

Thinking Postmemory through Translation in Roberto Brodsky's *Bosque quemado*

El presente artículo se concentra en Bosque quemado (2007), novela escrita por Roberto Brodsky y texto ejemplar para explorar el concepto de "posmemoria" - formulado por Marianne Hirsch para describir la experiencia de los hijos de sobrevivientes de un trauma. Considera la novela de Brodsky como una respuesta literaria tanto a la represión que imponía la dictadura chilena como a la herencia de aquel trauma en el presente. Se refiere a la figura de la traducción como metáfora general que reconoce y negocia las distancias que aparecen siguiendo los pasos de la dictadura en Chile y demuestra que la posmemoria, como respuesta o reacción negociada, es una forma de traducción en sí misma. Este artículo detalla las referencias recurrentes a fotografías y películas en Bosque quemado, proponiendo que estos objetos visuales son emblemáticos del pasado y, además, de la materialidad del pasado y sus representaciones. La posmemoria, entendida a través de la traducción, demanda una negociación con esta densa materialidad. Las distintas formas de trabajar con los objetos visuales (por ejemplo, revelar negativos fotográficos) son actos de traducción que se hacen eco de las negociaciones implicadas en la construcción y reconstrucción de narrativas personales y colectivas.

After Roberto Brodsky's novel *Bosque quemado* won a Spanish literary prize, the Premio Jaén de Novela, in 2007, he traveled to Buenos Aires to present his novel. The presentation was covered in *Emol.com*, the online edition of *El Mercurio*, one of Chile's most important national newspapers, on July 13, 2008. The article, unsigned, quotes Brodsky: "Tengo una relación muy frágil con el sistema literario chileno y tampoco puedo reconciliarme con Chile, ni desde mi obra ni desde la vida." The article further adds, "El escritor chileno Roberto Brodsky admitió que es incapaz de reconciliarse con su país porque persiste 'la herencia cultural' del régimen de Augusto Pinochet." Brodsky is from Chile - he was born in Santiago in 1957 - but he followed his father into exile in Buenos Aires after Chile's 1973 coup and lived there for several years. Since then, he has also lived in Caracas and in Barcelona, and he currently lives in Washington, DC. Though the article begins by claiming Brodsky as an "escritor chileno," the rest of the text notes his alienation from Chile, emphasizing his distance, and expatriation,

from his place of birth. Similarly, Brodsky's own words indicate that the legacy of Pinochet's rule continues into the present, long after the official end of the dictatorship - and this is part of the reason he has chosen to stay away.

These themes - distance, inheritance, and the legacy of repression - are also key elements of *Bosque quemado*, which tells the story of a son who, much like Brodsky himself, follows his father into exile after Chile's 1973 coup. Clearly, distance is a motif in Brodsky's own life; he moved from place to place as an adolescent and young adult and thus lacked a single place to call home. Distance is a motif in the novel, too; the son inherits his father's essential homelessness. In addition to the geographic distances wrought by exile and expatriation, the novel foregrounds generational distance (between father and son, for example) and formal distance (in its thematization of disruption and mediation). With regard to the latter, the novel makes recurrent references to photographs and film, emphasizing the relationship between text and image. These material objects function as both mediating and disruptive forces that intervene in the novel's many distances: between Chile and exile, past and present, father and son, and image and text.

Brodsky's references to photographs, as well as to the relationship between father and son, recall Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory," a term that speaks to the generational distance between those who experienced a particular historical event and those who did not, but whose lives have continued to be marked by the event. Postmemory is

distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. ... Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (*Family* 22)

Here, Hirsch distinguishes between two modes of engagement with the past - recollection (*via* memory) and imaginative investment and creation (*via* postmemory). She argues, too, that postmemory is intimately linked with photography: "Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting" (*Family* 22). Brodsky and his protagonist experienced the

historical events he describes (so the events do not strictly “precede their birth”), but both were young enough that they grapple with the past through a generational remove. Over the course of the novel, the son engages with photographs and film as “instruments of remembrance,” attempting to make sense of the events, both political and personal, that have structured his life.¹

In its original conception, Hirsch applied the concept of postmemory to the relationship between survivors of the Holocaust and their children, though it has since been used in a variety of other traumatic contexts, including Latin America and the Cold War-era dictatorships in the Southern Cone. In Chile, there has been a great deal of work on historical memory, such as that developed by Nelly Richard, which looks to instances of rupture and discontinuity as a means for resisting the institutionalized (and often reductive) narratives that emerged during and immediately after the dictatorship. In the decades that have elapsed since the end of the dictatorship in 1989, new narrative voices have emerged, and the struggles over memory have continued. However, relatively little work has been done on postmemory in Chile, although several scholars, including Alejandra Serpente, Luis Martín-Cabrera, Macarena Gómez-Barris, and Bernardita Llanos, have explored the term within a specifically Chilean context.²

Brodsky’s novel is an exemplary text for considering the nature of postmemory, particularly the ways in which postmemory is not strictly an act of creation from an autonomous subject, but a form of translation. Here I propose the figure of translation as a broad metaphor for acknowledging and negotiating the distances that emerge in the wake of dictatorship, political repression, and exile, and I examine the recurrent recourse to photographs and film in *Bosque quemado*. The photographs and film in the novel are emblematic not just of the past, but of the materiality of the past and its representations, and postmemory, understood through the lens of translation, requires a negotiation with that dense materiality. In the novel, for example, the son’s engagement with photographs and film is a way of translating the past into the present in order to make sense of - and find a place for - the legacies of trauma. The various forms of working with visual objects (developing film negatives, for example) are acts of translation that echo the negotiations involved in the construction and reworking of personal and national narratives over time. These processes are infused with creativity and imagination, but they are inherently translative, unfolding in negotiation with the past and its materials. In what follows, I shall briefly outline the ways in which I am using translation, before moving on to a reading of three scenes, each of which features a

negotiation with images or letters, in which these translative processes are in play.

