Posttraumatic Culture in Spanish and Latin American Theater

Posttraumatic Culture in Spanish and Latin American Theater

By

Henry James Morello

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Posttraumatic Culture in Spanish and Latin American Theater

By Henry James Morello

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-1733-8
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-1734-5

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book begins its journey thanks to John Mayer, a Western Illinois University graduate student. John convinced me to take my first theater course, a class on improvisational acting, thus leading me to study theater. I was interested in psychology, so I studied that as well. Even back then, I could see a connection between theater and psychology. From there, I began what I thought would be a long and, if not financially profitable, certainly rewarding career in acting. During my relatively brief career, I learned that much of what we do in life is connected to acting, theater, and performance. Though the lessons from my undergrad years were never dormant and helped me in my teaching career and personal life, they did not take the second step until I met Carmelo Esterrich. It was Carmelo who introduced me to some of the world's richest literature, and after years away from school, I returned to study Latin American Literature. Finally, in a class with Elzbieta Sklodowska on *testimonio* at the University of Illinois, I put all of these fields together. Elzbieta also started me thinking about the concept of memory and what trauma can do to memories. Lastly, she convinced me that one needed to study the inner workings of psychology before attempting to write about trauma and that too many people venture into fields without doing the proper background work. This last piece of advice has become an important cornerstone of my work.

Often, when I look around a field that ought to be a bridge between science and literature, I see that the science of memory is left out of the picture. In this book, I merge the fields in a rigorous yet approachable way.

A part of me also writes this book as a message of hope. I recognize and think about what in academia might be called the trauma trade and that I am trying to make my living, in part, by examining the pain of others as it manifests in literature, theater, music, and art. I know that this research is desperately needed and that, in the words of Willie Lowman, “Attention must be paid.” I do not feel as though I am writing about some disconnected Other who needs me to express what cannot be stated, but instead, I am writing for me, for my children, for my loved ones as I know that what

happened in Argentina, Chile, and Spain can happen anywhere at any time. We must recognize it, and we must be vigilant about fighting it. Throughout the book, I discuss the dangers of seeing without witnessing and the dangers of silence. These discussions are proving increasingly salient as we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century.

For that reason, my work, including this book, is fueled by a combination of desire and fear. It is my desire that if enough people learn about the events described in these pages, they will not be repeated. It is my fear that they are already being repeated and that they will continue to be repeated in the foreseeable future. As I write these words, conflicts are raging in every part of the world. The current butchery that gets splashed across screens always seems unprecedented, but it has its precedents.

There are, of course, a number of people I would like to thank for their help, expertise, and support while writing this book. This project began as a dissertation, which, in retrospect, looked a bit like an awkward teen, but it was *my* awkward teen. Dara Goldman put up with me as I tried to get my teen to behave. It was not a particularly smooth process, but she stuck with me. After I unleashed its youthful exuberance, Eva-Lynn Jagoe, Joyce Tolliver, and John Wilcox gave me additional advice, and John, in particular, was one of the first people to tell me that I was doing something important and that I ought to continue this line of investigation. I would also like to thank Charles Phillip Thomas, who translated many works for Marco Antonio de la Parra. His responses to my questions regarding de la Parra's work went far beyond mere collegiality.

That said, the book languished for a bit, or perhaps a better way to say it is that it marinated. I understand that career-wise, it is a bad move to let something sit, and that we are required to churn out articles and books, which vastly reduce the quality of what passes for research today, but with this book, there were some unanswered questions, ideas that needed time and investigation. I found that I had to write other pieces to the puzzle before returning to this. When I did come back to this project, I returned with renewed vigor due to the kind, enthusiastic, and motivating words of Cathy Caruth. Cathy's research and her book *Unclaimed Experience* were essential factors in getting me started on the research for this text, and it only makes sense that an email from her would be the final push I needed to finish.

Ariel Dorfman is another one who has had more of an impact than he knows. He is truly an inspiration for what I am attempting to do, and it isn't because he saw the horrors of the Pinochet dictatorship but because of how he continues to live his life. Ariel has a joy for life that is infectious. He epitomizes hope.

There are a few more people who I want to thank for their support in these efforts. First, Tim Wilson is a constant source of encouragement and is more than willing to talk about whatever nutty idea pops into my head. Witnessing the way in which Isabel and Sebastian connect with the world has made me change the way I see it. Diana and Juliana had to see me at a very low point in my professional career, and in many ways, my entire family had to bear the brunt of that period in my life.

CHAPTER 1

REMEMBRANCES

The advent of trauma as a diagnosis was controversial and underwent numerous iterations. Although the idea of a traumatic shock to the system has been around for thousands of years, it wasn't until the 1980s that the American Psychological Association gave us the contemporary definition of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The process of reaching that definition has also been quite political as it is the only disorder connected directly to a cause; nevertheless, a diagnosis of trauma has become more or less accepted, albeit with a considerable stigma attached. The condition is thus defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*: a feeling of "intense fear, helplessness, or horror" as a response to an experience "that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" (467). Furthermore, there is a disruption in the individual's ability to narrate the events due to several of the symptoms, including the inability to recall important aspects of the event as well as the recurring intrusive thoughts related to the event (468). This conception of trauma becomes the foundation for the argument for the existence of posttraumatic culture in the broader sense and the posttraumatic cultural products that arise from those cultures.

