁵ Following Gordon’s description, the

¹⁶⁵ Regarding the difference between trauma and haunting, Gordon writes:

Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot

appearance of Karen's ghost not only reveals the ways in which he has been traumatized by his torture; it also reveals that there is something he can do about it. In order for that to happen, however, he must give the ghost his attention (Gordon xvi). In order to understand the nature of the loss, he must allow the ghosts to speak to him. He must be willing to follow them.

Máximo, however, will only concede to talk to the ghost if he fails to destroy it: "Y fracándose en eso, de establecer un diálogo con él" ("And failing that to establish dialogue with it" [101, 121]). He finally succeeds in banishing Karen's face, but only after being seduced by Amarena, a gringa prostitute. In addition to being unable to write, Máximo's experience of being forced to have sex with Karen has also rendered him "desinflado" and incapable of performing sexually (110).¹⁶⁶ His "healing" occurs in two stages. First, he learns from his friend Chingolo of the revolution of 1944, and convinces his mother to tell him of the time before the bombs. His conversation with her is only intimated at the end of chapter 5 when she tells him to sit down and pay attention (118). The actual content of their discussion is not revealed until later when Máximo goes to see Amarena. Lying in her bed—while she is "jugando con él, contenta" ("playing with him happily" [139, 166])—Máximo tells Amarena what he has learned from his mother about his father's disappearance:

comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention.
(xvi)

¹⁶⁶ In one particular scene with Amarena, he screams that he cannot complete the sexual act: "Gritó que no, se disculpó, volvió a gritar que no, y a disculparse, no podía, no, los labios de ella en contacto con su verga. Cerró los ojos, su mente llena de algo que no era nada. Aquellos hombres, emplumándolo. No. Se mordió los labios. No" (109).

No creo que se haya escapado sin embargo. Hubiéramos oído de él. Las autoridades mexicanas dicen no tener un récord de su nombre. Los dientes de ella mordiéndole la oreja. Él dejaba, sus manos deslizándose por la espalda, esa espalda, suavemente. Debe estar muerto. Debe haber muerto en las calles defendiendo... Metete dentro de mí. Hubiera muerto antes de someterse al dominio extranjero. Morir para que yo pudiera vivir. Y ahora puedo tratar de contar el cuento que todos están tratando de olvidar. Sus caderas ya rodando, ella sí, contenta. Él pálido pero sin ofrecer resistencia, dejándose guiar, sus caderas rodando al ritmo de las palabras, sus dedos hundiéndose en esas nalgas morenas. Tengo que contar el cuento Amarena. Tengo que contarlo palabra por palabra. Mi estilo mejora cada segundo. ¡Ya lo creo! (140)¹⁶⁷

At this point he declares he will find his father “a través de las palabras. [...] Crearé al país con mis palabras. En mis palabras encontraré al universo y entenderé el eterno presente a través de mis palabras” (“through words. [...] I’ll create a country with my words. In my words I’ll find the universe and I’ll understand the eternal present through my words” [140, 167]). He then turns to Amarena and stares uncomprehendingly, “descubriendo por primera vez, ¿qué le había pasado?” (“discovering for the first time. What had happened to him? [141, 166]). He seems surprised that he has suddenly been able to perform sexually. Not only has he finally succeeded in talking about the time before the bombs, he has also—unknowingly—been seduced by Amarena in the process. He has doubly performed, so to speak, and can now return home to write. Only now has Karen’s face disappeared. No longer haunted by her ghost, Máximo discovers that the words begin to flow.

¹⁶⁷ “I don’t think he escaped, though. We would have heard about him. The Mexican authorities say they have no record of his name. / Her teeth biting his ear. He letting her, his nads slipping over her back, that back, gently. / He must be dead. He must have died in the street defending... / Come inside me. / He would have died before giving in to foreign domination. To die so that I could live. And now I can try to tell the story that everybody is trying to forget. / Her hips now rolling, she happy, yes. He pale but unresisting, letting himself be led, his hips rolling to the rhythm of his words, his fingers burying themselves in those brown buttocks. / I have to tell the story, Amarena. I have to tell it, word by word. My style is getting better every second. / I’m sure of it!” (166).

Yet for several reasons we must doubt the extent to which he has been “cured.” First, Máximo has completely refused any attempt to work through the trauma of his own torture. Following Gordon’s description of the ghost as a social figure, the appearance of Karen’s face clearly indicates a loss that Máximo has suffered, one which he himself has not yet come to understand fully. But because Máximo refuses to acknowledge the haunting, he refuses to understand and work through what has happened to him. According to Gordon, haunting “draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). Only by resting uneasily in the presence of the ghost and allowing it to speak will bring about such “transformative recognition.” In disappearing Karen’s ghost, however, Máximo forecloses any possibility of a substantive transformation. In fact, he is only able to disappear her with the aid of Amarena—who happens to be “gringa y diplomática y todo eso” (“a gringa and with diplomatic status and all” [168, 198]). Though the possibility that she is working for the government is never directly suggested, we do know that she has been intimate with high-ranking government officials in the past. And that appears to be how she succeeds in sneaking him out of the country. When Máximo asks her where she obtained the “pasaje alrededor del mundo” (“ticket for around the world” [187, 218]) for example, she simply replies “secretos diplomáticos” (“diplomatic secret” [187, 218]). When he presses her for her source, she says she attained them from Mr. Wright, “[u]n amigo de mi viejo” (“[a] friend of my father’s” [187, 219]).¹⁶⁸ Though he has learned the truth about the time before the bombs and expressed his desire to create a new country—

¹⁶⁸ See also the moment where she states, in English, “*My dear Mr. Wright! Lovely to see you again!*” (172). This scene is intercalated with the torture of Chingolo, lending further legitimacy to the possibility that she is aware of Chingolo’s detention and may, in fact, be involved.

to find his father and find the universe through his words—before he leaves Amarena’s apartment, he appears to capitulate to Amarena, saying, “Exageraré. Mentiré. . . . Es otra manera de penetrar dentro de alguien. Empezar mintiendo rápido y furiosamente y empezarán a oírme. Las mentiras son sagradas Amarena” (“I will exaggerate. I will lie. [...] It’s another way of getting inside a person. If I begin lying fast and furious they’ll begin to listen to me. Lies are sacred, Amarena” [142, 168]).¹⁶⁹ Her seduction has clearly affected him because suddenly, rather than exposing the truth about his father and the fall of Ubico, he chooses to exaggerate and lie. In fact, we must question the words he pens not only because he proposes to lie, but also because his inspiration is aided by a parrot. Though he has been thinking of purchasing one for some time, it is only during the sex scene that he makes the final decision to buy it, finally coming to understand that it will help him write (140). Immediately after having sex with Amarena, he buys one. And though readers, for obvious reasons, immediately doubt the effectiveness of a parrot, its arrival does happen to coincide with his writing. Readers then begin to wonder how much his writing is being affected by the “parrot” and to what extent his words will succeed in resisting the state’s control of language. Indeed, the parrot’s effect on Máximo is further questioned when it is revealed that the only statement the parrot makes in public is “Todos contra el paredón” (“All against the wall” [144, 171]). This raises doubt as to whether Máximo has become a voice of the state, ready imitate and “parrot” the fictions it constructs.

In fact, though he claims to have learned about those times “antes de las bombas,” his knowledge of the time “después de las bombas” remains woefully inadequate. While

¹⁶⁹ He says this just a few lines after claiming he wants to “decir todas esas cosas que callan los demás. Recordarle al pueblo de aquellos grandes años antes de las bombas, ese pasado que nos fuerzan a olvidar” (141).

Máximo is in hiding, Amarena tells him that his mother's house has been searched and that all his papers were burned (168). When he asks about his mother, she lies to him, insisting that she is safe: "Ella está escondida también, dijo Amarena, y no te podrá ver antes que salgás" ("She's hiding, too, Amarena said, and can't see you before you leave" [168, 197]). He hesitates, not sure whether to believe her, but her seduction is too strong. He thinks to himself "what the hell" and then asks about his other friends and Chingolo. She responds, "Vivitos y coleando. Sólo andan tras la gente cuyo nombre empieza con M" ("Alive and bushy-tailed. They're only after people whose names begin with M" [168, 198]). The reader knows that Amarena is lying to him, deceiving and seducing him once more without his realizing it. His mother has already been disappeared. A dozen men with machine guns abducted her in a "carro sin marcas" ("unmarked car" [166, 195]). On the page following Máximo's conversation with Amarena, we learn that Chingolo has also been seized and taken to "la *inteligencia*" (171). There the military tortures him repeatedly with electric shock "a ver si habla" (175).¹⁷⁰ Though his death is never mentioned, the growing fragmentation of the narrative suggests that his death is imminent.¹⁷¹ As for Máximo's mother, though readers never learn directly of her fate—only that she has been abducted—because of what we learn of Chingolo, we assume that she is also tortured and killed. Máximo never learns about either incident.

¹⁷⁰ Once again, we see the problematic conception of torture in relation to the confession and the discovery of truth.

¹⁷¹ The final description of his torture fragments into a chaotic jumble of ellipses and "blank spaces": Oyó la puerta abrirse. No... Listo... no... No abriría sus ojos... La risa... ¿para más? No... la música... ¡Twist! ¡Twist! ¡Twist!... La risa... Se irían si no abría los ojos... No... No... Sintió una mano en su tobillo. Estaba caliente... la risa... Lo jalaban... no más... Se resbalaba. Se resbalaba dentro de un sueño... No... Era niño... Los chuchos ladraban... La risa... Estaba caliente debajo. Frío encima... ¿Listo para más? No... Los chuchos ladraban. Alsita gritó... La música..." (177, all ellipses are in the original text). That is the last the readers learn of Chingolo.

Máximo, it would seem, is just as uninformed and unknowing as ever. In fact, after his seduction by Amarena and after he has begun writing, he witnesses the torture of a woman in the same park where he himself was tortured. As he walks throughout the city, he seems to be wandering aimlessly, unaware of where he is heading (149). But he ends up in Las Conchas park where he witnesses the torture of a beauty queen:

Escuchó los gritos. ¿Eran gritos los que escuchaba? Los soldados ya estaban en el parque y tenían a la reina de belleza tirada en la tierra. ¿Era la reina de belleza no? Ya le habían quitado la blusa. Grandes senos, sólidos. ¿Agresivos? Uno de los soldados se arrodillaba frente a ella. Estaba arrancándole los pezones con los dientes. ¿Estaba arrancándole los pezones con los dientes? Ella gritaba y gritaba y gritaba y gritaba y gritaba. El soldado tenía sangre en la cara. Máximo se paró. Habían otros soldados también. Y le sonreían. Él se paró. Ellos le sonreían. El toro seguía mordiéndola. Grandes senos, sólidos. ¿Agresivos? Ella gritaba, twistaba, gritaba, twistaba. Ella colaboraba con las guerrillas le dijeron los soldados y se encogieron de hombros. El loro les gritó ¡*Todos contra el paredón!* (149)¹⁷²

His constant questioning during this torture scene attests to the emptiness of his words and the “impossibility of bearing witness” (Agamben *Remnants* 39) to the violence around him. He does not really know and cannot describe what he witnesses, and yet we must recognize the possibility that he is sexually aroused by it. His description of the scene is strongly erotic. Even though the verb “se paró” could be interpreted to indicate that he stopped to watch, the repetition of the verb three sentences later, coupled with the confusion of subjects, could also be interpreted to mean that he became sexually aroused. Hence we see repeated the same production of desire that we witnessed in Máximo’s own

¹⁷² “He heard the screams. Were those screams he was hearing? Soldiers were already in the park, the beauty queen thrown to the ground. It was the beauty queen, wasn’t it? They had torn off her blouse. Large, full breasts. Aggressive ones? A soldier was kneeling next to her. He was tearing off her nipples with his teeth. Was he tearing off her nipples with his teeth? She was screaming and screaming and screaming and screaming and screaming. The soldier had blood all over his face. Máximo stopped. There were other soldiers around, too. And they smiled at him. He stopped. The other one kept biting her. Large, full breasts. Aggressive ones? She was screaming, twisting, screaming, twisting. She was collaborating with the guerrillas the soldiers told him and shrugged. The parrot screeched at them *All against the wall!*” (176).

torture scene, yet despite the strong similarities, he never relates this event to his own past experience.

One primary clue to the persistence of his past trauma is the continued repetition of the verb “twistear.” The term, first used during Máximo’s own torture, is the one term which is most consistently repeated in the other torture scenes.¹⁷³ Its continued repetition in later scenes, particularly violent ones in which Máximo is haunted by his past experience, attests to the fact that he has not been completely successful in disappearing or silencing his past trauma, despite the fact that he ignores it and moves on. David Punter, in his treatment of spectral criticism, asserts that hauntings often include the compulsive repetition of certain bizarre elements. Repeated words, images, or phrases are “[I]ike a stranger, like a ‘foreign body’ within the self, like a ventriloquist, calling into question the ‘authenticity’ of the words we speak even as we speak them, reminding us that ‘our’ words are always simultaneously the residues, the traces, of the words of others” (Punter 265). The repeated use of “twistear” when Máximo witnesses the violence of Guatemalan society thus calls into question the “authenticity” of his words, reminding the reader of the “trace” and “residue” of torture in his descriptions.

Indeed, the use of the term “twistear” during Máximo’s carnivalesque escape from the country signifies that he will carry these traces with him when he leaves. He cannot escape the specters of torture from his past, even though he believes he has disappeared them. Once again, despite the numerous critics who see in Máximo an attempt to construct a language that can resist the violence of the state, we must seriously question the authenticity and efficacy of that revolution. Zimmerman, for example, posits

¹⁷³ Even the torture of Chingolo, which Máximo does not witness firsthand, employs the same terminology: “Oyó la puerta abrirse. No... Listo... no... No abriría sus ojos... La risa... ¿para más? No... la música... ¡Twist! ¡Twist! ¡Twist!... La risa...” (177, all ellipses are in the original text).

that in the new novel words are organized “to go against the norms of spoken silence, the norms even of existing literary discourse, to create new distortions to get beyond the distortions created by Guatemala’s successive military governments” (Zimmerman 164). Yet if the new novel’s distortions, expressed in the repetitious use of terms such as “twistear,” are merely residues or traces of past trauma, then its languages cannot get beyond the state’s narrative. The specter of that past trauma has not yet been disappeared completely, despite Máximo’s renewed attempts at literary production. Because of his refusal to deal with his own torture and give its ghost the attention it deserves, Máximo will never be able to narrate the ways in which that which was “lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes” (Gordon 8) continues to make itself present.

In *Después de las bombas*, Arias seeks to present a voice that will find “some way out of the labyrinth of military-oligarchic power which has made of the national space one ripe for that polyphonic mix of realism and fantasy, testimonio and fiction” (Zimmerman 166). Unfortunately, however, Máximo cannot be such a voice. Granted, there exists ample evidence in the novel to suggest the ways in which Arias has attempted to question the relationship between visible and invisible, knowing and unknowing, signifier and signified, thereby seeking to wrest control of language away from the state and allow words to recover that which the state has rendered invisible. Zimmerman accurately points out that “the book is absolutely relentless in its playing—its reshuffling of historical symbols and tropes. The names of presidents, city streets, and highland locales become so much material in what is ultimately a ludic manipulation of space and time in a war of words against a military world” (164). In the end, however, we must

question the efficacy of Máximo's ability to give voice to that trauma. Máximo's refusal to speak to the ghost, coupled with his seduction at the hands of the gringa and the erasure of his own memory, reveals his inability to understand and work through what is happening around him. If Karen's face is "the specter of what the state has tried to repress" (Gordon 127), in vanishing it, Máximo merely assists the state in its project of repression and disappearance. In other words, Máximo can only repeat and "parrot" the state's narrative. His writing, far from being a way out of the labyrinth, simply refuses to acknowledge its existence. Arias has presented readers with a character who can see ghosts, a victim who has begun to see that "invisible things are not necessarily not-there" and that "that which appears absent can indeed be a seething presence" (Gordon 17). Unfortunately, rather than allowing the ghost to speak "in the interstices of the visible and the invisible" (Gordon 24), Máximo tries to make it disappear.

We can also see the ways in which this refusal to attend to the ghost—when coupled with his seduction at the hands of the American diplomat—also affects his search for words, preventing him from finding a language able to describe his reality. His inability to decide on the appropriate terms to describe the scene with the beauty queen is not simply an accident, but the stated goal of the Guatemalan new novel and its emphasis on floating signifiers. Arias' defends this strategy of the Guatemalan new novel:

Se reconoce que la palabra no puede referirse puntualmente a los hechos históricos. Los evoca, los toca tangencialmente. Es ese juego de deseo y rechazo que conduce a una escritura que, lejos de buscar la transparencia expresiva, se vuelve crispada sobre sí, se hace cada vez más laberíntica, más digresiva. ("Conciencia" 44)

As I have argued, however, this digressive and desire-producing nature of language— notwithstanding its self-proclaimed labyrinthine rupturing of signifier and signified—at

the very least produces ambivalence regarding torture, and in many cases can end up eroticizing it. Indeed, Arias' insistence on a "juego de deseo y rechazo" elevates desire in its impossible search for the "hechos históricos." As we saw in *Los compañeros*, this impossibility succeeds only in producing a "desire to desire" as desire is continually propelled by its own un-fulfillment and impossibility. However, because this desire is a construction of the psyche, it can be regulated (and manipulated) by cultural and sociopolitical ideologies. As Judith Butler reminds us, the state and its various apparatuses play an enormous role in regulating its citizens' desires, even to the point that we might come to desire our own wretchedness (*Psychic Life* 79). The scene witnessed by Máximo in Las Conchas park reveals not only the soldiers' pleasure in torturing the beauty queen, but also the possibility that their stimulation arouses Máximo. As we saw in *Los compañeros*, the insistence on presenting violence as unspeakable—rather than wrest language away from the state—establishes a linguistic violence that rips apart signifier and signified, pushing the non-symbolic of torture outside the text. Instead of challenging the state's narrative, however, the "absence" of the torture's meaning (its non-symbolic) creates only ambiguity and opens the possibility for substituting other meanings, namely the eroticization of torture. We see the same situation in *Después de las bombas*. Despite Arias' use of a rhetoric of uncertainty, signification has been neither foreclosed nor repressed, but is rather maintained in the repetition of the state's narrative and in the eroticization of the violence that Máximo sees in society.

