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Mapping the Memory of Armed Conflict through Cancer in Gabriela Ybarra's *El comensal* and Héctor Abad Faciolince's *El olvido que seremos*

This study examines how Spanish author Gabriela Ybarra and Colombian Héctor Abad Faciolince tackle the parallel deaths of family members due to cancer and to the violence of armed conflict in their autobiographical novels El comensal *(Spain, 2015) and* El olvido que seremos *(Colombia, 2006), respectively. Looking beyond the trope of cancer as metaphor, Ybarra and Abad Faciolince employ medical language to articulate the intergenerational mysteries surrounding instances of untimely death within their families. Cancer, thus, moves beyond a metaphor for violence and destruction, becoming a mode of representation for studying and articulating the unknown.*

Keywords: *cancer, memory, armed conflict, family, body*

Este estudio examina cómo la española Gabriela Ybarra y el colombiano Héctor Abad Faciolince abordan las muertes de familiares causadas por el cáncer y por la violencia del conflicto armado en sus novelas autobiográficas El comensal *(España, 2015) y* El olvido que seremos *(Colombia, 2006), respectivamente. El lenguaje médico de las obras de Ybarra y Abad Faciolince reelabora el tropo del cáncer como metáfora para articular los misterios intergeneracionales que rodean a las muertes prematuras dentro del círculo familiar. Como resultado, el cáncer se convierte en un modo de representación para aproximarse a lo desconocido.*

Palabras clave: *cáncer, memoria, conflicto armado, familia, cuerpo*

In *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (2010), Siddhartha Mukherjee draws upon his training as an oncologist to trace a lineage of cancer across the world, beginning with ancient history and continuing to the present. Defining cancer, he posits: "an ancient disease – once a clandestine, 'whispered-about' illness – that has metamorphosed into a

lethal shape-shifting entity imbued with such penetrating metaphorical, medical, scientific, and political potency … cancer is often described as the defining plague of our generation" (Mukherjee xiii). Indeed, throughout history, cancer has evolved from a silent and insidious disease into a potent and far-reaching collection of conditions that penetrates a diverse sphere of discourses. Susan Sontag began a discussion on the trope of cancer in 1978 with *Illness as Metaphor* by addressing how it has taken on newfound literary potency by following a long-standing tradition of representing illness in literature throughout the nineteenth century. As its scope and severity continues to cause significant medical affliction in the contemporary world, cancer strikingly enters into dialogue specifically with the post-conflict narratives of twenty-first century Spain and South America, here explored in two novels from Spain and Colombia.

In *El comensal* (Spain, 2015), Gabriela Ybarra confronts the parallel deaths of her paternal grandfather and mother to terrorist violence and cancer respectively. The autobiographical novel revisits how Ybarra witnessed her mother's struggle with cancer, which subsequently sparked a curiosity over the kidnapping and assassination of her grandfather by ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, a Basque separatist group formed during Francisco Franco's dictatorship), which occurred in 1977 in the Spanish Basque Country. The memory of her mother highlights the absent memory of her grandfather, whose death remains a mystery to her in the years leading up to the cessation of armed conflict between ETA and the state in Spain. In a similar vein, across the Atlantic, Héctor Abad Faciolince reflects on the murder of his father by paramilitary forces in 1987 in *El olvido que seremos* (Colombia, 2006). Though he focuses the text on his father, Abad Faciolince links his death to that of his older sister to cancer in the preceding years. By establishing connections between the pervasive violence of armed conflict and the insidious nature of cancer, both Ybarra and Abad Faciolince employ a study of bodily illness as a means of approximating and articulating the functions and consequences of militant insurgency in their respective countries as Spain and Colombia approach a post-conflict era.[1]

Though the Spanish and Colombian contexts may not present themselves as natural points of comparison, the study of armed conflict in both countries does highlight key commonalities lying at the base of both texts. *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA), meaning "Basque homeland and liberty," was formed in December of 1958 as an independence-seeking socialist, separatist group, which later turned to violent terrorist tactics – bombings, kidnappings and assassinations – particularly throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Casanova 15). Despite declaring numerous unsuccessful ceasefires throughout the 1990s, in October 2011 ETA announced a definitive cessation of armed conflict, which was finalized in 2018 when the

organization was dissolved. In Colombia, leftist *guerrilla* groups such as the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) grew in power and influence during decades of conflict with paramilitary forces and the Colombian government. After establishing itself as the military wing of the Colombian Communist Party in 1964, FARC employed military tactics in rural areas to promote Marxist-Leninist collective values while ELN drew upon the Cuban Revolution for inspiration to mobilize disillusioned middle-class youth (Bushnell 244). Both groups employed violent terrorist methods until a peace deal with FARC was approved in November 2016. ELN however did not participate.