Trauma enters the very fabric of a culture as a sociological construct when entire communities are exposed to catastrophic events such as natural disasters, civil war, genocide, coup d'état, or dictatorship. In other words, a posttraumatic culture is formed only when exposure reaches the level of society. These events lead to the same intense fear and helplessness for an entire people or segment of the population, as seen in individuals who have PTSD. Also, just as the individual has difficulty expressing the traumatic event, society's narrative becomes fractured, disrupting the identity of the imagined community, as Benedict Anderson would say. The

need for representation of that trauma, which mimics the individual's desire to re-experience the crisis event, is grounded in the desire to explore the fissure in the communal narrative and offers the possibility of a therapeutic effect. The repetition is not merely a symptom of PTSD but also functions as a way in which the individual attempts to reconcile the event. Ofelia Ferrán points out this duality, in a slightly different way, in the chapter titled "The *Pharmakon* of Memory" in her text *Working through Memory: Writing and Remembrance in Contemporary Spanish Narrative*. She mentions that the term *Pharmakon* means a remedy or a cure but also notes that Derrida draws attention to the fact that *pharmakon* means poison as well. "If writing is to serve as the remedy that will help make memory better," writes Ferrán, "it is at the same time the poison that will endanger it" (103). While Ferrán is speaking in a general sense of the danger that writing poses to the act of remembering, and if we extend that idea to the memory of a given trauma, the danger doubles as memory itself is threatened and in as much as the person writing and remembering is endangered because they are reliving the trauma, posttraumatic texts take that idea in a different direction for the consumer of those texts. That is, what Ferrán says of writing is true of the symptoms of PTSD, which are also the remedy for the condition and, thus, a type of *pharmakon*.

Consequently, the writing and performing of posttraumatic texts do not pretend to explain or write record memory as a matter of record. Instead, the goal of the texts is to stimulate one's memory. Indeed, the idea of the poison also potentially being the cure, the repetition of a given trauma through performance, is an apt concept to keep in mind as the plays are analyzed. Memory, then, is a contested space. The conflict, or the inability to coherently address memory, is the poison that is also, when appropriately mediated, the road to ameliorating the condition resulting from trauma. However, memory is also a site of struggle. "Those events, those subjects, those places, those meanings, and the will to or the desire to remember or forget them play an important role in the battle for the signification of memory. Memory is not just one but a set of recollections attached to oftentimes irreconcilable meanings, conditioned by—but also conditioning—the interpretations available in the present" (Forcinito 79). Memory, then, is a set of complex recollections, or rather the stories that gesture toward the

subjects, locations, and actions. In posttraumatic theater, then, we get the representations of those gestures.

Since the 1992 seminal work *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, there has been an explosion of research into the role of representation of trauma in literature. Various researchers have explored the role of literature's relationship to history as well as the efficacy of bearing witness to traumatic events. What becomes evident from these studies is that the representation of crisis events and the subsequent investigation of that representation remain areas in need of examination and clarification. It is essential to see the struggle of memory as manifested in representation, but the undertaking is not without risks.

The representation of trauma is fraught with contradiction. Aside from fueling the recent uptick in what has been dubbed trauma tourism, the effects that catastrophic events can have on memory and recall, trauma is at once a narrative that cannot be created, but neither can those effects be destroyed. That is, scientifically speaking, the same rush of chemicals to the brain that circumvents the ability to speak coherently about such events also heightens specific details that cannot readily be forgotten. Thus, trauma lives on in its victims, threatening to destroy them, but cannot readily be brought to the surface to create a narrative that could ameliorate the pain and suffering caused by catastrophic events. The contradictions inherent in PTSD and posttraumatic culture are also seen in those who are outside of the events looking in. Trauma causes outsiders to want to empathize, to connect on a human level with those who suffer, and simultaneously to distance themselves from the people and events. They pull back in fear, horror, or some cases, guilt; both of these desires will be evident in the texts examined here. In addition, people have an innate fear of getting sucked into the pain of trauma victims, a fear that the listener will be harmed by the event just by witnessing it at a remove.

In fact, that fear is not baseless, given the process of sharing what takes place in the telling of the trauma. Even mental health professionals, despite their training, may feel the effects of their patients' trauma to one degree or another. "There is a cost to caring. Professionals who listen to clients' stories of fear, pain, and suffering may feel similar fear, pain, and suffering because they care. Sometimes we feel we are losing our sense of

self to the clients we serve" (Figley, *Compassion* 1). The listener, which includes readers of posttraumatic literature, becomes vulnerable and, in some cases, may also show very mild symptoms of PTSD. In chapter one of *Testimony*, Felman describes this phenomenon occurring with a class she taught at Yale in which she had the students listen to the testimony of Holocaust survivors. The students, who would be perhaps at the other end of the scale of "listeners" from therapists, were able to quickly overcome the stresses they felt while serving as witnesses to the traumatic accounts. This suggests the effect of empathy in this regard has its limits, to be certain, but since therapists are exposed to traumas on a much more consistent basis, and thus there is a risk of secondary traumatic stress. Both of these groups serve as exemplars of a possible audience of posttraumatic theater.

I will return to the complexities of empathy, but for now, it is important to recognize that the result of trauma is that the victim simultaneously attempts to hide, expose, and on occasion, rewrite history through the conscious or subconscious exploration of the traumatizing event. When the victim of a traumatic event suffers from the inability to narrate that event coherently, they need to re-inscribe it or take ownership of the events. In many cases, the victim cannot do this work alone and needs an interlocutor to listen as they work out the details of their traumatic event. Important interlocutors of traumatic events over the years have been playwrights, writers, musicians, and other artists, which is why the culture that emanates from this empathetic listening, posttraumatic culture, mimics PTSD in an attempt to do much of that same work: to either hide or expose the trauma and then, perhaps, to rewrite history to either include or exclude the traumatic event depending on the overall cultural resolution of those symptoms.

