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Silences Between Jewishness and Indigeneity in Eduardo Halfon's *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*

Este artículo se centra en la obra Mañana nunca lo hablamos *(2011) de Eduardo Halfon, argumentando que Halfon aporta una mirada retrospectiva de la violencia de la guerra civil guatemalteca desde una perspectiva judía que se diferencia sustancialmente de la indígena. Sin embargo, este análisis elucida la medida en que la obra de Halfon plantea la posibilidad de una identificación afectiva entre los judíos y los indígenas en el contexto del violento conflicto político. Las conclusiones sostienen que la obra ofrece nuevas posibilidades para pensar la relación entre la etnicidad y la política, una relación conceptual que hasta ahora ha constituido una laguna crítica en los análisis de las producciones culturales judías latinoamericanas.*

Palabras claves: *Guatemala, judíos, memoria, indigeneidad, infancia*

This article analyzes Eduardo Halfon's Mañana nunca lo hablamos *(2011) arguing that Halfon offers a retrospective view of Guatemala's Civil War ("la violencia") from a Jewish perspective that is distinct from an indigenous perspective. Nonetheless, this study shows to what extent Halfon's work posits the possibility of an affective identification between Jews and indigenous populations in the context of the violent political conflict. The conclusion maintains that the work offers new possibilities for thinking through the relationship between ethnicity and politics, a conceptual relationship that until now has been a critical lacuna within analyses of Jewish Latin American cultural productions.*

Keywords: *Guatemala, jewishness, memory, indigeneity, childhood*

Set between 1976 and 1981, Eduardo Halfon's 2011 *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* ends with its ten-year-old narrator's father telling him that tomorrow he will explain the conflict that is forcing the family to leave Guatemala for Miami.[I] As the narrator informs us, however, he and his father would not discuss the conflict the next day. Nor would they ever. The ending punctuates a recurrent theme throughout the short novel: the silence, omission, and amnesia that inflect a child's perspective of a

political conflict of which he knows very little. The only information his father does offer him regarding the conflict is to answer in the affirmative his question of whether the *guerrilleros* are *indios*. The narrator follows up by asking if the soldiers fighting them are not also *indios*, which his father also answers in the affirmative.[2] That the novel should end with a discussion about the ethnicity of each side of Guatemala's conflict preceding a mention of the father's silence about the conflict is telling, for the narrator's family of Jewish immigrants in Guatemala is positioned as an outsider to the conflict. His father's industrial success has afforded them a life that is comfortable and largely protected from Guatemala's mounting conflict. *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* thus depicts Jews as being outside the conflict of the civil war occurring at the time, belonging neither to the side of the *guerrilleros* nor to the *soldados* because, we understand here, they are not *indios*. Halfon ponders the place of Jews vis-à-vis Guatemala's tumultuous political landscape, positing Jews as marginalized to the political events that take place in the country while simultaneously grappling to identify with those directly affected by conflict.[3] As I argue, Halfon's novel shows that Jews and indigenous people experienced the Guatemalan civil war distinctly. More importantly, the novel suggests possibilities for bridging these ethnic groups' respective relations to state violence.

Halfon questions what it means to witness the Guatemalan civil war as a Jewish child and the roles of silence and memory regarding that unique condition. I submit that the experience of the Jewish child is one in which he is marked by ethnic difference, yet he is young and vulnerable enough to be moved to affective identification with an ethnic other. My analysis situates Halfon's novel within a broader panorama of Guatemalan and Central American literary production, Jewish Latin American cultural production, and other Latin American novels that recount early childhood experiences in the midst of political conflict. From there, I focus on the novel's representation of the Jewish narrator's understandings of citizenship and his impending exile – which we may understand in terms of Emmanuel Levinas's and Maurice Blanchot's respective positions on Jewishness vis-à-vis exile and political participation – in relation to critical categories of ethnicity in Guatemala. I then consider the novel's themes of violence, class struggle, and coming-of-age processes in order to articulate a model of citizenship and Jewish identity from the perspective of an exiled adult reflecting on childhood in Guatemala's civil war. To conclude, I argue that the novel explores how ethnicity affected the ways in which citizens perceived and were affected by Guatemala's conflict. Specifically, I contend that Halfon's novel shows that there was a particular Jewish experience of

Guatemala's civil war that differed from indigenous experiences. Furthermore, the novel suggests an empathic identification between Jews and victims of the ethnically charged violence.

Halfon has received such accolades as the José María de Pereda Prize for the Short Novel and the Guggenheim Fellowship. Moreover, the 2007 Hay Festival of Bogotá named him one of the thirty-nine best Latin American authors under age forty. His works have been widely translated and the translations have also received great praise. Yet, to date, few critical studies exist of Halfon's *oeuvre*.[4] While a considerable amount of analysis in the past decade has focused on recent Central American literature (Beverley and Zimmerman; Arias; Cano; Aparicio; Villalobos-Ruminott), Halfon has figured scantly into this existing corpus, likely due to his emergence as a published novelist late in the first decade of the 2000s. Recent critical understandings of twenty-first century Guatemala have focused overwhelmingly on Salvadoran Horacio Castellanos Moya's narration of Guatemala's civil war and its aftermath in his novel, *Insensatez* (Kokotovic; Venkatesh; Sánchez Prado; Buiza; Kroll-Bryce); and Rodrigo Rey Rosa's novels (Cano; Carini; Buiza), or both (Drews; Gutiérrez-Mouat).

