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**TITLE:** The Spatial Politics of Marta Traba's *Conversación al sur*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper studies the literary strategies that Marta Traba's novel *Conversación al sur* uses to respond to the trope of penetration used during the 1976 Argentine coup: a so-called power vacuum that needed to be filled. This widely used trope by the military combined surgical, biological, and phallic images. The textual body-space maps two images, both of which have clear political implications: first, the medical image of a diseased body that is surgically penetrated, second is the gynecological image of a female body being raped. The novel is narrated as a live, suffering physical body in pain forced open; a private space that is continually penetrated. The resulting spatial politics shows how pain is experienced and represented when language has been destroyed by the experience of trauma. At the same time, through this textual politics the novel engages the medical allegory of biological and surgical penetration already present in official discourse during the *proceso*, contests its (mis)use and creates a possible poetics of renewal.

**KEYWORDS:** Marta Traba; *Conversación al sur*; literature and medicine; military discourse; Argentinean dictatorship; discourse analysis; metaphor; body politics

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo estudia las estrategias literarias en la novela *Conversación al sur* de Marta Traba para responder al tropo de la penetración durante la dictadura reciente: la necesidad de llenar un llamado vacío de poder. En este tropo de uso común por los militares se combinan la imagen quirúrgica, biológica y fálica. El cuerpo textual confecciona dos imágenes, ambas con claras implicaciones políticas: primero, la imagen médica de un cuerpo enfermo que es penetrado quirúrgicamente, segundo, la imagen ginecológica de un cuerpo femenino siendo violado. La novela se narra como un cuerpo vivo, sufriente y dolorido, abierto a la fuerza; es un espacio privado continuamente penetrado. La resultante política del espacio textual demuestra cómo se vive y se representa el dolor cuando el trauma destruye la palabra. Asimismo, la resultante dinámica entabla con la alegoría médica de la penetración biológica y quirúrgica ya presente en el discurso oficial mismo del *proceso*, así refutando su uso y abuso, creando una nueva poética de renovación.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Conversación al sur*; literatura and medicina; discourse nilitar; dictatadura argentina; análisis de discurso; metáfora; cuerpo político

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## The Spatial Politics of Marta Traba's *Conversación al sur*

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During the last dictatorship in Argentina<sup>1</sup> the military *Junta*'s imperative of occupying what it called "un vacío de poder" left after the previous government made the notion of penetration one of the most salient characteristics of the regime's biopolitical discourse. The military, self-professed as the only solution to the nation's purported identity crisis, was the ultimate penetrator—the phallic body-machine, the medical gaze—that would battle the imagined, virtual disease of *subversión* from within the nation's bloody entrails. For the regime, private spaces were the locus of disease, and the spaces in which most of the violence took place in order to eliminate it. As a last resort, they claimed, the military's diagnosis in March of 1976 was to intervene and operate on the pathological body politic. The power vacuum, affirmed General Jorge Rafael Videla over a year after the *proceso*'s inauguration, "o lo llenaban los terroristas o lo llenábamos los militares" ("Habló," 1).

Along with the necessary penetration of the body politic that the *proceso* narrative suggested—such as the *operativos* in private homes or purges of public or private institutions—Argentina's military declared themselves "el órgano supremo de la nación," the model of perfection to which the national body had to aspire.<sup>2</sup> "Cuando la causa de la PATRIA inspire y sostenga el pensamiento y la acción de nuestros gobernantes," "Comunicado 8" of the *proceso* stated, "los pequeños, los cómplices, los politicastos caducos y complacientes [...] quedarán sepultados para siempre" (República, 4). Then, according to this plan, when the purging phase was over, the disease-free body politic would begin to heal itself. This biological and phallic metaphor conflated a medical and masculine

necessity to penetrate a crippled and institutionalized body politic. By doing so, the body politic would be, in official terms, purified.

As a result, civil society during the *proceso* inevitably experienced a profound sense of loss. Post-coup literature in Argentina reacted to the exclusion from the body politic of anonymous and mutilated bodies, and to a new culture of fear:<sup>3</sup> as a parody of the regime's metaphorical penetration and conquest, the aim of these narratives is to use the regime's own logic against itself. The regime became even more open to literary parody as its nationalistic discourse—conflating notions of medical, moral, masculine, and religious superiority—created a sensation of extreme fear, claustrophobia, and paranoia. Recurrent themes in criticism of post-coup Argentine literature are the representation of un-representable horror, a crisis of realism, strategies to elude censorship, and an obsession with history (Feitlowitz, Sarlo, Morello-Frosch, Reati, Avelar, Roffé, Avellaneda, Masiello, Graziano, Colás).

It is within this context that I wish to situate the work of Argentine writer and art critic Marta Traba (1930-1983). Her novel *Conversación al sur* (1981) recreates the sense of anxiety, paranoia, and penetration, as the reader-voyeur witnesses a "taboo" conversation between two women drinking coffee one afternoon, and their kidnapping at the end. Although Traba had left Argentina in the 1950s, this novel shows her commitment to solidarity in Latin America, and to the condemnation of human rights in the Southern Cone.

