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TITLE: Re-membering War: Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* as Prosthetic Memory

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ABSTRACT: This essay presents an analysis of Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) and *La velocidad de la luz* (2005). It explores how Cercas's war novels have engaged in the task of recuperating and writing lost accounts and memories of war, and how each novel operates as what Alison Landsberg has called "prosthetic memory." I will show how the novels may be understood as a "transferral space" in which readers are invited to enter into experiential relationships with distinct war pasts that they themselves did not live. In their self-conscious, metafictional portrayal of writing and reading war experience, *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* trace out and explore the difficulty of coming to terms with a traumatic war past and confront issues of transgenerational transmission of memory. These novels show how war's legacy continues to matter and have an effect on postmemorial generations, and how the process of investigating episodes of the war past can ultimately bring healing and relief. The effort presented by the two narrators in Cercas's novels can be seen as emblematic of the process of memory that the post-Franco Spanish society has undertaken as it addresses its war past.

KEYWORDS: Javier Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina*, *La velocidad de la luz*, Spanish Civil War, Vietnam War, prosthetic memory, historical memory

RESUMEN: En este ensayo se presenta un análisis de *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) y *La velocidad de la luz* (2005) escritas por Javier Cercas. El ensayo explora cómo las novelas de guerra de Cercas se han emprendido la tarea de recuperar y escribir los relatos y recuerdos perdidos de la guerra, y cómo cada novela funciona como lo que Alison Landsberg ha llamado "memoria protésica." Voy a mostrar cómo las novelas se pueden entender como un "espacio transferencial" en que se invita a los lectores entrar en una relación experiencial con un pasado de guerra que ellos mismos no vivieron. En su representación autoreferencial y metafictional de escribir y leer la experiencia de guerra, *Soldados de Salamina* y *La velocidad de la luz* trazan y exploran la dificultad de resolver un pasado traumático de guerra y se enfrentan con los problemas de la transmisión transgeneracional de la memoria. Estas novelas muestran cómo el legado de la guerra sigue teniendo un efecto en las generaciones postmemoriales, y cómo el proceso de investigar los episodios pasados de guerra puede traer la curación y el alivio. El esfuerzo presentado por los dos narradores de las novelas de Cercas puede ser visto como emblemático del proceso de la memoria que la sociedad española post-franquista ha emprendido en su confrontación con el pasado bélico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Javier Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina*, *La velocidad de la luz*, Guerra Civil española, Guerra de Vietnam, memoria protésica, memoria histórica

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Re-membering War: Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* as Prosthetic Memory

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Two generations after the end of the Civil War, Spain's war past is appearing time and again in popular modes of cultural production created by writers and artists from the postmemorial generation. Literary works such as Almudena Grandes's *El corazón helado* (2007), Juan Manuel de Prada's *El séptimo velo* (2007), Ignacio Martínez de Pisón's *Dientes de leche* (2008), and Javier Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) are merely a few examples of how a generation of Spanish authors who were too young to have lived the war has revisited Spain's war past and explored through literature tropes of trauma, testimony, and memory. While the list of recent Spanish novels that explore tropes of historical memory and the Spanish Civil War is extensive, I have specifically identified these four novels because the narrative plot of each one specifically centers on representing how national trauma affects the life story of those who did not directly experience it: in these works, protagonists who belong to the post-memorial generation desire to know about past episodes of war, and struggle with the impossibility of arriving at the center, or "truth," of the war experience. The popular and critical success that these novels and their authors, as well as many others, have enjoyed speaks to the persistence of war in the contemporary imagination: they represent an all-consuming war that people continue to engage commercially and emotionally.

It is significant that the primary action of each of these novels takes place in a contemporary setting with protagonists who seek to uncover information about episodes of war

in the past. Though the protagonists do not belong to the generation that considered the Spanish Civil War or World War II period as "vivencia," they are all incapable of understanding or organizing their present or future without referring to this past. The drama of each narrative plot lies in the tension between past and present and the ways in which the secrets of the war past become manifested and unavoidably entangled in the present lives of the characters. In these particular novels, we see articulated the generationality of the war memory in Spain, principally the role of the family as a space of transmission and remembrance.¹

While *Soldados de Salamina* does not depict a familial transfer of knowledge about the war past, it is marked by a similar sense of personal urgency to uncover the truth about a past episode of war. At stake in each of these four literary representations is "not only a personal/familial/generational sense of ownership and protectiveness but also an evolving theoretical discussion about the workings of trauma, memory, and intergenerational acts of transfer" (Hirsch 104). These novels document a confrontation with the past, critique the earlier avoidance of the truth, and demonstrate the need to investigate the past in order to address its lingering effects and to come to terms with the present.

