

Introduction

The Space of Disappearance

Knowledge, Form, Rights

34° 32,3660 S / 58° 26,2575 W. At these coordinates, against the blank eastern sky and amid the gray waves of the Río de la Plata, stands the *Reconstrucción del retrato de Pablo Míguez* (Reconstruction of the portrait of Pablo Míguez). The boy's figure faces out to sea, toward the horizon, his back to the city of Buenos Aires and the Parque de la Memoria that abuts the shore. His right hand clutches the elbow of his left arm behind his back, one leg steps out just slightly, the water hides his ankles. It is a casual, if pensive, stance that belies the significance of his body in the water. For this water once received other bodies, the river a water-tomb to the men and women sunken in its depths so that their bodies would not be recovered. The sculpture stands as memorial to these enforced disappearances and moves in and out of sight, artist Claudia Fontes explains, as its "polished surface reflects its surroundings and makes the image more or less visible in the landscape depending on the weather conditions and the moment of the day."¹ When it takes on the gray of the water, the sculpture seems to disappear into the river; at other moments the light allows us to follow the curve of the young boy's back, the sinking line of his shoulders, the angle of his jaw. But we do not from the overlook on the shoreline see his face, reconstructed from surviving photos of the fourteen-year-old boy disappeared with his mother into the tortuous network of Argentina's detention and torture centers during the country's last military dictatorship. That we cannot make out his face allows the boy to represent the disappeared at large, to serve as a kind of universal figure while turning both toward the mass grave at his feet and away from the horrors he has lived. Fontes asks us, in tandem with her own meticulous efforts, to participate in the

reconstruction of Pablo Míguez as we attempt to give a face to the boy and to the history of disappearance that he represents.² The memorial sculpture, product of the competing attentions of water, light, and our efforts to see that which is concealed, gives a form to absence that we can engage with. The force of this form is undeniably overwhelming, even as we may not immediately or wholly understand what it communicates.

Fontes's sculpture illustrates, in the incorruptibility of steel, the subject of this book: the forms that disappearance acquires, the spaces it takes up, and the oblique reading practices it compels. These are, despite the fact that Argentina returned to democratic rule more than three decades ago, still vital concerns. On August 10, 2016, for example, newly elected Argentine president Mauricio Macri told an interviewer from the foreign press that he did not know how many people had been forcibly disappeared by his country's most recent military dictatorship: "I have no idea. That's a debate I'm not going to enter, whether they were 9,000 or 30,000."³ Macri's public refusal to recognize the more than thirty thousand victims disappeared by state terrorism—a number long recognized by historians, the United Nations, and human rights organizations and governments around the world—signals the historical distortions that still haunt Argentine political and civil society forty years after the coup d'état that ushered in eight years of state-sponsored genocide against alleged political dissidents.⁴ These chasms, however, are more than deep divides in a national consciousness that has splintered into conflicting interpretations of historical fact and competing opinions about how to move a country forward under the heavy weight of memory and impunity. They are also evidence of a larger network of gaps, holes, rifts, and fissures that is the complicated legacy of systematic disappearance. Breaches in knowledge, subjectivity, and identity emerge as constitutive of the state, its democratic apparatus, and wider cultural and aesthetic efforts then tasked with assimilating, responding, and making something new out of the chasms that enforced disappearance leaves behind.

This book is about these absences, the new spaces they forge, and the strategies and structures that late twentieth-century Argentine novelists have used to make art from disappearance. It is a study of disappearance as a formal literary phenomenon that evolves in tandem with significant historical breaches in a state's protection of human rights and dignity. But while the history of enforced disappearance and the representation of the disappeared help shape the core of this work and inform its scope, I do not directly attend to the politics and ethics of the disappeared's material absence. Nor do I parse the crucial details of the political battles over how to recover their bodies and the genetic material of the dead, how to locate and repurpose the

detention and torture centers that systematically manufactured disappearance, or how to bring the perpetrators of genocide to justice. Instead the chapters that follow propose that the structures and strategies proper to storytelling acknowledge and help us care for, mourn, and memorialize the absent dead by serving as an aesthetic index that transforms how we engage with and what we know of disappearance, as well as its future history. Rather than attending to the disappeared body, then, this work attends to disappearance as a body of work. Where art and the lived world exert equal pressures on each other, it may be that these are inseparable tasks.

Disappearance emerges in late twentieth-century Argentine fiction, I propose, as a literary device and narrative mode that responds to or intersects with the country's use of enforced disappearance as a mechanism of state terror during the military dictatorship. As it takes shape in fiction as a salient formal force—from the cusp of the coup d'état in 1976 through the decades of postdictatorship in the 1980s and 1990s—disappearance becomes a catalyst for the production of new forms of historical knowledge, knowledge production, and organizing knowledge, particularly where fiction serves as a viable primary source of alternate histories. Furthermore, and of particular significance to how we understand the legacies of disappearance, the literary strategies and structures that it takes on come to function as the ethically charged fundament of a new narrative commons that confirms the many and urgent reciprocities of the political and the aesthetic. This book engages a postmodern literary corpus particular to the twentieth century, but this commons opens up to new generations of writers from Argentina and indeed the rest of the Southern Cone who continue to craft narrative from disappearance on the far side of the millennial divide.