Conclusions

The appearance of Flores' *Los compañeros* in 1976 and Arias' *Después de las bombas* in 1979 signaled an attempt to find alternative ways to narrate the violence of the war. Employing diverse narrative techniques in order to play with the relationship between language and referent, Flores and Arias sought to question society's capacity for bearing witness to the haunting quality of state terror. Yet more so than any of their contemporaries, Flores and Arias recognized the critical role that the practice of torture played in that terror and sought to portray its effects in their novels. The state's use of torture to blur the lines between the known and the unknown had succeeded in creating an invisible form of violence that penetrated the deepest layers of the Guatemalan psyche. What makes these two novels stand out is not only their recognition of the critical role of torture during the war, but also their highly developed psychological treatment of torture and its relationship to the formation of the Guatemalan subject.

The Guatemalan new novel, as Arias suggests, seeks to combat that state-induced terror. By pushing the reader to give meaning to torture, not only does the new novel suggest that the truth about torture is out there beyond the text and beyond language; it also instills in its readers a desire for meaning and by extension, political action. Authors create voids and ruptures in the text precisely so that they can be filled and mended by the reader. Even though the texts seemingly reject a simple collapsing of the distance between signifier and signified, in the end, however, they create a situation in which the means for traversing that distance becomes ambivalent. Despite their attempts to create a "plurality of narrative signposts interwoven to the point of breaking syntactic linearity and confusing semantic levels" (Arias, "Literary Production" 24), in both novels the

torture scenes are strikingly similar in their erotic treatment of the violence. Indeed, over and against those critics who see in the new novel an attempt “to create new distortions to get beyond the distortions created by Guatemala’s successive military governments” (Zimmerman 164), I have shown that the “new distortions” in both Flores’ *Los compañeros* and Arias’ *Después de las bombas* succeed only in producing desire. Consequently, by emphasizing the “unspeakable” nature of torture and relying heavily on a rhetoric of uncertainty, the new novelists create the possibility for torture’s eroticization.

Chapter Five: A Rhetoric of Masking: Repetitions of Silence and Unknowing in

Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El cuchillo del mendigo*

*The point about silencing and the fear behind silencing is not to erase memory. Far from it. The point is to drive the memory deep within the fastness of the individual so as to create more fear and uncertainty in which dream and reality commingle.*¹⁷⁴

*[H]ow silent are silences?*¹⁷⁵

There is little doubt that *testimonio* and the new novel were the two major literary movements during the Armed Conflict—as evidenced not only by the number of texts published but also by the amount of critical and public attention they received both inside and outside Guatemala. Whereas *testimonio*'s emphasis on the visible aspects of violence signaled its commitment to a robustly empiricist epistemology, the new novel took as its starting point the rejection of such modes of narration.¹⁷⁶ With the appearance of the new novel in Guatemala in 1976, we witness a shift to a more direct emphasis on the uncertain aspects of torture and fear in Guatemala. By accentuating the impossibility of reaching the signified, the new novel pushed the non-symbolic of torture beyond the text into a space that was the other of language. Because Arias and Flores both posited a non-symbolic that was outside of language—in the realm of the non-verbal—they thereby established a dualistic dynamic between the uncertainty of the text and an unattainable certainty beyond the text. But *testimonio* and the new novel were not the only literary

¹⁷⁴ Taussig, *Nervous System* 27.

¹⁷⁵ Sanford 17.

¹⁷⁶ The shift from *testimonio* to *nueva novela* is not a chronological shift, but rather a stylistic one employed for the purposes of my argument. Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), which I discussed in Chapter 2, was published 7 years after the appearance of Flores' *Los compañeros* (1976).

modes to emerge. Other voices began to appear during La Violencia in order to attempt to narrate the atrocities of the war. One of those voices was Rodrigo Rey Rosa.

Rodrigo Rey Rosa (1958-) has been one of the most prolific Guatemalan authors of the last 30 years. Because of the violence in Guatemala, he spent the majority of the most violent years of the war in voluntary exile (1979-1994), travelling between New York, Morocco, and India. However, his family witnessed that violence firsthand. In 1980, his uncle was killed in the burning of the Spanish Embassy. The following year, his mother was kidnapped and held for ransom for six months. Several of his friends were tortured and killed throughout the 1980s. Without a doubt the violence had a deep and personal impact on Rey Rosa. When asked recently about the ways in which that violence haunts his writing, Rey Rosa responded:

Es el inconsciente el que me la impone. Cuando comencé a escribir, tenía pesadillas increíblemente violentas. En ese tiempo mataban a cincuenta personas por día, en el campo y en la ciudad, y yo no había podido escribir aún sobre la muerte de mi tío quemado, sobre un amigo que apareció castrado y asesinado. Cuando tuve la oportunidad de irme, me fui. Estaba odiando todo. Sí soñaba con eso, soñaba cómo matar a ese general hijo de puta... Recién comenzaba a escribir, todavía no había llegado a Marruecos, pero estaba con esta vasca (sic), esta náusea. (n. pag.)¹⁷⁷

From the very beginning, this “retching” and “nausea” permeated his writing. In this chapter, however, I will be focusing only on his first collection of stories: *El cuchillo del mendigo* (1985¹⁷⁸). As I will argue, the “retching” described by Rey Rosa makes its

¹⁷⁷ “It is the unconscious that imposes it upon me. When I began to write, I had incredibly violent nightmares. At that time, they were killing fifty people a day, in the country and in the city, and I had not even been able to write about the death of my burned uncle, about a friend who appeared castrated and murdered. When I had the opportunity to leave, I left. I hated everything. If I dreamed about that, I dreamed about how I would kill that son of a bitch general... Soon I began to write, I still hadn’t arrived in Morocco, but I had this retching, this nausea.”

¹⁷⁸ Please note that this text was not published in Guatemala until 1986. Nevertheless, I include it here because even though it was not available in Guatemala until 1986, it had been written several years previously and its English translation (by Paul Bowles) had already been published by City Lights Books in 1985.

presence felt in various ways in the stories of this collection, but most concretely through the recreation of fear and unease.

Unlike the new novel—which pushed the silent non-symbolic beyond the text into a realm of unchained signifieds and melancholic loss—Rey Rosa’s *El cuchillo del mendigo* preserves the uncertainty within the text. More specifically, I will argue that Rey Rosa, over and against previous attempts to narrate the violence of the war, seeks to mask the silent non-symbolic within language itself. In *El cuchillo del mendigo*, torture no longer has an immediate presence within the text as we saw with *testimonio*, where narrating torture became a means of presenting documented evidence for international audiences. Nor is torture a mediated absence, pushed beyond the text and language to a realm that cannot be reached by signifiers. Rather, Rey Rosa structures his descriptions of torture around a gap that cannot be named, but that nonetheless must be narrated. Rey Rosa does not seek to overwrite the uncertainty and irrationality of torture with documentary evidence; nor does he symbolize torture to the degree that we witnessed in the new novel.¹⁷⁹ Rather, by destabilizing the boundaries between the real and the unreal, the certain and the uncertain, Rey Rosa is able to repeat—to recreate—the spectral fear of torture. Criticizing the “hard realists” for their attempts to document reality, Rey Rosa suggests that reality is never that clear or certain. In an interview with Marisol García, he states, “Hay todo un aspecto de la realidad que no vivimos como si fuera historia dura. Entonces me parece que introducir el elemento imaginativo es darle aire a tu texto e incluso hacerlo más verosímil” (“There is a whole other aspect of reality that we do not live as if it were hard history. So it seems to me that introducing an imaginative element gives air to your text and even makes it more credible” [n. pag.]). In order to understand

¹⁷⁹ For my treatment of these options, see Chapters Two and Three of the present study.

how the nausea of violence, which has infected the depths of Rey Rosa's unconscious, is presented in *El cuchillo del mendigo*, we must again revisit Loevlie's concept of the "silent non-symbolic" and its relation to literary silence.¹⁸⁰ Only by analyzing this notion in greater detail will we be able to see how Rey Rosa silences torture in his writing, allowing it to occupy that "zone of indistinction" where one can bear witness only to the "impossibility of bearing witness" (Agamben *Remnants* 39).

¹⁸⁰ For my previous treatments of Loevlie's work, see the Introduction and Chapter Three of the present study.

Writing the Silent Non-Symbolic: On Simple and Complex Repetitions

*He can say everything, but one thing he cannot say, and if he cannot say that—that is, say it in such a way that the other understands it—then he is not speaking.*¹⁸¹

Neither silence nor speech is possible. [...] He speaks without speaking. (Loevlie 73)

The attempt to “silence” violence within literature is not a new idea. Indeed, in her study *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett* (2003), Elizabeth Loevlie notes that one of the main approaches to silence has been Holocaust literature (16). It is not uncommon for such literature to draw on silence as a means to designate the unsayable as the “spectre of the unspeakable, namely that which is inhuman or an unspeakable atrocity” (Loevlie 16). For many, in the face of such atrocities any attempt to speak the evils of genocide runs the risk of reducing the horrors to everyday language. Indeed, “[t]o suggest that it is possible to talk of the events of the Holocaust is often seen to imply that these events are explicable and that they can be made meaningful” (Loevlie 16-17). Over and against such attempts to explain the Holocaust, thinkers such as Theodor Adorno—who famously asserted, “No poetry after Auschwitz”—and Hannah Arendt have argued that that only proper response to such horrors is silence (Loevlie 16). The problem, according to Loevlie, is that much of this established tradition continues to speak of silence negatively, relying on a dualistic conception of silence that retreats behind the defense of the unsayable. As noted in the Introduction to the present study, silence is a seductive concept. Loevlie reminds us that for thousands of years the “Dream of Silence” has captivated the imaginations and the desires of countless millions of

¹⁸¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* 113, qtd in Loevlie 72.

people (13).¹⁸² Unfortunately, however, this type of silence—which is posited as “congruent with a sense of a ‘beyond’ of language, a realm that is free from discourse and linguistic ordering” (11)—ends up becoming the dualistic other of language. According to Loevlie, it is true that such a conception of silence can serve as a viable means of dealing with that which is “unsayable” and “can accept that which the verbal expression must dismiss as irrational or illogical” (11). Yet as we have just witnessed with respect to the new novel in Guatemala, positing the existence of a realm of experience that is beyond language often results in a dualistic conception of language and silence that can become problematic. In order to see the ways in which Rey Rosa moves beyond this dualistic conception of the relationship between silence and language, we must revisit Loevlie’s treatment of the different between simple and complex repetition (76-83).

The reader will recall from my discussion in the Introduction and in Chapter Three that simple repetition concerns the textual dynamic by which the silent non-symbolic is defined as existing outside the text (Loevlie 76). By placing the non-symbolic beyond the text and thus beyond language, simple repetition gropes and gestures at the non-symbolic, thereby “creating a certain ‘logic’ or ‘system’ that refers the reader to the beyond” (76). The text establishes itself as the limit between language and silence, and thus the text “bestows existence” (76) to the silence as an object beyond the limit of the text. In short, by placing the non-symbolic outside language, truth is also pushed beyond language and outside of the text. This distancing creates a “relationship of frustration”:

It is the text’s relationship, one might say, to its own end, its defeat in face of the unsayable that it strives none the less to say. Caught in this frustration, the text

¹⁸² For a more sustained treatment of the “Dream of Silence,” see the Introduction to the present study. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this section come from Loevlie’s text.

must create a dynamic or a gesture by which it indirectly says: ‘out there, beyond me, is the truth of what I am trying to say.’ The intention is to indicate the silence of the non-symbolic as the negative other of the text. The text attempts to gesture towards this silence, hint at it, point its readers in a special direction, lead them outside itself. (76)

The new novel is caught up in this simple repetition. By pushing the reader to give meaning to torture, not only does the new novel suggest that the truth about torture is out there beyond the text and beyond language; it also produces a never-ending desire for the lost object. Consequently, torture remains unsayable. Thus simple repetition is “the text’s means of affirming the non-symbolic *negatively* as that which cannot be stated: the non-symbolic is what lies beyond me” (76-77, italics in original).¹⁸³ By negatively affirming the existence of the non-symbolic, simple repetition functions according to a dualistic dynamic.¹⁸⁴

According to Loevlie, the effect of this negative affirmation is “stabilatory”: We might for a moment imagine that the text and its relationship to the non-symbolic behave in regards to each other like water and oil. In other words, their boundary is absolute, but fluid. Simple repetition ensures the stability of these two elements by continually reaffirming them as opposites, by making sure that no ‘reaction’ takes place that would destabilize the relation. (77)

Despite its desire-producing effects, simple repetition ensures that the boundary between the text and the non-symbolic—and thus between the reader and the lost object—remains absolute. As I suggested in the previous chapter, the new novel reaffirms this boundary

¹⁸³ More obvious examples of simple repetition include negative theology, which approaches the silent non-symbolic of God by emphasizing God’s otherness and inaccessibility from theological discourse (Loevlie 77).

¹⁸⁴ Loevlie describes this dualistic dynamic in the following manner:

It operates according to dualistic opposites such as inside-outside, within-beyond, present-absent, silent-speaking, me-other, etc. According to these dualisms, the text defines the text according to its inside (the actual text) and its outside (the non-symbolic), and consequently defines language in terms of an inside and an outside: the expressible versus the non-expressible. Simple repetition relies upon and keeps reproducing, *repeating*, this dualistic machinery that maintains the non-symbolic as the opposite of language. (77, italics in original)

by continually testing it and probing its stability. In the end, however, the “other of language” remains untouched.¹⁸⁵

Complex repetition, on the other hand, challenges the “stabilatory” nature of this dualism (77). If simple repetition produces “a concrete end-product, namely the delineated, negatively defined non-symbolic as that which lies beyond the text” (78), then complex repetition disrupts its “well-functioning ‘machinery’” and undermines the “stable, negatively defined notion of the non-symbolic” (78). Complex repetition disrupts the stabilizing dualism posited by simple repetition. Loevlie suggests that, abstractly, complex repetition is “the movement through which the border between the text and the non-symbolic is momentarily suspended” (78). It is a disruptive movement that “disorganizes” and “destabilizes” the dualistic repetition of the non-symbolic as beyond the text. Considered in terms of the metaphor of oil and water, complex repetition might designate some chemical reaction wherein “oil and water suddenly infiltrate each other” (78). According to Loevlie, the border between the two “desolidifies,” revealing itself to be “porous, thereby causing a certain ‘flooding’ between the text and its beyond” (78). This flooding prevents the non-symbolic from being relegated to some place outside the text. And perhaps more importantly for my purposes here, by refusing to define the “unsayable” as the other of language, complex repetition allows the text to speak about torture “without speaking” (Loevlie 73).

¹⁸⁵ “We can conclude that simple repetition is a dynamic that repeatedly ensures and stabilizes the Dream of Silence as the other of language. It follows that it is a dynamic that precludes literary silence. If the non-symbolic is posited as the dualistic opposite of the text, silence becomes the beyond. Within such a schema literary silence cannot take place. Literary silence requires a certain shifting of the border between the text and the non-symbolic. [...] Only in the destabilization of this border can literary silence happen as the expression of the non-symbolic through literature. In other words, the dualistic system must somehow break down or dissolve in order for literary silence to occur. This destabilization describes the work of complex repetition, namely to transform or destabilize simple repetition and the stable conditions it has procured and thereby create the potential for literary silence” (78).

Complex repetition is “first and foremost a movement” (79). Unlike simple repetition, which produced a stable conception of the beyond of the text and thus functioned as a repetition of “something” (79), complex repetition “has nothing to repeat, no pattern to reinstall” (79). It is not productive, but rather disruptive. Loevlie describes it as follows:

If we return to the image of simple repetition as a well-functioning machine that keeps producing stable versions of the beyond, complex repetition designates a certain flaw in this machinery, or rather a *derailment*. [...] It is this actual moment of derailment that I designate as complex repetition. It is the moment of a destabilization of the system, a moment when simple repetition turns into complex. (79)

Therefore, according to Loevlie, we must note that simple and complex repetition are intimately linked.¹⁸⁶ Though the precise nature of that relationship is not relevant to my argument here, we do begin to see how complex repetition is freed from the dualistic dynamic of simple repetition and is thus no longer bound by a negative conception of the non-symbolic (Loevlie 81). What this means, of course, is that the non-symbolic can move within the text itself. The silent non-symbolic can penetrate the text: “Silence, like water, infiltrates porous stone and leaves its trace in caverns and canals that it traces through the text” (81). The text can create silence (Loevlie 81).

¹⁸⁶ To better understand this connection, Loevlie proposes the concept of a “hologram” whose images shift depending on our perspective:

One angle reflects the well-functioning production line—the product being the silent beyond. The other angle shows how this production line is, in every ‘now’, a series of potential interruptions, derailments, tensions, discontinuities that disrupt the production line and preclude the end product. The advantage of the hologram is that it shows how both movements exist at the same time, and that whichever one you see is dependent upon the perspective from which the system is observed. (80)

No matter how we conceive of the relationship, the critical point is to understand that both repetitions exist simultaneously within the text. Complex repetition is not a derailment that causes the machinery of simple repetition to stop: “Rather we have to imagine a production line that keeps producing while it derails, and a derailment that keeps derailing despite the production line” (79). It might be helpful to think of complex repetition as always existing “in between” production and derailment. (80).

