Sexing of the City: Desire, Memory, and Trauma in Luisa Valenzuela’s *La travesía*

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[N]ombrar una ciudad, aún sin describirla, es suficiente para proyectar un espacio ficcional concreto, ya que el nombre propio es, en sí mismo, una descripción en potencia. (Luz Aurora Pimentel, *El espacio en la ficción* 32)

At the heart of the urban labyrinth lurked not the Minotaur, a bull-like male monster, but the female Sphinx, the “strangling one,” who was so called because she strangled all those who could not answer her riddle: female sexuality, womanhood out of control, lost nature, loss of identity. [. . . ] Ambivalence expresses fear and desire fused into one. What is feared is also desired: the Sphinx in the city. (Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* 7, 157)

Habiendo tomado posesión de su propio lenguaje, mejor dicho habiéndose posicionado dentro del lenguaje, habiendo revelado en parte los propios mapas y amojonado su territorio lingüístico, la mujer pudo expresar su deseo y emprender con pasión la travesía hacia el conocimiento. (Luisa Valenzuela, *Peligrosas palabras* 56)

Luisa Valenzuela has described *La travesía* (2001) as “una novela de crecimiento cuya protagonista va tomando varios caminos para entenderse a sí misma” (1).1 Like many novels that involve journeys, this too is a kind of *Bildungsroman*,2 but one where both the journey and the protagonist’s personal growth are characterized by indirectness, disoriented meanderings and a tendency to relive old haunts. In it, the protagonist’s urban explorations parallel that of her country’s *travesía* or difficult passage from the dark days of the military regime of the 1970s and 1980s towards the present period of increasing democratic

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1 See an interview conducted with Luisa Valenzuela by Guillermo Saavedra, “En busca del deseo.”

2 In *A Handbook to Literature* William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman define *Bildungsroman* as “a novel that deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity” (59).
rule. As the novel unfolds, personal memory is etched on multiple city spaces: museums, sanatoriums, and red-light districts. In turn, these urban spaces become trigger points for personal and communal reminiscences.

In *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (1992), Elizabeth Wilson reflects on the many ways in which women have been seen as agents of "disorder." For Wilson, the modern as well as the postmodern city are spaces where both real and fictive women have been simultaneously feared and desired. Using the metaphor of the Sphinx, she explains that the urban woman is "half woman, half animal [ . . . ] feared and desired at the heart of the maze" (157). Yet Wilson points out that urban disorder has also been beneficial for women. As this critic argues, women in modern and contemporary fiction have viewed cities as spaces of possibility as well as danger, as labyrinths that could hold promises as well as monsters. Although Wilson's arguments are more geared toward explaining modernist rather than postmodernist women in fiction, the image of the woman urbanité as a Sphinx is particularly pertinent to my discussion of Luisa Valenzuela's *La travesía*. As the protagonist in *La travesía* walks through the most public and yet most proscribed areas in a number of cities, she becomes a postmodern Sphinx in both senses of Wilson's argument: she questions her desire as well as the identities of urban space even as she herself is often perceived as an object of desire. In the process, however, she becomes an agent of urban knowledge, and it is that localized knowledge which ultimately helps her to confront her own trauma.

I. Urban Exhibitionism and Sexual Tricks

*La travesía* begins with an urban quest that revolves around a perverse, complicated, and outrageous sexual encounter. The novel's protagonist, Marcela, has been asked to meet a friend's client at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Her friend is a dominatrix, the male client is a masochist, and the protagonist is somewhat reluctant to conduct such a quest. Although the protagonist's curiosity ultimately brings her to the museum to deliver an envelope with the instructions for her friend's client, she is never completely at ease with her role in this encounter. As a cultural explorer, the protagonist is predictably tempted to experience this space of inventiveness, creativity and—not least—exhibitionism. Yet her discomfort grows as the date nears. Even before the reader learns the exact source of the protagonist's uneasiness, she perceives that the museum functions as a space that invites both memory as well as experimentation. Like any museum, MoMA both displays and freezes the artwork it hosts, simultaneously channeling an act of communication between recognized and experimental art in its exhibits and installations. If memory is a bridge between past and present, then the museum could well be seen as a terrain which can

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3 This is particularly evident when the protagonist begins to muse before the artwork of Kurt Schwitters and Guillermo Kuitca. As she moves from one hall to another, the museum is a terrain in which the displayed works tell their own stories pertinent to different periods, movements, and socio-political as well as cultural settings.
and does stimulate the resurfacing of memory. In her article on memory in Valenzuela’s *La travesía* and *Cambio de armas*, Juanamaria Cordones-Cook observes that the individual’s thorough awareness of previous experiences becomes vital in his/her dealings with the present. In other words, Cordones-Cook states that “la presencia consciente del pasado permite al individuo responder a las circunstancias del presente a la luz de sus experiencias anteriores” (60). The possibility of being reminded of the past—vis-à-vis an unusual encounter her friend (Ava) has designed—is precisely what keeps Marcela ambivalent about her quest.