Much deserved attention has been given to the novel as a project of female solidarity, to the reinscription of the female voice against

the regime's master narrative of power, the reversal of gender hierarchies, and the novel as a space of female resistance (Cobo Borda, Dejbord, Foster, Franco, Girona, Gómez, Kantaris, Moret, Norat, Pietrak, Poniatowska, Schlau, Tomlinson, Zárate Fernández). In an effort to contribute to the rich scholarship on this novel, I would also like to highlight the political implications behind the novel's apparent simplicity, and the way in which *Conversación* engages the medical allegory of biological and surgical penetration already present in official discourse during the *proceso*, contests its (mis) use and creates a possible poetics of renewal. The novel represents the dictatorship as having created not only a clinical sense of reality, but also a spatial politics that reproduces a sense of penetration and violation of privacy. Building on the work of Jean Franco on the literary text as social practice—on the live text as a space from which to reflect on social and identity politics—this type of representation was engendered by the regime's practices of “operating” on private spaces that it defined as sites of disease, and therefore sites of maximum penetration: the body and the home. The novel reproduces traditional precepts of medical procedures that functioned as the *modus operandi* of the regime in order to critique it. In this way Traba's novel creates a space for resistance that emanates from the purported spaces of disease. The political objective of this resistance is to parody the military's use of medicalization as an allegory of Argentina's alleged critical condition and justification of its technologies of repression, punishment and social control.

As much as Traba uses women in non-traditional roles (revolutionary leader, single mother, widow, divorcee, actress) to resist authority, the political force of this novel goes further in constructing a space of resistance. This novel is a national allegory of invaded space, a text that is forcibly opened at both ends. It recreates an institutional sense of reality and reacts to it by creating graphic images of surgical and phallic penetration. It produces a physiological space invaded by outside forces with

the pretense of healing it. The title suggests and creates its private space—the conversation—and its beginning and end construct the central binary between the private and the public. The novel's opening lines—“se estremeció al oír el timbre”—suggest this image. Ultimately *Conversación* suggests the characters' suspicion that the regime's diagnosis of the national situation and the medical treatment it dictated would not provide the “cure” that the Junta proposed.

One of Latin America's most talented art critics and writers, Marta Traba was born in Buenos Aires in 1930 to Spanish immigrants, and died in an airplane accident in Madrid with her second husband Angel Rama in 1983. Since her first trip to Chile with a summer grant at the age of 16, she lived and traveled throughout Latin America and Europe. She did her most exhaustive and important work in art criticism in Colombia, where she arrived in 1954 after marrying Colombian journalist Alberto Zalamea, and from where she was expelled in 1967 for protesting the military's violent invasion of the National University where she gave lectures on Art History and Criticism. She published eight novels, 23 volumes of art criticism, and over 1,200 articles and reviews in newspapers and magazines in more than 15 countries.

Constantly traveling, she lived in Uruguay from 1969 to 1972 after marrying Rama, later returning to Colombia, and again later living in Venezuela, where her negative views of Venezuelan art again kept her in controversy. In the 1970s her international reputation began to grow, after teaching in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and in prestigious universities throughout the United States. In her novel *Homérica latina* (1979) she exposes the deplorable political situation in Latin America, focusing on the abuse of power and the misery of survivors of repressive political systems. The novel has been termed “literature of the oppressed” (Poniatowska), underscoring her solidarity with victims of political repression.

In *Conversación* she addresses the theme of political repression within a generational framework, and the overall suggestion of a cyclical pattern of inescapable injustices. In this novel, Traba uses her country of birth—Argentina—and two different women from different Southern Cone countries as a point of departure for discussing repression through torture in Latin America. Expressing a deep solidarity with the oppressed, she detested the frivolous and trivial bourgeoisie to which she belonged. This is readily apparent in *Conversación*, where she caricaturizes the Argentine middle class as nationalistic tourists on a never-ending bus ride.

Most analyses of *Conversación* focus on the home as an allegory of confinement, its polyphony, and different local discourses and ideological positions where the relationship between the individual and the dictatorship is inscribed. Its allegory of confinement narrates an enclosed space to convey the sense of claustrophobia, paranoia, and anxiety caused by state terrorism. This confined space has a triple function in the novel: it addresses the need to create a sense of order and protection from an outside threat; it recreates a sensation of confinement as a result of repression; and it narrates a physiological space, a body-text that rescues and insists on its absent(ed) physical presence, in reaction to the systematic military practice of clandestine “disappearances.” The feeling of anxiety and confinement is intensified when the public penetrates into the private, “like whiplash or a nail being driven in” (Dorfman 173). Also classified as “literature of the oppressed,” “novela posgolpe,” and “literature of the dictatorship,” the text’s social commentary rests precisely within its ability to recreate a penetrated physiological space.

In the novel, two women, Irene and Dolores, converse in a private home in Montevideo about their memories of mutual friends, reminiscences of past events, and their experience of life under repression in the Southern Cone in the 1970s. The private thoughts and memories of each of the women in the novel’s two chapters reveal the contrasts that define

the novel’s themes: two generations, two social classes, two types of involvement in the events and consequences of the *proceso*. Dolores (her name clearly suggests an allegorical reading) is a young revolutionary poet from Uruguay who has been imprisoned, tortured, and suffered a miscarriage in the process. She has survived her husband, Enrique, who was executed in a clandestine detention center and symbolically “buried” in a presumably empty casket. Irene is an Argentine actress who has isolated herself in her vacation home in Montevideo to await news of her activist son and pregnant daughter-in-law in Chile.