In its most common definition, translation refers to interlingual translation, a process that requires attention not only to the nuances of language, but to the ways in which language's resonances are informed by geography and history. Translation, then, serves to transform something that is incomprehensible into something that is roughly comprehensible. Taking its common definition into account, I evoke translation in a more abstract sense to suggest that translation in response to trauma conveys some semblance of pain and loss across time, space, and form, while acknowledging that certain elements of trauma can never be assimilated. In particular, I use translation in three ways that correspond to the three registers of distance I mentioned above: geographic, generational, and formal. My use of an abstract metaphor here is not to imply coherence, but to offer a constellative approach that draws these different registers together and shows how they resonate with each other. First, in the literal sense of *translatio*, or "carrying across," translation allows for a movement or carrying of ideas across borders, national and otherwise. This idea of translation as a movement or carrying across suggests a spatial orientation and is thus fruitful for mediating the geographical distances in the novel. Second, Walter Benjamin's thinking on "afterlife" in "The Task of the Translator" suggests that translation may also be a temporal process, a carrying of ideas and meaning through time. In his essay, Benjamin writes, "a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life" (254). Here, translation mediates between the past - the moment of origin - and the present or future - the "stage of continued life." Benjamin continues:

The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. ... In [translations] the life of the original attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding. (255)

Here, Benjamin makes an explicit connection between generations, afterlife, and translation to suggest that translation is, in some ways, a forward-looking process of renewal and unfolding. It can also be a backward-looking process: "For in its afterlife - which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change" (256). A translation represents another "unfolding" or a "renewal" of the original, but it also changes the original.

In this way, translation allows a movement of ideas across space as well as backwards and forwards in time, via continuity and renewal. Thus, translation may be used for negotiating generational distance.

With these generational connotations of translation in mind, I argue that postmemory functions as a form of translation.³ As in Benjamin's notion of translation, postmemory mediates between the past (a set of traumatic events and attendant memories) and the present or future (continued manifestation of that trauma over time, in ways overt or subtle; the persistence of memory). Postmemory reflects a kind of afterlife, a "stage of continued life," for the effects of trauma, and the work of postmemory changes personal and collective connections to that trauma. As Hirsch notes, the "post" in postmemory connotes neither a "linear temporality" nor a "sequential logic," but - like the "post" in postmodernism, poststructuralism, or posthumanism (among others) - a sense of "layering" and "belatedness" associated with "practices of citation and supplementarity" (*Generation 5-6*). Translation, too, requires elements of citation and supplementarity; read through the lens of translation, the "post" in postmemory not only evokes those elements, it serves as a reminder that postmemory, like translation, functions as a forward- and backward-looking process, defying linear temporality.⁴ Postmemory unfolds in conversation with the past in the way that translation unfolds in conversation with - and as a supplement to - an original; as translation develops out a negotiation with language, postmemory develops out of a negotiation with the dense materiality of memory and its artifacts. We are perhaps used to the idea that memory constitutes a continued engagement with the past, whereas the emphasis in postmemory on "imaginative investment and creation" ascribes a degree of autonomy to the person receiving the memories. But postmemory, though it draws on various creative processes, is not strictly an act of creation by an autonomous subject in the same way that the translator's autonomy is circumscribed by the characteristics of the original. Benjamin's notion of translation, then, helps to illuminate some of the ways in which postmemory functions as a form of translation, negotiating the afterlife of trauma.

In a third sense, translation is a figure for thinking through that which cannot be fully understood or assimilated; here, translation is productive for negotiating formal distance. In practice, translation serves to transform something that is incomprehensible into something that is comprehensible. Benjamin describes this relationship as one that is supplementary or harmonic:

as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can - in fact, must - let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*. ... A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. (260)

Here, the figure of translation both points toward this fundamental difference - and distance - between an original and a translation and offers a way to describe the gap between the original and its supplement, a distance that cannot fully be bridged.

Brett Levinson and Alberto Moreiras take up Benjamin's ideas to examine that which exceeds translation and the ways in which translation recognizes its own limits. Levinson argues that "language as such" (a gloss on Benjamin's "pure language") necessarily "exceeds" translation, so that translation itself can never be fully successful (24), while Moreiras describes "an untranslatable excess" (23).⁵ For Levinson and Moreiras, translation can be an assimilatory process and often is by necessity. However, there is also something in the process of translating that exceeds or resists translation, and translation is not, nor should it be, "the final horizon of thinking" (Moreiras 23). These points are complementary to Benjamin's "harmony" or "supplement"; both points indicate a crucial distance between what is translatable (from the original) and what exceeds translation. Levinson and Moreiras remind us that some things, including pain and loss, cannot (and should not) be fully assimilated, and translation acknowledges those limits.

In Brodsky's novel, translation and its limits are reflected in the thematization of disruption and mediation, particularly a motif of still photographs and film. Just as the references to photographs and film are not surprising given the postmemorial context, the references to disruption are not surprising in the Chilean context. An aesthetic of disruption characterizes much of the work by the generation of writers associated with the baroque, many of whom were writing in the era of dictatorship and its immediate aftermath. These writers, such as Diamela Eltit, tend toward a style and structure that is hermetic, dense, and highly self-reflective, with a heavy focus on corporeality and bodily functions and on materiality in general. This style operates according to what Nelly Richard called "las estrategias de lo refractario" (*Insubordinación* 16), seeking to explode the hegemonic culture and authoritarianism imposed by the military regime and to reflect the kind of fractured lived experiences that resulted from so much violence and repression (17). Works by writers

of this generation are immediately recognizable as disruptive because their very form and content disrupt the reader's capacity to engage continuously or comfortably with the text. Brodsky's fiction, however, is markedly different in style and structure, indicating a generational shift away from the baroque aesthetic exemplified by Eltit. Where Eltit's disruption is overtly formal, Brodsky's disruption is primarily thematic. His style is far more conversational and readable, so much so that it is not immediately recognizable as disruptive. Rather, he indicates disruption in subtler ways, particularly *via* the motif of photography and cinema mentioned above. This recourse to ekphrasis indicates a formal distance that subtly underscores the geographic and temporal dislocations - and the attendant pain and loss - that come as a result of political violence and exile.