Rather than relegating the non-symbolic to a space outside the text, complex repetition also brings the “absurd” into the text and into language. The text then becomes neither speech nor silence, but rather that “third option” (Loevlie 82) explored by Kierkegaard in his treatment of the sacrifice of Isaac:

By speaking, Abraham has not broken with the dualistic system in the sense that he has not chosen either speech or silence. The dualism is therefore still valid on one level; he must still be silent as he cannot speak the ethical language of others. But exactly within this dualism he sees a parallel option: to speak while maintaining silence. On this level the dualism is destabilized by an in-between option: to speak in a language that is not universal. In this act of speaking, the relationship between language and silence changes from the strict either-or opposition to a new fluidity: he can speak silence. (82)

The possibility of speaking silence signifies a non-dualistic relationship with the non-symbolic. If the non-symbolic is no longer outside of language, and thus no longer outside of the text, the seemingly “unspeakable” horrors of torture need not be pushed outside the text. These atrocities can be spoken in the “in-between” language of the literary text. Before we explore the non-symbolic in Rey Rosa’s text, it is necessary to note precisely how these “in-between” movements function within a text.

Aporia and Impasse: Existing in the In-Between

*Aporia [...] is born of the knowledge that there can be no certain knowledge. It brings to light the failure of our attempts to seize that truth of the world.*¹⁸⁷

Loevlie notes that the “in-between” language of complex repetition occurs at those instances where “the text behaves differently, where it somehow slips away from, or transforms” the dualistic conception of the non-symbolic (82). In those instances, the text “slips” and its acts of gesturing become “weird,” “disturbing,” and often “meaningless” (82). Loevlie describes those instances as aporias:

The aporia originally means impasse and hence designates the place from which no further advance is possible. It has been used as a rhetorical term to signify the doubt arising from two incompatible but equally valid views on a subject matter. The aporia arises when there are two potential outcomes, both of which rule the other one out, but both of which are true. In other words, both outcomes, both ‘paths’, are true, but they are incompatible; choosing one, I am immediately thrown back on to the other, and so on. The only possible locus within the aporia is therefore the *in-between*. (83, italics in original)

These aporias exist as instances in-between two conceivable alternatives. To put the matter more concretely, we might conceive of these aporias as existing in-between the two options of recollection and (simple) repetition, or in the terms of my current project, between *testimonio* and the new novel.¹⁸⁸ To recap, Menchú attempts to “recollect” the past and make it fully present within her narration. The emphasis on a rhetorical certainty and the elimination of doubt precludes the “truth” from being placed or defined outside of the text. It is the promise of plentitude, immediacy, and full presence. The new novel, on the other hand, pushes that truth beyond the text. The silent non-symbolic is always already a mediated absence, forever just beyond language. Similarly, I believe that Rey

¹⁸⁷ Melzer 1986: 4, qtd in Loevlie 84-85.

¹⁸⁸ For a more detailed engagement with my analysis of testimony as “recollection” and the new novel as “simple repetition,” see Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of the present study.

Rosa's text does not posit an "either/or," but neither does it suggest a "both/and."¹⁸⁹ In his text, we find instances "in-between" these two options, between presence and absence, between certainty and uncertainty, between speech and silence. These aporias and "in-between" moments emerge as impasses within the text where the reader is left hesitating.¹⁹⁰

More concretely, we can see a direct comparison between this conception of aporia and the in-between nature of torture. As I suggested in Chapter One, torture causes everything beyond the pain of the victim's body to lose meaning, creating a "disintegrating perception" (Scarry 30) that ultimately fragments the psyche of the tortured. According to Elaine Scarry, in torture, the intractable materiality of the body is inflicted with an indescribably intense pain for the sole purpose of destroying the victim's world and language. The pain inflicted is so severe that everything beyond the immediate sensations of the body ceases to exist, both spatially—"either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe"—and temporally—there is no past or future, only the immediate presence of the body in pain (Scarry 35). The restriction and enclosure of the victim's world allows the imagining of a space and time in which the prisoner ceases to exist relationally. Or rather, there is an attempt to re-school the prisoner by rendering all

¹⁸⁹ Rather than choosing between a "both/and" or an "either/or", Rey Rosa somehow operates between the two, just as Loevlie describes Beckett's ability to exist "in between [...] production and derailment" (80). Perhaps we can suggest that Rey Rosa's text posits "both a 'both/and' and an 'either/or.'"

¹⁹⁰ There is no resolution of these in-between moments. Loevlie compares them to Paul de Man's conception of reading. In his *Allegories of Reading* (1979), de Man posits that reading "will always lead to the confrontation of incompatible meanings between which it is necessary but impossible to decide in terms of truth and error. If one of the readings is declared true, it will always be possible to undo it by means of the other; if it is declared false, it will always be possible to demonstrate that it states the truth of its aberration" (de Man 1979: 76, qtd in Loevlie 84). Reading exists at this impasse, in the back-and-forth movement between these two options.

relationality unthinkable.¹⁹¹ As the prisoner's world shrinks due to the pain, it becomes "a mere sketch" (Scarry 38), and she loses the imaginative capacity to form a positive, constructive relationship with her surroundings. Torture, as a crime committed against the imagination, not only deprives the victim of an imaginative vision and thus the ability to interact with her surroundings, but it also deprives her of the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Therefore, the unmaking of the victim's world and language has a drastic impact on her ability to comprehend what has happened and robs her of the ability to give meaning to the event. No longer able to give meaning to her own torture, the tortured exists permanently in-between the real and the unreal.

We see a similar aporetic "in-between" in Loevlie's treatment of "suspension," which she describes as follows:

It is the impasse between a past and a future. Repetition cannot be identified merely with the past as this past is always also a becoming into a future. Furthermore it cannot be identified merely with the future, as it is also always a past. In other words, repetition, as described by Kierkegaard, is an aporetic experience. It is the constant experience of an impasse between a past and a future that leaves one suspended in the present, in the *in-between*. The actual 'now' therefore becomes the only 'true', or possible experience of repetition. It is the only position that can account for repetition's relation to the past and the future. So the 'now' is the aporetic position of a constant in-between, a constant mediation between a past and a future. To experience the 'now' is to bear the full pressure of the aporia, to remain standing in the impasse, to not think the past or the future, but be absorbed in the in-between movement of the aporia. (84)

The connection with my previous treatment of torture is clear. Torture—as a practice that forces the victim to exist "aporetically" in both the immediate "here" and "now"—exists always in the in-between. It would stand to reason, therefore, that one successful means of exploring and narrating torture is to recreate this in-between state in the text and thus narrate torture "aporetically."

¹⁹¹ For more on this process, particularly as it relates to the processes of de-objectification and unmaking, see Chapter 1 of the present study.

Indeed, such aporetic narrations can be extremely fruitful because they allow the opportunity for imagining alternative forms of silence. If torture—on a continuum, of course, with other forms state-sponsored violence—is continually referred to as an “unspeakable” atrocity, thereby begging a form of silence in those who have borne witness to its horrors, then discovering new conceptions of the relationship between speech and language may allow us to speak of torture in a way that does not “imply that these events are explicable and that they can be made meaningful” (Loevlie 16-17). One such possibility mentioned by Loevlie is the discovery of a language that “speaks without speaking” (Loevlie 73). According to Loevlie, this third option—in-between standard conceptions of “speech” and “silence”—arises “when one remains in the aporia, when one stands in the ‘now’ of the impasse and thereby experiences how both potential paths, hitherto incompatible, ‘merge’ and transform, providing a ‘new’ opening” (85). Though existing within the “aporetic instance” implies a “leap of logic” and a willingness to succumb to the unthinkable (Loevlie 85), as we have just seen, living in the aftermath of torture implies a similar situation. For that reason, I find Loevlie’s approach to literary silence so illuminating. It opens up new possibilities for analyzing narrations of torture, particularly in Rey Rosa’s *El cuchillo del mendigo*, since I believe his texts “move towards a language that can both be and not be silence, towards a silence that can both be and not be language” (Loevlie 86). Therefore, in treating Rey Rosa’s *El cuchillo del mendigo*, I will seek to explore “the constant *in-between* of the silent non-symbolic and the literary text” (Loevlie 86), those instances where the reader is asked to “abandon a mere rational understanding” (Loevlie 86) and rest uneasily with the specter of torture. Before proceeding, however, I must briefly note the risks of such a venture.

When asked why he had not critically engaged Samuel Beckett's work, Jacques Derrida responded by saying, "How could I write, sign, countersign performatively texts which 'respond' to Beckett? How could I avoid the platitude of academic language?" (Derrida 1992: 60, qtd in Loevlie 193). The suggestion behind Derrida's comment is that any critical or philosophical treatment of Beckett's work would inevitably miss it. In Beckett's work, he suggests, there will always be something that "slips away from any philosophical or analytical meta-discourse" (Loevlie 193). The poetic language employed by Beckett behaves differently than everyday language; it "resists any congruence with an external set of philosophically defined ideas as it does not relate to any knowable [...] 'out there'" (Loevlie 194-195). Those who approach Beckett's work with this attitude in mind are able to safeguard the text's "signature"—that is, what Derrida calls "this remainder which remains when the thematic is exhausted" (Derrida 1992:61, qtd in Loevlie 193). The temptation of such an approach is to come away from a text like Beckett's by renouncing every possible interpretive reading. But such anti-conclusions run the risk of reducing the work in question to "a certain private, privileged realm" (195). Such an a priori dismissal of all philosophical or meta-discourse approaches to a text restricts all interpretation to the act of reading, even though it does protect the "experience" of the text (Loevlie 195).

The same set of questions could be asked of Rey Rosa's *El cuchillo del mendigo*. That is, there is something within the text that "slips away" from philosophical discourse. This is perhaps one of the reasons why he himself remains suspicious of overly theoretical engagements with his work. There are clearly benefits to approaching Rey Rosa's text with an a priori dismissal of all philosophical or meta-discourse approaches.

Foreclosing “any philosophical or analytical meta-discourse” (Loevlie 193) has the benefit of privileging the experience of reading Rey Rosa’s work and thus safeguarding its “signature.” Yet as Loevlie has pointed out with regard to Beckett, “[a]though such an approach avoids the philosophical temptation to define the non-symbolic, it runs into an impasse where there is nothing further to say” (196). My exploration of Rey Rosa’s work will attempt to move beyond this impasse. I have drawn heavily on Loevlie’s work because she provides a critical framework that allows me to navigate between these two dangers: first, the temptation to name the non-symbolic; and second, to reject such a naming by discarding philosophical or theoretical approaches in order to privilege the experience of reading (Loevlie 196). Loevlie’s conception of literary silence allows me to “‘test’ the fragility of the experience, to talk about it without losing it” (196). In the following sections, I try to avoid suggesting what specific texts “mean” because I hope to show how Rey Rosa’s language operates according to an altogether different dynamic that escapes signification. That is, we can see in Rey Rosa a language that is ultimately unlike “useful, everyday language” (Loevlie 194), or to borrow Agamben’s terminology, a language “that no longer signifies” (*Remnants* 39). The following sections provide various ways to approach Rey Rosa’s stories and indicate how it is possible to rest uneasily in the presence of the specter of torture in his text, and to accept its haunting.

Seeing and Unseeing: The Dissolution of the Real

No, no symbols—not for me.
(Rodrigo Rey Rosa¹⁹²)

*Sus ojos estaban abiertos, pero el contorno
de las cosas era irreal.*¹⁹³

*Lo que veía, era y, al mismo tiempo, parecía
no ser.*¹⁹⁴

Rey Rosa's primary means of narrating torture is unlike the two literary modes previously analyzed in this study. Torture never appears as fully present in his stories, as it does in Rigoberta Menchú (Chapter Two). In fact, in Rey Rosa there are no clear or direct descriptions of torture scenes, and the word torture appears rarely throughout the entire collection. To be sure, an initial reading of *El cuchillo del mendigo* might leave the reader wondering if torture is a theme at all in the text. That is not to suggest, on the contrary, that the non-symbolic of torture is fully absent, pushed into a space beyond language, as we saw in the new novel (Chapter Three). Rey Rosa has been adamant that he continually seeks to avoid the use of symbolic language in his writing. By their very nature, symbols push the non-symbolic into a realm that is somewhere "out there," somewhere beyond language in a place that cannot be accessed by language. As Rey Rosa says, "No, no symbols—not for me."¹⁹⁵ Rather than push the silent non-symbolic of torture beyond the text, I suggest that Rey Rosa has masked it within language itself.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Interview with Gray 185.

¹⁹³ Rey Rosa, "La entrega" (in *El cuchillo del mendigo*) 3.

¹⁹⁴ Rey Rosa, "El monasterio" (in *El cuchillo del mendigo*) 21.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Gray 185

¹⁹⁶ Regarding the silencing and masking of torture in Rey Rosa's stories, it should perhaps be noted that Rey Rosa has incorporated citations from Ludwig Wittgenstein in his fiction, particularly *El material humano* (2009). Perhaps no other philosopher is more widely cited concerning the relationship between silence and language. Wittgenstein was an Austrian-born philosopher whose theories of language often addressed the relationship between silence and language. Indeed, perhaps the most often-cited quote of Wittgenstein comes from the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): "Whereof one cannot

Given my previous discussion of the non-symbolic, we might say that torture exists aporetically in his stories; it is always in-between. In other words, what we see in the stories of *El cuchillo del mendigo* is a phenomenon that I will refer to in this chapter as the “masking” of torture. Torture, I will argue, is there, its phantasmal presence masked just below the surface of the text. Its presence, as I will show, remains silenced, though it does make itself felt. In these stories, torture is both there and not there—both seen and unseen—just as it was during the Armed Conflict: “Lo que veía, era y, al mismo tiempo, parecía no ser” (“What I saw was there, and at the same time seemed not to be” [21, 25]).¹⁹⁷ Throughout this chapter, I will examine the various ways in which Rey Rosa “disappears” torture within the text. In his stories, torture has what Gordon would call a “muted presence” or a “seething absence” (21). To see how the “in-betweenness” of torture functions in the text, we begin by examining two stories in the collection: “La entrega” (“The Release”) and “El vidente” (“The Seeing Eye”).¹⁹⁸ Significantly, these stories—the first and the last in the collection—both depict a blinding that forces the reader to ask whether or not something has been hidden or disappeared from the reader’s view—and if so, what is it?

“speak, thereof one must be silent.” Such an affirmation, of course, posits silence as the opposite of language, implying that silence can “give meaning to all those experiences, insights, intuitions, feelings, states ‘whereof one cannot speak’” (Loevlie 11). It follows that silence can deal with those facets of reality that somehow escape language. Yet in his later work—*Philosophical Investigations*, which was written in the late 1940s—Wittgenstein posits “reality as a reflection or product of language, hence questioning to what extent there is a reality beyond language” (Loevlie 11 n.). This latter view permits a more robust conception of language and would consequently challenge the former conception of silence as the beyond of language. Though we cannot be certain to what extent Rey Rosa is familiar with these divergences within Wittgenstein’s corpus, I believe we see evidence within Rey Rosa’s writing to suggest, if not an affinity with Wittgenstein’s later work, then at the very least, an attempt to think through similar difficulties. See his use of Wittgenstein in *El material humano*.

¹⁹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the English translations included here have been taken from Paul Bowles’ translation of Rey Rosa’s text.

¹⁹⁸ The term “entrega” actually means “delivery,” though I have decided to leave Bowles’ translation of the title as it is. Whether the title indicates a “delivery” or a “release” is not crucial to the story itself.

In the first story, “La entrega,” it is the confusion between the main character’s conscious and unconscious states that initially obscures and masks the reader’s ability to understand precisely what has happened to the protagonist. The story opens with a man being awakened very early in the morning. An old friend of his father is shouting at him from outside, telling him “Llamaron. Dicen que vayas a la Plaza de Tecún” (“They’ve called. You’re supposed to go to the Plaza of Tecún” [1, 1]).¹⁹⁹ The mention of the “Plaza de Tecún” is significant. Most importantly, it is one of the few sites specifically mentioned by Rey Rosa throughout the entire collection. As I will explore in greater detail below, the vast majority of the stories in this collection are not localizable geographically. That is, it is impossible to determine if the settings are in Guatemala, Morocco, the United States, etc.²⁰⁰ Though I will return to the question of space below, it is important to note that this particular story can be located geographically within Guatemala. Whether or not the “Plaza de Tecún” refers to the Plaza in the city of Ayutla, which is located in Western Guatemala and is more commonly referred to as the city of Tecún Umán, it is nevertheless almost certain that the story takes place in Guatemala, where Tecún Umán remains a celebrated historical figure of the ancient Maya and a symbol of continued resistance to foreign, imperial control.

The ensuing scenes briefly describe the main character as he follows a map out of the city in order to hand over a ransom for the release of his wife, who—as we learn in the final paragraph of the story—has been kidnapped. During the delivery of the money,

¹⁹⁹ The English translations referenced in this chapter are those done by Paul Bowles and published in *The Beggar’s Knife* (1985).

²⁰⁰ I mention these three countries as possible locations for several reasons. First of all, these are the three countries in which Rey Rosa had lived prior to his writing *El cuchillo del mendigo* in the early 1980s. That is not to suggest, of course, that he could not have written about another country. I offer it merely as a biographical observation that is perhaps strengthened by my second point, which is that most—if not all—of Rey Rosa’s other texts clearly take place within these three countries. Thus the lack of a determinable geographical location forces *El cuchillo del mendigo* to stand out within his corpus.

however, the man himself is abducted. He is beaten, drugged, and then returned to a house in the city where he is locked in the basement and left for the entire day. Though he appears to spend a long time unconscious, we do not know what happens to him during that time. Is he tortured? Does he spend the entire day drifting in and out of consciousness? What happens to him in that “cuarto subterráneo” (“underground room” [4, 5]) that has become a living hell (4, 5)? The simple fact is that readers do not know. There are indications that he awakens at one point: “Abrió los ojos y movió lentamente las pupilas” (“Then he raised his eyelids and moved his eyes slowly” [4, 5]). And there are suggestions that he is either tied down or too weak to move: “Intentó mover una mano y no lo consiguió” (“He tried to move his hand and was not able to” [4, 5]). Though there are no detailed descriptions of him being tortured, the only thought that he can elaborate is that he is in Hell: “‘El infierno’, pensó, y el pensamiento resonó y resonó en su interior, pero cada vez más débilmente. [...] No le fue posible elaborar otra frase; las ideas aparecían y desaparecían, una tras otra, inconexas” (“‘This is Hell,’ he said to himself, and the thought resounded within him, but with increasing feebleness. [...] He could not form another sentence in his mind. Unrelated ideas appeared and disappeared one after the other” [4, 5]). He had been beaten when he was abducted, and thus it is possible that he is also beaten in the “underground room.” We simply do not know. The next event that appears to occur with certainty happens later that evening, though once again, the prisoner—from whose perspective the story is recounted—has been drugged and continues to drift in and out of consciousness, and we have reason to doubt his ability to comprehend his own reality or understand the events that follow. In the narrative, someone rushes into the room and says their conspirators have been caught with the

money and that they have to move the prisoner. The man is placed back in the car and driven out of the city. Face down on the road, he hears one of them say, “Yo creo que ya está muerto” (“I’d say he’s already dead” [4, 6]). Without hesitation, the kidnapper pulls out his revolver and “sin mirar, hizo fuego” (“fired it absently into the body” [4, 6]). Incredibly, however, the man appears to survive the gunshot.

