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TITLE: The Body Speaks: Pain, Discipline and Agency in Ana Cañil's *Si a los tres años no he vuelto*

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ABSTRACT: Ana Cañil published *Si a los tres años no he vuelto* in 2011, after years of research on female prisons of Franco Spain and speaking with many survivors. Based in historical reality, the novel explores life in female prisons during the immediate postwar years, delving into the experiences of the prisoners as well as the prison director. In this article I examine the role of the body in the novel from several perspectives, incorporating studies on the body by Michel Foucault, Elaine Scarry, and Judith Butler. By looking at the body under control, in pain, and as a cultural subject/outlier, this analysis opens up the understanding of the experience of female prisoners and guards in Franco Spain, revealing points of brutality, manipulation, and agency.

KEYWORDS: The Body, Franco's Prisons, Pain, Discipline, Ana Cañil, Michel Foucault, Elaine Scarry

RESUMEN: Ana Cañil publicó *Si a los tres años no he vuelto* en 2011, tras varios años de investigación de las cárceles de mujeres de la España franquista y después de haber entrevistado a algunas sobrevivientes. Basada en hechos históricos, la novela explora las condiciones cotidianas de las cárceles de mujeres de la postguerra inmediata, profundizando en las experiencias tanto de las presas como de la directora de la cárcel. Este artículo examina el papel del cuerpo humano en la novela, desde múltiples perspectivas, incorporando los estudios sobre el cuerpo de Michel Foucault, Elaine Scarry, y Judith Butler. Esta examinación del cuerpo controlado, dolorido, y como un sujeto/excluido cultural, expande el conocimiento de las presas y las funcionarias de la España franquista, revelando puntos de brutalidad, manipulación, y agencia personal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: el cuerpo, las cárceles de mujeres del franquismo, el dolor, la disciplina, Ana Cañil, Michel Foucault, Elaine Scarry

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The Body Speaks: Pain, Discipline and Agency in Ana Cañil's *Si a los tres años no he vuelto*

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Since the end of the Franco dictatorship in Spain, several testimonial accounts of prison life have been published, offering a view into the horrors experienced by many thousands of Spanish women.¹ Although a plethora of novels have also contributed to the recuperation of voices of the Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, the female prisoner has not been featured prominently. As Luz Souto explains, despite the publication of women's testimonials following the end of the dictatorship, public and literary interest only grew significantly after Montse Armengou and Ricard Belis' documentary "Los niños perdidos del franquismo" aired in 2002 on Catalán television ("Las narrativas"). Dulce Chacón's *La voz dormida* (2002), Jesús Ferrero's *Las trece rosas* (2003), Benjamín Prado's *Mala gente que camina* (2006), and Ana Cañil's *Si a los tres años no he vuelto* (2011) are among the novels that use fictional and historical elements to explore the experience of Spanish female political prisoners in the immediate postwar years.²

Building upon the testimonies, documentaries, and novels preceding her work, Cañil's novel succeeds in bringing into narrative form authentic and well-documented aspects of life in postwar female prisons in Spain. Historical accuracy combines with a romantic story line, as young prisoner Jimena and her exiled husband Luis, along with their baby Luisito, represent many of the stories shared in testimonial texts. I agree with Souto ("Las narrativas") and Marta Kobiela-Kwaśniewska (69) that the novel is weakened somewhat by the underdeveloped and overly-sentimental romantic relationship as

well as the unrealistic happy ending. I would also argue, however, that the merging of an emotionally sympathetic character with an abundance of verifiable details of the prison experience draws the reader inside the prison walls as the story delves into the ugly realities of the prisoners' daily life, as well as the actions and motivations of the prison director.

To achieve this, Cañil's narrative focuses on the body as it moves through each day of confinement, violence, and deprivation. This allows the reader to understand what happens in a visceral way—the sights, sounds, and pain felt through the body convey deeply to the reader a difficult time in Spain's history that was unknown or unacknowledged for many years. Basing my analysis on the writings of Michel Foucault, Elaine Scarry, and Judith Butler, this article examines the body in *Si a los tres años no he vuelto* in its role as a rich communicator of the personal experience and social characteristics of female prisoners, their children, and guards of the Franco dictatorship. My aim is to determine what the body in the novel reveals about power dynamics, social and penal norms, and personal agency in postwar Spain.

Ana Cañil is a Spanish journalist, blogger, and novelist who, in addition to the novel considered here, has published *La mujer del Maquis* (2008),³ *El coraje de Miss Redfield* (2012), and *Masaje para un cabrón* (2015). In each text, Cañil infuses the narrative with carefully-researched documents and testimonies as she explores difficult historical and current realities of Spain. After writing *La mujer del Maquis*, she began to research María Topete, the prison director she had

heard much about in interviews with former women prisoners. As María Topete had died in 2000, Cañil felt unable to write a journalistic piece on her life, and so decided to expand her story into narrative form (“¿Quién fue María Topete?”). *Si a los tres años no he vuelto* differs from similar novels in its intimate portrayal of the women prisoners as well as the prison guards and director. Although the author’s partiality for the prisoners is clear, the exploration of María Topete’s life and motivations seeks to understand her better.⁴ The narrative combines historical and fictional elements, basing the story of Jimena in published testimonies, documentaries, and journalistic texts. Jimena is a composite of the many women who shared their stories of prison life during the Franco dictatorship (“¿Quién fue María Topete?”). She is a fictional character placed in circumstances that accurately reflect prison conditions of the time. Many of the women with whom she interacts are based on real women who were prisoners during the postwar years, such as Petra Cuevas, Trinidad Gallego, Paz Azzati, and Matilde Landa.⁵ The novel is not a documentary or testimonial text, but rather it uses real stories and details to inform the fictional narrative.