Literature that is baroque or refractory situates disruption as the exclusive domain of writers and artists: the reader's encounter with disruption depends upon the writer's ability to produce it. Brodsky's fiction suggests otherwise, that literature does not have to be disruptive *per se* in order to signal disruption and its effects. Brodsky's novel calls attention to our encounters with disruption in the world: through photographs and film, in familial separations and rifts, in the cracks and breaks in memory. His approach to disruption relies on a process of translation: of reception (or recognition) and re-inscription. This approach also indicates a potential distinction between responding to a traumatic event in its immediate aftermath, a process often governed by external and internal constraints, and responding to the repercussions of trauma that emerge in the long wake of devastation. Brodsky's style marks not just the initial disruption, but the echoes of that disruption, signaling the ways in which disruption is translated over time, space, and form.

Bosque quemado is narrated by the son - he goes unnamed - of a man named Moisés; Moisés is a Jewish-Chilean doctor who is forced into exile immediately following Chile's 1973 coup, which ousted the democratically elected Salvador Allende, a Marxist, and installed a dictatorship, led by General Augusto Pinochet, that lasted until 1989. Moisés is forced to leave because of his involvement with the Communist Party, and he brings his fifteen-year-old son - the narrator - with him.⁶ They stay first with family in Buenos Aires; when Argentina's Dirty War begins, they leave for Venezuela. During this time, Moisés is trying to revalidate his medical credentials so that he can continue to practice outside of Chile. This process of revalidation eventually takes him to Lechería, on the northeastern coast of Venezuela, and although the son comes to visit him there, he spends most of that time in Caracas, as well as in Chile and Spain.

Moisés is finally allowed back in Chile in the early 1980s, and although he returns to practicing medicine, he never fully re-integrates. As the father's name suggests, Moisés wanders without ever making it to the Promised Land, such as it is. Eventually, we learn that Moisés has Alzheimer's, and his disease and subsequent death structure the latter half of the novel. The novel begins in the recent past, well after Moisés has returned to Chile, before it slips back in time to the more distant past in Venezuela and Argentina. These movements through time and space are marked *via* narration (and sometimes *via* section break), but not always clearly, so the sense of time is strange and even disorienting. The lack of emphasis on temporal linearity and a clear geography is another one of the ways the novel underscores disruption and dislocation, but it also reflects the experience of someone living with Alzheimer's (or someone who cares for an Alzheimer's patient). In this way, the novel not only thematizes disruption, it allows the reader to engage with, and navigate, those disruptions—not overtly or uncomfortably, as in a more baroque work, but as part of the reader's ordinary progression through the trajectory of the narrative.

In what remains, I analyze three scenes: one is from the first section of the novel, while Moisés and his son are in exile in Venezuela, and two are from the last section of the novel, after Moisés has died. Each scene features the son's negotiation with a material object and thematizes disruption and dislocation. The first scene previews the burdens of inheritance to come, whereas the latter two scenes depict the son grappling with those burdens in the wake of his father's death. Taken together, these negotiations illustrate and elucidate the work of postmemory and the processes of translation outlined above.

Toward the end of the book's first section, "Golpes en la puerta," Moisés and his son are living in Venezuela, but the son has remained in Caracas while Moisés has left for Lechería to work on revalidating his medical credentials. Of the three scenes on which I focus, this is the only one that occurs during the period of dictatorship and exile, and it deals with a film, a moving image. The son gets involved with a film project, the first of several engagements with materials from the past as part of an effort to make sense of the coup and its legacy. In both its content and its material form, the film mediates the distances that emerge in the wake of Chile's coup and dictatorship: the geographic distance between Chile and Venezuela, the temporal distance between past and present, and the formal distances between text, sound, and image. In addition, the ekphrastic reference to the film in the novel further underscores the

formal distances between text and image, as well as between image and sound.

The narrator attends classes at the university; in the evenings, he works on a film project at an audiovisual production company. He also begins sleeping with his boss's daughter, María. The film project is a peculiar one: in Santiago, before the coup, María's father made a movie about a group of revolutionaries who tried to rob a bank, intending to use the money to help "los oprimidos" (71). Not only has the film been literally translated – i.e. carried over - the South American continent, the project is based in another place and time, in pre-coup Chile. The film would have had a different resonance in Allende-era Chile than it will go on to have in the space of exile in Venezuela. In the wake of the coup, it becomes a memorial project in the sense of both record and commemoration.

In addition, the film is without sound. The narrator explains that although the shooting had finished, the soundtrack and the dialogue were lost because the film and the soundtrack had been taken out of Chile in separate canisters and suitcases on separate trips, and even the script "había desaparecido" (71). The fact that the film canisters left Chile "escondidas," along with references to "viajes y maletas de embajada," recall the means by which many people left Chile in the days and weeks after the coup. Even Moisés sought refuge in the Argentine embassy in Santiago until he received a safe conduct pass to leave Chile. The use of "desaparecer" is significant, too, given that so many people were "disappeared" under the Pinochet regime.⁷ The narrator does not comment on the fate of the film's subjects and crew, but they may well have been "disappeared." Indeed, the circumstances were such that the physical elements of the project could easily be lost in transit, and so could the creators and participants; families and loved ones were often separated or lost, temporarily and even permanently. As an object, the film is one example of the many kinds of things that are carried across borders, but it also emblemizes the precarious process of transport and translation, particularly in the wake of crisis.