Marcela’s quest at the museum is to serve as anonymous guide for a carefully orchestrated and, for the client, high-priced sexual trick. In this particular instance a successful businessman is paying to be the victim of sadomasochistic sexual practices. In her role of mediator and muse, the protagonist delivers an envelope to the client instructing him to dress appropriately, which is to say, as a woman, before his rendezvous takes place. If her involvement in such a sadomasochistic prelude is a performative act, the museum could well be seen as a theatrical space. In other words, the museum, a space designed to house art objects, turns into a stage for a perverse display of sexuality, or at least for instruction for the perversion that will follow. The novel’s use of the museum space is thus both ironic and subversive. A space reserved for one type of exhibition becomes a space of exhibitionism, since her letter is to instruct the client to dress in women’s underwear. In it, the client is asked to wear “las medias caladas de mujer,” “el portaligas ajustable,” “el corpiño,” and “el slip de puntilla negra” (22). As a result, the museum is turned into a space for performance, but now of a very private nature. Significantly, as this first encounter in the novel comes to an end, the reader has been made aware that the protagonist has gone through different but equally non-traditional experiences of sexual initiation in her own past. Hence, as she steps out into the busy streets of New York City, Marcela “[d]ebía encarar ahora su propia cita a ciegas con la parte ignorada de sí que la había metido en esa loca historia” (25).

While at the museum, the protagonist struggles to fake a self-assurance she does not feel. As her apprehension grows, she begins to gaze at the art on display. Above all, she is drawn to images by Guillermo Kuitca and Kurt Schwitters; the former is an Argentine contemporary artist known for his dark installations, the latter a German pioneer of avant-garde *collages*. The art works on which the protagonist focuses while waiting to encounter her friend’s client reverberate with her anxious state for two reasons. First, the artwork provides a theatre for the sadomasochistic prelude she has come to set up for her friend, Ava, and her wandering through the museum halls is just another part of her performance of the pre-scripted role. At the same time, however, the artwork she sees becomes an impromptu background reminiscent of both adventures and traumas hidden in her own past. This is particularly evident as the protagonist tunes into Kuitca’s scenes that evoke controlled spaces containing images of walls, pillars, beds, chairs, and mattresses. As the images of the burned and stained mattresses repeat before Marcela, she examines them as paraphernalia for tormented intimacies, the locale for painful sexual encounters. Hence her comment: “Kuitca exhibía colchones con planos de ciudades ominosas hechas para recorrer durante el...
These mattresses, normally associated with sleep and sex, in Kuitca’s installations become symbolic of historical trauma, specifically alluding to the violence of the Argentine dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, Kuitca’s scenes of torment-ridden encounters marked out in the stains of blood, urine, semen and sweat are suggestive of Argentina’s notorious military detention centers, the settings of an electric shock cell. The avant-garde urban collages by Kurt Schwitters, on the other hand, may symbolize the protagonist’s personal travesía, or life journey. The superimposition of materials, images and words on Schwitters’s collage make up urban scenes that trigger disordered flashes of the protagonist’s personal and professional itinerary. The narrator explains this moment as follows: “los laberintos hechos de recortes superpuestos, estudió la factura, la textura, la composición de cada collage. [. . . ] y [la protagonista] percibió el reflejo de su propia vida tan hecha de retazos, hecha de papeles e hilos superpuestos, de rostros un poco fraccionados, borrosos, ajenos” (20). These collages composed of layered texts and images cut open the protagonist’s past experiences, giving her glimpses of her personal trauma as well as desire.

As the novel’s first chapter develops, both narrator and reader become aware that the protagonist’s reluctance to visit the museum in order to take part in this libidinous experiment has its sources in her disturbing past. Hence, the protagonist’s mission in the city museum serves as mise en abyme, an experience-within-the-experience, as the narrative confirms: “[u]na cita a ciegas minimalista dentro de la otra, la concreta, tan sólo gestionando la otra, orquestándola” (20). This short-lived involvement in a perverse and subversive date serves as nothing but a catalyst for the protagonist’s encounter with her own past, a past that encompasses not only memories of frustrated desire but also of personal and political trauma. The first scene is thus a prelude to subsequent encounters that force the protagonist to confront her own past.

