

2013

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Recommended Citation

Rajca, Andrew C. (2013) "Remnants of the Disappeared: Subjectivity and the Politics of Postdictatorial Cultural Memory in Sergio Chejfec's *Los planetas*," *Dissidences*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 9 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences/vol5/iss9/8>

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Keywords / Palabras clave

Cultural Memory, Postdictatorship, Postdictatorial, Argentina, Chejfec

*Remnants of the Disappeared:
Subjectivity and the Politics
of Postdictatorial Cultural Memory
in Sergio Chejfec's Los planetas*

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In the 1999 novel Los planetas, Sergio Chejfec explores the residual effects of military dictatorship through a complex narrative that engages with themes of memory, subjectivity, and the “disappeared” in postdictatorial Argentina. The novel is primarily narrated by S, who attempts to confront the disappearance of his best friend M during the dictatorship and the effects that this continues to have on his life. The circumstances surrounding M's disappearance are unknown, and S is only able to engage his absence by evoking childhood memories of their times together. He does this through a fragmented narrative that constantly jumps between multiple pasts and the present as he examines an old photograph of M, during encounters with M's mom (R) and M's childhood neighbor Sito, and through his interactions with and within Buenos Aires. While questions of mourning and melancholia are undoubtedly important approaches to the study of postdictatorial traumatic memory represented in Los planetas, I maintain that there is more at stake in Chejfec's novel, which allows us to expand our critical inquiry beyond “mourning work” to consider the politics of postdictatorial cultural memory in Argentina.

In this essay I place theoretical approaches connected with Subaltern Studies in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization of remnant, creating a productive tension that allows us to tease out Chejfec's critical engagement with the figure of the “disappeared” in Los planetas. In the

first section, I examine the representation of M in the novel through Gayatri Spivak's notion of subalternity (developed in the Latin American context by such authors as Alberto Moreiras, John Beverley, and Gareth Williams), arguing that M is presented as a type of postdictatorial subaltern subject in the novel. In the second section, I read the relationship between S and M presented by Chejfec not as a melancholic engagement with the "lost object," but instead through Agamben's vision of the "remnant" as a disjunctive space between two individuals where subjectivity is located. Drawing from these two theoretical approaches, I argue that Los planetas offers a critique of the activation of the "disappeared" as a symbolic victim/hero within postdictatorial memory discourses by offering ambiguity and impossibility surrounding the subjectivity of the "disappeared" as productive tools for a critical re-engagement with the effects of dictatorship. Through the novel's focus on the impossibility to represent the experiences of the "disappeared," due to both the unknown circumstances of the disappearance and the limits of language and accepted social discourses about dictatorship, I suggest that Chejfec traces a critical outside to the (counter)hegemonic themes of memory/forgetting, truth/falsity, and justice/amnesty that have dominated recent debates, and points towards an alternative approach to engage postdictatorial cultural memory.

Previous critical work [1] on Los Planetas has often drawn from trauma studies and psychoanalysis to examine S's narrative as "mourning" that involves both the need and impossibility to reconstitute the "loss" or "trauma," of his "disappeared" friend M. These studies apply similar critical approaches developed by such authors as Idelber Avelar ("allegorical mourning") and Alberto Moreiras ("critical melancholia") [2] to the study of postdictatorial memory in the analysis of novels published in the early 1990's, focusing on such themes as desubjectification and the perpetual narration of memory while construing M as the "lost object" mourned by S's melancholic memory narrative. As with the work of Avelar and Moreiras, these studies read S's engagement with M's memory at both the individual and collective levels, configuring the "disappeared" or the dictatorship itself as a collective "original trauma" that continues to influence the postdictatorial present through both a need and an impossibility to recuperate. However, while critical approaches focused on mourning and melancholy are undoubtedly an important piece of postdictatorial memory, "trauma" as an analytical category is not the only way to approach this subject. Andreas Huyssen, for example, contends that:

trauma cannot be the central category in addressing the larger memory discourse. It has been all too tempting to some to think of trauma as the hidden core of all memory. After all, both memory and trauma are predicated on the absence of that which is negotiated in memory or in the traumatic symptom [...] But to collapse memory into trauma, I think, would unduly confine our understanding of memory, marking it too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering, and loss. It would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition. Memory, whether individual or generational, political or public, is always more than only the prison house of the past (8).

This turn from the traumatic as a way to engage the memory discourses produced in places such as postdictatorial Argentina is not intended to negate the trauma associated with torture, murder, and "disappearance" during the military dictatorships, nor the need to overcome the effects of these experiences in the present. It is the notion of "historical trauma," influenced by "the cult status of Benjamin's angel of history, and the trauma work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and others" (9) that Huyssen finds problematic, arguing that "This approach to history as trauma, I would suggest, does not help much to understand the political layers of memory discourse in our time, although it may well represent one of its articulations" (9). This contention that trauma is one of many possible articulations of the political components of memory is important, as it points towards a critical approach to examine the politics of memory in postdictatorial cultural production without ignoring the traumatic elements of loss in the postdictatorship.

In this vein, Los planetas constitutes an excellent example of exploring multiple articulations of postdictatorial memory, as it includes both an individual mourning of "loss" while at the same time offering a meta-discursive exploration of representations of the "disappeared" as a postdictatorial political subject. This marks an important difference between Chejfec's work and the themes included earlier postdictatorial literature in Argentina, which, as Avelar suggests, are no longer a central concern in recent cultural production, "over time the metaphors of recovery, recuperation, and restoration have lost relevance" (Telling 184). Avelar observes a shift in a new wave of Argentine authors (including Chejfec) who "return to Argentina's dictatorial past in quite different terms from those made canonical in the historical, allegorical, and memorializing narratives" (Telling 184) of the immediate postdictatorship. This shift no doubt corresponds to the recent explosion of memory in Argentina (and throughout the Southern Cone) where the battle to construct postdictatorial memory narratives is no longer solely between "memory and forgetting," but rather

through multiple, contradictory, and highly commodified memory discourses about this time period, what Huysen refers to as a "hypertrophy of memory." These narratives are enacted by multiple social actors who, as Elizabeth Jelin suggests, "generate meanings of the past, framed by power relations in which their actions are embedded in the present" (Jelin xv).