The violence instigated by armed insurgency highlights examples of civil conflicts that arose in the second half of the twentieth century and became intergenerational conflicts that stretch into the twenty-first century and remain unresolved for writers like Ybarra and Abad Faciolince at the time they were writing. Given the recent ongoing struggles to achieve peace in Spain and Colombia, it is no surprise that there has been a parallel boom in second-generation or 1.5 generation[2] narratives that attempt to also make peace with a violent past so profoundly influential in the upbringing of authors like Ybarra and Abad Faciolince. This boom in cultural production lends itself to discourses on human rights and social justice comparing the Spanish and Colombian cases to other global tragedies, while little study has been previously conducted highlighting comparisons between the two phenomena in question.[3]

Looking beyond a study of armed insurgency itself, I am directing my focus towards the bodies symbolically and literally buried by armed conflict in order to demystify the family histories such bodies keep hidden within them. Given that both novels present autobiographical content, I examine how fiction sprouts from the exhumation of these bodies when the ghost stories of the dead are reanimated in the present through the trope of cancer. Just as Sontag warns against the use of cancer as metaphor, which may result in the oversimplification of the political contexts and family histories in question, I am using examples of death in Ybarra and Abad Faciolince's texts not merely to compare cancer to armed conflict in Spain and Colombia, but rather to investigate the way in which both authors create parallels between familial deaths for which cancer becomes, more aptly, an associative force that allows the authors to articulate what appears unknown.

Given its mysterious yet generative character, and because it has yet to be fully understood, cancer has become a monumental topic of discussion. Medical language surrounding cancer thus serves as a tool with which one can approach the unknown. In such an epistemological approach, cancer is transformed into a mode of representation that combats silence with a

discourse that can put into words what cannot be articulated. In the end, *El comensal* and *El olvido que seremos* are, at their core, books about medicine that employ medical treatment as tools for writing, specifically as both authors attempt to narrate a family history – as defined by deaths to cancer suffered privately within the home – in the face of national history. Such familial deaths due to armed conflict are suffered and discussed in the public sphere. Family history is transformed through fiction as authors Ybarra and Abad Faciolince superimpose themselves in the role of protagonists and narrators who retell the stories of their loved ones using writing as a new breeding ground for creation and imagination.

In breaking down the barrier separating the corporeal interior and exterior (the unknown and the known, respectively) in their study of cancer, Ybarra and Abad Faciolince likewise traverse the dividing lines between past and present through an investigation of untimely death as a familial inheritance which can be passed across generations like a contagion. By tracing a lineage of death, both authors resurrect the dead in order to heal them through writing, so as to preserve the memory of their loved ones when violence has abused their bodies publicly, yet left their images lost in oblivion within private spaces. Only once their loved ones have been restored through a new vocabulary found at the intersection of science and affect, likewise employed in armed conflict, can Ybarra and Abad Faciolince lay their family members to rest and reclaim their memories in name of the living instead of allowing them to be lost in the shadow of the violent forces that took them. Looking at cancer as a mode of representation for studying and articulating the unknown with the ultimate goal of survival, I examine how Ybarra's and Abad Faciolince's uses of cancer beyond metaphor forge new pathways in which the dialogue between science and fiction allows for a reconfiguration of the aesthetics of memory in literature and for the construction of new archives for revisiting personal and national histories.

BETWEEN CANCEROUS BODIES AND THE BODY POLITIC

Motivated by her mother's death, Ybarra reconstructs the circumstances surrounding her grandfather's kidnapping and murder in *El comensal*. At first, the connection between the two incidents is established when, after witnessing her mother's struggle with cancer, the author begins to question how her grandfather was killed. Her investigations into the past thus situate her as a narrator within her own novel, as she retells these events through memories and research. We learn that Ybarra grew up hearing many stories about her grandfather's death without ever fully understanding what happened to him because he was murdered six years before her birth. The specter of his figure looms over her family like "un comensal de más en cada comida" (Ybarra 15).

The mystery surrounding his disappearance haunts her family well after his body is recovered and buried. When her mother's death triggers a change in the way her father speaks about death, she suspects it is due to the grief surrounding the memory of her paternal grandfather. Thus, looking into the past in the aftermath of her mother's passing takes the form of "la reconstrucción libre de la historia de [la] familia" (Ybarra 11), a history tied together by tragedy. In her family history, untimely death appears as an inheritance. On her paternal side, her family has been plagued by the violence committed by ETA, not only with the murder of her paternal grandfather, but also with attempts on her father's life. On Ybarra mother's side, the death of both her maternal grandparents to cancer haunts recent family memory when her mother too is diagnosed. Witnessing the confluence of these two bloodlines, Ybarra takes on the responsibility of writing the intersection of two turbulent family histories.

The violence began in 1977, when Javier Ybarra[4] was taken by force from his home in the Basque Country by masked renegades who left his adult children bound and gagged. His children immediately received ransom letters demanding one billion *pesetas*, which they could not provide (Ybarra 27). Javier was a prominent figure in his community: he was wealthy, successful, and in the public eye, as he once served as the mayor of Bilbao.[5] In addition to his monarchist sympathies, Javier was taken due to his money and influence, characteristic of ETA's habitual strategy of targeting wealthy business owners and politicians in a campaign to ignite fear on a large public scale.[6] While he was held in captivity, he wrote letters to his family, which were published in *El País*.[7] Gabriela Ybarra uses these publications in her own reconstruction of the events, which she retells in the past tense through an unnamed omniscient narrator.