María's father makes it to Caracas with his visual material intact, and he decides to reconstruct the film's soundtrack scene by scene. In this way, the film carries a piece of Chile into the refuge of Venezuela in the same way it carries a particular revolutionary moment - now past - into the reality of life in exile. The narrator notes that "el único método fiable de reproducir los contenidos consistía en leer los labios de los personajes y anotar lo que pareciera plausible" (71). There is a tension between the prescribed method for replacing - or "reproducing" - the sound, where "fiable" implies fidelity, and the understanding that whatever is gleaned

from these readings will be plausible, but speculative (as the subjunctive “pareciera” implies). This tension is also a hallmark of translation, and this reconstructive process is a translative one. Similarly, the film project, with its dependence on speculation, signals a shift toward postmemory. The director has put together a group of actors whose voices resemble those featured in the film; they gather in the studio each evening to follow the film’s “imágenes frías e insonoras” (71), using the silent images to recuperate some semblance of the lost dialogue. Whereas María’s father maintains a connection to the original project that is mediated by some degree of recollection, the group of actors he assembles in Caracas is connected to the project only *via* imaginative investment, and yet their dialogue develops not as an autonomous act of creation, but from close negotiation with the extant footage. The film project straddles the border between memory and postmemory, and the image the narrator describes is an unnerving one: “Era como hacer hablar a un muerto y luego intentar oír lo que decía, para enseguida repetirlo” (71). The work of dubbing represents several layers of reception and re-inscription: making the dead speak, listening to what they say, repeating it for somebody else. The interplay among image, sound, and text raises a set of questions that echo those raised by both postmemory and translation: about the reliability of the lip-reading process, for example, or about the tenor of the new actors’ voices as juxtaposed with the images of the old actors. The dubbing process highlights translation’s inadequacies, exposing the inevitable gaps between an original and any subsequent translations. On the other hand, in the context of so much destruction and loss, the choice to continue with the project represents a stage of “continued life” for the film and signals the possibility of regeneration. The reconstructive - and postmemorial - effort in Venezuela carries the original film and its actors into Benjamin’s afterlife. Thus, the film translates between the past and the present, as well as between the living (the actors in Venezuela) and the dead (the likely disappeared actors in Chile).

The film project, especially the narrator’s part in it, is marked by repetitions. The narrator’s main role is to fit the day’s cut onto the projector and run it in “un loop incesante que llenaba la pantalla con la misma toma repetida hasta la náusea” (71). The repetition of the images on the screen sets the tone for the narrator’s involvement with María, the earliest of several lovers in the book. Their encounters unfold against the backdrop of the same scenes playing on loop, and this apposition gives their actions a certain continuity and circularity. In the recording studio, when the actors believe they’ve determined the “original text,” they begin recording “en medio del mayor silencio” (71); during that time, María joins

the narrator in the projection room. Their relationship is prompted, and intensified, by being together in that dark, enclosed space, and their actions reflect what they see onscreen. They stand together “remedando de los personajes con un ligero movimiento de los labios hasta que [sus] bocas se iban una encima de la otra de tanto musitarlo” (72). The whispered mimicking - a quiet echo of the actors’ dubbing - is converted into the intimate act of kissing each other, so the film project brings the lovers together and affords them space for their lovemaking. Moreover, something - “quizá la prohibición de hablar y de hacer escándalo” - pushes them to affect the air of a chance encounter (72). Although they know what will happen once the actors begin dubbing, each encounter between the narrator and María is performed as if it were unplanned. Thus, the encounters themselves take on a translative quality: each encounter a translation of the previous one, similar but not precisely the same. By performing each meeting as if it were happening for the first time, the narrator and María focus on what makes each one new, rather than what makes them all the same.

While at first the sexual encounters are quiet and secret, the two become progressively more reckless: “...nos zambullíamos con descaro bajo el rumor del loop que flotaba y se expandía dibujando curvas en la oscuridad como una serpiente o un tren que volvía sobre sí mismo golpeando a intervalos regulares el aire pesado y húmedo” (72). Again, we have an image of their physical entanglement set against the repetition of the images on screen and against the spinning and clicking of the film reel. Their actions absorb the cadence of the rotating reel, and its noise provides cover. Once the lights have been turned back on, they lie together exposed, “los cuerpos violentamente dibujados por las ampolletas y el hostigoso canto de los grillos alrededor” (72). To avoid being interrupted, the couple has the routine down to a science: “...con María debíamos calcular al milímetro los tiempos de intimidad entre el doblaje de la película y los rigores de mister Dewitt” (73), the studio administrator. Like the images circulating in constant repeat on screen, the couple’s intimacy is routinized, its patterns established by something other than (or in addition to) their own desires. Later, the narrator says: “La situación se volvía incómoda, sobresaltada, pero María sabía tanto como yo de la falta de espacio propio. ... pretender estar solos en su casa nos exponía a un juicio colectivo cada vez que explorábamos bajo las ropas” (73-74). In contrast to the judgment awaiting them at María’s house, the harsh studio lights are neutral. While these conditions seem less than ideal, they are the best available, and even though each encounter is routinized, it is nevertheless unique.