The literary turn to disappearance in the last quarter of the twentieth century also evidences the ways in which absence drives contemporary literary history more generally. For forms of absence show up in Western literature as conspicuous narrative devices at about the same time that midcentury hermeneutics and deconstruction offer up the possibility that what is most fully and properly literary enacts its own kind of disappearance on our given aesthetic horizons. Here disappearance as narrative technique reveals itself to be both evidence and harbinger of a Blanchotesque “disappearance of literature,” an always present future condition in which literature becomes most itself, most properly art. The narrative mode of disappearance that appears in late twentieth-century Argentine literature contributes, even half a century later, to this state of art still becoming.

The Space of Disappearance studies the ways in which disappearance shows up as literary preoccupation, device, and mode in relation to the

legacies of concealment, disavowal, and withholding of knowledge that enable enforced disappearance to work as a tool of state terror. Each of these strategies of dissimulation produces the epistemological aporia that make systematic disappearance possible, endow it with a perverse negative logic, and ensure that its effects are felt long into the future. I look at how three prominent Argentine authors—Rodolfo Walsh, Julio Cortázar, and Tomás Eloy Martínez—turn these gaps in knowledge that facilitate enforced disappearance into a productive aesthetic strategy. The epistemology of disappearance that emerges asks us—here where art responds to terror—to access knowledge in new, oblique modalities and to understand and engage with fiction in innovative, participatory ways amid the ruins of dictatorship.

The modes of disappearance that serve as the central axes of this book—dissimulation, doubling and displacement, suspension, and embodiment—are specific, dynamic manifestations of absence in which moments, things, ideas, knowledge, and historical possibilities that are withheld, recede, or go missing are recast as vital agents in the shaping of narrative form and both literary and lived worlds. They allow us to see the processes and techniques by which absence takes shape, takes place, and functions as a constitutive part of both storytelling and world-building. Read in the historic context of a dictatorial regime whose central strategy of repression was to fabricate invisibility, this aesthetic phenomenon abuts, resists, and repurposes disappearance in ways that have not been formally acknowledged or analyzed in literary study. The narrative spaces that an aesthetics of disappearance occupies allows disappearance to be seen, studied, and situated historically such that literary space—this the space of the book's title—verifies lived experience, validates historical reality, and becomes an agent of potential political and social engagement. The chapters that follow, in a series of engaged and contextualized close readings, examine how these spaces are provided for and function, and what they might signify both within the immediate context of their production and today, decades later, in a new literary atmosphere still trying to come to terms with the complicated legacies of disappearance.

Historical Distortions

Approximately thirty thousand people were forcibly disappeared under the military dictatorships that governed Argentina from 1976 to 1983.⁵ As strategies of state terrorism, the Argentine government organized, armed, and greenlighted paramilitary police forces that carried out the dirty work

of disappearance on the streets and set up a network of over five hundred clandestine torture and detention centers and concentration camps around the country to house the disappeared until their likely murder or, less likely, eventual release under the guise of social rehabilitation.⁶ But in order for disappearance to function on a large scale, the military juntas—especially that of General Jorge Videla, responsible for the initial coup that ousted Isabel Perón—also enacted certain social and legal distortions that worked to normalize disappearance and cement the state of exception under which the country operated until its return to democracy in early 1984. These included 1) an official disavowal both at home and abroad that anything out of the ordinary was happening in Argentina; 2) implementing a systematic withholding of knowledge aimed to mask the crime of disappearance, disorient and destabilize society at large, and inhibit acts of individual and collective agency; and 3) altering and naturalizing perceptions of personhood by positing a future anterior state that excluded alleged “subversives,” a high proportion of which were young people, from the national body.

The Videla government, in particular, took great pains to mask the work of its paramilitary police forces and the existence of its clandestine torture and detention centers. It denied domestic accusations and international suspicion that it had implemented a program of systematic disappearance—comprised of illegal detention, torture, murder, and the clandestine disposal of a body—that targeted specific populations in Argentina considered either “subversive” or sympathetic to subversive agendas. Videla’s nascent military dictatorship took cover behind the state’s ongoing conflict with the weakly armed Left, whose most prominent group were the Montoneros, a Peronist guerilla organization responsible for a series of urban bombings, assassinations, and ransomed kidnappings. Since their formation in the early 1970s, the Montoneros trained their eye largely on police or military units and collaborating business executives; the eradication of this smaller allied opposition was a likely rationale for the war against subversion that the Videla junta would claim. Whereas the junta would allege, however, that the number of subversives in the country totaled twenty-five thousand, Marguerite Feitlowitz documents in her landmark study of the dictatorship, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, that “at their height in 1974–5, these leftist groups totaled no more than 2,000 individuals of whom only 400 had arms.”⁷ The Videla government grossly exaggerated the numbers and capacity of the leftist insurgency in order to justify the construction and implementation of the so-called Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, or Process of National Reorganization, under whose aegis it implemented

a widespread system of national cleansing the insidious effects of which continue to shape Argentine society and politics more than forty years later.