II. Mapping Spaces of Desire

If curiosity is the reason the protagonist visits the museum at the beginning of the novel, it is also the reason for her numerous strolls through the city (and cities) throughout the rest of the narrative. The first of these city journeys takes place in Buenos Aires during the 1970s, a time when the protagonist was a student and Argentina was quickly falling victim to the military regime. These strolls in her native city are also the direct results of the protagonist’s romantic and sexual engagement with her anthropology professor and first husband, Facundo.
From their first meeting, Facundo proposes a sexual relationship based entirely on verbal sex. This “oral” sex ritual is to be predicated on accounts of sexual adventures she is sent to procure in the neighborhoods of sex commerce in Buenos Aires. It is in search of these adventures that Marcela first becomes an observer of urban customs. Responding to Facundo’s criticism about lacking worldliness—“[a] vos te falta calle, la increpó F más o menos al mes de vivir juntos. No me interesan las mujeres sin experiencia, date una vuelta por el puerto y levántate un marinero, hácete algo sustancioso, no quiero tímidas doncellas a mi edad” (105)—Marcela becomes an urban anthropologist des lettres. Like those of Ava, the dominatrix friend, and her clients, Facundo’s fantasies lean towards the perverse end of the sexual spectrum. Facundo’s intention of turning his young and inexperienced student into a sexually experienced woman leads to his directing her turns to the city’s red light districts (105). For Facundo, the city brothels are to serve as Marcela’s practicum on sexual skills. As a result, the prelude for Marcela’s sexual awakenings begins painfully, for she enters these darker city spaces reluctantly. Then, as her curiosity grows, she becomes her lover’s intermediary, muse and an unexpected window to the forbidden spaces of the city.

To Facundo’s directions, however, Marcela brings her own mounting curiosity, and she turns to the puerto with the curiosity of a voyeur—even if her voyeurism is a second degree voyeurism. She “spies” so as to invent experiences she is as yet unwillingly to engage in. As a result, her contact with these erotically charged spaces in Buenos Aires initiates what can, on one level, be considered a virtual prostitution on her part. Therefore, the perilous puerto is gradually transformed into an exotic stage for eroticism and perversion. Under Marcela’s able and quickly developing gaze, the red-light port district becomes what Wilson would describe as a space for “women’s right to the carnival, intensity and [. . .] risks of the city” (10). Eighteen-year-old Marcela connects to these spaces as a voyeuristic if yet inexperienced Sphinx; she does not yet know the right questions, but she is learning to look for clues. She commingles, observes and learns:

Levantó ideas, inspiración que le dicen, y volvió hecha otra y de su boca salieron palabras nunca antes pronunciadas por ella [. . .] y casi sin darse cuenta empezó la saga de una autobiografía apócrifa que se iría transformando en un erotismo oral desaforado. Lo novi-vido [sic] escapaba de la boca de ella como de un resumidero, y se alimentó de lecturas no sanctas para poder incursionar como quien no quiere la cosa en el magma del deseo. El deseo del otro. (105)

Thus begins the prelude to her future career as an anthropologist, one who will eventually learn to provoke, puzzle and seduce her readers with enigmatic questions about the urban customs she learns to study.

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6See Nancy Gates Madsen’s recent article “Uncivilized Remembrance in Luisa Valenzuela’s La travesía” regarding the symbolic weight the name of Marcela’s professor, lover and ex-husband brings about. According to this critic, “Valenzuela’s decision to name the protagonist’s ex-husband Facundo further links the individual private history embodied in the character’s secret marriage to the broader social events of the dictatorship and the imagining of the entire nation” (107).
It is in Marcela’s flat in Buenos Aires, however, where her experiences from the puerto begin to materialize. Although the intimate involvement with Facundo never moves beyond erotic dialogue, the encounters do turn sadistic, as Facundo initiates verbal intimacies promising physical encounters that never happen:

Por las noches Facundo se sentaba en un sillón frente al de ella y le hablaba. Le decía todo lo que le iba a hacer cuando estuvieran uno encima del otro, debajo, detrás, delante, cabeza arriba, cabeza abajo, le decía qué partes de su anatomía iba a usar para estimular, y cómo, tantas partes de la anatomía de ella. Le explicaba qué esperaba a su vez de ella y no la dejaba abandonar su asiento en la otra punta de un espacio que no era demasiado amplio pero se volvía incommensurable. (105)

As a sadomasochist who is turned on by virtual sex, Facundo finds pleasure in postponing his sexual encounters with Marcela. For the protagonist, this ushers in an era of both sexual frustration and his sexual perversions. Yet, the brothels she spies on grow to be an escape from her claustrophobic and impotent encounters with Facundo. The nature of this sexual relationship is both alarming and puzzling, and the reader is left with many unanswered questions: Is Facundo impotent? Is Marcela drawn to this man solely because of his intellectual powers, or is there some masochistic strain in her own personality? Is this personal sadomasochism ultimately more disturbing to her than her knowledge of the larger sadism that has invaded her nation? The novel leaves these questions open—as do many of Valenzuela’s novels—but positing the questions resonates with the narrator’s difficulties in resolving questions about sexuality and trauma (personal and political) when viewed against a broader context.