At first, Ybarra defines death as two opposing forces outlined in the twin parts of her text: the external, uncontrollable violence inflicted upon her family by ETA (part one) contrasts with the internal, physiological destruction brought on by cancer (part two). When her grandfather is kidnapped, her uncles' struggle to find him is defined by long periods of waiting paired with confusing messages they receive from Javier and his kidnappers. The letters received by the Ybarra family – from kidnapper and kidnapped alike – are characterized by what is not said, leaving both internal and external readers unsure of what is happening and what is yet to come. Assuming that Javier cannot reveal the full truth about the conditions of his captivity, nor can he detail his whereabouts, Ybarra's uncles resort to publishing hidden messages in newspaper crossword puzzles to secretly communicate with their father, though to no avail. Such absences of information and communication force Ybarra to fill the gaps with her own words, transforming her into an investigative reporter

crafting a narrative of events. When Ybarra discovers that writing failed as an epistemological force for previous generations, she uses fiction to share an untold story, shifting her focus from the need for absolute answers to the importance of interpretation. Her process of looking into the past by piecing together family stories and old newspaper clippings is paralleled by her father's search for Javier in 1977, particularly when his kidnappers announce that they have killed Javier and leave clues on scattered pieces of paper to help the family locate his body. The search for his body, as well as for the story behind how it was abused, becomes a jigsaw puzzle that replicates itself across generations. In beginning her text with this refracted scavenger hunt, Ybarra sets a precedent for further reconstruction of her family history, which, with the addition of her mother's battle with cancer, requires the use of reflections and refractions across time to piece together a more thorough narrative. The intensity of the unknown that clouds her family's understanding of death in the 1970s will later have a great impact on their response to her mother's cancer diagnosis, which is presented here as a parallel affliction that can be diagnosed and thus treated, until cancer too becomes complicated by the unknown.

In similar fashion, *El olvido que seremos* studies the relationship between two familial deaths in the aftermath of the murder of Abad Faciolince's father.[8] In contrast to Ybarra, who seeks to fill the gaps left in her family's collective memory of events she did not witness, Abad Faciolince must confront his own remembrance of two deaths he lived through. Abad Faciolince's father was shot in public by *sicarios,* who had openly threatened his life in immediate retaliation for his denunciations of their terrorist tactics throughout Medellín, but more crucially, for his support of left-wing values.[9] In returning to the past to make sense of his father's actions, Abad Faciolince steps into his shoes in order to retrace his decisions and dissect his motivations. In this sense, his project parallels Ybarra's in that both involve a retracing of steps that paves the way for the reexamination of past traumas. He recalls that while training to become a surgeon, Héctor becomes terrified at the prospect of treating patients when he witnesses how a critical error during surgery causes the death of a patient. He realizes that the human body – more precisely, the process of seeing the internal made external – repulses him, and he redirects his career toward public health: "Ejercía la medicina desde un punto de vista científico, pero sin contacto directo con los pacientes y con la enfermedad, tal vez incluso por un exceso de sensibilidad que lo llevaba a aborrecer la sangre, las heridas, el pus" (Abad Faciolince 135). For Héctor, science represents an empirical force, which, upon contact with the body, can fail due to the clandestine way in which the corporal interior functions below the surface, evading sight and study. Consequently, he commits himself to public health,

studying the rising number of deaths in Medellín resulting from contaminated water and unpasteurized milk.

Héctor's hesitation to use his medical training to study the complex ways in which the body responds to illness internally is problematized when one of his daughters, Marta, is diagnosed with melanoma. Because Marta has skin cancer, he is confident she can be treated just as he treats problems in public health, by circumventing the inner functioning of the body that revolts him and by focusing on the surface level nature of the illness: "era cáncer, sí, pero como era de la piel, la cosa era superficial y muy tratable. Él no creía que se fuera a morir" (Abad Faciolince 182). As the cancer spreads, he becomes paralyzed, realizing that the cancer is not merely superficial but an insidious illness that attacks other parts of her body from within. Because the interior of the body becomes a dark territory where reason fails and death eludes intellect, the family ultimately speculates that Marta's death is punishment "por los pecados cometidos por mi papá o por mi mamá, o por ella o por mis abuelos y tatarabuelos o por quién sabe quién" (184). Realizing that the medical subtleties of cancer differentiate it from the other viruses he studies, Héctor is forced to contemplate another form of contagion: the possibility of cancer as a gene passed from parent to child.

In her article "Duelo por el padre y duelo por la patria. La poliatría en 'El olvido que seremos' (2006) de Héctor Abad Faciolince" (2015), Kristine Vanden Berghe posits that the narratives of pain related in the intertwining of Marta and Héctor's deaths create a space for the intersection of the family and the nation, paralleling the nationhood narratives of the nineteenth-century Latin American novel (278). As Vanden Berghe analyzes the similarities in Abad Faciolince's text with such novels, her examination echoes sentiments expounded upon by Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*, which likewise studies an array of nineteenth-century novels. Sontag posits that cancer in the twentieth century, like tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, is canonized as a mysterious medical epidemic in literature so as to romanticize what would otherwise remain an ugly deadly force (5). For Vanden Berghe, illness serves as a vehicle for the conceptualization of Abad Faciolince's text, by which cancer becomes a means for relating the family to the nation. Both father and son draw upon a rhetoric of illness to discuss armed conflict, a rhetoric which, as discussed by Sontag, is itself plagued with military terminology (Sontag 66), allowing both Marta and Héctor to be seen as innocent victims of an inherently evil plague in the body and body politic respectively, particularly once relayed in writing for posterity. Just as Ybarra does, Abad Faciolince takes on the role of an investigative reporter seeking to fill the gaps left by death in personal and national histories.