What makes this novel so valuable is the polyphony that allows it to encompass two social sectors and their visions, and three different countries that have suffered similar turns of events throughout the 1970s and 80s. Through the dialogue between the two versions of repression, Traba is able to combine testimonial-like crudeness and rage with carefully crafted literary structure. The juxtaposition sheds light on the two worlds, while at the same time acting as a show of solidarity. Although full of misunderstandings at first, the conversation is therapeutic and necessary for the two women. Dolores hesitates to leave Irene at the end of the day, wondering what Irene would do after she closes the door:

Algo de ella se resistía en irse. Quería saber qué pasaría al cerrarse la puerta suavemente. ¿Se desmoronaría en el piso? ¿Gemiría con la frente pegada a las baldosas? ¿Hundiría la cabeza entre las manos esperando que sonara el teléfono? (97)

And Dolores recognizes the value of the conversation for her as well: she had not thought of her dead husband and baby in a year, and she spoke of them to Irene clearly and precisely, articulating her pain in a way she thought she was unable to do. This, she realizes, would have been impossible without Irene: “Sólo la intensidad de su compañía podía obrar tal milagro” (96). The literary composition without propagandistic urgency

of a testimonial narrative allows the novel to reach larger audiences, without losing its commitment. The urgent call for solidarity and dialogue noted by critics in this novel extends beyond national borders.

In *Conversación*, Traba uses the encounter between the two women to provide an indictment against repression in the Southern Cone. Exchanges between the middle class (Irene, the older generation) and the militant left (Dolores, the younger generation) examine issues of exile, silence, taboo, family, and complicity under a repressive regime. Irene has been interpreted by many as being modeled after Traba herself: it is her dialogue with the younger generation, her exiled identity, her resistance to patriarchal norms of conduct, behavior and ideas.

There is in *Conversación* an urgency to make the reader identify with a sense of confinement: one is immediately drawn into the narrative, and impressed by Irene's reclusion and obsessive sense of order, as well as Dolores' scandalous frankness (from Irene's point of view) and urgency to shake Irene out of her isolation. The reader thus attempts to make sense out of the events that both characters have witnessed, on different levels, and is then submitted to the same sense of horror of being "discovered" for discussing taboo subjects; of being penetrated, indiscriminately, at any time. The suspense mounts in the second chapter when the doorbell rings unexpectedly: no one appears in the peep hole, hurried steps are heard, an unknown man across the street is seen looking up at the apartment, and later gets into a car that speeds away.<sup>4</sup> Traba creates a communicative structure that allows the reader to experience the women's alienation and paranoia, and, as Ariel Dorfman has pointed out in the case of Hernán Valdéz's *Tejas Verdes*, "to believe in its verisimilitude, carrying out a process of simultaneous identification and distancing" (168).

Different sites of expression—the body, the home, the plaza—are reproduced in *Conversación* as pivotal and political sites. Dolores' body is a political intersection of

public and private. The marks of torture on her body, for example, although outwardly invisible, inscribe her into the master narrative as its defeated enemy: she is an emblem of the regime's excessive power, which forces her to embody both the public (the regime's strength), and the private (the corporeal body). As a projection of the regime's excessive power, Dolores has been, to use *proceso* tropes, institutionalized (imprisoned), treated (tortured and aborted) and released into civilian life, only to announce her defeat.

As a novel that explores both the agency of those imprinted (the tortured) by the regime and that of the force that imprints (the torturer), *Conversación* connects the body in pain to the textual body. It creates, as in a palimpsest, an external expression of the internally felt presence of pain. Dolores' wordlessness, Irene's intense privacy and isolation in her home and in her own body, and the constant fear of penetration by an outside weapon (real, metaphorical, or imagined) combine to shape the story as a suffering body itself. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry describes the mental habit of recognizing pain in the weapon. The weapon (in the case of Argentina's torturers, the electric *picana*, for example) or imagined (another outside penetrating force into a private space) and the wound (corporeal or otherwise), may be used associatively to express pain. Pain is recognized both in the *weapon* and in the *act* of penetration. As the novel incorporates other real events before and during the time of the *proceso*, it allows the reader to empathize with a kind of pain that he or she may not have experienced directly. Thus the novel creates a language of agency for the felt-pain of the passive, penetrated body, and enters into political discourse of resistance. If one can speak "on behalf of" those who were silenced by torture, then this novel aims to give pain a public place, by objectifying it in language, and making it visible to others.

Irene (initially the safe space of the home) admits Dolores' political reality into her privacy, knowing that she has been imprisoned

and beaten, thereby creating a political alliance. Irene's need to check for outward inscriptions on Dolores' body makes this admission, as well as their different ideological positions (liberal middle class versus militant left), more pronounced: "Pensó que las manos que mantenía en los bolsillos del pantalón deberían estar crispadas. ¿Y si le hubieran quemado las manos o arrancado las uñas? Lo hacían habitualmente" (14). Like the naïve Alicia Ibáñez in Luis Puenzo's 1984 film *La historia oficial*, Irene's seemingly innocent and curious observations about Dolores' physical appearance show her inability to fully realize Dolores' political reality. In *La historia oficial*, Alicia asks her colleague in the car one afternoon, "¿Y si fuera cierto [...] lo que dicen estos diarios?... esos bebés, esas familias [...]" And he replies, "¿Y a usted qué le importa lo que fuera cierto?" His reply prompts Alicia to search further for the truth about events of the *proceso*, and the consequences for her appropriated family and the biological family that she (unknowingly) and her husband Roberto (knowingly) destroyed. Similarly, in *Conversación* Irene watches Dolores come and go to the bathroom throughout the conversation, thinking "algo sórdido le pasa," but finds no physical signs of torture. As Dolores grimaces from pain ("Paró de hablar y su ancha boca hizo una mueca dolorosa"), Irene wonders: "¿Algo le ocurre, o simula?" During one of Dolores' trips to the bathroom, Irene continues to imagine:

¿Y si le rompieron la vejiga? Se comentó que el bazo se había salvado de milagro, porque prefirieron saltar sobre la barriga protuberante. Vuelve, parece tranquila, ¿tendrá un tubo y una bolsita de goma externa para orinar? No parecería, su blue-jeans se ve liso y modela su pelvis esquelética. (17)

As the invaded spaces—body and home—are gradually mapped out in the novel, Traba begins to explore the crisis of language created by the regime's "reorganization" of reality: finding a language that can adequately describe hor-

ror that is un-narratable (Reati). Both Dolores' frequent interruptions in the conversation to go to the bathroom, and the fact that she doesn't verbally speak her pain (she only grimaces and seldom mentions her physical discomforts to Irene: "es otro de los regalos que mi hicieron los milicos") signal what Francine Masiello has described as a break in linear (official) discourse, a crisis of literary realism ("Cuerpo," 159). How can one narrate the horror and violence of state terrorism without reproducing the same representational mechanisms of its discourse? Dolores' invaded body speaks non-verbally: by narrating somatically, it shows that the terror has been internalized. Mechanisms of silence, therefore—somatization versus verbalization—are a possibility for resistance. She displays her abjection in the novel by making her imprinted body speakable, and insisting on its presence. For torture inflicts pain that is language destroying: "word, self, and voice are lost through the intense pain of torture" (Cobo Borda 121-30).

But it is Irene's seductive maturity and "scandalous" optimism as Dolores' interlocutor that convinces Dolores to articulate her fears, and to recover her voice as well as her past. After the conversation with Irene she is able to attach words to her painful experience, both for herself and to explain to Irene. As Masiello has shown, the woman's body (Dolores), a site of abuse during the *proceso*, is a pre-text, a metaphor, which opens up a new space for dialogue and reconstruction. In this sense Dolores speaks for thousands of anonymous, voiceless, disappeared bodies during the *proceso*. The body (and also the home, as I explore below) acquires new meaning and a new, supplementary discourse, unforeseen by the regime (Foster). It is from inside the seen, passive object where one can begin to explore what sorts of agency are possible by bodies imprinted by the regime.

With a political alliance established between Irene and Dolores, the home functions as a subversive space. As I explained above, for the regime the home was the center of

disease, and social violence during the *proceso* was fought in interior spaces. The notion of penetration in *Conversación* reminds the reader of the regime's gendered construction of power, whether by nocturnal invasions of homes, rape, sexual torture, or university purges. When Irene is startled by the doorbell and terrified to open her house, the door itself symbolizes an orifice through which the medical gaze seeks entry. During one afternoon, the women are able to discuss taboo subjects (abortion, resistance, militant activity, death, hints of lesbian attraction), elude censorship, and protect themselves from the authorities—although the authorities eventually come for them. Once again, the space they had created is violated:

Así quedaron agazapadas en la oscuridad, animales aterrizados, escuchando cómo saltaban la cerradura de la puerta y cómo golpeaban sonoramente las botas sobre las baldosas de la sala. (88)

With this ending, the overall message is clear: victims of the *proceso* covered all social classes and subjects, and all bodies and spaces were porous and penetrable. And despite their collective desire for change, the system still prevails.

The metaphorical weapon appears in a pivotal scene of penetration and political alliance between Irene's upper-class childhood friend Elena and her militant daughter Victoria, against Elena's husband Abel and the authorities who come to take Victoria for "questioning." Victoria, the couple's only daughter (they also have a son), had moved out of the family home and into a bohemian studio near the port downtown. Avoiding her father because of the shame he has accused her of bringing upon the family, Victoria returns home to give a "suspicious" package to her mother to hide, while her father is away. As she hands Elena the package, Abel enters (first penetration, by Abel as the weapon), realizes what's going on, and reproaches

his daughter in outrage for having brought shame upon the family's (his) name due to her "subversive" activities: "Fue una increíble mala suerte que Abel apareciera justo en ese momento en la puerta de atrás," Elena explained to Irene,

Nos quedamos los tres paralizados. Victoria enrojeció, yo apreté el paquete que me había dado contra el pecho, y él empezó a mirarnos a una y otra, despacio, midiendo la situación. Pero enseguida comenzó a hablar evidentemente alterado, aunque hacía un esfuerzo por controlarse. Era evidente que estaba fuera de sí. (79)<sup>5</sup>

While Abel is speaking, a group of armed men (second penetration, by the military as the weapon) force open the front door and demand both the package and Victoria (the "disease"). In this scene Abel is the only one who speaks (the regime), while Victoria (the public) remains silent. Furthermore, Victoria and Elena join forces against Abel, creating an image of female solidarity.

Abel's name also suggests an allegorical reading and is another example of Traba's irony in the text: the irony of representing the "good," ideal son of the Father—the state. In the biblical sense, Abel projects the image of the ideal son of Adam, a projection that prompts his murder by his brother Cain, because this projection of goodness excludes Cain from the ideal family. Cain kills Abel because he feels excluded from the family, by Abel's constant acts of goodness and aims to please his father. Traba uses her Abel figure in this sense to ironize his position as the father of the ideal Argentine family (as he and Elena were first perceived by Irene: "argentinos hasta la médula"), as he destroys his biological family. He excludes his biological family from the national family imagined by the regime, in his attempt to approximate the projected "ideal family" of the state, by denouncing his daughter Victoria (the sacrificial lamb) and watching his wife leave him without a word.<sup>6</sup> And Traba's Abel is, coincidentally, a doctor.