In June 1978, two years into the dictatorship, the World Soccer Championships were held in Buenos Aires, which produced enormous national fervor when Argentina won the cup. But members of the foreign press took advantage of their access to the country during the three-weeks-long games to investigate international reports of human rights abuses, including torture and disappearance and clandestine concentration camps. The Videla government seemed to take an a priori defensive position to the rumors, however, by plastering Buenos Aires in advance of the games with the slogan "Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos," or as Feitlowitz offers, "We Argentines are human, we Argentines are right."⁸ The information gathered by foreign journalists during that summer helped in part to fuel the visit in September 1979 by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS), who organized the trip to investigate the increasingly widespread rumors of human rights abuses in the country. Throughout both the World Cup and the subsequent visit by the OAS, the junta and the national news press worked to simultaneously discredit the human rights organizations active in the country, most notably the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, and to build widely disseminated pro-Argentina advertising campaigns promoting the social and economic well-being of the country.⁹ These efforts, detailed and deconstructed at length by Feitlowitz, worked to actively obscure both at home and abroad the realities of the campaign of social cleansing that was taking place across Argentina. Constructing and promoting the appearance of normalcy was paramount to the success of the regime; a carefully devised campaign of normalcy allowed enforced disappearance to take place in plain sight, broad daylight, and next door without causing undue attention.

Official response to reports of disappearance began with local police forces that alleged they had no information regarding a missing person and local judges who routinely denied requests of habeas corpus. Civil institutions, including religious organizations such as the Catholic Church and the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations, were also complicit in fostering or covering up the illegal work of the regime;¹⁰ the history of civil complicity during the dictatorship is complex and difficult, but not necessarily extraordinary to life under an authoritarian state. The installation of a system of state terror might have been fashioned by Videla's government, but it was bolstered and cemented by national, regional, and local police forces and civil organizations who claimed to not know anything,

see anything, or have any information that might help people looking for loved ones who had been disappeared.

This state-sponsored network of carefully crafted denial and disavowal worked to sow in the country a kind of widespread social schizophrenia. This allowed Argentine citizens to carry out the tasks of daily life while either ignoring or not seeing (or some psychologically difficult combination of the two) the violent work of the regime on the ground. Diana Taylor identifies this kind of social blinding—either ideologically willful or a strategy for survival under an authoritarian regime—as a “percepticide” capable of crippling the country’s ability to see and make sense of the widespread systematization of disappearance, even despite its very often public spectacles.¹¹ Percepticide allowed paramilitary police forces to carry out violent detentions in public places without raising alarm; torture and detention centers to be built into lived urban spaces, such as churches, schools, and shopping malls; and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo to demand every week before the Casa Rosada the whereabouts of their children without interrupting the daily life of the city. This large-scale social blinding drafted, Taylor proposes, the “good” citizens of Argentina into an insidious power structure that allowed them to knowingly witness what the state crafted as the “given-to-be-seen” and not to see its inverse, the “given-to-be-invisible.”¹² This new kind of selective sight fomented by the very public machinations of the military dictatorship allowed people not to “know” what was going on around them. Taylor writes:

The military spectacle made people pull back in fear, denial, and tacit complicity from the show of force. Therein lay its power. The military violence could have been relatively invisible, as the term *disappearance* suggests. The fact that it wasn’t indicates that the population as a whole was the intended target, positioned by means of the spectacle. People had to deny what they saw and, by turning away, collude with the violence around them.¹³

In crippling a citizenry’s capacity to witness, the dictatorship secured its battle lines. People could see what the government wanted them to see and not more or, if given to “dangerous seeing,” become the target of the new government’s program of violence. The policing of sight is also the policing of knowledge; when witnessing becomes itself a crime or a life-threatening act of rebellion, the production of knowledge is severely truncated. Knowledge under the dictatorship—especially during its early years, which were the most violent—was suspect and made its owner suspicious in the logic of

the regime. Unknowing, or better, not knowing in the first place, became a means of preservation. At the same time it protected the individual, however, it also protected the military regime.

The dictatorship sought to cultivate a widespread unseeing and lack of knowledge in the daily lives of its citizens, but it also wielded a denial of knowledge when confronted about its extralegal activities. When relatives of the disappeared went to the police to register their loved ones as missing or to inquire about their whereabouts, these requests were met with a carefully crafted ignorance that denied knowing anything about a person's arrest. Families were offered alternate explanations for a loved ones' absence, including the possibility that they had assumed false identities—presumably in order to facilitate the execution of subversive acts against the state—or had gone to live abroad.¹⁴ This official rhetoric was mirrored in a larger social imaginary that willfully denied the existence of the disappeared. Feitlowitz cites a passage from a leading magazine of the time, *Para Ti*, that rebuked the populism and false patriotism of the “missing” while demanding that they show themselves for the good of the country: “A los que *se borrraron*, que se vuelvan, que den la cara si es que sus conciencias se lo permiten” (To those who *disappeared themselves*, return and show your face if your conscience permits).¹⁵ This more popular denial of the fact of disappearance—indeed the suggestion that the disappeared had willingly “erased themselves” from larger Argentine society—rearticulated in a public sphere the individual conversations held between families and the police officers, lawyers, and judges who actively withheld information and disavowed any knowledge of the crime. At both the level of the law and in a public arena, disappearance was a fiction the possibility of which was propagated by gaps in knowledge and the prohibition against knowledge collection.