In her work Space, Place and Gender (1994), Doreen Massey reminds us that space is, above all, relational. According to Massey, space is not “some absolute independent dimension, but [ . . . ] constructed out of social relations, . . . [which in turn] are experienced differently, and variously interpreted by those holding different positions as part of it” (2–3). Thus for Massey, space—viewed as open and unfixed—is never a dimension lacking manifold social meanings. According to Massey, “space is created out of the vast intricacies, the incredible complexities, of the interlocking and the non-interlocking, and the networks of relations at every scale from local to global” (265). It seems clear, then, that social contacts shape and re-shape the identities of space, so that the latter can figure in as fluid, diverse and therefore potentially contested. The protagonist’s relations with the brothels, juxtaposed with the city apartment serve as paradigmatic instances of the unstable and variable meanings a given space may hold. In fact, it could well be said that the above passage from the novel lends itself to a critique of the simplistic dichotomy of private vs. public so that the private is viewed perhaps too readily as a feminine safe-haven and the public as masculine and precarious for women. Contrary to this characterization, however, the private here proves to be a frustrating, monotonous and paralyzing setting for the protagonist. In fact, Facundo’s dominance, mirrored in the phrase “no te movás o te ato” (106), highlights not only the protagonist’s compulsory physical immo-
bility but her role as stationary listener of his "narrated" perversities. On the other hand, however, the city flat is also the space where Facundo's "lessons" turn the young woman into a teller of urban tales of sorts: "fue al puerto [. . . ] levantó ideas, inspiración que le dicen, y volvió hecha otra" (105). Furthermore, the changes brought about by her contact with the world of illicit sex reveal how she "se convirtió en escritora fantasma para un solo lector. Y del sexo oral o mejor dicho narrado pasó al sexo escrito" (118). As this "oral" stage ends, the protagonist becomes the focal instigator of the erotic encounters she witnesses, and hence an agent of pleasure and subversion in the city. Additionally, the pleasure she gains from vicariously sharing in others' sexual adventures becomes a source of creative inspiration.

Marcela's erotic writing could also be viewed as a rite of passage and a ritual of initiation, one which originates in Buenos Aires but later finds new sites for adventure and pleasure in Amsterdam, Kathmandu, and Barcelona as well as other cosmopolitan urban centers. After she graduates with a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of Buenos Aires, Facundo insists that she leave her homeland, explaining that "antropología es ahora una carrera peligrosa [en Argentina] [. . . ] quiero protegerte" (106–07). Given her nation's appallingly violent political climate, Facundo's remarks could well be read as his intent to protect Marcela from imminent danger. Even so, he decides to monitor her activities abroad by demanding reports on her travels and explorations. Following his suggestions for international adventures, Marcela builds an erotic "dossier" by acquainting herself with red-light districts all over the globe. As her journeys continue through Europe and Asia, Marcela maintains an erotic correspondence with Facundo, but she gradually begins to reverse the rules he sets for their game. Instead of having the sexual adventures he expected her to have, she invents them: "[é]l me mandó al mundo a tener aventuras sexuales para después contárselas. Yo salí al mundo y le conté aventuras que no tuve" (123). What she does learn in the process is to look at the cities as semiotic maps of sexual practices. Ironically, however, it is while trying to impress her lover that she becomes a full-fledged anthropologist.

III. Voyeurism and (Re)Search

Luz Pimentel's _El espacio en la ficción. Ficciones espaciales_ (2001) suggests that referring to real cities in fictitious texts stimulates in the reader a visual image of those cities together with their ascribed socio-political and cultural values. There is, says Pimentel, "una verdadera relación intertextual del texto ficcional que hace suyos los valores del texto cultural" (32). What Pimentel essentially suggests is that fictitious representations of real cities require that the reader "recognize" urban spaces as blueprints for different social, political and cultural implications. Pimentel's argument that "el texto ficcional activa, aun sin nombrarlos, los valores semánticos e ideológicos que han sido atribuidos, en el mundo extratextual" (32), can be seen at work in Valenzuela's novel.

The reference to Barcelona's _barrio chino_ in _La travesía_ immediately connotes a space known for its sex industry and brothels. When related to the protagonist's
journey, however, the barrio chino is particularly appropriate, for it serves as the backdrop for an important transition in Marcela’s travesía. In the diegetic present, as she makes her way through the crowded and bustling streets of Manhattan, Marcela remembers her stay in Barcelona and realizes her own loss of interest in remaining an observer merely for the sake of learning more about sexual practices. During a bustling festival in a neighborhood replete with sex for sale, Marcela begins to question her own relationship to the city brothels in Barcelona for the sake of the erotic creative writing. As she observes the carnivalesque procession of “el día de la Merced,” she realizes that her desire to remain Facundo’s erotic entertainer is coming to an end. Not one to discard past experiences, however, she re-directs her curiosity from “la droga de las cartas de F” towards “trabajos de verdad” (120).