Elena blames her husband for Victoria's kidnapping, as she explains to Irene:

Si Abel no hubiese aparecido, yo hubiera tenido tiempo de llevar el paquete adentro y esconderlo [...] porque llegaron en ese momento. Fue algo espantoso. Cuando golpearon de ese modo la puerta, no pude hacer el menor movimiento. No sé qué fue lo que me clavó en el piso. Creo que pensé que si me iba para adentro no podría defender a Victoria. ¡Qué ilusiones! Tampoco Victoria no hizo nada. Ahora estaba pálida como una muerta, y miraba hacia la puerta. Abel se acercó para abrirla. (80)

It is Abel (the weapon) who willingly opens the door (the orifice), in contrast with Elena's refusal to open it, and also in contrast with Irene's hesitancy to open the door at the beginning of the novel. It is Abel who willingly hands over his daughter to the authorities—"mi esposa les dará el paquete, que es de mi hija"—therefore guaranteeing his own daughter's execution (Foster 241). And in the hallway after the armed kidnappers leave with Victoria, Elena sees her son, standing silent and motionless: "Y más lejos, en el corredor que daba a los dormitorios, se había asomado el muchacho, sin decir una palabra, ¿te das cuenta? Bien lejos, sin decir una palabra" (Traba 81).

The purported subversive in this scene (Victoria) was the incarnation of non-cohesion and nonparticipation in the national project during the *proceso*. They were the errant children who threatened to destroy the father (the military) and claim the Patria (the mother) for themselves. They were configured as something deadly inside the social body rather than as the external enemy of traditional warfare. As Diana Taylor has described in *Disappearing Acts*, "they were the sons of bitches and locas [...] who had to be eliminated from the social body" (265). In *Conversación*, Dolores explains to Irene how the subversive was created as a category by the military, and was upheld in the family:

Esto ha pasado porque la mayoría de la gente no cree que las víctimas sean personas parecidas a ellos—murmuró Dolores—no creen que la muchachita sea igual a una de sus hijas. Ni se las pasa por la cabeza la comparación. Y desde el momento en que ya la ves como algo distinto, como una especie de alimaña venenosa, hay que aplastarla sin asco. Este es el mejor trabajo que han hecho las bestias encaramadas en el poder. (167-68)

Caught in the moral panic of the *proceso*, "subversion" was to be eliminated at all costs by all Argentines in order to secure their national and personal identity, and to secure their own personal safety. Because, as Dolores continues to explain to Irene, subversives were created as a category not even belonging to the human race:

La astucia de las bestias es haber convencido a la mayoría de la gente que, además de la condición humana, hay otra, distinta y no humana, que los amenaza como esos monstruos de las películas de ficción. O ellos o nosotros. (167-68)

Dolores concludes that the paranoid behavior of many was a defense mechanism: "Puestas así las cosas, la gente actúa en legítima defensa." The regime negated the humanness of its ideological adversary (*el subversivo*), in order to legitimate its enemy's extermination. And the exterminated, diseased body was welcome relief in sparing one's own body and those of their children from becoming infected. Upon Dolores' return to Irene's home she is able to explain things more clearly to Irene, now that she has been able to express her pain, anger, and frustration. Irene begins to understand what Dolores tells her, and makes connections between what Dolores tells her and what Irene has seen at the Plaza de Mayo, where she had gone with Elena and other mothers to protest the disappearances of their relatives: "Legítima defensa contra una niñita de tres años que lleva a la espalda un cartel

que dice '¿qué han hecho con mis padres y mis abuelos?' Yo lo vi en la Plaza de Mayo." Dolores answers: "No es una niñita, es la hija y la nieta de los monstruos; se la liquidaría sin remordimientos" (168).

The images of motherhood in *Conversación* are crucial: they evoke all disappeared persons and mothers of victims who continue to insist on their children's physical presence. More specifically, they also evoke the Argentine organization formed by the mothers of disappeared persons: the organization *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. The *Madres'* notion of motherhood, it is well known, became more political than biological since its creation in the 1970s, as the mothers imagined themselves as the mothers of *all* the disappeared, and not just their own children. As they began to lose hope of finding their own children alive, they still felt a responsibility to the disappeared.<sup>7</sup> This is central in *Conversación's* exploration of women's response to social control, its reclaiming of the discursive space of the "sick," and its portrayal of the alternate political forces and surrogate families created as a result of state repression. Traba shows how mothers have decidedly altered the politics of the home: they affirmed as public knowledge that which was said at home.

As most scholars agree, the *Madres'* movement is an example of one of the most visible political discourses of resistance to terror in recent Latin American history. Many of the *Madres* had become estranged from their nonpolitical family members who were unprepared to accept their changing role. Outside of their biological families they continued to lay out a nurturing role for other children, caring for them as they would their own children. An example of this alternate mothering is the relationship between Irene and Dolores: the more Dolores tells Irene about her view of the world and her experiences, the more Irene wants to help, guide, nurture, and protect her. In the end Irene gives the ultimate sacrifice for her adoptive daughter: her own life. By accepting Dolo-

res' political reality into her home, Irene too becomes marked and targeted by the regime, until eventually they are discovered by the authorities and kidnapped. Elena Poniatowska has argued that the women in this novel were aware that in the end the authorities would discover and come for them (893)—did Irene have this in mind when she invited Dolores into her home? Did she intentionally not only protect Dolores, but willingly give her life for her as well? The constant reminder of the shame brought upon Dolores' parents because of her "subversive" activities, and their consequent miserable living conditions, have driven Dolores from her own home and to seek solace with Irene.