Disappearance as a tool of state repression was also facilitated by a critical alteration in the perception of national subjecthood, as Taylor describes. She explains:

Entry into or expulsion from the judiciary and cultural system came to depend on the performance of nationness. If there is no subject *before* the law, if subjects are produced by the very systems that claim human subjectivity as their basis (law, culture), then the disappeared, as the military leaders said all along, do not exist. . . . All those considered subjects, “authentic” Argentines (as opposed to other Argentines), were subjects before the law, that is, had legal rights. The others, the so-called

subversives, lacked humanity and subjectivity according to the military government and thus had no legal status or rights. They fell outside or beyond the law. . . . As General Ramón Camps said, “It wasn’t people that disappeared, but subversives.”¹⁶

The logic of the regime excluded in its conception and rhetoric the national subjecthood of the subversive. Being a “good” Argentine—again here the patriarchal vision of the *patria* offers up a binary, nonpermeable, and fixed structure of national worth that must be performed—means inclusion in the state, whereas subversion is left out *avant la lettre*. Taylor here identifies an Argentine subjecthood worked out *before* the law in which “before” indicates a spatial position in front of, for example, a judge—rendering the widespread denial of habeas corpus a staple of authoritarian policy—but also a temporal position taken up in advance of the conception or enacting of the law. Reconceived by the junta, in a series of official proclamations and reports that Feitlowitz in her turn deftly studies, the juridical and cultural systems that produce human subjectivity reject a priori forms of national belonging seen as subversive. This exclusion from a national body allowed the regime, per its logic as Camps cites, to disappear not people but subversives.

The junta also, by withholding the fact of death from family members searching for their loved ones, denied the disappeared inclusion in a larger human collective. Judith Butler identifies precariousness as constitutive of human life and fundamental to how we apprehend this life. That life might be apprehended—grasped, learned—depends on social and political frames that set us up to see or not see and to value or not value certain lives. For Butler, this apprehension also signals a certain vulnerability or precariousness inherent in human life marked by grief or mourning. She writes, “Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters.”¹⁷ Grievability points to precariousness, the precarious life, and in this scenario, confirms that a life matters. The precariousness of human life is marked, Butler proposes, by the promise of grief that functions as a future anterior condition before a life has even been lived. In denying knowledge of the death of the disappeared, in withholding that information from their loved ones, the junta negated the very precariousness, and thus the human worth, of the disappeared. It foreclosed upon the possibility of grief, placed mourning in abeyance, by rejecting death where death had already occurred.¹⁸ In the logic of the military dictatorship, and of enforced

disappearance, no crime against humanity occurs because there is already no humanity in play; by denying mourning, the junta denied a priori the definition of a human life lived. The effects of this logic last for generations as family members, particularly children of the disappeared, continue to search for answers to their loved ones' deaths and reclaim within the justice system the precariousness on which their lives depended.

Knowledge under Argentina's military dictatorship was carefully curated, withheld, disavowed, and denied both under and before the law. The knowledge that the regime fought violently to suppress was the knowledge that the systematic and orchestrated absence manufactured by enforced disappearance formed its foundation. The military dictatorship produced bodily and social absence in order to confirm and rationalize the possibility of its own presence, but the propagation of its power depended on the rejection of this absence. This negation of negation provided for a false positive that allowed the regime to continue to function even as evidence of state-sponsored disappearance emerged both nationally and internationally. The holes in the power structure of the regime, and the gaps that it worked to produce, have long been located. But their effects—on individuals, families, on Argentine society writ large—are still felt more than thirty years after a return to democracy. This book looks at how these spaces manifest in literature as narrative device and form and defining epistemological agent as fiction responds to, supplements, and reworks knowledge withheld. Narrative modes of disappearance serve as new forms of knowledge production in response to the dictatorship and provide for new structures of knowledge that are transportable to other social and artistic contexts. The resulting epistemologies of disappearance instruct us in seeing and reading otherwise, accessing knowledge in new ways and often encoded forms, and understanding the absent as a dynamic agent capable of effecting change both on and off the page. These epistemologies work counter to the historical distortions, knowledge withheld and denied, and grief foreclosed upon that the dictatorship systematically generated.