The juxtaposition of the watching and dubbing with the lovers' rendezvous in the projection studio suggests another element of distance, between the steady, mechanized loop of the silent images and the organic, albeit constrained, interactions of the lovers. Indeed, this moment of ekphrasis is a visual rendering of the generational divide between Maria and the narrator and their fathers - and, in particular, between Maria's father's revolutionary-turned-memorial film project and its effect on his daughter. If the speculation inherent to the dubbing work signals a turn toward the postmemorial, the lovers' bodies, entangled beneath the shadows and images of the past, underscores this turn even further. Their response to the film and all it represents is, in some sense, a literal act of creation, even if their sex is not strictly procreative. They carefully negotiate their circumstances in order to come together, and in the shadow of what has come before them, their project is to continue to live, a regenerative and translative task.

There are several instances of subtle disruption in Brodsky's narration of this scene, not just in the references to image, sound, and text, but in the evocation of the lovers' bodies and their vulnerability to interruption. That vulnerability also points toward creatureliness, that is, the vulnerability of the self with regard to the other, also known as finitude. The creatureliness in Brodsky's novel stands in contrast to the more overt emphasis, in baroque literature, on bodily functions (spit, blood, semen, etc., none of which are explicitly present here). In *On Creaturely Life*, Eric L. Santner draws a connection between postmemory and creatureliness. Using Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and J.J. Long's essay on W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, Santner writes,

If the constructions of postmemory are not to become so many flights of unregulated projection and fantasy, they must, Long argues, "exist in some kind of dialogue with the empirical, must be open to confirmation or contestation by the real. One way in which this can take place is through photography, whose perceived privileged relationship to reality, as icon or index, can check, correct, relativize, but also prompt both primary memory (based on recall) and postmemory (based on retrospective reconstruction)." (158)

To this, Santner adds,

one also needs to turn this claim on its head; because Sebald's methodology is a *spectral* materialism, the relation to reality constructed on the basis of photographs - on what Barthes calls their *studium* - must in turn be corrected, checked, and relativized by one's attention to what sticks out from or stains the surface of reality,

to the *punctum* that functions as a kind of umbilical cord to the other's creatureliness. (159)

Here, the relationship between a photograph and reality is a complementary one; we might use a photograph to help us remember, but the sense of reality (whether recollection or reconstruction) that we create based on those photographs must also be checked and relativized. The *punctum*, in particular, invites these questions, drawing attention to gaps in our reasoning.⁸

In *Bosque quemado*, it is not clear whether the silent film is a documentary, a fictionalized narration of a true story, or a work of fiction entirely (I imagine it is one of the former two), but regardless, it depicts a Santiago and a revolutionary moment now gone. The film, like a photograph, is a record of the past with some kind of "relationship to reality" capable of "dialoguing" with the empirical. The dubbing work is also inherently speculative, no doubt subject to "flights of unregulated projection and fantasy," and yet the project is a tenable one precisely because the Chilean director and the Venezuelan actors are in possession of the film and its images, which function as icon and index - as the *studium* that prompts both recollection and reconstruction. The lovers' bodies, then, are the *punctum*, sticking out from the surface of this reality. Their bodies attest to their own creatureliness, but also to the creatureliness of the postmemorial task, to the -life in Benjamin's afterlife. Insofar as the film translates between the past and the present, between one generation and the next, the lovers' bodies point toward that which exceeds translation. Their bodies are a reminder, first, of that which cannot be reconstructed (what has, in other words, gone lost in translation). But, second, the bodies-as-punctum remind us of the ways in which the legacy of trauma and the task of postmemory is borne not just collectively, but personally, in dynamic and unpredictable ways. In the presence of real, desiring bodies, the film fades into the background, a relic of a distant, but haunting past. Their lovemaking occurs against the backdrop of a film that narrates, on loop, the story that is destined to become their inheritance - both literally, because it is the story their fathers have passed on to them, and figuratively, because they will be forced to confront the legacies of this story upon their return to Chile. They may have been too young to suffer directly the effects of Pinochet's violent coup and subsequent rule as dictator, but as adults, they will come to terms with its aftermath.

The second scene for analysis appears in the last section of the novel, *Cuarto oscuro*. This section begins with another disruption in the narrator's life, just after he has lost both his parents. *Cuarto oscuro* takes

place after the dictatorship ends, in the years following the father and son's return to Chile. In the section's first lines, the narrator explains that his father died in 1998 and that his mother died some years later; he notes that their deaths affected his own sense of self. Relatively little time elapsed between his father's death and his mother's, but at times, he says, it seems even shorter, reduced from years to "meses en verdad. A veces sólo días o minutos." He explains: "La distancia es minúscula al medirla con la ausencia de las personas que nos explican. Lo que fuera, ambos se han ido" (183). Distance as a result of loss is a key theme of the novel; here, the distance is primarily temporal, but the remark that his parents "have left" also echoes the geographical distances and departures that have shaped his life. This distance is also a generational one because his parents' deaths cement his place in the world: "Desde entonces soy padre sin padres en el arrollador mundo de los hijos. Un mundo de belleza siberiana, más frío y remoto del que nunca pensé encontrar ..." (183). The son, again, evokes a metaphor of geographical distance to describe the nature of life without his parents; this new world is cold, remote. The distinction between being a father - which the narrator has been since his own son was born, some ten years prior - and being a "father without parents" signals a generational realignment, in which the son is now the patriarch (and given the biblical connotations of his father's name, it is especially momentous that he has inherited Moisés' position). His mother's lover, Félix, is the only person, in his immediate circle, who remains "entre los recuerdos" of his parents' generation (183). This particular moment is ripe for re-engaging with the task of translation.