In forging his own symbolic use of his daughter's cancer within the framework of his family, Abad Faciolince studies the consequences of her death for him as a father, showing how cancer serves as an omen of what is to come. For Héctor, losing his child represents a pain and tragedy so grave that the prospect of his own death becomes irrelevant: "Estoy seguro de que mi papá no padeció la tentación del martirio antes de la muerte de Marta, pero después de esa tragedia familiar cualquier inconveniente parecía pequeño, y cualquier precio ya no parecía tan alto como antes" (Abad Faciolince, *El olvido* 209). Marta's death prefigures Héctor's when, in the face of his daughter's meaningless death, he sacrifices his body to a cancer in the body politic – by denouncing the rise of violence and death due to narcotrafficking – as an act of penance, not simply for Marta's death, but for the sins she may have inherited bringing about her cancer. Cancer spreads though the body as violence spreads through the body politic. The violence of armed conflict proves just as elusive as cancer, marked by the culmination of Abad Faciolince's father's death as the tragic reenactment of his sister's. When his father's words fail to cure his country, Abad Faciolince turns to writing not only to resurrect his father's campaign, but also to revitalize it through his own writing of the past.

MAPPING MEMORY AND MEDICINE THROUGH IMAGE

Cancer presents Ybarra with the prospect of tackling the unknown through science and medicine. From the outset, Ybarra's experience accompanying her mother to her doctors' appointments and to treatment centers on questions of language. Her mother does not speak English, and many of the doctors in New York, where she seeks treatment, do not speak Spanish, leaving Ybarra to serve as mediator both in reality and in her novel. Relaying medical explanations and instructions to her mother reflects the same process by which she, as narrator, studies various sources to craft a narrative of her grandfather's last days. In both cases, she is the vehicle through which a descriptive and imaginative narrative is crafted, though she does not always understand the coded medical language she confronts. Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* (1985) discusses the gap in communication that exists between a person in pain and another who attempts to understand him/her: "the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth" (3). The difficulty of understanding pain caused by an invisible illness such as cancer frustrates those who seek to encapsulate it in writing. Just as the interior of the body evades

understanding, in both textual cases, the illegible nature of hidden illnesses further evades language.

As a result, image becomes crucial in Ybarra's articulation of pain as it draws an invisible geography to a visible surface of reality. Listening to the doctor, she looks at her mother's scans and remarks: "en el centro de la imagen había un agujero negro rodeado de nebulosas circulares blancas que me recordaron a un mapa meteorológico" (Ybarra 66). Though medical language intends to clarify and elucidate, it is often encoded in a vocabulary not immediately available to the average person. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Michel Foucault states that "disease has a land, a mappable territory" (149), highlighting how understanding medicine becomes an interpretive act that exists beyond the use of words. For Ybarra, decoding cancer requires the use of visual media because language alone fails to communicate, a tension that echoes the frustrations produced by the puzzles and hidden messages published in newspapers that the Ybarra family used to try to communicate with Javier while in captivity. In both instances, information is encoded while transmitted, leading to the loss of meaning. Alternatively, in *El comensal*, looking at an image leaves significant room for imagination, and as a result, the language produced becomes a narrative that more closely parallels fiction than science.

Looking at the image of her mother's cancer cells draws Ybarra back into the past to revisit moments in which image played a large role in her attempts to understand her family history when trying to craft a family narrative. First, she thinks about the multitude of photographs that were published in newspapers in the aftermath of her grandfather's death, images which include photos of the crime scene and of his autopsy, and portraits of him used to denounce ETA in the media. Of a sensational nature, these photos are meant to provoke public outcry, to stir up a response using the murder of a public figure as catalyst: "El asesinato de mi abuelo se condenó en los medios, lo rechazaron todos los grupos políticos, pero nadie se movilizó" (Ybarra 53). The most iconic image that Ybarra references is the cover of Spanish newspaper *ABC*, published on June 23, 1977. The headline on the front page reads: "Todos los partidos condenan la nueva salvajada de ETA, atroz asesinato de Javier de Ybarra." The photos of her grandfather are used to capitalize on his death and its political ramifications, particularly given its significance in the immediate aftermath of the first democratic elections in Spain post-dictatorship. Rather than commemorate his life, these photographs generated a bifurcation in how his image has been preserved in collective memory versus privately in his family: "No se parece en nada. La oreja se ve más grande y la nariz más aguileña. La foto del cadáver de mi abuelo que observo en Google Images no tiene nada que ver con el retrato que hay en el salón. Miro las fotos y sigo buscando diferencias"

(52). As Ybarra studies these images, her gaze takes on medical form when her analyses parallels those outlined by Foucault in his discussion of the clinical gaze: "to see, to isolate features, to recognize those that are identical and those that are different, to regroup them, to classify them by species or families" (Foucault 89). As another reader of the newspaper, Ybarra is heavily influenced by family stories, allowing her to see what the average reader might not. The retelling of her grandfather's death, as the result of a series of dissections and reclassifications, produces an evolving image of who he was.