We may begin to consider Halfon's production by situating him within critical considerations of recent Central American literature. Arturo Arias includes Halfon in a 2009 essay on recent trends in Central American literature in which he categorizes a recent contingent of authors in the following manner: "influenciados directa o indirectamente por las tendencias globalizadoras e hibridizándolas a su manera muy tropical, los jóvenes escritores articularon un pastiche de mitos y ritos, fuera para trasmitir sátiras de la memoria cultural, o bien evidencia de su ausencia" (145). Indeed, belonging to this latter category that Arias mentions, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* evinces the absence of narratives regarding collective memory in its emphasis on silence and omissions. Elsewhere, Arias has noted a recent trend in Central American narrative that has sought to correct intellectuals' previous inability to represent the other, "un gesto vital para los encuentros éticos con la otredad" (qtd. in Buiza, "Rodrigo Rey" 62). Halfon's novel dovetails with both of these considerations that Arias has posited through the work's attempt to create cultural memory through identification with ethnic otherness. In *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*, the silences of what was never discussed underscore a lack of resolution with regards to the ethics of otherness for this upper-class Jewish immigrant family's encounters with Guatemala's poor and indigenous populations in the context of the mounting tension of armed conflict.

Halfon's novel grapples throughout with Jews' relation to the political sphere. As my reading of *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* shows, the narrator seeks to understand where his family belongs within the political turmoil of Guatemala in his childhood, which ultimately turns out to be the non-place of exile. In this sense, exile becomes the mode of politics that characterizes the Jewish experience. Before their exile, however, and as I will show throughout my analysis of *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*, the narrator's family is already depicted as not participating in the country's politics. Here, we may take into account Emmanuel Levinas's 1947 essay "Être juif", where he states that "to be Jewish is not only to seek a refuge in the world but to feel for oneself a place within the economy of being" (205), positing a need for political participation within one's place of refuge or settlement as an integral part of the Jewish condition. Levinas goes on to consider assimilation:

> The modern world is an infinitely vast and infinitely varied notion. Is it Christian? Is it liberal? Is it set in motion by an economy, a politics or a religion? Are these not vastly differing notions separated by an abyss? And yet there is a sort of affinity among all these non-religious manifestations of this world. (206)

Akin to Levinas's suggestion that economy, politics, and religion differ vastly yet share an affinity, while Halfon's narrator's Jewish family has significant standing within the economic sphere of Guatemala in the early 1980s, the family is figured as being removed from the political sphere. In his *crónica*, "Dicho hacia el sur," Halfon reflects on his four Jewish grandparents who immigrated to Guatemala and, in his words, "shook off" their native countries as if shaking dust off of their pants or hands. He adds: "A lo mejor, encerrados en sus respectivas comunidades judías, jamás se sintieron parte de esos países, de esas culturas, y entonces les fue fácil sacudirse de ellas" (124). Similarly, in *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*, Halfon suggests Jews' exclusion from the broader community – and specifically the realm of active political participation – despite having enjoyed significant economic successes.

While Levinas emphasizes the idea of forming part of the political sphere of the place in which one finds oneself, Maurice Blanchot would focus on the condition of exile (which he links to exodus) as a key mode of the Jewish condition in his homonymously titled essay, "Being Jewish," in 1967. Here Blanchot states: "the words exodus and exile indicate a positive relation with exteriority, whose exigency invites us not to be content with what is proper to us (that is, with our power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our "I")" (127). For

Blanchot, exile is the Jewish condition par excellence. Moreover, we may relate the exteriority that is part of being Jewish in Blanchot's estimation to the alterity depicted in the novel on the basis of ethnic identifications and in light of his impending exile. As I will elaborate further, this exteriority to which Blanchot relates exile dovetails with critical considerations of the ethical encounter with otherness that has characterized recent Central American literature.

Apropos of the narrator's exteriority to the conflict, we may return to his father's assertion that both the guerrilleros and the soldiers are *indios*. This categorization suggests an ignorance on his father's behalf surrounding ethnic categories in Guatemala, since "indio" is an imprecise term. Halfon thus speaks to a culture of misunderstanding between Jewish and indigenous categories, which takes on particular significance in the context of the country's civil war. Historian Greg Grandin posits in *The Blood of Guatemala*: "The state's counterinsurgency … was experienced in racial terms … Indians experienced the repression as Indians" (222). While, as the narrator's father states, both sides of the conflict consist of *indios*, the victims of state violence nonetheless are abused and experience this abuse *as* indigenous, whereby the body politic is coded as indigenous. Both Halfon's narrator and his father's considerations of ethnically indigenous people do not take into account differences between *indios* and *ladinos*, which may apply to *mestizos* or, more liberally, to anyone who does not identify as indigenous. In this regard, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* suggests the question of whether Jewish Guatemalans may be considered *ladinos*. Halfon reveals Jews to be misunderstood by and not fully integrated into Guatemalan hegemony, yet they are nonetheless distinctly different from indigenous people, leading us to consider whether *ladino* is capacious enough a category to include Jews. Anthropologist Kay Warren advocates for a constructivist approach to race in Guatemala in which "the Guatemalan categories *indio*, *indígena*, *natural*, or *maya* may be contrasted with *ladino*," but that "there is no Maya or Ladino except as identities are constructed, contested, negotiated, imposed, imputed, resisted, and redefined in action" (72-73). In light of the elasticity of the term *ladino*, we may thus ask whether Jews may be considered *ladino* within a cultural paradigm in which *ladino* or indigenous (which the narrator assuredly is not) are often presented as the only options available for racial identification.