Si a los tres años no he vuelto begins in 1938 and follows Jimena Bartolomé Masa, a young woman married to Luis Masa, a Communist and Republican soldier. After Luis flees to France in 1939, the now pregnant Jimena is denounced by her mother-in-law, Elvira, and then taken by force first to the Ministerio de Gobernación⁶ where she is beaten and interrogated, and then to the Ventas Women’s Prison. This is where she meets María Topete, director of the mothers’ ward. Although the novel focuses mainly on the experience of the women prisoners and their children, it also explores María Topete’s personal history and actions within the prison.

Cañil’s novel offers an authentic portrayal of the postwar penal system, which also reflects political, economic, and social divisions of the time. After Nationalist forces declared victory in 1939, many thousands of

Republican citizens, sympathizers, and family members were imprisoned. The Ventas Women’s Prison, in Madrid, housed political prisoners during the Civil War, and in 1939 thousands more Spanish women entered the prison’s doors. After volunteering for several months at the Ventas Prison, in 1940 María Topete became the director of the mothers’ ward in Ventas Prison and then at San Isidro Mothers’ Prison. Both Ventas and San Isidro were severely overcrowded and dirty, creating ideal conditions for the infestation of lice and scabies, as well as the spreading of tuberculosis, severe diarrhea, and whooping cough. Daily executions of fellow prisoners could be heard at night, and those who survived *la pepa*⁷ suffered from severe hunger, malnutrition, and lack of clean water (Hernández Holgado, “La prisión” 204-08).⁸ Through Jimena’s story, Cañil explores these harsh realities of prison, but also highlights examples of strength and agency.

Disciplining the Body

In the Ventas and San Isidro prisons, Jimena and her fellow prisoners are incarcerated within the Spanish postwar penitentiary system. Regulation and control of their bodies are key elements of this system, that seeks both to punish and redeem them. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault explores the evolution of the European penal system, from one that punished violently in the public space, to one that disciplines the body, reeducating it through surveillance and training within prison walls. In postwar Spain, the penitentiary system of the Franco regime sought redemption and control of the *vencidos* through retraining and reinduction (Vinyes, “Doblegar y transformar” 37-38), elements of which we see reflected in Jimena’s experience.

A key element at play in the treatment of prisoners in the postwar years was the work of Spanish psychiatrist Antonio Vallejo Nágera, who studied Republican political prisoners and concluded that adherents or

supporters of a Marxist or socialist ideology were genetically and mentally defective, and this deficiency could be transmitted to their children (Capuano and Carli 7-9). Therefore, separation from society and reeducation were paramount. In Cañil's novel, Vallejo Nágera's writings greatly influence prison director María Topete, and she sees her role as a discipliner of the women prisoners and savior of their children. This is based in accounts of Topete's life and former prisoners' testimonies,⁹ and then fleshed out within the novel by Cañil. Also relevant is the regime's strict adherence to Catholic tradition. In the case of political prisoners at this time, their removal from society and forced labor were justified as it allowed them to expiate their sins (Hernández Holgado, "La prisión" 224-26). With this "doble programa exterminista y redentorista del Nuevo Estado" (Hernández Holgado, "La prisión" 228), the penitentiary system aimed to create docile bodies, represented in the novel by the women prisoners, that could be "subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 136).

For Foucault, the disciplined body is not simply a receptor of power, but rather power infuses it, reinforcing its mechanisms through physical regulation (138). Violent coercion is no longer needed in the modern penitentiary system, as other methods of control, such as surveillance, repetitive behavior, and training, are found to be more efficient and durable (Foucault 137). In the case of Jimena and the other female prisoners, these same tactics are fundamental to the regime's plan to reeducate and redeem female political prisoners and their children.

In the novel, the prisoners of Ventas and San Isidro are watched closely. Guards are always nearby, and Jimena observes that María Topete seems to appear out of nowhere, as if she were everywhere all at once. This is similar to what Foucault describes as the panopticon, which is a constant surveillance of the body and induces "in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power"

(201). Another prisoner, Angelita, comments to Jimena that Ramón, Luis's brother who remains in Madrid, "no se comunicará contigo porque teme que estés vigilada. De hecho, lo estás, Jimena. No hay más que ver la atención que te presta la Topete," and the narration continues, "Efectivamente así era. Lo sentía como una espada que pendía sobre su cabeza cada día" (240). Prison visits are carefully monitored, public events are staged, and the women know that their freedom to see family is dependent on their compliance. This total deprivation of privacy is one of many tactics used to control and manipulate the prisoners, instilling fear and demanding obedience.