After Moisés dies, the narrator inherits Moisés' apartment, and he decides to turn it into a dark room, planning to develop some negatives (taken while the narrator was still abroad) into photographs. The dark room in Santiago is another iteration - and in some sense, the legacy - of the studio in Caracas. As the son claims his inheritance, we see the ways in which his time away from Chile has shaped his life and his desires. In Caracas, the son dreamed of privacy; in present-day Santiago, he has a privacy that approximates alienation. The new project in Santiago also echoes the project in Caracas. It represents another attempt at reconstructing the past, part of the son's effort to translate, and make sense of, his own and his father's experiences.

In Caracas, the son and María engage reluctantly with a project that is not theirs. In Santiago, the son has the space to make a project of his own, but finds that he cannot work. He writes: "Pensaba revelar y copiar los cientos de negativos que reservaba celosamente para un momento estelar como éste, definitivo y transparente, largo como el día después del

combate que lo había consumido en su trinchera ...” (192). Here, “el día después del combate” indicates a comparison between the narrator’s personal reconstructive project and the collective effort to regroup in the aftermath of conflict. The narrator, however, is unable to work, and he muses on possible reasons: “El momento ya había pasado o nunca llegaría, lo cierto es que el desánimo me invadió” (192). He seems to refer to his place in history (and perhaps that of his whole generation), as much as to this particular moment. The moment for action has passed, perhaps never to come again, and the narrator’s present is characterized by lingering despondency. He is overcome with a kind of malaise:

Los rótulos envejecían mi entusiasmo, como un indiscreto espejo al fondo del ropero: “Lechería 1976”, “Caracas 1978”, “París 1979”, “Barcelona 1981”, “Caracas 1982”, “Santiago 1984” ... Era para desquiciar a un archivista. En ocasiones, un solo vistazo a las tiras ennegrecidas me sumía en un estado de postración que se extendía por horas y me dejaba inmóvil, sin voluntad, con el cuerpo tenso y estragado. (192; ellipsis in orig.)

Like the soundless film, these negatives have been literally translated, carried across international borders, and these places and dates offer the reader a concrete set of geographical and historical citations in a novel that otherwise floats from place to place, often with no clear sense of time. For the narrator, the list is exhausting. The “envejecer” here is telling given the generational implications of this moment in the novel. The narrator has watched his father grow old and die as a result of a horrible, degenerative disease, and in the apartment that is his inheritance, the list of places - at once timeline and biography - exhausts his interest in a project composed of materials from his adolescence in exile. He dissociates himself from the role he has inevitably inherited, that of archivist and translator, declining - for the moment - to mediate between past and present. The anguish involved in the work of reconstructing, archiving, and translating is an immobilizing, enfeebling force, one that takes over not just his mind, but his entire body. Again, the novel draws a connection between the creaturely body and the legacy of trauma; the narrator reacts bodily and unpredictably to the task bequeathed to him and to the work of postmemory.

He continues to describe the effects of the project on his body and bearing: “...me descubría de pie con la cámara en la mano y la vista perdida en pensamientos crepusculares. Hacía clic para romper el embrujo y un peso de tumba me derrumbaba sobre el sofá, donde permanecía otras dos horas recreando hazañas del pasado y modificando el futuro con

actualizaciones arbitrarias" (192). In contrast to the desire he feels in Caracas, the malaise he feels in Santiago is like a curse, its embrace crushing and deathly. He finds himself at a translative limit, caught between past exploits and future possibilities. His desire to do this work, a task of his own, is zapped by these drowsing thoughts. What saves him in these moments is to turn away from the project and toward the television, with its own peculiar set of moving images: "...el aparato me regalaba con su indiferencia el duelo que necesitaba" (192). In these moments, he wants indifference, rather than recognition, however painful it may be.

In this scene, the narrator could create an archive of his own past, turning (transforming, translating) the disparate negatives into a coherent collection. In fact, the negatives hold an intermediary (and inverted) ground between a distant time and place, which has literally made its mark on the emulsion-coated plastic, and the future possibility of photographic prints with their original contrasts restored (light made dark made light again). The negatives are his, and in a very concrete sense, developing the negatives and printing the photographs would result in tangible artifacts of his adolescence abroad. Here, the photographs would serve "to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability" (Hirsch, *Family* 20). But he declines to put this archive together, overwhelmed and immobilized by the weight of the past. It rids him of desire and prevents him from acting, in contrast to the scenes with María, at the studio in Caracas, where the projection of images arouses and propels his desire. Moreover, these moments of crushing malaise take place, in a very literal way, at the site of his inheritance, in "un departamento célibe" (193). His father is gone, but haunting reminders of his presence continue to disturb the narrator. Whether or not the project ever comes to fruition, the existence of the negatives carries the past into the present, mediating between the narrator and the spectral presence of his father.

Finally, the narrator decides that the project with the negatives is impossible. He sets them aside and decides to write a book: "Definitivamente debía apropiarme del lugar, adaptarlo a mis necesidades y llenarlo con otros materiales, insuflarle vida. Era una tontería, pero decidí escribir lo que no podía copiar" (194). In choosing both to abandon photography and to take up writing (he alternates between the two throughout the novel), the narrator also draws a connection among mediation, translation, and form.⁹ The decision to write - an election of a new form - is linked with the appropriation and adaptation of his father's territory and space. He also wants to fill the space with the physical materials essential to that new form. Rather than rely on his photos to

mediate his memories, he sets about constructing his own narrative of the past. He must grapple on his own with his and his father's story; what was a shared experience is now his alone. By opting to write rather than develop old pictures, the narrator chooses a more interpretive act. His story unfolds in negotiation with that of his father, and so his artistic autonomy is constrained, but he claims for himself a kind of translation that seeks to supplement rather than reproduce.