It is in the barrio chino, therefore, that she begins to see ways in which she might profit professionally from her personal adventures in red-light districts. Therefore she decides to study urban expressions of sexual acts as a form of human contact. Soon, her expertise in examining the culture, behavior and customs of this “underworld” successfully materializes into a publishable piece: “Anthropology Today acababa de aceptar su primer artículo [. . .] y ella entonces pudo dejar sin previo aviso y sin remordimiento su puesto en el bar del barrio gótico” (120). Marcela’s professional success means she can finally close one chapter in her life to begin another one. Yet her experiences as an observer of sexual practices have prepared her to become a cultural observer in her own right. She thus stops writing for the sake of seducing a man who will never be able to give her back the pleasure she gives him through her letters. Initially a space of inspiration for her erotic writing/letters, the barrio chino becomes her field of research and the cornerstone of her career: “[p]rometió involucrarse en su tesis doctoral sobre la prostitución sagrada de manera menos pragmática, más libresca y académica” (122). The desire to free herself from Facundo’s power over her, but also from her sexual dependence on vicarious sexual games, is particularly evident, as she emphasizes the need to “cercenarse” and “soltar amarras” (120). Both of these verbs metaphorically suggest an image of someone seeking to be unmoored: unmoored from her past, but also from the person she had become by remaining faithful to that past.

Building on her work on urban prostitution, she begins to envision a career in cultural anthropology. In this way, she subscribes to a different kind of travesía; it is now a journey which takes her through different texts and discourses aimed at studying human ethos, behaviors or “conductas ajenas” (15). At first, though, this additional type of mobility strengthens her distance from her past as well as her erotic fiction. The narrator portrays this by clearly prioritizing Marcela’s vocation over the earlier hobby: “ella nunca fue ni pretendió ser escritora. Es antropóloga de formación y vocación, escribe por necesidad y urgencia” (123). Gradually, her erotic and personal travesía becomes a public travesía, a disciplinary calling of sorts. In addition, her scholarly success links Marcela back to her erotic fiction some twenty years later in the Big Apple. Her intellectual nomadism and published work eventually lead her back to her erotic fiction; the latter accidentally found by a Polish artist, by the name of Bolek Greczynski. Like her interaction with Kuitca at the Museum of Modern Art, this contact is not angst-
free. In fact, it is her friendship with Bolek that forces her to face the deeper layers of both personal memories and national trauma.

IV. Private Memories and Public Trauma

In an interview with Elizabeth Mehren, Luisa Valenzuela explains that regardless of her efforts to stay away from national politics explicitly, the political inevitably forces itself into her texts: “I think I have lived the experiences of many Latin American writers, in that you first start getting involved in politics without wanting to, because it is a matter of life and death, and little by little this involvement seeps indirectly into your literature” (61). As other critics have noted thus far, La travesía is sustained by a political undercurrent. In “Las dos travesías de Luisa Valenzuela,” Leopoldo Brizuela notes that the political inserts itself in La travesía through the relationship the protagonist establishes with her professor/husband, Facundo. Brizuela, therefore, specifies that “las cartas obscenas [. . .] y el casamiento secreto con Facundo Zuberbühler se presentan muy asociadas a las relaciones de dominación absoluta que ejercitaba la dictadura militar con los sobrevivientes” (141). For Gwendolyn Díaz, on the other hand, the political is particularly palpable in the protagonist’s need to go abroad. According to Díaz, “[a la protagonista] le conviene escaparse de la Argentina; son los años de la más fuerte represión y ella estudia una carrera perseguida por los militares” (75). For Díaz, then, the reader is aware of the novel’s political weight, as the protagonist explicitly maps out her sources of fear.

The political anxiety is further reflected in the narrative’s references to politically committed artists. As discussed earlier in the present essay, the protagonist’s encounter with Guillermo Kuitca’s artwork in the opening scene alludes to a particular historical context in the Argentina of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition, the novel’s allusions to the sociopolitical conditions in Argentina during the military rule and democratic transition are a major part of the protagonist’s encounters with another artist exiled in New York City, Bolek Greczynski.