For much of the twentieth century and currently, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and historical memory of the Civil War have served as central themes for critical exploration in imaginative and documentary cultural production as well as in academic study.

Presently in Spain, there is a prevailing political and social culture with a dominant generational profile (that of the third generation) eager to investigate, provoke, consume, and reclaim memories of Spain's traumatic national past.² This raises many questions about the ethics and aesthetics of remembrance and representation in the aftermath of war. For example: How, in the present, do we regard and recall the experience of war that we did not live in our own bodies? What do we owe the victims and veterans of war? How can we best carry their stories forward without appropriating them, and without calling undue attention to ourselves?

When considering the works produced by writers and artists of the postmemorial generations in Spain, it is not difficult to understand why Spanish citizens who had family members directly involved in the war or who were victims of Francoist repression would feel a vested interest in the articulation of a historical memory narrative about the past. Indeed, writers, filmmakers, and citizen activists like Francesc Torres, C.M. Hardt, and Emilio Silva are descendants of survivors of the Spanish Civil War who have all actively and passionately engaged in memorial projects motivated by a powerful sense of personal urgency.³ But what about Spaniards or other readers who are not direct descendants of survivors (victims as well as perpetrators) of war violence and postwar repression? What is their relationship to the experiences of the past? How do they learn about past episodes of war? How are the war and the aftermath of war manifested in their lives in the present?

Keeping these questions in mind, this essay explores how two best-selling novels by Javier Cercas (Cáceres, 1962), *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) and *La velocidad de la luz* (2005), have engaged in the task of recuperating and writing lost accounts and memories of war, and how each novel operates as what Alison Landsberg has called "prosthetic memory." I will show how the novels may be understood as a "transferential space" in which readers are invited to enter into experiential relationships with distinct war pasts

that they themselves did not live (and/or that they do not have close familial ties to those who did). Cercas's novels trace out and explore the difficulty of coming to terms with a traumatic war past and confront issues of transgenerational transmission of memory. They show how war's legacy continues to matter and have an effect on postmemorial generations, and how the process of investigating episodes of the war past can ultimately bring healing and relief.

Alison Landsberg's work interrogates the nature of memory transmission and problematizes the limits of living memory (memory linked to the lived experience of an individual) when there are no longer survivors left to testify. In her book *Prosthetic Memory*, she theorizes the production and dissemination of memories that have no direct connection to a person's lived past and yet are essential to the production and articulation of subjectivity (20). Landsberg argues compellingly that new media reflect a change in what counts for knowledge and the structures for producing knowledge, and highlights the way modern technologies of mass culture, like film and literature, operate to produce alternative ("prosthetic") memory in those who did not live through the event (21). Prosthetic memories are not natural. That is, they are not the product of lived experience, nor are they strictly "organic" in the hereditary sense (Landsberg 20). Rather, they are derived from engagement with mediated representation such as film, television, art, conversation, and literature.⁴ Prosthetic memory, which emerges at the "interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past," invites people to take on memories of a past through which they did not live and "suture" himself or herself into a larger history (Landsberg 2).

Because prosthetic memories are not "natural" (not the possession of a particular family or ethnic group), they evoke a more public (not privatized) past (Landsberg 143). While prosthetic memory is "personal" because it derives from engaged and experientially oriented encounters with "technologies of memory," it is not "collective" in Halbwach's

sense (Landsberg 143).⁵ “Interchangeability” and “exchangeability” are essential characteristics of prosthetic memory. Commodification, which Landsberg argues is at the heart of mass cultural representations, makes images and narratives widely available to people who live in different places and who come from different backgrounds (20). Prosthetic memory speaks to the idea that the residual effects of war are symptomatic of the entire community, not just of those who lived the event. Like a phantom limb, the war past is a ghost that haunts postmemorial generations: the younger generations did not live the experience, but they feel the mark of trauma and they can encounter it and engage it through narrative, oral testimony, and other cultural modes.⁶

Soldados de Salamina and *La velocidad de la luz* each represent an attempt to recover knowledge about, and the meaning of, pivotal moments of the past, and are noteworthy because of their self-conscious, metafictional portrayal of writing and reading war experience. Cercas’s self-conscious fiction about war depicts the process of prosthetic memory wherein narrators engage the past through investigation, conversation, video, and other mediated sources. From the outset of *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz*, memory, storytelling, and media are presented as instruments of knowledge capable of grasping the truth of history, and, in particular, of facilitating the process of confronting episodes of a war past.⁷ The novels attempt a textual mimesis of trauma through tropes of memory and testimony that potentially capture the effects contiguous with the traumatic event of war and its aftermath. *Soldados de Salamina*, which deals explicitly with the Spanish Civil War, and *La velocidad de la luz*, which takes up the Vietnam War, both point to the personal, physical, and psychological manifestations that untold war stories can have on their narrators (survivors and subsequent generations alike).