Her discussion of Javier's body is striking, as Ybarra notes how captivity changed his physical appearance in a way that reflects how cancer afflicts her mother's body. She discovers from his autopsy that Javier lost twenty-two kilograms and smelled of urine and excrement when his body was found (Ybarra 45). The readers are left with a striking echo later in the text when a doctor describes to Ybarra and her mother how chemotherapy will affect her body. She too will suffer from a sensitive stomach, which might make her lose weight uncontrollably, as well as "problemas para controlar los impulsos de ir al baño" (73). Both instances demonstrate an attack on the body that leaves the subject incapable of controlling inner bodily functions. Beyond the metaphor of cancer as an invasion that parallels the physical harm inflicted on civilians in times of violent conflict, the varied methods for envisioning the body in both cases force Ybarra as a narrator to reimagine her mother and grandfather in terms of their changing appearances while approaching death. Relating how death changes them requires a reimagination of their bodies, which is depicted for her first through scientific images and only later in words. A scientific body of evidence – a medical image such as an autopsy photo or a body scan – leaves behind doubts or uncertainties which themselves become the tools for writing about events that evade comprehension. Such gaps grant Ybarra the freedom to write when simply reading scientific road maps proves inadequate. Because these images depict, but do not speak, they require a mediator like Ybarra to step in and articulate their significance, and more importantly, to explain their utility when a cure cannot be found, and a resolution is not reached. In this way, medicine as a science becomes complicated when the gaze fails to read the map on which it is studied. Ybarra's gaze leaps off the map, reading new pathways that diverge from scientific territory in the face of imagination.

These instances additionally trigger another memory, that of a young ETA member who attempted to deliver a bomb to Ybarra's adolescent home. Looking into who this man was, Ybarra studies photos from his trial and eventually comes upon his YouTube channel. She delves into his life, using video as a window into his identity and is struck by how unthreatening he

seems. Images here cause her to imagine who he was based on what she sees, which makes her lose sight of the threat he once posed to her family: "Sus retratos me provocan sensaciones similares a las imágenes de las células del cáncer. No pienso en la amenaza, sino en la ficción que me sugieren. Las fotos de los tumores parecen galaxias, al verlas fabulo con el espacio" (Ybarra 88-89). Ybarra compares this moment to sitting in the doctor's office, looking at images of her mother's cancer cells. Isolated and taken out of context, they look like galaxies spread over black and white film, causing her to forget what they really are. She is lost in a new universe; the image of a galaxy suggests an infinitude, another world unlocked through writing as it is experienced by someone who is not a trained medical professional. Not bound by the rigidity of scientific terminology and the empirical demands of medicine, Ybarra does not look simply at illness, but rather at the way it grows, connects, infects, and propagates.[10]

One month after her mother is laid to rest, ETA ceases armed conflict and Ybarra returns to the Basque Country to make peace with her grandfather's murder, all of which are related in the text, which serves as an obituary (Ybarra 141). For Ybarra, the act of writing brings finality to these events, which were previously perceived as unavoidable inheritances of untimely death, drowned in silence before bodies could be properly laid to rest. Standing on the earth where she feels it all began – where her grandfather's body was recovered – Ybarra writes, and in writing a new narrative, she liberates the land from this curse. By rearticulating her family history, Ybarra makes peace with death and is able to emerge with her own voice that reclaims Basque territory from ETA as that of her family.

WRITING AS EXPLORATORY SURGERY

Reflecting on the spectral presence of his father in the years following his death, Abad Faciolince discusses how his father takes on the form of an imaginary interlocutor: "casi todo lo que he escrito lo he escrito para alguien que no puede leerme, y este mismo libro no es otra cosa que la carta a una sombra" (*El olvido* 25).[11] The paradoxical nature of this writing – he knows his father would love to read his book while knowing that his father will never in fact be able to – situates Abad Faciolince's project in a black hole not unlike those seen by Ybarra in the medical scans of her mother's cancer. Death, both the prospect of it and the specter of it, opens gaps that writing attempts to fill. Such black holes or shadows are confronted when Abad Faciolince sorts through his father's office after his murder and is inundated with papers and documents, including Héctor's personal writing.

Studying these papers, Abad Faciolince delves into the *sombra* that remains of his father, a shadow from which he attempts to emerge as a writer. Realizing that human beings are divided into interior and exterior

personas, he presents himself in a scene that parallels his father's earlier confrontation with the human body in surgery. He reflects: "abrir el cajón de un muerto es como hundirnos en esa cara que solo era visible para él y que solo él quería ver, la cara que protegía de los otros: la de su intimidad" (Abad Faciolince, *El olvido* 265). In this way, he opens up his father's interior for exploratory surgery.[12] The void left by his father's death mimics those of an open wound waiting to be treated, perhaps the very gunshot wounds that killed his father. Reading the documents, Abad Faciolince becomes a surgeon who opens up a body (of work), so as to diagnose the ills that have led to an untimely death. What he finds are "síntomas y signos que dejaban entrar los rayos de luz en sus zonas de sombra" (*El olvido* 265), allowing him to lay bare – make visible and legible – his father's interior in a way his father never could.