In the wake of his father's death, the decision to write also signals an attempt at translating his experience into something he can grapple with on his own. Just as the narrator makes space for writing, his written work makes space for a renewed dialogue between past and present, as well as between father and son - but one that happens on the narrator's own terms in his newly-adapted place. As he settles into the writing process, he begins to see his approach as characterized by "negación": "Adiestrado como estaba en relaciones de correspondencia," - another kind of mediation - "apelaba al espíritu activo de la negación. El rechazo era mi forma de encajar" (195). Although he initially considers taking on his father's voice, he ultimately rejects that idea: "Mientras impostara el lugar de los olvidados, siempre abrigaría una esperanza de salir de allí. Dar cuenta de mi padre, hacer fe de él, equivalía sin embargo al mayor de los abusos que podían cometerse" (195). Ultimately, the narrator chooses translation over reproduction, opting to tell his story of expatriation and repatriation, rather than attempt to reproduce his father's story of exile and return. He recognizes that the two are essentially connected (that one begets the other), even as they are fundamentally distinct, as is warranted by a translation. And no matter the output, there are elements of his experience - the acute pain of homelessness and exile, his grief over losing his father - that will resist the translation.

In the final scene for analysis, I want to highlight a conversation that takes place between the narrator and Victoria, his partner in Santiago in the present day. Victoria asks the narrator about the nature of his writing, and he explains that it is "una mezcla ... ni puramente novela ni tampoco biografía, en sentido estricto. Es ficción, en el fondo" (195). This description of fiction gets at the translative relationship between (auto)biography and the novel (or, literature) and the way they work together in order to be inscribed onto the page as fiction. Victoria asks about the title of the book, and the two have an Abbott and Costello-esque exchange:

- *La carta del padre*, ¿te gusta?

- ¿Así se llama? - dudó, cautelosa - . Sí... Me gusta, pero ese libro ya existe.

- No, ése es otro, donde un escritor le escribe a su padre. Aquí es al revés; el padre es quien le escribe al hijo.
- Ah, es una carta tuya a tu hijo.
- No, no estás entendiendo. Es *mi* padre quien escribe la carta.
- Y te la manda a ti.
- No, a mi tío. En Buenos Aires. Desde Lechería.
- Me miró raro, asustada. Como si me hubiera vuelto loco.
- Entonces es la carta del primo.
- Olvidalo - me ofusqué - . Hablemos de otra cosa.
- A ver, de nuevo - insistió ella, imperturbable - : Tu padre le escribe una carta a tu tío, y tú te asignas el rol del destinatario por una especie de justicia familiar. O al menos de intérprete. ¿Es eso?
- Claro - dije victorioso - . Simple como el sol. (195-196; ellipsis and emphasis in orig.)

The narrator refers to an actual letter, one Moisés sent from exile in Caracas to his brother in Argentina, after members of their family are disappeared during Argentina's Dirty War. In the letter, Moisés reaffirms his belief in the necessity of revolution, but expresses a devastating sense of hopelessness. The narrator knows nothing of the letter until many years later, after his father's death, although Moisés wrote the letter while his son was visiting in Lechería. For the narrator, the revelation of the letter is destabilizing and discomfiting because its contents - along with the fact that the narrator previously had no idea that his father had written it - alters the narrator's understanding of his father's character and spirit. In this way, the letter - an artifact from the past that shows up in the present - also calls the narrator to action.

The exchange between Victoria and the narrator reveals the narrator's decision to take on the role of interpreter and translator, while also signaling familial - and generational - confusion. The narrator wants to call his book *La carta del padre*, even though the letter, as sent, went from brother to brother, not from father to son. His insistence suggests that he sees his father always as his father, even when his father is in another role as brother or uncle. When Victoria asks whether the narrator has taken on the role of recipient in order to bring about a kind of familial justice, the narrator responds affirmatively, though it is not entirely clear what kind of justice he wants. In an attempt to clarify further the intentions of his work, the narrator assures Victoria that the letter is real: "Es lo único que no me inventé de todo el asunto" (196). But Victoria corrects even this: "Ya sé, pero no es tuya de tu padre - dijo - . Es la carta de Moisés" (196). The letter is real, but it isn't the narrator's, and it's not from his father-as-father.

Rather, it's from the man named Moisés, and the narrator's role in this exchange is not as son *per se*, but as interpreter. Victoria's questions, while initially intrusive, also help the narrator to make sense of his private burdens. Their conversation negotiates the subtleties of language, and it exemplifies the work of postmemory: interpretation and translation.

By way of conclusion, I want to consider the relationship between the title of the son's book and the title of Brodsky's novel. Given the description of the narrator's book project, it is possible that *Bosque quemado* itself is the book, although this is never made clear. In any case, the title of the narrator's book, *La carta del padre*, introduces an alternate title for *Bosque quemado*. These two titles signal different things, but they have a supplementary relationship to each other. "La carta del padre" refers to a material object written and sent in the past that shows up in the present. "The letter" - and the concern over sender and recipient - also recall Jacques Derrida's notion of *destinerrance*, the idea that a letter never truly arrives at its destination (qtd. in Miller 33).¹⁰ J. Hillis Miller notes that this is in part because the letter itself, rather than the sender, "creates the recipient, unpredictably, incalculably, by chance or even by error" (43). In *Bosque quemado*, the letter was not necessarily intended for the son - he comes to possess it by a combination of chance and error - but he is nevertheless its recipient. The reference to "la carta" in the novel's secondary title is a material representation of the legacy of trauma, and its *destinerrant* journey to the son hints at the unpredictable manifestations of that legacy in the present. Moisés' son, along with María in Caracas and Victoria in Santiago, are all recipients of, or inheritors to, those letters: to their fathers' legacies and the legacy of dictatorship and repression.