Artists are important interlocutors because they are the ones who move the trauma from the purely psychological to the broader historical context. Official history has been particularly inept at adequately representing trauma. Since the publication of the works of Caruth, Felman, and others, trauma as an organizing idea has increasingly become more central to scholars' attempts to reconsider the history of the last hundred-plus years from the perspective of the evolving field of psychology. Perspectives of trauma as a historical force in the lives of individuals and the culture at large come from the fields of psychology, literary and cultural

studies, illness studies, and historiography. All of these fields, however, come at the problem from different perspectives, and all have their own sets of criteria for exploring trauma or the culture of trauma—often with very little exchange of ideas between the fields. At the very least, the result is an enormously complex picture of trauma as it relates to history. The multiplicity of perspectives runs the risk of obfuscation or overwhelming these texts that are attempting delicate work, and therefore, one of the goals of this book will be to focus on all of those voices while, at the same time, allowing the primary texts to dictate the direction.

One of the main contradictions of writing about trauma is that the crisis of history or history that is overwhelming and nearly impossible to articulate becomes a crisis on other levels. This crisis, according to theorists, and perhaps articulated best by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in the introduction to *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (when writing about Camus' *The Plague* and a particular stylistic transformation in Camus):

> We read both the stylistic transformation and this philosophical transvaluation taking place in Camus' writing as the indirect expressions of—or the belated testimonies to—the radical crisis of witnessing the Holocaust has been, and to the consequent, ongoing, as yet unresolved *crisis of history*, a crisis which in turn is translated into a *crisis of literature* insofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself. (xvii-i)

That is, the representation of trauma is, as Elie Wiesel claimed, impossible. Or rather, a direct expression of trauma, in this case, the Holocaust, does not or cannot express the true nature of the event. There is, then, a crisis of representation, a crisis to which only posttraumatic texts can attend. Felman and Laub struggle with the question of how one creates a narrative of traumatic events. The above quotation is, in fact, emblematic of the problem at hand. The attempt to come to the issue of trauma from so many angles, from so many disparate perspectives, that the various researchers' fields constitute yields, at the very least, a complex picture of the issue. That complexity is merely a difficulty, however. There is a more significant issue in that the culture can only gesture toward the event, not

re-create it. History and memory, in general, can only gesture toward and not recreate events exactly. Trauma, though, compounds the problem in as much as some aspect of the event remains inutterable. However, I argue that it is within that very gap in utterance, that fissure where one can begin to examine posttraumatic culture and allow the members of a given traumatized group the impetus to begin exploration.

Indeed, since traumatic events that need exploration evade the telling and thereby evade literature, a series of crises evolve, the resolution of which will ultimately yield utterance. However, there is a rather large rift between the event and the resolution, as well as between the resolution and the utterance. The following questions serve as a guide as this book bridges that divide: How do plays, novels, poems, songs, and paintings address events that have such gaps between experience and expectation? If these events cannot be told, then why do they become such an essential feature of a wide variety of cultures in Latin America? Why does the representation of trauma show up in plays such as *Información para extranjeros*, *El arquitecto y el emperador de Asiria, Lo crudo, lo cocido, lo podrido*, and in novels such as *La ciudad ausente* and *El delirio de Turing*? How is trauma performed in the music of Aterciopelados or the testimonies of Rigoberta Menchú and Rodolfo Walsh? There are countless cultural forms that attempt to tell untellable stories of great pain and tragedy, and it is how literature manages to say what the culture at large has deemed unsayable that is the focus of this book. The journey to representing trauma is long. It starts from a metaphorical "no place," a heterotopic place as explained by Foucault, and occurs at "no time" (I describe this as the gap in experience by employing Ricoeur's conception of human time.). From a more scientific perspective, the inability to relate events comes from the ebb and flow of chemicals in the brain of the individual experiencing said events, allowing some details of the events to become fixed in memory while others are not. The artistic representation of these fissures between what is remembered and what is not remembered starts as a trickle; it leads to testimony and eventually floods our consciousness. It begins with voices like that of María Angélica Batallán, a mother from Tucumán, Argentina, who is finally allowed to speak about the disappearance of her son Juan de Dios Gómez:

> El 10 de agosto de 1976, a las 6 de la tarde un grupo de militares al mando de Tte. Flores que andaban en una camioneta,

> detuvieron a mi hijo en el Ingenio Santa Lucía, en la despensa donde trabajaba. Después me lo trajeron para la casa, ahí nos amenazaron a mí y al padre. Revisaron todo. Después se fueron con mi hijo y no tuvimos más noticias de él. [The 10th of August, 1976 at 6 in the afternoon a group of military personal at the command of Lt. Flores were traveling in pick-up truck, when they detained my son at the Ingenio Santa Lucía, in the dispensary where he worked. Afterward, they brought him home, where they threatened his father and me. They searched everywhere. Later, they left with my son, and we never heard from him again. (*Nunca más* 19 translation mine)

As painful as this singular event is to read, if this had been an isolated incident, the trauma of this event would have been limited to the Batallán friends and family. It would have been a case of personal rather than national trauma. However, the scene that María Angélica Batallán describes was repeated thousands of times across Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Uruguay, and Spain, repeated to such a degree that these societies collectively suffered from what can only be described as PTSD. In turn, the attempt to represent those traumas created cultural products that bear the markings of PTSD. As Alicia Partnoy admonishes her readers, "Beware: in *Little School,* the boundaries between story and history are so subtle that even I can hardly find them" (Kindle Locations 135-136). The traumas are not isolated but repeated with calculated precision to maximize the effects of terror on the general population, calculated precisely to blur the distinction between history and story.