We must highlight the appearance of survival, for when he opens his eyes, he is blinded: “una intensa luz lo encandiló” (“the intense light dazzled him” [4, 6]). The use of the verb *encandilar* draws attention to the fluidity of the boundaries between conscious and unconscious states, and thus signals the further destabilization of the boundaries between the real and the unreal. The verb *encandilar* has several meanings. According to the RAE, it can mean “deslumbrar acercando mucho a los ojos el candil o vela, o presentando de golpe a la vista una cantidad excesiva de luz” (“to dazzle by bringing a lamp or candle close to one’s eyes, or suddenly introducing into view an excessive quantity of light”). This blinding makes sense in the context; a man awakened in a hospital after being left for dead would be temporarily blinded by the sudden brightness. But does he awake in a hospital? The reader infers this possibility, but it is immediately put to doubt. According to the RAE, the verb can also mean “deslumbrar, alucinar, embelesar” (“to dazzle, to hallucinate, to fascinate”), which gives the passage other possible interpretations, including the possibility of trickery or fantasy. That is, the “blinding” might in fact be an act of bewitching or enchantment. In fact, according to the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Espasa-Calpe), the verb *encandilar* also means “deslumbrar con apariencias o engaños” (“to fascinate with appearances or delusions”) and is a synonym of *hechizar* (“to cast a spell on”) and *embrujar* (“to bewitch”). By

drawing attention to this verb, we can see that what follows in the story loses its certainty. The strong tie to “reality” has been severed, and thus the end of the story may not be as clear or defined as the preterit verbs indicate. After his blinding/enchantment/bewitching, the man sees a woman approaching: “Sus labios movieron, pero él no la pudo oír. La miró en los ojos, y le pareció que sus cuencas estaban vacías. ‘Son bonitos’, pensó, y trató de decírselo, pero las palabras quedaron en su boca. La mujer le puso los dedos sobre los párpados y se los cerró” (“Her lips formed words but he could not hear her. He looked into her eyes, and it seemed to him that they were empty sockets. ‘They’re pretty,’ he thought, and tried to tell her but no word came out. The woman put her fingers on his eyelids and pressed them shut” [4, 6]). Her “cuencas vacías” (“empty sockets”) give her an eerie presence in the story, as does the fact that she closes his eyes. Yet the immediate effect of her touch produces an even greater sense of the uncanny in the reader:

Él sintió un estallido en el tórax. Una voz le preguntó: ‘¿Estás dormido?’ Él asintió mentalmente, pero ‘Estoy muy despierto’ pensó para sí. ‘¿Sabes quién soy?’ siguió la misma voz. No trató de responder, pero comprendió que era su mujer. La habían libertado. Luego sintió otro golpe: un sonido débil. ‘Es mi corazón’, pensó, y para sus adentros: *Es suficiente. Que se detenga.* (4-5)²⁰¹

The cracking in his thorax is confusing, and readers do not exactly know what is happening. Has he been stabbed or shot? Did the woman with the empty sockets do something to him? Is there a chance that he has been returned to the “underground room”? Or is he free? We simply do not know with any certainty. Indeed, the man’s confusion regarding his conscious state leads the reader to question his ability to relate to

²⁰¹ “Something cracked in his thorax. A voice asked him: ‘Are you asleep?’ In his mind he said yes. But to himself he said: ‘I’m wide awake.’ ‘Do you know who I am?’ the same voice went on. He did not try to answer, but he understood that it was his wife. They had let her go. Then he felt another blow: a faint sound. ‘It’s my heart,’ he thought, and inside himself: *‘It’s enough. Let it stop’*” (6). It should be noted that this story has an additional line in Bowles’ English translation. After the man thinks, “Let it stop” (6), there is a concluding sentence: “He died then” (6). There is no indication of this conclusion in the original Spanish.

his immediate surroundings. How can he mentally assent to being asleep, but at the same time think to himself that he is very awake? More than anything else, this passage reveals his continued confusion between waking and sleeping. That is, he still does not have a firm grip on his state of consciousness. So when he recognizes the woman's voice as his wife's, and states that she has been freed, readers must decide whether or not to believe him.²⁰² Is he a reliable witness? We have just witnessed the complete dissolution of his ability to discern what is real. To add to this confusion, we do not know whether this is the same woman he saw earlier, the one with empty sockets who had closed his eyes. Once again, we must ask ourselves: has he been freed? Or is he constructing an alternate vision of reality in order to cope with the horror of the experience? The beating of his heart is painful and seemingly foreign to him; it "cracks" in his thorax. To live with this confusion is to live in-between the real and the unreal.

The legacy of torture forces both the victims and the witnesses to live permanently at the threshold, and thus in order for their narrations to bear witness to their condition, the general senselessness of bearing witness must make itself felt in the text. But not to the degree that it pushes all meaning outside the text. It is certainly true that for many Guatemalans, the terror produced by the legacy of torture seemed "senseless" and "meaningless"—hence my continued emphasis throughout this project on its unspeakability. But as I argued in Chapter One, this unspeakability was purposeful. That is, the state intentionally provoked terror in order to blur the boundaries between fact and

²⁰² To suffer the kidnapping of a family member was an immensely traumatizing experience for countless thousands of Guatemalan citizens. And it was a phenomenon with which Rey Rosa had a deep personal connection. This story quite significantly carries the following dedication: "Para mis padres" ("For my parents"). Rey Rosa's mother was kidnapped and held for ransom in 1981. Though Rey Rosa has not spoken in great detail about her abduction in public, he includes a description of that experience in his recent novel *El material humano* (2009).

fiction and thus preclude any effort to make sense of torture. So while that terror may have seemed “senseless,” it would be more precise to assert that it actually “makes a mockery of sense-making” (Gordon 80). It does so “not because terror is senseless but, on the contrary, because it is itself so involved with knowledge-making” (Gordon 80). The confusion between fact and fiction wreaked havoc on the social imaginations of citizens. Shifting continually between “unbelievable facts and potent fictions” (Gordon 80), the terror of torture “makes epistemological doubt itself a form of domination” (Gordon 80). Narrating that “mockery of sense-making” in literature will require textual strategies that attempt to repeat that doubt within the text. As Loevlie reminds us, in order to bear witness to the aporia, the text must also falter, and its acts of gesturing must become “weird,” “disturbing,” and often “meaningless” (82). In “La entrega,” we encounter several impasses where our ability to discern between what is certain and what is uncertain—between presence and absence, between speech and silence—is also disrupted.

As we can see from this story, the collection opens by destabilizing the boundaries between seeing and unseeing, thereby establishing a very close relationship between themes of blindness, self-delusion (or bewitching), and violence. The collection ends by reinforcing this thematic in the final story, “El vidente” (“The Seeing Eye”). The story “El vidente” begins with a confession of envy: “Reconozco que lo envidiaba. Yo asociaba su imagen—la piel metálica, el pelo tan oscuro que parecía azul, su mirada suave y vacía—con mi idea de un hombre que ha logrado contacto con Dios” (“I admit that I envied him. With his skin like metal, his hair so black that it seemed blue, his soft empty gaze, he fitted my concept of a man who has made contact with God” [75, 93]).

This man who has seemingly made contact with God is blind, and the narrator proceeds to recount his first experience of envy: “el impulso de cegarme” (“the impulse to blind myself” [75, 93]).²⁰³ As the two of them walk arm in arm through a crowd, hearing the loud voices of the children, the narrator is suddenly struck by the desire: “mirar la oscuridad y *verla* para siempre” (“to look into the darkness and *see* it always” [75, 93]). This desire does not abate, and a few months later, as the narrator is driving with the blind man, he closes his eyes and experiences the desire once again, noting the “sensación de libertad” (“sensation of freedom” [75, 93]) in not seeing: “Fue entonces cuando, con los ojos cerrados, me vi envuelto en una nube dorada, densa, pero a la vez luminosa y transparente. Deseé estar ciego, y me dije en silencio, con una voz que no era mía: ‘Que me convierta en esto’” (“It was then, with my eyes still closed, that I saw I was enveloped in a gold-colored cloud, heavy but luminous and transparent. I wanted to be blind, and I said to myself in silence, in a voice that was not mine: ‘If only I could be like this’” [75, 94]). This passage presents several striking difficulties for the reader. First, we must note the narrator’s false experience of blindness. That is, with his eyes closed he still sees, experiencing a vision of luminosity: “a gold-colored cloud, heavy but luminous and transparent.” Biologically, his eyes still function. And thus closing his eyes on the world does not render him completely blind. He can still see, although his vision has now been altered and skewed. The relevance of this feigned blindness to Taylor’s conception of “percepticide” should be obvious. The “careful blindness” cultivated in times of

²⁰³ Though it seems clear that the narrator is male from the use of masculine past participles and adjectives—“me vi envuelto” (75) and “Deseé estar ciego” (75)—there are indications that problematize this conclusion. For example, the narrator mentions walking arm in arm through a crowd, which is not a common occurrence for two men to do in public. In addition, Bowles’ English translation does not carry any suggestion whatsoever regarding the gender of the narrator. Nevertheless, in order to be faithful to Rey Rosa’s use of the masculine form, I have decided to use masculine pronouns when referring to the narrator. After all, it is possible that they are brothers, or father and son (or son and father).

atrocities allowed people not to see the spectacles of power (Taylor 122). The fear of being caught seeing forced people to look away. This “production of denial” (124) created a situation in which “[t]he passersby, the neighbors, could not bear witness; they closed the door, shut the curtains, turned off the light” (124). Those who did see the violence denied it because they too feared being disappeared and/or tortured. Thus the lack of sight experienced by the narrator is not truly blindness. It is “percepticide,” a false blindness.

The most immediate danger of the narrator’s feigned blindness is that it can produce a fragmentation within the psyche. We see indications of this split in the above quotation: “me dije en silencio, con una voz que no era mía: ‘Que me convierta en esto’” (“I said to myself in silence, in a voice that was not mine: ‘If only I could be like this’” [75, 94]). What does it mean to speak to oneself in a voice that is other? Has the recent experience of “percepticide” somehow fragmented the narrator? Do we see here a separation of self and voice, which is described by Scarry as one of the effects of torture (Scarry 49), and which Agamben refers to as the “supreme ambition” of biopower” (*Remnants* 156)? Clearly, the narrator has begun to question his selfhood. His envy not only reveals his current desire to be other, but also suggests an underlying doubt regarding his own identity, which is then questioned further with the appearance of the “other” voice. What is it about the experience that the narrator finds so freeing and thus so desirable? Is it this experience of otherness? These questions remain unanswered in the text, leaving only a feeling of uneasiness with the narrator’s desire. What is undeniable, however, is that the narrator has experienced a crisis of selfhood, and he answers the question “Who am I?” not with an “I am...” but with an “I want to be other.”

The fragmentation within the narrator's psyche reveals a further danger of feigned blindness. The risk of continually practicing "percepticide" is that we forget its falseness. We forget that this skewed perception of reality is a condition produced in us by the state and its spectacles of horror. Though we cannot be certain that the narrator's struggle is anything more than a general psychological rupture, the context of the story implies otherwise—especially the presence of "una medalla, una estrella de seis puntas" ("a medal in the form of a six-pointed star" [76, 94]), which suggest a military honor and thus a connection with the state and the horror of the war. The danger, therefore, is that we forget what it was like to see. Indeed, we become entrapped by the luminosity of our golden unseeing and begin to desire its permanence. Thus the continued production of feigned blindness can lead to a permanently skewed vision. What this story seems to propose is that in order to learn to see again—to become "videntes"—we must be blinded; we must train ourselves to see anew. Only by altering our vision can we learn to see again. We see this played out at the end of "El vidente." The destabilization and dissolution of the narrator's selfhood culminates in the final paragraph of the story with the narrator's act of self-blinding:

Sobre la chimenea colgaba una medalla, una estrella de seis puntas. Fui a descolgarla, y recuerdo, siempre lo recordaré, que tembló en mi mano. Salí al jardín. Las nubes estaban cargadas de lluvia. Fui a sentarme al banco de piedra, cerca de la fuente. Vi la noche por última vez. Moví los párpados, y con el filo de la estrella me abrí las pupilas. No sentí dolor. Sentía que caía; una corriente tibia bajó por mis mejillas. Sacudí las manos delante de mi cara y no las vi. A mis espaldas oí su voz que me llamaba. (76)²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ "Above the mantelpiece there hung a medal in the form of a six-pointed star. I took it down, and I remember, and shall always remember, that it trembled in my hand. I went out into the garden. The clouds were heavy with rain. I went to the stone bench near the fountain and sat down. For the last time I saw the night. I moved my eyelids, and with the sharp edge of the star I slashed my eyes. There was no pain. I seemed to be falling; a tepid current ran down my cheeks. I moved my hands in front of my face and did not see them. From behind me I heard him calling out to me" (94).

The effect of this self-blinding is undescribed, neutral, and silenced. The narrator does not experience the golden luminescence this time around. This time, he sees nothing, not even his hands in front of his face. Yet he is not surprised by the darkness. The story ends with a parenthetical note: “(No me sorprende la soledad, ni la oscuridad, ni pensar que ahora vivo en mi propio infierno. A veces me sorprende mi pasado, y el recuerdo que tengo de su voz.)” (“I am not astonished by the solitude or the darkness there is in the air, and much less by the thought that I am in a hell of my own creation. Sometimes my past surprises me, and the memory I have of his voice” [76, 95]). We can see clearly that the narrator’s life is difficult, as suggested by the references to his solitude, darkness, and the “hell of [his] own creation.”²⁰⁵ Thus on a more immediate level, we can suggest that the story points out the dangers of willfully not seeing the reality around one, and that acts of self-blinding carry weighty consequences.

Yet it is also possible to suggest that there are benefits to self-blinding. That is, it is possible to argue that the narrator can now see something we do not. The title “El vidente” literally means “The clairvoyant” or “The sighted person.” (and is translated by Bowles as “The Seeing Eye”). Hence the title seems to suggest that the narrator, though now blinded, retains the capacity to see. In fact, in the Spanish version the narrator’s act of self-blinding carries a suggestion that is not present in Bowles’ translation. Rather than slashing his eyes, the narrator opens them: “me abrí las pupilas” (“I opened my pupils” [76, my translation]). The fact that his act of self-blinding is described as an opening rather than a closing is significant. Unlike his previous experience—in which he closed

²⁰⁵ Yet these experiences do not surprise him. What does surprise him, however, is his past, specifically the memory of a voice. But whose voice is it? Is it the blind man whom he was attempting to imitate? Is it his own “other” voice that spoke to him when he closed his eyes? Even though he had been searching for his blind friend just previous to his act of self-blinding, there is no way to know with certainty whose voice it is.

his eyes and saw luminous, golden clouds—this blinding seems to provide him with a new vision or an alternative perception of reality, albeit a reality that is dark and solitary. Though there is no suggestion within the text to indicate precisely what he sees, one effect of his self-blinding is that he is now surprised by his past: specifically, “el recuerdo que tengo de su voz” (76). Though this could be the memory of the blind man’s voice, the “su” is unclear and opens up other possibilities, including his own voice that he experienced as “other” upon closing his eyes. As readers, we simply do not know what to make of his self-blinding or how to think about his newfound characterization as *vidente*.

Clearly, the story resists easy or satisfactory explanation. The impasse experienced by readers requires a “suspension of rational understanding” (Loevlie 85) that stretches the imagination. As Loevlie argues, however, such aporias can be “fruitful” (Loevlie 85) and often give rise to “experiences, insights, meanings that are non-rational, non-linguistic and immediate in nature” (Loevlie 2). Indeed, on a meta-critical level, I would like to suggest that this final story provides a possible key to approaching and re-reading other stories in the collection. As I will argue, Rey Rosa actually writes similar acts of self-blinding into other stories in the collection. In addition to “El vidente,” notions of seeing—including blinding, opening or closing one’s eyes, etc.—occur often in the collection (see, for example, the following stories: “La viuda de don Juan Manuel,” “El monasterio,” and “El cuarto umbroso”). Like the blind *vidente*, readers must “open” their pupils and re-focus their gaze in order to see what is “in-between” the language of the text.

I will refer to these textual acts of blinding or unseeing as the “masking” of torture. As I suggested above, acts of “percepticide” were common throughout the war in

Guatemala. The public nature of massacre as collective torture made the displays of tortured bodies unavoidably visible throughout the country. Yet the people had been trained to look away and to ignore the spectacle. Thus their response to the torture can be called a feigned blindness. But the risk of continually practicing “percepticide” is that we forget its falseness. We forget that this skewed perception of reality is a condition produced in us by the state. The most immediate danger, therefore, is a permanent loss of vision. That loss of vision does not negate the presence of torture; nor does it erase its effects on those who have been witnesses to such atrocities. This loss of vision merely numbs the senses of individual citizens and nullifies their ability to resist the state’s hegemonic control. As I suggested in Chapter One, under these conditions in Guatemala, torture becomes a masked presence that permeates the deepest recesses of both society and the individual psyche. In a certain sense, the spectacle of torture is itself “disappeared.” Yet its presence continues to be felt. In order to understand the dynamics of this masking, readers must experience “percepticide” firsthand. This experience can reveal the fact that our gaze needs to be re-focused, perhaps even blinded, in order to open our pupils and allow us to become a species of *vidente* capable of seeing that which the state has disappeared. To do so, however, we must learn to allow ourselves to rest uncomfortably in those in-between spaces where the visible and the invisible come together. To employ Loevlie’s terminology, the aporia of complex repetition can still be a “fruitful” moment (85). By pushing readers to exist within this in-between moment—in-between seeing and blindness, in-between past and future—Rey Rosa opens up the possibility for encountering a “language that does not speak” (Loevlie 85).