In this act, Abad Faciolince and his father, who happens to be his namesake, partake in a series of reflections and refractions within themselves and of each other. When Héctor is killed, he is taken to the same morgue where he once took his son to see his first cadaver and autopsy as an adolescent. In the same way his father rejects the sight of a body in surgery, young Abad Faciolince sees the cadavers and is repulsed by their injuries: "Huelo un profundo olor de sangre disuelto con formol, como una mezcla de carnicería bovina con laboratorio de química. Después, como mi papá notó que el espectáculo de la autopsia era muy fuerte, decidió llevarme a dar un paseo por entre los otros muertos. … Ahí me desmayé" (*El olvido* 153-54). The inert and mangled bodies force him to confront the violence that led to their deaths and he is overcome with fear. As a child, he sees firsthand the terrorist violence that causes the death of innocent civilians; violence which later as an adult, is epitomized in his father's assassination. When Abad Faciolince turns to the prospect of writing the very book we are reading in the face of these memories, he remembers: "Las veces innumerables en que lo intenté, las palabras me salían húmedas, untadas de lamentable materia lacrimosa, y siempre he preferido una escritura más seca, más controlada, más distante" (296). His writing becomes paralyzed when he sees the writing process as his father views surgery: messy, morbid, full of risk and peril. Like his father, Abad Faciolince attempts to approach writing from a safe distance, until he realizes that he must face the *herida* – the gaps – that paralyzes him: both the absence left in the aftermath of his father's death as well as the inability to write about the emotions and frustrations it has provoked, previously inaccessible until he reads his father's personal documents.

Subsequently, Abad Faciolince does not avoid interiority, but rather sees the corpus of a man's personal possessions as a way of understanding what plagued him. He discovers that his father wanted to be a writer due to

his failure as a doctor and as a politician. This highlights how, in the face of his inability to cure society through science, writing offers another potential remedy. By interpolating excerpts of his father's writing into his novel, he fills the shadows and black holes left by death like patchwork. In doing so, the text takes on a messier form; he dissects, replaces, patches, and allows for the corpus to come together on new terms. In *Beyond Words: Illness and the Limits of Expression* (2013), Kathlyn Conway examines the varying methods for relating illness, and particularly pain, in text. She proposes that "the linear narrative, structured around a beginning, middle, and end, inevitably carries the plot along from crisis to resolution. Serious illness or disability, on the other hand, because it has an indeterminate beginning and an unknown ending, is not adequately served by a linear narrative" (Conway 99). Conway attempts to draw the reader's attention away from the predominant culture surrounding stories of triumph – narratives of illness that end in full recovery – in order to look at the internal emotional experiences related to pain that evolve outside of time and may not have a happy ending. Her speculation on the inefficacy of a linear narrative pairs well with a study of Abad Faciolince, given that, in his interaction with his father's personal documents, he comes to discover how diagnosis and prescribed treatment plans can fail both in medicine as well as in writing. As with Ybarra, medicine intervenes as a mediator that does not necessarily present an antidote to the problems at hand but does prove productive in the moment of writing.

While he cannot explain, diagnose, or cure the tragedies that have been left by disease and death, Abad Faciolince can achieve a positive prognosis for his future. The interpolation of his father's writing in his own text allows for Héctor to accompany him on his journey through the past, no longer as a shadow, but through the presence of his voice on the page. Abad Faciolince turns to writing to discuss the problems he witnesses, to share and to reflect, but he never pretends to propose a solution: "Al escribir este libro … entendí que la única venganza, el único recuerdo, y también la única posibilidad de olvido y de perdón, consistía en contar lo que pasó, y nada más" (*El olvido* 264).[13] As he discovers that death creates a void that can only be filled through writing, and that can only be healed by laying bare the interior of his soul, he puts aside a need for vengeance in favor of preserving his father's story: "de mi papá aprendí algo que los asesinos no saben hacer: a poner en palabras la verdad, para que esta dure más que su mentira" (300). Abad Faciolince strays from the map of science, and even from the dominant discourse on human rights and violence in Colombia, to forge, as Ybarra does, a new narrative that carries a regenerative force much more personally powerful than what can be achieved through medicine or peace accords alone. In this way, both authors use the black holes in their family

narratives to revitalize the voices of their deceased loved ones who were killed for speaking out. In placing them into the corpus of their own texts, Ybarra and Abad Faciolince heal their silenced voices even if they cannot cure the ills that killed them.

REMEDIES FOR HEALING THE PAST

Ybarra's *El comensal* and Abad Faciolince's *El olvido que seremos* confront personal tragedy in attempts at building an archive, which stands initially for their respective families but, upon publication, transforms itself into one to be shared by the nation. A striking aspect of both texts is the way in which technology becomes an intrinsic element of research, reflective of how the digital age is increasingly influencing the way cultural products are shaped, shared and archived. Looking at Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory[14] allows us to think about the way in which both texts illustrate how the tensions highlighted by Hirsch evolve in the twenty-first century. For Hirsch, photography is a critical tool in her postmemorial project, since such images allow her to look into the past so as to imagine, recognize, and relate to events she did not witness. We see how family photographs serve as an intimate archive of family history when the act of organizing them and passing them down across generations becomes in and of itself part of a collective familial effort to preserve history.