In this book, I claim that the texts under discussion are *best* described as posttraumatic, that they are texts that attempt to perform a society in anguish and, as such, share common characteristics regardless of genre, location, or period. This book examines six texts that are at the forefront of that struggle. They represent traumatic events in ways that are unexpected, and because of the way they address those catastrophes, they are of tangible consequence. I also make a case for reconsidering texts labeled postmodernism, especially those previously considered ludic, in light of advances in posttraumatic studies. Too often, posttraumatic texts have been misidentified as postmodern, and as such, too often, they were dismissed as apolitical and ahistorical. For example, a quick review of

criticism about *El arquitecto y el emperador de Asiria* will show it was seen as ludic with little to offer in socio-historical terms. However, when the theoretical lens is adjusted slightly, the play says more about the context of the Spanish civil war and the subsequent dictatorship than previously realized.

El arquitecto y el emperador de Asiria and other texts like it are products of catastrophic events or cultural wounds which occurred in several countries in Latin America and Spain. These painful events created an environment of stress that was pervasive enough to affect the culture of those regions. In other words, posttraumatic texts have stylistic features informed by the cultural context in which they were written. The historical contexts of the plays are extreme violence and repression, which created societies with a high prevalence of PTSD. In turn, the culture—in this case, the theater created in that context—has specific characteristics that parallel the symptoms of PTSD, and the texts that come out of that culture offer a way to talk about tragic events and offer the possibility of a therapeutic effect.

In examining the relationship between traumatic histories and cultural responses to social trauma, the primary texts discussed include, from Spain, Fernando Arrabal's *El arquitecto y el Emperador de Asiria* and Alfonso Sastre's *Escuadra hacia la muerte*. From the southern cone, I focus on two Chilean and two Argentine plays: Marco Antonio de la Parra's *Lo crudo, lo cocido y lo podrido*; Ariel Dorfman's *La muerte y la doncella;* Griselda Gambaro's *Información para extranjeros;* and Diana Raznovich's *El desconcierto*. These particular texts were chosen for a variety of important reasons. First, they show a range of what would fall within the parameters of a posttraumatic cultural product, but they also cross-gender and generational lines and are thus more likely to be representational. Some of the texts were written in exile while others were not, and some of the texts were written while the terror was still occurring, while others were written post-authoritarian rule. Furthermore, these texts, in exemplary fashion, manifest the symptoms of PTSD as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV-TR)*. Finally, due to the performative nature of the genre, these plays also serve as tools for healing the societies that have suffered those wounds.

I chose works by writers from these three countries in part because of their similarities but also because of some of the striking differences between them. The logic is to look for similarities in trauma literature while recognizing inherent differences between various cultural contexts. "Although one must consider the connections and similarities between authoritarianism in Spain and Latin American nations, especially the neo-fascist ideals of the Southern Cone who took as their model Francoism, critics stress that any attempt to standardize these experiences would be amiss" (Swier and Riordan-Goncalves 7). I will go into more detail regarding the complexities of these similar yet distinct histories in chapter one. Lastly, the characteristics produced by these works emerging from posttraumatic stress are strikingly similar to the aesthetic criteria used to define what is often referred to as postmodern culture. Philippa Page references this idea in her book *Politics and Performance in Post-Dictatorship Argentine Film and Theatre*. She asks, "How then is genre still relevant to the study of plays and films which can also be described as postmodern" (9)? Although I would prefer to move entirely away from the discussion of the postmodern and discuss posttraumatic texts on their own, there is an impulse by many to categorize posttraumatic texts as postmodern. It is an impulse that is understandable and needs some examination. Whether one examines Ihab Hassan's list of postmodernism's traits in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature*, some of which include purely stylistic differences with modernism, or one looks to the more theoretical aspects of postmodernism as laid out by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, signs of trauma are included in the definition of what constitutes postmodernity. As Lyotard points out:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (81)

It is not difficult to see a parallel between Felman and Laub's analysis of *The Plague* and what Lyotard describes here. From a more

purely aesthetic perspective, some of the hallmarks of postmodernism, according to Hassan, Linda Hutcheon, and others, are parody, pastiche, and fragmentation. The postmodern work has a repetitive nature in that it often borrows from history and is often cyclical within the framework of the text. Often postmodernism is open-ended or lacks a clear resolution. With one crucial addition, posttraumatic texts have all of these hallmarks. Parody, pastiche, and fragmentation are critical stylistic features of posttraumatic texts. They also have a circular or looping aspect to their narrative structure, the same type of structure used in the therapies associated with PTSD. Lastly, the open-ended nature of posttraumatic cultural products is important in that they are not forcing a memory; rather, they serve as a triggering mechanism for self-reflection. Since one of the effects of posttraumatic culture is to trigger memory or even discussion of past events, many of these same aesthetic features are prominent in the plays discussed in this book. The crucial difference between postmodern and posttraumatic texts is the empathy toward the people who suffered the catastrophic event.

The key to unlocking the difference between the postmodern and the posttraumatic lies in the consideration of human rights discourse. Although Michael Galchinsky discusses the problems with human rights culture, he lays out the impetus for human rights culture. He discusses the fact that human rights culture tried to move people through the use of empathy and identification. Posttraumatic texts concentrate on empathy while trying to avoid the identification for a reason aptly discussed by Galchinsky, "Human rights culture performs its many tasks by addressing multiple audiences. Most rights works are directed to their national audiences and speak to a national crisis in a global dialect. In addition to addressing the national audience, a small proportion of these also reach the global public. At the national level, we can split the audience into three parts: the abused, the witnesses and allies, and the perpetrators" (6). If you are to include identity as part of the project, the question becomes, to which group do you create a sense of identity? The audience is split, and so is identity. This split opens up a pathway for empathy, which becomes the critical piece that connects all of these ideas and separates the postmodern from the posttraumatic. Prior to the explosion of trauma studies started by Caruth, Felman, and Laub, it would have been easy to miss the importance of traumatic events in many twentieth-century texts. Phillipa Page runs into

this problem when she discusses the re-politicization of films and theater since the dictatorship in Argentina. The fact is, posttraumatic theater is always politicized, even when, for a variety of reasons, it does not appear to be. Yes, there is overlap in what is called postmodern and posttraumatic, but there are substantial differences that cannot be ignored. The most important, again, is the inclusion of a sense of empathy.