The bodies of the female prisoners in the novel are not only surveilled, but they are also highly regulated, disciplined through their behavior, speech, and rituals to create "permanent coercions" and "automatic docility" (Foucault 169). As was true of penitentiary practices during the dictatorship (Vega Sombria; Cuevas, *Prison* 91, 177), Jimena and all prisoners are expected to perform certain rituals, such as singing every morning "Cara al sol," the anthem of the Falange Party. Additionally, prisoners must pray and attend mass every day, and their children must be baptized in the Catholic faith, despite the mothers' objections. Through this type of physical repetition of culturally-imbued words and actions (Butler 95), the female prisoners perform a normalization of the regime's conception of woman/mother/citizen, which is a disciplinary mechanism that uses "[t]he Normal as a principle of coercion" (Foucault 184). During the short hour that Jimena sees Luisito each day at San Isidro Prison, for example, the guards denigrate her body's mode of interaction with him: "Cuando [...] trataba de jugar con él a correr, a lanzarle por el aire, una mandamás le decía que esas cosas eran de pueblo y que así no se educaba a los niños" (315). This is a way of using their bodies as physical manifestations of state power and ideology, forcing it upon them to affirm it, as it is continually repeated. It is a form of

punishment designed to shape and train the body to behave within accepted norms and to reeducate it through regular performance of state ideals, which is especially distressing for the political prisoners, as they are made to use their bodies in a way that goes against their beliefs.

Schedules in the prison are also regulated and compartmentalized, with time allotted for all activities. The use of timetables to “establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, [and] regulate the cycles of repetition” is a way of disciplining bodies, controlling, and training them in the application of a micro-physics of power (Foucault 149). Prisoners’ activities and schedules are predetermined and monitored, as they follow a strict program of mass, prayers, and work. Times for breastfeeding and playing with children are carefully regimented, and mothers are allowed only one hour a day with their children. Such limitations are effective in training the women’s bodies to follow a set pattern of rituals and tasks. It regiments their bodily functions, manipulating them physically to ensure their submission to an imposed structure. However, these practices have negative consequences for the mothers in the prison, as they are often unable to produce milk due to the stressful conditions, which typically results in further separation from their children.

Work is also an important element in the regime’s plan to both punish and redeem the political prisoners. Jimena and her fellow political prisoners are skilled in nursing and sewing, and they are required to use these skills to help other inmates when they give birth and to sew linens and clothing for affluent families. María Topete sells the sewn items to well-connected women of Madrid, presenting this as charity that will aid in the prisoners’ redemption. This is an important part of the prisoners’ regulation, surveillance, and training, because the discipline of work provides “a guarantee of the submission of forces and bodies” (Foucault 220). As the women spend hours each day sewing in the

workshop and cleaning toilets and floors, such work is one of the many techniques and tactics of “a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power” (Foucault 215) that seeks to retrain the female prisoners through the body.

This reeducation also extends to the next generation, or the children brought into or born in prison. In the novel, this is the main objective of María Topete and the prison system, borne out as the bodies of mother and child are slowly and methodically separated, both physically and mentally, following Vallejo Nágera’s claim that the Spanish race must be cleaned and regenerated, to eliminate inferior elements (Capuano and Carli 10-11). Cañil’s portrayal of María Topete’s actions and attitude reflect what appears in many testimonial and historical accounts that describe how she established “un régimen acorde con las teorías eugenésicas de Vallejo Nágera, separando de raíz a niños de madres por la mala influencia que pudieran llegar a ejercer” (Tortosa 57). As Jimena sees, once women give birth, if they are not killed and if the children survive into toddlerhood, they are allowed to spend increasingly less time with their children. Children are permitted to stay with their mothers until they reach three years of age.¹⁰ They are not treated well in the prisons, and many are separated from their mothers, as Luisito is from Jimena. Here, Cañil’s novel shows the importance of Vallejo Nágera’s conception of *Hispanidad*,¹¹ as many Spanish children were taken from their imprisoned mothers and handed over to social services, convents, monasteries, and wealthy families to be educated in the regime’s values (Capuano and Carlo 10-11).¹² This is what Jimena fears the most, and she senses, correctly, that María and her mother-in-law Elvira plan to send Luisito to a religious facility or a Catholic family. Through these practices, the mother prisoners and their children are manipulated through the body, as babies and toddlers are removed from their mothers’ care and placed within a sphere of influence that is loyal to the regime’s values.

The novel also explores how disciplining of the body within the *Nuevo Estado* also extends beyond prison walls, as it pervades Spanish society in its normalization of the state's power and values. This follows Foucault's finding that modern military and penal techniques of training and regulation of the body influence the social body, in politics, education, medicine, and labor (168-69). Jimena's experience in postwar Spain reflects the aftereffects of the military victory of General Franco, the Nationalist troops, and the Falange that assured a systematic control of the larger society. Regulation of the body by the totalitarian state becomes normalized and even desired, in order to show adherence and avoid punishment or shame. María, for example, dresses and fixes her hair in a conservative manner, covering herself and keeping everything tightly controlled. Her gait and the way she holds herself are measured, and viewed as aristocratic: "Alta, flaca, el uniforme de funcionaria de prisiones le daba un aire más militar y envarado si cabía. Lo lucía como nadie, decían las otras funcionarias. Tenía clase, murmuraban" (224). She is unemotional and strict with everyone, especially the prisoners. Likewise, Elvira, Luis's mother, conforms her body to the norms of the regime, wearing her hair gathered high up on her head in a style that gained popularity at the time, called the *¡Arriba España!*. Here, Cañil broadens the scope of the novel's depiction of the postwar penal system, as she shows how power dynamics, working through a regimentation of the body, have also affected the *vencedores*.