There is an instructive counterpoint between Javier Cercas’s personal history and his taking on the theme of memory of war that

makes an examination of these two novels particularly interesting in relation to the concept of prosthetic memory. In an interview with John Payne in 2004, Cercas admitted to not having a direct, familial connection to the Civil War: “mi padre no hizo la guerra. Entonces, en mi caso hay una mirada más distanciada de la guerra. [...] Yo] ya veo la guerra como de una gran altura. A mi padre no le fusilaron, ni a mi madre no sé qué—no estoy implicado personalmente” (199). Cercas, who is too young to have experienced the war and does not have an “organic” direct familial tie to the Civil War (or a national-geographical tie to the Vietnam War), has, nonetheless, had success in (re)creating war-based fictional worlds.

While the Spanish Civil War and the Vietnam War are two very different conflicts whose remembrance plays very different roles in Spanish society and history, in *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* these two wars are symbolic historical spaces that lend themselves to dynamic literary representation. *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* share many thematic and structural similarities that work to demonstrate how national (and international) trauma is inscribed in the life story of those who did not directly experience it: a self-conscious, innovative, and critical aesthetic that conveys absence and loss; the determination to know about the past and the acknowledgement of its elusiveness; the testimonial structure of listener and witness separated by relative distance and proximity to the events of war; the reliance on reading and writing, and on visual media in addition to verbal ones; and the consciousness that the memory of the past is still firmly located in the present. These elements invite the reader to make connections between past traumas and the present by drawing attention to war and reflecting on how past violence continues to affect individuals and society.

In both *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz*, writing about war has important consequences for the narrator who desires to uncover the truth about unremembered persons and war events that

seem to have an effect on him in the present. Cercas's narrators refuse to accept the gaps in history about the war, and become obsessed to the point that the investigation of the past becomes their identity and their life's work. *Soldados de Salamina* is about an author (also named Javier Cercas) who, after a divorce and the death of his father, becomes obsessed with writing a "relato real" about an episode of the Spanish Civil War wherein the Falangist leader Rafael Sánchez Mazas escapes death aided by an unknown Republican soldier. *La velocidad de la luz* focuses on its narrator's efforts to discover and tell the story of a Vietnam veteran named Rodney Falk and his experience in the massacre at My Khe.

Soldados de Salamina and *La velocidad de la luz* present a practice of prosthetic memory that grows out of, and articulates, the generational transfer of knowledge about the war past, both that of the Spanish Civil War, and, on a global scale, that of the Vietnam War. Samuel Amago has pointed to how Cercas draws attention to the "transnational reality of war" by extending the themes like memory, trauma, testimony, and truth that were introduced in *Soldados de Salamina* to *La velocidad de la luz* ("Speaking for the Dead" 246). In this way, Cercas represents and explores how the repercussions of war violence continue to be present in a globalized society. John Payne affirms the broad scope of Cercas's authorial intention. He maintains that Cercas's novels suggest an understanding of "the fragments of memory" that is not limited to a specific generation or conflict (121). To this end, Payne suggests that in *Soldados de Salamina* "the Civil War might be better understood as part of a wider European conflict than as a purely Spanish affair" (121).

Indeed, in his fiction, Cercas emphasizes a link between the Spanish war and the World War that followed it: he refers to his character Miralles's transition from Spanish Republican soldier to soldier in the French Foreign Legion, his service with the British forces, and eventual involvement in the Normandy landings (*Soldados de Salamina* 153-61). Beyond the European theater, Amago

has noted how the narrator's relationship and conversations with Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño underscore the connection between the Spanish Civil War and Franco regime and the oppressive Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s and '80s (*Soldados de Salamina* 145-47, "Speaking for the Dead" 245). Amago has also observed that *La velocidad de la luz* "invites the reader to make connections between past traumas (the Vietnam War) and present ones (Iraq)" ("Speaking for the Dead" 245). In this way, rather than focusing on rehashing the hostilities existing between the two sides of the Spanish Civil War or the controversial American intervention in Vietnam, Cercas directs attention towards the act of testimony and understanding the human experience of war.⁸