A question one might ask is, why did I choose primarily works for the theater? How does live theater differ from film, literature, or music in regard to its posttraumatic possibilities? I do not believe that prose, poetry, or any other form of cultural production should be excluded from a posttraumatic investigation, and to that end, include other forms (in fact, although I deal primarily with theater, I reference a cross-section of plays, novels, testimonies, and music from a range of countries in this discussion). However, theater has some components that make it an important starting point for a discussion of posttraumatic cultural theory.

For some perspective, let us consider some historical context. Theater, as we know it, grew out of primitive rituals and ceremonies. Theater historian Oscar Brockett notes, "During the early stages of its development, a society becomes aware of forces that appear to influence or control its food supply and well-being. […] Perceiving an apparent connection between certain actions performed by the group (or its shamans) and the results it desires, the group repeats, refines, and formalizes these actions into fixed ceremonies, or rituals" (1).

Essentially, certain rituals were seen to have a cause-and-effect relationship with outside events, and these highly theatrical rituals were thought to have therapeutic effects on people as well as bringing about a good hunt or healthy rainfall, or other such boons for the culture. The idea of theater as efficacious did not end with the establishment of more formalized theater. Robert Landy writes that "[J]ust below the ruins of the ancient Theater of Dionysus in Epidauros, Greece, lie the remains of an equally ancient hospital [and that] patients of the hospital were cured by performing in the Greek chorus" (5). Furthermore, Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* of the cathartic effect of tragedy, where fear and pity are employed to purge the spectators. Agosto Boal finds Aristotle's system to be coercive, and while I agree that there is a measure of audience manipulation in tragic theater generally, it is important to note that posttraumatic theater can never

be classified as tragic and avoids the manipulative nature of cathartic theater, and as such avoids the trap of being manipulative. And I would add prescriptively that, for a play to be posttraumatic, it needs to avoid any such attempt at catharsis. I argue that posttraumatic theater does not attempt to purge the spectator, nor does it try to force a catharsis through the use of pity and fear. In fact, I argue that the farther posttraumatic plays stay from instilling fear in the spectator, the greater the chance of achieving a therapeutic effect.

As Marina Jenkyns points out, "[T]he play can be a powerful mirror of human experience…" (1). Dorfman takes this metaphor literally when in *La muerte y la doncella,* a mirror is lowered in front of the spectators. Of course, the best-known use of theater as a mirror is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which Jenkyns discusses in depth. In the play that Hamlet has performed for Claudius, the *Murder of Gonzago*, he inserts some lines that mirror Claudius' murder of Hamlet's father and is thus able to ensnare Claudius.

> Claudius: What do you call the play?
> Hamlet: 'The Mousetrap.' Marry, how? Tropically. This play is the image of a murther done in Vienna.
> (Open Source Shakespeare Line 2130-2)

The play within the play is a mirror and a potential trigger for Claudius, and that trigger functions perfectly in the eyes of Hamlet. Not all plays will serve as triggers in the way they are intended, however. Jenkyns notes: "This moment illustrates the powerful ways in which metaphoric language coupled with dramatic action can speak to us. However much it might be described, elucidated, analysed, it can have its full impact only in its context, played on the stage at best, at second best read with the reader's imagination supplying the theater" (3-4). By definition, theater offers the confluence of dramatic action and language, making theater an excellent basis for a discussion of posttraumatic cultural theory. Though Hamlet falls under the coercive form of tragedy, this particular scene demonstrates the power of theater as a metaphoric mirror.

Theater as a mirror, however, is an imperfect metaphor. A mirror reflects the observer and events in the present, but theater can, of necessity, only reflect past events. Moreover, theater reflects the past with a certain

degree of inaccuracy. The reflection is fragmented. It is not so distorted that the audience cannot reconstruct events; in fact, they can reconstruct events sufficiently to think about their own relationship to those events. However, the play's rendition of events is, at best imperfect and may well stand in opposition to official versions of the same events. To return to Shakespeare's use of a play within a play, Hamlet presents the murder of his father, which provokes Claudius to halt the play and exit. Claudius's response affirms what Hamlet knows of his father's death and serves as proof for Horatio, but not everyone in the audience understands what the players are trying to say. The play does spark conversation, and some controversy, and much of the discussion contradicts the events presented in official history. For all of Elsinore, the King's death was officially declared the result of natural causes. In this case, Claudius had control over what counted for official history.

Hamlet's intervention into what is a false history also suggests that there are witnesses to any event who understand that neither history nor memory is perfect because both must pass through some form of mediation. According to Hayden White, "Theorists of historiography generally agree that all historical narratives contain an irreducible and inexpugnable element of interpretation" (51). This would, obviously, include historical narratives of traumatic events. Unfortunately, official history is often accepted as unquestionable truth by the general public, in part because, although there may be some anecdotal evidence to the contrary, as Raznovich and Dorfman point out so eloquently in their plays, silence seems to be the overwhelming response to traumatic events leaving only the loudest voices and most repeated version of events to serve as historical truth. Furthermore, the voices of individuals attempting to counter the narrative offered through official channels often go unheard or are quickly silenced by those who fear losing power and even those who fear that any examination of the past runs the risk of reigniting the events of the past. This dynamic, which can be described as personal memory versus official history, creates tension between the people and the institutional representation of the people that exacerbates traumatic stress. For example, in Argentina, there are still those who claim that the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983 was a heroic prevention of subversive activity, while others remember the state disappearing thousands of innocent men, women, and children.