Halfon's novel appears during a moment at which historical memory is a central topic throughout Latin American and specifically Central American cultural productions. Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004) is set in a country that is most likely Guatemala (but whose name, like in

Halfon's novel, is never actually uttered), where the narrator works on a report that is most likely the REMHI report (Informe sobre la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica).[5] The bishop overseeing the human rights report is murdered, as happened in Guatemala. Rey Rosa's *El material humano* (2009) also recounts its narrator's experiences working in the archives for the human rights commission; the author addresses issues of authoritarianism more figuratively in his science-fiction novel, *Cárcel de árboles* (1997). These authors deal with issues of historical memory – specifically, the silences and omissions that exist in the transmission of memory – but, unlike Halfon's work, do so from an adult perspective rather than from that of a child. Moreover, while Castellanos Moya and Rey Rosa were both almost immediately embraced and celebrated academically, Halfon has yet to receive significant attention within literary criticism, despite his above-mentioned editorial accolades. At age forty-five, Halfon is over a decade younger than Castellanos Moya or Rey Rosa; while not a substantial age difference, we may consider Halfon to be the harbinger of a new, younger generation of authors. Indeed, many of the thematic and stylistic elements of *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* – namely the use of a child's perspective – are similar to recent fiction by generation X authors from other regions of Latin America, as I address further.

Central American literary production has figured scantly into existing cultural analyses of Jewish Latin America. David William Foster's 2009 edited volume *Latin American Jewish Cultural Production* includes no analyses of Central American authors or filmmakers. Erin Graff Zivin's *The Wandering Signifier: The Rhetoric of Jewishness in Latin America* includes a consideration of Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío's mentions of Jewishness in some of his works. A recent issue of the *Journal of Jewish Film and New Media Studies* was dedicated to cultural production of Latin America, yet includes no analysis of Jewish Central American cultural production save a passing reference to Panamanian Jewish filmmaker Abner Benaim. Otherwise, critical considerations of Jewish Central American cultural production are non-existent, likely due to the fact that there were far fewer Jewish immigrants to Central America than to the Southern Cone region. Nonetheless, the experience that Halfon narrates shares some key similarities with Jewish authors of other regions of Latin America. Like many of Brazil and the Southern Cone's Jewish populations, Halfon's family immigrated to the Americas escaping the Holocaust, as he would later address in his novel *Monasterio*, which centers around conversations with his grandfather regarding the latter's experiences in Nazi concentration camps. Throughout all parts of Latin America, critical studies are lacking in

the way of conceptualizing issues of memory among Jewish culture vis-à-vis recent history. Most analyses dedicated to memory and Jewish communities has focused on less overtly political, familial issues of tradition and intergenerational relations.[6] Even in the case of Jewish authors and filmmakers whose works have received attention within Latin American studies, there remains a great deal of work to be done when it comes to considering questions of Jewish citizenship and political participation in Latin American cultural production (Pridgeon).

The term "Jewish Latin American" evokes complex questions of belonging and identities, beginning with the term itself: is one a Latin American Jew or a Jewish Latin American, as Raanan Rein has asked of Argentine Jews/Jewish Argentines? The order of terms is of significance insofar as a privileging of certain aspects of experiences and identities over others is always connoted by the choice of one word order over the other. In the case of Eduardo Halfon, we must take into account the added complexity of his exile in the U.S., the condition in which his narrator finds himself on the precipice at age ten towards the work's end.[7] Halfon immigrated to the U.S., where he would live until he graduated from college and had to return to Guatemala. Because he grew up in the U.S., the author might be categorized as a Jewish Guatemalan-American, a Guatemalan-American Jew, or a Guatemalan Jew living in the U.S. In this regard, we may compare Halfon to author Francisco Goldman, son of a Guatemalan man and a U.S. Jewish woman, who grew up in Boston and penned *The Long Night of White Chickens* (1992) about his experiences of marginalization and identity formation as a Jewish Latino. Similarly, we may think of the important work of U.S.-based Jewish Mexican writer Ilan Stavans, who as both an author of fiction and a critical voice has offered significant interventions in the way of thinking U.S. Jewish Latino identities. A *Telegraph* review of Halfon's works characterized the author as "falling somewhere between the works of Roberto Bolaño, WG Sebald, and Junot Díaz," a characterization that evokes Halfon's multiple identities as a cosmopolitan Latin American writer (Bolaño), a Jewish writer (Sebald), and a U.S. Latino writer (Díaz), but that eschews any mention of Central American literature. My interpretation of Halfon's work seeks to synthesize these discrete facets of Halfon's authorial identity by focusing on his identity as a Jewish Guatemalan(-American) author.

The study of Jewish Central American literature problematizes critical understandings of both Central American literature and Jewish Latin American literature. Specifically, as Arturo Arias posits in *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America*, Central American culture is "marginalized both by the cosmopolitan center and by countries

exercising hegemony in Latin America" (xii). Indeed, while Arias does not name these "countries exercising hegemony" explicitly, countries that have traditionally been the foci of Latin American Jewish studies – Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Cuba – have for decades also been editorial and cinematic powerhouses, thus exerting a certain amount of cultural hegemony over the rest of Latin America. At the same time, as Borges once remarked, the Latin American Jew is doubly marginalized by virtue of being both Latin American and Jewish. Halfon thus presents a particular challenge to critical considerations of positions of hegemony and power, as his narrator enjoys the privileges afforded by being non-indigenous and wealthy within Guatemala, yet is also Guatemalan and Jewish and thus marginalized on both counts within Latin America. We are reminded of the nuances of the narrator's seemingly privileged position by his exposure at a young age to both anti-Semitism and to the violence that affects his country, whereby we are left to wonder: what are the points of contact between his identities as Jewish, Guatemalan, and non-indigenous?

These identity categories come into sharp relief against the indigenous characters that the narrator encounters. Relationships between Jews and *indios* have figured as a subtle plot point in many works of Mexican and Central American Jewish fiction and film. The tragicomic film, *Cinco días sin Nora* (2008), for example, includes as one of its funniest moments a scene in which Fabiana, the family's indigenous housekeeper, places a rosary on the defunct body of Jewish Nora in hopes that her soul will be saved. Likewise, the similarly themed *Morirse está en hebreo* (2007) depicts the matriarch's heated encounter with the domestic staff whom she scolds for using the same knife for dairy and meat, informing them that to mix the two is a sin as she furiously scrapes the tainted food into the trash. The indigenous housekeeper replies that wasting food is also a sin. In these films, the religious and cultural differences between Jews and indigenous people are brought to light. What remains to be considered, however, is the way in which interactions between these very different ethnic groups may be understood to inform notions of citizenship and political participation among the two groups, a topic that Halfon suggests throughout *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*.