Cercas's war novels are metahistorical works that retrospectively appropriate historical events and memories of war. The metafictional technique, the multiplicity of perspectives, and the constant blurring of frames in each novel serve to obscure the distinction between reality and fiction in order to draw attention to the dynamic processes of historiography and literary representation as means to mediate memory.⁹ These novels increasingly challenge the traditional framework of fiction and history as Cercas's writing of fictive discourse involves actual historical events and historically recognizable figures. Cercas inserts historically contextualized people, events, and geographical locations into the narrative structure and discourse of each novel: from the inclusion of Rafael Sánchez Mazas, Falangist ideologue, author, and poet, who escapes a Republican firing squad during the last days of the Civil War, to the many details about the Civil War, to the My Khe massacre in Vietnam. But perhaps the most striking, if not the most obvious, characteristic of Cercas's metafictional narrative strategy is his self-referentiality. In *Soldados de Salamina*, for example, the narrator-protagonist is a novelist and journalist named Javier Cercas. Throughout the novel, he refers to his previous publications, all of which were written by (the real) Javier Cercas, and to other

personal data of the real-life author: “En 1989 yo había publicado mi primera novela; como el conjunto de relatos aparecido dos años antes, el libro fue acogido con notoria indiferencia” (Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina* 15); “Oye, ¿tú no serás el Javier Cercas de *El móvil* y *El inquilino*?” *El móvil* y *El inquilino* eran los títulos de los dos únicos libros que yo había publicado, más de diez años atrás” (Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina* 143). The reader also can trace a marked similarity to Cercas himself in the unnamed narrator-protagonist of *La velocidad de la luz*: he is a writer who, like the real Cercas, has spent time in Urbana, Illinois, currently lives in Girona, Spain, and has recently become famous for a tremendously successful novel he wrote about the Civil War (presumably *Soldados de Salamina*). Cercas again duplicates this aspect of metafictional self-referentiality when the narrator of *La velocidad de la luz* remarks that he is writing a novel in which the narrator will be “un tipo exactamente igual que yo que se hallaba exactamente en las mismas circunstancias que yo” (62).¹⁰

Amago and Spires have remarked that because the narrator of *Soldados de Salamina* is named Javier Cercas, and because the subject of the novel is historical in nature, some readers have been tempted to read the work as nonfiction or autobiography (Amago, *True Lies* 144, Spires 502). However, the Javier Cercas (narrator) of *Soldados de Salamina* is a literary construct; a metafictional technique that Cercas (author) employs to increase awareness about the processes of writing.¹¹ Cercas himself has insisted that readers interpret *Soldados de Salamina* as a novel, not an autobiography. In an interview with David Trueba, Cercas stated, “el Javier Cercas de la novela no soy yo [...pero] sí soy yo”:

Quiero decir que soy yo elevado a la enésima potencia, ese tipo es jugo o esencia de Javier Cercas, es una máscara que se ha puesto el Javier Cercas real para decir lo que quiere decir, porque escribir consiste, entre otras cosas en fabricarse una identidad, un

yo que soy yo y no soy yo, igual que una máscara: pero, cuidado, porque máscara es lo que significa persona en latín, y la máscara es lo que nos oculta, pero sobre todo lo que nos revela. (*Diálogos* 19)¹²

In addition to the metafictional technique, *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* portray the historical as inseparable from the literary imagination and sensibility by demonstrating that history is a construct and symptom of subjective forces such as personal recollection, mediated representations, reformulation, testimony, and remembering. From the outset of each novel, memory and storytelling are put forth as instruments of knowledge capable of grasping the truth of history. The narrators in Cercas's novels are not only separated from the historical events by a temporal or generational gap, but must also interpret the subjective accounts of historical events authored by other historical actors and narrators. The narrator of *Soldados de Salamina*, for example, does not remember the pivotal event (the encounter between Sánchez Mazas and the Republican soldier) because he did not experience it directly. Rather, he looks for other documentary and memorial evidence to prove the truth of the story. His information comes from people who knew Sánchez Mazas, from reading the memoirs of Dionisio Ridruejo and Pedro Laín Entralgo, from interviews with Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio (Sánchez Mazas's son), from a video recording wherein Sánchez Mazas recounts the experience, and from conversations with the “friends of the forest” (the Republican deserters who aided Sánchez Mazas), among other sources.