The Unmade World

Although Foucault's description of the modern penal system holds true for part of the prisoners' experience in *Si a los tres años no he vuelto*, older forms of coercion and punishment through physical violence and torture are also used in the prison. Foucault describes how, previous to modern prison reforms, violent, brutal punishment of criminals in the public space was meant to demonstrate

the sovereign's absolute control over the body, thus reinforcing his power over the social body (48). In the case of Jimena and her fellow prisoners, in addition to control of the body through surveillance and training, the prisoners suffer torture, humiliation, and execution. While the purpose of the former is to retrain and redeem, the latter is retaliatory and aims to unmake the prisoner's world—as Elaine Scarry writes: "Intense pain is world-destroying" (29). Torture may be short or long in duration, as in this case prisoners suffer both, and with it the world and self disintegrate (Scarry 35). Some violence against the body is made to be public spectacle, for example the executions carried out at the walls of Cementerio del Este in the city center, but most takes place within prison walls, hidden and covered up from family and townspeople.

After Jimena's husband Luis flees to France, she is interrogated and tortured at the Ministerio de Gobernación. While there, she sees, hears, and feels the bloodied and mangled bodies of other political prisoners. She meets Petra Cuevas, whose barely-banded hands are bloody and raw, soaked in gasoline used to strengthen electric currents attached to her skin. Other women arrive to Gobernación with shaved heads, soaked in feces after they were forced to drink castor oil and walk through the streets.¹³ The conversations between Jimena, Petra, and others are fictional, however, the violent mistreatment portrayed in these scenes come from prisoner accounts. Jimena, pregnant, is beaten as interrogators seek to determine her husband's whereabouts. She witnesses many horrors, as men and women are interrogated, tortured, and killed:

El grito que se oyó desde otro lugar de los sótanos taladró la puerta y los oídos de las tres muchachas, que, instintivamente, se llevaron las manos a las orejas. Pero todo fue en vano. Un hombre lanzaba berridos animales, salvajes, hasta desfallecer. (83)

Jimena is transferred to Ventas prison, which was constructed in Madrid in 1931 as a model women's prison.¹⁴ As she enters, however, she is overcome by "aquel olor podrido, mujeres tiradas por las esquinas, los pasillos, las escaleras, al lado de las letrinas que desbordaban mierda" (96). Cañil's descriptions incorporate details gleaned from testimonial and historical accounts of prison life in the postwar years.¹⁵ The horrendous conditions of the prison break down the body, slowly depriving it of all comfort and instead infusing it with pain (Scarry 40). Jimena has entered a prison designed for no more than five hundred women, but now there are more than five thousand, making it nearly impossible to sleep or stay clean. Twelve women are forced to stay in a room made for two, and the prison is filled with bugs, dirt, blood, and human excrement, accelerating rates of contagion, infection, and death. Women suffer from tuberculosis, whooping cough, viruses, and intestinal parasites. Bedbugs, cockroaches, fleas, and scabies roam freely over the women's bodies, and their skin is marked from bites and constant scratching. In this space, the body is attacked—everything that should provide comfort becomes distressing. As Scarry writes:

the de-objectifying of the objects, the unmaking of the made, is a process externalizing the way in which the person's pain causes his world to disintegrate; and, at the same time, the disintegration of the world is here, in the most literal way possible, made painful, made the direct cause of the pain. (41)

The prisoners' world is methodically unmade, removing all previously-known concepts of the body and its surroundings, and replacing them with pain.

This unmaking of the world continues with physical deprivation. It informs every moment of their lives, as they are denied healthy food, and are instead rationed

small amounts of dirty, bug-infested water containing rancid food that comes once a day, if it comes at all. Clean water is scarce, and hundreds of women must use the same non-functioning toilet. There is likewise no medicine for them when they become sick. The entire body becomes deprived—of sleep, privacy, comfort—and instead turns on itself as another weapon in the torturer's arsenal. Intense and drawn-out pain reduces the prisoner to her body, as everything that it does, sees, feels, and lacks is painful (Scarry 41)—the body in pain becomes all that she can perceive. Yet it feels like a self-betrayal, as one's own body can no longer provide relief (Scarry 48). In reducing the prisoners to their bodies, as the pain makes the body always present, they are dehumanized.

As daily executions continue, Jimena and her fellow prisoners watch the prisoners leave their cells and hear the shots that ring through the night. The daily threat of *la pepa* is excruciating, adding to the constant assaults on the body. As pain and suffering besiege every pore of the body, this enduring torture makes the body so present that the self loses its voice, as Scarry writes: "The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it" (49). However, as the tortured's voice diminishes, the torturer's power grows (Scarry 36-37). In this case, María Topete and the prison guards increase in power as they continue to fill the prison with pain. Their voices permeate the space, and their words and actions reinforce their power and agency as they ignore the prisoners' pain.

Cañil's novel also explores the children's mistreatment and their separation from their mothers. In Ventas, when children become ill, the mothers agonize as they are not given any medical help, nutritious food, or milk to help their children. Every day, the prisoners tend to sick children and pick up the dead from the dirty floor. When one day five children have died, Jimena recoils as

she sees them lying on the floor, attacked by worms and flies:

A aquellas moscas gordas, repulsivas, les atraían como un imán los oídos de las criaturas, los orificios de la nariz, exploradores del mejor lugar para depositar su larva en aquella carne que comenzaba a pudrirse [...]. A un niño le asomaban los gusanos por las cuencas de los ojos. (187)

The violence visited upon the prisoners is seen here through the children's bodies—their suffering and physical separation from their mothers puts into practice the brutal tactics of a penitentiary system that aims to crush the *vencidas'* will.