In this context, I propose a reading of Los planetas that focuses less on the melancholic engagement with M's memory from the perspective of S, and more on the construction of M (and the "disappeared" in general) as a postdictatorial subject. I maintain that Chejfec's novel not only narrates S's mourning work in the present in relation to M's disappearance, but that in exploring the relationship between S and M, the Sobreviviente and the Muerto [3], he also offers a critique of ideological representations of the "disappeared" within the (counter)hegemonic politics of postdictatorial memory in Argentina. When I use the term (counter)hegemonic, I am referring to the totalizing system of meaning that is constituted by the relationship between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, which are always already implicated in one another. As a result, groups that seek to challenge dominant forces often participate in the same system of meaning that they seek to upend (albeit from the opposite ideological or political perspective), and thus ultimately reproduce and reinforce the hegemonic discursive logic that continues to exclude "other" subjectivities and perspectives. While I discuss multiple examples of this as it relates to postdictatorial memory in this essay, in sum, I contend that Chejfec's ambiguous representation of the "disappeared" denies their appropriation as a symbol of "resistance," "revolution," or "human rights" as part of a political project in the present. In doing so, Los planetas articulates a postdictatorial subjectivity for the "disappeared" that is not based upon the incorporation of their experiences into an ideological narrative in the present, but rather a subaltern subjectivity based upon the impossibility to speak.

The Silence of M – The Disappeared as Postdictatorial Subaltern Subject

A key moment early in Los planetas that points towards M's position as a subaltern postdictatorial subject is a reflection by S on the absence of his friend's name from the public lists of the "disappeared" that have continued to appear in the years since the military regime:

Todavía hoy me asombra no haber encontrado el nombre de M escrito en ningún lugar, en los listados de las organizaciones ni en los avisos de la prensa. Y digo todavía hoy porque, enseguida después del secuestro, me aboqué como muchos otros a leer denuncias y pedidos judiciales, documentos de antiguas víctimas, etcétera. Esto duró años; después simplemente continué aguardando su aparición en algún listado o aviso de prensa [...] Se ignora el nombre de muchos secuestrados; sin embargo sólo su ausencia en las listas públicas nos habla a nosotros, que lo conocimos (42-3).

The omission of M's name from the public lists of the "disappeared" further accentuates the effects of his absence for S, who notes that not seeing the name of someone known to be "disappeared" has a particularly strong impact on family members and friends. Some have analyzed M's absence from the public lists as a critique of dictatorial power embodied by the State, which continues to maintain control of the "naming" of the "disappeared," even as they were the ones responsible for the disappearance in the first place. For example, Erica Miller Yozell comments that "In Los planetas, the State appears as a pervasive force that both confers and denies personal identity. In this context, public lists become a principal symbol of institutional power" and that the absence of M's name on the public lists reflect that "what is so easily conferred by the State can be just as swiftly taken away" (Yozell 95). However, it is important to point out that M is not only absent from the lists of the "disappeared" sanctioned by the State, but that his name is also excluded from the lists of human rights organizations who insert themselves as the counter-hegemonic voice in the discourse of memory over forgetting, truth over falsity, and justice over amnesty in postdictatorial Argentina. It is the exclusion of M's name from the lists of these organizations dedicated to recuperating the memory of the "disappeared" as part of a political project in the present that doubles M's erasure – not the actions of institutional powers associated with the State. In this sense, we can consider M as subaltern within postdictatorial debates about the "disappeared" – reflective of an "other side" to the demands for memory, truth, and justice in present. M's exclusion from the recuperative efforts of human rights organizations destabilizes the "counter" discourses to institutionalized forgetting and amnesty, and point towards a larger critique of the dominant discursive structure that often appropriates the "disappeared" as ideological subjects in the postdictatorship.

My use of subaltern to describe M draws from both Spivak's definition of the term as "the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic" (SSDH 16), and Moreiras' contention that,

“Subalternism finds its field of incidence in the study of the cultural or experiential formations that are excluded from any given hegemonic relation at any particular moment of its own history” (TEOD 280). These conceptualizations of subalternity add a layer of critical self-reflection on the cultural, ideological and discursive power structures that determine our own engagement with marginal figures, and have sparked numerous debates surrounding testimonialism and the subaltern’s “capacity to speak” in the field of Latin American cultural studies in recent years [4]. My intent here is not to review the arguments of this debate, but to frame my particular use of subalternity as a theoretical tool in rethinking representations of the “disappeared” in the context of the cultural politics of postdictatorial memory. As Spivak contends, attempts to rescue “subjugated” or “disqualified” knowledges as a way to challenge structures of meaning of the dominant discursive system often conflate the concepts of political representation and subjective re-presentation, thus ignoring the critical intellectual's own implication in creating these “subjugated knowledges” and maintaining them as a subaltern “other.”

Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as “speaking for,” as in politics, and representation as “re-presentation,” as in art or philosophy [...] These two senses of representation [...] are related but irreducibly discontinuous [...] The banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed: representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent (CTSS 275).

Spivak continues to argue that while the attempts to allow the subaltern to “speak” through criticism may be well-intentioned, intellectuals in fact often subsume the “subaltern” within their own subjectivity as a way to combat a dominant narrative, participating in the same system of meaning that they propose to upend. In this way they ultimately incorporate the “subjugated knowledge” within a (counter)hegemonic system, instead of trying to displace the established rules of representation and meaning. It is for this reason that Spivak argues that “The subaltern can not speak” (CTSS 308), and that you can only perceive traces of the subaltern at the limits of discursive logic, because the incorporation of “other” within the logic of a dominant system of representation always already excludes a subjectivity that does not fit within that discourse.