This polyglot, bisexual Polish painter makes a living by working at a sanatorium in Queens where he paints while nurturing the mentally ill. Inspired by Marcela’s writing (fictional and academic), Bolek attends one of the intellectual gatherings in New York City, so as to meet this remarkable and exciting scholar. He introduces himself as a true fan of Marcela’s scholarly (and other) creativity by citing portions from the protagonist’s published article:

[Bolek] le espetó a boca de jarro unos desconcentrantes párrafos en inglés. Le llevó un rato a ella reconocerlos como propios. El hombre en su tono displicente le estaba citando un trabajo publicado en Anthropology Today. Hace mucho que te leo, muchísimo más de lo que te podés imaginar, le dijo con aire entre misterioso y sobrador; imaginate, te busqué en Buenos Aires en el ‘82 cuando fui a montar una muestra, nadie parecía conocerte. (35)

7 Quoted in Joanne Saltz’s article “Luisa Valenzuela’s Cambio de armas: Rhetoric of Politics.”
As this passage makes clear, Bolek’s comment confirms his admiration for Marcela’s scholarly work. More importantly, it uncovers his mania for learning more about her fictional erotic writing which he, as the reader subsequently learns, accidentally finds in Buenos Aires. From now on, Bolek becomes an ubiquitous reminder of a violent Argentine period through both the references to his art as well as his interactions with the protagonist. In other words, Marcela’s contact with this Polish painter as well as his work further emphasize the sociopolitical facet of La travesta that has been critically overlooked thus far. As Marcela’s meetings with Bolek become more frequent in New York City, her mental flashes of the Dirty War intensify as well.

Bolek’s remark draws attention to the political background that lurks ominously just behind the deceptively lighthearted dialogue. Juxtaposing two major realities of the Argentine period of the guerra suca—disappearance (“nadie parecía conocerte”) and search (“te busqué”)—Bolek’s words transport both the protagonist and the reader back into a Buenos Aires ruled by a military junta. Appalled by the atrocities committed in Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s, this artist decides to contest such acts of violence through his own work: an art exhibition entitled “Los fluidos de la revolución francesa.” Bolek’s visit to Buenos Aires in the 1980s takes him, ironically and shockingly, to Marcela’s old apartment—the space she shared with her lover and first husband. Apparently abandoned in a hurry by Facundo, the apartment still housed piles of Marcela’s opened letters. Stunned by the letters’ explicit eroticism as well as the obscurity of Marcela’s whereabouts, Bolek seizes them as an inspiration for his own art against the military regime. He justifies his act by explaining: “estas cartas son la metáfora de mi arte, son alegatos contra la represión en el plano erótico y señalan con luz roja el erotismo solapado de toda dictadura” (132). This moment in the novel suggests that Marcela may have just become one more “disappeared,” establishing thus an emblematic reference to the missing daughters (and sons) of a brutal Argentine reality.8

Not unexpectedly, Marcela responds to Bolek and to his inquiries reluctantly. For Brizuela, the protagonist’s reluctance to engage Bolek’s questions openly signals a lasting ambivalence on her part: “Marcela vive una verdadera tragedia: de un lado, la necesidad de transgredir un olvido que la encierra, la paraliza [ . . . ] la condena a la perpetua repetición del horror. Del otro, la certeza de que la memoria y el inconciente depara, siempre, dolor, acaso un dolor todavía más terrible que el que se sufrió” (129). Perhaps this is why the conversation with Bolek triggers feelings of apprehension in the protagonist, for “ni habló Bolek de Buenos Aires pero señaló con todas las letras [. . . ] en qué preciso edificio había tenido lugar la mentada muestra” (36). As the protagonist’s uneasiness grows, so do her motives. On the one hand, she recognizes that Bolek’s exhibition took

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8This allegoric undertone is a recurrent element of Valenzuela’s writing. In an interview with critic Sharon Magnarelli in Reflections/Refractions, Valenzuela stresses that her frequent reference to an Argentine tragedy (thousands of disappeared individuals) stays inevitably crucial to her writing: “If you are living in a place where your friends have been tortured and killed and where the best thing you can think of when somebody has disappeared is that she is dead, because otherwise the reality would be too overwhelming, you have to write about torture because you cannot deny it” (209).
place where she and Facundo used to live in Buenos Aires. Reluctant to share any personal remembrances with Bolek regarding her perverse relationship with Facundo, “sintió un sobresalto tan pero tan profundo que no logró registrarlo en el momento” (36). The protagonist’s discomfort prompts her to end this visit abruptly: “[cuando] ella se levantó para encender las luces Bolek consideró que era hora de irse” (37). Upon seeing him off, Marcela notices a red, blood-like stain on his pants, her couch, and a pillow; an accidental leak from Bolek’s pen. This image signals the symbolic and erotic charge of her relationship with Bolek. The image, marked by the blood-like leakage, once again, is multivalent and open. On the one hand it may suggest the inevitable violence present in all erotic encounters; on the other it could imply the protagonist’s inability to separate sexuality from memories of trauma. It is not accidental, however, that Marcela is immediately reminded of Kuitca’s stained mattresses: “ella reconoce en su almohadón a un pariente putativo de los colchones de Kuitca” (37). If Kuitca’s disturbing installations resemble the sites of persecution in Argentina, Marcela’s stained pillow becomes a personal reminder of her nation’s agony.