At the San Isidro Mothers' Prison, living conditions improve somewhat for the children, however, there is no heat in the building, and the children spend most of the day and night on a roof patio that offers no shelter. Consequently, many of the children fall ill and die. Housed in a separate, locked area, the mothers are unable to reach their children. When Jimena arrives at San Isidro and realizes that she will be separated from Luisito, she reacts with intense anger, screaming and using her body to hold onto him. She is held back by prison guards, who then take her to a small cell and spray her with a hose. This continues for hours as she cries out and groans, until she finally tires and stops fighting. The pain overtakes Jimena, and she becomes withdrawn and depressed. This is what Scarry describes as the totality of pain, when it

occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside [...] [as it] exhausts and displaces all else until it seems to become the single broad and omnipresent fact of existence. (55)

As the prisoner continues to bear extreme violence and prolonged pain, her body and spirit begin to break down.

The constant attacks on the body are an extension of the power relations at work, which support the dictatorial regime and its values. As the novel explores, the *vencedores*, represented by María, the prison guards, Luis's mother, and the *madrileño* aristocracy, agree with Vallejo Nágera's view of these women prisoners—they are a defective other because they do not conform to the concept of *Hispanidad*. Their bodies represent all that Spain aims to purge and they must be unmade. As they deny the pain inflicted on the prisoners,

it is not the pain but the regime that is uncontestably real, not the pain but the regime that is total, not the pain but the regime that is able to eclipse all else, not the pain but the regime that is able to dissolve the world. (Scarry 56)

The prisoner's pain, as a negation of her self and voice, proclaims her to be an enemy:

This internal physical experience is in torture accompanied by its external political equivalent, the presence in the space outside the body of a self-proclaimed 'enemy,' someone who in becoming the enemy becomes the human embodiment of aversiveness. (Scarry 52)

The abuse is so intense and all-encompassing that the body becomes dehumanized and an object of loathing, and this in turn justifies its mistreatment and manipulation.

Spanish Womanhood and the Valid Subject

In Cañil's novel, domination of the female prisoner's body occurs through corporal coercion, which includes violent treatment, as well as regular, repeated training of gestures and habits. These work in tandem to break down, control, and manipulate the

body and soul. As Foucault suggests, modern penal techniques seek to regulate the body and discipline the soul, which is

the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body [...]. [It] is born [...] out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint. This real, noncorporeal soul is not a substance; it is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power. (29)

The female prisoners' bodies in *Si a los tres años no he vuelto* contain a subject (a soul) that the penitentiary system objectifies and attempts to shape. The women are not simply corporal receptors, but rather their "souls" are culturally, socially, and politically imbued as their bodies perform the values of the state.

The sociology of the body has been explored by sociologists and philosophers such as Norbert Elias, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu, Susan Bordo, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, and the significance of their work is its conception of the body beyond its biological limits, viewing it as both a receptor and producer of cultural norms. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* for example, Judith Butler examines the role of the body within social and cultural norms (and the role of social and cultural norms within the body), looking closely at questions of gender. Basing much of her analysis in Foucault's understanding of the effects of power relations on the body, Butler finds that the materialization of sexual and gender norms occurs through the performance and reiteration of those norms through the body (1-2). Sex is a norm, materialized through regulatory practices that produce the bodies it regulates (1). For the purposes of this article, my analysis of the female body in *Si a los tres años no he vuelto* focuses on particular aspects of sex, namely gender and cultural norms of womanhood and motherhood in postwar Spain, and their relation to power.

During the Second Republic and the Civil War, thousands of Spanish women sought greater equality with men as they worked and fought alongside them, eschewing traditional conceptions of sex and gender (Nash 61). As the Franco regime took power, however, the erasure of the social advances of previous years was paramount, and women's social roles began to shift. This purposeful rejection of progressive gender norms, coupled with the influence of the newly-empowered Catholic Church in Spain, shaped ideas of Spanish womanhood and motherhood (Nash 185-87). Cañil's novel explores the sexual norms of postwar Spain that materialized through their reiteration in regulated practices of the body, seen in the context of Spanish womanhood, and more concretely, her sexuality and motherhood. Jimena and her fellow prisoners do not conform to the image of Spanish woman/mother promoted by the regime, but rather they represent degeneration and abnormality, as purported by Vallejo Nágera (Capuano and Carli 8).

María Topete and most of the prison guards despise Jimena and the other women prisoners. Jimena "era para María la viva imagen de lo arpiás que eran las republicanas, mujeres sin principios" (176). Identification of the body works by exclusion, as Butler explains:

The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex,' and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. (3)

The identification by Jimena as the wife of a Communist and mother of a child considered illegitimate by the regime confirms the norm by excluding the subject who does not conform to it. As depicted in *Si a los tres años no he vuelto*, at this time in postwar Spain, women were expected to marry, have children, and stay at home to care for the family. Religious

norms also influenced cultural norms, which lauded the virginal woman who waits to have sex until marriage, and then is pious and submissive to her husband (Morcillo Gómez 56-57). These are regulatory norms that materialize through their performance (and non-performance) in female bodies, “in the service of the consolidation of the [regime’s gender] imperative” (2).¹⁶ Jimena and many of her fellow prisoners, however, had either been in romantic relationships without marrying, or had married in a civil ceremony and not in the church. Once the war ends, Jimena and the other political prisoners are considered to be immoral, commonly referred to by the prison authorities as *rojas*, *zorras*, and *descarriadas*.¹⁷ This type of naming, as Butler suggests,

is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. Such attributions or interpellations contribute to that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as ‘the human.’ (8)

When María meets with her aristocratic friends, for example, they want her to tell them “las terribles cosas que hacían y decían las rojas en prisión. Lo sucias que eran, lo rebeldes que aún se mostraban” (232). Jimena and her fellow prisoners, however, feel no shame for their sexuality or sexual relations.