The figure of the “disappeared” has often been incorporated within postdictatorial memory discourses as a type of anti-dictatorial symbol, a victim/hero [5] within the discourses of memory,

truth, and justice against institutionalized impunity and amnesty associated with the so-called “politics of forgetting” and “punto final” in the immediate postdictatorship. While the use of images and names of the “disappeared” by groups such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and H.I.J.O.S. to draw attention to the human rights violations committed against more than 30,000 people during the dictatorship has been extremely important, the elimination of the “punto final” and the increased number of military personnel being placed on trial in recent years creates the opportunity for critical commentary about the figure of the “disappeared” that goes beyond their symbolic use for juridical (or personal) purposes. The conflict in postdictatorial Argentina is becoming less about memory vs. forgetting, and more about what meanings are being produced within multiple, contradictory memory discourses and how are they being transmitted and received in postdictatorial society through what Jelin refers to as “conflicting narratives based on ideological clashes” (Jelin 37). Critical work in this area has begun to examine ideological and political components of postdictatorial memory that move beyond the categories of memory/forgetting and offer a reevaluation of the way that the figure of the “disappeared” is appropriated and activated within particular political projects in the present. Hugo Vezzetti, for example, notes a recent shift in the use of the “disappeared” in cultural discourse from representing an “innocent victim” of state violence to becoming a symbolic “hero” for political militancy during the 1960’s and 70’s, “la figura moral de la víctima, que ha encontrado su cifra mayor en el desaparecido, viene a ser revisada por una evocación que busca exaltar o simplemente recuperar imágenes y sentidos de la militancia revolucionaria” (Vezetti 19). By exposing the use of the figure of the “disappeared” as an ideological symbol within competing political projects of cultural memory in the present, work such as Vezzetti’s points towards the need to critically evaluate the way that the “disappeared” are portrayed in postdictatorial cultural production.

It is in this vein that I consider the “disappeared” as a subaltern subject in postdictatorial Argentina, in that attempts to politically represent them or re-present their experiences through language commonly fall into the same (counter)hegemonic discursive trap alluded to by Spivak. The rhetoric often activated to evoke the memory of the desaparecidos in the postdictatorial present as symbolic heroes/victims of a unified resistance to the military regime is problematic in that it is in fact impossible to represent the experiences of these individuals. The “true” nature of what happened to the “disappeared” can never be discovered, we can only perceive traces of their experience within accepted systems of representation. The appropriation of the figure of the “disappeared” as an

ideological or political symbol in the present, despite the good intentions of social justice behind these counter-narratives, ultimately deny subjectivity for the "disappeared" by displacing their experiences and projecting new meanings for the lives of these individuals within political projects related to human rights, memory, and truth. The "desaparecidos" do not have a voice, they are made to speak through memory narratives of "resistance" to the dictatorship, politically representing them as anti-dictatorial symbols and re-presenting them aesthetically through testimonials, novels, films, photography, and multiple other examples of cultural production.

These discourses have the laudable goal of giving voice to the "disappeared" by creating a space for the silenced subject to be "heard" and incorporated into social discourse. Yet these representations of the "disappeared" also often participate in the same dominant system of meaning established by the military government and continued through the so-called transition into postdictatorship. For this reason, critics such as Avelar argue that the memory of the dictatorship "requires another language" (TUP 64), one that moves beyond the idea that "redemption is just around the corner, being announced by a subaltern voice transparently coincident with its experience [...] the assertion that testimonio leads us into 'postliterature' or that now 'the subaltern other really speaks'" (67). While here Avelar is critiquing the use of idealized notions of "victim" or "hero" in testimonial memory narratives of "resistance" during the dictatorship that draw from the same language as the military regime, and thus ultimately displace experiences that don't fit within this narrative, these ideas also reflect the crux of my argument about the postdictatorial subjectivity of the "disappeared." We need to problematize the idea of the "disappeared" as a "subaltern voice transparently coincident with its experience" that can be represented through language, and critically examine the appropriation and displacement of subjectivity of those who suffered into postdictatorial memory narratives of "resistance" to the military regime. Despite the importance of uncovering the juridical facts about the "disappeared" and exposing the violence committed by military personnel during the dictatorship, the "true" nature of what these individuals experienced is beyond both political representation and aesthetic re-presentation, constituting a subaltern subjectivity at the limits of logic that exceeds the conventions of language.

It is this focus on the impossibility to represent the subjective experiences of the "disappeared," and the resulting political ambiguity in relation to their usage as a symbolic figure in the present, that Chejfec explores in Los planetas. Throughout the novel, S is critical of the dominant memory

narratives that are typically presented about the military dictatorship, which often substitute meaningful reflection on the violence of the time period with political ideology. Within this context, S recognizes that the “disappeared” are often appropriated by postdictatorial political projects, and he reflects upon this while stating emphatically that representing M in this way is not his goal:

Algunas veces, como puse, me he preguntado si alguien llegado el caso de que esté leyendo esto, no pensará que sugiero, o quiero descubrir, en la imagen de M como emblema, la razón o enigma sobre las cuales la gente boga desde aquellos años; pero la verdad es que hay poco para proponer y aún menos para descubrir (183-84).

Here, S explains that he does not intend to present M as an "emblem", neither a symbolic “hero” nor "victim" of resistance to the military dictatorship, which would appropriate his death within what he later calls "la sustitución violenta y trivial producida en el llamado sentido histórico" (187). Instead, S's narrative disarms any future attempts to incorporate M's disappearance into an ideological argument about this time period through a meta-narrative dialogue with elements of the politics of postdictatorial cultural memory. He continues this denial of a symbolic appropriation of the figure of M through multiple, ambiguous comments on the politics of the 1960's and 1970's, and the unknown circumstances surrounding M's disappearance. This is particularly evident in a conversation with another of their childhood friends, Sito, which is the only time that these two explicitly discuss M's disappearance.