The notion of *destinerrance* also sheds light on the question of the recipient-translator's autonomy, or a lack thereof, with regard to the original material. Miller writes that, over time, Derrida "redirected [the figure of *destinerrance*] toward a claim that each valid piece of writing or any utterance is not an *autonomous* speech act. It is, rather, a response to the demand made on the writer or speaker by the wholly other, which changes radically the direction in which he is headed" (46; emphasis mine).

In *Bosque quemado*, the letter from Moisés functions as a demand on the son, one that shakes him from his malaise and thus has the potential to radically change his "direction." The son's book project, his own "valid piece of writing," is not "an autonomous speech [or written] act," but rather "a response" to that demand. In this view, the letter not only stands in for the legacy of trauma, but for the demands imposed by that legacy, particularly, here, the demand made on the son's generation to confront

the legacies of Pinochet's dictatorship. The work of postmemory, then, is a response to those demands, rather than a wholly autonomous act. One of the challenges of this demand for confrontation is its unpredictability and volatility (the idea that the letter could arrive to anyone at any point), and translation *vis-à-vis* postmemory is a formal response, unfolding in negotiation with the dense materiality - with the letters - of the past, but with potentially radical ramifications for the future.

As a material object that accrues new meanings over time, "la carta del padre" is on the same order as the film reels in Caracas and the narrator's undeveloped negatives. Each of these objects has the power both to intervene in, and disrupt, the present. Reading the letter as an example of *destinerrance*, however, also directs our attention to the ways in which each of the objects in the novel makes a kind of demand, calling for an engagement in the work of postmemory and, thus, of translation. The film reel, the negatives, and the nascent book project intervene in the narrator's life - and, in a formal sense, in the novel itself - evoking the malleability of memory, the weight of inheritance, and the translative possibilities bound up in postmemory and interpretation. Similarly, the letter recalls the past events that have so profoundly influenced the course of the narrator's life and epitomizes the objects - and the attendant postmemorial work - that will both demand and mediate his attention to that past going forward. These disruptions not only mark the intensely disruptive patterns of dictatorship and repression, they also represent the echoes of that disruption, the continual - and sometimes surprising - demands made on the present by the past. The story the narrator finally tells, *via* "la carta del padre," is a translation that recognizes the legacy of the past and attempts to make sense of that legacy in the present and for the future.

With the connotations of "La carta del padre" in mind, we turn our attention to "Bosque quemado," the novel's actual title. In the novel, "bosque quemado" is used as a metaphor for the mind of an Alzheimer's patient: "algunos árboles y ramas humeantes" linger after the devastation of Alzheimer's, itself "un incendio que arrasó con recuerdos, referencias, memoria, todo" (122). As a metaphor, "bosque quemado" translates the abstract effects of Alzheimer's into a stunning, and poignant, visual image, standing in for the loss of memory. It is the central theme of the novel and its most forceful instance of disruption. In that sense, it supplements the other material objects in the novel; as a counterpart to "la carta del padre," the loss of memory, too, is a missive that the son is forced to interpret, even though he is neither a unique nor final destination for that missive. The loss of memory makes a demand as compelling as the one made by memory itself, perhaps even more so as recollection slips away and

translation steps in to take its place. Like Barthes' *punctum*, these disruptions invite interpretation, but also call those interpretations into question. And in the context of postmemory and translation, the material objects are not just disruptions, but demands, calling not for a single response to the effects of trauma, but for multiple responses over time - not for reconciliation or resolution, but translation.

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NOTES

- 1 A number of critics have considered the relationship between media and memory, including photography. See, for example, Franco 192-213 and Richard, *Crítica*, especially 49-53, 64-68, 262-271.
- 2 There is also some scholarship on the concept on postmemory elsewhere in the Southern Cone, particularly in Argentina; see Kaiser, Lazzara, Nouzeilles, and Sosa 105-128, as well as Ana Ros' work on the "post-dictatorship generation" more broadly (4-5) and Levey on postmemory in Uruguay.
- 3 In her examination of visual culture after the Holocaust, Hirsch, too, occasionally connects the work of postmemory with translation, particularly in reference to linguistic translation in visual projects (see, for example, Hirsch's reading of Tatana Kellner's *Fifty Years of Silence, Generation 87-92*) or the relationship between image, memory, and speech (see her analysis of Dori Laub's treatment of Menachem S. in *Testimony, Generation 168-173*).
- 4 Hirsch also distinguishes between "familial" and "affiliative" postmemory (*Generation 36*), which is similar to the distinction between the personal and the collective.
- 5 Moreiras argues: "The maximum accomplishment of translational thinking is also its total defeat: an adequate integration into the circuits of conformity, when all further translation becomes unnecessary, when language exists as such, when there can be no literary community anymore. If it is necessary to translate so that what is alien does not expropriate us, and if it is necessary to translate so that what is ours does not kill us ... it is also necessary to understand that translation is not the final horizon of thinking" (23). The "untranslatable excess" is in response to that assertion.
- 6 Moisés is an exile because he is forced to leave Chile, whereas his son, who accompanies him voluntarily, is better termed an expatriate. In the novel, the exile/expatriate distinction also underscores the generational gap between father and son. For more on these terms, see McClennen 14-17.

- 7 In their discussions of the relationship between media and memory, Franco and Richard, in *Crítica*, consider the particular implications of photography with regard to disappearance.
- 8 Barthes writes: "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27). For more on the *punctum* and the *studium*, see Barthes 27-28 and Santner 155.
- 9 For more on the narrator's photographic and written work as a form of refuge after dislocation, see Areco 262-267.
- 10 I will refer here Derrida's *destinerrance* as elucidated by J. Hillis Miller in *For Derrida*, 28-54.

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