As I will argue throughout this chapter, Rey Rosa attempts to “repeat” or re-stage the state’s disappearing of torture in the stories of *El cuchillo del mendigo*. As I suggested above, torture never appears as fully present in his stories, as it does in testimonio. There are no clear descriptions of torture scenes, and thus readers might even doubt its “presence.” Yet precisely because of its apparent absence, we cannot suggest that the non-symbolic of torture is fully absent either, as we saw in the new novel. Rather than push the silent non-symbolic of torture beyond the text, Rey Rosa has masked it within language itself, allowing it to exist in the aporetic in-between. Therefore, in *El cuchillo del mendigo*, torture is experienced as both a “seething absence” and a “muted presence” (Gordon 21).

The masking of torture recreates for the reader the impossibility of witnessing torture. To employ Agamben’s terminology, Rey Rosa’s stories bear witness to the “impossibility of bearing witness” (Agamben *Remnants* 39). There is a sense in which the stories silence and/or blind the reader. More abstractly considered, the masking of torture is “the movement through which the border between the text and the non-symbolic is momentarily suspended” (Loevlie 78). To put the matter more simply, in many of Rey Rosa’s stories, readers encounter a moment where something is not quite right. The reader can either stop reading, or she can continue to rest uncomfortably with the uneasiness of the text. Other critics have drawn attention to this uneasiness in his writing. Roberto Bolaño, for example, has drawn attention to the sinister nature of Rey Rosa’s stories, calling him a master of “sombra, una raya que atraviesa veloz el espacio de la normalidad” (“shadow, a line that swiftly crosses the space of normality” [141]) and suggesting that he is an author who “cree en la vida como sólo creen los niños y los que

han sentido la presencia de la muerte” (“believes in life the way that only children do and those who have felt the presence of death” [200]). Unfortunately, the majority of such comments come from reviews of Rey Rosa’s books and occasional interviews. While these critics have drawn attention to this uneasiness, very few have developed a sustained treatment of it, and thus have not explored the specific dynamics and rhetorical strategies within the stories that create such unease.²⁰⁶ Clearly, there exists “something” within Rey Rosa’s narrative that resists explanation. Whether it is a feeling or what Rey Rosa himself calls the “sabor de la pieza” (“flavor of the piece” [Solares n. pag.]), it is a sensation that Rey Rosa says he works diligently to produce. No matter what we call it, it is an effect that “slips away from rational analysis” (Loevlie 87). In *El cuchillo del mendigo*, for example, this displacement occurs primarily through fear. Indeed, there are several stories in this collection that, to be honest, completely escape the reader’s understanding. They do not make rational sense, yet nevertheless continue to terrify. It is an irrational fear, to be sure, but that does not make the experience any less horrifying. The effect on the reader is immediate, for the reader “must accept to stand in the unthinkable, must accept a text that continues while it derails, that continues while it is silence” (Loevlie 87). Loevlie calls this literary phenomenon an “implosion”: “An implosion ‘sucks’ space together and causes it to ‘cave in.’ It is this sense of *collapsing* and *bursting inwards* that provides such adequate and powerful descriptions of the experience of reading literary silence” (87). Normally, readers experience a certain “distance” with the text that allows the text to remain an “object” that can be read. However, when we consider literary silence, “this distance collapses and the text is no longer a separate object facing the

²⁰⁶ As I suggested above, Loevlie’s treatment of Beckett provides a framework that allows us to approach Rey Rosa’s stories and better understand the dynamics involved. For that reason, in what follows, I will draw heavily on Loevlie’s work.

reader, but rather the two ‘merge’ together. We can recognize literary silence because it invites this implosion, this transformation in the traditional analytical relationship between text and reader” (Loevlie 88). Literary silence therefore creates a certain destabilization or dissolution that escapes rational explanation. Because the “not quite right” quality of the text is never resolved, Rey Rosa’s texts force a hesitation or suspension of belief in the reader. As Loevlie explains, such implosions require the reader to abandon reason:

The implosion is therefore also a movement that is not primarily *thought*, but rather experienced. To think the implosion is to lose it and re-enter the realm of reflection and control. Literary silence is the dynamic that invites the reader to perform a certain unmediated ‘jump’ away from the firm ground of reason, and into the free fall, scary or relieving, of non-rational control. (89)

By resisting rational thought, Rey Rosa’s stories impede reflection and therefore re-create an uneasiness that repeats—in complex form—the state’s project of blurring the boundaries between the real and the unreal. Because literary silence requires that the readers approach the text in a different way, it forces them to suspend momentarily their previous understanding and accept their inability to discern between what is certain and what is uncertain. If there is something masked within his narrative, it is torture itself, and Rey Rosa challenges readers to see it. More than anything else, what we see in these stories is an attempt to narrate life through the eyes of the tortured, or from the perspective of those who have witnessed torture and thus experienced the fragmentation firsthand. This suspension of understanding can produce lasting effects: “the implosion relies upon the willingness of the reader to change not only the relationship to the text as an object, but also to him- or herself as an interpreting, reflecting, rational reader” (Loevlie 89). If reading challenges the ways in which we conceive of ourselves as rational beings and

therefore as interpretive agents, it can fundamentally destabilize our sense of self and our conception of reality.²⁰⁷ To understand the dynamics of this destabilization, we can now turn to the use of dreams and nightmares in *El cuchillo del mendigo*.

²⁰⁷ According to Loevlie, “Reader and text merge together, mixing, so to speak, their voices. The implosion is intrinsic to this view of reading. It is the moment through which the subject-object constellation actually collapses. It is a moment of a certain ‘trembling’ between text and reader, a dissolution of roles as the reader is no longer the interpreting subject and the text no longer the object to be interpreted” (88).

“Entre sueño y vela”: *The Masking of Torture*²⁰⁸

Y un poco de paranoia no hace mal en la literatura. (Rodrigo Rey Rosa)²⁰⁹

*La historia se repetía sistemáticamente hasta un punto en que era difícil reconocer qué era realidad y qué pesadilla.*²¹⁰

In *El cuchillo del mendigo* the primary method of dissolving the boundaries between the real and the unreal—and therefore of masking torture—occurs through the use of dreams and nightmares. Rey Rosa has admitted that his early stories were “dream-inspired” and that much of the action occurs “inside the head of someone.”²¹¹ Yet when Rey Rosa claims that “[s]ome of the stories—for example, in *The Beggar’s Knife*—are dreams,” such a statement can be misinterpreted and over-generalized.²¹² Though it could certainly be argued that *some* of the stories are dreams, it would be more appropriate and precise to suggest that the collection as a whole explores the liminality of dreams. That is, though some stories certainly appear to remain within the dream itself, in most cases the stories probe and test the boundaries between the dream and reality. Characters enter and exit the dreamworld fluidly, and in several instances, the reader is uncertain where the line between the two is, or if it even exists at all. Rey Rosa challenges readers to question to what extent dreams are in fact “real.” And thus the central question throughout the collection appears to focus upon how we differentiate between what is real and what is not. To that purpose, in this section I will be exploring this psychological dimension of his characters in the stories, specifically regarding their probing of the unconscious. Though

²⁰⁸ The title of this section is taken from the story “El monasterio” (*El cuchillo del mendigo* 21).

²⁰⁹ Interview Solares

²¹⁰ Ramón Díaz Eterovic, *Nadie sabe más que los muertos* 80.

²¹¹ Interview with Gray 167.

²¹² Interview with Gray 167.

Rey Rosa employs the term “dreams” in the interview with Gray, I have chosen for various reasons to employ the term “nightmare” throughout this chapter. First of all, it is a term employed by Rey Rosa himself in several of the stories (e.g. “Un gato amarillo”), and thus its use is not without warrant. Second, “nightmare” captures more precisely the uneasiness of the stories, as well as the lingering emotional trauma produced by the act of reading. Finally, as I noted in Chapter 1 of the present study, the real-life experience of torture was itself a nightmare. Or rather, in torture pain was repeated and reproduced “sistemáticamente hasta un punto en que era difícil reconocer qué era realidad y qué pesadilla” (“systematically to the point in which it was difficult to recognize what was reality and what was a nightmare”).²¹³ As already noted, Scarry refers to this process as the “objectification of the prisoner’s world dissolution” (38). And thus the primary feature of torture is the destabilization of the boundaries between the real and the unreal. We see this destabilizing aspect of torture repeated in many of the stories in *El cuchillo del mendigo* through the use of nightmares.

Nightmares are practically omnipresent in *El cuchillo del mendigo*.²¹⁴ In fact, as I noted in the previous section, the opening story “La entrega” includes numerous attempts to dissolve the boundaries between the character’s conscious and unconscious states, thereby blurring the lines between nightmare and reality. We see this dissolution just as prominently in “La señal” (“The Sign”). In this story, a man awakens one morning to find a scratch just below his eye, but he cannot remember how he could have been injured:

²¹³ Ramón Díaz Eterovic, *Nadie sabe más que los muertos* 80.

²¹⁴ Of the 26 stories in the collection, at least eleven directly mention dreams or nightmares (“La señal,” “El monasterio,” “La herencia,” “El hijo y el padre,” “El cuchillo del mendigo,” “Un gato amarillo,” “Nueve ocasiones,” “Sueños repetidos,” “Una versión de mi muerte,” “El animal,” “Un prisionero”); at least four others include characters who either awaken or fall asleep (“La entrega,” “La viuda de don Juan Manuel,” “El lecho del río,” “La lluvia y otros niños”); two appear to be full-fledged dreams (“El camino se dobla,” “Informes de Cahobón,”); and two more have main characters who are blind and thus cannot “see” what is real and what is not (“El cuarto umbroso,” “El vidente”).

“Quise hacer memoria, pero no recordaba haberme herido la noche anterior, y si lo había hecho durante algún sueño, el sueño se había borrado por completo” (“I thought a moment, but could not recall having hurt myself the previous evening; if I had done it during a dream in the night, I had completely forgotten the dream” [6, 7]). Yet even though he cannot remember the dream itself, neither can he discount the possibility that the cut is the result of a dream. Thus from the very beginning, the reader is alerted to the potential fluidity between the man’s reality and his dreams. The man’s faulty memory raises uncertainty regarding the stability of that boundary. The scratch remains on his face for two days. A week later, it happens again, once again “sin el más débil recuerdo de un accidente o sueño alguno que lo explicara” (“without the faintest memory of any accident or dream which might explain it” [6, 7]). He becomes determined to understand the origin of these wounds. His first thought is that the injuries are a result of nightmares: “Comencé por imaginar que yo mismo, en medio de una posible pesadilla, pude haberme señalado el rostro” (“I began by imagining that in the midst of a possible nightmare I might have clawed myself” [6, 7]). Though he is willing to concede the possibility of injuring himself during a nightmare—and thus admitting the potential destabilization of the boundaries between reality and nightmare—he cannot imagine how he could have done so twice, nor now he it could have produced two identical wounds: “una línea que comenzaba justo bajo el centro de mi ojo y bajaba, haciéndose más profunda, formando una media luna que terminaba junto a la comisura de mis labios” (“a line beginning just below the center of my eye and cutting deeper as it described a half-moon that ended near the corner of my mouth” [6, 7-8]). This confusion becomes more and more pronounced as the story continues.

Apart from his confusion regarding the origin of the “sign” and his curiosity regarding its cause, the most immediate effect of his experience is actually social marginalization: “Así señalado, me resultaba embarazoso hablar con cualquiera, aun con los desconocidos” (“Disfigured in this way, I found it embarrassing to have to speak to anyone, even someone I did not know” [6, 8]). Having been “señalado” (“disfigured”), his emotional response is shame and embarrassment. As I noted in Chapter One, this mirrors the reaction experienced by torture victims. Once the prisoner’s immediate physical setting has been destroyed and ceases to exist as a possibility for social relationships, the torturer is able to “reach out, body forth, and destroy more distant and more numerous manifestations of civilization” (42). Thus social isolation is one of the primary effects of torture. Indeed, according to Elizabeth Lira and Eugenia Weinstein, psychologists who work with victims of torture in Chile, “The most important psychosocial damage that torture generates consists in the destruction or deterioration of collective links” (qtd in Cavanaugh 44-45). We see the repetition of this alienation in the story.

Despite his embarrassment, he decides to seek help. He invites a friend to stay with him in order to keep an eye on him as he sleeps (6, 8). For nine straight days, his friend observes nothing, finally leaving the protagonist alone. Then, the second night he spends alone, the sign appears again. He once again asks his friend for help: “A lo largo de veintisiete noches sin fruto me veló con perseverancia, y al cabo de este período ambos nos dimos por vencidos” (“For twenty-seven fruitless nights he watched me steadfastly, and at the end of that time we agreed that the thing was beyond us” [7, 8]). The friend leaves, but the following night it happens again, this time with a slight

variation: “en lugar de la curva descendiente, era una U invertida, justo bajo el ojo”

(“instead of the descending curve, it was an inverted letter U, just below my eye” [7, 8]).

His growing confusion and exasperation force him to abandon society: “No salí de la casa aquel día; no quería ser visto por nadie, y me encerré en el cuartito que me servía de estudio, decidido a resolver el problema” (“I did not go out of the house that day; I did not want anyone to see me, and I shut myself into a small room I used as a study, determined to solve the puzzle” [7, 8]). It becomes clear to him that he cannot seek help from anyone, and he is left alone with his nightmares.

At this point in the story, just as readers witnessed in the story “El vidente,” we once again see a crisis of selfhood. The appearance of the sign, though of primary importance, reveals an additional difficulty for the man: he cannot protect himself against himself. He proceeds to explore various means for watching himself while sleeping, but soon realizes the absurdity of such an attempt (7, 9). His numerous efforts to understand what has happened to him are unfruitful until one night when, overcome with exhaustion, he has the following nightmare:

Lo que soñaba, no era sino la prolongación del asedio producto de mi obsesión. En el baño había un espejo circular, y soñé que lo descolgaba de la pared para llevarlo a mi cuarto. Tomé varios libros de la librería y con ellos levanté una columna para apoyar el espejo, de manera que, estando yo tendido en la cama, podía ver mi reflejo de cuerpo entero. Luego saqué dos pinzas de una cajita y, no sé cómo, las apliqué a cada uno de mis párpados, de suerte que me era imposible cerrar los ojos. Me quedé dormido con los ojos abiertos, y me miraba en el oblicuo espejo. Entonces oí algo, como el aleteo de un pájaro. Era algo sin forma claramente definida, una nubecita con garras, lo que vino a golpearme a cara. Inútilmente forcejeé, tratando de juntar los párpados. Y entonces, desesperado de mi propia impotencia, me desperté. Mientras reconstruía el sueño, me fui librando del miedo. (7-8)²¹⁵

²¹⁵ “What I dreamed was simply a prolongation of the state of siege resulting from my obsession. In the bathroom there was a circular mirror, and I dreamed that I removed it from the wall and carried it into my bedroom. I took several books from the shelf and made a pillar against which I leaned the mirror in such a way that when I was lying in the bed I could see the reflection of my entire body. Then I took two tweezers

The theme of vision and keeping one's eyes open is here combined with the theme of violence. As noted in Chapter One, it was common for citizens to be "marked" during torture. Though the physical wounds may have healed, the psychological wounds often accompanied the tortured for years after their release from the detention center. Though it is far from certain that the character in this story has been tortured, it is clear that he is besieged to the point of exhaustion by an indecipherable and unknowable terror. It is a fear of something unseen that nonetheless marks him.

We see a similar connection between nightmares and violence in "Un gato amarillo" ("A Yellow Cat"). This very short story consists of only three succinct paragraphs. Despite its brevity, the dissolution of the boundaries between the real and the unreal is remarkably disturbing. The first paragraph notes that the main character has suffered a "pesadilla" ("nightmare" [54, 68]). He awakens and places his hands over his "vientre hinchado" ("swollen stomach" [54, 68]), thinking that the nightmare was the result of something he had eaten the night before. He goes into the bathroom, and as he is washing his face, "comenzó a hacer memoria" ("he began to remember" [54, 68]). Rey Rosa's use of language is significant. He does not write that the man remembered, which is possible in Spanish, but that he began to "make memory" ("hacer memoria"), thus highlighting the possible imaginative nature of our memories. The second paragraph, which begins with verbs in the past perfect, presumably describes the nightmare itself. In the dream, he enters a house and meets two men dressed in black. Without speaking, they

from a little box, and somehow affixed them to my eyelids in such a way that it was impossible for me to shut my eyes. I remained asleep with my eyes open, and watched myself in the slanting mirror. I heard then what sounded like the fluttering of wings. What came to strike my face was something without a clearly defined shape, like a little cloud with claws. It opened its black bill, and I made a vain effort to shut my eyelids. It was then, made desperate by my helplessness, that I awoke. As I reconstructed the dream I felt my fear leaving me" (9).

lead him through the rear of the house to the other side of the yard where he sees his dead grandfather waiting for him in a boat. After they embrace, a priest appears: “Miró con reproche al anciano, que tenía en la mano una botella; éste se excusó con un gesto, y ambos desaparecieron tras un enrejado y comenzaron a discutir” (“He cast a reproachful glance at the old man, who had a bottle in his hand. The latter made a gesture of excusing himself, and they both disappeared from view for a discussion which took place behind a grill” [54, 68]). The topic of their argument is never mentioned, and this point, the second paragraph ends.