The conversation begins with a critique of the armed-left in Argentina through a story told by Sito about one of his high school classmates, who was making bombs out of gas cans when he was captured by the military:

“Todavía podía ver la consagración inocente que lo empujaba; su idea de la lucha armada, para la cual esos explosivos se fabricaban, como algo parecido a un carnaval, una competencia que los bandos dirimirían a sifonazos [...] Ese amigo mío terminó como M, prosiguió. Cierta día estaba bien atento enroscando un pico y no escuchó los golpes de los secuestradores” (119).

In his critique of the "innocence" of the armed-left, Sito seems to intimate that while the repressive actions of the military were not justified, the activities of his ex-classmate were in fact the root cause of his kidnapping, an idea that S had alluded to earlier in the novel, "Muchos podían pensar que el

secuestro de un militante político no se justificaba, pero la causalidad, aunque cruel y asesina, no dejaba de operar como tal" (42). Here, by exposing the violent activities of both the armed left and the military regime, Chejfec hints towards placing at least some of the blame on the “disappeared,” which creates a sense of ambiguity that disrupts the idealized narrative of those opposed to the military regime.

This conversation leads to a discussion of the “innocence” or “guilt” associated with M’s activities prior to his disappearance, which constitutes a critique of the symbolic activation of the “disappeared” as either “heroes” of the resistance to the dictatorship or “innocent victims” of its repression in postdictatorial memory:

Sin embargo el caso de M fue distinto, por quanto él no hacía nada, ¿no?, me preguntó Sito [...] advertí el tenor de las dudas de Sito. En su memoria la figura de M [...] conservaba una aura de inocencia [...] El pasado de M, según lo que entendía Sito, podía haber sido susceptible e propiciar el secuestro – o todo lo contrario, acaso fuera absolutamente ajeno a la política, y por lo tanto víctima de una situación imprevista ni buscada [...] necesitaba saber si M era absolutamente inocente, o sea, según su criterio, una víctima absoluta. Lo era, dije al responder ‘No’ a su pregunta (119-20).

Sito’s need to determine M’s “guilt” or “innocence” when confronting his disappearance is born out of the competing justifications offered by the military (that they were defending the “nation” from “subversives”) and the armed militant left (that they were “resisting” the repression of the dictatorship in the name of the “pueblo”) that are reiterated in the postdictatorial narrations about this time period. This exposes the contingency of needing to articulate the experiences of the “disappeared” within one of these two perspectives in order to “make sense” within dominant memory discourses, which, in fact, functions to further displace subjectivity for the “disappeared.” During this conversation, S perceives Sito’s need to name M as “guilty” or “innocent,” and then appears to confirm M’s political “innocence” at the time of his disappearance - that he did not participate in the activities of the armed-left and was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time, which serves as an indictment of the indiscriminate violence used by the military regime during the dictatorship. Yet whether or not M participated in militant actions is ultimately left unexplained in the novel, as S is unable to confirm whether or M was involved in armed militancy or not. In presenting M in this ambiguous manner, refusing to name his innocence or complicity in his own

disappearance, Chejfec places the subjectivity of the disappeared outside of the accepted discourses of innocence/guilt and victim/subversive - which also disrupts the so-called "two evils" argument that lays equal blame on the violence perpetrated by the military and the violence of guerrilla groups. This contrasts sharply with attempts to incorporate the "disappeared" into ideologically inflected memory narratives about the dictatorship, pointing towards the impossibility of both re-presentation and representation of the "disappeared," and thus, I argue, construing them as subaltern subjects of postdictatorial memory.

This focus on the impossibility of subjectivity for the "disappeared" and an ambiguity surrounding their memory is in fact the ideal goal of postdictatorial literature for Chejfec. In a paper entitled "La memoria disuelta" that he presented at Hood College in 2005, Chejfec reflects upon about the impossibility to fully represent the dictatorial past through language, while noting the demand for "truth" about this time period as part of the current focus on collective memory in the postdictatorship. He maintains that the dictatorial past is "oculto," "indefinido," and "indeterminado," (LMD 165) but that these traits can be beneficial if not understanding what happened is given a positive turn - if the inability to fully articulate the excesses of the past through language is ultimate goal of the postdictatorial "witness:"

Pienso que ese sentido de no entender, ese estado de conmoción frente a las señales del pasado o la memoria, es la situación ideal que debe alcanzar la literatura [...] sabemos que difícilmente la literatura se conjuga según premisas de verdad. La literatura es un discurso verdadero solo en la medida en que establece una relación ambigua con la verdad y con lo falso (LMD 165).

In these comments, Chejfec marks the incapacity to understand as an ideal, as a way to connect to the experience of the dictatorship in the present. Faced with the impossibility to explicitly represent the experiences of the tortured, murdered, and "disappeared" through language, Chejfec calls for a literature that accentuates this impossibility, instead of filling in the gaps of representation with an ideological or political perspective. Through the constant questioning of the idea of "truth" and multiple reflections upon the impossibility to represent the experience through language [6], Los planetas establishes this "sentido de no entender" as the central theme of the novel, reiterated time and again through S's referral to the ideas of "excess" and "silence" in relation to M within the narrative.

A key example of the novel's focus on these narrative silences is the constant allusion to S's incapacity to explicitly narrate what happened to M. S repeatedly refers to M and his disappearance as excess, that which is beyond representation or explanation within the limits of conventional discourse, and that "silence" is the only response that M's family and friends can muster when confronted with his disappearance. We observe this in such phrases as, "Un silencio no tan prolongado y enigmático como el que adoptaron los padres de M" (21); "Nos quedamos sin habla" (33); "el silencio que mantuvimos y no rompimos, unos largos segundos antes de cortar" (34), etc. S explains that there is no language that exists to represent excess, the only possible response is silence, "el motivo de nuestro silencio radicaba en que la desaparición de M era un hecho excesivo [...] las personas callan ante lo excesivo; es el silencio de exceso" (125-26). The repeated use of the word "excessive" to describe M's disappearance reiterates the "impossible" nature of M's death - that it exceeded the norms of reality, logic, and representation. This "silence" can be interpreted through the Lacanian notion of the impossibility to fully represent experience through language, the objet petit a or the "Real" that is taken up in the critical approaches to postdictatorial memory from the perspective of trauma, melancholia, and mourning work. Yet, as Huyssen contends, we don't have to articulate excess or narrative impossibilities solely as trauma, particularly in relation to the analysis of the cultural politics of memory. By reading these representational gaps through the prism of subalternity that I outlined above, as a subjectivity that is always already excluded from (counter)hegemonic categories of analysis, we can examine the multiple references to excess, silence, and the impossibility of representation of the M in Los planetas in ways that move beyond the critical lens of mourning/melancholia, shifting our focus onto M's incapacity to speak.