María Topete, on the other hand, as well as her sisters, embody a virginal devotion to God and country. This portrayal of María is based on prisoners’ testimonies as well as Cañil’s interviews with family and friends (“¿Quién fue María Topete?”). María’s sisters are nuns, and María has devoted her life to re-educating the *presas rojas* and caring for their children. As we have seen with Jimena and the other prisoners, “the matter of bodies [is] the effect of a dynamic of power” (Butler 2), and this holds true for María as well. When she was younger, she fell deeply in love with an affluent young man, Juan Antonio Aznar,

but he later married another woman. As Cañil had only these details about the relationship, she continues with her interpretation of what may have happened, in an attempt to understand why María never married and instead dedicated herself to the care of the prisoners’ children. In the novel, Juan Antonio one day sneaks into María’s room at a friend’s house, grabs her and brings her to the dressing room where they kiss, and he fondles her with great passion. They do not have intercourse, but she feels immense guilt over the incident: “[E]lla había cometido lo peor del mundo: el pecado de la carne [...]. Nunca más se sintió limpia. Nunca se perdonó aquella debilidad” (137). Afterward, she becomes less accessible to him physically. When he loses interest and marries a wealthier young woman, María is devastated by the loss, and by her believed sin. Suppressing her emotions, she vows to devote her life to her country and to Spain’s children.

In the novel, María and Elvira both resent Jimena for what they see as her sexualized body, a *zorra* who tricked Luis into marrying her and seduced Ramón. María thinks to herself one afternoon:

[Jimena] es más peligrosa que las rojas declaradas. Mira lo que ha hecho con [Luis y Ramón] [...]. Esa joven tiene aura, los enamora, babean por ella. Es asqueroso. Repugnante. Tiene todo bien puesto, la cara, las piernas, los pechos. (273)

After Jimena gives birth to Luisito, María hovers over her as she struggles to breastfeed her baby. With disgust, she orders Jimena to cover herself, insisting that it is unnecessary to expose her breasts. In the novel, María Topete and her sisters represent bodily the values of the Franco regime, as they are exceedingly religious and restrained in their behavior and appearance. As María and her sisters reiterate cultural norms as females in Franco Spain, they constitute the valid subject, while Jimena and her fellow prisoners

form the “constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (Butler 3).

The concept of motherhood is also closely tied to questions of gender and is informed by cultural values. In postwar Spain, Spanish women were expected to be mothers, and to dedicate their lives to family and children (Morcillo Gómez 56-59). This return to rigid traditional gender roles that limited most women to the domestic realm normalized the concept of Spanish motherhood through repetition of regulatory practices of womanhood through female bodies. In *Si a los tres años no he vuelto*, most of the political prisoners are mothers. However, in their appearance, speech, behavior, and self-identification they fail to conform to normative expectations of Spanish motherhood of the postwar years. They are opinionated, strong women who considered themselves equal to men under the Republic and supported democratic ideals. Yet their strength, ideas, and sexuality are outside of the norm—they are believed to be mentally degenerate, and capable of contaminating their children with the destructive ideas of Marxism. Fernando Hernández Holgado comments on how this was seen during the postwar years:

[S]e trataba de familias infectadas [por el virus del marxismo] en las que el acto violento de separación de la madre de sus hijos, por *roja y degenerada*, tanto a través de su eliminación física como de la retirada de la patria potestad, quedaba absolutamente legitimado. (*Mujeres encarceladas* 173)

Although Jimena and the other mothers use every resource at their disposal to care for their children, María and the prison guards believe them to be unfit. Negated as subjects—first through overwhelming pain, and then relative to gender norms—the prisoners become the abject, which “designates [...] those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject” (Butler 3). María views Jimena and

the other mothers as incapable of caring for their children, and harmful to their mental development. As the mothers are separated from their children, they cannot perform the regulatory practices of motherhood, and this removes them further from the norm of motherhood. In their place, María steps into the role of mother as she cultivates close relationships with the children. Convinced by Vallejo Nágera’s writings, María is committed to removing the children from their mothers, limiting their time together soon after birth and trying to persuade the mothers to hand their children over to the state.¹⁸ It is ironic that the children are deprived of that which they need most—food, milk, medicine, and physical nurturing from their mothers, and yet because the mothers’ bodies are not considered proper for motherhood, they are blamed for their children’s deficiencies. The women are punished and tortured until they cannot provide for their children, and then separated when they insist on giving their children what they have left—their physical warmth and love.