As we have seen, Ybarra's preliminary and often primary means of research involves the Internet, most notably Google Images, YouTube, and social media. Images are everywhere and form the basis of her writing, yet these images are not family photographs. Instead, they belong to the public domain and can be viewed by anyone, including the reader, at any moment. Though Ybarra and Hirsch do not digress drastically – they both look at how images allow us to imagine and recreate past moments – it is important to note that Hirsch, and many of the authors and artists she references, are the ones who choose to make their family photographs public, while Ybarra is appropriating other people's images for her familial project. Newspaper clippings, videos and medical records are taken and superimposed onto her family history; they carry her on an exploratory journey away from her writing until she can use them to find her way back. If photographs are used as tools of recognition, the process of recognition for Ybarra takes on distinct challenges given that she is one of an infinite number of people with access to the necessary photos. While Hirsch can repurpose family photos for her project and for the study and retelling of family history, Ybarra must first dissect how the images she finds were originally used before she can decide how she personally interacts with them in her text. As Ybarra lays bare her confrontation with publicly circulated images of her family by writing about her reactions to internet searches, her metafictional

reflections suggest that much still remains unresolved. Ybarra shares her inquiries and her doubts regarding the utility of her abundant electronic findings, leaving the reader to likewise question how our use of technology shapes the way we understand the past.

Though Abad Faciolince does not rely on the Internet in the same way, particularly because his text does not constitute a work of postmemory, he is aware of the risk he takes in writing about his father's murder, which has already faced public scrutiny. In his article, "Estética y narcotráfico" (2008), he examines the implications of works that take on the topic of armed conflict in Colombia, proposing that most are "libros escritos para lavarse las manos" (Abad Faciolince 516), aimed at uneducated and easily manipulated audiences. He speculates that in the future, when scholars study the cultural material produced at the turn of the twentieth-first century, they will find a large collection of alleged testimonials that have been manipulated by biased authors and corrupt media outlets seeking to promote such texts as "lectura popular" (517).[15] The challenge facing future generations will be, consequently, how to differentiate between sensationalized accounts produced primarily to turn a profit and educated studies of armed conflict in Colombia.[16] Written before the publication of *El olvido que seremos*, which itself has enjoyed great commercial success regardless of Abad Faciolince's intentions, the article poses a very poignant question: how will autobiographical or testimonial novels that incorporate fictional elements into their narratives, such as those studied here, factor into a canon of twenty-first-century literature, given that they coincide with the cessation of armed conflict in their respective counties, and as a result, with a growing global fascination for the truth behind what has transpired? The sensitivity of this question is exacerbated by the fact that authors like Ybarra and Abad Faciolince have used their own families as material for their work – deceased loved ones who have already faced notable public scrutiny in their own time – making their accounts heavily influenced by the emotional stakes for them and their families.

Returning to Mukherjee, his work *The Emperor of All Maladies* allows us to think about the implications of the process by which cancer cells grow in relation to the roles that Ybarra and Abad Faciolince's texts play in the formation of a healthy and productive collective memory in their respective countries. Mukherjee explains:

> Cell division allows us as organisms to grow, to adapt, to recover, to repair – to live. And distorted and unleashed, it allows cancer cells to grow, to flourish, to adapt, to recover, and to repair – to live at the cost of our living. Cancer cells grow faster, adapt better. They are more perfect versions of ourselves. (6)

Perhaps the publication of material in the digital age functions in a similar way. Whether it be on the Internet, through a publisher or in mass media, the introduction of material into the public sphere results in a proliferation of duplicates, manipulated refractions, and public scrutiny. Though writing may serve as a means of healing the family – of laying to rest the dead who have been exhumed and put on public display so as to create a new body of inheritance found in these novels – the publication of these texts further complicates an understanding of intimate family tragedies, which are played out in endless iterations in the public eye in the past, present, and future. If the propagation of false or misleading materials in the public sphere can grow as cancer cells do, then the production of projects of reconstruction such as Ybarra's *El comensal* and Abad Faciolince's *El olvido que seremos* present a corpus of cells that grow out from a personally intimate source to adapt, repair and heal family narratives with the goal of helping them to live on in the aftermath of destruction and forgetfulness.

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NOTES

1 Laws governing historical memory in Spain have been cultivated throughout the decades since Francisco Franco's death in 1975, proving to be vital in the ongoing search for disappeared people and the identification of bodies discovered in unearthed mass graves. Such initiatives focus on the Spanish Civil War and the years of dictatorship without emphasizing the specific and separate violence suffered in the Basque Country due to the rise of armed insurgency during the same period. Colombia has witnessed a surge of historical memory efforts, reflected in government funded initiatives such as the *Centro de Memoria Histórica* and the *Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación* in Bogotá. The impulse toward cultivating historical memory is fairly new – such centers were inaugurated in the past decade – but mirror an ongoing demand for increased activism in Colombia, both in legislature and beyond.

2 In her seminal article "The 1.5 Generation: Thinking about Child Survivors and the Holocaust" (2002), Susan Suleiman defines the 1.5 generation as the "child survivors of the Holocaust, too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have been there during the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Unlike the second generation, whose most common shared experience is that of belatedness … the 1.5 generation's shared experience is that of premature bewilderment and helplessness" (277). Suleiman's term is particularly useful given that both Ybarra and Abad

Faciolince were born and grew up during the decades of armed conflict in their respective countries.