Some scholars have argued that in Argentina mothers like Elena turned private pain, rage and terror into a collective project of resistance, while fathers like Abel disappeared and turned inward, often isolating themselves from collective projects, and often going into major narcissistic depressive states and developing high morbidity and death rates (Suárez-Orozco 497). This image is conjured up in the episode in which Abel turns over his daughter to her executioners, while his son watches motionless as Victoria is taken away. Even though she is Abel's daughter, she is turned over to the authorities to be "cleansed," in official terms, and if necessary, eliminated. As Elena later appeals to the authorities to help her search for her daughter and the authorities not only refuse to help, but deny that she even existed, Irene begins to understand, through Elena, the concept of physical and emotional pain:

Entendí que el golpe mortal en la cerviz, como a las vacas en el matadero, no se lo habían dado cuando se la llevaron a empujones, sino después, cuando nadie, en ninguna parte, en ninguna oficina, declaró haberla visto nunca, no entró en la antesala de ninguna comisaría, no caminó por ningún corredor, no la tuvieron horas parada delante de nadie, no la trasladaron de un sitio a otro, no la metieron

en un carro sin chapa, no la ingresaron a ninguna celda, no figuraba en lista alguna. ¿Quién era esa muchacha? Algunos, de plano, decía Elena, se negaban a mirar la fotografía. Tipos torvos movían la cabeza de un lado a otro, se la rascaban, chasqueaban la lengua entre los dientes, o, en el peor de los casos, sonreían mirando al vacío. A lo mejor nunca había existido [...]. (76)

After the spaces of the home are hollowed out, the women construct alternate families: Elena, Irene, Dolores, and Luisa, another friend who accompanies Dolores to the cemetery to symbolically “bury” her husband’s sealed (and presumably empty) casket. When Dolores leaves Irene after the first visit she returns to her parents’ home to find that her father has died suddenly of a heart attack. Shocked and confused at another death in her family (after the execution of her husband, and the abortion of her baby), she returns to Irene’s home on the city bus. This late night outing, alone and grieving for all three family members, has been interpreted as Dolores’ risking her own life to see Irene one last time (Poniatowska 893).

The bus trip is Dolores’ final moment of truth: confessing her feelings to Irene and choosing her own death. The fact that Dolores goes back to Irene’s house a second time is also symbolic of the alternate family that the women have created. New social relationships were formed to fill the vacuum as “a force unimagined by dictatorships: they were ungovernable and outside the dictatorial dream of a controlling discourse. These relationships were oppositional and they were resistant” (Foster 242). As Abel excludes his biological family from the national family, those excluded (Elena, Victoria, Dolores) found alternate networks outside of government control. In *Conversación* the vacuum of the traditional home creates new alternate concepts of home and family. The *Madres* are an example of a new kind of empowered citizenry who spoke collectively of the state’s destruction of that traditional family.

Participating in a *Madres* rally at the Plaza de Mayo is a turning point for Irene in the novel. When she is there, what profoundly troubles her is the massive avoidance of this public and central space by people passing by. Horrified and confused, she sees that the group of mourning mothers is a quarantine of “infected” and supposedly dangerous women who are ignored and avoided by everyday traffic and police. She remembers the horrifying scene, in which the entire city turned its back on this overwhelming display of pain, and recounts it to Dolores:

Fue cuando advirtió la ausencia de los granaderos que la operación del enemigo se le hizo transparente: se borraba del mapa la Plaza de Mayo durante las dos o tres horas de las habituales manifestaciones de los jueves. (87)

The Thursday plaza is framed as a public mental institution, as a temporary quarantine from the rest of the “healthy” city. The mothers are the “infected” group that must be closed off in order to protect the rest of the population from “going crazy,” like Irene: “me estoy volviendo loca yo también,” pensó, y volvió a recorrer todo con parsimonia” (85). The public’s denial of this spectacle is also reinforced by the authorities of a “modern” and “civilized” nation:

No podían ametrallar a las locas ni tampoco meterlas presas a todas. Hubiera sido impolítico, mientras afirmaban con todos los medios a su alcance que la ‘Argentina corazón’ era un verdadero paraíso. El sistema era ignorarlas; ignorar la existencia de la plaza y las locas que pateaban. ¿A ese grado de refinamiento habían llegado? Y por qué no, si al mismo nivel estaban en cuanto a torturas y desapariciones. Un país desarrollado hace bien las cosas. (87)

This is Irene’s awakening, one that becomes much clearer to her during her conversation with Dolores. As Irene enters the site (the quarantine) of the Plaza as a spectator, she becomes

contaminated by the *Madres*' outward display of pain and nonconformity. From the discreet, contained, and cautious woman she appeared to be at the beginning of the novel, she now begins to question her own sanity, as she observes the overwhelming performance of the women who insist on their children's physical presence, through photographs and their own memory:

¡Y qué infierno, Dolores! Un infierno nuevo, inventado, que hasta ahora no se le ocurrió a nadie. Sin decir nada, sin gritar, las mujeres levantaban las fotos lo más alto posible. ¿Para qué, si nadie las veía? [...]. Empecé a sentirme mal sin hacer nada ni tener nada que mostrar. Levanté la lista con ambas manos y me quedé esperando. ¿Eso sería todo? ¿Llorar en silencio con otro que llora en silencio? (88-89)

As a turning point for Irene, it is here that Traba most explicitly points a finger at the selective attention of many Argentines during the *proceso*.