Agency of the Abject

Despite the immense limitations and controls imposed on the female prisoner’s body in *Si a los tres años no he vuelto*, Jimena and her fellow prisoners retain a certain amount of agency, seen through the body. On a few occasions, the female prisoners band together as a group of bodies to overwhelm guards to protect a fellow inmate, showing physical strength and persistence in the face of severe repression. Based on a true episode in Petra Cuevas’s life (Armengou and Belis, *Pueblos*), when in the novel Petra tries to keep her sickly daughter with her, away from the cold patio, Trini, Angelita, Jimena, and other prisoners gather around her and struggle to prevent the guards from reaching her. The body can also at times be a source of comfort. The women remain close to those who are suffering, offering them a hug or a smile, and help each other to remove the bugs that pester them. When Jimena receives a packet from Ramón with food and a book,

[l]as lágrimas le recorrían el rostro con la misma velocidad que los recuerdos, hasta que sintió que Antonia se deslizaba a su lado, la abrazaba fuerte, muy fuerte [...]. No le importó descubrir los piojos gordos y las blancas liendres en las sienas y cerca de la oreja de su amiga. (212)

As many of the women are political prisoners, they find ways to organize, passing clandestine notes and setting up classes for the children. Cañil's portrayal of prisoner solidarity recreates what Hernández Holgado refers to as *la prisión militante*: "Las mayorías de presas políticas tanto de Ventas como de Les Corts fueron construyendo a lo largo del período estudiado una comunidad, una identidad colectiva, toda una cultura" (228). As women prisoners did during the postwar years,¹⁹ Jimena and the other inmates band together to improve prison conditions, gather scarce resources, and maintain cultural knowledge. These examples show how the body is an agent of solidarity and everyday resistance, allowing the women to preserve agency within a repressive environment.

Although the female prisoner's body in the novel has been broken down so severely that her world is unmade, she finds a way to remake it. Scarry writes that, whereas the body can only refer inward when intense pain batters it, as objects outside the body are unmade and recast as pain/power, the imagination refers only to objects outside the body that allow the self to remake its world (162). This imaginative process transforms pain "from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self-modifying and, when most successful, self-eliminating one" (Scarry 164). In the novel, Jimena often thinks about Luis, remembering past days and imagining a safe and loving future with him and Luisito, as "cada minuto, cada segundo del día, se repetía el nombre de su marido en una retahíla que hubiera sonado ridícula para las otras compañeras" (205). She also sings a song that her father taught her, the "Romance de la loba parda," comparing María Topete to the *loba parda* that steals the shepherd's sheep, and herself

to the *perra trujillana* that captures the *loba* with strength and cunning. Although this does not eliminate Jimena's suffering, this helps her to transform it into an active experience of hope.

Part of the prisoners' agency lies also in their status of abject selves, who in their repudiation of the norms of Spanish womanhood are a "threatening spectre" for the subject and a "critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" (Butler 3). While it is true that they remain dehumanized, outside of the normative self of womanhood, Cañil's novel shows how through corporeal performance they resignify the norm (Butler 21). Although Jimena and the other prisoners are not accepted as Spanish women and mothers because they do not perform gender along normative lines, their agency is "a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (Butler 15). They *are* Spanish women and mothers, and their performance of these roles works in relation to the normalized subject. Their embodiment of difference from the norm refigures, redistributes, and resignifies normative limits and "constitute[s] a subversive rearticulation of [the] symbolic" (Butler 109). Looking closely at their experience in Ventas and San Isidro prisons, the women prisoners show strength, intelligence, persistence, and kindness in the face of intense repression. They remain steadfast in their position as Spanish women, determined to retain their dignity. As mothers, they sacrifice their own needs and wants for their children, and use their bodies to nurture and protect them. Despite the obstacles facing them, they continue to perform womanhood and motherhood. Additionally, in their representation of Spanish female prisoners of the postwar, their stories provide the reader with an understanding of how they achieved resistance within an oppressive and highly manipulative prison system.

Conclusion

In *Si a los tres años no he vuelto*, the body acts as a vessel that travels through the depths

of human experience in a women's prison of postwar Spain. As a fictional narrative based on testimonies and historical documents, Cañil's novel guides the reader through the many sufferings, limitations, and manipulations affecting the bodies of women inmates, their children, and the female prison authorities. By focusing on the body, the narrative communicates in an emotional and direct way, drawing the reader into a detailed and nuanced portrayal of the inner workings of the penitentiary system. At the same time, the fictional elements of Jimena's story of imprisonment, conversations and comments among the women, and character motivation serve as an interpretation of testimonial accounts, imagining what the day-to-day experience would have been like and attempting to understand how such repression could occur.

Analysis of the body in Cañil's novel offers insight into how the power dynamics of postwar Spain manifested within the prison system. Both modern penal techniques of regulation and discipline, as well as more barbaric methods of violence and deprivation, were used to crush the female political prisoner in body and spirit, to reeducate her within the traditional, Catholic ideals of the Franco regime. As seen through the experiences of Jimena, her fellow prisoners, and prison director María Topete, the penitentiary system is designed to unmake and reshape the woman prisoner, and this extends to the prisoners' children. Their bodies are first neglected and abused, and then separated from their mothers so that they can be educated within the norms of the regime. The manifestation of these norms through the body extends into the larger society as well, as we have seen in the characters of María and Elvira.

Yet the body also reveals the women prisoners' strength and exposes the falsity of the regime's claims against them as women and mothers. The prisoners resist with their bodies, using them to create solidarity and community, to continue to feed and care for their children, and to maintain their own beliefs and norms of Spanish womanhood. They

also find ways to transcend the body, using their imaginative capabilities to maintain hope and preserve their courage. Resisting manipulation, they occupy a space of alterity and abjectness that threatens the power dynamics that support the functioning of the penal system, and in turn, the dictatorial regime. This defiance contradicts the regime's belief, represented in the novel by María, the prison guards, and the affluent women of Madrid, that the women political prisoners were inferior and defective; on the contrary, their actions as women and mothers disprove this, revealing the carefully-designed methods of oppression meant to deny their humanity and recreate them as compliant, docile bodies.