Halfon is not the first author to contemplate the political violence experienced by Guatemala's indigenous populations from a Jewish perspective. Francisco Goldman has also written about relationships between Jewish and indigenous Guatemalans in *The Long Night of the White Chickens.* Guatemalan-American Jewish author Víctor Perera recounts his return to Guatemala as an adult in 1981, the year that *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*'s narrator leaves for Miami:

> Nothing in my education or my years in Europe and India had prepared me for this level of violence, which turned neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, and provoked respectable heads of family to hire contract killers to rid themselves of an offending relative over a petty argument or political disagreement. In the highlands, the army's war of counterinsurgency against three guerrilla organizations had cost the lives of more than 40,000 Guatemalans, the great majority Indians of Mayan descent. (252)

While Goldman and Perera mention Guatemala's conflict in the early 1980s from the perspective of adults living outside the country, Halfon's narrator also positions himself outside the political conflict in Guatemala despite still living there. In this sense, the child narrator's looming exile comes to define the way in which the Guatemalan Jew experienced and was affected by Guatemalan state violence. Moreover, Halfon's somewhat unique position as an authorial voice who left Guatemala but was there during the conflict makes his intervention of particular value for considering Jewish political subjectivities vis-à-vis the racial other in the context of Guatemala's civil war.

Mañana nunca lo hablamos forms part of a considerable contingent of recent Latin American fiction and film that has adopted a childhood perspective as a way of approaching the political context of recent history as well as exploring themes of memory. In these recent works of film and fiction, the childhood perspective has often served to emphasize the complexities of memory and the silences that have impeded the transmission of memory between generations and reconciliation with countries' recent political strife.[8] Moreover, a childhood perspective has often been used to nuance the historical and political complexities regarding recent decades of political struggle throughout Latin America through generational confrontations between political actors and their children.[9] Halfon's novel thus contributes to a broader panorama of recent Latin American stories about childhood amidst conflict and chaos.

Within recent cultural production of Central America, the childhood perspective of *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* recalls the same perspective used in Mexican-Salvadoran film *Voces inocentes* (dir. Luis Mandoki, 2004), the Guatemalan film *El silencio de Neto* (dir. Luis Argueta, 1994), and the Franco-Costa Rican film *El camino* (dir. Ishtar Yasín Gutiérrez, 2007).[10] *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* differs from *Voces inocentes* in the latter's overt depiction of graphic violence in which its child protagonists engage, a difference that is important to note here for my emphasis on the narrator's exclusion from the conflict that plagues his country. Like Halfon's novel, *El silencio de Neto* also centers on an upper class, non-indigenous child

protagonist as he experiences a coming-of-age process against the backdrop of political turmoil in Guatemala, specifically the 1954 coup that ousted president Jacobo Árbenz. The title's inclusion of silence dovetails with *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*'s silence regarding Guatemala's political struggles that characterizes the child's perspective and impedes understanding of the political context. In light of the works' shared focus on upper class, non-indigenous protagonists, we may understand a certain equivalence between this social status and a lack of political consciousness, a willful silence of sorts. As Georgia Seminet posits in her interpretation of the film, "Neto is implausible as a representative for the disenfranchised sectors of society that were/are seeking, indeed fighting for, a greater voice in Guatemalan politics" (54). To a great extent, the same is true for Halfon's narrator who also belongs to upper class, non-indigenous society. However, it is worth considering what such a notion of a disenfranchised sector of society fighting for a greater voice in Guatemalan politics means in the case of Halfon's protagonist's family of Jewish immigrants who, though in very different ways from poor and/or indigenous populations in Guatemala, are also marginalized from Guatemalan politics.

The novel's childhood perspective is at times particularly poignant due to the innocent child's lack of awareness of the differences between Jews and gentiles, and subsequent naiveté regarding possible anti-Semitism.[11] The narrator refers to his family's Jewishness only tangentially, whereby we understand that the family's Jewish identity may be yet another topic that they will not be discussing the next day, or ever. Nonetheless, the family's encounters with anti-Semitism and blatant ignorance towards Jewish culture figure into the novel as parts of the narrator's coming-of-age process. The narrator recounts a scene at his grandparents' house in which some soldiers arrive unexpectedly and search parts of the house. While they are talking to his grandfather in another room, the narrator waits in the kitchen and watches as men with guns occupy the family home. At one point, one of them asks, "¿Qué es esto?" (93), while tampering with the mezuzah in the doorframe, to which his aunt responds that it is a Jewish talisman with some Torah verses rolled up inside and that its purpose is to protect the house. The narrator observes as the soldier continues to tinker with the mezuzah, hitting it with his fist "como si quisiera quitarlo del dintel y llevárselo y así también llevarse la buena suerte" (93). Thus, the family – in this scene, paralyzed by the presence of soldiers in their home – is victim to the soldier's act of veritably attacking the family's mezuzah. Insofar as the family is also victim of the intimidation on behalf of the military officials in this moment,

Halfon offers a possible point in common between his Jewish characters and direct victims of state violence.