But while Traba does point a finger at middle class complicity during the *proceso* through Irene, Irene is also the novel's possibility of renewal. Like Puenzo's Alicia Ibáñez, she signifies the way in which individuals' lives are constructed and shaped according to certain technologies of social administration. As a product of Argentina's middle class, Irene is unprepared to understand the realities that Dolores explains to her, until she joins forces (alternate communities) with the other women in the novel: Dolores and Elena. In an episode toward the end of the novel Irene confronts this fact, as she puts a blanket over Dolores who has fallen asleep in her living room after returning late at night on the bus:

Tuvo un miedo irracional de verse obligada a vivir en ese mundo informe donde cada uno se agarraba inútilmente a bordes de arena que se desplomaban. No era justo, no era justo, nadie la había preparado para esto. (169)

Like Alicia in *La historia oficial*, Irene begins to see what is happening around her, as different people unveil different facts to her that she had refused to see before: "¿Dramatizaba, como todos?" Irene wonders as Dolores gives her uncensored accounts of political torture. In *La historia oficial*, Alicia begins to discover the truth about events of the *proceso* through her students of Argentine history, and through Benítez, the avowedly "dangerous" literature teacher who "voluntarily resigned" from his last teaching position after his apartment was raided and his papers shredded ("Entendí el mensaje. Yo solito" he says of the resignation). In one particular scene Benítez signals a collective consciousness that helps Alicia to make sense out of events happening around her. She drops him off near the Plaza de Mayo during a well-attended Thursday rally, after a long conversation with him in her car after school. The camera spans the mothers and families of disappeared victims and their photographs, shouting: "se va a acabar / esa costumbre de matar." Over the mothers' chanting Benítez tells her as he closes the car door:

Siempre es más fácil creer que no es posible, ¿no? Sobre todo porque para que sea posible, se necesitaría mucha complicidad... mucha gente que no lo pueda creer, aunque lo tenga delante, ¿no?

In *Conversación*, Dolores also makes this complicity explicit to Irene as they discuss what happens to "la mayoría," the spectators of the *proceso* described by Benítez:

¿Qué pasa con los que no intervienen, que, además, son la inmensa mayoría? Entiendo las razones políticas; espíritu conservador, fascismo latente de la clase media, lavado de cerebro bien orquestrado, la sartén por el mango, lo que quieras. Lo que yo sigo tratando desesperadamente de averiguar [sic] es en qué momento un pueblo consagrado a la sociedad protectora de animales considera perfectamente bien, ni siquiera inevitable que un tipo... Iba a

decir 'le meta un palo por la vagina a una muchachita hasta que le rompa todos los órganos,' porque esa historia real la torturaba, pero se calló y se agarró la cabeza. (167)

Whereas Dolores' inability for amazement at events such as disappearances and torture is part of her activist training, Irene's utter shock at Dolores' numbness distances her from the realness of the struggle. What for Irene is unreal, unimaginable and parenthetical to "normal" existence, for Dolores is real and immediate. Traba's ability to show the inner struggles of her characters allows her to show the vulnerability of even the most compromised militants.

*Conversación* offers insights into what or whom the regime defined as "insane" and whom they defined as "healthy," in episodes depicting the military's reliance on performance on national and local levels, such as the display of photographs of the "subversives" on television. Dolores explains to Irene that some of the pictures of delinquent-looking Argentines were actually "captured" just in case: "¿Sabés que noche tras noche se interrumpen los programas de televisión para transmitir el parte militar y mostrar las fotos de los enemigos del pueblo caídos o buscados?" She tells Irene, who had not been watching television for some time:

De frente y de perfil y con un número debajo, no hay quien parezca ni siquiera humano. Todos delincuentes peligrosos, ya sea con la cabeza rapada o los pelos largos, la mirada fija, las bocas apretadas... Y a pesar de ese desfile patibulario se te hace imposible creer que sean tantos los enemigos del pueblo y que tengan quince años, diecisiete años y anden por ahí empuñando ametalladoras como lobos; y de repente te muestran unos tipos con cara de pánico que son plomeros, odontólogos, amas de casa, cualquier cosa que va, todo lo que apareció en la libreta de direcciones de un preso. La locura. (55)

Framed as delinquents, the figures look inhuman. Framed as innocent people, they look scared. The "infiltrado" during the *proceso* was one of the most common official tropes used by the regime to identify and describe the regime's "enemy." The "infiltrado" could have been anyone: a latent presence among the public, whom the regime (and the "healthy" public) had to watch extremely closely for signs of suspicious behavior or activities. "Infiltration" could occur through the spread of "subversive" ideas, the association with a particular group or belief, or association with a person affiliated with a particular group or belief. Newspapers reported daily on the "war against subversion"—how it was going, who was "winning," how many "subversives" died in staged confrontations with police forces.

In *Conversación*, Dolores describes the television performance of the photographs, "la locura," by reassigning the pathological characteristic of "insanity" back to the regime's project. The word "locura" in this text is used in three ways: it is a concept that implies chaos (television images of innocent people framed as criminals); lack of containment (Irene screaming at the Plaza as a "loca enérgica"); and reappropriation (the casual references to the *Madres* as "las locas"). The characters use modes of expression available to them, in order to contest their (mis)use.<sup>8</sup>

The literary effectiveness of *Conversación* lies in the fact that, as the reader follows the victims in all their vulnerability and efforts to retain their privacy, the reader suffers *with* them, and feels that his or her temporary space, too, is invaded. The sense of enclosure escalates up to the novel's end. The open ending of the novel, characteristic of post-coup literature, more than announcing that the regime ultimately prevails over all, as T. Foster has suggested, signals Irene's limits in the face of extreme fear. As the armed men move closer to the cornered women, Irene searches for some force within the walls of her own body to resist:

La mujer pensó que se salvaría de ese pánico enloquecido si lograba percibir

algo dentro de su cuerpo, pero por más atención que puso en oírse, no escuchó ni el más leve rumor de vísceras, ni un latido. En ese silencio absoluto, el otro ruido, nítido, despiadado, fue creciendo y, finalmente, las cercó. (170)

The silence that Irene hears within her own body has a dual purpose in Traba's novel. On one hand, it shows the limits of Irene's resistance: in this extreme situation, she is unprepared to resist. On the other hand, Irene's unpreparedness, or "inconciencia" as she had revealed to Dolores earlier, is the silence within herself, which surprises her. Ultimately, Traba suggests, it is this absolute silence that will allow the "other noise," "nítido, despiadado," of the regime, to overcome and prevail.