Notes

¹ See, for example, *Cárcel de Mujeres: 1939-1945* (Tomas Cuevas, 1985), *Desde la noche y la niebla* (Juana Doña, 1978), *En el infierno. Ser mujer en las cárceles de España* (Lidia Falcón, 1977), and *Irredentas: las presas políticas y sus hijos en las cárceles franquistas* (Ricard Vinyes Ribas, 2002).

² Similar novels include Carlos Fonseca's *Trece rosas rojas* (2004), Ángeles López's *Martina, la rosa número trece* (2006), Clara Sánchez's *Entra en mi vida* (2012), and José Luis Gordillo's *Yo te quiero* (2012).

³ Winner of the 2008 Premio Espasa de Ensayo.

⁴ In a 2011 interview with Pilar Portero on their joint website tu2is.blogspot.com, Cañil remarked:

La Topete también me da pena, aunque eso irrita a mucha gente [...]. Se me hacía difícil que una mujer vinculada a la cultura y la vida cristiana se convirtiese en un ser tan insensible y perverso. Entonces intenté buscar las razones que la transformaron en un pedernal. No hay nada que la justifique, pero necesitaba entenderla.

⁵ Petra Cuevas, Trinidad Gallego, Paz Az-zati, and Matilde Landa spent years in the Ventas Women's Prison, as well as other prisons during the dictatorship. Several aspects of their portrayal in Cañil's novel are accurate. For instance, they were politically active before the Civil War, Petra lost a baby in Ventas prison due to mistreatment, Trinidad was a nurse and midwife, Paz was imprisoned in Ventas Prison, and Matilde Landa helped

fellow prisoners organize and review their legal cases (Hernández Holgado, *Mujeres encarceladas*).

⁶ The Dirección General de Seguridad depended on the Ministerio de Gobernación and was tasked with the responsibility of public order. During the immediate postwar months, thousands of Spanish citizens were rounded up and taken to the Ministerio de Gobernación, housed at the Casa de Correos, where in the basement they were questioned and tortured before being executed or imprisoned.

⁷ *La pepa* is a term that was used to refer to a death sentence.

⁸ Several additional testimonial and historical sources have documented the violent repression that took place after the end of the Spanish Civil War, as well as the conditions of women's prisons in the post-war years. Selected texts are Anderson and del Arco Blanco, Casanova, Espinosa, Mir and Moreno Gómez, Casanova and Gil Andrés, Mir Curcó, Hernández Holgado's *Mujeres encarceladas*, Cuevas, Falcón, Doña, and Vinyes' "Doblegar y transformar."

⁹ See Tortosa 51-59, and Armengou and Belis, *Pueblos*.

¹⁰ The Order of March 30, 1940 (Orden de 30 de marzo de 1940) permitted incarcerated women to breastfeed their children and keep them in prison with them until the children reached three years of age. After this time, children could be placed with family or, more commonly, with religious or charitable institutions (Tortosa 52).

¹¹ Basing his writings on the concept of social eugenics, Vallejo Nágera proposed a definition of *Hispanidad* that conceived Spanish identity within cultural and political boundaries. By fostering traditional Catholic, military, and monarchic values, and cleansing the people of Marxist and democratic ideals, the Spanish people and nation would grow to be superior. Consequently, Republicans, Marxists, Communists, and their families were believed to be the cause of the Spanish race's degeneration, and a cultural regeneration would necessitate their expulsion or reeducation (Capuano and Carli 7-10).

¹² See also Vinyes, Armengou, and Belis.

¹³ On the violence and repression visited upon *las vencidas*, see Cobo Romero and Ortega López.

¹⁴ Victoria Kent, the first female General Director of Prisons in Spain, worked to reform female prisons under the Second Republic. Ventas Women's Prison was the fruit of Kent's efforts, and when it opened in 1933, it had sufficient space, light, and facilities to foster reeducation and rehabilitation (Hernández Holgado, *Mujeres encarceladas*, 39-84).

¹⁵ See, for example, Cuevas *Prison*, Ramos Mesonero 67-97, Hernández Holgado "La prisión militante," and Vinyes *Irredentas* 72-78.

¹⁶ Butler writes of the "consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (2). However, her finding that the materialization of regulatory norms reinforces the norm (power) may apply to various contexts, here the consolidation of gender norms as put forth by the Franco regime.

¹⁷ Women who fought during the Spanish Civil War and women associated with the Republican cause were often portrayed as prostitutes and immoral women. For many during the war, and also during the dictatorship, the term *roja* became synonymous with whore (Hernández Holgado *Mujeres encarceladas* 123-26; Moreno 5-6).

¹⁸ Many women prisoners felt that they had little choice in giving up their children. For many, their husbands were in jail or dead, and if other family members remained, they often suffered from extreme poverty and could not take care of their children. By law, children could not stay with their mothers in prison after three years of age, and consequently if there was nowhere for the child to go, many mothers signed the papers to give their children to the state, or the state took them by force (Souto "Formas de la expropiación," 116-17). On the Spanish children sent to state care or adoption, see also Vinyes, Armengou, and Belis.

¹⁹ See Hernández Holgado "La prisión militante" 228-32, and Vinyes "El universo penitenciario" 172-75.

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