Similarly, *La velocidad de la luz* is full of references to war and memory, and reconstructs the war experience in the form of letters and people telling stories: Rodney's letters to his parents while he was in Vietnam; Rodney's father's version of events; Rodney's first-person account of the Vietnam events; and Rodney's wife Jenny's account of Rodney's last days, among others. In both *Soldados de*

Salamina and *La velocidad de la luz*, diaries, letters, conversations, and video recordings serve as textual, oral, and visual traces of the past that highlight the mediated access to history and memory. They underscore the interrelation of visual and narrative aspects of memory formation. From these disparate accounts, the narrators of *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* attempt to fashion a cohesive narrative about the war experience. That is, the narrators literally “re-member” the war story out of the details they gather from the multiple objects, testimonies, and recollections.

Cercas’s novels acknowledge the complexities inherent in the generational transfer of memory as well as in the writing of history. The self-conscious, metafictional technique used in *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* enables the author (and readers) to confront the problematic nature of historiography and explore the value of storytelling as a method of approximating truth and mediating cultural memory. *Soldados de Salamina*, for example, is not just informed by history; it is a story about the writing of history. In *Soldados de Salamina* (and, to a certain extent, in *La velocidad de la luz*), the act of writing history and the actual historical events are in question, as the witnesses try to remember history and as the narrator-protagonist reconstructs the war history. Here, post-memory is symbolized as prosthetic memory via the relational exploration of history and memory in significant sites for recollection. The self-conscious collection, sorting, review, and interpretation of the sources available in *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* emphasizes the literariness of its historical subject matter and highlights the narrative process. Ultimately, each narrator finds that history and memory are ongoing, multidirectional, and multidimensional processes.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to identify the extent to which fictional texts have influenced real processes of remembering or communities of remembrance that exist in the nonfictional world, however, the

effort presented by the narrators in Cercas’s novels should be seen as emblematic of the process of memory that the post-Franco Spanish society has undertaken. New generations of Spaniards are coming to terms with the experiences of postmemory, of inheriting the (often traumatic) memory of war and postwar repression that they have not necessarily lived, but that have manifested in their lives through the fears and recollections of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, or through other experiential sites of memory. In their contact with mediated sources such as letters and videos, Cercas’s narrators are able to engage with the past and begin to understand the vital responsibility that the living have to uncover and share information about episodes of war in the past. For example, in *La velocidad de la luz*, it is only after viewing a documentary about Vietnam, titled “Secretos sepultados, verdades brutales,” which features testimony about the war by veterans including Rodney, that the narrator realizes that he has a personal obligation to write about his friend:¹³

Como en una súbita iluminación, en aquel momento me pareció comprender [...]. Pensé en Rodney, pensé en el padre de Rodney [...] pero sobre todo pensé en Gabriel y en Paula, y por vez primera intuí que todas aquellas historias eran en realidad la misma historia, y que sólo yo podía contarla. (Cercas, *La velocidad de la luz* 286)

As a result of learning about Rodney’s war past through mediated sources the narrator “sutures” himself into the larger history by assuming the memorial project and remembering the silenced and the deceased through narration. Thus, he sustains the “embodied living connection” between the past and the present (Hirsch 110).

Landsberg writes that prosthetic memory is not necessarily therapeutic the way that other kinds of memory work are. In Cercas’s novels, however, it seems that prosthetic memory does indeed have therapeutic

potential. Cercas's war novels each represent a narrator who becomes enmeshed in an investigation of episodes of war at a time when he is experiencing a personal crisis. The act of investigating the war parallels and intersects with the narrator's own personal journey towards resolution. As Gómez and Amago have pointed out, in *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz*, the narrators' crises are linked to their investigations of the "grand crises" of the Civil War and the Vietnam War: not only does looking back at a war past allow the narrators to overcome their writer's block, it also enables them to come to terms with their own personal calamity. The specific task of the narrator in each novel—researching and writing about an episode of the Civil War in *Soldados de Salamina*, and digging up the "truth" about the experience of one Vietnam veteran in *La velocidad de la luz*—functions as a method of "coming to terms with his own personal loss and loneliness" and point to the therapeutic function of storytelling and writing as a way of coming to terms with personal trauma and to memorialize the departed (Amago, "Speaking for the Dead" 247).