However, despite the threat of the soldiers' looming presence, we also see that the narrator's family is not on the side of the guerrillas. We learn that the family patriarch – the narrator's grandfather – had been kidnapped in 1967 before the narrator was born. While having a family lunch at a restaurant on a Sunday afternoon, he tells us that his father whispered: "'Esa señora allá, la del gabán rojo…fue una de las guerrilleras que secuestró a mi papá" (75-76). He goes on: "Yo tenía casi nueve años y sabía algunos detalles del secuestro de mi abuelo: detalles sueltos, deshilvanados, irracionales" (76). We learn that he was held for ransom and gave his kidnappers two gold-encrusted pens that he always carried with him; we thus surmise that he was kidnapped for economic reasons. The captors dubbed the kidnapping "La Operación Tomate" because his grandfather's skin was so light that it at times appeared pink. The narrator comments that he had imagined the kidnappers very differently. Namely, he tells us that he imagined them as dirty, stinky, villainous men and not at all like the woman in the red coat. In this sense, we understand that he has always been aware of the violence, but that now he realizes that the reality of these acts is much more nuanced than he had previously thought.

Elsewhere, we see that the narrator's family has, by some characters' accounts, been victim to anti-Semitic attacks. Once the family has decided to move to Miami, the narrator's grandmother asserts to him: "Está bien que se vayan, mi vida…Demasiadas balas en este país" (128). The narrator then reflects: "me quedé pensando en el agujero que aún permanecía en la ventana del comedor de mis abuelos: un agujero circular y pequeño hecho por un balazo que disparó el vecino, decían, un señor ya mayor y algo borracho, decían, que odiaba a los judíos" (128). Halfon's use here of "aún permanecía" emphasizes that this violence was visited upon the family in the past and that the bullets now pervading the country are, in a sense, nothing new for his family. His repetition of "decían" evokes the complexities of the transmission of memory and suggestively belies the veracity of the anecdote regarding the bullet hole's provenance. This conversation between the narrator and his grandmother immediately follows the sole direct narration of violence in the novel – a moment I will explain further – so we understand that the grandmother is referring to the impending civil war. That the narrator should immediately recall the bullet hole resultant of a purportedly anti-Semitic act towards his family again suggests parallels between the repression now occurring in the civil war and anti-Semitism.

As we see through the mention of the bullet hole that "aún permanecía," while violence is treated very obliquely in the work, it is always a looming presence. Unlike Halfon's description of the devastating earthquake in the narrator's early childhood toward its beginning, violence and destruction are largely absent from the rest of the text. However, the final section of the novella, homonymously titled "Mañana nunca lo hablamos," is a vignette of the armed conflict that came to characterize Guatemala in the late 1970s and early 1980s and that would result in the narrator's family's emigration from Guatemala. He states: "Los primeros disparos habían sonado a las diez de la mañana. Yo no los oí. Pero supe, por la gravedad en los rostros de mis compañeros, en el rostro de Oscar, que algo importante había ocurrido" (118). The first and only moment of violence in the novel is presented obliquely and through absences: the absence of his witnessing aurally the gunshots, only shown by the presence of his schoolmates facial registers of something that had happened. The grammatical shifts from the preterite "yo no los oí" to the pluperfect "algo importante había ocurrido" here are noteworthy. Like in the shared title of both this last chapter and the novella, the idea of a past anticipation of an event that the narrator would never experience characterizes his relationship to both his childhood and to the political sphere of his home country. Moreover, the temporal shifts correspond to characteristic psychological responses to trauma through temporal shuttling between past and present.

Violence is central to the novel's plot as well as to recent Central American literature writ large. Arias points out that, in recent Central American literature: "el clima de violencia continúa permeándolo todo. Sin embargo, ya no es una violencia política, con cierta lógica racional que posibilita explicarse quién está contra quién. Ahora es una violencia anímica, irracional, cuyo sinsentido lo permea todo y a todos" (146). While the oblique references to armed conflict that are included in *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* are circumscribed to the context of the civil war in the early 1980s, the novel nonetheless implicitly deals with this profusion of violence; the narrator, who is not indigenous and therefore – as we see through his brief conversation with his father – does not belong to either of the known sides of the conflict and is largely sheltered from the conflict, still comes into contact violence and must reckon with its reality.

Violence has been posited as inescapable even within the context of present-day Guatemalan literature. In an interview with Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Francisco Goldman contemplated the problem that Guatemala presents to writers who feel compelled to share the experience of living through the country's violence with their readers. Goldman remarks to Rey Rosa:

> You let the reader see how it is to live in this atmosphere, so full of violence, death, and paranoia. You openly show a very ambivalent relationship to the country; you write constantly about the desire to escape. And you almost define the problem of being a writer in a situation like the one in Guatemala. You feel, first of all, that it's a radical experience that changes you; you're drowning in, and are being shaken by an incredible darkness. And you ask yourself: Why do I have to deal with this? What I'm seeing, is there anything universal about it? Do I have a duty to tell this story, should I leave, or do something else?

Unlike Rey Rosa's and Castellanos Moya's depictions of Guatemala, however, Halfon's narrative focuses on oblique and tangential references to violence that remind us of his youth and innocence during this conflict and that also show that he and his family were not directly affected. Nevertheless, we still see the pervasiveness of this conflict that seeps into the lives even of those who are barely witness to it.

In light of the complexities of both his family's relatively few roots in Guatemala and his exile at a young age, Halfon's identification as Guatemalan is, as he has attested, quite fraught. Nonetheless, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* focuses – albeit somewhat obliquely at times – on a key moment of Guatemala's recent history that was also a watershed moment in the protagonist's coming-of-age process: the country's civil war in 1981 as a defining moment in his process of identity formation. In an interview given in 2010, the year before *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* was published, Halfon stated the following:

> Guatemala for me is a big issue. I have a big problem with Guatemala. I left so young that I don't identify at all with the country, with the people. I see Guatemala as most people from the outside see it, as an outsider. So the subject matter of Guatemala, socially, politically, the civil war that went on for forty years. The poverty, the violence of it, that is also one of those subjects that I'm tentative about. It'll get there. ("On the Fly")

Written shortly after this interview, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*, his first novel set in Guatemala, may be understood as part of Halfon's working through his identification with the country. In keeping with his mention here that he sees Guatemala "as most people from the outside see it," the novel is rife with moments that seem to be narrated from an exogenous viewpoint, despite representing memories of a young child who was born in the country. These moments in which Halfon presents Guatemala, its

people, and its political strife as exogenous may be attributed to his exile but are also often enveloped in differences of class, religion, and ethnicity.