It is during her visit to Bolek’s workplace, the city sanatorium, that Marcela engages her memory of national trauma most directly. When Marcela visits Bolek in the sanatorium to retrieve her personal “artifacts” from the past (her erotic letters Bolek has adopted as an inspiration for his own art against the military regime in Argentina in the 1980s), she straightforwardly demands: “que me devuelva las agujas de mi reloj parado, que las cartas y la imaginación [. . .] aquellas cartas que [. . .] ahora bien podrían permanecer en el pasado, las cartas, pero no hay pasado” (247, emphasis mine). Although the allusion here is open enough to be ambiguous, what prompts the protagonist to decide to recover those letters is partially her own desire to make peace with her own past. Marcela’s recovery of her own youthful, lusty and feverish letters in the space of an insane asylum is resonant with contemporary theory on trauma and recovery. We are reminded not so much of Michel Foucault but of feminist theories of trauma and resolution where the resolution is never too far from the dark spaces that occasioned the trauma in the first place. Cathy Caruth’s Trauma: Explorations in Memory (1995), for instance, proves particularly helpful here. Departing from current discussions regarding post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Caruth redirects her discussion toward understanding the “impact” trauma causes on the individual as it reoccurs subsequently. Commenting on various essays that follow her introduction, Caruth focuses on “how trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experiences and of communication, in therapy, in the classroom, and in literature, as well as in psychoanalytic theory” (4). The key issue Caruth emphasizes here is the individual’s gradual and deferred absorption of a traumatic event, for “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly” (4). As a result, the individual becomes haunted by such traumatic occurrences, for being “traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4–5).

La travesía’s protagonist’s visit to the sanatorium allows her (and the reader) to revisit the traumatic time of her homeland’s past twenty years after such traumatic experiences took place. As the sanatorium triggers such a painful remembrance, the protagonist undergoes a belated “assimilation” of the traumatic
experiences, thereby confirming her long-term possession by this trauma. In other words, the protagonist’s short stay in the sanatorium lets her retrace and confront the cause of her imposed flight from the political havoc in her homeland. Perhaps that is the reason why she subsequently burns the retrieved letters that have, after all, taken on their own life in Bolek’s art. Brizuela interprets the burning of the letters as the way the protagonist chooses to push her tormenting past out of her life. For Brizuela, there is a clear correlation between the act of burning her letters and expelling her past: “Marcela quema las cartas y por fin exorciza su pasado” (130). Yet, one can also speculate that forcing her—and more importantly—her nation’s past completely out of her life is practically impossible, as the protagonist explicitly confirms: “soy argentina y por lo tanto restañar heridas olvidándolas es precisamente lo que las autoridades pretenden de nosotros, que nuestro deber es nadar contra esa corriente” (148). Hence, as Marcela sets her recovered letters on fire in the sanatorium, she is only to lessen the weight of the dark period in her past.

An incident Marcela remembers while at the sanatorium makes the political connotation all the more immediate. As she recalls a particular anecdote about an Argentine couple who hides in the Buenos Aires zoo at night to experience the true life of the caged animals, she remembers clearly hearing that the couple’s desire was to “saber en carne propia qué se siente al estar en una jaula, convertidos ellos también en animales” (261).9 Remembering this story—one reported in newspapers—she begins to understand the source of her own lingering fears. In other words, Marcela’s memory of the couple’s incarceration allows her to pinpoint a specific period and specific persons who set off an omnipresent fear among Argentines. This is particularly evident as the protagonist comments on the couple’s survival, for: “[p]or suerte, eso ocurrió en los tiempos livianitos de Cámpora, que unos años más tarde no la hubieran sacado tan barata, si la sacaban, si salían con vida” (261). It seems clear that the protagonist overtly contrasts two opposing regimes responsible for the slaughter of some 23,000 Argentines. “Olvídalo,” suggests Bolek so as to ease her pain, “[e]s una trampa aciaga” (261). For Marcela, however, memory and fear stay indivisible when it comes to the dark reality of military Argentina. Thus, aggravated by this type of consolation, she explains: “Olvidar como por decreto [ . . . ] ¿Pretendes por un lado que me acuerde de todo, que reviva el pasado [ . . . ], y por el otro lado que me aparte del miedo?” (261). At this point in the novel, an act of remembering remains fused with fear.