Modes of Disappearance

The narrative work that this book examines responds to, directly and indirectly, the withholding of knowledge and the states of epistemological suspension propagated by disappearance. The novels of Cortázar and Martínez, published between 1975 and 1995, intersect with or reply to their immediate historical circumstances or take up the longer effects of years of disavowed knowledge

and impunity in the Argentine government. The trilogy of short stories by Walsh, published a full twenty-three years before the coup of 1976, serves as precursor to the later work of his friends and contemporaries, offering up an early model of how disappearance functions as epistemological and literary preoccupation. These works intersect with the historical background of the military dictatorships and serve as a response to the withholding of knowledge that facilitated systematic disappearance, but their most significant engagement with the tensions of their historical present is in their use of disappearance as a literary technique and mode. The authors gathered together in this study offer up disappearance as more than historical fact, new social reality, or catalyst for mourning by employing it rather as a device and mode of narration. This adaptation of disappearance into textual form, structure, and method means that it is written *into*, becomes a constitutive part of, these narrative works and worlds at the moment when it is being disavowed or while the legacies of that long disavowal are still materializing. So here fiction offers up a counternarrative that more closely reflects a lived reality unable to safely and openly engage with its own epistemological constraints. It provides for alternate worlds not only capable of representing what is otherwise unrepresentable, but built out of the empty spaces, abysmal logic, conflicting accounts, divided and refracted ontologies, and states of suspension that are all also proper to disappearance.

Disappearance becomes a narrative device and strategic mode in these works of fiction and indeed in the larger corpus of modern Argentine literature, if not also of the Southern Cone as a whole. Disappearance as narrative device takes up room on the page and in the reading process in the same ways as other literary devices by providing for new cognitive and imaginative spaces through operations of displacement, substitution, supplementation, and representation. In the same way that human speech, writing, and art are encoded by metaphor, metonymy, and allegory—and here I am indebted to the late Angus Fletcher's and Idelber Avelar's elegant studies of this last¹⁹—perhaps it is worth considering disappearance as a fundamental rhetorical figure only limited in its expression because of its necessarily receding form. Disappearance often relies on contiguous literary devices to fully take shape, but absence and things receding are a constitutive part of our speech acts and discursive endeavors. All figurative devices work otherwise, work to name things in other ways, serve as hinges or apertures to deeper, lateral, or even superscript readings of a textual surface structure. Disappearance asks us to perform the same cognitive processes with the same ethical endpoint in mind—to think, to know, to engage

otherwise—but banks on the materialization of a critical rupture to make this happen. Absence and disappearance on or from the page have the same technical agility and capacity to shape text and world as related figurative devices that we study in more concrete form.

The twentieth-century evolution of these operations has been well rehearsed in the linguistic, literary, and historical theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Roman Jakobson, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, Paul Ricoeur, and Hayden White, among others. My study of aesthetic disappearance draws from this body of thought and is aligned, if within a political context, with its largely deconstructive tendencies and commitment to extended close and rigorous reading practices. I seek to locate and emphasize in my own close readings and attention to narratological experiment the ways in which disappearance appears as linguistic and aesthetic fulcrum that opens up new spaces and provides for an extension of narrative and then also lived worlds.

As a mode, disappearance functions as a way, manner, and means of telling a story; is both a technique and method of narration; and becomes a constitutive component of form and narrative structure. Modes of disappearance find a place, or make a place, for disappearance as not only a political reality to which fiction responds, but as a critical means of seeing the world and then, by way of narrative, reconstructing that world and the systems of knowledge production upon which gross human rights abuses have acted. The larger social world here works upon literature, but this fiction is in turn also poised to work upon the world as it offers up new tools, structures, and forms by which to recognize, take into account, and account for what is not present, particularly in the context of Argentina's transition to democracy in the postdictatorship. These narrative modes of disappearance mean that disappearance is no longer denied; they function instead as markers of a Jamesian political unconscious to participate in the construction of a new hermeneutic that might return the world, necessarily transformed, to itself.

Put another way, literary studies has acknowledged since Abrams that works of art do not merely mirror reality but also illuminate it through an author's subjective expression of his interior life. Through this study I demonstrate that the aesthetic strategy of disappearance goes even further in this direction. Just as the viewers of the *Reconstruction of the Portrait of Pablo Míguez* must bring their own specificity to the figure's face—positioned purposefully to remain unseen—the authors I examine use blank spaces, elided histories, and obfuscated surfaces to imagine a different world. Art becomes

not merely a lamp to illuminate what is already present but something far more potent: a tool to illuminate both what has been systematically obscured and new forms of meaning-making that emerge from the darkness of state terror. Here disappearance, by way of the most fundamental techniques of narrative, tells a story and models a means of world-building in which that which is gone, receded, vanished, or absented is a dynamic and vital force capable of exerting pressure on a corresponding lived and known world.

The four modes of disappearance I identify at work in the narrative of Walsh, Cortázar, and Martínez each perform a specific function that helps shape the text or what it aims to communicate such that disappearance becomes fundamental to how we read and what we read for. In Walsh, dissimulation manifests as key to properly reading and interpreting art, Cortázar uses techniques of doubling and displacement to catalyze historical consciousness in the face of catastrophe, suspension serves in Martínez's *La novela de Perón* as narrative infrastructure and fulcrum for parsing the relationship between history and fiction in the postdictatorship, and *Santa Evita* gives us the embodiment of disappearance as metonymic and superabundant remainder in Eva Perón's errant corpse. While each chapter distinguishes a principal mode in the work it analyzes, these four modes, in various combination, also overlap, intersect, or dialogue with each other. What appears in one work as a principal mode appears in another as a supplementary mode or at work in the background in some way. Together these four modes of disappearance function as fundamental strategies of narrative and world-building in this literary corpus. As such, they also allow for a recuperation, if partial or oblique, of the component mechanisms of enforced disappearance. Dissimulation, doubling and displacement, suspension, and remaindered embodiment are all techniques that aided in Argentina's platform of state terror. Here manifest as literary modes, they allow disappearance to do another kind of work that asks us to reevaluate our structures of knowledge, many of which participated in the construction of state terror in the first place.