What is unclear is whether the third paragraph continues the dream or not. At the end of the first paragraph, we left the main character standing in the bathroom, washing his face, and reconstructing the dream. At the beginning of the third paragraph, the man “se dirigió al cuarto donde tenía su cama” (“went to the room where he slept” [54, 69]). Does this action continue the dream or do we see a continuation of the post-dream action? That is, after hearing the two men argue, does he go back into the house? Or does he head toward his bedroom after washing his face? Clearly, the boundaries between the real and the unreal have dissolved. Though the paragraph break seems to support the latter conclusion, i.e., that he is now awake and returning to his bedroom, the ensuing action seems more like a nightmare than reality. I include here the final paragraph in its entirety:

Él se dirigió al cuarto donde tenía su cama. Un gato amarillo estaba acostado sobre la almohada. Cuando se hubo desvestido para descansar un rato, el gato le saltó encima y le clavó las uñas. El dolor le subió al cuello como un cristal en pedazos, y luego bajó al estómago. Tendiéndose en la cama, logró ver las estrellas en el cielo a través del tejado. (54)²¹⁶

²¹⁶ “He went to the room where he slept. There was a yellow cat on his pillow. When he took off his clothes to rest for a while, the cat sprang at him and dug its claws into him. Pain rose into his throat like shattered

This is where the story ends, and the reader still cannot determine whether the action occurs in the dream or in real life. The boundary between the two has been destabilized, and anything is possible, including seeing the stars “through the tiles of the roof” (54, 69).

Though the meaning of the story is far from clear, we must recognize the fact that this type of narration—in which reality and nightmare commingle—is a common legacy of torture. The fracturing of the psyche post-torture prevents the tortured from distinguishing the real from the unreal. The same can be said for those who witness torture. In a country like Guatemala, torture—and the terror it produced—corrupted and infected society to such a degree that it became “normal.” As it was tolerated, and finally normalized by society, torture penetrated the recesses of the Guatemalan psyche and fragmented it. Even those citizens who had not experienced torture directly felt its “masked” presence. Everything—no matter how unbelievable—became a possibility. Through a process that Scarry calls the “objectification of the prisoner’s world dissolution” (38), both the objects in the room – bathtubs, refrigerators, tables, etc. – and the room itself are converted into objects of pain. The boundaries between the real and the unreal fade and blur, and everything becomes a potential weapon (Scarry), even yellow housecats. The effect of this blurring on the citizens’ ability to witness to torture and other atrocities of the war cannot be underestimated. Masked behind the normalcy of everyday life, torture creeps below the surface, “just beyond view.” Torture’s shadowy presence haunts the very fabric of Guatemalan society. Whether this story is “about”

glass, then sank to his stomach. He lay down in bed and was able to see the sky and its stars through the tiles of the roof” (69).

torture or not, its mode of narration repeats the feeling of uncertainty and despair common for those who live with the haunting of fear and vulnerability.

This feeling of uncertainty produced from the destabilization of the boundaries between the real and the unreal appears again and again throughout the collection. In “Lecciones inciertas” (“Uncertain Readings”), for example, this destabilization is so strong that it disrupts the writing itself, as witnessed in the chaotic sentence and paragraph structure. In many cases, each sentence begins a new paragraph, and the narration is almost impossible to follow, thus requiring what Loevlie calls a “leap of logic” and a willingness to succumb to the unthinkable (Loevlie 85). At the end of the story, the narrator appears to be abducted, although the precise moment of the abduction is uncertain: “Ayer fui llevado a una habitación llena de hombres. / Desde el otro lado de la pared llega la voz de las mujeres. / ‘Dicen que los que están allí todos están muertos.’” (“They came for me yesterday. / They took me to a room full of men. From the other side of the wall comes the sound of women’s voices. ‘They say the ones who are there are all dead’” [71, 89]).²¹⁷ It was common practice in detention centers for the victims to be segregated by gender. And the suggestion that they are all dead recalls the fact that in Guatemala, most who were abducted were either killed or disappeared. The next two passages of the story contain the most direct reference to torture in the entire collection: “Por la mañana recogen nuestra basura, la comida desechada y el agua sucia. Cada tres días se llevan a uno de nosotros, para volverlo tres días después. Cuando regresa, su cara es diferente, pero sus ropas son las mismas” (“In the morning they gather up our trash, our leftover food and dirty water. / Every three days they take away one of us, bringing

²¹⁷ Note that the first line of the paragraph (“Ayer fui llevado a una habitación llena de hombres”) is divided into two separate lines in Bowles’ English translation (“They came for me yesterday. / They took me to a room full of men”).

him back three days later with a different face, but wearing the same clothes” [71, 89]). Though we cannot know with any certainty whether those who have been carried off are tortured, it is certainly true that torture is an experience that disfigures the victim, perhaps to the point of giving him a new face. The final passage re-affirms this possibility:

Dicen que al salir uno no recuerda haber estado aquí.
Las voces de las mujeres son el único alivio. Se filtran por la pared y flotan entre nosotros. Entre nuestros dedos y piernas, calentándonos.
A veces entran por los oídos y se meten en la cabeza. Entonces son un martirio.
(71)²¹⁸

Once again, we cannot be entirely certain as to the “meaning” of these passages. Unlike the previous literary modes examined (*testimonio* and the new novel), Rey Rosa has chosen to mask the violence behind the language of the text, thereby making it impossible for the reader to extrapolate any easy interpretations. Rather, the reader is asked to rest uncomfortably in the presence of the text’s uncertainty. As the boundaries between the real and the unreal destabilize, the resulting irrationality—or to borrow Loevlie’s terminology, the “in-between movement of the aporia” (84)—establishes a “complex repetition” of the experience of torture. Rather than recollect or symbolize that experience, Rey Rosa chooses to repeat the experience itself by re-staging the traumatic uncertainty of torture. Thus his narrative presents torture spectrally and silently, occupying that “zone of indistinction” where one can bear witness only to the “impossibility of bearing witness” (Agamben *Remnants* 39).

²¹⁸ “They say that once you are outside you no longer remember having been here. / The voices of the women are the only relief. / They filter through the wall and float among us. Between our fingers and legs, warming them. / Sometimes they go in through the ears and enter the head. Then one suffers” (89).

A Non-Localizable Exteriority

We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there. (Gordon 5)

By accentuating dreams in his stories, Rey Rosa not only destabilizes the boundaries between the real and the unreal; he also destabilizes the reader's conception and experience of space. Indeed, we see in Rey Rosa's stories a conception of space that Loevlie would refer to as a "non-localizable exteriority" (191) and what Agamben might deem the "non-place of articulation" (*Remnants* 130).²¹⁹ That is, the mode of spatial production in these stories remains difficult to ascertain. This feeling that the stories always seem to take place somewhere else further contributes to the reader's unease. By enhancing this sense of otherness, space is another element of Rey Rosa's stories that accentuates the uncertainty of the non-symbolic.

Recent approaches to theories of space tell us that in literature and in life, places are important because, quite simply, everything happens somewhere. In recent years, theorists have explored more precisely how the places we inhabit form us politically, socially, and culturally, and also how they limit our ability to challenge, transgress, and perhaps even subvert the powers that be. In other words, space is no longer conceived as pure "innocent backdrop to position" (Keith and Pile 4). Rather it is vital in understanding the complexity of human relationships, and can be a weapon of either hegemony or resistance. According to such theories, space—whether expressed

²¹⁹ Regarding the "non-localizable exteriority" of the voice in Beckett's *L'Innommable*, Loevlie writes, "his voice arises from a position that is neither inside nor outside—but *au milieu*. The voice from this middle ground addresses from a place that is both outside and in between the dualism and that cannot be defined according to it. It is a voice that arises from the aporetic locus, neither inside nor outside, a place with no such borders" (191).

consciously as such by the author or not—is determined by political ideology. As Edward Soja so eloquently writes, “We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology” (7). Space determines its inhabitants by limiting the places they inhabit. Certain places can only be occupied by certain people. For that reason, space becomes an “active constitutive component of hegemonic power: an element in the fragmentation, dislocation and weakening of class power, both the medium and message of domination and subordination” (Keith and Pile 37). This spatial construction of hegemonic power is stabilizing in that it produces—to greater and lesser degrees—grids of discipline through which citizens can be governed, and possibly controlled.²²⁰

Yet as I have suggested above and in previous chapters (see especially Chapter 1), torture problematizes many conceptions of spatial production. As a social practice, torture is both present and absent; it exists permanently in-between. The stories of *El cuchillo del mendigo* clearly do not take place in the “here”; but it would also be theoretically imprecise to claim that they take place nowhere. Rather, we might suggest that they are always seemingly taking place somewhere else. This “somewhere else” is what Blanchot calls *l’espace poétique* (qtd. in Loevlie 191). This poetic space is “a place that is both outside and in between the dualism and that cannot be defined according to it” (Loevlie 191). In fact, to suggest that these stories function as poetry would not be off the mark. In a recent interview, Rey Rosa once suggested that his early work—including *El cuchillo del mendigo*—was incredibly “abstract” and that he began by trying to write

²²⁰ My terminology here draws heavily on Foucault’s conception of space and its relationship to constructions of power. Though the Panopticon was a concept imagined by Bentham, its theorization in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1979) remains the most widely cited.

“lo que podríamos llamar ‘poemas en prosa’” (“what we might call ‘poems in prose’” [n. pag.]). This concern for the abstract can be seen in the fact that his stories do not occur in real space. In an interview with Gray, he states, “My early stories are more abstract as far as place is concerned; [...] There’s hardly any description of landscape” (167). As we have just seen, however, this use of abstract space does not mean that his stories occur in dream space. They somehow occupy an in-between space, what Loevlie calls “an aporetic locus, neither inside nor outside, a place with no such borders” (191). Rey Rosa’s complex repetition, as a mode of spatial production, prevents the reader from locating the stories in real space. In an interview with Solares, Rey Rosa suggests that this was intentional, stating that his early work incorporated “temas que podrían ocurrir en cualquier ciudad latinoamericana, pero no estaban ligados al entorno ni al paisaje inmediato” (“themes that could occur in any Latin American city, but were not tied to the immediate environment or landscape” [n. pag.]). Readers might possibly deduce that the action occurs in Latin America—either because of specific objects or clothing—but “no se sabe nunca de dónde son exactamente porque era un poco vago y no incluía nombres de lugares” (“you do not know where they are exactly because it was a little vague and did not include place names” [n. pag.]). This feeling that the stories always seem to take place somewhere else contributes to the reader’s unease and feeling of being permanently in-between.

As noted above, the only major exception to this “non-localizable exteriority” (Loevlie) is the initial story “La entrega.” The remaining stories often seem to drift in and out of real space. In “El camino se dobla” (“The Path Doubles Back”), for example, there are strange shifts in the geography of the story. First of all, the story is divided into four

sections, each of which jumps to different locations. Furthermore, the geographical destabilization causes the spaces themselves to shift in and out of focus: “Por un momento desconoció la puerta y las gradas de la casa, pero pronto volvieron a verse como antes” (“For an instant he failed to recognize the door and the iron grillwork, but then they returned to looking as they had” [9, 10]). As I have suggested throughout this study, torture victims are often incapable of relating to the spaces around them. The restriction and enclosure of the victim’s world makes relationality unthinkable, warping their sense of space and geography. As Scarry notes, space itself becomes a potential weapon (Scarry 38). Thus when the man is later stabbed, we should not be surprised that the initial suspect is nature. Though we cannot discount the possibility that he is attacked by an unknown assailant, the most likely culprit is the wind itself, since the path is empty and the man seen earlier had already disappeared. The attack is described as follows:

Primero entró el viento, compacto y frío. En lugar de la sonrisa que esperaba, sin sentir dolor, recibió una puñalada. La hoja le abrió la piel en el ombligo, y subió, dejando una estela roja casi hasta la garganta. Afuera, las estrellas brillaban. El cielo se rasgó en dos mientras el hombre caía. Siguió cayendo durante mucho tiempo. (10)²²¹

The attacker is never mentioned, and we see a striking parallel with the haunting vulnerability witnessed in “El gato amarillo.” As noted above, as torture became tolerated in Guatemala, and finally normalized by society, it penetrated the recesses of the Guatemalan psyche and fragmented it. Even those citizens who had not experienced torture directly felt its “masked” presence. As the boundaries between the real and the unreal dissolved, everything—no matter how unbelievable—became a possibility. This

²²¹ “First the wind entered, compact and cold. In place of seeing the expected smile, and without feeling any pain, he was stabbed. The blade opened the flesh at the navel and swept upward, leaving a red furrow, almost to the throat. Outside the stars flared. The sky tore in half before his eyes as he fell. For a long time he went on falling” (11-12).

produced an increased vulnerability, leading to situations in which even the geography seems violent. We see this geographical violence in “El camino se dobla.” Immediately after the man is wounded, we witness another spatial transformation: “La casa comenzó a convertirse en una nube que luego se alejó; la colina de enfrente se convirtió en una ola; las gradas eran un elefante, y el camino un túnel invisible” (“The house began to change into a cloud and then to be moving farther away; the hill opposite became a wave; the steps were an elephant, and the path an invisible tunnel” [10, 12]). Thus the mode of spatial production becomes very destabilizing.²²² Because the mode of spatial production in these stories remains difficult to ascertain, the unease experienced by the reader is further heightened. By enhancing this sense of otherness, space is another element of Rey Rosa’s stories that accentuates the uncertainty of the non-symbolic. Therefore, these stories occupy what Agamben might deem a “non-place of articulation” (*Remnants* 130), where it becomes possible to bear witness to the “impossibility of bearing witness” (*Remnants* 39).

²²² For other examples of this spatial destabilization, see “Sueños repetidos” and “Lecciones inciertas.”

Trembling in the Uncertainty of the Instant

*...que la historia, que es una puta sencilla, no tiene momentos determinantes sino que es una proliferación de instantes, de brevedades, que compiten entre sí en monstruosidad.*²²³

*[W]e are other, no longer what we were.*²²⁴

The dissolution of the real/unreal dichotomy not only produces an altered conception of space; it also destabilizes the reader's conception of time. Recalling my treatment of torture in Chapter One, we must once again draw attention to the ways in which torture breaks down the tortured's experience of time. For the tortured, there is no past or future, only the immediate instant and the presence of the body in pain (Scarry 35). The restriction and enclosure of the victim's world allows the imagining of a "now of torture," in which the prisoner ceases to exist relationally with his past and future. In order to understand the relationship between the "now of torture" and Rey Rosa's stories, we must again turn to Loevlie. Though Loevlie does not specifically address the now of torture, she does nevertheless provide a theoretical means of talking about this back-and-forth movement of torture, and a method for assessing how it might be depicted in literature. Loevlie refers to this back-and-forth movement as the repetition of the "instant." She writes,

In order for something to be repeated it must have been. But in the actual repetition it becomes new. This is the temporal understanding of repetition. Repetition is the transition from old to new, it is the *movement* by which the past transforms into present existence. It is the coming 'into existence', the producer of existence. [...] So repetition is the category of *becoming* and as such it refers both backwards and forwards. It relates backwards to what is repeated, and forwards to the new becoming of this past. Repetition, one might say, *trembles* between past and future. It is the suspension of temporal sequence, the mark of the paradoxical

²²³ Roberto Bolaño, 2666 993.

²²⁴ Beckett 1965: 11, qtd in Loevlie 216.

re-versal of the past into the future. In linear sequence the present becomes the past, but through repetition the past becomes the present. Repetition corresponds to the instant of becoming and hence relates to the temporal category of the instant, or the ‘now’, the actual moment when time advances, transforms the past into the future. Repetition is the topos of the ‘now.’ (Loevlie 66-67)

In terms of violence and torture, we might say that the “instant now” reflects the tortured’s constant “trembling” between the ever-present *past* memory of what has come before but is always continually present, and the fear of an ever-present *future* over which they do not have any control.²²⁵ Following Scarry, we know that the victim of torture exists perpetually in the impossibility of the instant. This back-and-forth movement of the instant is always in-between and thus supremely unstable; it is perhaps best described as a “constant evaporation and constant becoming” (Loevlie 67). In constant flux, the instant now of torture destabilizes into “a forever shifting place to which it must constantly return only to constantly flee” (Loevlie 67). As a “suspension of temporal sequence,” this “trembling” escapes standard conceptions of linear or teleological time.²²⁶ As a practice of complex repetition, torture disrupts the forward movement of standard causality. In such situations, the only conceivable telos is the “constant ‘now’” (Loevlie 67). Hence

²²⁵ Loevlie’s use of the verb “tremble” is a clear reference to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, which she examines at length in her study of literary silence (see especially pp. 70-75).

²²⁶ Yet the instant is not somehow outside of time, nor is it to be “equated with a metaphysical ideal of presence” (68). In the words of Loevlie:

Although the ‘now’ is silent and although it is not reducible to linear time, it is actually *not* outside or beyond time. Rather it is an intense ‘being in’ time. The experience of the *øieblikk* [Danish for “the blink of the eye”] is the result of the rather dizzying back-and-forth of repetition, the highly accelerated movement between a ‘has been’ and a ‘will be’. It is therefore quite the opposite of the plenitude and wholeness postulated by the dream of presence. Repetition rather negates the presence it suggests because it radically precludes rest or standstill. It is always movement—*kinesis*. So although the ‘now’, and its inverse relation to eternity, is seemingly *outside* time, it is always the result of repetition. It is haunted by repetition’s buzz of minuscule back-and-forth. A potential image is that of an electric current accelerating between two poles. It is by remaining in this (rather unbearable) movement of back-and-forth that we might experience the ‘now’. In other words the ‘now’ is a result, one might say, of daring to remain *inside* the temporal sequence of repetition, whereas the metaphysical presence was postulated as a beyond time. (68)

Conceptualizing the instant is clearly difficult. Indeed, according to Loevlie, it escapes language. Therefore, “[t]he moment it is stated in words, or measured, it is lost. As such it might be defined as an experience of the non-symbolic” (Loevlie 69). Yet despite the fact that the instant is “a silent experience that always slips away from articulation” (68), it can nevertheless be explored in literature.