Particularly in *La velocidad de la luz*, Cercas shows how people can be troubled by the past, and how that past must be addressed if we are to move forward. Amago notes that "the novel's self-conscious emphasis on working through past issues through narrative suggests that perhaps it is because Rodney was unable (or unwilling) to work through or even share his history that he is doomed to be destroyed by it" ("Speaking for the Dead" 254). Indeed, although Rodney does tell the narrator his version of the massacre at My Khe, he never appears to come to terms with his memories of the event. When interviewed by the local news, Rodney displays no reaction or emotion to the reporter's accusatory line of questioning. Rather, he remains, "callado, inmóvil como una estatua" (Cercas, *La velocidad de la luz* 267). Rodney's outward response to his war memories has no depth, and he refuses to accept help dealing with his traumatic past. After the news report, Rodney

withdraws from the world and spirals into a deep depression, "Rodney ya sólo está ocupado en morir" (Cercas, *La velocidad de la luz* 277). *La velocidad de la luz* is a novel that probes the complexities of guilt, and the burden of the past upon the present. Puig remarks:

Rodney is [the antihero]: as a soldier he committed atrocities that cannot be told. The horrors of war lead him to his own personal destruction: the pressure of constant fear and death turned him mad and destroyed others, including women and children. (92)

In *La velocidad de la luz*, Cercas tries to reconstruct the war experience and make known the evils of war so that other people learn to recognize the mistakes of the past and can rectify them. This point is demonstrated by the parallels between the lives of Rodney and the narrator: similar to the way that Rodney is responsible for the death of other people, the narrator feels responsible for the seemingly undeserved commercial success of his novel, his subsequent extramarital affairs, and, ultimately, the death of his wife and son in a car accident. "[Yo] también era responsable de la muerte de una mujer y un niño (o me sentía responsable de la muerte de una mujer y un niño)" (Cercas, *La velocidad de la luz* 219). Rodney went to war thinking he was doing the right thing and ended up in the hopeless situation of the Vietnam War. Likewise, the narrator did not expect success to lead him to his depraved life and the accident of his family. "Rodney, mi semejante, mi hermano—un monstruo como yo, como yo un asesino" (Cercas, *La velocidad de la luz* 219-20). Here, the narrator's specific experience of personal trauma allows him to better understand Rodney. Though, after Rodney's suicide, it is too late for him to help his friend, and even though he has no first-hand knowledge of the Vietnam War, the narrator is finally able to "provide his friend's ghost with a vicarious hospitable memory" (Amago,

“Speaking for the Dead” 256). Puig concludes that Cercas wants to recount Rodney’s story because “it redeems other people” (Puig 92).

In *La velocidad de la luz*, “working through” is a way of coming to terms with the trauma and guilt associated with the war experience. Reflecting on his project, the narrator remarks, “No sentía horror, no sentía náuseas, ni siquiera tristeza, por primera vez en mucho tiempo tampoco sentía angustia; lo que sentía era algo extrañamente placentero que no había sentido nunca, algo como un infinito agotamiento o una calma infinita y blanca” (Cercas, *La velocidad de la luz* 283). In struggling with his own traumatic memories after the death of his wife and child, the narrator of *La velocidad de la luz* finds that the only way out is to confront the trauma directly—that is, to finish writing his novel about Rodney’s war experience. “[Escribir] era lo único que podía permitirme mirar a la realidad sin destruirme o sin que cayera sobre mí una casa ardiendo, lo único que podía dotarla de un sentido o de una ilusión de sentido” (Cercas, *La velocidad de la luz* 302). By writing his story, the narrator “sutures” his life story to Rodney’s in the hope that others will learn from the mistakes of the past. Thus, the written narrative is presumed to have a double healing effect. At a personal level, it breaks with years of shame, humiliation, fear, and forgetting. At a social-historical level, it feeds into public discourse, and produces a collective memory of suffering caused by the trauma of war and its aftermath.¹⁴

In the third part of *Soldados de Salamina*, when the narrator rethinks the “*relato-real*” he wrote, he recalls his conversations with the late Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño. Bolaño, who told Javier Cercas that he wrote in order to keep alive the memory of his leftist friends killed in Latin America, felt great sorrow during a night he spent in the hospital:

no porque supiera que iba a morir,
sino por todos los libros que había
proyectado escribir y nunca escri-
biría, por todos sus amigos muertos,

por todos los jóvenes latinoameri-
canos de su generación—soldados
muertos en guerras de antemano
perdidas—a los que siempre había so-
ñado resucitar en sus novelas y que ya
permanecerían muertos para siempre
[...]. (*Soldados de Salamina* 150)

Bolaño is sorrowful because he knows that when he dies, his memories, and all of the people kept alive within his memory, will die too. According to Bolaño, “las novelas se escriben combinando recuerdos” (*Soldados de Salamina* 149). But Cercas’s narrator replies, “yo me he quedado sin recuerdos”—not just because he has run out of investigative leads for his story about the Civil War, but also because the memories of the Civil War past were never really his to begin with (*Soldados de Salamina* 149).