Still, others are unable to speak clearly of the events as regards any positive or negative net effect of the military dictatorship in part because, on the one hand, official history tends to unite these versions of events into a unified master narrative.

On the other hand, these multiple versions of the past tend to create cracks in official discourse by erupting into public consciousness via cultural representations. In Argentina and Chile, in particular, there seems to be a constant stream of plays, novels, and films that still attempt to deal with the tragedy on some level. In fact, Argentine director Adrián García Bogliano mentions both on the DVD special features section of his film *Cold Sweat* and in an interview with Matt Barone.

> [W]e wanted to make a very commercial film, something that was very catchy, but at the same time having this subject about the dictatorship. It's something that's sort of taboo in the general films; you are supposed to talk about it only in dramas and documentaries, but you're not supposed to talk about it in a horror film. We thought it'd be interesting to put that subject in a horror film, because a horror film like this is for a very young audience, and that young audience is exactly the kind of people who don't want to see documentaries, or hear these recollections of what happened back then. It was really a very terrible thing that happened in Argentina in the '70s. I really wanted to communicate that to that generation, and I thought the best way to do it was in a very fun film where you don't feel like you're being lectured about anything. (http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2012/01/interview-cold-sweat-director-adrian-garcia-bogliano)

There is still the desire, or perhaps the need, to find ways to discuss the tragedy of the dictatorships in all three of these countries. People are still trying to access their memories to reconstruct the narrative, and interestingly, it is more challenging to get to the memories even as distance makes the topic easier to discuss. García Bogliano, seemingly, tries to address that paradox. Yet, even as another generation endeavors to struggle with these topics, the question remains: what happens to those memories? Why do people who witness traumatic events often have entirely different stories to tell, and why do others have no story to tell at all? Why are these people's

memories unspeakable? Part of the answer is perhaps what happens to memory when a person is under extreme duress. For a person who has suffered in ways previously unimaginable, the memory of that suffering becomes both distorted and the central focus of that person's life. In a very real sense, they live in the past and are unable to move forward with their lives until they can, at the very least, take ownership of the distorted narrative. The stress of crisis events, such as the violence of the brutal dictatorships in Spain, Chile, and Argentina, are the types of wounds that create fissures in how events can be remembered, or rather, in how the victims tell the story.

To examine this disruption in particular and how it figures into the posttraumatic narrative in general, we will first consider Jonas Grethelein's reconfiguration of Paul Ricoeur's concepts of human and narrative time. According to Grethelein, the definition of human time is "the tension between expectations and experience." I consider this tension to be flexible but somewhat tenuous, and it is the tenuous nature of human time that aids in the understanding of posttraumatic literature. There is a second stage of tension that happens at the level of reception that will be dealt with as it pertains not only to narrative and human time but also to the collective sense of time.

Human time, narrative time, and collective time depend on the tension between experience and expectation. The never-stable present, then, resides in the space between experiences (the past) and expectations (the future). Although time is not stable in that there are constant adjustments as experience is added, the tension keeps the present moving forward in both human time and narrative time. Trauma, however, subverts human time by radically shifting experience and thereby destroying the relationship between experiences and expectations; the frame, or the cognitive schemata, by which one understands the world, is shattered. Posttraumatic narratives mimic this fracturing, and on both the level of action and the level of reception, as, in the text, expectations are divorced from the experiences. Thus detective novels make an excellent frame for these types of narratives because there is a constant search for clues in the past. The detective/protagonist is often trapped in the past until they discover some lost secret. In other words, the former life narrative has been disrupted, and the individual moves from operating in present time (that tension between experience and expectations)

to a different type of tension, between pre-traumatic experience and post-traumatic experience, both of which are past tense. Expectation, or the future, becomes a void without the possibility of narration until the tension between the pre- and post-traumatic experiences has been adequately addressed.

A salient example of how this tension is disrupted comes from the field of illness studies. In *Health, Illness and Culture: Broken Narratives*, Lars-Christer Hydén and Jens Brockmeier write about former rugby players from the UK whose identities, for better or worse, were wrapped up in their bodies and in their self-image as masculine and athletic. Those identities were, of course, reinforced by the media and the public at large. However, after these rugby players suffered spinal injuries, they were no longer able to think about themselves as embodied masculine and athletic narrative identities. For "the narratives that have been made available in the past and are available now to these men through the world of sport are extremely problematic in terms of enabling them to construct different body-self relationships and different identities in the future" (Sparkes and Smith quoted in Hydén and Brockmeier 6).

The trauma of the spinal injury puts into question their experience; it creates a dissonance between the experiences they had previous to the trauma and those that came after. This is not to say that the pre- and post-traumatic experiences cannot be reconciled, but when they are not, there is no room for expectation. There is no movement forward without reconciling the past.

The autobiographical narrative that makes up the memory of these individuals in that society has been interrupted. This interruption, in the case of individual illness and other sorts of trauma, has minimal effect on society at large. However, since history is constructed, in part, from those suffering from PTSD, when the number of people whose narratives are disrupted reaches a critical mass, they begin to affect the overall society. History, then, becomes also subject to problems such as gaps in the narrative. Human beings, then, have a very strong desire to fill those gaps. The more horrific the event, the greater the desire to understand what happened. This desire allows for "false history construction," which follows from the psychological phenomena of false memory construction, which I will discuss at some length in the first chapter.