Loevlie's conceptualization of the instant parallels quite fittingly Scarry's description of the experience of the tortured.

With this conception of the “instant ‘now’” in mind, we can now examine the ways in which Rey Rosa's stories appear to be narrations from the perspective of those haunted by torture.²²⁷ In addition to the numerous spatial displacements noted above—which in many cases entailed corresponding temporal disruptions as well—the most obvious point of departure for exploring the aporetic movement of the instant as a temporal in-between is the dissolution of a concept of “Self” in the text. As noted in Chapter One, torture creates a destabilizing fragmentation in the victim, which ultimately leads to the experience of the self as other. The conversion of the prisoner's own body into an agent of pain creates a division between “self” and “body” (Scarry 49), which then forces the tortured to become “other.” The ontological split into self and body often forces the prisoner to “renounce her psychological integrity as a coping mechanism, such that her words become those of another, dissociated from her self” (Cavanaugh 40). This coping strategy—in which “death, the very negation of ego, becomes desirable” (Cavanaugh 40)—reveals the profundity of the fragmentation of the tortured. Indeed, many victims dissolve the ego (Cavanaugh 40) and create an alternate “self” in order to deal with the experience. As Cavanaugh notes, “The experiences are remembered vaguely, as those of another, repressed into a hidden corner of the fragmented self” (Cavanaugh 40). Because the experiences are repressed and rendered unspeakable,

²²⁷ The connection between repetition and narration is explored by Melberg in a study on theories of mimesis. Melberg writes, “The temporal dialectics of ‘repetition’ suspends temporal sequence: the *now* that is always an *after* actually comes *before*—it is the *now* of the instant, the sudden intervention in sequential time, the cesura that defines what has been, makes it possible to tell its story and makes way for the ‘new’” (Melberg 1995: 137, qtd in Loevlie 67). Thus repetition avoids the metaphysical difficulties of “true presence” and the problems inherent in attempts to “recollect” violence (see Chapter 2 of the present study).

witnessing to those experiences becomes highly problematized. Therefore, any witnessing to this aspect of torture must plumb the depths of the “aporetic position of a constant in-between” (Loevlie 84). In many of Rey Rosa’s stories, we can see this “aporetic position” as the moment of psychological split in between self and other.

These coping mechanisms figure prominently, for example, in his story “El animal” (“The Animal”). In this text, a man awakens from a dream he has forgotten. But in place of the dream, he repeats a nightmare from his childhood: “volvió a su memoria una pesadilla que había tenido cuando niño” (“he recalled a nightmare from his childhood” [67, 83]). The resurgence of the repressed dream, however, leads to a psychological break. The nightmare is of an animal “que nunca había visto” (“the like of which he had never seen” [67, 83]). Yet even though he had never seen the monstrous animal before, he realizes that “su horrible rostro era su propia cara. Se veía débil y triste y sangraba lentamente por la boca” (“its ghastly face was his own, weak and sad, and bleeding slowly at the mouth” [67, 83]). He asks the animal, “¿Quién eres?” (“Who are you?” [67, 83]), but the animal does not respond. The horror of the nightmare forces him awake. But it is not the animal itself that has frightened him, but rather his inability to identify the animal, and the confusion of that animal with his own face. The confusion between self and other reveals the true horror of the remembered nightmare. But though the man has been forced awake, time has fragmented. Is the man in the “now” or in the “past”? If this is simply the memory of a nightmare, why does he feel confused as to whether he is now awake? The shift within the story from preterit (simple past tense) to past perfect and then back to preterit confuses the temporal sequence of the text. What began as the memory of a nightmare from his youth (past perfect) has become part of the

preterit narration of his own reality: “Tenía lágrimas en las mejillas, y esto le había hecho pensar que todavía soñaba. ‘Sueño,’ se había dicho a sí mismo. ‘Cuando me despierte, yo seré animal’” (“There had been tears on his cheeks, and this made him think that he was still dreaming. ‘I’m asleep,’ he had told himself. ‘When I wake up, I’ll be the animal’” [67, 83]). The repetition of the past nightmare creates a rupture, an aporia that cannot be comprehended. This confusion between his past and his present is accompanied by a corresponding confusion between himself and the animal. Drawing on Loevlie’s discussion of the instant, we know that the constant repetition of the “now” destabilizes temporal sequence, and the possibility emerges that we are paradoxically both always and never who we were. Or to be more precise, existing in the instant, we are in constant flux between our past and our future. In an interview, Rey Rosa once remarked that this back-and-forth between past and future gives reality a fictive character that is not unlike literature, and states, “Esa es la pregunta: ¿cuándo no es la vida una construcción imaginada?” (“That is the question: when is life not an imagined construction?”).²²⁸

In “El animal,” we see the ways in which this uncertainty regarding past and future selves can lead to a crisis of selfhood. Because of the confusion between self and other, when the man asks the animal, “Who are you?”, he is asking himself, “Who am I?” But there is no answer to the question. According to Loevlie, these moments of misidentification, when combined with the complex repetition of the instant, signal that “the only answer to ‘Who *now?*’ is ‘Who *now?*’, ‘Who *now?*’, etc. Any attempt to reflect and answer is caught in the arrival of the new *maintenant*” (Loevlie 217). The repetition of the instant now of the nightmare interrupts forward motion and the sense of duration.

²²⁸ A video excerpt of this interview can be found at the following site: <http://losbucbuc.blogspot.com> (accessed April 26, 2012).

Thus readers are left with “a potentially infinite propelling of more instants” (Loevlie 217). As readers enter into the text and accept an interaction with its characters, they are presented with a repetition that offers no possible synthesis or resolution. The same is true in Rey Rosa’s stories, particularly “El animal.” To interact with the man in this story to accept the possibility of a continual and continuous repetition ad infinitum: “*who now, who now, who now, who now, who now, who now, who now, who now...*” (Loevlie 217). By disrupting linear conceptions of time and destabilizing the divisions between self and other, these stories repeat and re-stage the dissolution experienced by the tortured and the haunted.

This temporal and psychological dissolution is repeated again and again throughout *El cuchillo del mendigo*.²²⁹ In the story “Nueve ocasiones” (“Nine Occasions”), for example, time is fragmented into “nine occasions.” In the penultimate occasion, we see the same uncertainty of self witnessed in the above story:

Lo que la atormentaba era la incertidumbre. Porque nunca sabía si obraba bien o mal. Su conciencia no le parecía un instrumento fiel; ya se había equivocado muchas veces. Dudaba de sí misma; dudaba de todo. Quería descansar, pero fue a mirarse al espejo. No comprendía lo que eran sus ojos, sus labios, o su afilada nariz. (59)²³⁰

The voices of these characters attempt to witness to the fragmentation of the psyche within the arrival of the instant now. Drawing on Loevlie, we might suggest that they bear witness to

²²⁹ Such a conception of time is not foreign to Rey Rosa. In addition to referencing philosophers and literary theorists in his interviews, Rey Rosa often includes intertextual references in his novels and short stories. In one of his most recent publications, he references this notion of the “instant” by including the following quote, which the narrator attributes to Schnitzler:

Toda verdad tiene su momento—su revelación—que suele durar muy poco, de modo que, como la existencia misma, es un destello, o sólo una chispa, entre la nada o la mentira que le precede y la que le sigue, entre el momento en que parece paradójica y el momento en que comienza a parecer trivial. (*El material humano* 116)

²³⁰ “What tormented her was uncertainty. Because she never knew whether what she was doing was the right thing or not. Her conscience did not seem to her a trustworthy instrument; many times she had been wrong. She doubted herself; she doubted everything. She wanted to rest, but she went to look at herself in the glass. She did not understand her eyes, her lips, or her pointed nose” (75).

the experience of the instant, to an experience that cannot be thought, that escapes consciousness, but that defines all experience and that is therefore not congruent with an unconscious state. To speak from within this arrival of the instant is to speak a voice that is in between, not conscious, not unconscious, not able to speak, yet not silent. (218)

As witnesses to an aporetic movement between past and future, their voices are necessarily fragmented and destabilizing. They are voices that testify to the aporia of the instant. As such, these voices bear witness to the “impossibility of bearing witness” (Agamben *Remnants* 39). Their psychical fragmentation into self and other is a “*monstre incompréhensible*” (Loevlie 218) that repeats and thus re-stages the uneasiness of the experience of torture for the reader. The constantly arriving “now” dissolves the certainty of the narration. These characters thus live in the uncertain in-between; their voices occur at the “limits of the sayable” (Butler xvii).²³¹

²³¹ In the story “La salida del sol” (“Sunrise”), readers witness a similar connection between temporal and psychical fragmentation. The story is divided into two parts. In the first part, a man and a woman sit together and discuss her “dolores” (“pain” [16, 20]). We do not know the origin of her pain, only that it appears to be the cause of their unhappiness. In the second part, the man experiences some sort of dream or out-of-body experience:

Dio unos pasos atrás y se dejó caer en el sillón que miraba al fuego. Al caer oyó un crujido, y sintió un dolor intenso en la columna. ‘Me he roto en dos’, se dijo, y lo asustó el sordo ronco de su voz. Quedó ahí sentado; sus muslos estaban lánguidos. Pero al mismo tiempo se vio que se ponía de pie, pasó frente a la lumbre, salió al pasillo y salió de la casa.

He took a few steps backward and sat down heavily in a chair facing the fire. As he sank down, there was a cracking sound, and he felt an intense pain in his spine. ‘I’ve broken in half,’ he said aloud; the hoarse sound of his voice frightened him. He remained sitting there. His leg muscles were languid. But at the same time he saw himself rise and pass in front of the fireplace into the hall and out of the house [17, 21]).

He is fragmented and we see the connection with Loevlie’s concept of living “in-between.”

Living in the In-Between: The Specters of Torture

It is not a case of dead or missing persons sui generis, but of the ghost as a social figure. It is often a case of inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiraling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential. (Gordon 25)

As I have argued, the destabilization of the boundaries between the real and the unreal takes several forms in *El cuchillo del mendigo*. One final example of the blurring of these boundaries occurs in the story “La viuda de don Juan Manuel” (“The Widow of Don Juan Manuel”), which describes the appearance of a specter: the ghost of don Juan Manuel. At the beginning of the story, Jaun Manuel dies. We do not know the reason for his death, only that he dies in his home with his wife present. The only information we have about his death is that his widow “no lloró su muerte” (“did not bewail his death” [26, 30]). This suggests numerous possible interpretations about her state of mind, but it does not provide us with any details regarding the cause of his death. Thus it is impossible to know with certainty whether his death can be connected to the violence in Guatemala, although given the recurring themes in the overall collection, it is a distinct possibility. What we do know with certainty, however, is that one week later, his specter appears and speaks to his widow:

Su rostro estaba tranquilo; sin embargo, lloraba. No temas, mujer—dijo a su esposa—soy yo. Ella se serenó y escuchó con atención. Él, que se había sentado a los pies de la cama, le decía: “Uno vive esperando el descanso, muere, y se encuentra igual que al principio: ignorante. Como quien se ha drogado, no sabe uno dónde se halla. Todo está hecho de luz. Luego, sin darse cuenta cómo, se despierta; la luz pesa; quisiera estar ciego. (26)²³²

²³² “The face held no threat; at the same time, he was weeping. Don’t be afraid, woman, he said. It’s I. She became calmer and listened attentively. He had sat down at the foot of the bed and he told her: ‘A man spends his life hoping to rest finally, and when he dies he finds that he’s just as he was at the beginning:

The widow's reaction to the specter merits particular attention. She does not flee, nor does she attempt to ignore him or make him go away. Rather, she "listens attentively." This capacity to rest uncomfortably in the ghost's presence is explored by Avery Gordon in her sociological study *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997). According to Gordon, the appearance of a ghost demands our attention. She writes,

These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us. (xvi)

By listening attentively to the ghost, the widow opens herself up to that which had been previously ignored.

Of course, listening to the specter of her dead husband creates a profound sense of unease in the story. So many aspects of this story are disquieting. For example, as they are talking, they are interrupted by a knock on the door. But when she goes to open the door, "[e]l viento y una sombra cruzaron el umbral. No había nadie" ("[t]he wind and a shadow came in. There was no one" [26, 30]). When she returns, her husband's ghost has disappeared. But then she hears a loud noise coming from the dining room. She remains on her bed, not daring to move. When she hears the sound a second time, she sees her husband's face at the window. But the noise had come from a different direction. She stays where she is. After the sun goes down, she finally gets out of bed and discovers that

ignorant. He's like someone who's taken drugs: he doesn't know where he is. Everything is made out of light. Without noticing how, he wakes up; the light is heavy, and he wishes he were blind" (30).

the door to her bedroom is ajar (“ligeramente abierta”). Why is it ajar? Is there a particular reason why it is not shut or fully open? Is it simply because Rey Rosa believed that a door slightly ajar produces greater unease in the reader? If not, is there some reason why—if her husband is dead and no other characters are mentioned—she seems to be hiding in her own house, only risking an occasional peek through the crack (“rendija”) of the door? Can we conclude that perhaps she is not alone, and that she is scared of whoever else is in the house with her? Would that explain the strange light that she sees on the other side of the house (27)? Is she scared? Or is there another explanation? If she is not scared, why does she attempt to be silent as she leaves the bedroom: “[p]rocurando no hacer ruido, atravesó el pasadizo” (“[t]aking care to make no sound” [27, 31])? At first, we assume she is leaving the bedroom either to find the ghost or to investigate the odd sounds. She does neither. As soon as she exits the bedroom, she reaches for the phone, marks a number, and sits down in the hallway on “el oscuro banquito” (“the dark wooden stool” [27, 31]). She has called the Reverend: “‘Reverendo’, dijo, ‘venga, por favor’” (“‘Reverend,’ she said, ‘please come’” [27, 31]). We do not know why she called, nor do we know exactly why she wants him to come. Their conversation, even if it had been made known to readers, is interrupted: “En ese momento, un pájaro azul y amarillo que se había escondido en la lámpara sobre la mesa del comedor salió volando, y se estrelló contra el ventanal” (“At the same moment, a blue and yellow bird that had been hiding in the lamp which hung above the dining room table, flew out of it and broke its neck against the windowpane” [27, 31]). This is where the story ends. Only at this point does the reader realize that the noise heard by the widow was most likely the bird hiding in the dining room. Despite that knowledge, however, the reader’s unease and, more

importantly, the uncertainty created by the story do not vanish. There are no guarantees that she is alone in the house. In a country like Guatemala, which continues to be haunted by the specters of torture, nothing can be taken for granted.

Without a doubt, the appearance of her husband's specter creates a disruption in the story, destabilizing our perceptions of her situation. According to Gordon, this is precisely the function of the ghost. Because they describe "how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence" (Gordon 8), hauntings often alert us of the presence of abusive systems of power, "especially when they are supposedly over and done with [...] or when their oppressive nature is denied" (xvi). Understanding Gordon's conception of the term "haunting" merits an extended quote:

I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.

Gordon's description of haunting summarizes quite fittingly my previous arguments concerning the "in-between" nature of Rey Rosa's stories.²³³ As it is fundamentally an exercise in mediation, haunting exists in those in-between spaces that challenge how we narrate trauma and violence. The presence of the ghost in the story and the widow's reaction to the haunting reveal a fundamental truth about living life during the armed conflict: nothing was ever truly what it seemed. To follow the ghost and to listen attentively to what it has to say is a risk. It may produce more unease than calm. The state's blurring of the real and the unreal had unhinged the citizens' ability to make sense

²³³ Throughout her exploration of haunting, Gordon continually returns to the question of the "in between," noting that we must learn "to move analytically between that sad and sunken couch that sags in just that place where an unremarkable past and an unimaginable future force us to sit day after day" and those "conceptual abstractions" that name the "monumental social architecture" (4). Torture, as I have argued throughout this project, is one concept that is often discussed as if it were such an abstraction.

of their situation. In order to narrate that dissolution, Rey Rosa incorporates the presence of a specter in his story. Narrating haunting and the destabilization of the lines between the certain and the uncertain allow him to repeat the conditions under which many citizens lived during the Armed Conflict. Because ghosts alert us to the fact that “the gap between the personal and the social, public and private, objective and subjective is misleading in the first place” (Gordon 98), learning to rest easily in their presence can retrain our vision and teach us to see the state’s dissolution and destabilization of the boundaries between the certain and the uncertain, the real and the unreal. In Rey Rosa, we see an attempt to narrate the “in-between” nature of such hauntings.

Conclusions: A Non-Signifying Language

Even if I had been there I could not have told their story. (Ariel Dorfman)²³⁴

[...] you know that I could not tell them the full truth of what is being done to our people, for fear no one would believe me. (Perera xv)

Narrating the seemingly “unsayable” nature of torture requires a new conception of witness, specifically concerning the complex relationship between language and silence. As I suggested in previous chapters, the *testimonios* and *nueva novela* are both confronted by a void: a seemingly impassable breach that they found to exist between their texts and the horrific reality of the war. In order to challenge the state’s narrative, the authors of *testimonios* and the *nueva novela* play with the relationship between torture and witness—between language and representation, presence and absence—in order to attempt to fill in the void by producing either political responsibility or the desire for it. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, however, learning to narrate torture—as it exists on the continuum of state-sponsored violence and its goal of social domination—can often involve the recognition that our language and our stories often fail us. In his *El cuchillo del mendigo*, Rey Rosa recognizes this failure. In terms of “complex repetition,” Rey Rosa’s stories explore the relation between language and silence, showing the ways in which the boundary between the two “desolidifies,” revealing itself to be “porous, thereby causing a certain ‘flooding’ between the text and its beyond” (Loevlie 78). Rather than the continual backwards movement of recollection that attempts to re-create or document a full presence; or the continual forward movement of simple repetition that pushes the desired lost object (the non-symbolic) into a space that is the other of

²³⁴ Qtd in Sanford 12.

language; Rey Rosa's complex repetition creates a continual backward-and-forward movement that destabilizes the boundaries between the real and the unreal. The stories of *El cuchillo del mendigo* do not pretend immediacy, as we saw with Menchú, nor do they mediate an absent or lost reality, as in the case of the Flores and Arias. Rather, his stories seek to find a poetic language—a “strange tongue” that speaks silence. His is a non-signifying language that, even as it reveals the difficulties inherent in narrating torture and violence, “disorganizes” and “destabilizes” the dualistic repetition of the non-symbolic as beyond the text. This confusion prevents the non-symbolic from being relegated to some place outside the text. By refusing to define the “unsayable” as the other of language, Rey Rosa's complex repetition allows the stories to speak about torture “without speaking” (Loevlie 73). In *El cuchillo del mendigo*, Rey Rosa probes the in-between, seeking what Agamben calls the “non-place of articulation” that can bear witness to the “impossibility of bearing witness” (Agamben *Remnants* 39).