I contend that it is in fact the silent, subaltern subjectivity of M, and not S's mournful engagement with loss, that Chejfec explores in the novel. In this way, Chejfec gives a positive turn to the silence of M (and the "disappeared"), to the impossibility of entering into the narrative as a speaking subject and the ambiguity surrounding his disappearance. He does not attempt to appropriate M within ideological or political discourses about the past, and thus further subsuming the experiences of the "disappeared" within a dominant system of meaning. Instead, he notes the continued influences that M's absence has on the present, not in terms of a mournful "lost object," but in guiding S's interactions with others (Sito, M's mother R) and with the city of Buenos Aires itself. In this sense, Chejfec traces the effects of the silence of the "disappeared" through the continuous exploration of

the relationship between S and M, which, it is important to note, is presented through both a first and third person narrative [7] that further allows us to take a step back from examining S's narrative solely as a mournful engagement with M's memory. The constant meta-literary reflection upon the relationship between S and M in the novel opens a space to read this relationship through Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization of the term remnant, not necessarily in the sense of a ruins of M's subjectivity, but more as a certain zone of indistinction and ambiguity between two subjects. It is in this ambiguous "disjunctive" space that both binds and separates S and M, where we perceive momentary glimpses of the effects of M's silence, the possibility of a subaltern subjectivity for the "disappeared" that disrupts hegemonic discourse in the present.

El Sobreviviente y el Muerto: The Remnant between S and M

The inseparable nature of the relationship between S and M is a theme that is revisited multiple times throughout the novel, either through explicit references by S or in metaphors sprinkled throughout the stories told by others and reproduced within S's narrative. A primary example of this is the use of the word "planets" to describe the strong connection between S and M during their childhood, which is also an obvious reference to the title of the novel. S narrates two particular instances where S and M accidentally met up with one another while wandering through Buenos Aires that reflect this connection between them. The first encounter happened after they had said goodbye, turned around and each walked in the opposite direction. Both S and M had become disoriented while walking in the city and ended up running into one another at a magazine stand on a street. M begins their conversation by saying, "A veces pienso que andamos por la ciudad como planetas" (110) and S finishes by commenting:

Así, el movimiento aparente de aquello que está en el cielo [...] se convirtió, por obra de casualidad, en clave y emblema de nuestro vínculo: pese a los vacíos y distancias que pudieran producirse, eventualmente [...] entre los dos, siempre habría una influencia recíproca, pautada por simples principios de equilibrio y compensación, ley suprema de nuestros cursos y recorridos (111).

S accentuates the importance of this "reciprocal" attraction between them through the memory of a second encounter with M, which was even more inexplicable than the first because neither were lost and both should have been on the other side of the city. However, "guided by mysterious forces"

they had met up with one another hours after having said goodbye, reiterating the importance of this strong connection with M for S. "Y esas fuerzas, vimos claro, eran la conjunción alrededor de cuyo poder gravitábamos sin pausa. Ese poder casi siempre nos unía, protegiéndonos de toda distancia" (194).

The "gravitational" forces that pulled S and M together in these instances are further explained through the characterization of their meanderings through Buenos Aires as the orbiting of planets in such phrases as, "necesitaban precisamente del espacio de la ciudad para ser concebidas como tales; como las órbitas de los planetas" (147) and "Errábamos como planetas, y nuestras órbitas pasaban bien lejos del radio de influencia de la actividad" (149). The shared experiences within Buenos Aires were an important piece of their childhood, and for this reason played an important role in evoking M's memory for S in the present. Yet, their imagined roles as "planets" orbiting within the "spatial system" of the city is a significant part of the way that S conceives of their relationship, both in the past and in the present. Through this metaphor of "planet," S considers his life as inseparable from M's, and he reflects that, even after his disappearance, M continues to exert an "invisible" influence on S's life:

A veces me he preguntado si esta solidaridad pudiera seguir actuando [...] como si la prueba existencial no pasara por su masa [de un cuerpo particular], sino por los efectos indirectos de su intervención misteriosa [...] Los cuerpos tienen entonces una categoría existencial negativa, definida por sus consecuencias o señales más que por su materialidad. Por lo tanto, la influencia sería invisible, pero efectiva (111).

It is important to note here is that S is not incorporating M's absence (the "lost object/trauma") in the present into his own subjectivity through melancholia. He instead notes that – just like the planets that he uses as a metaphor for their relationship, S and M are individual subjects who have always shared an inexplicable influence at the limits of their subjectivity. His reflections on the ability of an absent body to continue to exert influence through its "effects" and its "signs" are important in that they point towards Agamben's conceptualization of "remnant" as the ambiguous zone beyond the limits of linguistic or discursive convention where subjectivity is located.

In Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive, Giorgio Agamben argues that the experiences of those who were isolated and killed in the concentration camps during the Holocaust

(who Primo Levi calls the "complete witness") are "unwitnessable" -both because of the impossibility to fully convey their suffering through language and due to the limits of culturally delimited discourse, the conceptual impossibility of extermination or genocide within the accepted logic of society. For Agamben, the testimony of those who survived is only possible because of the "impossibility of speaking" of those who were killed and the "unarchivability" of their experience within socially constructed systems of meaning - beyond the realm of both memory and forgetting. "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 - that is, the necessity by which, as the existence of language, it escapes both memory and forgetting" (Agamben 158). In this sense, Agamben traces the impossibility of subjectivity for those who were killed in the gas chambers as subaltern experiences that are beyond appropriation within established discursive structures that he contends are always already predicated upon the denial the Holocaust. He does this by placing the concept of subjectivity (as well as "testimony" and "witness") as contingent upon the relationship between those who were killed and those who survived the Holocaust, at the point of disjunction, or the "non-coincidence" of experience that both binds and separates these individuals, "so the remnants of Auschwitz - the witnesses - are neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved. They are what remains between them" (164).