The etymological history of *mode* sustains this move toward recuperation or recalibration. Where *mode* is "a manner" or "way" or "means," it comes to us from Latin's *modus*, evolved from the Proto-Indo-European root *med*, "to take appropriate measures." The root splits into various linguistic directions that appear in words such as *modern*, *model*, *accommodation*, *meditation*, *mediation*, *remedy*, *modify*, *mood*, *empty*, and *mold*. This last appears by way of Old French to signify "a hollow space" that coincides with the root's manifestation as something empty at the same time that it acts to

mediate, modify, or remedy. A narrative mode, then, is a way and a means that signals in its very appearance both empty space and the capacity for modification and remediation. The modes of disappearance at work in fiction activate these affordances in narrative mode that already deal in open spaces, space hollowed out, and in the possibility that these might perform some kind of mediating function at a moment invested in its own newness. They appear as ways to represent or narrate by way of things gone or going, a narrative means that allows us to see how disappearance takes shape, takes form, takes up space, and functions to mean otherwise.

Dissimulation, doubling and displacement, suspension, and embodiment are constitutive to how the works of Walsh, Cortázar, and Martínez function, how they construct, shape, and communicate a particular narrative and world. Together they make up an important fundament for the motivation, arc, and horizon of storytelling at the same time as they participate actively in these narrative impetuses. This is to say, disappearance and the modes in which it appears in the works I study function as both base and means in the construction of new narrative, and by extension, also new possible social realities that will again in turn manifest in literature. Disappearance is at once a technique and method of narration and a constitutive part of form and narrative structure. It operates by way of specific and recurring rhetorical designs, functions in ways that can be understood together as a type of narrative movement or hermeneutics, and actively works to shape the ways in which fiction presents new worlds and engages and informs the lived world with which it interacts.

The recognition and reading of holes, gaps, and absences in literature became, under the careful lenses of post-structuralist theorists, an important aesthetic and political endeavor whose own evolution occurs in tandem to the production of the literary corpus this book identifies. Cortázar and Martínez—and alongside them Ricardo Piglia, Juan José Saer, Aída Bortnik, Griselda Gambaro, Tununa Mercado, and Liliana Heker, among others—wrote many of their works within the context of this post-structuralist moment, so that as deconstructionists noted absence as an active hermeneutic agent at work in literature, these writers were offering up works that made pointed use of gaps, holes, states of suspension, withholding, and things no longer present as a fundamental part of narrative construction and a way to engage a social reality they could not otherwise. They belong to a particular moment in literary history that identified an ethics—if often complicated and sometimes troubled—of reading what is not present, what remains, the trace, the meaningful open spaces that literature proffers. But

this endeavor takes on new significance when understood as a project that evolves in tandem with, or in response to, the real-world production of absence. Literature here is not by any means a mirror image of the lived social realities of the Argentine dictatorships. To the contrary, it is a kind of *contre-écriture* or counterwriting that allows a readership to better parse the ways in which knowledge is withheld or produced; history lived, constructed, and archived; and in which art engages with and amplifies the human condition. While the stakes here are not fatal, they are mortal. For this corpus of Argentine fiction instructs us in modes of disappearance that allow us to understand how absence and the knowledge of that absence is produced, fabricated, planned, and provided for so that we move better armed through a history that wields disappearance as a tool of silencing, oppression, and dirty warfare.

Refraction and Resistance

The intimations of disappearance—blank space, gaps, deferral, the withheld—that emerge as crucial components of late twentieth-century thought and experience give way to a refracted literature troubled with its own capacity and limits of representation. Genette warns us of this as early as 1966, when he writes:

It is as if literature had exhausted or overflowed the resources of its representative mode, and wanted to fold back into the indefinite murmur of its own discourse. Perhaps the novel, after poetry, is about to emerge definitively from the age of representation. Perhaps narrative . . . is already for us, as art was for Hegel, *a thing of the past*, which we must hurry to consider as it retreats, before it has completely disappeared from our horizon.²⁰

In Genette's estimation—offered the same year as Derrida delivers up the dislocated, shifting structural center that ushers in post-structuralism—contemporary narrative folds back in on its own means of representation to reveal a troubled and imperfect artifice. "The only imitation is an imperfect one," Genette tells us, "*Mimesis is diegesis.*"²¹ Here imitation cannot help but *tell* a story, and that narrative is inherently imperfect. When the limits of narrative are violated by discursive technique, however, the text speaks for itself in ways that lay bare its artifice, reveal the unsteady subject position

of the author and narrative subject, and trouble the borders between text and world. The represented world struggles against the means of its own material depiction. But as the scaffolding of representation comes asunder, where the possibility of representing the world falls short, here world construction begins toward the end of the twentieth century. What we have come to know as postmodern literature freely admits its failure to represent the world wholesale, indeed uses that failure to its aesthetic advantage to replace the effort of incongruous or imperfect representation with one of world-building. If we look back through the various theoretical efforts to describe how that world construction occurs, we find it cut through with the possibility of things disappearing, with the possibility that the very worlds that narrative seeks to build up are already precariously balanced upon certain hermeneutic vanishing points.