As a way of exploring the identifications between people and the breakdown in transmission of memory – and as the novel's title suggests – silences play a central role throughout the novel. Ilan Stavans notes, in his afterword to the English version of the story "Tomorrow We Never Did Talk About It," that "This is the kind of tale in which what is said, what the narrator understands, and what the reader knows, is as important as what is kept out of sight, what falls into that nothingness we call silence" (267-269). Indeed, the brevity of Halfon's work emphasizes both the innocence of the child's perspective and the problems of memory transmission typical of childhood narratives. The novel's first chapter, "El baile de la marea," is a snippet of a conversation between the narrator and his father on the beach. The father abruptly tells the narrator that he drowned in the ocean when he was his son's age and offers no further details or explanations. In a sense, the novel's beginning chapter mirrors its ending in the narrator's mention: "Quería preguntarle cosas a mi padre" (16). The novel's first pages introduce the motif of truncated conversations or questions that the narrator struggles to formulate to his father, while the final section concludes that these conversations never did take place.

Mostly, the silences and temporal jumps (the novel spans five years of the narrator's life yet is narrated over fewer than one hundred pages) lead readers to consider what the narrator cannot remember due to his young age at the time of the events. To a large extent, we may consider *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* in light of Marianne Hirsch's notions of postmemory: "'Postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (3). Here, the lacunae of memory – evinced through both the promise of conversations that would never take place as well as the elisions and silences in the novel's structure – dovetail with the narrator's family's lack of direct engagement with the conflict, a conflict that nonetheless prompts the family's exile and thus determines a great deal of the course of the narrator's life.

While childhood memories of political struggle have not been the immediate focus of much recent Central American literature, the topic has figured prominently in Southern Cone literature and literary analysis.[12] Argentine novelist Patricio Pron's recent novel, *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia*, for example, also focuses on silences and the breakdowns in the transmission of memory. Whereas Halfon's narrator's father breaks his promise to discuss the conflict with him tomorrow,

Pron's narrator's father lay unconscious in a coma for most of the novel's diegesis, likewise impeding a pending conversation about what took place during a moment of political upheaval. Geoffrey Maguire concludes his analysis of Pron's novel: "the protagonist…exercises his right to creatively account for the fissures in his own past by means of a process which is posited as entirely justifiable when the familial stories one inherits are fragmentary, incomplete, and objectively unknowable" (225). In this vein, Halfon uses silences and the foreclosure of the possibility of resolution via one's parents' discursive interventions. In this sense, we are reminded of Arias's assertion that recent Central American fiction often evinces a lack of collective memory, in this case – like in Pron's novel – through explicit mentions of lacunae in family history. Similarly, Hilary Levinson analyzes Roberto Brodsky's depiction of material objects in *Bosque quemado* (2007) that "intervene in the novel's many distances, between Chile and exile, past and present, father and son, and image and text" (590) through the lens of Hirsch's postmemory.[13] As we observe through Levinson's and Maguire's emphases on fissures and distances in these respective novels, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* forms part of a broader constellation of recent Latin American fiction that centers on the failures of childhood memory in the context of exile and violence.

Memory is also an important element of the text's focus on the childhood perspective. In many ways, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* offers the impression of a simple coming-of-age story or *bildungsroman*, until we reach the final scene of armed conflict and exile. The novella's antepenultimate section, "Mujeres buenas y mujeres malas," for example, begins with the narrator and his brother returning home from school with their mother demanding, "Quiero saber dónde consiguieron esta porquería" (97) without greeting them, incensed upon discovering her sons' possession of pornographic materials. Once their father arrives home, he explains to them "mujeres buenas y mujeres malas" and slips them a copy of a *Playboy*. In this sense, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* emphasizes the rites of passage of the coming-of-age process. Halfon's juxtaposition of this scene of pre-pubescence with the subsequent moment of political violence and exile thus emphasizes the interruption of childhood and of the coming-of-age process due to the strife that characterized Guatemala at this time.

These seemingly innocent and benign coming-of-age snippets are tragically juxtaposed against painful childhood memories of destruction and suffering. The second chapter is set in 1976, when the narrator is five years old, and recounts the February 4th earthquake that killed an estimated twenty-three thousand people and wounded another seventy-

six thousand. The narrator awakes the morning of the earthquake to find the servants in his house crying. His uncle Benny asks him if he likes his house and explains to him that many people (an estimated one million) were left homeless after the earthquake. Benny, a volunteer firefighter, responds to this earthquake and takes the narrator along with him. They go to a part of town that he has never seen before and to which he refers as "<<esa otra ciudad>>" (25; emphasis in original), instilling in the protagonist an awareness of his good fortune and the differences between him and those Guatemalans who have less. He spends his day with the volunteer firemen distributing drinking water to local citizens without potable water. Later in the chapter he returns home and comments that the domestic staff have draped a cloth over his swingset so that they may sleep there instead of in the small room they share out of fear of another earthquake or returning home to their decimated neighborhoods. Thus, the novel begins with a depiction of a moment of national catastrophe that is shown to affect poorer sectors of the city disproportionately and to make class differences more evident to our very young narrator, who at this age is beginning to identify and empathize with those who are less fortunate than he. At the end of the day, however, he is safe at home and the woman who is sleeping under his swingset is serving him hot chocolate and reassuring him that he is now safe from any further natural disasters.