Agamben articulates the relationship between the dead and the survivors through this ambiguous zone between the limits of these two perspectives as the place where a "silent" subjectivity of those killed in the Holocaust momentarily appears:

Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject (120).

It is for this reason that Agamben argues that the survivors of Auschwitz can not be separated from those who were killed, because it is the "non-coincidence" between them, what he terms the remnant, where witness testimony is located. In other words, while those who survived can never fully narrate the experiences of "the complete witnesses" (due to lack of knowledge and discursive limits of representation), they can bear this impossibility within their own speech by articulating their

relationship to the silent traces of the experiences of the dead that momentarily appear within the disjunctive space that both connects and separates their subjectivity. By "bringing to speech the impossibility of speech," Agamben maintains, "then the denial of Auschwitz is refuted in its very foundation" (164).

We can apply Agamben's conceptualization of "remnant" to the analysis of the subjectivity of the "disappeared" in Argentina, and more concretely to the relationship between S and M presented in Los planetas [8]. Paralleling the experience of those killed in the concentration camps, it is impossible to fully know the experiences of those whose lives were made bare in an "unwitnessable" manner in Argentina, as survivor testimonies, truth commissions, and trials, convictions, or confessions by military personnel can never fully reconstitute the experiences of these individuals. As I discussed above, while the "disappeared" are often appropriated as symbols of human rights violations, the true nature of their experience is beyond both the limits of language and the archival conventions of social discourse. The capacity to speak about the "disappeared" is thus contingent upon their incapacity to speak, and it is exactly this disjunctive space between "survivor" and "disappeared," the "remnant" between the S and M that Chejfec explores in Los planetas. S does not try to reconstitute M as a speaking subject, nor does he attempt to speak for M by explaining or defining his disappearance within the discursive structures that dominate postdictatorial memory. Instead, recognizing the impossibility to represent a subjectivity for his "disappeared" friend, S can only articulate his relationship to the traces or the effects of M that momentarily appear within the remnant space that both connects and separates their experiences. As noted above, the narrative constantly explores the inseparable relationship between S and M, both in the past and after M's disappearance, and in doing so, it locates a postdictatorial subjectivity for the "disappeared" within the zone of indistinction of the speaking subject (S) and the silent subject (M).

Multiple pieces of the narrative focus on the "traces" of what I have called a subaltern subjectivity for M, such as a story that S overhears while waiting for Sito outside of a store during one of their walks in Buenos Aires years after M's disappearance. S overhears two girls discussing an ashtray that had fallen and split into two while they were at a bar, and after looking everywhere, the people who dropped it were only able to find one piece - the other half had vanished:

'Pero es un cenicero grande, no puede desaparecer así como así.' 'No, es que no desapareció todo; desapareció la mitad [...] Al caer se rompió, buscaron por todos lados y faltaba la otra mitad [...] Nadie le hace caso a un cenicero, pero cuando falta la mitad todos se paralizan de terror.' '¿Y por qué terror?' 'Porque no vieron lo sobrenatural, sino sus efectos' (200).

As Chejfec does throughout the novel, hidden inside one of the multiple stories within the main narrative we find a reference to two pieces of a whole that serves as a metaphor for the relationship between S and M. The last part of the quote is especially important, as it notes this occurrence as a "supernatural" act and that the "witnesses" can only observe the effects of this event on the present - just as it is impossible to represent M's disappearance, and his family and friends can only engage the effects of his absence on their lives. S immediately makes this connection, barely listening to Sito describe how he would react if he were unable to find the "other half" while thinking:

Nada impide tomar la desaparición de medio cenicero como una señal, un presagio, un efecto, una causa, una prueba o una reminiscencia [...] Así estaba, preguntándome por la naturaleza de un hecho imposible; y no solo eso, sino más: tratando de encontrar algún indicio que explicara su aparición en mi camino (202).

Here, S connects something that he overhears to the "impossible fact" of M's disappearance and the influence it has had on his life, imagining M as the missing piece of ashtray whose "absence" is felt in the present. Yet, like the metaphor of planets, this "whole" is in fact reflective the relationship between S and M, the interaction of the limits of two subjectivities that are both connected and separated by a non-coincidence of experience.

The presentation of the relationship between S and M as "traces" of each others' subjectivity is repeated in the First Story told by M that S reproduces in his narrative, which is about two best friends who exchange names and identities in order to play a trick on their parents. The two friends, Sergio and Miguel (a more than obvious reference to S and M) each go home in the place of the other one day after school and are surprised by the reaction of their parents, who accept each as their own child - creating a situation that is both "familiar y extraño a la vez" (48). The boys begin to take the place of the other while conserving their own identity, creating yet another situation where the absent "trace" of one was always already implicated in the presence of the other:

La identidad, [...] latía dentro de cada uno de una manera errática, iba de un cuerpo a otro, confundida entre nombres, recuerdos y creencias [...] Eran equivalentes. Decir Sergio, por ejemplo, significaba decir uno mismo y el otro a la vez; lo mismo sucedía al decir Miguel" (53).

At the end of the story, both boys fall into a river and drown, and M explains that the moral of the story has to do with the insecurity of one's own identity, which M connects to a group of orthodox Jews that the boys saw on the street, saying that they too are unsure of the origins of their identity. In S's reflections upon the memory of this story, however, he maintains that the moral was not that Sergio and Miguel had decided to exchange identities, it was that in doing so, "olvidaran la naturaleza profunda de la propia, el nombre" (62). The fact that Sergio and Miguel were "traces" of one another was not problematic; it was the inability to mark a difference between them (presence of one, absence of the other) that caused their mutual erasure.