Chapter Six: “A Way In”: Silence and the Specters of Torture

*En alguna parte del pasado han de estar
ahora, en alguna quebrada vivirán ocultos
como monstruos de ensueño.*²³⁵

All societies live by fictions taken as real.
(Taussig, *Shamanism* 121)

This study has attempted to highlight the contributions of authors during the most violent years of the Internal Armed Conflict. The struggle to name the violence, however, continues and remains a central concern in contemporary Guatemala. Even today, more than fifteen years after the signing of the Peace Accords and roughly three decades after the end of *La Violencia*, Guatemala continues to be haunted by the specters of its traumatized past. Current attempts to seek justice and work through the violence of the war take many forms, but all in some way or another continue to struggle with naming that violence, groping for an adequate means of narrating, and thus confronting, what happened.²³⁶ The rhetoric of “silence” still has a seductive appeal, and the country still finds it difficult to pass “del silencio a la memoria” [“from silence to memory” (AHPN)].

As I have argued throughout this project, the difficulty of naming and narrating the “truth” of what happened during the armed conflict reveals the extent to which in Guatemala the lines between the real and the unreal have become so blurred that understanding what happened necessitates a masking—a confusion between the certain and the uncertain. Narrating violence and torture often requires a willingness to bring those “zones of indistinction” (Agamben *Remnants*) into the narration, and to mask

²³⁵ Graffiti painted on wall in Guatemala City (June 30, 2010).

²³⁶ Consider, for example, Ronald Flores’ *Último silencio* (2005). This text narrates the story of an exiled Guatemalan living and working in the United States who returns to his native country after the end of the war to work as a psychologist treating torture victims. A key theme of the novel is the “unspeakability” of the violence and the difficulties—if not impossibilities—of working through the legacy of torture.

torture within language itself. Sometimes, the best we can hope for is a narration that witnesses to the impossibility of witness.

Therefore, following the specters of torture means we must learn to narrate in new ways. Avery Gordon suggests that to describe a “ghostly haunt” requires “sympathetic magic” (Gordon 20-21).²³⁷ A “sympathetic magic” will not reject empirical observation per se, but it would perhaps rely more heavily on “the making and making up of social worlds” (21). As I have described the matter, narrating the specters of the unspeakable requires a blending of certainty and uncertainty in literature—a confusion between the two that is masked within language itself. Because a haunting exists in that in-between space where fact and fiction mingle, following the specters of torture often entails the search for a new language for narrating. Indeed, it also implies the recognition that what we take as “fact” and “fiction” is questionable in the first place.²³⁸ All our narrations

²³⁷ Gordon borrows this terminology of “sympathetic magic” from Michael Taussig. Such a magic is necessary, she claims, because “in the world and between us as analysts and the worlds we encounter to translate into world-making words are haunting, ghosts and gaps, seething absences, and muted presences” (21). This blurring of fact and fiction will also rely heavily upon what Gordon calls “conjuring,” which “merges the analytical, the procedural, the imaginative, and the effervescent” (Gordon 22). Conjuring is a necessary element in the ghostly haunt “not only because it is more exact” (Gordon 22), but also because in order “to convince others that what we know is important” and change their minds, we must realize that “we do not experience things, nor are affects produced, in the rational and objective ways our terms tend to portray them” (Gordon 22).

²³⁸ Slavoj Žižek suggests that, when confronted with the horrors of the 20th century, we must look at the problem of violence from an “awry” perspective, permitting ourselves only “sideways glances” (4). In the introduction to *Violence* (2008) he suggests that narrations of violence must contain an element of irrationality. Here Žižek is reacting to Adorno, who in a famous quote asserts that poetry is no longer possible after Auschwitz. His statement is controversial and has received much critical attention, but the essential premise is that we must question our ability to represent the violent horrors of the 20th century. Instead, Žižek posits that “Adorno’s famous saying, it seems, needs correction: it is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather *prose*. . . poetry is always, by definition, ‘about’ something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to” (5). If we are no longer capable of narrating a violent reality coherently, “representations” of that reality must give up any hope of a factual mimesis. Any “truthful” narration must in many ways render itself “false.” He writes that a rational, “dispassionate” analysis of violence must ignore its “traumatic impact” yet “there is a sense in which a cold analysis of violence somehow reproduces and participates in its horror” (4). In considering treatments of violence, he suggests that a distinction must be made “between (factual) truth and truthfulness: what renders a report of a raped woman (or any other narrative of a trauma) truthful is its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency” (5). He claims that “factual deficiencies” in the narration of the trauma “bear witness to the truthfulness of her report, since they signal that the reported content ‘contaminated’ the manner of reporting

constantly struggle against the “fictive” (Gordon 25). This is not only true in literature, but also in social life and its numerous complications: “the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence” (Gordon 25). We are never only who we are; we are also who we imagine and who we describe ourselves to be. As I have noted throughout this study, however, torture is most fundamentally “a crime committed against the imagination” (Dorfman 8). As such, torture and its specters constantly challenge “the distinctions between the fictive and the factual, and between the imaginary and the real” (Gordon 14). And thus in Guatemala, as the violence elevated during the 1970s and 1980s, several authors began to experiment with language and writing in order to pursue a new vision, a different way of seeing that would take into account the gaps and disjunctures at the heart of social life (Gordon 24). To rest uncomfortably in the presence of the ghost and to listen attentively to what it has to say allows one to see the impacts of those abusive systems and to learn how to name them—perhaps even when they might initially seem indecipherable or unspeakable.

Consider, for example, the case of Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda and the massacre at Dos Erres. In 1982, a group of elite army commandos, the Kaibiles, attacked the village of Dos Erres in northern Guatemala, slaughtering more than 250 men, women and children (Rotella and Arana). As was the case in most massacres, some managed to survive. In this instance, one of those survivors was a three-year old boy, who was taken by Lt. Oscar Ovidio Ramírez Ramos— the most experienced and highly trained of the Kaibiles—back to his hometown of Zacapa and raised as his son. Lt. Ramírez was not

it” (4). Because there is “something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation” with violence, literary representations of that violence must be equally “mystifying” (4).

married, and died in a car accident approximately eight months after the massacre (Rotella and Arana). Oscar was raised by his grandmother Rosalina, whom he always considered his mother (Rotella and Arana). He never knew anything about the massacre or his “true” identity until 2011, nearly thirty years after the massacre, when he was found by prosecutors who were tracing information about the massacre. Oscar, whose real name was Alfredo Castañeda, had lived his entire life believing that Lt. Ramírez was a war hero. When confronted with the truth about Dos Erres, Oscar “found it hard to believe. He could summon no mental picture of Dos Erres. The people he knew as blood relatives in Zacapa had treated him as a full-fledged member of the family” (Rotella and Arana). Oscar’s “memory” of the massacre no longer existed; it was replaced with an alternative fiction. In many cases, children abducted during massacres were treated poorly, almost like slaves, by the families with whom they lived. That was not the case with Oscar, however: “Where I was raised, I was raised well. [...] I wasn’t treated differently than any other kid” (Rotella and Arana).

How do we narrate the “truth” of a story such as this? How do we go about seeking “justice”? In Dos Erres, more than 250 men, women, and children were tortured and killed by the military. Some of the acts were so terrible that they defy the imagination. Most of the victims were killed and then thrown into a dry well in the center of town. Some of them were hit on the heads with sledgehammers (Rotella and Arana). Several young girls were raped in front of their family members and then strangled. Numerous young children were killed and thrown into the well. Some were thrown into the well while they were still alive. One of the commandos, Gilberto Jordán, killed a small baby and then threw its body into the well (Rotella and Arana). Lt. Ramírez

oversaw the entire operation. Despite the brutality of the crime, however, Oscar—whose family members were among those thrown in the well—still has strong affection for his adoptive father and family: “He’s still a hero for me [...] I see him the same way I did before” (Rotella and Arana). Despite learning what had happened to his biological family, Oscar states, “He was in the army. And in the army they tell you things, and you have to do things. Especially in times of war. Even if someone doesn’t want to” (Rotella and Arana). In such situations, how does one fight for justice when the victim not only has no memory of the crime, but also still idolizes the violators? In such situations, there may not be a way out of the in-between. Perhaps the only option is to find “a way in” (Secor). This “way in” would penetrate language itself in order to mask the violence and torture within, just as the Guatemalan state sought to do during the armed conflict.²³⁹

As I have shown in this project, in Guatemala, where millions of people continue to struggle with the specters of torture, several authors have struggled to produce a “poetry that crackles” (Secor 51), a new kind of language that refuses to distinguish between fact and fiction, between the real and the unreal, or between the certain and the uncertain. Oscar is one of countless victims in Guatemala who will continue to struggle with the legacy of torture and massacre. The ghosts of the past will continue to haunt society for years to come. Refusing to talk about the torture and genocide, however, is

²³⁹ I borrow the phrase “a way in” from Anna Secor. In her article on violence in the police state of Turkey, she concludes,

I would like to find a way out of the endless hall of mirrors that the state of exception sets up, the endless division of outside from inside, chaos from order, and the swallowing of each new ‘exception’ within the rule, the absorption of all within a permanently cross-hatched space of violence, guilt and abandonment. I cannot propose a route out, but I can pronounce the poetry that crackles in the voices of those [...] who have suffered and who have considered their suffering, at the threshold of the pure force of the law. It is not, of course, enough. Poetry is not a way out; it is, perhaps, a way in. (51)

simply not an option. Despite the seductive appeal of silence, to remain silent completely forecloses the possibility of witnessing to the violence.

As I have argued throughout this project, certain forms of writing (and speaking) also render that experience unspeakable. The authors explored in this dissertation have sought to explore ways to manipulate language in such a way that they might re-negotiate the presumed boundaries between fact and fiction—the real and the unreal—so as to bear witness to the gaps and disjunctures that define a life haunted by the specters of the unspeakable. As Gordon reminds us,

The willingness to follow ghosts, neither to memorialize nor to slay, but to follow where they lead, in the present, head turned backwards and forwards at the same time. To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really. (Gordon 57)

In such situations, justice may be impossible. Yet hauntings will bring about what Gordon calls a “transformative recognition” (8). Understanding those specters and talking about them will require a maimed language, to be sure, but it will be a language that speaks from within the silence, in order to bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness (Agamben *Remnants*). Counter-narrating the violence and torture of the war must itself be structured around a traumatic impossibility. My hope is to continue to pursue discussions about the diverse ways of narrating torture in literature. Despite its universal ban by international law, torture—and its legacy in the individual and collective psyche—continues to be of major significance, not only in Guatemala, but also across the globe.

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Vita

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EDUCATION

M.A. University of Kentucky, 2010. Hispanic Studies.

M.A. University of Notre Dame, 2009. Moral Theology.

M.T.S. Duke University, 2001, *summa cum laude*. Theological Ethics.

B.A. Centre College, 1999, *cum laude*. Spanish, Religion.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Assistant Professor of Spanish. Franklin College. Franklin, Indiana.
August 2012-present.

Visiting Instructor of Spanish, The University of the South. Sewanee, Tennessee.
August 2011-December 2011.

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky.
August 2010-May 2011.

Visiting Instructor of Spanish, Centre College. Danville, Kentucky.
August 2009-December 2009.

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky.
August 2007-May 2009.

Adjunct Faculty, Indiana University at South Bend. South Bend, Indiana.
August 2004-December 2004.

Adjunct Faculty, Lake Michigan College. Niles, Michigan.
August 2004-December 2004.

Graduate Teaching and Research Assistant, University of Notre Dame.
August 2002-May 2004.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Paid Research Assistant, "Hispanic Heritage and Oral History in Kentucky." Department of Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky.

Spring 2011.

Interpreter, Clarity (Central Kentucky Interpreting Services). Lexington, Kentucky.
March 2011-August 2011.

Migrant Recruiter, Jessamine County Board of Education. Nicholasville, Kentucky.
Summer 2008.

Translation Intern, Kentucky Employers' Mutual Insurance. Lexington, Kentucky.
Summer 2008.

Bilingual Customer Service Representative, Kentucky Employers' Mutual Insurance.
April 2006-August 2007.

Research Assistant, University of Notre Dame.
Summer 2003.

Research Assistant, Duke Divinity School.
Summer 2000.

Staff Member, Journey. Trujillo, Honduras.
Summers 1996, 1997.

PUBLICATIONS

“Borderlands and Homosocial Sites of Transgression: An Analysis of Rolando Hinojosa’s *Partners in Crime*.” *Border Crossings: Boundaries of Cultural Interpretation*. October 2008, Vanderbilt University. Ed. Pablo Martínez Diente and David P. Wiseman. Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 2009. 11-23. Print.

SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS

October 2011. “Los vacíos oscuros de la razón: Memoria, trauma y tortura en la imaginación latinoamericana contemporánea.” *Representaciones de la violencia política en la literatura latinoamericana contemporánea*. Santiago, Chile.

February 2011. “‘Un vacío colmado’: Specters of Violence in Guatemalan Post-War Literature.” *Latin American Studies Graduate Student Symposium*. University of Kentucky.

October 2010. “‘Atado de pies y manos’: Torture, Resistance, and the Sacred in *Los compañeros*.” *Mid-America Conference on Hispanic Literature (MACHL)*. Washington University.

October 2010. "The Erotic Word: Torture and Desire in Arturo Arias' *Después de las bombas*." *Symposium on Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. Transylvania University.

October 2010. "'The Striptease of Power': The Rhetoric of Torture in Marco Antonio Flores' *Los compañeros*." *Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference (MIFLC)*. Radford University.

February 2010. "The Masking of Violence in Guatemalan Fiction." *Latin American Studies Graduate Student Symposium*. University of Kentucky.

October 2009. "Sonámbulos hechos de humo: Poder, melancolía y libertad en *Conversación en la Catedral*." *Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference (MIFLC)*. Furman University.

October 2008. "Borderlands and Homosocial Sites of Transgression: A Spatial Analysis of Rolando Hinojosa's *Partners in Crime*." *Border Crossings: Boundaries of Cultural Interpretation*. Vanderbilt University.

April 2008. "Sites of Illusion and Subversion: A Spatial Analysis of Carlos Fuentes' *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*." Working Paper Series. University of Kentucky.

November 2004. "A Prophetic Vision: Faith and the Grotesque in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*." Conference on "Epiphanies of Beauty: The Arts in a Post-Christian Culture." University of Notre Dame.

TRANSLATION

Ute Seibert, "Springtime: September in Chile" (trans. from Spanish). *Dissident Daughters: Feminist Liturgies in Global Context*. Ed. Teresa Berger. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001.

WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION:

Fall 2010 – Certificate, Written Spanish Workshop Series, Department of Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky. Led by Judith Liskin-Gasparro, Janet C. Eldred, and Cecilia M. Colombi.

Fall 2006 – Certificate, "Bridging the Gap," 40 Hours of Training in Medical Interpreting, The Cross Cultural Health Care Program. St. Joseph Hospital. Lexington, Kentucky. Led by Ernest D. Romero.

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Reviewer, *Nomenclatura: aproximaciones a estudios hispánicos*. University of Kentucky Fall 2011.

Undergraduate Studies Committee. Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky.
August 2010-May 2011.

Elementary Language Instruction Committee. Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky.
August 2010-May 2011.

President, Hispanic Studies Graduate Student Association, University of Kentucky.
August 2010-May 2011.

Session Organizer, Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, University of Kentucky.
April 2011.

Representative, Graduate Student Congress, University of Kentucky.
August 2009-May 2010.

Session Organizer, Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, University of Kentucky.
April 2009.

Course Leader (SPA 102), University of Kentucky.
Spring 2008.

President, Sigma Delta Pi (Spanish Honor Society), Centre College.
August 1998-May 1999.

Treasurer, Sigma Delta Pi (Spanish Honor Society), Centre College.
August 1997-May 1998.

AWARDS AND HONORS

Fall 2011 – Travel Grant for Conference Presentation, The University of the South

Fall 2011 – Travel Grant for Conference Presentation, University of Kentucky

Spring 2011 – Travel Grant for Dissertation Research, Department of Hispanic Studies,
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Fall 2010 – Travel Grant for Conference Presentation, University of Kentucky

Summer 2010 – Latin American Studies Travel Grant, University of Kentucky

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2001-2004 – Ph.D. Fellowship, University of Notre Dame

2000 – Board of Higher Education and Ministry’s Award, Duke Divinity School

1999 – Phi Beta Kappa, Centre College

1998 – American Bible Society Scholarly Achievement Award, Centre College

1998 – Phi Sigma Iota, International Foreign Language Honor Society, Centre College

1998 – Gamma Sigma Alpha, National Academic Greek Honor Society, Centre College

1998 – Sigma Delta Pi, National Honor Society, Centre College

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Spring 2011 – Soccer Coach, YMCA. Lexington, Kentucky.

Spring 2007 – Baseball Coach, YMCA. Lexington, Kentucky.

2006-present – Volunteer Translator, Adopt-A-Village. Guatemala.

2006-2007 – Soccer Coach, Lexington Youth Soccer Association. Lexington, Kentucky.

2005-2008 – Volunteer Interpreter/Translator, Children of the Americas. Translated e-mail communications between the Board President, Executive Director and Guatemalan Director. Translated numerous medical documents. Served as medical interpreter in Guatemala in January 2006 and January 2007.