In these cases of identification between the novel's narrator and people of lower social classes, ethnicity is an important factor. When he goes to "that other city" just after the earthquake with his uncle, the narrator observes: "un niño moreno de más o menos mi edad lloraba solito sobre la banqueta" (26).[14] The mention of this "niño" evinces both difference (moreno) and similarity (más o menos mi edad). At five years old, we understand that this is likely the first moment of identification between the narrator and a "true" other, an experience we may liken to Lacan's mirror stage. His observation that the child was crying "solito" suggests an empathetic identification through the retrospective narration decades later. We understand that the image of this crying, dark-skinned child has stuck with the narrator since his early childhood. While this character's ethnic categorization is ambiguous (i.e. we cannot categorize him as *indio*, *indígena*, *natural*, or *maya* on the basis of the information Halfon presents here), the narrator's use of "moreno" suggests that this child does not belong to the category of *ladino*.

Halfon's identification with this *niño moreno* as part of his narrator's consideration of his childhood in Guatemala suggests an identification between Jewish and indigenous populations as an integral component of

Guatemalan citizenship. Unlike this *niño moreno*, the narrator's grandparents are immigrants from Syria and Eastern Europe. The novel's final scene and the conversation that the narrator would never have with his father regarding the soldiers and guerrillas who were both *indios* evoke complex issues of the role of Jews in the context of political upheaval. Halfon's novel thus posits the complexities between ethnicity and active political participation. In this regard, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* recalls Shawn Stein's analysis of the Brazilian director Cao Hamburger's film *O ano que meus pais saíram de férias* (2006), which centers on the film's young protagonist's time as a temporary orphan in Bom Retiro, Sao Paolo's Jewish neighborhood, while his parents have gone underground during the military dictatorship. Stein focuses on the way in which the film's depiction of the Jewish child dialogues with Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's notions of racial democracy. Stein proposes that Hamburger's film "poderia ter sido sobre japoneses brasileiros, sírios brasileiros, ou libaneses brasileiros (os grandes grupos de imigrantes não considerados brancos), mas Hamburger escolhe enfocar em suas próprias raízes para meditar o papel dos judeos na questão da brasilidade" (259). In this sense, Stein offers an equation between immigrant groups – yet, crucially, not to racially indigenous or African sectors of society – as a way of considering whether Hamburger's film ultimately propagates or demystifies the notion of racial democracy.[15] Although there are of course many differences in the racial composition of Brazil and Guatemala, we may liken Freyre's notion of racial democracy to the ideas of *mestizaje* that are predicated upon the erasure of racial and ethnic difference. As Stein concludes, "*O ano em que meus pais saíram de férias* aproveita a moda do multiculturalismo para sugerir ao espectador o sonho de um futuro ainda mais inclusivo e tolerante" (262). Likewise, Halfon's depiction of identification between the narrator and the dark-skinned child may also posit a more hopeful, inclusive vision for the future. Both works suggest a possibility for solidarity between Jews and other racial groups insofar as articulating a model of national identity.

Within Guatemalan film and literature, ethnicity has been shown to be an integral component of political action and of the political violence that has characterized the past decades of Guatemala's history. In the above-mentioned film, *El silencio de Neto*, the family maid tells Neto that in Guatemala everyone is indigenous, to which Neto responds that he is not indigenous. In this way, Argueta's film posits a stark separation between Neto and the rest of the nation along ethnic lines. In light of the contrast between Neto and the maid in this exchange, his social class also sets him apart. Like Halfon's narrator, Neto is upper-class and reckons with his

coming-of-age process that is likewise punctuated by Guatemala's political conflict. While the narrator does not make mention of the earthquake or of his experiences on that day later in the novella, his curiosity about the *indios* at the end of the novel recalls his identification at a very young age with the "niño moreno" crying after the earthquake at the beginning of the novel.

If, as Grandin suggests, the indigenous victims of repression experienced the country's civil war "as Indians," we may venture that Jews experienced this moment *as Jews* through the condition of exile. We may return to Blanchot's notion of exodus and exile in order to consider how Halfon's novel creates a crescendo throughout these five years of the narrator's life in which he becomes increasingly less innocent and more aware of the harsh realities of the world surrounding him. This crescendo culminates in exile and in silence. In the case of Halfon's narrator, who by his own account is neither a guerrilla nor a soldier because he is not an *indio*, the only place for him and for his family within the Guatemalan political sphere is to be found in the non-place of exile.

We wonder, then, what possibilities for identification as fellow Guatemalan citizens and as fellow humans Halfon is suggesting between Jews and the poorer, indigenous characters – the young dark-skinned boy around his own age and the domestic staff in his home. In this regard, *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* evokes similar questions of otherness to Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*, whose narrator also positions himself outside the political conflict in part because he is not indigenous, yet ultimately comes to form significant affective identifications with the indigenous victims of Guatemala's state violence. The crucial difference between these two works' narrators, however, is that Castellanos Moya's (like Castellanos Moya himself) is not Guatemalan. It is therefore interesting to note the similarly exogenous position that Halfon occupies when recounting this time period. The sensation of distance and otherness that characterizes the protagonist's relationship to his country and its traumatic past is due to his exile but also, we come to understand, to his family's Jewish and non-indigenous ethnicity.