The sanatorium appears to be a surreal space to the protagonist when she first encounters it. The dream-like and grotesque artwork of the mad is everywhere on the walls, creating a hallucinatory atmosphere:

Louis XIV extiende su verde encrespada y radiante cabellera por dos de las paredes, acompañado en su empresa de forestación casi trifídica por varios ficus, un montonal de matas indiscriminadas y hasta

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9 Once enclosed with the incarcerated animals, the couple begins their tour. Their presence and, more importantly, free roaming leads to an absolute infuriation of the restrained animals. As the commotion in the zoo grows stronger, the couple is discovered and, ultimately, imprisoned by the zoo authorities.
tres arbolitos de pomelo [. . . ] en las paredes hay murales de animales salvajes, de pájaros alucinantes [. . . ] ininteligible, fantástico mural. (90–92)

Unlike the eerie artwork she observes in MoMA at the beginning of the novel, the uncanny art representation in the sanatorium gradually decreases her nervousness. In fact, she is astonished by the patients’ artwork, and she regards the sanatorium as a terrain for artistic release or, as the inmates chose to name it, “el Museo Viviente” (88). The spatial confinement the sanatorium conveys, then, is challenged through the act of artistic liberation each patient practices. More importantly, such a practice prompts Marcela to initiate her own anxiety release, which, as shown above, comes about in fragments regarding her remembrances of life in Argentina.

Hence the sanatorium in the novel is a multivalent site of meaning and traumas. As a space that hosts madness and art as well as celebration and creativity, it is suggestive of Foucault’s discussion of spaces of “deviation” in Discipline and Punish (1977). In this work Foucault discusses spaces in which discipline and punishment are implemented so as to rectify individuals’ deviant behavior. It is the authority of modern society within prisons, rest homes, schools or psychiatric hospitals that operates in accordance with “the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal” (199). Given Pimentel’s theory of fictitious representation of real urban space, the sanatorium in La travesía unavoidably implies the normative values generally ascribed to such a space. Yet the sanatorium in La travesía is not exclusively a space for disciplining the mentally unfit. This space is also, through Bolek’s efforts, a living museum, as Bolek continues to convert a space intended for discipline and punitive means into a space of healing vis-à-vis the patients’ art production. For Marcela, moreover, this space is cathartic; it prompts the protagonist to free herself from the feeling of “haberse sentido rehén del miedo durante demasiados años” (30).10

V. Journeys of Return

In a lecture entitled “Memory and Exile” delivered at the University of Louisville on September 22, 2004, Argentine writer Tununa Mercado remarked that remembering her nation’s past is in itself an agonizing act.11 Referring to the contemporary Argentine sociopolitical context, Mercado stated that memory “es un discurso para transmitir un duelo” yet despite such a pain, the act of remembering was/is a way to condemn military brutalities. Luisa Valenzuela’s La travesía creates such a discourse, yet it does so by turning the memory of trauma into an opportunity for recovery and self-discovery of the protagonist. Although La

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10 See Díaz’s article “Una odisea hacia el caos: La travesía de Luisa Valenzuela” regarding the aspect of the protagonist’s “inner harmony” in this novel.

11 I thank Tununa Mercado for meeting with me to further discuss my curiosities regarding the theme of her lecture and allowing me to cite parts of it.
travesía begins in the New York of the 1990s, the protagonist’s ghosts return repeatedly to the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the urban Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo protesting the disappearance of their children and grandchildren. Even though the novel does not explicitly refer to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, it does much to reflect on what women’s public questioning, their Sphinx-like presence, can do to change the nature of the urban spaces they begin to frequent. As these women began to gather in front of the Presidential Palace in Buenos Aires, the plaza (San Martín) became a space where a group of middle-aged women—many from the working classes—began to seriously threaten the military junta by the mere fact of having taken to the streets with their white handkerchiefs and their posters with young people’s photos on them. According to historian Jonathan Brown, the military government faced an unbreakable obstacle when “the middle class parties finally developed enough backbone to follow up the earlier protests of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” (248). If approached from Wilson’s viewpoint, then, these women’s presence and rightful demonstrations in Buenos Aires drew enough international attention to this public space that international organizations were finally able to exert real pressure on the already weakened regime.

La travesía ends with the protagonist having come full circle. Having burned the letters that both distanced and kept her hostage to a traumatic past, the protagonist decides she can now face the city of her past on her own terms: “[y] sí, yo, Marcela Osorio, de cuerpo entero, créase o no me vuelvo a BAires. Falto desde hace más de veinte años, sonó la hora de enfrentar tanto gato encerrado que dejé por allá” (398). Marcela’s decision to return to Buenos Aires could also be read symbolically. If treated as a symbolic moment in the novel, Marcela’s comment could emblematically mark an end to the journey that signaled Marcela’s own provisional “disappearance.” The protagonist’s homecoming could also be viewed as her readiness to assume her own future responsibilities to keep the national memory of that trauma alive. Finally, as the novel examines the protagonist’s negotiations of urban spaces she visits/inhabits, it clearly depicts the country’s present in which, as Valenzuela points out, “están aflorando todos los horrores de la dictadura y se están reconociendo” (2). The national recovery from the political trauma of the past century is to be carried on.

WORKS CITED


12 See Jonathan Brown’s A History of Argentina.

13 See Culture and Customs of Argentina in which David Foster examines the overt political participation of the Argentine intelligentsia in the Programa Nacional de la Democratización de la Cultura.