Official history created in such an atmosphere keeps the wounds from healing. It keeps those who have suffered from truly assimilating, or rather, coming to terms with, or owning, the traumatic events. Those events need to be mediated in order to be fully assimilated by the individuals so that both they and society can heal from the wounds caused by the violence, which is a function of the representation of trauma. Mediation and subsequent healing differ from catharsis in that the latter purges the spectator of the tension created by a tragic flaw. Assimilating the trauma does not necessarily purge the spectator, but it allows them a starting point from which they can access the memories of their trauma, or rather, a starting point from which they can explore the fissure between pre- and post-traumatic experience.

Although most research on trauma culture is based on psychoanalytic theory, the following is a carefully constructed eclectic approach that draws not only on psychoanalysis and cognitive and clinical psychology but also cultural studies methods to include history, politics, and culture in the analysis. An integrated approach is efficacious because of what the various disciplines bring to the discussion of trauma but also necessary because of shortcomings in each field as applied to the topic. For example, cognitive psychology provides a great deal of insight into human mental processes: remembering, thinking, and feeling. That is: "The discipline portrays the human mind as, first, a processor of information; it computes answers to problems in a manner analogous to a computer" (Kellogg 4), and thus the insights offered by cognitive psychology are essential to the study of trauma because trauma represents one of the most extreme challenges to the processing of thought. Nevertheless, because cognitive psychologists view the brain as a biological, or to be more specific, a neurophysiological system, they do not always take into account the actual relationship between the brain and external reality.

Furthermore, it is never the case where scientists are in a position to measure brain function during a traumatic event. Cognitive psychologists can only measure the before and after, leaving a tremendous gap in our understanding of the process. Consequently, while cognitive psychology adds insight into brain function, it is not as helpful in understanding the larger social role played by trauma.

Clinical psychology focuses on what happens when things go wrong with the way humans remember, think, and feel. The Society of Clinical Psychology defines the discipline as follows:

> The field of clinical psychology integrates science, theory, and practice to understand, predict, and alleviate maladjustment, disability, and discomfort as well as to promote human adaptation, adjustment, and personal development. Clinical psychology focuses on the intellectual, emotional, biological, psychological, social, and behavioral aspects of human functioning across the lifespan, in varying cultures, and at all socioeconomic levels. (APA)

Clinical psychology builds on the knowledge of brain processes afforded by cognitive science by factoring in external forces and human interrelationships: two critical components to the study of trauma.

Likewise, Freudian psychoanalysis offers a bridge between the study of the brain and the study of mental disorders but also allows for a bridge to both with literary culture. Not only was Sigmund Freud a pioneer in trauma theory, but he also had a keen interest in literature. Posttraumatic theory was initially sparked by Freud's work on trauma, most notably his work in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud lays out the function of dreams and their relationship to memory. He makes several claims that are of particular interest to this study, perhaps the foremost being that even the most trivial events, objects, and words are stored in memory. The question then arises: if even minute information is stored in memory, then why is it so difficult for people who have suffered severe traumatic events, events that should stand out for obvious reasons, to access those memories?

Furthermore, Freud claims that, even though these memories cannot be accessed during waking hours, they can appear in dreams, which is essential in any discussion of posttraumatic theory because dreams are one way in which people living with PTSD mediate traumatic events. Dreams are a way of processing smaller bits of information while at the same time forcing the victim to attend to the information. Most victims of trauma suffer from a sort of repetition-compulsion. Sometimes this repetition can, especially in less severe cases of trauma, help the victim mediate the experience; dreams and fragmented intrusive thoughts become

a way to reconstruct the fractured narrative of the event. It seems a short step from this symptom appearing in individuals subjected to a horrific event to its cultural manifestation as posttraumatic theater.

Cognitive scientists dispute Freud's notion that everything that enters through the senses is stored in long-term memory. Instead, cognitive scientists believe that there are several levels of memory and that most everything that enters our sensory register is gone in a fraction of a second, and that the only way for information to reach our actual memories is for us to attend to it. Unfortunately, this discrepancy has led cognitive scientists to dismiss psychoanalytic approaches, even Freudian literary analysis. Consequently, practitioners in the fields of psychoanalytic literary theory and cognitive science rarely interact, a lack of communication that has crippled the interpretive potential of posttraumatic cultural theory. On the one hand, those who depend solely on Freudian psychoanalysis for their understanding of trauma miss the scientific understanding of brain function offered by cognitive science. On the other hand, cognitive scientists fail to appreciate the complex social and cultural context for trauma that is afforded by taking a psychoanalytic view of interconnectedness.

This lack of dialogue is evident in the following example. Henry D. Herring, a cognitive scientist, makes the following conclusion regarding Norman Holland's Freudian literary analysis of the "Tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow" speech from Macbeth: "The objection to this interpretation certainly has nothing to do with its virtuosity, but rather with its circuitousness, its inefficiency, and its unconvincingness. In brief, to understand the speech as a comfort for our fears about our parents' intercourse is farfetched" (242). Herring attempts to explain what cognitive science, by contrast, can offer literature. "Its epistemological base offers the possibility of a firmer, if somewhat less systematic grounding" (226). That is, cognitive science allows cultural theorists to test their theories and provide material and practical contributions to psychoanalysis.