These acts of textual disappearance belong to what Brian McHale identifies as the ontological nature of the postmodern text: a text that self-reflexively investigates the worlds it creates, the nature of these possible worlds, and the “modes of existence” and structures of the worlds it offers up.²² McHale provides a detailed reading of the narrative techniques and strategies that postmodern literature makes use of in its world-building efforts, many of which employ forms of disappearance or end in some kind of vanishing world. But McHale stops short of dealing explicitly with disappearance; he does not name it as such or, in his work so keenly focused on the inner workings of fiction, address the possibility that literary ontologies under erasure have a counterpart in real sociopolitical landscapes. I build on the work McHale begins by investigating the formal qualities of disappearance that make it a literary technique in its own right, the ways in which narrative strategies of disappearance respond to the formally disavowed realities of political disappearance, and the possibility that together this work of disappearance signals a shift in how we think about the work of literature—its form, engagement, and future—writ large.

McHale proposes that the ontological emerges as the defining characteristic of postmodern fiction in the same way that the epistemological became the dominant tendency in modernist literature. Postmodernism’s preoccupation with literary ontologies replaces the modernist epistemological concerns that, in McHale’s estimation, ask not what world is this, but “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? . . . What is there to be known?; Who knows it?”²³ Where postmodernist literature multiplies the worlds we might know, modernist literature investigates and pushes back against how we know, how that knowledge

is transferred and changes over time, and “the limits of the knowable.”²⁴ McHale acknowledges that these tendencies are inextricably interconnected, that there is no world-building without knowledge of the world and the self in it. But the evolution from the epistemological to the ontological over the course of the twentieth century allows McHale to ground the possibility of new worlds and world-making in prior structures of knowledge and knowledge production that then become in postmodern literature more questions than structures.

If postmodern literature exhibits an essential refractory quality in which it turns in on itself, back toward itself, enters into meditations upon or interferes with its own narrative structure in its efforts to advance, then whatever ontological preoccupations it displays necessarily fold back in on themselves and in so doing trap the reader within the hermeneutic circuitry of the text. A narrator or reader who finds herself caught up in the machinations of the text may well ask: Where am I? What world is this? What makes this world possible? But these questions return to the epistemological as soon as our reader wonders: Where does this world intersect with the world I already know? How do I perceive possible differences between these worlds? What are the limits of this apperception and how do I grasp these limits? The ontological returns us to the epistemological, even if just to ask us to experiment with how we engage with the new spaces we inhabit. I would propose—from the vantage of thirty years after the publication of McHale’s work and more than fifty years after Genette observed narrative’s nascent impulse to fold back into the “indefinite murmur of its own discourse”—that new epistemological concerns and forms of knowledge are produced when new worlds turn in on themselves, violate their perceived structural or discursive limits, or multiply in unexpected ways.

The chapters that follow examine the new knowledge and structures of knowledge that appear as the necessary consequence of worlds narratively refracted. This knowledge is intimately bound up with the construction of new fictional worlds and understands these worlds as potential blueprints for future lived political and social realities. So where McHale observes a modernist epistemological tendency followed by a dominant postmodern ontology, I see also a new epistemological framework that emerges to make sense of these new postmodern worlds and states of being. These worlds give way to knowledge as much as modernist epistemologies might have provided for the possibility, indeed the necessity, of the new multiple, dynamic, and refracting ontologies that have come to define the postmodern experience. *The Space of Disappearance* is concerned with what kind of knowledge is

required, produced, or motivated by these worlds—lived and textual—when cut through with disappearance. The narrative that this work analyses foregrounds disappearance as a literary technique or narrative mode that signals a concern with how to know and how to document or represent the knowledge that the new world construction proper to postmodern fiction demands. An aesthetics of disappearance emerges, as becomes evident in the work of Walsh, Cortázar, and Martínez, as constitutive of a larger postmodern engagement.

The postmodernism that these authors participated in is a very different project from the postmodernism that we are living today. The refracted narrative worlds—and the pages that follow will look closely at examples of this refraction and its politicization—that populated Western literature from the late 1960s to the 1990s hit up against new modes of lived experience at the turn of the millennium, including multiple and dynamic cyber and virtual realities, the complex networks forged by transnationalism, the precarity and arbitrariness of war on terror, and linguistic differences at once leveled and multiplied in new media and their translation and consumption around the globe. Our current postmodern condition is not quite postmodern any longer, but perhaps rather modern again in ways that better rival the experiences of newness, shock, war, and experimentation that our early twentieth-century counterparts lived a hundred years ago.²⁵ It is from the perspective of this new modernism that this book looks back on the significance of disappearance in twentieth-century postmodernism and then, at its close, at its legacies evidenced in the literature being produced by a new generation of writers from Argentina today. For, at least from this vantage in the early years of the new millennium, a preoccupation with disappearance—things going or gone, receding or vanished or missing—turns out to be a lasting contribution to postmodern thought and literary technique, fundamental to the aesthetic expressions and experiences that have ushered in the new, as yet unnamed, millennial modernism we currently inhabit.