In conclusion, the medicalization of the body politic during the *proceso*, as a cultural expression of that time, is explored in *Conversación* in two ways. First it uses the regime's notion of a medicalized forced entry to examine issues of repression, state terror, disappearance, family, solidarity, mothering, complicity, memory, and resistance. Second, it describes the regime's creation of categories of normalcy and alterity. On one hand, the forced entry at both ends of the text is an example of what Idelber Avelar has described as "reactivating the hope of providing an entrance into a traumatic experience that has seemingly been condemned to silence and oblivion" (*Untimely*, 10). On the other hand, the forced entry creates an image of a body-text, a physiological space that has been penetrated and violated by an outside force. The imperative of what the regime described as "healthy"—to penetrate, to "cleanse," and to "cure" private spaces—is inverted in this novel and posited as "unhealthy." The examples of penetration in this novel have a triple function: (1) to reproduce the military's fusion of public and private; (2) to create a physiological space, as a way to rescue the physical body from silence, and to parody the regime's own paradoxical practices of healing; and (3) to lay the groundwork for an alternate family/community formed by the penetrated bodies of the *proceso*.

The space of the home and the conversation (the "subversive," "sick" site, the physiological space) disidentifies with the repressive system and its talkative gaze (medical discourse) that have classified it as "sick." And in the case of Traba's "sick" and "deviant" characters, eliminated them, by penetrating into their site and "disappearing" them in the end. This momentary disidentification with power allows the novel to defamiliarize, displace and disperse the regime's logic and the "reorganized" reality that it attempted to impose. Together it produces an effective counternarrative, which is inscribed within the opposition to the "per-version" (Dorfman 145) of official history in the Southern Cone. It provides a temporary sense of safety. The actions and discourse of the characters go beyond the terrain of existing (available, permissible) practices, and form alternate families and possibilities. The ending is symbolic in that the system does ultimately prevail, but that change is yet to come. *Conversación* as a political project clears an ideological space: a space for action, experimentation, chance, freedom, and mobility.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>1976-1983, referred to in Argentina as "la guerra sucia" or "el proceso", short for "El Proceso de Reorganización Nacional". Hereafter I will refer to this period as the *proceso*.

<sup>2</sup>Diana Taylor has pointed out that this penetration trope introduced in the original *proceso* decree implied that the Junta believed that they had not only the right, but the obligation to penetrate the objectified body.

<sup>3</sup>For an in-depth analysis of this aspect of Southern Cone Studies, see Novaro and Palermo (2003), Vezzetti (2002, 2009), Crenzel (2008), Feitlowitz (1998), and Corradi et al. (1992).

<sup>4</sup>This scene of persecution and constant paranoia of being followed occurs many times in *proceso* literature and film: in Rafael Fillippelli's film *Hay unos tipos abajo* (1985) and in Rodolfo Rabanal's novel *El apartado* (1975), for example, the protagonist is repeatedly followed and beaten for random reasons.

<sup>5</sup>Victoria once said to Dolores that she felt sorry for her father, because unlike her mother he was unable to accept modifications in his view of a world that was changing: "Si deja de funcionar lo que él considera el orden establecido, es el fin del mundo, del colapso. Y hará todo lo que pueda para que las reglas de ese orden se establezcan" (Traba, *Conversación*, 120). Abel imagines that he is serving a higher Good (the nation) by denouncing his daughter to the authorities.

<sup>6</sup>In *Luna caliente*, Mempo Giardinelli ironizes the absurdly paradoxical "long term" will to "Goodness" that the *proceso* proposed. One of his characters, Teniente Coronel Alcides Carlos Gamboa Boschetti, mimics the military's attempt to shape Argentine citizens into their idea of "Goodness" through official discourse: "Nuestro objetivo es exterminar el terrorismo, para instaurar una nueva sociedad," Boschetti barks at a detainee during a police interrogation,

Necesitamos construir una sociedad con mucho orden. Pero se trata de un orden en el que no podemos permitir asesinatos, y menos por parte de gente que puede ser amiga. ¿Me entiende? Y además, un asesinato es una falta de respeto, es un atentado a la vida. Y la vida y la propiedad tienen que ser tan sagradas como Dios mismo. (77)

<sup>7</sup>It is well known that the organization *Madres* de la Plaza de Mayo has cast the mother in a central role, and inspired and influenced numerous other political women's groups worldwide. For analyses of this organization and its political and social impact, see Jo Fisher, *Mothers...* and Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*.

<sup>8</sup>Saúl Sosnowski has shown that the wide use of the word "loca" during the *proceso* and afterward was proof of an awakening—a contestatory marginality that used its alterity as a political tool: "[...] fue precisamente con la asignación de la palabra 'locas' que se comenzó a urdir a segmentos mayores la recuperación de la sensatez, de la racionalidad; el lento fin de la perversión oficial" ("Introducción," 11).

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