This story eventually serves as a type of foreshadowing to another story near the end of the novel, where S explains his attempt to legally change his name to M. In explaining his reasons for wanting to change his name, S states:

Ya que él había tenido la desdicha de ser muerto, ya que era él quien había sufrido el martirio, me pareció justo que yo, habiendo quedado vivo, compensara su ausencia volcando su nombre sobre el mío. Pero no lo pensaba solamente como una compensación; era, [...] un equilibrio que debía reestablecerse. Sentía que con M habíamos alcanzado una compenetración insólita y diversa, y que ella necesitaba restituirse aunque fuera de un modo puramente verbal o incluso nada más que figurado (213).

In the analysis of this portion of S's narrative, it is important to consider the characterization of the relationship between S and M throughout the novel that I described above: as "traces" of one another, as separate "planets" that gravitated towards each other, or as two parts that together formed a "whole." While the strong connection between S and M is repeatedly demonstrated in the narrative, they are never presented as one in the same, and in fact the story about Sergio and Miguel serves as a warning as to what would happen if the "difference" between them were eliminated. In the quote above, S maintains that he wanted to change his name to M to re-establish the "equilibrium" and the "co-penetration" that he had with his friend, words that inherently require two individuals, not one. In this sense, S did not want to become M by changing his name, he wanted to restore the connection that had always existed between them.

It is in fact this desire to maintain the relationship between them that S decides not to change his name to M at the end of the novel. "Todo podía ser muy paradójico, pero ante la posibilidad real de cambiar de nombre advertía mi propio temor [...] no por lo que pudiera pasar conmigo, sino por lo que pudiera sucederle a mi recuerdo de M, a él dentro mío" (225). S recognizes that by collapsing M's identity onto himself, he would eliminate the difference between them, incorporating M's subjectivity within his own.

As I have maintained throughout this essay, it is important to consider this "difference" not only through the psychoanalytical lens of "mourning" the "loss" of M without "incorporating" it in order to overcome the traumatic experience, but also as a critique of the cultural politics of postdictatorial memory. In the explanation for wanting to change his name, S describes M as a "dead martyr," while referring to himself as "alive," the one who survived the dictatorship. Here S actually refers to his relationship with M, as well as the relationship of others that "survived" M (his mom R, Sito), as that of Sobreviviente and Muerto (or Mártir) - evoking the same language offered by Agamben to describe the constitution of the remnant. In this way, I contend that the disjunctive relationship between S and M serves as a way to re-conceptualize "testimony," "witness," and "subjectivity" and destabilize ideological appropriations of the "disappeared" in postdictatorial Argentina. S's ultimate resistance to collapse the remnant space constituted by his relationship with M also functions as a refusal to displace the "un-representable" experiences of the "disappeared" within competing political/ideological discourses about the past. Thus, it is the disjunction between S and M, the "non-coincidence" of their experiences as Sobreviviente and Muerto where traces of a postdictatorial subjectivity of the "disappeared" appear as silent effects of impossibility that influence the present by making the "survivors" speak about an incapacity to speak.

Shared Relationships to Impossible Subjectivities – A Posthegemonic Community?

We can not consider S's memory narrative solely as an individual, melancholic narrativization to overcome a past trauma because his memories of M constantly interact with and are informed by his contact with others in both the past and the present: M's Dad, M's Mom, their childhood friend Sito, etc. All of these individuals share the impossibility of not being able to fully explain M's disappearance and the commonality of the effects of his disappearance on their present lives, even though they may perceive these effects differently. They all bear the impossibility of M's subjectivity

in their speech and in their interactions with one another, and it is through this articulation of an inter-subjective relationship to the "impossibility" to fully represent M that Chejfec offers an alternative way to engage the "disappeared" beyond ideological or political symbolization. An excellent example of this is S's description of his first encounter with M's mom, R, after his disappearance. At first, S did not want to talk to R, as he knew that it would immediately conjure the memory of M and the pain that his disappearance caused them, so he turned his head away and avoided her as they crossed paths on the street. S immediately felt bad for having avoided R in this way, so he ran around the block in the opposite direction so that their paths would cross again, and this time they interacted for the first time since M's disappearance, which S describes as the moment that he fully understood that he had "lost M forever." This provokes yet another "silence" in him when faced with an "unspeakable" past:

Otra vez me encontraba sin habla. Pensé que ella, ante quien yo no podía decir nada porque ignoraba todo, en especial aquello que en ese momento ocurría en su interior, al pedir que visitáramos [...] ponía de manifiesto una sabiduría superior, certera, en buena medida porque obviaba el silencio del que yo no podía liberarme [...] era ella que me había rescatado del silencio mientras la abrazaba (38).

This description of their encounter reflects what Brett Levinson refers to as the "shared, common, or liminal region-finitude" (70) of the "unspeakable" that both separates and connects the limits of "self" from "other" and creates the possibility for communication - even if this interaction is ruled by silence. S states that he had no way of knowing the feelings inside of R at the moment of their meeting, but he knows that the absence of M is what connected them, and embracing one another both physically and metaphorically pushes each towards the subjective limits of the other, an act that S maintains rescued him from his silence as a response to M's disappearance. S and R are connected through their shared impossibility to fully know what happened to M and the limits of only being able to reflect upon the effects of his disappearance on their lives in the present. In this sense, both are bound to M as "survivors," and through this relationship they point towards subaltern subjectivity of M that influences their lives through silence.