The modes of narrative disappearance seen in Argentine fiction are as much evidence and product of this fully mature modern condition as they are response to the ethical breach of state-sponsored terror at a particular historical moment. The latter works in concert with the former so that postmodern Argentine fiction does not give us disappearance as one half of a binary in which the seen, known, and constructed world is the other half. Rather it substantiates disappearance as constitutive of how and what we see, know, and build of this modern world; aperture to new kinds of

visibility and presence; and as catalyst for new forms of historical, political, and cultural engagement. Dealing in disappearance follows a different logic, fulfills different narrative requirements and expectations than when building a narrative world out of what is present and tangible. It requires a giving in to the trace, the artfulness of the oblique, and a command of disconcealment. It entails making space for intimation and approximation, a deftness for navigating blank space and receding borders, and a propensity for the strategies of spatial reconstruction even when an aesthetic field is not entirely visible. These tasks—this art—works outside any binate logic, such as that promulgated by the military dictatorship that divided Argentine society into “good Argentines” or subversives. Instead, it works as part of a larger system of meaning-making that seeks not only to dismantle the knowledge structures established by dictatorship—although this act of resistance is a first step—but to construct new aesthetic forms and forms of engagement that privilege the oblique, contingent, incidental, paradoxical, fragmentary, interstitial, negated, overheard, discarded, ephemeral, and rhizomatic.

Nelly Richard describes an aesthetics that works outside of binary systems of representation in the context of the Chilean postdictatorship, whose resonances with Argentina’s own dictatorship are many:

In order critically to twist the ideological linearity of that “standpoint of the vanquished,” it was necessary to be able—just as Adorno himself had proposed in his essay on Benjamin—“to address . . . things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside—what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic.” Blind spots that demand an aesthetic of diffuse lighting, so that their forms acquire the indirect meaning of what is shown obliquely, of that which circulates along the narrow paths of recollection, filtered by barely discernible fissures of consciousness.²⁶

Richard turns here to Adorno’s reading of Benjamin in *Minima Moralia* in order to describe the possibility of creating art that operates outside the dialectic of oppressor/vanquished or perpetrator/survivor.²⁷ Where Benjamin works to craft an alternate history out of the remnants and ruins of nineteenth-century Paris, Richard sees her contemporaries—perhaps especially the neo-avant-garde art group CADA (Art Actions Collective)—working with the materials and means that fall outside the purview of the binaries that

buttress the possibility of dictatorship in the first place and that support, in many ways, the mainstream social reconstruction of the postdictatorship. There is an alternative way of moving forward that operates according to a more communitarian, paradoxical, and rhizomatic ethics than to a system of political logic that includes some at the expense of others.²⁸ But of particular interest in the preceding passage from Adorno and Richard is the possibility that blind spots, in assimilating and refracting the neglected, forgotten, and barely seen, demand a new aesthetics that channels new ways of understanding a recent historical past and subsequent social structures. Here art works upon historiography such that a historical future is rewritten by way of what we do not see, see well, or wholly see. Where a blind spot is what we do not discern, willfully or unwittingly, when we proceed according to prescribed or familiar means of apperception, it both falls outside our field of sight and makes possible what we think we know.²⁹ But this obfuscation gives way to new modes of seeing—as evidenced in the fiction that follows, variously oblique, doubled, suspended, or remaindered—that demand as consequence other forms of historical engagement that serve not only to reinterpret the present but to chart how to know differently future histories or coming catastrophes.

Disappearance functions, both on the ground and in art, as its own kind of aporetic blind spot and makes a similar epistemological claim: gaps, holes, elisions, and obfuscations actualize our received and perceived knowledge. But this book asks what happens when what we are missing or what has receded from view is activated as a narrative force. What happens to the form of the novel, in particular, but also to modes of historiography when our blind spots become, in De Man's words, "a phenomenon in [their] own right"?³⁰ How do our reading strategies change, or how must we change them, when absence takes shape and works upon the text before us? How do these strategies then mobilize alternative interpretations of historical event and opportunities for renewed historical consciousness? In the works of fiction this study attends to our blind spots are activated in the form of dissimulation, doubling and displacement, suspension, and embodiment. Seeing, apprehending, grasping, and understanding these forms and the pressures they exert upon literature and history requires that we adopt obliquity as an interpretive method. In so doing, obliquity becomes a reading of resistance, a new historiographical method capable of responding to coming crises and their aftermath, and a means of addressing some of the paradoxes and blind spots inherent to human rights discourse and their aesthetic representation.