3 In Spain, where the history of violence in the Basque Country is only beginning to differentiate itself from a more predominant discourse on the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, contemporary authors such as Fernando Aramburu, Edurne Portela, and Gabriel Urza have played a crucial role in bringing novels about the Basque Country into a larger global readership. Likewise, authors such as Laura Restrepo, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Evelio Rosero, and Fernando Vallejo have published acclaimed works of fiction, which have been translated into numerous languages worldwide, on varied aspects of the Colombian conflict.

4 From here on when necessary, I will refer to Javier Ybarra by his first name and Gabriela Ybarra by her last to avoid confusion between the two.

5 Javier Ybarra was born in 1913 in Bilbao. Trained as a lawyer, Ybarra served as mayor of Bilbao from 1963-1969, as president of the *Diputación de Vizcaya* from 1947-1950, and as an executive at the newspaper *El Correo*. He was a member of the *Real Academia de Historia*, a consultant to various local businesses, and the author of ten books on the history of the Basque Country (Ybarra 52).

6 Ybarra notes that it is particularly significant that her grandfather was murdered days before Spain celebrated its first democratic elections on June 15, 1977 (52).

7 Ybarra recovers articles and photos published in various newspapers such as *El País*, *Blanco y Negro*, and *ABC* as well as radio broadcasts and scholarly books on the history of the Basque Country in order to uncover what happened to her grandfather. Many of these pieces of evidence are reproduced in her book. When doing research into more contemporary events, she uses Google, YouTube, and Facebook to supplement her findings.

8 From here forward, given that both father and son have similar names, I will refer to Abad Faciolince's father always by his first name Héctor, while using the family name to refer to the author/son.

9 Héctor Abad Gómez was born in 1921 in Medellín. He was trained in medicine and became a prominent university professor and human rights activist, founding the Colombian National School of Public Health. In addition to developing public health programs to aid the poor, he was also active in fighting social injustice and political corruption. Most importantly, he denounced the murders and disappearances of fellow human rights defenders executed by paramilitaries.

10 Here, it is striking to note the intersection of the etymologies of the words "metaphor" and "metastasis," which share Greek roots for denoting carrying, transfer, and change.

11 After the publication of *El olvido que seremos*, Abad Faciolince's daughter, Daniela Abad, directed a documentary entitled *Carta a una sombra* (2015) about her father and grandfather. The documentary, in collaboration with Miguel Salazar, is based on the book.

12 In his article, "*El olvido que seremos* y *Mi confesión*: testimonio, memoria e historia" (2010), Fredy Leonardo Reyes Albarracín analyzes this moment in Abad Faciolince's text through Walter Benjamin (Reyes Albarracín 27). Reyes cites Benjamin's reflections on Proust, in which he posits that a lived event becomes a closed experience once it ends, whereas the same event as a remembered experience is limitless. Reyes's connection is useful in associating this scene with an exploratory surgery. Abad Faciolince opens his father's documents not to discover hidden moments of his father's lived experience, but rather to delve into the realm of his memories and the memory of him, which live on as an infinite entity beyond his death.

13 In her article "Los paseos por Auschwitz de Héctor Abad" (2014), María Caña Jiménez looks at the moral implications of Abad Faciolince's text: "Por una parte, en cuanto a los personajes, las novelas históricas hispanoamericanas del pasado reciente, por ejemplo, la narrativa del crimen, a menudo incluyen personajes ambiguos, desdibujan las fronteras entre inocencia y culpabilidad o insinúan que los culpables lo son por su pasado o por el sistema, lo cual hasta cierto punto los redime. Frente a estas tendencias, resaltan la claridad de los juicios éticos y la índole dicotómica de los personajes en la novela de Abad Faciolince" (285). Rather than focus on the moral implications Abad Faciolince himself seeks to avoid inculcating, I find it more productive to look at expression and modes of representation.

14 Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012) as "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" (5).

15 Similar concerns are expressed by Andreas Huyssen in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003). Looking at the memory boom from the 1980s and onward, Huyssen addresses the role of media in the commodification of memory. As commercial media outlets allow for increased circulation and reproduction, he questions how to approach studying memory and trauma in the contemporary world (Huyssen 19).

16 Reyes Albarracín relates Abad Faciolince's discussion on contemporary Colombian literature in "Estética y narcotráfico" with *El olvido que seremos* by analyzing Abad Faciolince's claim that his writing on his father's death will allow him to speak the truth, even if it does not help him to forgive and forget (19) through Tzvetan Todorov's notion of exemplary memories from *Les Abus*

de la mémoire (2004). When memories relate horrific events, exemplary memories are drawn into the present in search of justice, not merely for the horrific events being remembered, but additionally for others they may parallel or resemble in present day. Reyes proposes that Abad Faciolince's final reflections draw the memory of his father's murder into a shared social discourse in Colombia, which constructs exemplary memories in literature to combat the very abusing of Colombia's history of armed conflict for commercial profit he anticipates (29). In "Imágenes del tiempo en *El olvido que seremos* de Héctor Abad Faciolince" (2009), Andrea Fanta Castro echoes these sentiments in arguing that Abad Faciolince's intertwining of past and present through publishing memories allows him to establish a collective readership with whom he can share his truth of his father's murder and consequently achieve his own sense of justice (32).

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