Even though cognitive science can add a fuller understanding of brain processes, some of its claims regarding memory are problematic and reductive. Because cognitive science is wholly epistemological and seeks proof for brain function, it cannot account for certain types of memory. This narrow view has led cognitive scientists to dismiss the theory of recovered memories. While it is true that some cases of recovered memories associated

with sexual abuse were later found to be fabricated by psychotherapists who suggested the details of these false memories to their patients, cognitive scientists have found the vivid memories of all traumatic events to be suspicious. This suspicion has led, in turn, to a dismissal of any of Freud's theories regarding recovering lost memories, such as those associated with trauma. A review of the research finds that false memory syndrome is very helpful in fully understanding the process in posttraumatic texts. Instead of dismissal or suspicion, a healthy dose of skepticism will help us navigate the terrain between remembering and forgetting.

Alternatively, Freudians tend to consider repressed memories to be recovered memories (as in regaining something that was lost), but cognitive scientists have shown that trauma creates an overabundance of memory rather than a loss of it. People who have experienced a traumatic event and subsequently had a release of stress-related hormones can have those events etched in their minds to a degree that would make them unable to assimilate the information, leading to what the *DSM IV TR* defines as PTSD. Herring goes on to explain:

> The most significant implication is that literature serves a valuable cognitive/constructivist purpose rather than serving as merely a comfort of a pleasing aesthetic artifact—the limiting roles assigned to it not only in the Freudian psychoanalytic system but even in other critical approaches that are more conventionally literary in their origins and that recognize the role of literature in making sense of experience. Literature as knowledge or as a mode of acquiring valid knowledge about the world functions in two ways from a constructivist perspective: (1) the literary work provides an imaginative working out of the genuine complexity of belief sets about the world, and (2) the literary work corresponds to the human act of constructing experience. (233)

Indeed the texts here must be seen as more than merely pleasing, as they are doing important work in trying to make sense of a tragic experience. Furthermore, as opposed to Greek tragedy, which tries, didactically, to explain or instruct on a particular aspect of society, posttraumatic works focus on the complexity and exploration of experience as opposed to definite explanation. To Herring's final point, posttraumatic texts very

much correspond to the way victims of catastrophic events deal with those events.

A combination of these three fields of study allows us to explore not only the biochemical basis for much of what constitutes individual trauma but the human experience of that trauma. To leave trauma studies to any single field would be reductive and leave out important advances in neurological studies, clinical work in trauma, and Freud's literary observations. Furthermore, the work of historiography and literary studies connect the psychological to the philosophical. In a sense, this book attempts to connect what, academically speaking, are very disparate fields that tend to have very few points of contact.

History and literature still reside outside the purview of science and aside from a few studies, there is a great deal of resistance to bringing these two fields into conversation. There are scientific theories regarding time, but it has, so far, proven impossible to relate the human experience to these theories. Chronological time moves forward in a relatively predictable manner. However, human time, and to a much less extent, narrative time, does not necessarily adhere to chronological time. As Felman points out, "the event historically occurs through its disappearance as an historic actuality and as a referential possibility. It is as though the vanishing point of its literality is what constitutes, precisely the historical particularity of the event before and after its occurrence" (104). Since history becomes only as it disappears, it is impossible to measure that history, how it is perceived, and its effect on us. Only through the exploration of the human condition through the telling of stories, historiography, can we attempt to come to an understanding of the past.

I have named this hybrid approach to trauma studies posttraumatic cultural theory. Of course, the theory gives way to a critical practice that allows us to approach cultural artifacts that arise from moments of crisis in a way that creates an understanding of the connections between the event, those who attempt to control the event, those affected by it, those who write about it, and the eventual audience. This critical practice will allow for a reconsideration of a number of texts, primarily but not exclusively from the second half of the twentieth century. As previously noted, I have opted to apply this theory to the theater because the collaborative, performative,

collective, and therapeutic nature of theater provides an especially rich example of the way that culture responds to mass trauma.

In addition to the reasons given previously for the texts chosen, I also study posttraumatic theater across cultures and times in the hopes of opening a transatlantic dialogue regarding the issue of trauma. By looking at the different ways that the theater engaged with the trauma of authoritarianism in Spain and Latin America, I am able to test my theory through comparative analysis. In this way, I hope to build on the work of scholars like Julio Ortega, who call for a transatlantic approach to the study of Spanish-speaking culture. Lastly, I call for reconsidering the application of apolitical and ungrounded postmodern theory to the study of posttraumatic culture. I argue that what many take as signs of postmodernism, i.e., repetition, open form, historical ambiguity, etc., is more aptly understood within the logic of posttraumatic theory.

In essence, the chapters in this book will trace the evolution of trauma: from personal trauma to, if it is sufficiently widespread among individuals, becoming part of the social fabric of a group through the cultural products produced by that culture, and then back out to society. The first chapter will define PTSD and include the various perspectives in the current psychological debate. This chapter will also contextualize PTSD in terms of the traumas, or the wounds, suffered by the citizens of Argentina, Chile, and Spain. I will trace how individual traumas systematically become national wounds and how those wounds compare across the different social milieus. For example, the most glaring similarity in all of these cases is the level of violence that, in the last century, has left countless dead or missing, but the leaders of each country handled the violence and communicated with the public in slightly different ways. In effect, all of these dictators aimed to rupture personal and collective narratives and rewrite those narratives. However, regardless of the type of violence or the ways in which the different regimes tried to fill in the gaps left by the trauma, the resulting damage and cultural response are relatively steady.

In chapter two, “The Time Trap in El arquitecto y el emperador de Asiria,” I discuss how the disruption of personal and collective narrative finds its way into the posttraumatic text. An almost visceral re-creation of the feeling of being trapped in the past is repeated in several works by Fernando Arrabal. From *El cementerio de automóviles* to “Guernica” to, of