Now, as survivors of the Spanish Civil War are dead or dying, the pressing question is how other bodies—bodies that did not live through the original trauma and do not possess living memory—might testify to what happened. Here, through their metafictional narrative, Cercas’s texts show how literature (writing and narrative) is a site, or “transferential space,” in which people are invited to enter into experiential, memorial relationships to events through which they themselves did not live. Through memory and narrative, people may gain access to a range of processual, sensually immersed knowledge that would be difficult to acquire otherwise by purely cognitive means. While the truth finally escapes the narrator of *Soldados de Salamina*, and the narrator of *La velocidad de la luz* is not able to save Rodney from the horrors of his war past, the process of investigating and writing the war history allows each narrator to appreciate the important dialectic that occurs between memory, history, and narrative, and to engage in meaningful ways with memories of past events that have significant ramifications for their present identities. Cercas’s narrators find meaning in the process involved in investigating, interviewing, interpreting, and representing experience (their own and

others') through writing. By "suturing" themselves to such powerful but unlivable events as the Spanish Civil War and the Vietnam War, Cercas's narrators come to understand their own personhood. In representing the process and effects of prosthetic memory, *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* help us understand how traumatic events like war affect subsequent generations in ways that are similar to, but also significantly different from, how they affected those who suffered the events directly. By combining their own memories and those of history's survivors, Cercas's narrators are able to write versions of events that take into account the processes of their own writing, which in turn functions to open up the interpretive memorial process to the reader.

The central idea of *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* is that interpretation, including literary and visual representation of experience, is a necessary part of memory and of writing history. This is a process that is self-consciously put forward by the narrators of each novel. *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* suggest that the intersection of memory, history, and fiction offers valuable narrative perspectives on the past and the present: remembering, imagining, and writing are all interrelated processes that help to make meaning out of experience. Cercas is faced with the unrepresentability of the horrors of war as well as with the fact that he did not live the war in his own body, but the metafictional conceits of *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* allow him to engage with the larger ongoing discussion of historical memory in Spain, and to seek out the voices of the Spanish Civil War and the Vietnam War.

The narrative process whereby Spanish narrators face the past and forge an identity, combines memory and imagination in a manner that recreates the past not in its official versions, but in new constructions that give a voice to historical protagonists (here namely soldiers) who had previously been silenced or forgotten. Investigating the past

and reestablishing a sense of narrative agency make each of Cercas's narrators feel like he has finally found the stability in his personal life he had been seeking all along. "Vi mi libro entero y verdadero, mi relato real completo, y supe que ya sólo tenía que escribirlo, pasarlo a limpio, porque estaba en mi cabeza desde el principio" (Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina* 207). The mixture of imagination, history, and memory, in *Soldados de Salamina* as in *La velocidad de la luz*, allows for readers from the postmemorial generation to engage in a new view of history, one that may allow them to reconcile with the traumatic past and move, as Cercas writes in *Soldados de Salamina*, "hacia delante, hacia delante, hacia delante, siempre hacia delante" (207).

Notes

¹*El corazón helado* and *El séptimo velo* deal with Spanish families who, upon the death of a parent, discover a family secret that had remained hidden for nearly half a century—namely their father's participation on various fronts in World War II. Likewise, *Los dientes de leche* portrays the generational legacy of the Spanish Civil War in a Spanish-Italian family.

²For a thoughtful discussion of how the third generation (the grandchildren of those who experienced the war) has absorbed its meager knowledge of the wartime and postwar years, and the problems that are created by this paucity, see Izquierdo Martín and Sánchez León.

³After the war, Torres's grandfather spent many years in jail, and his grandmother was repeatedly harassed, including having her head shaved, by the police in a Barcelona precinct. In his book *Dark is the Room Where We Sleep / Oscura es la habitación donde dormimos* (2007), Torres documented the excavation of a mass grave at Villamayor de los Montes in Burgos, Spain in 2004. His project was presented in photographic installation form at New York's International Center of Photography in autumn 2007. C.M. Hardt, whose grandfather was executed by the Guardia Civil, recorded her investigation of her family's story in a documentary film titled *Muerte en El Valle* (1995). Emilio Silva is the founder and president of the *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* in Spain,

which he established in 2000 to advocate for the excavation and exhumation of mass graves containing the remains of victims of Francoism. Silva's grandfather was executed by the regime and buried in a mass grave.