To conclude, if indigenous people experienced the civil war *as* indigenous people, exile is the experience that marks Jews' experiences of the country's civil war. As Halfon's novel shows, this exile is not simply experienced once outside of the country, but also during the time when the narrator is still in the country leading up to his exile in light of his perceived exteriority to the events going on in the country. The recurring themes of silence evince the silences between Halfon's protagonist and the racial other during his childhood. He cannot articulate a place for himself

in the economy of being of which Levinas speaks, so that the only way in which he is able to experience being Guatemalan is through exile, the exodus that, according to Blanchot, characterizes the Jewish condition. Nonetheless, decades later and from the perspective of an adult reflecting back on his childhood, Halfon begins to make explicit the political, racial, and familial tensions in the wake of Guatemala's recent history that have gone unspoken for decades. *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* thus suggests a possibility for conceptualizing the gaps between Jewish and indigenous experiences of state terror in Guatemala.

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NOTAS

1 While Halfon never names Guatemala directly, we can be all but certain *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* is set in this country because of the references to the 1976 earthquake at the novel's beginning and the increased paramilitary activity in 1981 as the government forces sieged guerrilla strongholds, both events in keeping with Guatemalan history.

2 In her recent reading of *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*, Magdalena Perkowska notes that these questions "revelan que este niño ya ha asimilado la distinción racista y clasista entre ladinos e indios, entre los que son sus pares y los otros. Sin saberlo, no obstante, toca con sus preguntas una herida histórica y social que el padre no puede o no quiere explicar" (608). Perkowska's interpretation of the novel focuses on childhood memory and not on elements of race and ethnicity. This conclusion takes for granted that the narrator and his family, as Jews, readily form part of the category of *ladino*, a notion that I seek to consider here.

3 Ilan Stavans notes in his afterword to the English short story version of "Tomorrow We Never Did Talk About It" that: "The fact that they are going to the United States makes clear where their loyalties are" (loc. 275). That is, the family is against the guerrillas' struggle. However, the narrator does not comprehend – much less articulate – how his family fits into the political conflict.

4 See Astro and Perkowska.

5 The REMHI report, published in 1998 as *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, was the product of over a decade of research that chronicled the brutal acts committed against the country's Maya communities. Bishop Juan Gerardi oversaw the report's creation and was murdered two days after its release.

6 While Marianne Hirsch's notions of postmemory related to the Holocaust (discussed later in this analysis) have been widely embraced in critical considerations of political disappearance in the Southern Cone, the intricacies of memory within Jewish populations during moments of political conflict have not been sufficiently theorized.

7 While we want to avoid conflating the narrator and the author, the two often seem interchangeable due to Halfon's use of autofiction. Autofiction is also prevalent throughout Halfon's works in the expansions and additions that he adds when translating works from one language to another. This is the case of *Mañana nunca lo hablamos*, whose English version "Tomorrow We Never Did Talk About It" is a short story that consists only of the last section of the novel.

8 In the way of films: *Voces inocentes* (dir. Luis Mandoki, Mexico, 2004), *Machuca* (dir. Andrés Wood, Chile, 2004), *Infancia clandestina* (dir. Benjamín Avila, Argentina, 2011), *Los rubios* (dir. Albertina Carri, Argentina, 2002), *O ano em que meus pais sairam da feria* (dir. Cao Hamburger, Brazil, 2006). Novels include Laura Alcoba's *La casa de los conejos* (Argentina, 2006), Alejandro Zambra's *Formas de volver a casa* (Chile, 2011), Andrés Neuman's *Una vez Argentina* (Argentina, 2004). Both Hamburger's film and Neuman's novel focus specifically on Jewish topics in their exploration of childhood vis-à-vis Brazil and Argentina's political struggles of the 1970s. *Machuca*, for its part, was co-written by the director, Andrés Wood, and the Jewish Chilean author Roberto Brodsky, who also wrote the 2007 novel *Bosque quemado*, which, like Halfon's novel, recounts its childhood narrator's exile from his home country after the military takes over.

9 See, for example, Luis Martín Cabrera's analysis of recent Argentine fiction in which the younger generation presents a "betrayed inheritance" of their parents' political legacy.

10 If we consider the broader panorama of twenty-first century Latin American cultural production that draws from the childhood perspective to explore issues of political conflict, Halfon's novel also closely resembles *Machuca* (2004) in its depiction of an upper-class boy's experiences during the days leading up to Chile's military coup in 1973. Unlike *Machuca*, however, Halfon's narrator sees violence and death only obliquely, whereas *Machuca* centers on a close friendship between two young boys, one the upper-class student of a parochial school and the other the inhabitant of one of Santiago's shantytowns whose home is decimated and who disappears. The novel's lack of development of a similar storyline is likely due to the snippet-like structure of the novel, which, as I mentioned previously, is marked throughout by silences and omissions.

11 Halfon treats anti-Semitism and Nazism more directly in his novel *El boxeador polaco* (2008).

12 Perkowska also places *Mañana nunca lo hablamos* in dialogue with recent Southern Cone novels dealing with childhood memory.

13 Levinson does not pay much attention to either Brodsky or his narrator's Jewish identity in her analysis of the novel.

14 While this child may be *mestizo*, the fact that the narrator refers to him this way strongly suggests that he does not belong to the category of *ladino* to which the narrator's childhood friends – who live in fancy houses and attend the same school as he – undoubtedly belong. When mentioning these friends, categories of race and ethnicity are absent, whereby we surmise that this child is darker and likely would not pass as *ladino*.

15 "Racial democracy" was a term coined by Gilberto Freyre to refer to the idea that Brazilians did not perceive racial tensions and differences as acutely as other societies. The term began to be criticized for the whitewashing inherent to it beginning with historian Thomas Skidmore in the 1970s. Wade maintains, "some of this…was very optimistic – indeed naïve – stuff when applied to the realities of Brazilian social structure and culture" (34). While it is clearly a fraught term, it is worth mentioning here for the connections that the term posits between race and democracy, connections that are necessary also for considering Jewish political participation and the relation between Jews and other ethnic groups as they each relate to the political sphere.

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