The relationship between Sito and S offers a similar example of the shared "limit-experience" with the impossible subjectivity of the "disappeared," as it is M's disappearance that joins them years later, "la ausencia de M, claramente omnipresente- tanto que fue, era y sigue siendo la circunstancia

que hizo posible que nos conociéramos-, le otorgaba a aquel encuentro un aire de tristeza, desconfianza e incluso despropósito" (115). While noting that it is their common experience of M's "absence" that unites him with Sito (as with R), the initial effects of this bond result in a mutual distrust with one another. S mentions multiple times that he did not believe a word that Sito was saying, and that Sito probably did not believe him either, and the thought even crosses S's mind that Sito was responsible for M's death. Despite the initial negative tenor of the reencounter, the shared experience of facing M's disappearance allows them to communicate with one another, even if they did not speak about M, or if they did, they were incapable of fully articulating the effects of his disappearance through language:

Tal como sucediera con la madre de M hace años [...] al reconocer con otras palabras que M no estaba [...] también Sito y yo jugábamos un papel ingrato [...] Frente a su desaparición, su ausencia, cualquier comentario, aunque no se refiriera a M, adquiriría un matiz inadecuado, impropio, como si un lastre le impidiera alcanzar una trascendencia real (115).

The shared experience of dealing with the impossibility of M's disappearance, of only being able to articulate their relationship to the effects of this event on their lives, creates a space for a dynamic interaction with the experiences of the dictatorship in the present for S, R, and Sito. This intersubjective interaction with M's silence - "beyond memory and forgetting" - reflects the articulation of a type of postdictatorial discourse along the lines of Gareth Williams' conceptualization of a "negative community," an "outside" to competing memory discourses about dictatorship [9]. By focusing on the impossibility to represent the "disappeared" as speaking subjects and capacity that this "silence" has to influence the lives of those who "survived," Los planetas points towards a certain subaltern subjectivity for the "disappeared" that denies their appropriation as symbolic figures for political or ideological projects in the present. In doing so, I suggest that Chejfec's exposes a critical beyond to (counter)hegemonic categories such as memory/forgetting, truth/falsity, and justice/amnesty that presently serve as the constitutive narratives of the politics of memory in postdictatorial Argentina, a cultural intervention deserving of further analysis.

Notes

- [1] See for example studies by Erica Miller Yozell's "Negotiating the Abyss: The Narration of Mourning in Sergio Chejfec's Los planetas," Isabel Alicia Quintana's "Ciudad y memoria en

Los planetas de Sergio Chejfec," and Noble Novitzki's "Memories in Orbit: Loss in Sergio Chejfec's Los planetas."

- [2] See for example Idelber Avelar's The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning and Alberto Moreiras's Tercer espacio: literatura y duelo en América Latina. For an important collection of essays dealing with these issues, see Pensar en/la postdictadura, edited by Nelly Richard and Alberto Moreiras.
- [3] Previous studies of the novel have widely discussed the use of only the first initials for characters in the novel, S and M, in terms of desubjectification of traumatic memory, refusing to assign a "proper name" to trauma as a way to confront loss, so I will not enter into this discussion in the present essay. As others have noted, S and M can stand for different words, and here I have developed my analysis of the relationship between S and M as reflective of the relationship between Sobreviviente and Muerto, in order to connect with Agamben's conceptualization of the remnant.
- [4] For an excellent recent article on the debates surround subalternity and questions of "silence" and political subjectivity, see Abraham Acosta's "Contingencies of Silence: Subalternity, the EZLN, and the Accounting of Speech in Latin America."
- [5] Both Idelber Avelar (The Untimely Present) and Nelly Richard (The Insubordination of Signs) critique this idea constructing idealized hero/victims of resistance to the dictatorship through counter-hegemonic memory discourses that often utilize the same language as the military regime to describe the past, albeit from the opposite ideological perspective. Both authors call for memory narratives that are articulated in a different language, one that resists both the institutionalized forgetting of this time period as well as idealized counter-memory narratives of "resistance." As Richard puts it, "Critically resolving this conflict means as much avoiding the nostalgia of an anti-dictatorial Symbol, as it does resisting any enterprise of forgetfulness that seeks to reunify history by forcibly appeasing those forces disputing its meaning" (Richard 21).
- [6] While I don't have space to discuss all of the examples of these meta-narrative reflections on "truth" and the impossibility to fully represent experience through language, they are an important part of the novel that augment the focus on impossibility and silence related to the subjectivity of the "disappeared" in Los planetas.
- [7] While I am unable to discuss this at length here, Los planetas is constructed in such a way that there are multiple levels of narration being presented, which add complexity to S's memory narrative. There is the first person narration of S, which is written in normal script and includes both his memories and his recollections of stories told by M and M's dad during their childhood, his own present day reflections on his childhood experiences and the meanings of the stories told by other characters, and a description of his activities in the present. Yet there are also multiple times in the story where the narration is presented from the third person omniscient perspective, always written in italics, which often retells the experiences of S and M that S has just narrated in the first person, offering further details of these memories from a different perspective.

- [8] The use of Agamben's notion of "remnant" to analyze the post-dictatorial subjectivity of the "disappeared" in Argentina is relevant in that it reflects what Huysen calls the "global Holocaust discourse" that is often invoked in the study of the "disappeared" in Argentina (See Huysen 98). Using "global" critical approaches is not intended to displace the "local" traumatic experiences of the "disappeared" in Argentina within theoretical approaches to the study of the Holocaust, but instead reflects transnational connections to articulations of memory discourses related to violence, genocide, and human rights violations. This connection between the Holocaust and the "disappeared" is especially acute in Los planetas, as S and M are both Jewish, and there are multiple references to Yiddish, Orthodox Jews, religious ceremonies, and the Jewish neighborhoods they grew up. Multiple sections of the novel in fact explore the concept of Jewish identity (in its multiple iterations), as Erin Graff Zivin expertly examines in "Writing the Absent Face: 'Jewishness' and the Limits of Representation in Borges, Piglia, and Chejfec," as well as in her book, The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary.
- [9] Following Williams' argument for a posthegemonic articulation of postdictatorial memory, a recent article by Kate Jencks moves in this direction as well, arguing that Los planetas offers the notion of "myopic witnessing" in relation to postdictatorial memory and the "disappeared" to form a community as, "an event of encounter and of being together that exceeds any notion of homogenous commonality, such as those defended beneath the banners of opposing ideologies or different forms of nationalism" (Jencks 220).

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