⁴Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory theorizes a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. In her work, Hirsch recognizes the real physical and psychological effects that gaps in knowledge about traumatic historical events can have in generations after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma, and signals the need for "forms of remembrance that reconnect and reembody an intergenerational memorial fabric that has been severed by catastrophe" (110). While Hirsch's theory of postmemory presupposes or favors an immediate familial link, it also recognizes that less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory through engagement with alternate forms of mediation like aesthetic expression (110). Hirsch reasons that "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" can become the mediated forms for memory through which people may gain access to a range of knowledge about a past they did not live bodily (Hirsch 107). This echoes and affirms Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory about how the postmemorial generation's connection to a historical or collective memory can be understood as a kind of prosthetic linking facilitated by cultural products.

⁵Halbwachs emphasizes the collective frameworks by which a culture might share and order its recollections of the past. His account implies a geographically bounded community with a shared set of beliefs and a sense of "natural" connection among its members. Landsberg argues that the "forces of modernity and the changes wrought by modern mass culture have made Halbwachs's notion of collective memory inadequate" (8).

⁶Amago writes about the ghostly in Cercas's war novels. See "Speaking for the Dead."

⁷Samuel Amago has observed how these two novels "draw attention to the responsibility and role of novelists and historians to tell the [war stories] that have not been told, especially those that have been silenced" ("Speaking for the Dead" 246).

⁸In both *Soldados de Salamina* and *La velocidad de la luz* there is a tendency to avoid harsh judgment on individuals. That is, in his war narratives, Cercas resists an explicit oppositional structure of victim/perpetrator, hero/villain, Republican/fascist, etc. This feature of Cercas's fiction has provoked varied responses from literary critics. For

example, Joan Ramon Resina takes issue with *Soldados de Salamina* on account of "the novel's affectation of political aloofness and its vindication of fascist writers on dubious aesthetic terms" ("Last Look" 344). In his book *True Lies*, Amago writes that Cercas "[acknowledges] the legitimacy of the subjective multiple viewpoints that coexist in postmodern conceptions of historical discourse," and concludes that Cercas does not vindicate the memory of fascist figures (154, 198). Likewise, David Richter argues that, despite the lack of an oppositional structure, the multiplicity and fragmentation in Cercas's historical narrative stand as a reaction against the hegemonic Francoist version of history (295). For a thoughtful discussion of "depolarization" and Cercas's fiction, see Spire.

⁹Amago, Martín, Dolgin Casado, Richter, and Puig have all written convincingly about the blurred lines between fiction and history in Cercas's metafictional narrative strategy.

¹⁰In this part of the novel, the fictional narrator echoes Cercas's real-life comments made elsewhere to David Trueba about the blurred lines between the autobiographical author and the fictional persona: "¿Entonces el narrador eres tú mismo?," conjeturó Rodney. 'Ni hablar,' dije, contento de ser ahora yo quien conseguía confundirle. 'Se parece en todo a mí, pero no soy yo'" (*La velocidad de la luz* 62).

¹¹For purposes of clarity I will use Javier Cercas to indicate the narrator-protagonist of *Soldados de Salamina* and Cercas when referring to the author.

¹²In 2003, David Trueba adapted *Soldados de Salamina* into a film version with the same name. A number of studies have been written on the film adaptation of *Soldados de Salamina*, including Luis García Jambrina, "De la novela al cine: *Soldados de Salamina* o 'El arte de la traición'" (2004), and Arthur J. Hughes, "Between History and Memory: Creating a New Subjectivity in David Trueba's film *Soldados de Salamina*" (2007).

¹³Generally, the novels omit any graphic portrayal of war. In *Soldados de Salamina* there is a scene of execution, and in *La velocidad de la luz* Rodney narrates his memories of the attack on My Khe in Vietnam, but the battles of the Spanish Civil War and the Vietnam conflict are all otherwise absent. Ellis posits, on the one hand, that this omission demonstrates how war operates beyond the battlefield, affecting "entire societies for generations while confounding the very effort to understand war," and, on the other hand, that it "makes possible an idealization of male-male relationships that are in fact rooted in violence, as well

as in a nostalgia [...] for the fellowship that war produces" (529).

¹⁴Ellis observes that in *Soldados de Salamina*, "the text's appeal for reconciliation undercuts its act of remembrance, for the ability to reconcile hinges at least somewhat on a willingness to forget" (530). In *Soldados de Salamina*, Miralles remains stubbornly contradictory and refuses to affirm Cercas's hypotheses about the events at Col·lell. However, quite the opposite can be said about *La velocidad de la luz*. In *La velocidad de la luz*, Rodney's suicide represents the ultimate failure to reconcile with a past that he cannot (or will not) forget; his memory of the war overwhelms him to the point that he literally cannot survive.

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